

EU'S RESPONSE TO THE GEORGIA CRISIS: AN ACTIVE PEACE BROKER OR A CONFUSED AND DIVIDED ACTOR?

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ABSTRACT

Crises have seemed to play a substantial role in shaping the course of EU foreign policy and the one which erupted between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 is not an exception in this regard because of its impact on the EU as an international actor. On this account, this paper seeks to examine the questions of how the EU responded to this crisis and what it can do further to deal with its implications for the security of wider Europe. It first offers an analysis of EU's immediate reaction towards both Georgia's ill-fated incursion into South Ossetia and the Russian counterattack against this move. Then the analysis focuses on the division among the EU members in giving an appropriate response to the crisis on Europe's doorstep. EU member states' contradictory positions, in terms of favoring a more accommodative policy or posing a hardline stance towards Russia, are closely analysed in the article. The study ends with an overview of what the Union can do more to avoid similar imbroglios in the future when it has to respond to any crisis again in Europe.

Key Words: Georgia, Russia, the European Union, Caucasus, South Ossetia, Abkhazia

INTRODUCTION

The crisis and the subsequent conflict between Russia and Georgia in early August seem to spark questions about whether the world is heading towards a new cold war. Georgia's recent attempt to retake the control of the pro-Russian separatist region of South Ossetia by an ill-judged use of force on 7 August

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2008 resulted in a backfire on its own strategic interests within a few days with a rapid and decisive counter-offensive into Georgia-proper by Russia under President Medvedev.¹ The six-day conflict ended with the withdrawal of Georgian forces from both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as the Georgian President Saakashvili's call for help from the Western countries, most notably the US, went mostly unanswered. The crisis then quickly escalated with the US-Polish deal to base a missile defence in Poland despite Moscow's strong opposition, Russia's formal recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's self-declared independence and Washington's dispatch of several naval vessels carrying humanitarian aid to Black Sea in a show of solidarity with Tbilisi. All these steps show us that a new cold war in a classical sense which means a tit-for-tat struggle may not be imminent, but both sides are apparently ready for a protracted stand-off. It is now clear from this burgeoning crisis that relations between Russia and West need to be reassessed from now on and this reassessment also needs to consider the specific implications of this event for the relationships between Russia and the EU on the one hand and between the EU and its eastern neighbourhood on the other.

When we look at the foreign policy activities of the European Union, we see that they range enormously from security-defence related 'hard' issues to the 'soft' or 'low profile' engagements such as enlargement, development aid, the promotion of democracy and the encouragement of regional cooperation. Its involvement in security-defence fields as both a regional and global actor is divided between the realms of soft security (peacekeeping, humanitarian aid and conflict prevention) and hard security (terrorism, the proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction and humanitarian interventions). The significance of these distinctions lies largely in their implications for assessing the international identity of the EU, namely whether it is only influential in non-crisis situations or its foreign actions are also effectual and consequential in defusing regional and global crises. If you consider EU's foreign policy in a broader and longer-term context, there is no question that it is a considerably influential actor and has a strong presence in the world politics. However, this is not much the case when its foreign policy is thought in narrower terms of

¹ This crisis between Georgia and Russia has been especially intensified since Saakashvili's ascendance to power in 2004. For detailed analysis on the background of the crisis, see Güner Özkan, "Gürcistan'da Yeni Yönetim, Etnik Ayrılcı Bölgeler ve Güvenlik", in M. Turgut Demirtepe (Ed.) *Orta Asya ve Kafkasya'da Güç Politikası*, (Ankara: USAK Yayınları, 2008), pp. 211-247

