

SIPU report for the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA)

Under contract 'Advisory Services for EU – Ukraine, Sida ref: 2007.002743'

Date: 3 September 2008

REF: SIPU/JMWEN ASS. 02

The Positions of the Main Ukrainian Stakeholders on the Russia–Georgia Conflict

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Key points:

- Ukraine's political parties are seriously divided on how to respond to the conflict between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia;
- Nasha Ukraina–Narodna Samooborona has adopted a pro-Georgian stance, as has President Yushchenko, whilst the Party of Regions and the Communists are more pro-Russia. Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc has tried to remain neutral; Ukrainian society is equally divided on the issue.
- The conflict between Ukraine's political elite on to respond to the crisis has been ruthlessly exploited for electoral advantage by all political forces in the run-up to the next Presidential elections, which will take place in a year's time. It is unlikely that Ukraine will be able to agree on a uniform position on how best to respond to the changing dynamics in relations between Russia and the non-EU former Soviet republics.

Introduction

As a result of the conflict in the Caucasus, Ukraine has found itself in a delicate situation as the two warring sides happen to be two of Kyiv's strategic partners. Moscow's use of the Black Sea Fleet during its military actions is not in violation of the Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation about the status and terms of the stationing of the Federation's Black Sea Fleet on Ukrainian territory. Consequently, this particular point is not discussed in the document.

However, Kyiv has violated the terms of the Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between Ukraine and the Republic of Georgia. Art. 4 clearly states that each side commits itself to not allow its territory to be used for the preparation and carrying out of aggressive military actions or other forcible moves against the other party to the agreement and that should one of the sides become subject to aggression, the other side will not provide the aggressor any military assistance or other form of support.

This paper discusses the positions of the various Ukrainian stakeholders who are deeply divided on the issue between support for Russia and support for Georgia.

I. Ukraine's Political Parties and the Conflict in the Caucasuses

In the Verkhovna Rada, which has not convened to prepare a common position regarding the conflict in the Caucasus, only the pro-presidential bloc, **Nasha Ukraina–Narodna Samooborona** has adopted a pro-Georgian stance. NS deputies Volodymyr Ariyev and Yuriy Stets have registered a draft resolution with the VR condemning the military intervention of armed forces of the Russian Federation on Georgian territory. Some members of the NU–NS bloc have also proposed a renunciation of the CIS pact and the Ukraine–Russia Agreement on the status and conditions for the Russian Black Sea Fleet to be stationed on Ukrainian territory.

The Lytvyn Bloc has taken a neutral stance. Mr. Lytvyn would like to establish a foreign policy position that rejects the forced accession of Ukraine to NATO and gradual steps to gain this status with genuine guarantees of independence and national security. Furthermore, on 28 August Mr Lytvyn warned political parties in Ukraine about supporting one or another party in the conflict and called on the Ukrainian government to solve the issue of Russia's recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia via the United Nations.

The Communists supported Russia and condemned President Saakashvili's actions. The Communist Party's position is that the policies of Georgia's President are a reflection of the aggressive policies of the US and its partners. The leader of Crimean Communists, Leonid Grach, was particularly hostile in his comments. He stated that Crimea "will never allow itself to be dragged into NATO as a part of Ukraine and will not agree to stay within Ukraine if it is dragged into the Alliance." Moreover, the Communist Party's parliamentary faction submitted a resolution to impeach Yushchenko for his support of "Georgian aggression against South Ossetia".

In the first days of the Russia–Georgia war there was no clear statement of a position from the two largest political forces in the Rada, the Party of the Regions and the Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko, whose leaders are evidently hoping for support from Russia, as well as from voters in both western and eastern Ukraine in the upcoming presidential race.

The Party of Regions Presidium waited until 12 August, the final day of military action, and then merely called on Ukraine's government to protect national interests and to avoid standing unambiguously on any one side of the Georgia–South Ossetia–Russia conflict. One PR spokesperson, Hanna Herman, even proposed forming a temporary VR commission to investigate the sale of Ukrainian arms to "hot spots."

The PR's main spokespersons (MPs Vasyl Kyseliov, Vasyl Horbal, Oleksandr Kuzmuk) mainly concentrated on criticizing the Ukrainian president for its pro-Georgia stance in the conflict which led to tense relations with Russia. A more radically pro-Russian position was sounded by the PR leader Viktor Yanukovich on 26 August, the day after the Russian President's decree. He called for Ukraine's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia: "We must act without any double standards – we must do what the West did when Kosovo declared independence".

This position was immediately supported by the Crimean regional organization of the Party of Regions and by MP Yuriy Boiko, former minister of Energy and Fuel and one of the lobbyists of RosUkrEnergo in its gas deals with Russia (the Ukraine–Russia consortium that manages Ukraine's gas pipeline), while other party members have not commented on it yet. Victor Yanukovich's position has been supported by the Party of Regions in an implicit way. A day after the trip to the USA of Raisa Bohatyriova, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, where she had supported the President's line and called Victor Yanukovich's statement 'his personal opinion', the political council of the PR expelled her from the party list.

