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**THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S NEO-IMPERIAL  
EXPANSIONIST STRATEGY FOR THE POST-SOVIET  
REGION DISCUSSED USING THE EXAMPLE  
OF THE RUSSO-GEORGIAN CONFLICT OF 2008**

**Keywords:** International relations, post-soviet area, Russian Federation, Georgia, Caucasus, separatism.

**ABSTRACT:** The subject of this article is the analysis of the conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia in 2008. The conflict has opened a new stage in Russia's strategic drive to make decisions and implement them in areas recognized as important for the security of the country, even if they are outside its borders. The Georgian case clearly indicated that Russia wants to maintain its dominant position in the entire post-Soviet area. The region of the Caucasus remains an extremely important area for Russia, where it wants to maintain strategic control. The author proves in his article that the main determinants influencing the policy of the Russian Federation in the Caucasus region are: maintaining the greatest possible impact on the internal situation of the countries of the region, the maximum hindering possible integration with the Euro-Atlantic structures, the largest economic dependence on Russia, taking control over key sectors of the economy, maintaining military presence, isolation of the North Caucasus from Georgia, maintaining a monopoly on energy supplies, interest in Azeri mineral resources, striving to take over control of natural gas transport.

The Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008 was one of the elements of Russia's demonstration of the consequences of maintaining its dominant position in the post-Soviet

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area. The sphere of influence extends not only to Eastern Europe but also to the so-called Putin's doctrine extends, in fact, to the entire area of the former USSR.

### PRELIMINARY NOTES

The aim of this article is to analyze the 2008 conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia. The struggle opened a new stage in Russia's pursuit of a position where it could independently make decisions and implement them in areas it considered as important for its security, even if they lay outside of its borders. The Georgian case was a clear indication that Russia wished to maintain its dominant position towards more than merely the "near abroad" states.

In his analysis, the author verifies the following research hypotheses:

- a) the first hypothesis – the Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008 was another example of the implementation of Russia's strategic pursuit of maintaining control over areas it considered as important for the state's security, even if they lay outside of its borders. As mentioned above, this was connected with Russia's self-awarded monopoly to have the casting vote in resolving disputes within the territories of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), including the option to use armed force in situations recognized as threatening the security of Russian interests in this part of the world. The military activities undertaken by the Georgian armed forces aimed at regaining control of the rebel regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which however became independent from Georgia as a consequence of the conflict, much to the benefit of the Russian Federation.
- b) the second hypothesis – as a result of the operations carried out in Georgia in 2008, Russia's determination in its consistent pursuit of strengthening its own security within the so-called soft underbelly, as the Caucasus tends to be referred to (Maciążek, 2010), was exposed. Russia made it clear towards the whole world that maintaining its dominant position in this volatile region, one of a strategic importance to the transport of oil and gas to the West, was a natural goal. Moreover, of all the region's states only Georgia demonstrated, after Mikheil Saakashvili took the office of President, clear pro-Western tendencies in its international policy.

That situation was unacceptable for Russia, which is why it undertook decisive political and military activities within its spheres of influence, at the same time emphasizing that it was only after securing its important national interests, including the protection of its nationals abroad. We are currently facing similar rhetoric and activities in eastern Ukraine, where the ongoing fighting with the Ukrainian army serves the purpose of ensuring the federalization of the Donbass and, in the longer run, the establishment of a separatist quasi-state built on the foundations of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics

- c) the third hypothesis – protection of Russian-speaking nationals living abroad fits well with the catalogue of Russia's strategic actions undertaken towards the former USSR territories, which is sometimes referred to as the neo-imperial expansionist strategy. The first and most important task for Russia is to restore its strategic control of the post-Soviet region, establish Russia's exclusive sphere of influence there and force the West to acknowledge such *status quo*. In particular, this refers to Russia invoking extralegal categories (such as national interest, truth and justice) for justification of its policy, and to considering the use of armed force as a legitimate tool for protecting the fellow countrymen abroad. The foregoing doctrine (sometimes referred to as the Putin Doctrine) constitutes a conceptual basis of Russian dominance within the post-Soviet area.

