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THE IMPACT OF THE SOUTH OSSETIAN CONFLICT ON UKRAINIAN POLITICS

The article examines how the 2008 war fought between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia impacted the cultural and political cleavages of contemporary Ukraine.

Keywords: *politics, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia.*

Introduction *

Prior to the start of the 2008 war in South Ossetia, the conflicts of the South Caucasus were seen by Ukrainians as nothing more than the outcome of contemporary international politics. Even though these conflicts developed and played out on the territory of the former Soviet Union, they were not especially important to Ukrainians. But starting from the first day of the war on 8 August 2008, such perceptions began to change as events in South Ossetia, Georgia, and Abkhazia began to influence the internal politics of Ukraine.

The advance of Georgian troops on Tskhinvali (or Tskhinval, as the city is called in the Ossetian language) on 8 August 2008, and the succeeding Georgian–Russian military conflict, served to provoke serious political confrontations among Ukrainian political elites. These confrontations in turn revealed the deeply rooted cleavages that exist in Ukrainian society. The conflict in the Caucasus, though seemingly far away, has had unpredictable repercussions not only for Ukrainian political life, but also for Ukraine’s fragile economy.

The South Ossetian conflict’s impact on Ukraine – not only on Ukraine’s internal and international politics, but also on its public opinion and state institutions – is of prime importance for academics hoping to understand post-Soviet Ukrainian society and other types of culturally and civilizationally divided

societies. It is also important for those who hope to work out a realistic set of policies of national reconciliation for Ukraine, policies which aim to preserve Ukraine as a united nation. The Russian–Georgian conflict demonstrated the dire weaknesses of the political system in Ukraine, as well as the risks of official attempts in Ukraine to conduct various hegemonic policies that benefit one cultural or political group at the expense of the others.

The Stages of the Conflict and Its Interpretations in Ukraine

The 2008 war in South Ossetia had two clear-cut and distinct stages: (a) several days during which Georgian troops advanced on Tskhinvali, and then (b) the days during which those troops were militarily routed by the Russians and South Ossetians. Georgia’s defeat by the Russians was then followed by weeks and months of control of large parts of Georgia by the Russian Army. This “periodization” is also relevant to the war’s effects on Ukraine’s politics.

The first days of Georgia’s initial “military success” in Tskhinvali (which saw a significant number of casualties for South Ossetians and Russian peacekeepers) was not accompanied in Ukraine by “patriotic celebrations of a victory over separatists,” as was reported by the Russian media regarding the celebrations of some Georgian diaspora in Moscow. But certainly, the events were welcomed by many high-ranking Ukrainian officials and politicians whose political values incorporated the slogan which had long ago, in the 1930’s, been launched by the words of the famous national-Communist

* The materials of this article are based on the author’s presentation at the International Symposium “Trans-Border Politics in the Black Sea Rim” held at Hokkaido University (Sapporo, Japan) on 5–6 of March, 2009 [1].

Mykola Khvyliovyi: “*Het’ vid Moskvy.*” In other words, “Let’s go as far as possible from Moscow.” The Ukrainians belonging to this political trend were ready to greet the success of Mikhail Saakashvili in defeating the separatists. And accordingly, the purpose of Ukraine’s official massive supply of weapons to Georgia (prior to the 2008 war) did not oppose the idea of the “reunification of Georgia” via the “legitimate use of force.”

A second trend in Ukrainians’ perceptions during the initial days of the war in South Ossetia, quite critical of Georgian leadership’s politics, stemmed from a profound lack of understanding as to how Russia would respond. Would Russia again let things transpire like it did in the Serbian Krajina in Croatia in 1995? (But those were the times of Boris Yeltsyn, which have already passed long ago).

Representatives of a third trend (to which the author of the present article belonged to) were supposing that it must be a skilled manoeuvre of Russia, creating for Mr. M. Saakashvili and his team a trap similar to that which the US had allegedly prepared in 1990 for Saddam Hussein (in fact, offering him a chance to attack Kuwait, but not the chance to get away with it).

And a fourth trend’s adherents just watched and thought of how better to adapt themselves to the changing circumstances.

The second stage of the war has brought in some other emotions and questions and reformulated the arguments used in support of various trends’ (camps’) views and assessments.

A first group mentioned above had split into two camps. One camp continued uncritically supporting Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili. For example, the President of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, personally visited Tbilisi and spoke there at a large meeting, together with the top leaders of Poland and the Baltic states. V. Yushchenko’s speech was not openly anti-Russian, like that of the Polish president, but its thrust should be more properly understood not in terms of the rhetoric used as much as in the “message” itself. V. Yushchenko clearly took on the side of the Georgian leadership.