The clear position of Victor Yanukovich in supporting Russia can be explained by the growing competition for Russia's political support in the forthcoming presidential campaign and his need to boost his popularity in the Southern and Eastern regions of Ukraine. The other reason why Victor Yanukovich has dared to suggest that Ukraine should recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states is that he has a different perception of the threats coming from Russia: the Caucasian scenario would not be repeated in Ukraine, if Ukraine returned to a Russia-friendly policy. The PR leader called for the adoption of a new Constitution at a future VR session. The Party of Regions has proposed its version of a new draft of the Constitution which would include the neutral status of Ukraine and recognition of the Russian language as a second state language.

Victor Yanukovich did not repeat his claim to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia in his speech at the opening of the parliamentary session on 2 September, but concentrated on criticizing the President for worsening Ukraine-Russia relations. The Party of Regions initiated a resolution in the Parliament to create an *ad hoc* commission to investigate the facts about deliveries of Ukrainian weapons to Georgia against the Ukrainian and international law. This resolution was supported by the Communists and the Lytvyn Bloc.

The Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko made its first public statement even later on 15 August. The text seemed to be aimed at pleasing both Tbilisi and Moscow, condemning the use of force to resolve the conflict situation in Southern Ossetia and called on both sides in the conflict to choose the path of peaceful agreements within the framework of international law. At the same time Yulia

Tymoshenko has clearly distanced herself from the President's line, she even sent her own Envoy of the Government of Ukraine to Georgia, Vice Prime Minister Hryhoriy Nemyria, in contrast with the President's Envoys from the MFA.

Yulia Tymoshenko has taken a cautious position in order to balance between Georgia and Russia. In her first public statement on the Russian–Georgian conflict on 21 August Mrs Tymoshenko supported the territorial integrity of Georgia but did not criticize Russia at all. On the one hand, Yulia Tymoshenko wants to keep good relations with Russia, especially in the light of the negotiations on the imported gas price this autumn. Just before the start of Russia's operation in Georgia, she visited Kremlin and talked to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for the first time in this position. On the other hand, the BYT leader is trying to take a catch-all position in the upcoming presidential campaign. After the electoral defeat of Nasha Ukraina and the President in the last parliamentary elections the main source of increase in Yulia Tymoshenko's support lies in the electorate of the Eastern and Southern regions, where pro-Russian orientations are traditionally strong.

Although Ukraine's President reconfirmed the urgent need to continue the integration of Ukraine to NATO and Nasha Ukraina launched NATO-YES! public campaign as a reaction to the Russia invasion into Georgia, Yulia Tymoshenko kept maintaining an ambiguous position on NATO. BYT's main foreign policy adviser, Vice Prime Minister for European Integration, Hryhoriy Nemyria, was alarmed at the threat for Ukraine of remaining in "the security vacuum" and the "grey zone" and called for the strengthening of the security aspect of Ukraine's integration into the EU, particularly Ukraine's integration into the European security and defence policy (ESDP).

From the first days of the conflict **Ukraine's President**, by contrast, has taken an active position and fully supported his Georgian counterpart. Together with the leaders of Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, he visited Tbilisi and participated in measures to support the Georgian sovereignty. From the very first days of the conflict, the President sent the first Deputy Foreign Minister to Georgia to assist in resolving the conflict. Victor Yushchenko's pro-Georgian position is consistent and predictable: the Presidents of Georgia and Ukraine are united in both personal friendship and a revolutionary past, antipathy towards Moscow, joint efforts to revive GUAM (known as the GUAM Organization for Democratic and Economic Development since 2008), and other initiatives in the post-Soviet arena aimed at integration with the EU and a reduction of the Kremlin's influence, such as the Forum for the Free Choice of Democracy in 2005.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is subordinate to the President, criticized Russia's decision on the recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia: "The declaration by the Russian parliament is viewed by Ukraine as a particularly dangerous precedent which will sharply destabilize the security

situation in the Caucasus region and throughout the entire post-Soviet space and will have a negative impact on the peaceful solution to inter-ethnic conflicts throughout the world". Furthermore, the MFA condemned the position expressed by PR leader Victor Yanukovych, accusing him of "holding consultations not with colleagues in the parliament, but with those outside of Ukraine".

On 13 August Mr. Yushchenko also signed the National Security and Defence Council's decree on the establishing a procedure for the military personnel, military vessels and aircraft of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation stationed on Ukrainian territory to cross the border of Ukraine. Starting from this moment, a system based on permits has been introduced. Accordingly, Ukraine may require Black Sea Fleet vessels to leave its territorial waters if they violate the special procedure for crossing the state border, which requires the Russian fleet inform Ukrainian HQ 72 hours in advance, about the crossings, weapons, equipment and crews.

Besides this, the President of Ukraine issued a statement through his press service on 15 August. There are two main points in the President's position. One is ensuring the territorial integrity of Georgia, because this will have a direct impact on ensuring Ukraine's own territorial integrity. The second is a proposal to Russia that it immediately prepare a treaty on the option of using the Black Sea Fleet for military purposes. In addition, the President condemned the position of ambiguity that is supported "by certain politicians and, possibly, even some of the people" and called on everyone to come up with an active position and an action plan.

