

opini3n

EUROPA



81

August
2010

GEORGIA, AUGUST 2010: Conflict flows under frozen hostilities

Carme Colomina

Research Fellow CIDOB

Two years after its five-day's war with Russia little has changed in Georgia. The postcards evoking Russian military threats sold in the small souvenir shops in Tbilisi's old town are just one sign of the lingering presence of the 2008 conflict over the secessionist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There is a similar mark on the minds of the people: they are still living a post-war experience. "Fear of Russia" rhetoric poisons every political discussion and it's a card President Mikheil Saakashvili plays constantly, in both internal and external politics, even if the European Union insists that Georgia's relationship with the EU will never be a matter of choosing between Brussels and Moscow. Tanks remain silent, but the Russo-Georgian propaganda war is still going on.

There is also a deep disappointment in Brussels regarding Mikheil Saakashvili's rhetorical tone and concentration of powers. The European Commission's country progress report published last May insists on the "need to continue with democratic reforms, especially in political pluralism and media freedom. Improve separation of powers, independent court system and protection of Human Rights". "Politically motivated kidnappings and assaults, poor prison conditions, abuse of prisoners, arbitrary arrest and detention, politically motivated imprisonment or excessive use of force" have been also denounced by the latest U.S. Department of State's report on Human Rights in Georgia. However, Mikheil Saakashvili's government seems to be back on track on its long journey to the West, so abruptly disrupted in August 2008. A number of events took place in recent weeks that have been crucial: Hillary Clinton's visit to Georgia; the European Union opening talks on an Association Agreement; and the extension of the mandate for the EU monitoring mission until September 2011. All of them mean good news for Saakashvili, who was already boosted by local elections held in May. Those were a hard test for the President's movement, for opposition parties and for democracy itself. Not everyone was a winner. Elections were declared "free and fair" and the ruling party, Saakashvili's United National Movement, scored a comfortable majority, particularly in the capital, Tbilisi, considered by opposition forces as their stronghold. However, there is no real party system or internal political dialogue as such in the country, a very post soviet feature that Georgia hasn't been able to get rid of, in spite of the high expectations that the Rose Revolution in 2003 raised at home and abroad. Polarization has become more acute since 2007, when corruption and economic problems disconnected citizens from government and they took to the

streets in protest, forcing the president to resign. But Saakashvili managed to be re-elected and he is again, and by far, the most popular politician in the country. His second and final term expires in 2013, but the May elections reinforced Tbilisi's present mayor, Gigi Ugulava (34), a young but shrewd politician and close ally of Saakashvili. In a scenario involving more than 30 small opposition parties and movements gathered around charismatic or well-known personalities - who on the most part have real difficulties explaining the differences in their political programmes - Mr Ugulava is already considered "the coming man".

The issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remains unresolved. The two regions are no closer to genuine independence than before the five-day's hostilities. The process of international recognition failed to go any further than a short list of four countries: Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and the small island of Nauru (13,000 inhabitants, south of the Marshall Islands), a country known for selling its vote in international organisations. Russia has consolidated its position as the big economical, military and political brother of the two territories, ignoring the full implementation of the 2008 ceasefire agreements, which oblige Russia to reduce troop levels to those mandated before the hostilities and to withdraw from previously unoccupied areas. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are actively preventing the European Union civil mission from checking that the conditions are fulfilled, turning the EU policy of "knocking at the door" of both enclaves into an absurdity with no tangible results. Nonetheless, getting closer to the European Union is not only on Georgia's interest but is also that of territories like Abkhazia, set on a path of nation building and trying not to depend exclusively on Russia. The door for a dialogue is half-opened and the EU has a crucial mediator role to play. The European unarmed civilian mission will stay in Georgia for another year, but Brussels already feels that this will be the last chance since, lacking in progress; the value of the mission erodes. Security incidents are decreasing but conflict remains. There are still 280,000 IDP's (about 6% of the country's population), most of them from the breakaway war of the early 90's, and the real challenge is getting them back home. Not much progress has been achieved. Two years after that short blitz war, the main call is to avoid the consolidation of a frozen conflict that will keep the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in limbo and strengthen Russian military presence at Georgian borders. Stabilisation, that magic word for European foreign policymakers, would not prevent hostilities from breaking out again.