At the same time, the doctrine provides justification for the process of restoring the unity of the "Russian nation" (Russian-speaking community), either within the framework of a tight integration block (the Eurasian Economic Union), or possibly even a state (the USSR light).

- d) the fourth hypothesis – it must be remembered that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus became one of the few post-Soviet regions marked by this level of national and political complexities. The newly-created states of Georgia and Azerbaijan saw the reemergence of old unresolved ethnic conflicts: the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict, the Georgian–Ossetian conflict and the Armenian–Azeri conflict.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CAUCASUS IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S STRATEGY FOR THE POST-SOVIET REGION

For centuries, the Caucasus has been an area where the interests of states claiming it to be their property or at least their exclusive sphere of influence have clashed. The region was fought for by Mongols, Persians, Turks and Russians, the last of whom managed to subdue the disputed area in 1813 and confirm their rights to it in 1823. Both Ciscaucasia and Transcaucasia belonged to the Russian Empire, and then the Soviet Empire until 1991. In the meantime, the aforementioned peripheralization of the region was softened by the increasing significance of fossil fuels and the development of the oil industry, particularly in the contemporary Azerbaijan (Włodkowska, 2008). In 1991, the Caucasus made its comeback to “the Great Game” as an area where not only the neighboring countries clashed, but also American and European (in the form of the EU) penetration began to be noticed (Gołaś, 2011). For the Russian Federation, weakened when compared to the power of the USSR, the Caucasus became to be an area troubled by such problems as terrorism, illegal drug trafficking, religious extremism and regional conflicts (Bryc, 2009). The last of these were the product of complicated historical circumstances arising from ethnic issues. Transcaucasia is currently experiencing the Armenian-Azeri conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Georgian-Ossetian conflict over the status of South Ossetia and the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict over the status of Abkhazia. Russia has been involved in each of them, and its participation has not been limited to mediating in specific issues but extended to supporting one of the parties and, in extreme cases, using its armed forces (Furier, 2005).

The foregoing circumstances have led to a situation where the Russian Federation's strategy for its Caucasian policy has been mainly driven by the following determinants: to preserve the largest possible influence on the internal situation in the region's states, to put maximum effort into hindering their Euro-Atlantic integration, to make them as economically dependent on Russia as possible, to maintain markets for the sale of Russian goods, to maintain military presence, to isolate the North Caucasus from Georgia, to maintain a monopoly in the supply of energy sources, and to pursue taking over control of natural gas transport (Malak, 2008).

As stated earlier, it is *inter alia* the important communication routes between the North and the South, as well as the East and the West, that determine this region's political attractiveness (Iwańczuk, Kapuśniak, 2008). Its location on the border of a number of civilizations, traditions and cultures is another hallmark of the specificity of the Caucasus (Topolski, 2008) Since the very beginning of the conflict over spheres of influence in Caucasia, Russia has been facing the challenge of regaining and keeping control of the transport routes for energy sources that cross this region. Among them are such pipelines as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE), Baku-Supsa, Mozdok-Tbilisi, Ciscaucasia-Transcaucasia and Baku-Novorossiysk (Włodkowska, 2008).

As it comes to the Caucasus, Russian most complex relations were with Georgia. It must be emphasized that the latter joined the Commonwealth of Independent States during the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict of 1993 (Janicki, 2009). Despite its accession, the Georgian government decided relatively soon to create new – unfavorable to Russia – foreign policy and security strategies, which were meant to ensure integration with transatlantic and European energy networks. These actions resulted in the establishment in 1997 of a group of states including Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldavia (hereinafter referred to as GUAM). Wishing to join the political and military body of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Georgia withdrew from membership in the Tashkent Agreement in 1999 (Siekierzyński, 2005).

An even greater concern for Russia arose when the so-called „Rose Revolution” of 2003 brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power. His election brought about the setting of a course for radically pro-Western – particularly pro-American – policies (Musiałowicz, 2008). Georgia's regional importance was also influenced by the opening of the BTC (in 2006) and BTE (in 2007) pipelines, which significantly reduced Tbilisi's dependence on Moscow for energy sources, thanks to which Georgia's attractiveness as a transit country increased (Wyciszkiewicz, 2008). Georgia's resilience to external pressure was substantially enhanced after it regained control of Adjara in May 2004 (Strachota, Bartuzi, 2008).