security and defence policy given its apparent failures in dealing with the security threats and crises in its own backyard during the 1990s. In this regard, rising to a global power status in the EU's case as the indicative of a *complete* international actor has often been equated with going beyond the scope of solely a civilian or normative power which cannot back up its diplomatic leverage and economic strength with its coercive clout in foreign affairs when necessary. What is meant here is not of course that the EU should pursue a power-based foreign policy in a *realpolitik* sense and exert its influence over other states forcefully at the expense of its unique civilian power status which promotes democracy, human rights and the rule of law beyond its borders. In fact, the adoption of a more robust foreign policy course does not conflict with EU's being an organisation prioritising consent and cooperation over confrontation and conflict in international affairs. From the early 2000s to the present the Union seems to move towards forming a global power based on both hard and soft power with its more independent resources and capabilities, going beyond the concepts of civilian power or sub-system Europe despite that these two characteristics are still in place. It has showed a considerable capacity to survive from its past mistakes and has not ceased to be ambitious in foreign affairs in the face of a policy failure. However, as evidenced by its ineffective and confusing policy towards the crisis in Georgia, the EU as a political actor is still far from being a full-fledged global power which can actively influence world politics together with other major powers, let alone rival them.

The European Union: A Struggling Actor in the Caucasus

In the run-up to the Georgia crisis, the German government had already engaged in a mediating attempt to reach a diplomatic solution to the frozen disputes in the region, but other EU members failed to back German efforts strongly. "The Georgians felt isolated. We created a vacuum where Saakashvili thought he had to act on his own, and the Russians thought they could act with impunity" as Andrew Wilson put it.² Thus the EU was not effective in preventing the crisis, nor was it successful in stopping both sides from going this far and acting recklessly once the crisis erupted.

² Andrew Wilson, "War in Georgia - the EU Needs to Step in", *The European Council on Foreign Relations* 10 August 2008; (http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_georgia_and_russia_can_still_step_back_from_the_brink/).

In the face of the most difficult foreign policy test since the 2003 Iraq War, it can be said that the EU's immediate response to the crisis in Georgia was diplomatically vigorous but then, when the crisis deepened it remained again quite confused as it had been many times before. French President Sarkozy, as the holder of the current EU presidency, first brokered a cease-fire between the two sides on 12 August and refrained from a too harsh reaction to the Russian military actions in the region. With this truce involving a six-point peace plan, both sides agreed to commit not to resort to force, cease violence definitely, provide free access for humanitarian aid, return to the positions they occupied prior to the start of hostilities and take part in international discussions on the modalities of security and stability of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. After Moscow's defiance against pulling back all its troops to their pre-war positions and then its unilateral recognition of independence for Georgia's two breakaway republics on 26 August, however, the French made a u-turn and began to speak of convening an extraordinary session of the European Council to decide on convenient measures including possible sanctions against Russia such as tightening the visa regime, a step which was found emotional by Moscow in a belief that it would only help further sour its relations with the Union.³ In fact, the Europeans were in a much more advantageous position in mediating between the fighting sides as a neutral and honest broker in comparison with the US which apparently took side with the Tbilisi government. The involvement of other international organisations such as the UN and the OSCE also would not be productive since Russia could prevent them from deciding on any action such as providing peacekeeping forces.⁴ In recognition of this, all 27 EU members have backed Sarkozy's mission and so placed him quite a bit of weight as a negotiator. However, it seems that the peace plan brokered by the French resulted mainly from the Russian strategic considerations rather than an EU leverage vis-à-vis Moscow.⁵ Indeed, Moscow looked to agree to the peace plan, yet did not comply with all terms imposed upon it by the deal in line with its own *realpolitik* calculations. It also took

³ "EU Considers Sanctions on Russia," *BBC*, 20 August 2008; (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/7585580.stm>).

⁴ Guner Ozkan, "Russia in the Caucasus: Looming Wrath of 'Elder Brother'", *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 14 August 2008; (<http://www.turkishweekly.net/comments.php?id=2959>).

