

“THE CAUCASUS NEEDS A REST AFTER THE WAR”

Interview with Alexander Rahr*

Conducted by Jan Künzler for CRIA

Question: Six weeks ago, the war between Russia and Georgia over the secessionist Georgian provinces Abkhazia and South Ossetia ended. What is the current situation, especially concerning the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Georgian territory?

Rahr: The current situation is quite different from the status quo which existed in the region between 1992 and 2008. The Russian troops will be withdrawn from the Georgian mainland, but they will stay in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These secessionist regions have been recognized as independent states by Russia. I think that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will join the collective security pact of the CIS countries in the next months. They may even become members of the so-called Russian and Belarusian Union State which would give Russia the legal fundament to keep its troops in both republics. The broader picture will be like the following: the Russian troops will leave Georgian main territory and the former Russian peacekeeping missions in the secessionist provinces will be recognized by observers from the EU which will get an OSCE mandate to monitor the borders between Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This will not take place without conflict and harsh rhetoric on either side, but is the most likely scenario for the upcoming weeks and months.

Question: As reasons for the massive Russian intervention - even in the Georgian heartland- foremost two reasons are frequently stated: The geopolitical importance of Georgia as a transit route for resources to the West as well as the will of the Russian Administration to stop the expansion of western interests in the post-Soviet area. What is your explanation?

Rahr: The Russian intervention in Georgia served four main goals:

First: Russia wanted to protect its peacekeepers and the inhabitants with Russian passports. If Russia had failed to protect its interests and safeguard its peacekeepers, the Russian Great Power status would have been badly damaged.

Second: Russia clearly drew a red line to the West; much like the West did 50 years ago in the Cuba Crisis. Russia is not going to accept a further expansion of the NATO in the heartland of the post-Soviet territories, which are regarded as specific and historic zones of influence of Russia.

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Therefore, the response was very harsh, including the destruction of Georgian infrastructure and the humiliation of Georgia and also that of the USA and the West.

Third: another aim was, of course, to regain its sphere of interest in the big energy game which is conducted in the Caucasus, maybe even to weaken Georgia as a future transit state for energy flows from east to west. Russia sent a clear signal to western investors that investments in Georgia are not safe and the Nabucco Pipeline is dead.

Fourth: Russia destroyed the infrastructure of the Georgian army in order to make the Georgian side less capable of making a new effort at a military solution in South Ossetia in the future. This makes clear that it was also a military task.

***Question:** In the Caucasus crisis, Russian aggressiveness and Western cautiousness were peculiar. What are the implications for the other hotspots like Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria?*

Rahr: The Russian aggressiveness was peculiar, but the role of the Georgian aggressiveness should not be underestimated. It provoked the Russian response. The issue of the Georgian intervention will be the subject of a very intense discussion inside the Georgian elite and President Saakashvili will probably not survive this internal debate politically.

You can compare the Transnistrian issue with South Ossetia and Abkhazia because most of the citizens of Transnistria have Russian passports. At the same time we see that the situation in Moldova itself is less tense. The President of Moldova, Voronin, is not Saakashvili - he is not willing to solve the problem by force and he is not presenting Moldova - like, for example, Yushchenko in Ukraine does - as another victim of Russia. On the contrary, he is willing to solve the Transnistrian issue in the framework of a kind of (con)federation for Moldova in return to the Kozak-Plan. This plan was developed by Russia in 2003 and was partly accepted by Moldova by this time, but was fully rejected by NATO and EU. I think it is now possible to return to the Kozak-Plan in Moldova. Before the developments of the 8th of August, this could have been a very interesting concept for Georgia as well.

My feeling about Nagorno-Karabakh is that the Russian influence over this conflict is much smaller than that over Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Nagorno-Karabakh is an issue which is being dealt with much more seriously on an international level. There is a strong involvement of the USA and of France, which has a considerable Armenian diaspora. This is much more crucial in this context than the Russian involvement. Of course Russia is playing its game in Nagorno-Karabakh, but it is not the ultimate force which can do what it wants in that part of the Caucasus. The Turkish influence is an important factor as well. The Nagorno-Karabakh issue is much more complex and much more difficult to resolve. But anyway, I think the EU has heard the recent wakeup call and is beginning to engage in this region. The resolution of the frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the key tasks of the EU in the region.

