

## **The Significance of the European Factor in the Resolution of the Conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia**

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It has been thirteen years since the UN sought to resolve the conflict between Georgia and its separatist region of Abkhazia, but no notable results have been achieved at the present time (especially, in regard to the question of the political status of Abkhazia). Against a background of obvious ineffectiveness of the UN, it has become more and more urgent that conflict resolution and peace-keeping operations become one of the main directions of the European Union's (EU) policies. They should realize in Brussels that the security and economic welfare of the EU are interrelated with security and economic welfare of its neighbors. Since 2004, Georgia has already been included in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), and in 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria become members of the EU, Georgia will be the nearest neighbor of the European Union. That means Georgia will have a common maritime boundary with the EU. After Turkey joins the EU, Georgia will have a common land border with the EU (according to the widespread prognosis, talks on joining the EU by Turkey will be finally completed in 2012). It is very important, because the establishment of peace and stability in close neighborhood is within the security interests of the EU itself. Considering the abovementioned, the EU will by all means try to pay more attention to the Abkhaz problem to make its positive contribution to a final resolution of the conflict.

The relations between Georgia and the EU have a long history. Starting in 1993, the EU has been providing a significant support to the states of the South Caucasian region, and the overall support to Georgia has totaled more than 390 million Euros. However, it should be mentioned that the EU has never considered Georgia as a separate entity (there has been no individual approach toward Georgia): In Brussels, the policy of the EU toward Georgia has always been considered as part of the common EU policy toward the entire South Caucasus, as a region. In July 2003, the EU appointed its special representative to the South Caucasus and, thus, stressed its growing interest in the region. At the same time, an unchanged regional approach was once again observed. This situation is not desirable, because an excessive concentration on the Caucasus factor will possibly establish the image of Georgia as a country of non-European traditions, and that will naturally diminish the chance of strengthening the European component in resolution of the Abkhaz conflict, and will not help Georgia's aspirations for the eventual EU membership. Thus, in 2007-2008, Georgia must gradually carry out a policy of re-defining itself in the Black Sea region, and at the same time, it must make every effort towards the Black Sea region, not the South Caucasus (it is quite a realistic endeavor, since in 2007 Georgia will have a common maritime boundary with the EU<sup>146</sup>). From this viewpoint, the proposal of Romania concerning the establishment of

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<sup>1</sup> The essence of re-definition is the following: the country 'leaves' the region that gives rise to negative association. Implementation of the above re-definition policy is also desirable for Georgia, because the South Caucasus reminds people of corruption, ethno-political conflicts, terrorism and organized crime, as well as of social poverty. A successful "re-definition" policy will give Georgia an opportunity to become less dependent on the problems in the North Caucasus and in Nagorno-Karabakh.

the Black Sea – Europe Region is a rather appealing initiative. It is expected to promote resolution of the conflicts by establishing a favorable regional environment.<sup>147</sup> Considering the favorable geographic location of the Black Sea (the Black Sea represents the kind of bridge between the West and the East), the region has an enormous importance for Europe (for Central Europe in particular.)

By being concentrated on the Black Sea region, Georgia, on the one hand, will ‘dissociate’ itself from the problems in the other two South Caucasus states (including the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh), and, on the other hand, will ‘dilute’ the backlash potentially caused by its closeness to the highly explosive region of the Middle East. The southern neighbors of Georgia – Armenia and Azerbaijan, will remain as the so-called “buffer zones” between the EU and the Middle East, while Georgia will be shifted to the list of closest neighbors of the EU. Another important trend that Georgia should follow is to actively strengthen its European (not ‘Caucasian’) identity. It should be stressed at all possible international levels that Georgia is of European nature, not only by its historical background and spiritual culture, but by its political culture as well.