Russia let it be known that it has no intention of fulfilling this decree when the Deputy Commander in Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, Anatoliy Nogovitzin, announced that the Russian armed forces consider legitimate only those orders coming from their Commander in Chief, that is, the President of Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry declared this decree as a "serious anti Russian move" that violates agreements between Moscow and Kyiv regarding the stationing of the Russian Federation's Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine.

III. Conflict between the President and the Government

The presidential decree on the BSF has provoked a political conflict between the President and the Government. The President's Secretariat accused Yulia Tymoshenko of delaying the implementation of the decree (the Government approved the new rules on functioning of the Black Sea Fleet on the territory of Ukraine by its decision in June 2008, but never published them; then when at the peak of the Russian-Georgian conflict, the President introduced new rules by his decree, the Government did not hurry to adopt technical documents to bring the President's decision into force) as well as state treason and political corruption. The Presidential Secretariat Deputy Head stated that "the political government of Russia is paying particular attention to its decision to support Tymoshenko in the

next presidential elections in Ukraine after conditions were met as to the passive stance of the premier and her political forces on the conflict in Georgia.”

The Party of Regions’ reaction to the President’s decree was rather moderate. The opposition shadow minister of defence, Oleksandr Kuzmuk, criticized the unilateral manner in which the new rules for the BSF had been introduced, but he did not attack the content of the President’s decree.

IV. Ukrainian Society on the Russian–Georgian Conflict

The results of public opinion polls which reflect the reaction of Ukraine’s society to the Russian-Georgian conflict were presented by the polling services of the Razumkov Centre and the Kiev Gorshenin Institute of Management Issues.

According to their results , Ukrainians are divided in their opinions about who was guilty in the conflict in South Ossetia: 29,2% of respondents consider that fault for the aggression is with Georgia, 24,7% with Russia, 19,6% with both countries and 3.7% – with none of them, according to the Razumkov Centre.

60.5% of Ukrainians consider Georgia's operation in South Ossetia as being against the law, while 10.3% of Ukrainians consider that it happened according to the law. While a lesser percentage of Ukrainians, 49.9%, consider Russia's military operation against Georgia as illegal, 23.5% consider it legal.

At the same time, more than half of respondents (55.9%) hold the opinion that the Caucasian scenario could be repeated in the Crimea. 18.9% could not answer the question, while 25.2% do not believe in the possibility of similar conflict, according to the Gorshenin Institute.

About 47.4% of respondents have a negative attitude towards the participation of the Black Sea Fleet in the military conflict in South Ossetia. At the same time 54% would vote against Ukraine's membership of NATO.

I think we have to add the results of one more poll made by Razumkov Centre. They have published the results today and their polling company is trustworthy.

Conclusions

There is no consolidated position on the part of Ukraine’s political elite and society regarding the Georgian–Russian conflict and its consequences for Ukraine. Thus it is unlikely that a consolidated state policy will emerge on this issue. At the same time, the conflict near the Ukrainian border has become an additional field for political competition in the country.

The main political forces in Ukraine have different or even opposing positions on the Russian–Georgian conflict and its impact on Ukraine. While the President of Ukraine has taken a more assertive pro–Georgian position and reaffirmed Ukraine’s move towards NATO, the Prime Minister has tried to balance between Georgian and Russian interests in the conflict and is extremely reluctant to take

actions which could be regarded as anti-Russian. The opposition of Party of Regions and Communists have taken a more pro-Russia position and do not regard Russia as a potential source of threats for Ukraine. While Victor Yanukovich insisted on the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and amending Ukraine's Constitution to introduce formally neutral status for Ukraine, the Communists are more radical, offering to impeach the President of Ukraine for an alleged betrayal of Ukraine's national interests.

The fact that the main state bodies, especially the Verkhovna Rada and the National Security Council failed to respond instantly indicates that Ukraine is not prepared to come up with a well-informed, rational policy on this issue. As with Kosovo, whose independence has not been commented on officially by Ukraine's Foreign Affairs Ministry, the Russian-Georgian conflict shows that when it comes to difficult international issues, Ukraine has no particular position – it is easier to sit on the fence. The steps taken by President Yushchenko aimed to break this trend by issuing a decree on the Black Sea Fleet and calling on political parties to elaborate on the action plan, while the main political parties have not developed any analysis of the situation in the Caucasus and its consequences for Ukraine. Moreover, they have not proposed any plan of policy action, but instead used the conflict as a tool in the political competition. On the first day of a new session of the VR, eight resolutions on the situation in Georgia were submitted by all the party factions in the parliament, but none of them could find the support of a majority. Even though the Russian-Georgian conflict was discussed in the parliament for around 7 hours, this issue was used by all the political parties to reach their varying political goals: to weaken the President's or the Prime Minister's influence, not to come to a compromise decision on the strategic issue.