⁵ Janet Stobart & Sebastian Rotella, "Georgia Crisis Exposes Europe's Diplomatic Limits", *Los Angeles Times*, 13 August 2008; (<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-europeans13-2008aug13,0,3166603.story>); Hasan S. Özertem, "What Should the West Do in Georgia?", *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 18 August 2008; (<http://www.turkishweekly.net/comments.php?id=2965>).

advantage of the French-brokered deal's imprecise terms which enabled it to delay its troop withdrawal from Georgia and to create buffer zones in its territory.

The crisis therefore exposed the limits of EU diplomatic efforts that were neither clear nor determined and as it deteriorated, confusion among member states turned into disunity at once. Some member states like Slovakia criticised Georgia's adventurism while Poland, Britain, Sweden and the three Baltic States, which still regard Russia as a major threat to their security, were openly critical of the Russian aggressiveness and military incursion.⁶ After the Russian incursion escalated into the invasion and attempted dismemberment of Georgia, it did not take a long time similar divisions to break out among member states on how tough to be on Moscow. First of all, almost all member states declared their attachment to the territorial integrity of Georgia. But then, the same like-minded EU members blaming Russia for engineering the war were eager to take a hard-line approach against Moscow and proposed that this could include the suspension of partnership treaty talks with it. The Polish and the three Baltic leaders even made a visit to Tbilisi in a demonstration of solidarity with Saakashvili. Other member states such as Italy and Germany, which have already developed close links with Moscow, however, were more cautious in upsetting a major trading and energy partner despite that they deplored Moscow's unilateral recognition of the breakaway provinces as an unacceptable redrawing of borders by force.⁷ They also were of opinion that what aggravated Russia was not the EU involvement in the region but the US military presence and political influence in its backyard and for this reason, the Union should pursue a more prudent policy and keep engaging Moscow carefully.⁸ Thus the fault lines between old and new member states, as it happened during the 2003 Iraq Crisis, halted again an EU common stance on this highly contentious issue.

In view of this serious rift between member states, it is arguable that the Union lacked a united stand in imposing any tough sanction and this disunity is

⁶ Tomas Valasek, "What Does the War in Georgia Mean for EU Foreign Policy", *Briefing Note*, Centre for European Reform, August 2008, p. 1.

⁷ Tony Barber & James Blitz, "EU States Consider Delaying Russia Talks", *The Financial Times*, 28 August 2008; (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/07e5dd7c-7519-11dd-ab30-0000779fd18c.html>); "USAK Gürcistan Krizi Değerlendirme Raporu (Georgia-Russia Crisis Analysis Report)", (Ankara: Uluslararası Stratejik Araştırmalar Kurumu Yayınları, 2008), p. 35.

⁸ Tomas Valasek, "What Does the War in Georgia Mean for EU Foreign Policy", p. 3.

exacerbated by the fact that EU is highly dependent upon the Russian energy for a third of its oil and 40 percent of its natural gas. So it seems that Brussels could only apply to indirect ways of punishing Russia through further strengthening its relations with Georgia and Ukraine, which is worried that it would be the next target because of its Crimean region where ethnic Russian are in majority and host the Russia's Black Sea fleet. Ukraine's concerns about the Russian aim of taking over Crimea rapidly mounted after the Georgia crisis and heightened tension within Black Sea between Russia and NATO.⁹ Here the extraordinary EU summit on 1 September was expected to send a strong message to Ukraine by backing up its quest for the EU membership, as Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn had already proposed. "Ukraine could be the next political pressure point for Russia . . . Therefore it is important from a stability point of view to send a positive signal that it is possible for Ukraine to progress towards the Union," he said.¹⁰

It remains to be seen if the current crisis spills over into neighbouring regions, but one thing is obvious enough: resurgent Russia's military over-reaction that destabilised Caucasia as a whole has to be viewed against a backdrop of a humiliating contraction of its sphere of influence in what it regards as a post-Soviet space. In this respect Russia is especially displeased with the successive NATO enlargements eastwards and its ongoing encirclement in the Black Sea region by NATO members if this process goes on with the accession of Ukraine and Georgia into the Alliance.¹¹ In addition, there appears to be other political and diplomatic disputes with the Western world such as Moscow's close ties with Iran, its recent suspension of the

