

Georgia - National Security

Giorgi Bilanishvili, research fellow, GFSIS

Nearly 30 years passed since Georgia gained the independence, but its national security is under constant danger, facing grave challenges that prevents its development and undermines the stability of the country. The region, where Georgia is located, is quite unstable, Georgia's territorial integrity is violated, Russia continues its heavy military presence on occupied territories and effectively controls the ongoing processes in those regions. Socio-economic situation stays unfavorable, the society is deeply polarized, the quality of integration of densely settled ethnic minorities into the Georgian society is low, state borders with most neighbours are not demarcated and delimited.

Georgia's national security system obviously is not working properly. There are problems in both – in the field of strategic planning and in ensuring effective inter-agency work. In the foreign policy dimension, the process of Georgia's integration into NATO has long been stalled. There are no new initiatives to deepen Georgia's EU integration.

This rather heavy and unfavorable background is further complicated by Russia's growing effort seeking to regain exclusive influence on post-Soviet countries. Moscow believes that Western influence in international politics is declining and this process is irreversible. Consequently, the international system will eventually shift to multi-polar world order.

The ongoing developments in international politics is seen by Moscow as a window of opportunity to regain control over Georgia and other post-Soviet countries and to become one of the poles in the emerging multi-polar international system. Accordingly, ceasing down Russia's rising activity in the near future should not be expected.

Occupied Territories

Military aggression against Georgia in August 2008 and recognition of independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia by the Russian Federation, at some extend led to the false assumption that Russia had lost these regions as an effective leverage against Georgia. Unfortunately, that expectation did not come true. Russia continues to manipulate on Georgia with Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia directing its efforts to three main directions:

- 1) After 2008 aggression against Georgia Russia increased its military presence on Georgia's occupied territories establishing two full-fledged military bases (around 4000 to 5000 military personal in each) and deploying modern systems such as S-300 and S-400 in Abkhazia. Russian military presence on the occupied territories of Georgia, contributes to the enhancement of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble, which was created in the Black sea with the annexation of Crimea. Frequent maneuvers and military exercises by the Russian forces on the occupied territories increase the perception of the military threat and create a sense of insecurity among Georgian society.

2)The process of ‘borderization’, which has been going on for many years, is getting even worse year by year. This had been proved by the so-called Chorchana incident¹ of last year that dramatically strained relations between the conflicting sides. In fact, Russia may have completed the ‘borderization’ process long ago, but its gradual implementation is in its own interests.² The constant ‘borderization’ of new sections across ABL is aggravating the problem and putting psychological pressure on both the Georgian government and the population.

3) The rights of the Georgian population living on the occupied territories are extremely violated. Movement from the occupied territories to the rest of Georgia (and vice versa) is restricted. The number of so-called crossing points has been reduced in recent years from 6 to 2 in Abkhazian ABL. Existing crossing points are regularly closed for fabricated reasons. Russian FSB border guards regularly detain population charging them with illegal “border crossing”.

Russia’s and local authorities abovementioned efforts enhance the sense of insecurity among Georgian society and are aimed at reinforcement of negative attitudes towards both the Georgian government and the international community as well. The presence of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia has a great political importance. However, EUMM needs more effective mechanisms to prevent Russia's aggressive steps against Georgia. Inadequate responses make an impression that the international community is not capable of developing mechanisms that would deter Russian aggression against Georgia.

Russian Propaganda

The main purpose of Russian propaganda in Georgia is to undermine Western prestige in the Georgian population. To this end, Russia is trying to prove that Western culture and lifestyle are incompatible with Georgian traditions and even endanger them. Russia knows pretty well that the Georgian Church has a high authority in the Georgian population. Given this, it tries to propagate that the threat to the Orthodox religion ostensibly would arise as a result of Georgia's integration into the West.

Along with this Russian propaganda tries emphasize that the West is declining and is not able to cope with growing problems. In contrast, Russia is getting stronger day by day. It firmly pursues its own policies and gradually regains the influence that it had lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

¹ The decision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia to set up an observation post between the village of Chorchana in the Khashuri municipality and the village of Tselisi in the Russian-held Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia in August 2019 caused weeks of crisis at the occupation line;

² According to the information provided by Georgian authorities in March 2018, the total length of the barbed wire and other fencing along the ABL with Tskhinvali Region/ South Ossetia at that time was more than 52 km out of 350 km, and the total length of the barbed wire and fences on Abkhazian ABL was around 49 km out of 145 km; As of late 2018, at least 34 villages had been divided by fences installed by the Russian servicemen separating their residents from adjacent “critical infrastructure”, such as farms, pasturelands, irrigation sources or village cemeteries. “BEHIND BARBED WIRE - HUMAN RIGHTS TOLL OF “BORDERIZATION” IN GEORGIA”, Amenity International;

Russian propaganda is particularly successful in Georgia's regions densely populated with ethnic minorities, where traditionally, support for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic course is lower than in other regions of the country³. This is partially due to the fact that Russian channels are one of the main sources of information for ethnic minorities.⁴

Simultaneously, as in the Western world, Russia is trying to make local Georgian media sources to serve its propaganda. It should be noted that the number of pro-Russian media outlets in Georgia has increased in recent years. According to Medea Development foundation, 9 Georgian media outlets serve as a main source of anti-Western propaganda in Georgia. At the same time, the activities of the Russian non-governmental sector, like Gorchakov Foundation and Primakov Foundation, engaged in propagating Russian culture and values are becoming increasingly visible.

This rather unfavorable background is further aggravated by the activity of various local radical and conservative groups that claim to uphold Georgian traditions and culture. However, their activities are largely anti-Western and thus serve the interests of Russian propaganda.

