

# War in Georgia and the “Russian Card” in Ukrainian Politics

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 50

*Olexiy Haran and Petro Burkovsky*  
*National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy*  
*December 2008*

Escalation of the South Ossetian conflict into a Russian-Georgian war immediately changed the security climate in the post-Soviet space. For the first time since 1991, the Russian Federation officially rejected internationally recognized borders. The territorial integrity of post-Soviet states was among the fundamental principles of the “peaceful divorce” that gave rise to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It took six years of Ukrainian independence before Russia agreed to include this principle in a Treaty on Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation and formally renounce its territorial claims on Crimea and Sevastopol.

After the war in Georgia, it is a question whether Russia will continue to respect the obligations and promises it made in the 1990s. For now, it is clear that Russia will not tolerate independent and pro-Western foreign policies in its former “fraternal” republics, so long as it can exploit domestic vulnerabilities in these states. Being the closest and most strategically important country for Russia, Ukraine has had to adapt to the changing security environment since August 2008 and resist external and internal challenges.

## **War and Ukrainian Reaction**

Since the early 1990s, Ukraine has supported Georgia’s efforts to restore and further preserve its territorial integrity. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Moldovan Transdniestria, are cases in which Russian interference and military support of separatists was evident, and they served as warnings to Ukrainian politicians to establish a cautious but firm policy toward separatist-like political movements in Crimea. They also pushed Ukrainian authorities to seek international security guarantees.

In the spirit of solidarity, and to create safeguards against Russian revisionism of the

Belovezhsky Accords that created the CIS, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk and Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance in April 1993. While the treaty did not include provisions for military assistance, it clearly stated that the “two High Parties of agreement must not permit use of their territories for preparing and exercising aggression or other acts of force against each other. In case one Party becomes an object of aggression, the other party shall not provide military assistance or any other favor for the aggressor.” After fifteen years, this obligation played an important role in shaping Ukraine’s position when the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF), based in Sevastopol, participated in the war in Georgia. Under the next Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, other important relevant legal documents were signed, including an Agreement between the Ministries of Defense of Ukraine and Georgia (January 1995) and an Agreement on Military-Technical Cooperation between Ukraine and Georgia (November 1996). These agreements established, respectively, a framework for cooperation between the armed forces of the two states and for arms sales to Tbilisi.

This cooperation intensified after the Orange Revolution. In January 2005, Ukrainian President-elect Viktor Yushchenko and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili signed the “Carpathian Declaration,” which proclaimed support for democratic transition in both countries. The next year the two presidents expressed ideas for creating a “military dimension” to the regional organization GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova).

From this perspective, the Ukrainian reaction to the war in Georgia was foreseeable. However, it did not emerge fully-formed. It evolved from appeals to stop violence in the lead-up to and immediate outbreak of war (a classic diplomatic response to armed conflict similar to the position later developed by the European Union) to a politically demanding statement against Russian interference, calling for withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia and urging “separatists” to return to negotiations with Tbilisi. After a few days, when the Russian army had advanced deeply into Georgian territory, President Yushchenko along with the presidents of Poland, Estonia, and Lithuania, appeared at a rally in Tbilisi to show political support for President Saakashvili. A presidential decree of August 9 also gave orders to the Cabinet of Ministers to provide humanitarian aid to Georgian refugees and victims of the conflict.

As a next step, President Yushchenko endorsed a Ministry of Foreign Affairs decision to implement new regulations for the movement in Ukrainian waters of the Black Sea Fleet, especially while engaged in military action. The decree was issued after it became clear that a number of BSF warships had cruised near Georgian ports, and it was clearly motivated by the president’s desire to demonstratively support Georgia at a critical time. That said, two months earlier the President and the Cabinet of Ministers had already discussed new regulations for the Black Sea Fleet, which the government was instructed to implement. The delay can be attributed to Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko’s intention to develop regulations after consultations with Russia (to smooth negotiations over gas supply).