⁹ Tomas Valasek, "What Does the War in Georgia Mean for EU Foreign Policy", p. 4; Michael Emerson, "Post-Mortem on Europe's First War of the 21st Century", *Policy Brief*, No. 167, Centre for European Policy Studies, August 2008, p. 4; Askold Krushelnycky, "Crimean Peninsula Could Be the Next South Ossetia", *The Independent*, 28 August 2008; (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/crimean-peninsula-could-be-the-next-south-ossetia-910769.html?service=Print>); Jonathan Marcus, "Georgia: The Ripple Effect", *BBC*, 10 September 2008; (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pt/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/7609016.stm>); Yuri Zarakhovich, "The New (Old) Russian Imperialism," *Time*, 27 August 2008; (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1836234,00.html>); Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Staring Down the Russians," *Time*, 14 August 2008; (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1832699,00.html?iid=sphere-inline-sidebar>).

¹⁰ James Blitz, Stefan Wagstyl and Tony Barber, "EU Leaders Step up Criticism of Russia", *The Financial Times*, 28 August 2008; (http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ae96a8fe-7497-11dd-bc91-0000779fd18c.html?ncklick_check=1).

¹¹ "USAK Gürcistan Krizi Değerlendirme Raporu (Georgia-Russia Crisis Analysis Report), p. 24.

conventional forces treaty, its pursuit of energy dominance by bullying its neighbours into abandoning their pro-Western policies and the most important, the recognition of Kosovo's unilateral independence from Serbia by the Western countries.

As far as the EU enlargement eastward is concerned, it may not be disturbing in itself to Russia, but the picture is different from another angle. Indeed, particularly after the accession of the former Eastern Bloc members, EU's attitude towards Russia dramatically became much more critical than the EU-15 had been. "Under Putin, the gap has widened drastically between the EU's rule-of-law approach and Russia's reviving great power ambitions."¹² Thus Russia's recent recklessness and ruthlessness had also to do with restoring its self-respect and honour as well as protecting its impaired security. By going to war in order to satisfy its hunger for hegemonic power, Russia "has thrown down a serious challenge to NATO, the United States, and the EU. One which none of the above are eager (or perhaps even able) to handle."¹³ It truly intended to redraw the map of Europe between the Western world and itself, being in firm belief that the West is not ready to defend countries like Georgia and Ukraine until they will join the Atlantic alliance.

By undermining the pro-Western Saakashvili regime, scuttling its NATO prospects and ensuring that the two breakaway provinces were released from the Georgian rule for an indefinite time, therefore, Moscow demonstrated that any further Western involvement, either EU or NATO, in the region will be a much riskier business than before and it will not allow any foreign power to challenge it in its backyard.¹⁴ As well as thwarting Georgia's NATO aspirations and establishing its own rule in the secessionist regions, amongst Russia's long-term strategic goals was also regime change with an aim of turning Georgia into a pro-Russian protégé. Finally, it was also hydrocarbon pipelines that the Kremlin sometimes used as a political weapon in the recent past, and now it directly chose to respond by the blatant use of armed force against a weaker neighbour on behalf of its strategic and geopolitical goals. Indeed, the control of the energy supply from the Caspian Sea to Western markets by military means serves as one of the motives behind the Russian aggression.¹⁵

¹² Dieter Dettke, "Russia and the EU: The Difficult Path to a New Partnership", *European Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Fall 2008; (http://www.europeanaffairs.org/current_issue/2008_fall/2008_fall_03.php4).

¹³ William Montgomery, "Russia Asserts Itself", *News Insight*, 17 August 2008; (http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/opinions.php?nav_id=52775).

From this picture, Moscow seems to be ready to pay any price and has no fear of being isolated and estranged from international community because of its new foreign policy course and insists that the Western world needs it more than it needs them.

