



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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## BEHIND THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

*GEORGE GVIMRADZE*

EXPERT OPINION



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The situation existing in Ukraine has justly been recognized as the most acute crisis for Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century both by experts and politicians. One part of Ukraine has not just been occupied, but it has already been annexed by Russia, its neighbor and, moreover, its major economic partner. At the same time, Ukraine still stands on the verge of civil confrontation in the eastern part of the country which borders the Russian Federation and is densely populated by ethnic Russians; a rather significant part of this population supports approximation to Russia.

It is important to mention that Russia, it can be said, had decided to punish Ukraine for its foreign political choice which, as has already been made clear, dramatically opposes Russia's national geopolitical project.

In November of last year, Ukraine was due to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Russia has openly stated the inexpediency of this document several times. The main emphasis was made on the so-called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade between Ukraine and the European Union which, as Russia claimed, might have had a negative effect on the trade relations between Russia and Ukraine. Eventually, Ukraine refused to sign this document which is objectively perceived as the result of Russia's political and economic pressure. In return for this refusal, the former president of Ukraine received the guarantee of a 15 billion dollar long-term credit and the reduction of gas tariffs by one-third from Russia (indeed, Russia has officially withdrawn these guarantees).

The decision of the Ukrainian authorities caused mass protest rallies almost across the whole territory of Ukraine, especially in Kiev and in the western part of the country. Protest demonstrations were permanently arranged and characterized by occasional aggravations and clashes with representatives of law enforcement bodies. As a consequence of these clashes, dozens of people were killed from both sides. Most of the victims were people supporting the opposition. Finally, the protest actions came to an end in February just after Viktor Yanukovich, the already former president of Ukraine – in a few days after leaving the country – held a conference in Rostov in the Russian Federation.

Russia had a rather acute response to the revolution. It still does not recognize the new temporary authorities of Ukraine and regards them as non-legitimate, although without any substantiation. Russia's behavior on the Crimean peninsula was particularly important and extremely destructive.

At first, Russia occupied the peninsula and then grossly violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as the standards of international law, committed annexation which was carried out on the basis of an unsubstantiated repression of compatriots and a referendum not recognized by the international community. It should be mentioned that together with the USA and Great Britain, Russia itself was the guarantor of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity according to the Budapest Agreement signed in 1994.

Russia's interests towards Ukraine can be divided into two – 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' – parts. The following desires could be placed in the first category:

*Economic ties* with Ukraine are important to Russia. Russia is the major and, in terms of certain directions of Ukrainian production, the only buyer of it. In its turn, Russia itself is highly dependent on both Ukrainian production and the service of Ukrainian specialists, mainly in the component of space and strategic military rocket building technologies.

The *Black Sea Fleet*, located on the Crimea peninsula, is of particular importance for Russia. It gives Russia the opportunity to possess a full-value representation on the Black Sea as Novorossiysk's potential is incompatible with that of Crimea. At the same time, arranging proper infrastructure there is rather expensive which, at this stage, is unaffordable for Russia.

Equally important are *gas pipelines running across Ukraine* through which Russia supplies Europe and which make one of the most important sources of its income. In the past, there have been cases when Ukraine managed to hinder this transit. Owing to this, Russia has made a decision to build alternative gas pipelines. However, the transit energy pipeline running through Ukraine still remains to be the major one at this stage. At the same time, building of the 'South Stream' has not been completed yet and, moreover, in the context of Ukraine crisis, an idea of the possibility of suspending the project has already aired.

The issue of the so-called '*contemporaries*' is also an important component for Russia. Russia's population is very sensitive towards ethnic Russians living abroad which Russian authorities often use for certain purposes. This particularly refers to Ukraine where, as has already been mentioned, the ethnic Russian component is rather numerous, especially in the eastern regions of the country. Apart from this, the sensitivity of relations with Ukraine is conditioned by ties of relationship between these peoples.

