

Events in Georgia provoke discussions on security in good, old, peaceful Europe

By Jaak Aaviksoo

In April of this year, the NATO member states decided to assure Georgia's NATO perspectives. Georgia's aspirations were handled in the same way as were the Ukraine's. They were not granted Membership Action Plans, for which they had both been applying for some time, the granting of which Estonia and several other member states, especially the United States of America, had been strongly supporting.

The formulation, which reached the final declaration of the Bucharest Summit and stated firmly and clearly the perspective for accession for Ukraine and Georgia, was a compromise between the more cautious countries (mostly Western and Southern Europe) and more energetic countries. This was the maximum that could be achieved at the given moment, both then and today.

Of course, the conviction and resolve of the United States of America, which has strived to create support to the NATO aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine, is quite remarkable. This is based on a simple and attractive principle: those European countries that strive to gain NATO membership should be admitted to the alliance, regardless of their history and geopolitical considerations, provided that they meet certain quality requirements. The very roots of this standpoint can be found in the treaty that established NATO, which states that any European country that contributes to the security of the North-Atlantic space and promotes the principles established with the Treaty should be admitted to the most powerful security organisation in the world. Differences aside, all NATO member states share basic values and both Georgia and Ukraine are countries that share this common value base and are prepared to contribute thereto.

Since the Bucharest Summit, but especially since Russia's aggression in Georgia, it has been asked whether such a decision, as that adopted in Bucharest, enhanced the security of NATO and the Central and Eastern European countries and Georgia and Ukraine as two countries striving for NATO membership or whether the decision only served to diminish it. Two political hypotheses, both of which undermine our interests, are currently being circulated. According to the first hypothesis, the promised perspective for accession, given to Georgia by NATO member states, is a political step too short and it rather confirmed to Russia that its immediate neighbourhood is still within Russia's legitimate sphere of interest. According to the second hypothesis, Central and Eastern European countries that have several challenges in their relations with Russia are troublesome as members of NATO and would in the long-term cause even more problems and strain the otherwise good and pragmatic relations between Western Europe and Russia. Therefore, we need to ask even more directly what the consequences of the events in Georgia are for Estonia's security.

For Estonia, the events in Georgia shouldn't, in principle, come as a surprise – due to our historical experiences and developments – since the last war in Chechnya to the war in Georgia and the consequent recognition of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia is just a logical sequence to the chain, which was started by Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. The listed names weren't chosen in random – these are the heads of state that are mentioned most often in an Internet survey conducted in Russia as the greatest historical personalities. The Russian media, which largely reflects and magnifies the opinions from the Kremlin, has mentioned the rebirth of Russia as a “geopolitical subject” as the most important outcome of the war in Georgia. Indeed – the western states are now coming to

Moscow to plead, either for a truce, withdrawal of the military troops, or simply adherence to international agreements. This is seen by Moscow as a strategic victory – in comparison to a situation ten years ago where the IMF, EU, Amnesty International or just some of the Western politicians were giving patronising lectures on the meaning of democracy and market economy. The very nature of this “rebirth” is stated by Russia's own self-definition: “We don't need your democracy; we have our own sovereign democracy”. Such confrontation is clearly deliberate and visible in practically everything that Russia says or does: the confrontation is uncompromising and principal in nature.

Russia's described self-determination and self-validation, based thereupon, clearly makes geopolitical sense. The status of the USA, perhaps temporarily weakened, for multiple reasons; the continuously growing economic and political self-awareness of the Third World; opposition to a unipolar world order; China and India's forceful demands for their own place and truth; the struggling Near and Middle East; and additionally supported by the oil dollars, have all built the window of opportunities that allow for yet another attempt to reintroduce a supreme statehood. And let us not forget, that Russia has an international, broad audience, while she goes about her ventures. Russia wants to be Russia, to identify itself as a geopolitical subject and have it done based on its best historical experiences. That ambition has considerable domestic support, which is magnified by the systematic and all-exhaustive socio-political manipulations of the Putin-Medvedev administration. Russia is Russia. Both today and in the foreseeable future, as its today's reality, leaves no alternatives. The first realistic opportunity for westernisation was ruined by the October Revolution and the second by the inability of Yeltsin's administration to share the fruits of the market economy with the majority of the population.

