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ANALYSES

Mutiny in the Georgian army

On 5 May, the Georgian government announced that it had foiled an attempted military coup, which involved, inter alia, a mutiny in a tank battalion stationed in Mukhrovani near Tbilisi. Tbilisi blames the coup attempt on a group of former military officers who served in the army during Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency, and accuses Moscow of having inspired and ordered the coup.

Even though the events of 5 May have not destabilised Georgia, they threaten to escalate tension, especially in Georgian-Russian relations, and to put the West (particularly NATO at this stage) in a difficult situation because both Moscow and Tbilisi will take the West's stance as the key point of reference.

The events

The first, unofficial reports about the mutiny in the Mukhrovani tank battalion appeared in the morning of 5 May. At midday, the Georgian Interior Ministry announced that it discovered a plot which had been allegedly unfolding in the Georgian army. The minimum objective of the plot was to block the NATO military exercise scheduled to take place in Georgia between 6 May and 1 June, while its maximum objective was to stage a nationwide military rebellion. The Georgian authorities also revealed that on the night of the 4th, it arrested one of the leaders of the mutiny, Giya Gvaladze, a former military officer who commanded Georgian special forces under former President Shevardnadze. Simultaneously, reports about the mutiny in Mukhrovani were confirmed by the Georgian minister of defence David Sikharulidze. The mutineers, however, had actually taken no action, nor put forward any political demands, perhaps because of the unexpectedly rapid response from the Interior Ministry.

It is known that at that time the highest state officials were negotiating with the mutineers. The garrison itself was surrounded by the Interior Ministry forces and heavy military equipment was deployed. The Interior Ministry provided television stations with a video recording made with a hidden camera, which showed Gvaladze presenting the plotters' plans (these were to take control over Tbilisi with the assistance of Russian troops that were to join the mutineers, eliminate the country's top leadership, and stage a takeover of power by a group of former military officers), naming the mutineers, and speaking openly about Russian assistance and money for the plotters.

In the afternoon, the authorities announced that the negotiations had been successfully completed and that the mutineers had laid down their arms. Several hundred soldiers involved in the events were taken to a different location for interrogation, while the officers, including the garrison commander, were arrested. In the evening it was also reported that more than a dozen persons had been arrested in Tbilisi. President Saakashvili delivered an address

in which he accused several former military officers and Russia of having organised the mutiny in order to to impede the NATO military exercise and the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, that was to be inaugurated on 7 May in Prague.

Reactions

The opposition, which has been protesting in the streets of Tbilisi for the last four weeks and demanding Saakashvili's resignation, cancelled its blockade of main roads leading to the capital, which had been scheduled to take place on 5 May, but its protest actions are continuing. The dominant opinion in comments expressed by opposition representatives is that the mutiny and the media exercise surrounding it were a provocation organised by the Georgian authorities in order to divert the public's attention from the anti-presidential protests. It has even been claimed that the mutiny broke out in protest against the president's intention to use the army to pacify the demonstrations. However, it must be emphasised that the scale of the protests, which have continued for nearly a month now, certainly does not justify the claim that the authorities may have considered using force to pacify them; in recent days, no more than several thousand demonstrators have taken part in the protests. Moscow has firmly rejected Tbilisi's accusations and maintains that the Mukhrovani mutiny is a proof of "the decomposition of the Georgian army and state" and of "the agony of the Georgian regime" (in the words of Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's representative to NATO). Moscow has also stressed once more that organising a NATO exercise in Georgia as part of the Partnership for Peace programme was an erroneous and provocative decision. For its part, NATO has confirmed that the exercise would take place as planned.

An attempted coup or a Georgian provocation?

It is extremely difficult to assess the nature and scale of the threat created by the Mukhrovani mutiny because all the information available comes from official government sources.

Had the mutiny succeeded or reached wider proportions, it would have been very beneficial for Moscow in propaganda terms, and would have discredited Tbilisi (especially since it occurred before the planned NATO exercise and the Prague summit on the Eastern Partnership). It cannot be ruled out that some of Saakashvili's opponents (those purged from the army and security apparatus after the 'Rose Revolution') were interested in overthrowing him in collusion with Russia. It is therefore possible that Georgia's accusations against Moscow are not unfounded, although they can hardly be regarded as proven.

The version according to which the mutiny was controlled by the authorities cannot be ruled out either: the Interior Ministry admission that it had known about the preparations for two months, the effective suppression of the mutiny and the concerted nature of the accompanying media campaign, might suggest that this was indeed the case. On the other hand, the mutiny has done serious damage to Georgia's image in the eyes of the West on the eve of the NATO-organised Partnership for Peace exercise, which could be an argument against the claims of major involvement by the Georgian authorities in the rebellion.

Conclusions

It seems that the Mukhrovani mutiny has changed the situation in Georgia, albeit slightly; the mutineers were not backed by the opposition or the public, and the authorities have apparently maintained control over the situation.