In 2006–2007 the relations between Georgia and Russia deteriorated considerably. The aforementioned application by Russia of a hardline foreign policy consisted in introducing an embargo on water and wine and raising gas prices, which led Russian Federation nationals being arrested in Georgia under es-

pionage charges. In October 2006 Moscow blocked Georgia's communication routes completely. The beginning of the next year brought another gas price increase for Tbilisi, which caused another energy crisis in this country (*Rocznik Strategiczny 2006/2007*).

Attempts at resolving the conflict on a political level were undertaken for more than a decade, but every one failed. This was accompanied by incidents (shooting at each other, arrests) involving all the parties. After the aforementioned "Rose Revolution", the tension between Georgia and the separatists exacerbated noticeably. This was caused by the new authority's pursuit of a clear-cut resolution of the conflict, even if it was to entail the use of military force. In 2007, within South Ossetian territories inhabited by Georgians and controlled by Georgia, Georgia established administration called "The Provisional Administration of South Ossetia".

### THE GENESIS AND ESCALATION OF THE ARMED CONFLICT OF 2008

The separatist aspirations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which enjoyed the support of Russia, led in August 2008 to the use of military force during a five-day armed conflict. Russia unilaterally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, providing them with military support. These territories, formally being part of Georgia, are to date *de facto* independent states.

Russia's ambition, wounded after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine on the one hand, and Georgia's pursuit of seizing South Ossetia in 2008 on the other, resulted in the stepping up of activities over a few months. It should be recalled that the political establishment led by Mikheil Saakashvili, together with the chief commanders of Georgian armed forces, commenced activities aimed at stabilizing the situation in South Ossetia. They adopted a plan for a swift military campaign using a substantial part of the military force at hand. Their will to resolve the conflict in a military manner was partly due to the fact that after the above-mentioned "Rose Revolution" Georgia had changed its military doctrine and increased military expenditure. A large role in the development of Georgian armed forces had been played by American advisors and American, Israeli and Turkish military instructors. The training support had contributed to a qualitative change in organization of the armed forces, which particularly

applied to the army. Georgia's Russian-made equipment had been modernized, and new arms purchased from, *inter alia*, Ukraine (tanks, armored personnel carriers, anti-aircraft systems, a missile boat), Turkey (light wheeled armored personnel carriers), Israel (reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles, carbines), or Bulgaria (mortars) (Barabanow, Ławrow, Cełujko, 2009).

Russia and Georgia did not formally declare a war on each other, nor did they break off diplomatic relations, and throughout the few days of the conflict both the parties – although they did not comply with the Third Hague Convention (Convention relative to the opening of hostilities. The Hague, 18 October 1907) – were convinced they alone were right (Kosienkowski, 2008).

On 7 August 2008, Georgia's leader Mikheil Saakashvili extended to the Ossetians an offer of Russia-guaranteed autonomy within Georgia and announced a unilateral ceasefire on the border with Ossetia. His proposal met the resistance of the Ossetians. Therefore, the authorities in Tbilisi decided to pacify the rebel provinces by force. At 22:47 it was publically announced that the President of Georgia had ordered "the restoration of the constitutional order" in South Ossetia (Cyganok, 2011). The fighting broke out on the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 with Georgian artillery shelling South Ossetian paramilitary troops in Tskhinvali and in the area of Java. The Georgian attack on South Ossetia came from southeast and was designed to capture the separatist republic's capital and then continue northwest (Grodzki, 2009). Following fierce street fighting the Georgian troops, which outnumbered their opponents, already occupied at least half of Tskhinvali by midday (Grodzki, 2009).

Early morning of 9 August 2008 saw the breaking out of more intense fighting than the clashes from the night before or the previous day. The Georgian army, supported by tanks and artillery fire, attacked positions occupied by the Russians and the Ossetians (Cyganok, 2011). This was the day that the Georgian troops, with artillery support, undertook an offensive in a number of directions.