It must be pointed out that, unfortunately, the Black Sea is not regarded as a whole entity in the EU policy, from the security point of view. Though, considering that not only Georgia has pro-European aspirations, but Ukraine and Moldova do as well, the belt of the pro-European states has actually been established around the Black Sea. These countries are likely to become real candidates for EU membership in the-not-so-distant future. Besides, as it has been already mentioned, Romania and Bulgaria will join the EU in 2007. The Republic of Turkey will probably become a member of the EU in the foreseeable future. That will eventually make the Black Sea region. Naturally, Europe will be more motivated in such an environment to establish a stable and long-term period of peace in the Abkhaz region (the EU will have more reasons for interference in the resolution of the only armed conflict at the Black Sea coast). And then, the EU will have to think seriously how to deal with the Abkhaz issue, and what kind of role (positive or negative) the Abkhaz factor could play in a new Black Sea region, and how Abkhazia could integrate in to this area. In this context, everyone should realize that Abkhazia could integrate in to this area only together with the rest of Georgia. Any other outcome of this process is implausible. If Europe seeks peace and stability in the Black Sea region, it must contribute to the settlement of the Abkhaz problem by carrying out a policy based on the respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders.

Although from the geographical point of view, Abkhazia is not as close to the EU as, for example, Transdniestria, the EU should play a more active role in order to facilitate a settlement of the dispute over the conflict in Abkhazia, since the EU is gradually coming nearer to the entire region of the South Caucasus and Abkhazia in particular. In the frames of the “Wider Europe” initiative, the European Union assumes a commitment to actively interfere in the resolution of the conflicts, existing not far

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<sup>2</sup> On 30 March 2006, representatives of 10 countries including Georgia met in the Romanian town of Constanza under frames of the international conference Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea Region, and they held dialogue on the topic of establishment of the Black Sea Euro-Region.

from its borders.<sup>148</sup> “A shared neighborhood implies burden-sharing and joint responsibility for addressing the threats to stability created by conflict and insecurity”<sup>149</sup>. In this context, the policy of the EU towards the conflict in Transdniestria seems very interesting. This policy is especially interesting because it is carried out in the context of a dialogue with the USA and, what is more important, Russia. The EU managed to establish a fixed policy regarding Transdniestria.

The EU should have the same approach to the internal conflicts in Georgia. It is vitally important to ask the EU not to be indifferent towards the conflicts on the territory of Georgia and actively interfere in their settlement. Help from the EU is especially important in the Abkhaz conflict. Naturally, future trends of full-scale resolution of the Abkhaz conflict are within responsibility of the national governments, including such powerful states as Russia and the US. These two states are very influential for the parties to the conflict, as well as for the whole Black Sea region. By that reason namely, the peacekeeping activities of the EU regarding the Abkhaz conflict should be carried out simultaneously with an intensive dialogue with the US and Russia, as it is already happening in Moldova’s Transdniestria region.

To this day the EU has no political role in the Abkhaz conflict (in contrast with the conflict in Transdniestria).<sup>150</sup> The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus is not directly engaged in conflict mediation in any of the political conflicts, including Abkhazia. Even more, so, it seems that there is no uniform policy regarding the Abkhaz conflict either in EU, or NATO (especially it refers to the Black Sea dimension of the Abkhaz conflict). There is no clear policy regarding the entire Black Sea region, either.

Therefore, the government of Georgia has to do its very best in order to include an EU component in the settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia. More active support from Brussels, as well as membership in the EU, as another external foreign actor, both in the peaceful resolution of the Abkhaz conflict and the post-conflict rehabilitation, will be evidently a step forward for both Georgia and the whole Black Sea region. Definite efforts have been already taken from that viewpoint. The government of Georgia is holding talks on how to galvanize the process of resolution of its internal conflicts using both the ENP format and the EU-Georgia Action Plan. Nevertheless, a lot more has to be done, and much more than in the past. It would be helpful to include a more precise definition of particular instruments of resolution of the internal conflicts of Georgia in the bilateral EU-Georgia Action Plan, to be possibly

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<sup>3</sup> The initiative of the Wider Europe was formulated in spring 2002, and it basically implied relationships of the EU with Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. In March 2003, address of the European Commission (Communication) was issued, and relationships of the EU with eastern and southern neighbors were fixed under it. Georgia was not included in the Wider Europe initiative (because of geographic factor), as the address referred to direct neighbors of the EU only, i.e. those with common either land border, or maritime boundary with the EU. Despite it, the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia gave a fresh positive start to rapprochement of the EU to the South Caucasus. In 2004, Georgia and its South Caucasian neighbors were included in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP).