The consequences of the mutiny for Georgia's international image (especially in the Georgia-Russia-West triangle) will be much more significant. This perspective defines the media campaign currently underway in Georgia. The campaign follows the model used on many occasions in recent years, for example when tension was high in the areas of the Abkhazian and Ossetian conflicts, during the spy crisis with Russia (2006), or when the defence minister Irakli Okruashvili was arrested (2007). In all of these cases, the emphasis was placed on the threat posed by Russia to Georgia's security, and on the preventative nature of the measures undertaken by the authorities; and each time, the campaigns were addressed both to Georgian domestic public opinion and to Western states. In all of the cases mentioned here, the Georgian authorities were initially accused of reacting irresponsibly, provoking tension and making instrumental use of it to the detriment of Georgia's reputation as a stable and responsible country, but subsequently the measures were usually acknowledged as justified and effective (until the Georgian-Russian war in 2008). In Tbilisi's calculations, the current campaign should boost the importance of the NATO exercise which is beginning now, and should persuade the West to become more involved in Georgia in view of the threats posed by Russia.

As in the previous campaigns, Russia's interpretation is different. According to the Russians, the Mukhrovani mutiny is the final proof that Saakashvili's rule is breaking down. This should discourage Western engagement in Georgia while justifying greater Russian involvement in Georgia's internal problems and in the 'stabilisation' of the country. In this context, it should be expected that Russia will take further action (both by concrete measures and by propaganda exercises) to justify its policy in Georgia.

The West's position will be crucial for further developments in Georgia. Its readiness to stabilise the situation and stop Russia – or the lack of it – may be decisive for the future of Saakashvili and Georgia.

Wojciech Bartuzi, Krzysztof Strachota

Russia and Georgia: a new conflict brewing?

On 30 April, the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev and the leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia signed agreements under which the borders of these para-states will be protected by Russian border guards for the next five years. Russian border troops were deployed there on 2 May. These agreements, which both Tbilisi and NATO have protested against, have made the two republics even more dependent on Moscow and, in the Kremlin's view, serve to legitimize the Russian military presence on Abkhazia and South Ossetia's borders with Georgia. They also mark another step towards strengthening Moscow's position in the region (at the expense of the eroding influence of the West). The agreements were concluded on the eve of the NATO military exercise in Georgia (launched on 6 May). Russia had protested fiercely against this exercise, describing them as a provocation, and resorted to veiled threats against Georgia and the West.

The Kremlin has been increasingly assertive in demonstrating to the West that it considers Georgia and the entire Southern Caucasus to be a zone of its exclusive interests, where it will not tolerate any Western military presence. Moscow's strategic objective is to make the West informally accept this state of affairs. This does not seem possible without a change of government in Georgia. It should therefore be expected that Russia will continue taking measures intended to discredit Mikheil Saakashvili's team abroad, and will declare its support for the Georgian opposition. It cannot be ruled out that Russia will attempt to destabilise the situation in Georgia, possibly in the immediate future; according to the Georgian authorities, Russia was involved in the attempted military putsch in Mukhrovani on 5 May. In the longer term, it is also likely that Russian armed forces might intervene if unrest breaks out in one of Georgia's provinces; currently the most likely trouble spot is ethnically predominantly Armenian Javakhetia region.

Relations between Moscow and Tbilisi

The relations between Russia and Georgia were frozen after the conflict in August 2008. Leading Russian politicians, including President Medvedev and Foreign Minister Lavrov, have said on several occasions in recent weeks that dialogue with Tbilisi could only be resumed on the condition that President Saakashvili stepped down. These statements appear to have been intended as support for the Georgian opposition, which has been protesting and demanding the president's resignation since 9 April. The Kremlin is aware that the chances for a pro-Russian turn in Georgian politics are next to none. It hopes, however, that, with the continuing erosion of the Georgian state, a weaker group could come to power that would be more susceptible to Russian pressure and more willing to take Russia's interests into account (by suspending the process of integration with NATO, or authorising the take-overs of transport and energy enterprises by Russian businesses). In return, Georgia could expect some concessions, such as facilitations in the movement of people or better access for Georgian goods to the Russian market).

Moscow's relations with the para-states. The border agreements

Russia is the only state (apart from Nicaragua) to have recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Its relations with the two republics are based on identical treaties on friendship, co-operation and mutual assistance, which Moscow signed with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali in September 2008. The treaties state that the parties will conclude a number of detailed agreements, including agreements on military co-operation that will, *inter alia*, regulate the presence of Russian military bases in the para-states. No such agreements have been signed so far, perhaps because of additional conditions set by Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, although the bases are in fact already in operation. Numerous Russian statements have indicated that 3,700 Russian troops will be deployed in each of the para-states, and that they will remain there for at least several decades. The fact that military agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia have not been signed may also be due to Moscow's cautious attitude and its preference to reach its goal in small steps, testing the West's reactions along the way.