A second camp of Ukrainian elites (and the public in general) adopted a more balanced approach – criticising both M. Saakashvili and V. Putin, albeit for different wrongdoings. Among the basically anti-Russian and pro-Euro-Atlantic politicians that took this second stance, the most prominent was the talented politician and ex-Minister of Defence of Ukraine, Anatoli Gritsenko.

A third camp among both the Ukrainian elite and the public took a different tack, opting to show its pride in the fact that Russia “did not forget those who asked for her support and understanding.” Though some of the political analysts in this camp

did point out publicly that the arguments employed by Russia’s leadership against the Georgian one were often inadequate and counterproductive, they nonetheless took the Russian Federation’s and South Ossetian side in the conflict. Still, this third group went about its support for Russia and South Ossetia in a nuanced way. For example, the core issue as they saw it was the protection of the human rights and lives of Ossetian civilians, and of Russian peacekeepers who were ruthlessly killed in an attack on Tskhinvali *, rather than the issue of Russia wanting to protect its “citizens” (Russia had previously given most South Ossetians citizenship). Indeed, Russia’s official arguments about the need to protect its citizens did not always play well in Ukraine, where they created tensions in light of the possible claims in the future to interfere “on behalf of its citizens” in Sevastopol and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Similar tensions must be avoided in some of Ukraine’s areas bordering with Hungary and Romania, where those two states are extensively granting either their “foreign compatriot’s” (“foreign Hungarian”) passports for ethnic Hungarians, or their citizenship – as Romania does to those who themselves, or whose parents or grandparents, have been living in the territories controlled by Romania prior to the Second World War.

Some analysts belonging to this group were also wondering if the 2008 war represented not only a political “trap” for Georgia (having now created a unique, favourable chance for an independent South Ossetia and an independent Abkhazia), but also – on a larger scale and in a longer perspective – a “historic trap” for present-day Russia, for whom it is still early to start independently undermining the world hegemony of the USA. Even China still does not dare to act so openly and radically while opposing a unipolar world model.

Finally, a fourth camp among Ukrainian public opinion was formed around the traditional folkloric principle of a number of Ukrainians: “*Moia khata skraiu,*” or “My house is aside.” This group was comprised of political elites whose perception of their mission was simply to avoid any confrontation with Russia at the same time as they tried to please the West. Members of this group wanted to show that they accept the European Union’s points of view on the South Ossetian conflict; and they even offered Georgia some humanitarian aid. This group’s

* In this regard, M. Saakashvili went much further than did the US General Wesley Clark nine years earlier, in June 1999 (at that time the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO forces in Europe) – he gave the direct command to a column of 30,000 NATO allied troops advancing towards Pristina airfield in Serbia’s Kosovo to overpower the 200 or so Russian paratroopers who came to Pristina airfield just a bit earlier than the NATO troops. In fact, in 1999 no politician dared to actually give the military a license to kill the Russian peacekeepers [2].

viewpoint was espoused by Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and her political allies.

The conflict in (and around) South Ossetia had many dimensions for Ukrainians. These included (1) *the geopolitical level*, where Georgia was seen not as an independent political actor *per se*, but rather as a client of another actor, such as the United States or the West; (2) *the basic national level*, which involved primarily economic and security interests; (3) *the level of relations with particular states*, or their unions (or coalitions); (4) *the interpersonal level*, which involved personal relations and inter-clan relations among the national elites (e.g. presidents of Ukraine and Georgia and their families had maintained very close personal friendships, sometimes at the expense of the national interest of Ukraine) [3]; (5) *the institutional level*, as it concerns relations within the country; and (6) *the civilizational level*, especially as it concerns “civilizational codes” and “historic memory.” All of these levels of understanding impacted the particular situation of contemporary Ukraine and have been very conflictogenic. To understand why requires some additional clarification of the peculiarities of the present situation in Ukraine.

Basic Concepts Related to Contemporary Politics in Ukraine

To understand the influence of the South Ossetian conflict on Ukraine, it is necessary to present a clearer vision of present political system in Ukraine:

A. Concepts of Three Major Political Actors in Contemporary Ukraine

The post-Orange Ukrainian political landscape has clearly presented three major political “macroformations” in society. These include (1) a union of national-democratic and radical liberal-cosmopolitan forces; (2) the social-populist forces (allied with some national radicals), and (3) post-Soviet “civilizational conservatives.” The components of all of these three blocs are “independent” or semi-independent actors that have been able to re-group and form various kinds of coalitions. There are two types of prominent coalitions at present: either some kind of a class coalition, or a civilizational (non-class oriented) union [4].