Whatever the motivation, Russia's surprisingly swift recognition of the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia was unexpected because it was predicted that it would delay this decision until a peaceful solution to the dispute is found and such a move would serve as a strong bargaining chip as well. But it turned out to be that this was not the case. It was apparent that Russia was no longer interested in any form of discussion at all with anyone, thereby reminding of a cold war mentality which does not help anybody's interest. In fact, "every time the Russians make this kind of move, they are forcing Western capitals to bind more and more closely together because any sort of moderating voices in the West are simply shut out by moves like that."¹⁶ Such a course may also bring the former Soviet republics together in pursuing more pro-Western policies by silencing the domestic opposition groups who are suspicious of the West.¹⁷

The calls for a serious re-evaluation of the Union's relations with Moscow have increased before the emergency EU summit scheduled for 1st September. Britain has cautioned that the EU should not be hasty in signing a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia without a re-examination of whether such a step is truly in the best interests of the Union.¹⁸ Tougher sanctions such as banning Russian real estate investments in Europe or freezing financial assets of Russian companies and individuals, on the other hand, were not anticipated ahead of the summit. According to some analysts, an EU troop force must be dispatched to Georgia with the purpose of observing

¹⁴ Nicu Popescu, Mark Leonard and Andrew Wilson, "Can the EU Win the Peace in Georgia?", *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, August 2008, p. 3; Robin Oakley, "A New Cold War -- or More Hot Air?", *CNN*, 26 August 2008; (<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/26/russia.georgia.oakley.analysis/index.html>).

¹⁵ Adam B. Kushner, "Not a Safe Route," *Newsweek*, 23 August 2008; (<http://www.newsweek.com/id/154938>).

¹⁶ "Crisis Group: 'Every Unilateral Russian Step Helps Unite the West'", *Euractiv*, 27 August 2008; (<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/crisis-group-unilateral-russian-step-helps-unite-west/article-174922>).

¹⁷ Kamer Kasım, "Back to the Cold War?," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 8 September 2008; (<http://www.turkishweekly.net/comments.php?id=2977>).

¹⁸ James Blitz, Stefan Wagstyl and Tony Barber, "EU Leaders Step up Criticism of Russia".

the ceasefire and it must also involve in conflict resolution efforts under the auspices of the OSCE. In the short term, an EU rather than a NATO anchor would also be better for both Ukraine and Georgia since their accession would not soon be an asset to the strength of the alliance.¹⁹ Therefore, it is true that the EU would not remain silent as if nothing had happened and as it did in the Balkans. It has to take the lead in Black Sea and Caucasus region if it wishes to halt a new division line and maintain stability on its doorstep, but the worst reaction it would give to at that moment was utter threats that it could not follow through.

At the end of the emergency EU Council summit, only the third in the Union's history, on 1 September 2008, the French President Sarkozy announced that Europe was united and overcame its divisions. But united on what? True, some member states like Poland, the Czech Republic and Lithuania that demanded a tough line against Moscow were seemingly satisfied with the result, claiming that it was a strong signal to Russia that there could be no business as usual any longer.²⁰ But from a much wider perspective, the three-hour meeting, it seems, ended with an agreement on a lowest common denominator between France, Germany and Italy which chose a moderate position and were eager to keep diplomatic ties open with Russia and those above-mentioned countries which stood for a harder line. It also did not reach to a level of a serious or a "root-and-branch review", as Britain PM Brown put it, of the relations with Russia as opposed to the ambitious pre-summit statements made by the EU leaders in this direction. Indeed, what the EU members looked to unite on was only a step-by-step approach to the crisis while immediate and punitive sanctions or tougher measures were not even mentioned.²¹

In a compromise aimed at speaking with one voice over Russia's actions without risking direct confrontation with it, therefore, the heads of EU states just expressed strong support for Georgia's territorial integrity, emphasised the illegitimacy of Russia's unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

¹⁹ Andrew Duff, "Summer of Discontent," *The Financial Times*, 28 August 2008, (http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/87344432-7506-11dd-ab30-0000779fd18c,dwp_uuid=70662e7c-3027-11da-ba9f-00000e2511c8.html).

