

South Ossetia: The War has Begun!

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The night of August 7, Georgian forces launched an attack on Tskhinvali, which Tbilisi cynically described as an effort to restore the constitutional order. Just hours earlier, Saakashvili declared a ceasefire in the conflict zone, but the move was only a propaganda maneuver disguising the plan for a large-scale offensive. The timing is carefully chosen — the attention worldwide is focused on the opening of the Olympic Games, Russian Prime Minister V. Putin is in Beijing, and Russian President D. Medvedev is on a short vacation.

Georgian forces are acting with extreme ferocity. A total devastation of the Tskhinvali downtown which came under Grad missile, artillery, mortar, and machinegun fire has been reported. Dozens of blasts shatter the city every minute. Tens of armored vehicles and thousands of soldiers moved into the conflict zone. Russian Peacekeeping Force Deputy Commander V. Ivanov said that the positions of the peacekeepers were not directly targeted or hit and that they continue to watch the situation in the region. However, the Ossetian side and Russian journalists say that the peacekeepers' headquarters came under fire.

The offensive has already left tens if not hundreds of people dead. Nevertheless, it appears that the activity of the peacekeepers remains limited to monitoring the situation. Their inaction helps the aggressor — the Georgian side states that the Russian peacekeepers are not intervening in the conflict. The army of South Ossetia returned fire, but it has no potential comparable to that of the Georgian forces. Several Ossetian villages have already been seized and there is a possibility that the Zar highway linking the Republic to Russia will be blocked.

The statement made by Mathew Bryza in connection with the events is remarkably cynical — cunningly siding with Georgia and interpreting Moscow's position in the manner of a downright hooligan, he blamed the escalation on South Ossetia. Earlier C. Rice said in Tbilisi that the US was entirely on Georgia's side in the conflict, thus leaving no doubts concerning the US position. US State Department spokesman Gonzalo Gallegos says the US demands that Moscow exert pressure on the leadership of South Ossetia in order to achieve a ceasefire in the conflict zone. At the same time, the Georgian side is no more than advised to exercise restraint.

It is symbolic that Tbilisi launched the aggression on the anniversary of the fall of the Republic of Serbian Krajina. Its demise became a prologue to the next phase of the Balkan war – to the war in Kosovo, the NATO strikes on Serbia, and the humiliation and partition of the country. It has been said many times that the West is reusing the Balkan scenario in the Caucasus, and that this time Russia is planned to play the role of Serbia. Belgrade politicians who said 13 years ago that selling their countrymen in Croatia and Bosnia would preclude the Western aggression now pretend they were unaware that Serbia's turn would come after the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia.

Is Moscow capable to learn at least anything from the recent past? In 1995, the UN «peacekeepers» opened the way for the Croatian army which was killing Serbs, and these days we see Russian and Ossetian peacekeepers helplessly watch the Georgian artillery hammer residential quarters in Tskhinvali. **In the Caucasus, the consequences of such helplessness are going to be catastrophic — there will be no respect for the weak country unable to normalize the situation at its border and to protect its citizens.**

The situation can spin out of control and evolve to the conditions under which the federal authorities will be unable to control not only the activities of informal leaders and the mobs of their followers, but even those of the heads of the Republics of the North Caucasus who — in case the escalation continues — will start acting independently and attempt to somehow establish control over the process. North Ossetian President Taymuraz Mamsurov already said that hundreds of volunteers are on their way to South Ossetia. He said: «We cannot stop them». People from other Republics of the North Caucasus and from Abkhazia are ready to do the same. As of 4 a.m. August 8, the border guards in North Ossetia did not report Russian forces crossing the border.

The Georgian aggression deals a heavy blow to Russia's positions in the North Caucasus. In case it is «backed» by several terrorist acts (the blast at a beach in Sochi was a wakeup call), more than just the 2014 Olympiad will be at stake. The entire system of administration in Russia can be rendered shaky by several precisely targeted strikes, the result being a direct threat to the existence of the Russian state.

Sadly, the warnings about the long-term negative consequences of the passivity of the Russian diplomacy in dealing with the issue of the unrecognized Republics have had no effect despite being reiterated for years. The obvious truth that the Georgian authority so heavily armed by the West is not going to play games and some day will go all the way to the end was simply ignored. As in 1992 and 1993, it is Russia who will have to address the resulting problems, the difference being that today's Georgian army is something much more serious than the gangs led by Kitovani and Ioseliani.

So far Moscow has reacted to Georgia's aggressive intentions solely by uncertain calls for peace and invitations to sign an agreement not to use force, thus practically making the job easier for Tbilisi. Hopes that «things will somehow settle down» and that Moscow's non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will delay Georgia's NATO integration — which was a decided matter — have not materialized. Tbilisi openly ridiculed such expectations and remained fully aware of its tasks and of the support of its allies. Unfortunately, Russia did not provide equally decisive support to its friends in the Caucasus.

At the moment, only urgent measures can remedy the situation. Russia should immediately break diplomatic relations with Georgia, and, in case the aggression continues, deliver airstrikes on the Georgian forces in South Ossetia (including the Liakhv corridor which is Georgia's main strategic recourse in the de-facto Republic).

Only a prompt and resolute response can arrest the aggression and also prevent similar developments in Abkhazia, which would destabilize the Caucasus irreversibly. Statements like «we will not just stand by» and «we have an adequate response» are no longer enough. As the informational aspect of the resolute response, Russia should state that it opens an anti-terrorist operation aimed at countering the act of state terrorism and at protecting the lives of civilians.

Following the return to the status quo — this time ensured by force — Russia should immediately form a defense alliance with South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the Russian parliament should establish the status of the two Republics as associated subjects within the Russian Federation.

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