In the evening, despite the fierce fighting, the Russians managed to gain a definitive advantage in the city itself and now controlled much of its area. By noon that day, 100 Georgian tanks and almost 8 thousand soldiers had been involved in the clashes (Grodzki, 2009). The fighting was not only for the South Ossetian capital and the surrounding hills, but was held in other places, as well. During the whole day of the war, the Russian forces concentrated in the area

were receiving reinforcements with additional logistic support and artillery units.

In the morning of 10 August 2008, the Georgian army once again moved into the attack against the Russian troops, as a consequence of which it seized control of practically the whole South Ossetian capital for a few hours and, as the Georgian authorities announced, crushed the Russian military deployed in this city. Although the night came, very dynamic fighting continued, now to the south of the capital. Repulsing the Georgian troops and driving them away from the South Ossetian capital became a priority for the Russian army. They made it at midnight. The Georgian troops were also driven from other Ossetian territories back into Georgia (Tiszajew, Katzitatze, 2009).

Before 12 p.m. on 10 August, the northern part of Tskhinvali was already controlled by the Russians, who came in such large numbers that they were able to seize the whole city by the evening. At the same time, the Russians, backed by the Ossetians, kept attacking the Georgians defending themselves around the city, while the Russian air force continued bombing selected targets. At the end of the day the Georgian forces withdrew south of Tskhinvali, which wrapped up the third day of fighting in this region.

On 11 August, the Russian troops continued fighting the Georgian units, with the largest clashes of that day focusing on the village of Zemo Nikozi, located south of the capital. Mi-24 attack helicopters joined in with intensity, incapacitating the defending Georgians and thus contributing to the Russians gaining advantage (Tiszajew, Katzitatze, 2009). On the same day, the 104<sup>th</sup> Air Assault Regiment of the 76<sup>th</sup> Air Assault Division bypassed the Georgian line of defense and, avoiding the main fighting venues found itself at the rear of the Georgian troops. At Warani, they clashed with surprised Georgian soldiers, who were beaten.

12 August 2008 was the last day of warfare. The Georgian forces in central Georgia withdrew in the Mtskheta-Tbilisi direction. In Gori, already before noon, preparations for defense began and the civilians were evacuated. Unexpectedly, these efforts were abandoned and withdrawal to Mtskheta, a city situated 25 kilometers north of Tbilisi, was undertaken (Tiszajew, Katzitatze, 2009). During the retreat tanks, rocket launchers, armored personnel carriers and personal equipment were abandoned, whereas the behavior of the reserve soldiers compounded anxiety and panic not only among the civilians. As a re-



sult of that, in the afternoon there were no Georgian soldiers in Gori to defend it as it was surrounded by Russian forces. In turn, Ossetian paramilitary units began to screen Georgian towns and villages in South Ossetia, which caused masses of Georgians to flee those areas. Simultaneously, Russian-Abkhaz forces crushed Georgian units in the Kodori Valley. During the clashes, the Russians carried out a tactical landing of two hundred and fifty soldiers at the rear of the Georgian forces (Tiszajew, Katzitzadze, 2009). A truce offered by the Georgians was rejected by Russian authorities, who did not even intend to submit it for discussion at their highest administrative levels (Ławrow odrzuca europejski projekt rozejmu, 2008). Additionally, information was published at the same time that at approx. 4 p.m., on the President's order, the Georgian high command had begun a complete retreat of all forces from central Georgia in order to defend the Georgian capital, and the Russian forces had started to enter Georgia from Ossetia.

After the five days of fighting, the two separatist republics solidified their status of independence from Georgia, with the latter having lost not only in military but also political terms as it failed to achieve its strategic objective of liquidating the separatist movement in the rebel regions. Georgia was forced to undertake peace talks the conclusions of which were unfavorable to it. At the same time, in order to end the conflict, then President of France Nicolas Sarkozy and then Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE Alexander Stubb held talks on 12 August 2008 with Dmitry Medvedev, where they agreed on a six-point plan ending the Russian-Georgian conflict (Zasztowt, 2009). The plan provided for:

- a) a commitment not to use force
- b) complete cessation of military actions
- c) free access for humanitarian assistances.
- d) return of the Georgian armed forces to the places of their permanent location
- e) the Russian armed forces pulling back on the line preceding the start of hostilities
- f) a start of international discussions on the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the ways of providing their stable security.