²⁰ "EU Freezes Talks with Russia at Summit", *Euractiv*, 2 September 2008; [<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/eu-freezes-talks-russia-summit/article-175031>].

²¹ Achrene Sicakyuz & Sebastian Rotella, "EU-Russia Partnership Talks Hinge on Retreat", *The Los Angeles Times*, 2 September 2008; (<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-eu2-2008sep02,0,6111104.story>).

and urged other countries not to follow Russia's lead in a joint statement. The most significant decision in this regard was the postponement of the next round of talks with Moscow on a new wide-ranging Partnership and Cooperation Agreement scheduled for mid-September until it withdraw its all troops to their pre-war positions in line with the terms of the French-mediated six-point peace accord.²² But the Union did not seek a full suspension of the talks with Russia, nor did it attempt to scrap the existing 1997 agreement. Indeed, with the new agreement it was intended to set new principles for Moscow's energy cooperation with the Union and these principles were needed by the Union much more than by Russia.²³ Also the Summit, which declared that relations between the EU and Russia have reached a crossroads, delayed a decision on the fate of relations in the near term by announcing that "the various aspects of EU-Russia relations" would be subjected to "a careful in-depth examination" by a scheduled Europe-Russia summit in November in Nice. All these were clear signs of EU's step-by-step approach and conciliatory tone.

Still, when compared to its 2003 predecessor in the run-up to the dreadful Iraq War, the outcome of this summit was not a complete washout and EU members succeeded somehow this time in shying away from a full-on row. Recreating the Cold War conditions by responding too harshly and sharply would be the last thing the Union want to do and as a reliable broker it had to observe a very delicate balance between the two options: going too far in punishing Russia and so encouraging it to act more aggressively on the one hand, and forcing it to bear consequences for its bellicose attitude and to cooperate with the international community as one of its responsible members on the other.

²² Tony Barber, James Blitz and Daniel Dombey, "EU Warns Russia of Talks Delay," *The Financial Times*, 1 September 2008; (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9fa9fe66-782c-11dd-acc3-0000779fd18c.html>); Ian Traynor & Luke Harding, "Relations with Russia at Crossroads, Say EU Leaders", *The Guardian*, 1 September 2008, (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/01/russia.georgia3/print>); Stephen Castle & Steven Erlanger, "Europeans Meet on Crisis in Georgia", *International Herald Tribune*, 2 September 2008; (<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/09/02/europe/02georgia.php>); Guner Ozkan, "Russian 'Bear' Defying Rules of the Jungle", *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 17 September 2008; (<http://www.turkishweekly.net/comments.php?id=2986>).

²³ Nabi Abdullaev, "EU Links Talks to Georgia Pullout", *Moscow Times*, 02 September 2008; (<http://www.moscowtimes.ru/article/1010/42/370587.htm>).

Against this background, the EU leaders were forced to focus on supporting Georgia instead of punishing Russia because of limited policy options ahead of the Union for getting tough with it. So the Council decided on providing economic and humanitarian aid to Georgia worth 110 million Euros and organising an international donor's conference soon. However, the Russians looked not to be worried about this sort of symbolic reprisals. "We don't need these talks or this new agreement any more than the EU does" Russia's EU envoy Vladimir Chizhov proudly declared in his response to the summit. He also added that the EU had missed an opportunity by putting on hold long-delayed talks on the new deal.²⁴ It appears that Moscow managed to exploit the strife that marked the meeting and even played off the opposing sides against each other skilfully as the US did during the Iraq Crisis of 2003 which split the Union into two camps again. Meanwhile, rather than dispatching peacekeepers to the region, the EU's talk of sending only civilian observers around 200 (The EU already has some 40 observers on the ground in Georgia) into contested territory also reflected its cautionary attitude towards the crisis whereas what Georgia expected from Brussels was a fully-fledged peace keeping operation.²⁵