These compound (“mixed content”) post-Socialist political actors are acting in “real” political life in present-day Ukraine within various institutions and political processes. And in their abstract form, there are three “pure types” of actors defined by the peculiarities of their life values (often spiritual or quasi-spiritual): (a) *ethno-nationalism*; (b) *post-Soviet civilizational conservatism*; and (c) *technocratic populism* [5].

B. The Concept of “Dual Power” in Ukraine

Viktor Yushchenko was trying to exercise not only the symbolic and conceptual authority of a constitutional leader of the state, but also the elements of the executive power. In fact, he was executing the authority of a kind of latent “Revolutionary Council.” Such an extra-legal body – the National Salvation Committee – has been created during the Orange Revolution [6; 7], and though it was later “dismissed”, its ideas and principles have been preserved in the consciousness of V. Yushchenko and his devoted supporters. The major cultural values behind them are a democratic version of ethno-nationalism and Euro-Atlantism.

That first component of the “dual power” comprised the institutions directly controlled by the President and his team: the Presidential Secretariat, the Council for National Security and Defence, the Army (Ministry of Defence), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Security Service of Ukraine (whose acting head had been appointed by the President in an extra-legal way), the Internal Troops (subordinated to the President in a non-constitutional way), and at some stages of Ukrainian Orange (post-2004) politics, also the Ministry of the Interior. This “quasi-branch” of power included regional administrations, most heads of which were appointed by the President V. Yushchenko in a non-constitutional way. Some courts have performed as so-called “pocket courts” of the President, under his manipulation and control. Even the Constitutional Court of Ukraine had been under strong elements of presidential, unconstitutional control.

The other component of the “dual power” was the “ordinary state machinery,” which was meant to be under the control of the prime minister. But inside it, there were still some ministries and institutions headed by the presidential “appointees” (the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Health, etc.).

Such dualism of power has existed both during the “cohabitation” of opposing political factions, each one controlling different groups or components of the state institutions, and during the joint exercise of the supreme state power by the former Orange allies.

Ukraine’s Major Political Parties’ and Blocs’ Positions Concerning the South Ossetian Conflict

At the start of the conflict in South Ossetia, the President and “his” political bloc (*NU-NS*, or “Our Ukraine”–“People’s Self-Defence”) energetically supported Georgia’s territorial integrity and accused Russia of aggression. They spent their energy com-

paring Georgia's security problems with Ukraine's. In practical terms, this camp was trying to limit the Russian Black Sea fleet, and supported the Ukrainian policy of supplying weapons to Georgia. The aim was to use the war situation in Georgia to speed up Ukraine's integration into NATO. The pro-Yushchenko political bloc was also trying to win over the political bloc backing the prime minister, by making her take risky anti-Russian steps. Otherwise there would have been threats to dismiss the current government by destroying the ruling coalition by using presidential constitutional powers and his personal influence on his "coreligionaries". In rhetoric, Ukraine's "national-democrats" had some additional support on the part of marginal nationalist forces. But their extremist proposals served to destabilise the situation in Ukraine.

A second political position was held by the "Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc" (*BYuT*). This group was very cautious in trying to balance its pro-European rhetoric with practical steps to improve its relations with Russia. Its positions demanded that its populist leader, Yu. Tymoshenko, make incredible zigzags in her political stands, as a bit more than one year before the South Ossetian conflict she had published an aggressive anti-Russian article called "Containing Russia" [8] *. But soon Yu. Tymoshenko, the prime minister of Ukraine, "became a realist" (in understanding the very complex nature of Ukraine's relations with Russia) and got rid of her aggressiveness toward Russia. She soon began using just the EU formulas in her assessment of the conflict.

Finally, the Party of Regions was always very friendly towards Russia. Viktor Yanukovich, the party's leader, after the Russian Federation's official recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (on 26 August 2008), had several times mentioned the radical idea that "Ukraine should appreciate the will of the peoples of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and recognise their independence" [10]. Although the Party of Regions did not take up V. Yanukovich's suggestion, it nonetheless was actively criticising the "Saakashvili regime" and its Ukrainian supporters (including President V. Yushchenko) and initiated the organisation of a special parliamentary commission to review Ukraine's military supplies to Georgia. Regional and local organisations of the Party of Regions in Eastern and Southern Ukraine actively conducted campaigns aimed at collecting and delivering humanitarian aid to South Ossetia; and a number of

local and regional authorities controlled by that party passed political resolutions demanding recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia [see e.g.: 11; 12].