Resulting from all of the abovementioned, it is of utmost importance for Russia that the so-called *Russophobes* do not come to power in Ukraine. It is difficult to say to what extent we can call the present authorities of Ukraine 'anti-Russian' but, if we theoretically admit such a possibility, it is understandable that it might sacrifice the abovementioned political and economic relations existing between Ukraine and Russia which will cause a serious problem for Russia. After the revolution, there were signs that ultra-nationalists had been trying to take power in Ukraine. The law on the status of the Russian language, initiated in Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada under the new authorities which, fortunately, was vetoed by the acting president, added to this problem.

Crimea's annexation by Russia makes it clear that its actions are not so much determined by the abovementioned motivations as, in order to implement those interests, it was not necessary to violate Ukraine's territorial integrity and, therefore, extremely strain relations with it. Accordingly, there emerges Russia's so-called *illegitimate interest* which probably implies the *rehabilitation of the Soviet state* or the formation of a similar super-state in the post-Soviet space. The accelerated speed of implementing the annexation of Crimea, ignoring the reaction of the international community and absence of at least a slight convincing excuse for its own action, which Russia usually pays attention to, indicate its clear intention to implement its own global project. The telephone conversation between Russia's president and the leader of the Crimean Tatars is really remarkable. After the conversation, the latter declared that the Russian president does not consider Ukraine's withdrawal from the Soviet Union as completely legal, which was also publicly announced by the latter while declaring the decision on Crimea's annexation.

It should be taken into account that if it has been determined that Russia would implement such a geopolitical project, the present situation creates the proper conditions for its implementation: Ukraine going through transformation and political crisis, the economic crisis in Europe which is interested in economic relations with Russia and whose part is still fully dependent on Russian energy resources and the present administration of the United States which is not characterized by clear and firm foreign politics.

All of this, in its turn, is connected to Russia's second illegal interest. As it is said, the more revolutions occur near Russia's borders, the more reactionary Russia will become. The authoritarian regime itself will not admit that particularly talked-about revolutions, occurring especially in the states of

its interest, are successful. Accordingly, it was very important for Russia to aggravate a post-revolutionary destabilization and defeat the revolution. Consequently, it is still expected that Russia will encourage the provocation of civil confrontation, especially in the eastern regions of Ukraine which, in the case of the realization of a certain scenario, will create the possibility of changing the power and annexing the whole of Ukraine.

Naturally, the defeat of the revolution has its internal political motivation, too, as well as Crimea's annexation. According to recent sociological surveys, in the context of the Crimean epopee, Vladimir Putin's rating has grown by 10% and exceeded 70%. Given such a growth of rating and the creation of the image of a 'powerful' ruler, which might be added to an unsuccessful revolution, the possibility of the realization of a hypothetical revolution in Russia has been delayed by at least several years; of course, this is in the case of everything going according to the scenario planned by Russia's present authorities.

Thus, it has been made clear that Russia needs the abovementioned so-called *legitimate interests* for implementing its geopolitical project. It tries to justify the unacceptability of Ukraine's approximation to the European Union by economic ties and, at the same time, to have influence on Ukraine. It is also true that the service component has strategic importance for Russia as it guarantees a proper and smooth operation of strategic arms and makes the international community consider Russia's status as that of a nuclear state. It needs the Black Sea Fleet in order to keep control over the whole Black Sea region, gas pipelines and transit of energy resources to have impact on Europe and, of course, to create wealth necessary for maintaining its international project (it mainly implies military maintenance. It is not a secret, that Russia's defense budget continues to grow rapidly and, on the other hand, it grows in order to buy loyalty of the authoritarian leaders of the states included in the geography of the integration project. The promise of submitting the credit of 15 billion USD to the former president of Ukraine can be considered to be the reflection of this assumption). Such an intention deprives its seemingly legitimate interests in Ukraine of their legitimization.

It is understandable that the existing crisis will not end without a result. It means that it might incite undesirable processes, first of all, for Russia. At this stage, as experts believe, the reaction of the West is not appropriate which is confirmed by the fact that Western sanctions did not force Russia to back out of Crimea's annexation. However, it is impossible for this situation to last for a long time. Russia made the West understand clearly that

it needs, at least, to diversify its export of energy resources. Presumably, the production of shale gas will develop more intensively which will be added by the growth of the number of atomic power stations despite the environmentalists' protests and, naturally, the implementation of these projects will not be commissioned to 'Rosatom.'

