

TRIAL WITH THE CONFLICT

The most serious test in Russia's relations with the West

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The firm response of Russia to the invasion of South Ossetia by Georgia has become the first serious trial in Moscow's relations with the West after the March presidential election. At the same time the conflict in South Ossetia has represented the first major test for President Dmitry Medvedev. Leaving aside the origins and history of the frozen conflicts in Georgia it should be recognized that the crisis in South Ossetia has been a product of differing geopolitical interests of Russia and the West as well as a complex interplay of foreign policy and domestic interests of the parties involved in the conflict, the external players included.

Putting aside the history of the conflict and chronology of the recent developments, it should be recognised that the conflict has been triggered by the heavy-handed US/NATO involvement in the post-Soviet space. Russian liberals warned Washington and Brussels on many occasions that NATO's enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine without a clear policy vis-à-vis Russia was fraught with a new confrontation. Nobody in the West wanted to take these warnings seriously in line with the logic "Russia already swallowed several waves of NATO's enlargement and nothing happened". Put simply, the crisis in South Ossetia has been initiated by the Bush administration which has "pushed hard for Georgia to join NATO, against European misgivings and

Russian fury at the idea”.¹ Probably there were illusions in Washington that Medvedev as a liberal would not react with use of force to Saakashvili’s provocation or if he did it would present Russia as a belligerent aggressor. In both cases the Republicans thought they would make a profit on the crisis. In the first case the US would win diplomatically as an architect of NATO’s enlargement to the CIS, in the second case they would show that the cold war veterans were still in demand.

It is too early to make a long-term forecast for future developments in the Russia-West relations after this crisis. A great deal will depend on the Russia post-conflict strategy, namely on its foreign policy priorities as well as on the lessons learned from its former strategy on the frozen conflicts. Without lifting Georgia’s responsibility for the recent conflict, it is necessary to recognize that Russia has misinterpreted its role as mediator. It looks that Russia during the last 16 years could have played more active role. It had huge influence on Georgia, and even more on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. If Russia had itself worked out a package of agreements aimed at regulating the conflict, and had forced the parties to sign this package, then, perhaps, the tragedy would not have happened.²

Russia has won a military campaign having complied with its peacekeeping to the South Ossetia people, but lost the communication campaign. Russia has drawn “a red line”, having shown to NATO that its opposition to the Alliance’s enlargement to the CIS space has not been just words. At the same time one

¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSN11397807>

² www.carnegie.ru/en/pubs/media/78822.htm - 23k

cannot neglect the fact that in this conflict Russia found itself in solitude. None of its allies in CSTO, SCO or EuroAsEc clearly and unequivocally supported Russia in the South Ossetia conflict. No doubt, this fact will have long-term consequences for the CIS at large as well as for Russia's relations with the CIS states. Russia's closest neighbours are confronted today with a difficult dilemma how to ensure their security – through external security guarantees, first and foremost the US/NATO guarantees, or through a new model of relationship with Russia. The latter will fully depend on Russia. First, a hasty and unilateral recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia along the Kosovo model would be detrimental for the CIS, not to mention Russia's relations with the West. And second, it is very important to actively create collective positions within the scope of international cooperation. Because, there is not one country - not even the US - that can throw down a challenge to the whole world. The conflict in South Ossetia has shown that it is the European Union which has turned to be the only responsible international partner of Russia. EU has taken a difficult mission not only to be a mediator in the conflict but, like after the Kosovo crisis in 1999, to reduce the growing gap between Russia and the West. However, the Russian-Georgian conflict has increased differences inside the EU on the question how to deal with Russia.

Addressing this sacramental question the West should understand that contemporary Russia is opening a new page of such historic evolution. There should be no illusion that this stage will be smooth, fast and easy. But the pertinent global and regional problems and conflicts cannot wait till this stage is accomplished. The current Russian leadership is ready to cooperate with the

West, provided that its clearly formulated foreign interests are taken seriously and respected. When these interests differ from those of the West or particular Western powers, the disputes should be resolved by a mutually acceptable compromise or a trade-off between various foreign policy interests through the wise tactics of diplomatic linkage. In the contrast to 1990's Moscow is no longer willing to accept resolution of the disputes either through Western preaching or pressure. Pragmatic political compromise is the slogan of the day of Russian foreign policy. It would be yet another historical blunder of the West to miss this unique opportunity.