It is worth mentioning that having been elected to the post of President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich has stated that the issue of recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia "is not on the agenda" [13].

As for Ukraine's Communists, they have been always the most active critics of official Georgian policy, and of the Ukrainian President's policy vis-à-vis Georgia. Ukraine's communists proved to be enthusiastic supporters of South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence.

Coverage of the South Ossetian Conflict on TV and Cleavages in Ukrainian Society

After the conflict in South Ossetia had started, Russia almost immediately became an active participant in the war. But at the beginning, the conflict between Ossetia and Georgia was viewed as a foreign internal matter by the Ukrainian media, and Ukrainian journalists were not sent to Georgia to cover the war.

Once Russia started its military operations, it was not easy to get to Georgia by air. Almost all of the airlines refused to send their planes to Georgia, while Ukrainian insurance companies refused to insure reporter's lives. It was possible to get into Georgia only with the help of official charter flights, which were normally used by refugees and politicians. Under such circumstances, Ukrainian TV channels had to resort to using local correspondents from Georgia's own media channels. Paata Yakobiashvili, a reporter for the Georgian TV-channel "Rustavi 2," commented by phone for several Ukrainian media outlets from the hot spots in Georgia.

When Georgians were announcing their victories, Russian media were publishing contrary information. This was not just a war of the battlefield, but a war of information as well. On several days during the war, Georgian websites were not working properly. This made the media's job difficult, because in every newsroom journalists are used to accessing Internet content. Soon Ukrainian media had access almost only to Russian sources of information.

Ukraine's main TV channels labeled the Russia-Georgia conflict as a war. Ukrainian TV channels initially did not take an openly pro-Russian or pro-Georgian slant. They were acting as platforms where journalists initially gave balanced, differing points of view. The mass media highlighted that South Ossetia, Georgia and Russia were all, in their individual ways, active participants in the war, and contrasted

* Though subsequently it became clear that most of Yu. Tymoshenko's tough arguments in that article were in fact not hers. As the "Foreign Affairs" editor has written in this regard, "An essay in the May/June issue of *Foreign Affairs* paraphrased a number of separate sentences from the writings of Henry Kissinger. A representative of the essay's author claims that attribution was not provided because of an impression that *Foreign Affairs* does not incorporate citations. ... *Foreign Affairs* regrets the misimpression" [9].

the role of these parties with the passivity of the EU, NATO and Ukraine itself. This was important given that Ukraine's President at the time, V. Yushchenko, had the support of the Georgians during the Orange Revolution in 2004, and given that Georgia's president, M. Saakashvili, had received his higher education in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, and was a well-known friend of the Yushchenko family.

Still, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko played a waiting game during the conflict, not siding with any party. This move was seen by political experts as possible reverence for Russia or as a manifestation of the traditional anti-presidential position of a Ukrainian prime minister with her own presidential ambitions.

The topic of war between Georgia and Russia was covered not just in the TV news, but in well-known talk shows as well. The political experts who appeared on these talk shows tried to analyze whether the threat from Russia was real for Ukraine in the context of the Crimean question. Even after the war was over, news programmes continued to broadcast stories about Georgian families who came into Ukraine, where Ukrainian sister towns were waiting for them.

TV channels in Ukraine are controlled by various economic groups connected with particular political interests. As a result, they displayed various kinds of political biases in covering the South Ossetian conflict. While there were no openly "pro-Russian" channels in Ukraine, it could be said that "Inter" and "TRK Ukraina" were more favourable towards Russia. Moreover, Russian TV channels form part of the "cultural space" for a number of Ukrainians (especially via cable TV and satellite TV), in particular those living in the East and South. So, many Ukrainians were directly exposed to the Russian government's official positions.

Western media is also accessible to cable and satellite TV users, but to a lesser extent than Russian media. The positions of Western media were predominantly critical of Russia. Still, because Ukrainian media extensively uses Western media news products, the indirect impact of the Western media (as seen on Ukrainian TV channels) remained quite strong.