<sup>4</sup> „Wider Europe – Neighborhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbors“, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Brussels, 11.03.2003, COM (2003) 104 final. [[http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2003/com2003\\_0104en01.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2003/com2003_0104en01.pdf)], p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Several member states of the EU play the political role, and namely, Great Britain, France and Germany (these Countries are members of the so-called UN Group of Friends, and they participate with the above status in the talks on Abkhaz conflict.

signed before the end of 2006. One should think of particular instruments of resolution of the Abkhaz conflict. From the above viewpoint, the EU will possibly play a role of some kind of “frame structure” that will establish proper grounds for solution of the problem of constitutional nature. Besides, the EU can act either as a mediator, or an arbiter (the third party). Preparation of particular forms and instruments of possible participation of the EU in the settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia is quite possible, and the task is quite realistic if a proper political will is expressed by the EU. According to Bruno Coppieters, “It will not be easy to include the EU in the membership of the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia. But the practical difficulties of achieving such direct participation by the EU have to be overcome”<sup>151</sup>. It is time for the EU to overcome internal political restrictions by engaging itself directly in the Abkhaz conflict transformation and conflict management.

There is even a practice of joint measures by the EU and NATO much known as the “Berlin Plus” agreement. “Berlin Plus” – is a short title for a comprehensive package of agreements, based on the format of strategic partnership between the EU and NATO, and serves as the foundation for practical work between the EU and NATO, inclusion peace-keeping operations<sup>152</sup>. Including of the EU and NATO component in resolution of the Abkhaz conflict is also necessary for significant reduction of influence of Russia in the Black Sea region. The factor of Russia is another challenge to European and Euro-Atlantic security. The Black Sea region (including the water area of Azov Sea) is part of the south-eastern zone of responsibility of NATO and, consequently, any attempt by Russia to retain the status quo and to provoke destabilization in Abkhazia directly contradicts the long-term interests of the EU and NATO. For Europe’s security, preventive measures should be taken in the Black Sea region against terrorism and separatism, and, especially, in order to do away with a danger caused by the aggressive policy of Russia. The EU and NATO must ensure elaboration of a coordinated approach aimed at implementation of peace initiatives in the conflict zones of Georgia. European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) is one of such optimal approaches under which the frames of operation by the military observers’ mission is possible.

Abkhazia, Georgia is a “frozen conflict” that needs a political solution, and as a part of it we would like to have the EU do the peacekeeping. Under the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), such kinds of future peacekeeping activities of the EU as peacemaking operations, peacekeeping operations and crisis management operations could be considered as possible alternatives.<sup>153</sup> It is very important that crisis

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<sup>6</sup> Bruno Coppieters. The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict (Chapter 5) –

[[http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/1-](http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/1-2004Chapter5.pdf#search=%22bruno%20coppieters%2C%20the%20Georgian-Abkhaz%20Conflict%22)

2004Chapter5.pdf#search=%22bruno%20coppieters%2C%20the%20Georgian-Abkhaz%20Conflict%22].

<sup>7</sup> The Agreement on partnership between the EU and NATO is based on the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) Declaration that was approved on 13 December 2002. The Declaration includes four components of the so-called Berlin Plus Agreement: 1) ensuring of participation of the EU in planning of NATO operations; 2) use by the EU of asset and potential of NATO; 3) participation of the NATO European leadership in the EU operations; 4) adaptation of the NATO defence planning systems to the EU operations aimed at consolidation of forces.