Furthermore, the West will have to impose more effective sanctions despite the fact that it will suffer significant damages, too. Otherwise, the existing situation will create a far more serious crisis in the West itself, first of all, in Europe. The Europeans have already been reminded that the present crisis is the consequence of an inadequate reaction to the aggression committed over Georgia. Leaving the challenges without response will also show clearly that Europe is not ready to face real challenges of safety and shows the weakness of its security system. Furthermore, questions were raised whether NATO would be able to respond to Russia if it committed aggression against the allied country, i. e. whether Paragraph 5 of the North Atlantic Agreement would work. Failure to give an adequate response will give more strength to Russia in the matter of accomplishing its geopolitical project, whose geography involves certain states of European Union and NATO, as well as to European Euro-sceptics themselves. Indeed, it will also lead to disappointment towards European integrity and the so-called European values and principles among the communities aspiring to this integration.

Apart from this, it is far more important that Crimea's annexation by Russia is a great blow to the fundamentals of the existing international order and system. It establishes a negative precedent for the fact that not only it is possible to review a country's territorial integrity under an unjustifiable pretext but also to broaden one's own territories by means of violating territorial integrity as well.

This fact also shows that in the future, Western sanctions will prove ineffective in other cases, too. Russia made a clear statement that if so far it has participated in coercion against certain subjects together with the West (for example, it consented to a part of the sanctions against Iran), from now on it might try to fill up the freed space against Western sanctions. Signs of this have already emerged when Russia aired initiatives on implementing joint projects with the states of the Caspian Sea basin where Iran was allotted a special place.

The existing situation creates a serious challenge for the regime of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Ukraine is a country which renounced its own nuclear arsenal in return for the guarantees of its own safety, sov-



ereignty and protection of territorial integrity received from nuclear states. However, the violation of its territorial integrity emphasizes the fact that the only real guarantee for it might have been the presence of restraining weapons in its arsenal. This might cause other states to start considering the implementation of their own nuclear programs. This, first of all, refers to Iran. In the given situation it will be much more difficult to dissuade Iran, which will lead to tension in the situation in the Near East. For Israel, it will make sense to attack Iran unless Iran states its own nuclear status.

As has been mentioned, it will have a negative impact on Russia. Apart from the fact that the West will need to apply effective sanctions against Russia, which will cause its economy to suffer substantial damage (Russian Ministry of Finances has already predicted recession); Russia has already managed to put itself into political isolation. This decision was not supported even by its direct partners – members of the Eurasian Customs Union – Kazakhstan and Belarus. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan, which is considered a candidate country of the aforementioned union, openly stated its support towards Ukraine's territorial integrity and even expressed its opinion that it is impossible to recognize Viktor Yanukovich's legitimacy, which is firmly backed by Russia, due to the victims among the participants of protests in Ukraine. The circumstances made it clear for Kazakhstan that the ethnic Russian population residing in the north of the country may be used against its sovereignty if necessary. Accordingly, Russia's image of a desirable and strategic partner has been humiliated. It is becoming obvious that the only motivator for other countries in conducting normal relations with Russia might only be ensuring their own security. In its turn, China, which also has territorial problems, still maintains neutrality with regard to this issue.

Despite the fact that in the short-term perspective Russia will use Western sanctions inside the country for consolidating the image of an enemy – moreover, if the sanctions are ineffective – in the long-term perspective it will not be able to resist the dissatisfaction of its own population in the context of economic fall. At the same time, being a country with acute ethnic problems, Russia created a precedent that referendum is enough for endorsing the move from one country and joining another. Russia has even confronted itself. It has been reminded that it has already waged two extremely bloody wars in order to maintain its own territorial integrity.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that Russia put the whole world against a very difficult challenge. It apparently started intensive implementation of the already mentioned geopolitical project. If considered separately, Rus-

sia's desire to be an independent center of alternative gravity is not illegal although the implementation of such a project might be based on Russia's attractiveness, on the one hand, and on independent decisions made by separate countries, on the other. The absence of this component, which is quite obvious at the moment, makes the aforementioned project illegitimate. Despite this, the ball is now in the West's court.