***Question:** The EU and the NATO have vital interests in the South Caucasus which currently seem to clash with those of Russia. What kind of strategy could prove successful to protect them? Isolation of and confrontation with Russia or rather an engagement-oriented approach?*

Rahr: I do not think that one can say that the interests of the EU really clash with those of Russia. The EU has not fully positioned itself in the Caucasus yet. So we will see whether there will be common interests with Russia or a clash of interests in the future. NATO is also not positioned in the South Caucasus and it is split about the topic of its enlargement in the Caucasus. Considering this, I do not see NATO interests clashing with those of Russia, either. They may clash soon, but there is still a possibility that the expansion of NATO to Georgia will be postponed. Furthermore, a country like Azerbaijan is not ready to join NATO not only because of its problems with Armenia which, in turn, is a member of a different military organisation [*author's note:* The Collective Security Treaty Organisation]. The Caucasus needs a rest after the war. And Georgia alone in NATO is not making the region any safer.

But that does not mean that the West will relinquish its influence in the South Caucasus to Russia. What I predict is a stronger development of the EU security and defence policy in the region. Maybe the EU soft power along with NATO power could find the political will to do more than they have done before, including a new mission on Nagorno-Karabakh to try to solve this conflict in an attempt to bring Turkish and Armenian interests together. Although the current US Administration favours a containment policy towards Russia, I still think an engagement-oriented approach is possible.

Question: Russia sent a clear signal that it is willing to secure its interests in the so called 'near abroad' even by military means if needed. Ukraine is a country seeking membership in the EU which includes with the Crimea a territory of great geopolitical importance where the majority of the population is constituted by ethnic Russians. What are the implications for Ukraine?

Rahr: The Crimea is indeed a region with a huge population of ethnic Russians, but according to my knowledge this fact is changing. The ethnic group of Tatars is growing quickly and could become the biggest minority, a fact that should not be underestimated. Another aspect is that the Ukrainian constitution prohibits double citizenship. Russian citizenship - if it is really offered to Russians on a large scale, as is stated by the Ukrainian foreign minister and disputed by the Russian Foreign Ministry - confronts the people with a very difficult dilemma. The situation is very different to what we have in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where the inhabitants had no connection to the Georgian state, the Georgian police or the Georgian authorities. I do not believe that the majority of the population of ethnic Russians in Ukraine or the Crimea wants to be part of Russia as is the case in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What could happen is that a conflict will develop over the Black Sea Fleet. For example in the case that the Russians want to demonstrate is that they are not willing to leave Sevastopol in 2017, when the agreement over the use of the naval base will expire. On the other hand this situation could be worsened by the Ukrainian side, when they try to push the Russians out of Sevastopol earlier than 2017 in order to promote its ambitions for the NATO membership. This is a dangerous moment which should be watched closely.

Question: In November the USA is electing a new president. What type of policy towards the Caucasus region could be expected of the candidates?

Rahr: To be honest, I do not think the Caucasus will play a major role. The financial crisis is by far the most important issue. In general one can say that McCain will probably be more favourable to a containment policy towards Russia and that Obama will be more reluctant.

He will look for opportunities for cooperation, but he will probably not be doing it by himself, but by listening to the European attitude towards Russia more closely.

***Question:** The rhetoric in the West and Russia in the aftermath of the conflict resembled that of the Cold War era. Is there a threat of a new Cold War? And does Russia want to restore its empire?*

Rahr: It is true, the rhetoric resembled that of the Cold War. But I do not see an upcoming confrontation like in the Cold War era. There might be an attempt of Russia to restore its empire, but not in a classical sense of warfare and of occupying territories. Russia does not have the military means and is not in the economic situation to do that. What Russia could probably try to do is to develop mechanisms for the reintegration of post-Soviet areas, which could under the circumstances become neo-imperialistic. The reintegration process could go hand in hand with pressuring states through energy policy to the subordination to Russian influence. Russia could make attempts to replace pro-American regimes with more Russian friendly regimes, but the Russian capability for such a policy is very restrained.

But it could also be possible that this will not happen. There will be a process of integration in the post-Soviet area, because almost everywhere states are coming together and trying to integrate in regional alliances in order to become economically more efficient; but this process does not necessarily have to take place under a Russian flag. It is also thinkable partly under a Chinese flag, or partly under some kind of Kazakh flag. Also the idea of the GUAM [Organization consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova] could be revived in a certain way. With such integration, the West could not only live with it, but it should even support it. The EU-membership brings the promise of prosperity and financial support. If we close the door of the EU to countries like Ukraine or the South Caucasian states, because we are frightened to overstretch the Union, then we should not be alarmed if these countries will seek other forms of integration with the Islamic world, with Asia or again with Russia.