<sup>8</sup> In 1999, after the Amsterdam Agreement was put in force, Member States to the EU fixed common approach to the foreign and security issues - the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that from its side envisages forming of the common defence policy of the EU. Thus, the EU European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) represents the integral part of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In 1999, under European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), the EU set the so-called “Petersberg tasks” that implied such operations of the EU as peacekeeping operations, peacemaking operations and crisis management operations.

management be implemented by means of both military operations and civil instruments (civil crisis management operations). We think it is practical for Georgian diplomacy to work for this purpose too, as well as to try to assure the EU leadership at all possible levels of necessity of implementation in Georgia of any of the types of the abovementioned peacekeeping activities (we believe that the use of civil instruments in crisis management operations is more realistic). These peacekeeping activities are important because they imply possible participation of Ukraine, which also meets interests of the Georgian side.<sup>154</sup> We suppose that it would be much better if the EU makes use of the “Berlin Plus” arrangements, because that would give the US, as a NATO member country, some political control over the mission.

Despite the existence of many problems in the Black Sea region, one can already tell for sure that the region is firmly following the path of democratic development, and the so-called “Frozen conflicts” are main obstacles and major preventive factors on this road. Among those conflicts, the Abkhaz conflict is the only armed conflict on the Black Sea coast. The Abkhaz conflict represents the largest strategic danger for both Georgia and the whole Black Sea region. Actually it is a criminal enclave on the Black Sea coast which resulted from a local conflict purposefully inspired by Moscow, and that permanently threatens destabilization of the whole region. The existence of such an enclave at the Black Sea coast is no less serious a challenge to European security than terrorism, human trafficking and drug and arms smuggling. Thus, until the way out of this deadlock is found, the danger of destabilization in the Black Sea region will always exist, and, for that reason, the political security of Europe will not be fully guaranteed.

The resolution of the Abkhaz conflict is also necessary for Europe to protect its energy security and to make sustainable the energy corridor passing through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Europe and America share a common interest in the success of this corridor, particularly as they seek to diversify their energy supplies away from Saudi Arabia and The Persian Gulf. The Black Sea region is poised to become a key conduit for Eurasia of non-OPEC, non-Gulf oil and natural gas flowing into European markets and beyond (one should bear in mind that the significance of the Black Sea as the main corridor of movement of energy resources between Europe and Central Asia will increase in the future). Therefore, the Black Sea region’s long-term stability, sustainable development and integration with the West are critically important for the long-term energy security strategy of the EU and NATO members. The EU and NATO should be more active, in order to establish a secure and stable Black Sea zone, which is impossible to be done without resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia. The EU, in fact, does depend on Russian oil and gas very much, and it has to reckon with Moscow on many issues. Yet, we strongly believe that the EU must not yield to Russia in this strategic zone of the Black Sea.

So far, neither America nor Europe has made the Abkhaz conflict a top priority (regardless many attempts in the UN and the OSCE frameworks), partly because the resolution of this conflict requires hands-on political involvement, economic engagement, and a willingness to provide Western peacekeeping forces and monitors if and when they are needed (aimed at diversification of peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia).

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<sup>9</sup> On 13 June 2005, 9<sup>th</sup> sitting of the EU-Ukraine Council for Cooperation was held in Luxemburg where an Agreement was signed. Ukraine got the right of participation in the crisis management operations and operations under European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) under the Agreement.

But the long-term peace and stability in the Black Sea region will also require either a change in Russian behavior or a reduction in Russian political influence. Evidently, the main problem regarding the resolution of the Abkhaz conflict refers to the destructive policy of Moscow in this region. Moreover, Russia has no intention of changing its policy, and it still shows a confrontational approach toward Georgia. Russia can change its destructive policy in one case only - if the western world, Brussels and Washington in particular, exert strong diplomatic pressure on Russia at the highest level. Under 'the highest level' we mean such international forums as the G-8, the EU-Russia Council and the NATO-Russia Council (Any other level or format including the UN and the OSCE is insufficient, and that has been a proven fact for a long time). Only in those frameworks is it possible to make Russia agree on compromises with the West and to oblige it to show a more relaxed approach toward the Abkhaz issue.

In the case no structural changes, it is desirable for Georgia to take its place in Europe and in the world, and in case such external actors as the EU and the US do not intensify efforts to resolve the Abkhaz problem, a serious danger of keeping the status-quo for a long period of time will exist in the Abkhaz part of the Black Sea region. Such a situation will also mean having a slow-burning conflict hearth near the EU borders.