Although the decree exerted little effect on the outcome of the conflict, the action was of great political value for Yushchenko. He demonstrated to his Western partners, especially in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, that the Russian Fleet in Sevastopol is trouble – a source of instability and a threat to Ukraine’s territorial integrity. His message was heard in Washington and on August 16, U.S. Secretary of

State Condoleezza Rice called Yushchenko and expressed strong support for Ukraine's "steps" to stop the conflict. Later, President Yushchenko repeated his concerns about Russia's new aggressive approach toward its neighbors in influential Western press outlets such as *The Times* of London and the *Washington Post*, as well as in discussions during U.S. Vice President Richard Cheney's visit to Kyiv and an EU-Ukraine summit in early September 2008.

## **The Russian Response and Parliamentary Crisis in Ukraine**

From the start, Russia's military intervention in Georgia was accompanied by heavy propagandistic media coverage in neighboring states. The Russian interpretation of events dominated most Ukrainian broadcast and print media in August. On August 4, "preemptive" Russian allegations of Ukraine's involvement in the conflict were aired; these included an accusation by South Ossetia's *de facto* president Eduard Kokoity that Ukraine was selling heavy arms to Georgia. Such claims soon evolved into accusations by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that President Yushchenko was involved in the "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" of South Ossetians and the killing of Russian peacekeepers. After the ceasefire, the Russian military blamed the interception of Russian bombers on Ukrainian anti-aircraft systems supplied to Georgia and operated, allegedly, by Ukrainian military officers. In early September, Russian government sources started disseminating information about probable economic sanctions against Ukraine.

At the same time, on August 30, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin denied any Russian intentions to take Crimea or Sevastopol back by force. Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov followed suit, noting that Russia would not break the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation with Ukraine – as long as the BSF Agreement remained untouched and Ukraine did not accede to a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP). Through this mixture of harsh and "pragmatic" messages, Russia intended to depict Yushchenko as an "irresponsible nationalist" and promote the idea that Ukrainian authorities were adhering to a policy that fatally misperceived their country's security interests.

Debates over the Russian-Georgian war became a tool in Ukrainian domestic politics, in particular as a pretext for the long-awaited breakup of the pro-government majority in parliament. The presidential secretariat first blamed Prime Minister Tymoshenko for "betraying" national interests because she did not give her immediate support to Georgia in order to broaden her political support during the 2009 presidential campaign (instead of aligning with Yushchenko, Tymoshenko adopted the more cautious EU approach). While clearly supporting the presidential line, Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Volodymyr Ohryzko (himself appointed by the president) diplomatically observed that the prime minister did not make official statements about Georgia because foreign policy lay in the exclusive sphere of the president. Despite this explanation, the presidential secretariat continued to accuse Tymoshenko of colluding with the Kremlin and even passed alleged "proof" of her activities to the security service for investigation. In November, the Prosecutor General's Office cleared Tymoshenko from suspicion of treason, finding no evidence of crime.

To some extent, this new political scandal reminded people of the "corruption scandal" of 2005, when Tymoshenko blasted Yushchenko's "crony decisionmaking," an act which resulted in the dissolution of the first Orange Coalition. This time, it was

Tymoshenko who was the target of attack, and she reacted in the same manner Yushchenko had three years before. She agreed to form a tactical anti-presidential parliamentary majority with the Party of Regions, either to limit the president's power or force him to retreat from his policy of attacks against the government.

As always, the opposition benefited from rivalry in the "Orange" camp. In September, the Party of Regions accused the president of covering up an illegal arms trade with Georgia. With the help of the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc (BYT), it founded a special parliamentary commission to investigate. This commission served as a platform for disseminating controversial and unproven allegations to the media about Yushchenko's involvement in the Caucasian war that echoed Russian propagandistic claims. Simultaneously, the leader of the Party of Regions, Viktor Yanukovych, called for recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This maneuver promised to position the Party of Regions in the eyes of the Kremlin and Ukraine's own pro-Russian electorate as the only political force meeting Russian requirements of a "true ally." However, it caused a stormy reaction in Ukraine, and the party was forced to downplay its leader's statement.