Following the summit, EU's mediation effort was needed again since Russia, which pledged to withdraw all its troops by 22 August to positions occupied before fighting and announced that it completed the withdrawal process on 25 August, had not withdrawn fully and maintained its military presence in parts of the Georgian territory. As the Western calls for Russia's complete and unconditional implementation of the peace plan increased, the Union had failed to follow up on its six-point deal. This failure required a second high-profile mission led by French President Sarkozy, along with the European Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso, and the EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, to Moscow on 8 September with the aim of convincing it to fully comply with the terms of the plan and more broadly to redirect relations with Russia into pre-crisis trajectory.²⁶ After the talks between an EU delegation led by Sarkozy and the Russian government were completed, Russia agreed to retreat its troops from bases inside the undisputed territory of

²⁴ Oana Lungescu, "EU's Show of Unity over Georgia", *BBC*, 01 September 2008; (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/7592972.stm>); "EU Suspends Talks on Russia Pact", *BBC*, 01 September 2008, (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/7592541.stm>).

²⁵ Ian Traynor & Luke Harding, "Relations with Russia at Crossroads, Say EU Leaders", *The Guardian*, 01 September 2008.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Georgia to pre-conflict lines following the planned deployment of EU monitoring force by 1 October. It also consented to close checkpoints between the Georgian towns of Poti and Senaki within a week and to take part in international talks on the conflict which would be held in Geneva on 15 October.²⁷

Although the latest talks were considered fruitful by Sarkozy and the final outcome reached was found acceptable by Georgia, it was not clear whether EU monitors are allowed into the breakaway regions of the Russian-controlled Abkhazia and South Ossetia as they are expected to deploy areas surrounding these two regions. This was caused by a discrepancy between the documents agreed by Moscow and Tbilisi. While the document signed by Russia stated that “preparations will be accelerated to allow the deployment of observers in the areas adjacent to South Ossetia and Abkhazia”²⁸, the agreement with Georgia said that “the EU stands ready to deploy monitors in the whole of Georgian territory.”²⁹ Actually, the rationale underlying the deployment of such a mission was to convince Russia that its military presence is not needed any longer and the security of the region and the return of displaced people to their homes in particular are guaranteed by the Union.³⁰ However, accusing the Union of twisting the deal, Russia did not lose time to refuse to allow EU monitors to observe the situation in Georgia’s separatist republics since what it truly expected from the EU was to act as a buffer outside, not inside, the two regions, along borderline. Here, as the EU itself acknowledged, there was a misunderstanding with the Russian side over the mandate of the EU mission. The vagueness of the latest deal was also made subject to criticism by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer who thinks that too much concessions and freedom of manoeuvre were offered to the Russians because their military presence in the rebel regions was not opposed by the EU in a direct violation of its earlier six-point plan.³¹ Indeed, while Russia declared that

²⁷ “Georgia Positive on Russia Pledge”, *BBC*, 09 September 2008; (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/7605508.stm>).

²⁸ “Mise en oeuvre du plan du 12 août 2008” ; (http://www.eu2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/import/0908_visites_moscou_tbilissi/Mise_en_oeuvre_plan_12_aout_2008.pdf).

²⁹ “Déclaration des Présidents,”; (http://www.mfa.gov.ge/files/461_7954_144121_461_7953_691344_Plan.pdf).

³⁰ “EU Peace Mission to Georgia up in the Air”, *Euractiv*, 11 September 2008; (<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/eu-peace-mission-georgia-air/article-175266>).