Georgian official propaganda, on the other hand, impacted Ukrainian public opinion only very slightly and not so efficiently. Even the presence of Georgian diplomats and politicians on the talk show programmes was not very effective (sometimes because of the biases of Ukrainian organizers, as in the case of the presentation of the Georgian ambassador at "TRK Ukraina"). Russia had already prepared a documentary on the Ossetian war ("War 08.08.08. History of Treachery" [14]) and made its presentation a top media hook, especially because of the awkward attempts by the Security Service of

Ukraine to create problems for its presentation. Usually lagging behind, Georgian media propaganda made an interesting attempt to fill the gap by a Georgian documentary in Russian called "The Chronicles of Georgian August," which was depicted as "the first film based not on emotions, but on documentary materials," as the journalist Ia Barateli put it when launching the film on 24 January 2009 [15]. Some study visits and seminars in Georgia that were organized by various Georgian organizations served as an efficient tool for influencing the Ukrainian professional community (in particular journalists), and especially impressing were the visits to the sights of the recent warfare, and meetings with internally displaced persons or refugees. But the overall information resources imposed by Russia were much stronger than those of Georgia in influencing Ukrainian public opinion. Still, it would be wrong to conclude that the core of the issue in forming the attitude of the Ukrainian public was just material resources. The role of "civilizational instincts" and "historic memories" were of a much higher importance, irrespective of a present day mass-media influence.

In this context, unofficial Georgian interpretations of the nature of the cleavages in Ukraine's society are important to note. Special monitoring of Ukrainian public opinion by Georgian state structures most likely was not conducted. One high-ranking Georgian diplomat, in a private conversation with the author, had mentioned that the strong "pro-Ossetian" and "pro-Russian" positions among many Ukrainians may be explained by the fact that "the Russian ambassador has much more funds available than the Georgian one."

The present research did not aspire to find the percentage of supporters of each of the major positions in Ukraine concerning the conflict in South Ossetia: (a) "pro-Georgian", (b) "pro-Ossetian" or "pro-Russian", or (c) "neutral," but rather to discover the roots of the cleavages on this issue that clearly reflect the core political and cultural cleavages in contemporary Ukraine in general. Nonetheless, professional public opinion polls conducted in Ukraine during and after the 2008 South Ossetian war clearly demonstrate that a significant majority of Ukraine's citizens are in support of Russia rather than of Georgia (see e.g.: [16]).

In analyzing present-day relations between Russia and the nations of its "near abroad," and the prospects for the near, mid-term, and long-term future, there should be taken into account various types of approaches (open, or latent, or quite possible in the future) based on different strategic visions (by the relevant actors) of the correlation between someone's perception of their own ethnicity and the responsibility for (and the attachment to) a particular society (socio-political entity). These are per-

ceived either in global terms, or regional, or local, or dispersed throughout). There are the following major types of approaches: (1) the tribalist or “fellow-countrymen” (“regional clan”) approach; (2) the approach of a typical ethno-nationalism of a developed nation; (3) the nationalism of a “super-ethnos” (or “supra-ethnos”), or of a “strategic union” of ethnoses (not necessarily culturally kin – for example, the concepts of a united Europe, or of a Slavic–Turkic cultural-civilizational world); (4) political citizenship approaches (with the main stress on the values of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural “political nation”); and (5) the predominance of a politicized, global cultural-and-political project (purely political, or religious-and-political) of one or another kind, etc. [17]. The most important aspect in the

influence of the South Ossetian conflict on Ukrainian society consisted in bringing to the surface of Ukrainian political and cultural life two major vectors in a conscious or subconscious vision of the nation’s development, as well as in a corresponding sense of cultural and spiritual belonging: (a) a multifaceted “Russian world” consisting of a number of sovereign and semi-sovereign (or even just autonomous) entities (“Russian” here refers to a sense of cultural belonging to Rus and its historic inheritors, a special type of cultural world similar in magnitude to either a European/Western, or a Chinese, or an Arab, or an Indian world, etc.; but definitely not just to a Russian Federation’s “political world”); or (b) a subordinate part of some other civilizational, cultural world yet to be defined.

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ВПЛИВ ПІВДЕННО-ОСЕТІНСЬКОГО КОНФЛІКТУ НА ПОЛІТИКУ В УКРАЇНІ

У статті розглянуто вплив війни 2008 р. між Росією і Грузією в Південній Осетії на процес подальшого прояснення ліній культурно-політичного розмежування в сучасній Україні.

Ключові слова: політика, Україна, Росія, Грузія, Південна Осетія.