

Baltic security reflections in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian conflict

By Artis Pabriks

The Russian-Georgian war strengthens the argument that the current Russian leadership prefers an alternative regime to the liberal democratic system. Despite hopeful predictions after the collapse of the Soviet Empire, not everybody in Russia is willing to embrace democracy. This certainly increases the feeling of insecurity among many Russian neighbours. Security is back on top of the agenda in the Baltic region replacing the short period of relaxation after the successful integration of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland into the EU and the North Atlantic Alliance.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama published a book on "the end of history and the victory of liberal democracy" as the only valid model of life. Joining the EU and NATO, the Baltic nations saw for themselves the end of the history as end of insecurity and injustice, and the beginning of life as free individuals.

But today like never before, liberal democracies find themselves challenged by successfully developing authoritarian systems. Russia leaders are reminding the world that Russia will follow its own path of development. Factors like high oil and gas prices have successfully allowed Russia to avoid developing a full liberal democracy. More than this, the Russian leadership quite blatantly and aggressively uses energy policy as a means to regain the national strength and "glory" once enjoyed by the Soviet Union. Russia is becoming an increasingly difficult international partner when dealing with the Middle East, Iran or in fact any other issue where consolidated opinion and the action of international institutions are required.

Bearing this in mind, the recent Russian war with Georgia should be judged as a litmus test for any Russian relationship with her immediate neighbours. The war showed clearly that Russia is ready to use military force in her immediate neighbourhood and is ready to interfere in the domestic affairs of others on behalf of Russian citizens, a Russian ethnic population, or any other grounds she can manufacture if she deems necessary. The region bordering Russia is again feeling intimidated by this newly assertive neighbour whose non-democratic political leadership is increasingly overtaken by memories of "power" as a raw tool.

The war turned out to be a strong test for the European Union's ability to find a common point of view and form a common reaction to the new challenges on its borders. The fragmentation of EU opinion showed both the difficulties of collective decision making, and the broad range of differing national interests. Many European decision makers were simply on their holidays and out of touch. During the early days of the conflict a number of larger EU nations were taking pro-Russian stances whilst EU members geographically closer to Russia used every effort to mobilize Brussels against the Russian advance into Georgia. Today, many are convinced that it was actually the visit of the Baltic and Polish Presidents to Tbilisi which ultimately stopped the Russian forces at the suburbs of the Georgian capital. NATO and the Americans were both caught unprepared and politically outflanked.

Many analysts in the Baltic Countries believe the EU has been engaged too little in the Caucasus in recent years

whilst Russia has had clear plans using political tools like trade, passports and visas in new more aggressive ways. The European Union was simply behind the Russian political game and proved unable or unwilling to take any real decision regarding Georgian territorial integrity.

Another serious blow to European security was dealt by the Bucharest NATO Summit. Officially NATO announced Georgia to be a future member country but significantly did not expand MAP to Georgia because of resistance from some EU member countries and weak US diplomatic persuasion. Russia correctly interpreted this as a weakness of the Alliance in the Caucasus region and as authority to act and use military force

The war showed that Russia will continue to use the ethnic card aggressively to promote its interests abroad. In all three Baltic countries, particularly in Estonia and Latvia there are a large number of ethnic Russians remaining after the collapse of the USSR. Political integration of parts of this population into the main stream population is challenging. But it is deliberately being made more difficult by a large and consciously aimed Russian economic and media influence on these minorities from across the border.

The mood in the Baltic region about EU and NATO membership can be characterized by the saying of Benjamin Franklin: "If we do not hang together, we will hang separately. The Baltic nations want to be certain they will receive NATO and also EU support in the event of crisis." The striking absence of common EU foreign and defence policy, the continuing political/military isolation of Sweden and Finland, the disagreements about further enlargement and questions about contingency planning within the Alliance worry Baltic nations about the seriousness of these institutions. They want to be sure of serious support regardless if it is the holiday season in Europe.

The Baltic nations are more than anyone else willing to see a good relationship between NATO, the EU and Russia. NATO must re-establish and restate its Article V core values. The EU must prevail not only as a united institution but also as capable, strong, and globally influential union in the 21st century. It must not always yield its interests to those of Russia. The current stance of both organisations towards Russia fail to reflect these goals and the Baltic nations are among the first to worry about this failure. In long term Russia itself would benefit from less appeasing and more value orientated international stance. Maybe and hopefully, liberal democratic system might also fit the Russian people one day.

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