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The Balkan Roots of the War in South Ossetia

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The current developments in the Caucasus are a manifestation of a broader tendency which is going to play a fundamental role in the global politics for years to come.

The crimes committed by the Georgian regime led by M. Saakashvili became possible not only as a result of the military-technical assistance massively provided to Georgia by the US and other countries touting their democratic images, but also due to the collapse of the system of international law which took place on February 17, 2008. On that date, Albanian extremists proclaimed the independence of Kosovo, another conflict zone in the Eurasian space. According to various UN resolutions, Kosovo had to remain a part of Serbia and an international peacekeeping mission was deployed in Kosovo under the UN flag. Western countries not only raised no objections to the unilateral declaration of the Kosovo independence, but welcomed it as the optimal solution.

Throughout the months after the declaration, Moscow kept warning that the “Kosovo independence” would undermine the entire system of international relations. The Kosovo scenario would equally attract the leaders of numerous separatist movements worldwide and the regimes eager to suppress opposition by force. In February and March, international politics watchers followed with a great deal of surprise the cacophony in Tbilisi's official assessments of the Kosovo phenomenon.

Already on February 18, the very next day after the Kosovo Parliament had voted for independence, Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Bakradze said Georgia did not recognize the independence of Kosovo. He said that Georgians were united on the issue regardless of their individual political preferences¹. As for the unity, it was clearly an overstatement – already on March 29 Georgian Prime Minister Lado Gurgenidze said in an interview to Estonian media that “since the friends of Georgia had recognized the Independence of Kosovo” it would be quite natural for Georgia to do the same². The statement outraged the opposition which condemned it as unacceptable in the light of Georgia's problems with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Saakashvili sided with the opposition on the issue and said that Georgia had no plans to recognize the independence of Kosovo.

The uncertainty of Georgia's stance is explainable. The country is struggling to combine loyalty to the US in every aspect of politics with at least a shadow of common sense at the face of the threat posed to Georgia's positions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia by the self-proclaimed Kosovo independence. The truth is that the illegitimate outcome in Kosovo absolved politicians like Saakashvili of any legal limitations whatsoever. If the Kosovo Albanians could forge a country of their own by



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means of anti-Serbian ethnic cleansing, what could prevent Tbilisi from cleansing Ossetians from South Ossetia?

Ordering the invasion of South Ossetia and planning a similar aggression against Abkhazia, Saakashvili was simply trying to benefit from the fact that after February 17 the UN, the OCSE, the Council of Europe, and likewise organizations were no longer the guarantors of the international law. Saakashvili's reckoning was absolutely correct in this respect. The Georgian Fuhrer did make a mistake, but of a different kind: as in the not-so-distant past, he and his US patrons expected to meet no resolute opposition from Russia.

Speaking on conditions of anonymity, a diplomat shared with me certain details of the discussions between Russia and the US in the UN Security Council during the crisis in South Ossetia. The US supported by Great Britain was promoting its vision of the situation with great hypocrisy and stubbornness. Allegedly, there were no 2,000 civilian fatalities in South Ossetia and no 30,000 refugees who fled the Republic. Even if there were any civilian casualties, the people were killed by Russian air strikes. When asked whether they recognized the fact that Russian peacekeepers had been killed, US diplomats mumbled that indeed that was pretty odd, but at the moment it was Russia who was the cause of tensions and had to be stopped. The Russian delegation invoked the recent hostilities between Israel and Lebanon, during which the UN Security Council kept trying for a whole month to pass a resolution calling for a ceasefire and thus to stop fire from the Israeli side, but the US neutralized the attempts. Americans replied that it was a different type of a situation, there were terrorists and they had to be suppressed. They also claimed that the situation in Yugoslavia was different and had nothing to do with the current developments in the Caucasus. My source said that at the moment talking to Americans in the UN Security Council was completely useless.

All that remains is to admit that Moscow's recurrent warnings concerning the imminent demise of the entire system of international relations as a result of the "Kosovo independence" did not help. Now that the collapse is an accomplished fact, there are no reasons for Russia to refrain from acting according to the new rules of the game, and not only in South Ossetia but also in other regions where it has vital interests, including the Balkans.

[1] <http://www.geotimes.ge/index.php?m=home&newsid=9375>

[2] http://www.finchannel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=9895&Itemid=55

[3] http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2008&mm=05&dd=09&nav_id=50095