

## **The conflict in Georgia and its implications for the region – the Polish perspective**

In Poland, the conflict in Georgia is considered to be one of the most important political incidents of the present decade. The general opinion is that it will shape the strategic reality in Eastern Europe in the upcoming years. Its importance stems from the fact that it was the first incident where Russia used military force against a sovereign state created after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Caucasian events are usually interpreted as confirmation of the thesis dominating the Polish debate, according to which the internal situation in Russia is taking a disturbing turn. Such thesis is increasingly illustrated by the Russian policy towards the region. Nevertheless, as time passes, and more information about the circumstances of the outbreak of the Georgian conflict comes to light, judgements become more balanced and the irresponsible behaviour of the Georgian authorities – and particularly of President Saakashvili - attracts more attention.

Polish perception of the Georgian conflict is dominated by a conviction that its strategic dimension must be considered a priority. Broadening geographical boundaries of the world of Western values is a basic priority naturally enhanced by the historic context and by the Polish experiences. This is the reason why, in spite of his obvious mistakes, President Saakashvili is relatively well perceived in Poland. This situation is going to evolve, particularly if Georgia begins to take Poland's support for granted, and stops seeking it in an active manner.

Interpretation of the events during the Georgian conflict was not unanimous, particularly as far as the President and the Prime Minister were concerned. President Kaczyński was especially active. For a long time, he had been indicating a disturbing evolution of Russia's attitudes and its increasing assertiveness towards its neighbours. His involvement was facilitated by the fact that Eastern Europe had been the primary focus of his foreign policy. Right from the start, the government's stance on the issue was more moderate, and it acknowledged the complexity of factors leading to the outbreak of the conflict. As the situation developed, and President Kaczyński's rhetoric toughened, the government was gradually forced to take a more decisive stance, particularly during the session of the European Council on 1/09/2008.

There is no doubt that the conflict in Georgia is an area of internal political struggle in Poland, especially since the issues of foreign policies are increasingly identified by both major parties as the area of confrontation before the upcoming presidential election in 2010. It is hard to avoid an impression that aggravating the dispute about the reaction to the Georgian events suits both the President and the Prime Minister. By his tough attitude, President Kaczyński encourages his hard line electorate, traditionally averse to Russia. The Prime Minister on his part promotes his image as a statesman, a politician conducting a strategic game rather than succumbing to emotions. Numerous animosities between the two Polish leaders about who plays the key part in formulating the Polish stance are the inevitable consequence.

The session of the European Council on 1/09/2008, devoted to Georgia and the relations between the EU and Russia, which was third such informal meeting, led to a joint stance on the conflict and its implications. This was an unprecedented, albeit ephemeral demonstration of unity. No doubt, there was no major reevaluation behind it, although the European Union seems to have adopted a more realistic point of view. Opinions about the EU's involvement in the Georgian conflict incite quite contradictory emotions – from the cover of "The Economist" where the EU shivered in the face of Russian assertiveness, to opinions that Russia could have easily captured Tbilisi, had it not been for the European intervention, i.e. that it was the European Union, which prevented the worst case scenario.

Obviously, should someone want to impose sanctions against Russia, their options would have been very limited. The best example is the issue of Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation. Objecting to Russia's accession would be against EU's interest, which is to introduce Russia to the principles of international trade and to the dispute settling procedures. WTO is last years' success story. At the same time, its latest round of liberalisation ended up in a fiasco. Hence, for someone aiming to develop the worldwide trade now is not the best moment to block Russia's WTO membership. It would be much more effective to resort to areas more important to Russia itself, i.e. to the issues of agreement on nuclear fuel trade and of Russia's participation in EU's research programmes.

During the discussions within the EU, Poland opted for an unequivocal opinion about the Russian actions in Georgia, as well as for reserve in further diplomatic contacts with Russia, namely for postponing the EU-Russia summit (it took place on schedule in November). However, Poland was not in favour of economic sanctions and it focussed on the issue of EU's offer for Georgia, Ukraine and other East European countries, as well as on the issues of energy security. Poland represented an opinion that at the moment the best solution is to seriously strengthen relations with the Eastern partners participating in the European Neighbourhood Policy. This is to be facilitated by the Eastern Partnership initiative, proposed late this Spring by Poland and Sweden. In the context of the Georgian conflict, the concept of the Partnership assumed new importance, much to the satisfaction of Polish politicians (minister Sikorski called it "prophetic"). At the moment, Poland strives to speed up the works on the Partnership, and to fill the initiative with contents. It will be more complicated to advance the works on energy security, which was another successful Polish initiative at the September summit. The energy and climate package, which is this year's flagship project for the EU, will lead to increased demand for gas and consequently to probable increase of demand for gas imported from Russia. Therefore, Poland has to propose solutions, which will not lead to increased emissions, but will limit the dependence on Russia. In this process, Poland's increasingly unequivocal ally is the European Commission, which in November proposed an Action Plan on energy security including many of Polish postulates.