Cyber Security

In 2008 Georgia was the first country, which simultaneously fell under the military and cyber attack from the Russian Federation. Many countries drew lessons from the Georgia's experience, but Georgia itself has not been very successful in advancing its own cyber security capabilities.

Since then, Georgia experienced various scales of Russian cyber attacks several times. Last one conducted on October 28, 2019, was extremely large scale and targeted public and private sectors simultaneously. The US and UK led investigation revealed responsibility of Main Intelligence Department (GRU) of the General Staff of the Russian Federation for conducting this malicious act. Many foreign officials, including US State Secretary Mike Pompeo and UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab condemned Russia for this act and called to cease this behavior in Georgia or elsewhere in the world.

It is worth mentioning that GRU had been claimed to bear responsibility for conducting various types of cyber activity against US, Ukraine and some other states previously. Frequent cyber attacks against Georgia leads to assumption that Georgia has become type of testing ground for Russia, which aims at further enhancement its own cyber capability to apply it even more efficiently in seeking to achieve its own objectives.

³ According to NDI poll July 2019, EU membership support on National Level equals to 78%, while in ethnic minorities settlements it equals only to 57%; Similarly, NATO membership support on National level equals to 71%, while in ethnic minorities settlements it equals only to 36%;

⁴ In 2019, 27% of ethnic minorities said that they watch political news on a Russian TV channel on a daily basis. "Georgian Public's Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia", 2019 Survey Report, by Europe Foundation;

Economic leverages

Since 2013, Russia has lifted the embargo on export from Georgia, after which the export of various goods to Russia has been increasing at a rapid pace. According to preliminary data of 2019, Russia, together with Azerbaijan, is in the first place in Georgia's main export trading partners with 13.2% share in total export. As for the main trading partners, Russia is on second place after Turkey, with 10.8% share. The Georgian authorities themselves admit that the Russian market is quite insecure as it can be closed at any time for Georgian export.

Such a threat was reactivated in last year, when Russian MP Gavrillov's visit to Georgia triggered a sharp wave of protests that forced him to leave Georgia. In response, Russia has decided to cancel direct flights to Georgia. Besides flights, Moscow was also considering banning exports from Georgia, but eventually changed its mind. However, it is clear that Moscow considers other countries dependency on Russian market as one sort of a leverage, and it had repeatedly used embargo policies against Georgia and other post-Soviet states in the past.

Along with the rapid growth of Georgia's dependence on the Russian market, there are concerns that various Russian companies are increasingly winning state tenders in Georgia. If there were only 11 Russian state-owned bids in 2013, in 2018 their number increased to 163. During the period of 2013-2018 Russian companies won the state tenders in Georgia, which amounts totally to about 153 mln. Georgian lari. It has to be said that Russia was already firmly represented in various sectors of the Georgian economy, though its influence has increased in recent years.

High level of Political Polarization

The high level of polarization of society is rightly considered as one of the main challenges to the national security that makes easier for foreign countries to manipulate such a society and pursue their own interests. Unfortunately, the Georgian society has been deeply polarized since gaining the independence.

Parliamentary elections is scheduled in Georgia in the autumn of 2020. The dynamics of the political process show that tensions are rising with the approaching elections date.

However, with the mediation of partner states the agreement on a new electoral system has been reached recently among the government and opposition. Despite this the risk of destabilization, provoked by political tensions or triggered externally still remains sufficiently high. While talking on destabilisation Russian factor should be taken into account. Instability in Georgia and/or deviation of the latter from democratic path, is the opportunity for Russia to damage Georgia's reputation internationally and weaken its Western support.

Recommendations

- EU should keep its firm support of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. As well as Russia should be kept under sanctions. Any relief of sanctions, would be perceived by Russia as a justification

of its aggression that would encourage it to undertake new adventure and increase pressure on its neighbours.

- EU's support of Georgia's peace initiatives (such as a step to a better future for instance) is a vital for conflict resolution. Restrictions of the freedom of movement, blatant violation of the rights of people living on occupied territories of Georgia, the process of borderisation should be condemned further by EU and other parties of the Geneva International Discussions.
- Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have received all the benefits provided by the EaP through visa-free travel, free trade, Association Agreements. Granting European Perspective to Georgia will give strong new impetus to the European integration process and to the reforms necessary in this process;
- New ways should be found to enhance Georgia's cooperation with EU institutions. Recently, on the initiative of the Open Society Georgia Foundation, five Georgian think tanks have produced a joint document, which elaborates on the ways of further EU integration. According to this document in order to strengthen resilience of EaP states and enhance stability and security in the wider region, EU should:
 - Explore avenues for participation by EaP countries in security cooperation mechanisms, such as PESCO and the European Defense Agency;
 - Increase support for programs designed to enhance security sector oversight and accountability; Strengthen security cooperation, including measures for building confidence and countering radicalization and violent extremism, among others;
 - Foster cooperation in the area of cyber resilience for critical infrastructure.
- National security policy planning process is in urgent need of improvement. Almost all conceptual documents are outdated. For instance, Georgia's National Security Concept was published back in 2011 and have not been revised since then despite dramatic shifts in Georgia's security environment. Involvement of Georgia in PESCO projects will enhance Georgia's national security capabilities and also will generate knowledge on various components of national security as well;
- EU should continue facilitation of the dialogue between ruling party and opposition. As well as, it should continue to monitor closely major political developments in Georgia given the upcoming parliamentary elections. Keeping Georgia on the track of democracy has a tremendous importance.
- EU should facilitate cooperation among SCO's of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, as those countries face very similar challenges, mainly originated from Russia. Sharing experience and knowledge would help them to prevent those threats.
- In order to counter Russia's subversive propaganda, with the growing effect, EU support of Georgia's civil society is tremendously important as well. Civil society should stay as firm supporter in troublesome and highly polarized Georgian political landscape