Yet, this is merely a socio-political narrative and already, in the victorious haze of the post-Georgian aggression, there appear many problems for Russia. Massive capital flight, extremely low western business confidence in Russia and the lowering demand for oil because of the almost inevitable global economic recession demonstrate that Russia can talk the talk, but not walk the walk. She is inherently weak, open to the winds and storms of the “outer-world”, interlinked with the rest of us. She cannot exist autonomously and independently of the global economy and attempts to tinker with political and administrative borders of neighbouring countries does not come without a heavy price – and more can be expected, if this simple fact is not recognized in the Kremlin.

Russia did not succeed in instilling fear in her neighbours in North-Eastern Europe. In the long-term, we have to consider that staying true to the basic values, as written down in the Charter of the North-Atlantic Treaty, should assure security more effectively than hesitant appeasement politics or the search for beneficial compromises. I am convinced that Estonia's positions, which have consistently served to support the efforts of Georgia and Ukraine, are correct, not merely due to remaining true to ideological principles but also because it increases our national security in the long-term perspective.

In principle, such an aggressive and revanchist attitude is always characterised by a uniform course of events. As such behaviour sees compromise as a weakness, any humouring on principle issues would only contribute to increase the aggressor's hunger. Therefore, one should take the parallel, as pointed out by the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr.

Carl Bildt, who compared the aggression and annexation in Abkhazia and South-Ossetia with the fate of the Sudetes before the outbreak of the World War II. As the Munich Treaties could not avoid the onset of the Second World War in Europe, one could assume that any compromises made now would be as dangerous for Central and Eastern European countries today. Therefore, I do think that the consistent and principal attitude of Estonia and our NATO allies regarding the issue of basic values, including consistent conformation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries, are not issues on which we should seek compromises, as these could become very expensive later. These compromises shouldn't smell of gas or oil.

It has nothing to do with the profits gained or to be gained or the success granted by cheap energy carriers with regard to other partners. It comes, above all, down to the spineless attitude, expressed by such attitude in one-way or another. Spinelessness injects self-confidence and increasing aggressiveness to an aggressor.

Considering everything said above – it's not quite correct to say that the security situation in the world did change considerably after the events in Georgia. It would be more appropriate to say that the situation changed long ago, but now the required changes in understandings and beliefs are also taking place in the western capitals of Europe. Here, Estonia will continue its work to stress the growing importance of the co-ordination of NATO defence planning, while not forgetting the efforts we need to make ourselves and all together to enhance NATO's security.

For me, one the most important outcomes of the conflict in Georgia was the realisation gained at the price of sufferings of the people of Georgia and Ossetia – Russia really is, above all, Russia. Europe has learnt its historic lessons and therefore, a war between Germany and France or, for example, Estonia and Latvia, would be unthinkable – but we can't apply this experience to relations with Russia and vice versa. It is, however, much better and safer to be aware of this difference, instead of entertaining delusions about shared experiences and values.

For these very reasons, I am convinced that Estonia's security political position, supported by our consistent position, which states that the efforts that democratic states make on NATO direction should be supported and the aggressors should be stood up to, has contributed to the improved security of Central and Eastern European countries. Our clear and transparent behaviour has revealed the nature of today's regime in Russia with the related threats. And let's also keep in mind that our sense of threat has been verified – this also shows that we have taken the right way to improving our security.

I would like to end with a brief train of thought, concerning the long-term perspective of the relations between Russia and the Western countries. It's quite obvious that mutual sense of threat is sharper today than it used to be a couple of months ago and while the nature of the sense of threat is conflicting – from one side, above all, physical and, from the other hand, conceptual – this sense of threat is, in fact, real and regrettable. At the same time it seems that the geopolitical spectre of threats of Russia and the Western countries, based on wider and, above all, demographic trends, largely overlaps while a number of security threats of both Russia and the Western countries would be easier to manage by co-operation instead of opposition. Therefore, may strategic security partnership, as real and strategic as possible, provide some hope and air for breathing. This would definitely serve Estonia's best interests.

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