The conflict in Georgia strengthens Poland's international position, because Warsaw is perceived as an expert on Eastern Europe and an advocate for a more active attitude towards EU's immediate neighbours. The Polish assessment of the evolution of Cremlin's stance and its actual intentions proved right, and became an important element of EU's thinking. At the same time, the Polish government assumed a more moderate line than expected – much closer to the European point of gravity on this issue.

Theoretically, Poland gained, since the Eastern Partnership is a broadly discussed and supported project. The question remains, whether the prevailing rhetoric will be decisive about the project's success and its future direction. It is possible that there will soon be attempts to re-orientate the Eastern Partnership towards an offer for East-European neighbours, treated as an alternative for membership.

The Eastern Partnership project creates huge expectations, which can only be fulfilled by vast mobilisation of efforts and means. More so, since it occurs in a very difficult moment, both as far as the situation in the East European countries and in the European Union are concerned. The EU's Eastern neighbours are undergoing a phase of geo-strategic confusion caused by the implications of the war in Georgia. The EU, on the other hand, is entering deep recession and a crisis concerning a number of important areas of its operation. Hence, even generating extra funding outside the extremely modest allocation for Ukraine (about 120 million euro a year), or mobilising political support for the initiative of Eastern Partnership will not be easy. Furthermore, the formula proposed by Poland and Sweden emphasises visibility of the new initiative, but it might fail in its present form to effectively consolidate the

internal reforms and the reforms in the neighbouring countries. In order to obtain more causal powers, it would be necessary to strengthen the political and institutional dimensions of the Partnership, to deepen economic integration and really take up tasks connected with the “human dimension” of the Partnership, i.e. create a perspective for visa-free travel and opening of broader opportunities for citizens of the Partnership member countries to study in the EU, by lowering fees.

The Georgian conflict shed new light on the Polish-Russian relations. The role of Poland in defining the common denominator of the entire Union meant that Russia, at least temporarily, had to abandon its policy of selective relations with individual member countries, which facilitated the existence of Russia’s privileged, as well as largely ignored partners. Russia must objectively acknowledge that due to Poland’s increasing role in shaping the stance and views of the European Union, as well as of the trans-Atlantic commonwealth, it deserves higher respect. Such was the message of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s visit to Poland in mid-September 2008. Nevertheless, due to crucial differences of strategic nature, the Polish-Russian relations will, in the nearest future, remain distanced.

Furthermore, Poland has a chance to tighten relations with the United States, which reevaluate their views on Russia. Formerly largely focussed on the war against terrorism, the US will be forced to monitor the Russian affairs more closely, invest in their presence in the region, in which Poland can offer its assistance. The world after August 7<sup>th</sup> will force closer trans-Atlantic cooperation, of which Poland will be one of the strongest advocates. The new American President Barack Obama has received telling congratulations from his Russian counterpart, who on the day of the election announced placing Russian Iskander rockets in Kaliningrad. On the other hand, Barack Obama aims for reinstating American leadership in the world via dialogue with everybody, including the enemy states. Hence Russia will be perceived as a partner in solving global problems rather than as a political opponent.

The war in Georgia significantly postpones the perspective of Ukraine’s and Georgia’s NATO membership and creates doubts about possibility of expanding the European Union to the East in the nearest future. Russia achieved a success, which suits many in the Western political elites. The situation poses a huge dilemma for NATO, which has to reconsider the priority of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, or the right of democratic countries to strive for membership of the Alliance. It remains an open question, how to utilise the present time – whether to maintain the strategic goal of expanding NATO, or to leave the issue undecided and concentrate on practical political reforms.

The conflict in Georgia strengthened the position of those, who reckon that Russia should be more involved in cooperation with the Western world. The development of the global situation is conducive to maintaining cooperation with Russia. Georgia, which was eligible for the Membership Action Plan in December 2008, lost the most, since in the present situation it can no longer join. The best it can do right now, is to begin systematic efforts to gradually tighten the links with the European Union.

*Paweł Świeboda*  
President of demoseUROPA – Centre for European Strategy