³¹ “Foreign Ministers Agree Details of Georgia Mission”, 1 *Euractiv* 6 September 2008, (<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/foreign-ministers-agree-details-georgia-mission/article-175416>).

some 7600 troops will be stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a number two times more than the pre-conflict one, “I do not consider this as a return to the status quo,” said the NATO chief who visited Georgia for a first meeting of a new NATO-Georgia Commission on 15 September.³² The US government also dismissed the deal by blaming Russia for increasing its military presence by more than 5000 troops and so infringing the previous accords including the 12 August peace plan engineered by the EU. Nevertheless, Russia’s full compliance with its pledge to withdraw from buffer zones inside Georgia was enough for EU’s talk of a possible retreat from its decision to suspend new partnership treaty negotiations with Moscow, as the French President Sarkozy announced. A too quick restoration of the EU’s relations with Russia to normal, however, has not many supporters among those member states which stand for a confrontational stance and such a move would also weaken the EU’s already damaged diplomatic and political leverage. At this critical point, instead of sending confusing signals, what Brussels should do is to link the resumption of the partnership talks to not only Russia’s post-war attitude, but also the degree of progress made in Geneva talks on South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

What Can and Should the EU Do Further?

Whether or not the crisis in Caucasus signified a defining moment in the history of great power politics, the EU’s response to the Russia-Georgia conflict can only be characterised by confusion and division despite its initially active intermediary role in the crisis. Even in this respect which represents the EU’s main power asset, its peace plan was unclear and unable to secure the territorial integrity of Georgia. It engaged in this role robustly under the ambitious agenda of the French Presidency who wishes the EU to reassert itself in international arena, but failed to save itself from the trap of strategic, political, institutional and operational limitations and deficiencies which resulted in a deep confusion and then disagreement between member states over what and how to do. Once again what hampered it from firm action were its internal dynamics and divergent national interest considerations among member states as well as geopolitical calculations concerning the energy security of the continent.

³² James Blitz, “Nato Fury over Russia’s Georgia Deal with EU”, *Financial Times*, 15 September 2008; (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2c90468e-82bc-11dd-a019-000077b07658.html>).

From now on the EU needs to reconsider its options in the light of this outlook in the field of common foreign policy. First of all, it has to overcome its structural weaknesses by deciding upon the fate of the pending EU treaty reform that equips it with the new competences and institutional mechanisms in dealing with crises more effectively. Beyond this, it should acknowledge that the relations with Russia need a major overhaul and without taking into account Russian security fears, this task will unlikely to produce expected results. It may assure here Russia that Georgia was not blameless and the protection of Russian minorities should also be monitored. Its message can be that further integration of Russia with Europe is not through the use of hard power but through benign mechanisms of diplomacy and soft power. Thus instead of searching for short-term punitive measures, Brussels should direct its efforts towards promoting democracy, prosperity and security in the broader region. But if Russia's new realpolitik-driven foreign policy course, which have already had some consequences for its credibility as a partner of the Union, escalates the already tense situation by, for instance, bullying other neighbouring countries like Ukraine or Moldova, then the Union will definitely need a more decisive and firmer policy than its existing appeasing approach towards crises and conflicts near its borders. In this case a revitalisation of EU policy towards the eastern neighbourhood will seriously be needed. Thirdly, in the wake of the Georgia crisis, it is necessary for the Union to diversify its suppliers of energy away from Russia and forge a common energy policy if it wishes to reduce its high dependency on Russian oil and gas that apparently limited its freedom of maneuver during the current crisis. At this point, it may take advantage of the fact that the Russian economy is tightly integrated with the rest of the world and particularly the EU as its biggest customer and in view of this fact it should make clear to the Russians that further Western investment and finance can only continue flowing should Russia change its current foreign policy course, play by the rules of the game and stick to its international commitments. As well as using economic levers, it would also be better to encourage EU members to act collectively in similar cases rather than developing individual links with Russia such as signing bilateral deals which affect their independent policy decisions and enable Russia to play off EU states against each other.

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