On 13 August 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy went to Tbilisi in order to secure Georgia's endorsement of the agreement achieved in Moscow. He did secure a preliminary endorsement, but due to a difference of opinions

concerning the sixth point of the agreement the talks were suspended (Zasz-towt, 2009). On 14 August the earlier-announced withdrawal of Georgia from the Commonwealth of Independent States became a fact. On 15 August 2008, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice arrived in Tbilisi and announced political support to Georgia in this conflict. During this visit, President Mikheil Saakashvili endorsed the ceasefire plan including a modified version of the sixth point.

## CONCLUSION

Russian authorities once again showed that maintaining a dominant position within the post-Soviet territories was one of the key elements of the country's political strategy. This was confirmed in President Medvedev's 31 August 2008 interview for Russian media, in which he presented five principles on which the government's foreign policy would be founded (*Chronologia soobytij w Južnoj Osetii*, 2008). The principles were:

- Russia's relations with other countries will be based on recognition of the primacy of international law;
- The world should be multipolar, without accepting the domination of any state;
- Russia is open to develop friendly relations with other countries, including the Western states;
- Russia is determined to protect Russian nationals and their economic interests also abroad;
- Russia will develop special friendly relations with neighboring countries situated within regions in which Russia has privileged interests.

In conclusion, it should be found that the Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008 discussed in this article was one of the elements of Russia's demonstration of its determination to maintain its dominant position within the post-Soviet territories. The near abroad does not only extend to Eastern Europe, but in fact over the whole area of the former USSR, where the Caucasus, due to its geostrategic significance, plays a special role in this regard. Firstly, as mentioned above, after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine Russians have become particularly "sensitized" to pro-Western tendencies emerging in foreign policies of some of the former Soviet republics. This, for example, has applied to the Republic of

Moldova, or Georgia. Secondly, the Putin Doctrine is being analyzed not only from a commentary but also scientific perspective. The starting point for the analysis was the Russian President's statement made in his 2005 state of the country address, where he claimed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. For some time now, Russia has been working on a project referred to as "the Soviet Union light". This characteristic scheme not only refers to Ukraine, Belarus and Moldavia, but practically includes all the former Soviet republics. The doctrine is centered around a vision of the world recognizing the existence of a natural civilizational community with the Russian Federation at the core. This Russian world is to be focused on the Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian community, and more widely construed as the Russian-speaking people living within the post-USSR territories (Orzechowski, 2015).

The concept of hybrid warfare has come into wide use in the context of the "phoney war" that began as a result of Russian aggression against two eastern regions of Ukraine. This form of conflict is an unconventional one, where one of the parties does not officially declare a war on the other, but where the military nature of its operations clearly shows who the aggressor actually is (*Gibridnaja wajna Rossiji protiwn Ukrainy*, 2015).

Some analogy with hybrid warfare can be spotted in the Russo-Georgian clash of 2008. Such a hypothesis appears to have been confirmed by general Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, who in his 26 January 2013 address to a session of members of the Academy of Military Science delivered his interpretation of the above-mentioned concept of "hybrid warfare", making a reference to the current situation in Ukraine, but also mentioning the Georgian conflict. In his opinion, in both these cases the actions undertaken by Russia were not spontaneous. Quite the opposite, they were in fact well thought out and planned long in advance. Long after the end of the conflict with Georgia Russia kept assuring that it had only been responding to Georgian aggression in South Ossetia as it developed, only to admit four years later that – which is confirmed by some statements made by the highest commanders and generals – Russia's plans for a war with Georgia had been prepared much earlier (Gierasimow, 2013). Therefore, it can be concluded that the hypotheses proposed at the beginning if this articles have been positively verified.

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