For his part, President Yushchenko made an effort to try and seize pro-Western voters from Tymoshenko. He described the cooperation between Tymoshenko and Yanukovych as a tool of "Russian imperial influence" and a scenario for "destroying the gains of the Orange Revolution." The pro-presidential party, Our Ukraine, quit the ruling coalition, triggering a process of early parliamentary elections (the president has the constitutional right to call early elections if factions fail to form a new government within 30 days after the collapse of a ruling coalition).

Negotiations for a new coalition failed in this atmosphere of distrust and mutual accusations. Yushchenko, Tymoshenko, and Yanukovych not only refused to work on a compromise for developing a common attitude toward the Russian-Georgian war but also used the issue in their political campaigns. Furthermore, Russia redoubled its efforts to sow divisions among Ukrainian politicians. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev directly named Yushchenko as an "accomplice" of Saakashvili's "crimes," while holding friendly meetings with Tymoshenko and Yanukovych. All this played into the hands of the presidential secretariat's theory of a conspiracy between the Kremlin and the prime minister and contributed to the president's decision in early October to dissolve parliament and schedule early elections for December 2008. For its part, the Prime Minister's camp interpreted Yushchenko's actions as a plan to remove Tymoshenko from office and create a coalition with the "pragmatic wing" of the Party of Regions, re-positioning Yushchenko on the eve of the 2009 presidential campaign. The BYT thus did everything possible to disrupt the schedule and prevent pre-term elections. To date, their efforts have been successful. On December 9, despite opposition from the presidential secretariat, the previous coalition was restored with the participation of a third party, the Lytvyn Bloc, in exchange for its leader, Volodymyr Lytvyn, being re-elected to his old post as parliamentary speaker. Due to this struggle, Ukraine entered the current financial and gas crisis in political disarray, and with the prospect of early elections not yet eliminated (due to the coalition's fragility).

President Yushchenko was warned by Western diplomats that the dissolution of the Rada would erase even the slightest of chances to receive a MAP from NATO in December. In addition, sociological surveys by the National Institute for Strategic

Studies, commissioned by the presidential secretariat, revealed that Tymoshenko's position of not supporting the Russian or the Georgian side was more appealing to voters than the polarized views of either Yushchenko or Yanukovich. Although Yushchenko was able to increase his own rating by several percentage points (at the expense of Tymoshenko), less than 10 percent of those polled believed that the prime minister had committed treason. At the same time, the political crisis which began in September, and the inability of elites to agree about basic issues, decreased the level of public trust in state institutions to its lowest point since 2004.

## **Conclusions**

Although concerns about a potential threat to Ukraine's territorial integrity from Russia increased after the war in Georgia, Ukraine also faced other more familiar and formidable hazards of Russian political interference: the breeding of internal civil disarray, interference in domestic politics, and the exploitation of issues such as gas pricing, the Russian language, the Moscow Patriarchate, and opposition to NATO integration.

Different reactions to the war in Georgia became one of the factors in the subsequent parliamentary crisis which helped Russia pursue its own objectives and which damaged Ukraine's image and position in its relations with NATO and the EU. The war in Georgia exposed significant weaknesses in Ukrainian political and security institutions, as well as the rigidity of the stances of political forces in power and in opposition. It also revealed the absence of sufficient instruments to influence and shape public opinion in order to shield it from Russian propaganda campaigns, a fact which Ukrainian decisionmakers ought to take into account.

At the end of 2008, during the gas crisis with Russia, Yushchenko and Tymoshenko issued a joint statement defending Ukrainian interests. It remains to be seen whether this demonstration of unity will be translated into real progress.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