The agreements under which the Russians will guard the borders of the para-states are apparently one such test; they came into force with immediate effect, and the Russian border troops started developing the necessary infrastructure at the beginning of May. The agreements were strongly criticized by NATO, among others; according to the Alliance, they infringe the Medvedev-Sarkozy agreement which provided for the pullout of Russian and Georgian troops to positions held before 8 August 2008.

Moscow's reaction to the planned NATO exercise in Georgia

The agreements were signed on the eve of *Cooperative Longbow'09* and *Cooperative Lancer'09*, two military exercises taking place between 6 May and 1 June as part of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme; these exercises will involve the Vaziani base near Tbilisi, which was used by the Russians until 2001. Their signature appears to have been intended to demonstrate that Georgia and the entire Southern Caucasus belong to Russia's exclusive sphere of influence, and Moscow will not accept any Western military presence there.

Moscow has known about the exercise for many months, but it has been protesting against it since mid-April, claiming that due to the proximity of the Russian border, they are a provocation staged by NATO. Minister Lavrov has said that the exercises would not contribute to stability in the Caucasus, and President Medvedev stated that the Kremlin would follow it closely and "take appropriate steps if necessary". The president also recalled that conflict broke out last year shortly after a similar exercise, which may be interpreted as a veiled threat to Georgia.

Several NATO members and partners have cancelled their participation in the exercises, including Estonia and Latvia (which stated economic difficulties as the reason), as well as Armenia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Serbia (presumably under Russian pressure).

Finally, Georgian authorities claim that the attempted putsch which took place on 5 May in the tank battalion stationed at Mukhrovani, east of Tbilisi and not far from Vaziani, was inspired by Russia.

Tentative forecast

It seems that Moscow will continue its current policy of discrediting the Georgian authorities internationally and hindering Georgia's integration with Euro-Atlantic structures, while the restoration of a sphere of influence in the Southern Caucasus remains its strategic objective.

It is possible that attempts will be made to destabilise the situation in Georgia, for example by exploiting the existing internal tension in the country and the general weakness of its state institutions. Such attempts may be made in the coming weeks or even days, while the NATO exercises are still under way. The mutiny in Mukhrovani may be an indication that such attempts might fall on a fertile ground. At this stage, the most likely trouble spot appears to be Javakhetia, a region bordering on Armenia with an ethnic Armenian majority, which is not well-disposed toward the Georgian authorities. The situation in Javakhetia has been tense for the last few months, since the arrest of several Armenian activists accused of espionage for Russia. Larger-scale riots could break out in the province, which would trigger an intervention of the Georgian police, which in turn could lead to an intervention by the Russian army "in defence of Russian citizens" (a Russian military base existed in Javakheti until 2007, and some inhabitants have obtained Russian passports).

Wojciech Górecki

EVENTS

Russia threatens to interrupt gas and oil supplies to Europe

During the meeting of the Russia-EU Permanent Partnership Council on Energy held on 30 April in Moscow, the Russian deputy prime minister Igor Sechin warned the EU of a possible new crisis in oil and gas supplies via Ukraine. The intention behind his statement was, on the one hand, to present Ukraine as an unstable transit state whose gas pipeline system should be controlled by an international consortium involving Russia, and on the other, to impede the Odessa-Brody project.

Igor Sechin said in the presence of the EU energy commissioner Andris Piebalgs that the January gas supplies crisis could have a 'disastrous continuation' if Ukraine failed before winter to accumulate in its depots the 19.5 billion m³ of gas needed to ensure transit to the EU market. He also suggested that Russia and the EU should jointly finance Kyiv's purchase of Russian gas (Moscow has officially offered a loan of US\$3 billion). Faced with decreasing gas exports to the EU, Moscow is trying to persuade Ukraine to buy the gas it will need in winter now. However, in a few months Kyiv will be able to buy gas at a lower price.

Sechin also warned the EU that operating the Odessa–Brody pipeline in the originally planned direction might entail disturbances in the export of Russian oil to Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary. This was the first time that Russia has actually blackmailed the EU by threatening to reduce supplies if a project in which Russia is not involved is carried out. Russia's position was a reaction to the adoption on 24 April by Sarmatia, the company implementing the Odessa-Brody project, of the feasibility study for the pipeline, which might dent Russia's monopoly on oil supplies to this part of Europe. <WojK>

Minister Lavrov reveals the details of Russia's vision of the agreement with the EU

During the meeting of the Russian Foreign Minister's Business Council on 30 April, Sergei Lavrov commented on the state of economic relations between Russia and the European Union, and referred to the ongoing talks about the future framework agreement between the two parties. It follows from his statement that according to the Russian side, trade issues should be regulated in a separate agreement.

Minister Lavrov said that concluding a sectoral agreement, regulating the trade in goods and services between Russia and the European Union, would only be possible after the new framework agreement with the EU (which Russia refers to as the strategic partnership agreement) is signed, and after Russia joins the World Trade Organisation. Lavrov also accused the European Union of applying a number of protectionist measures which, in his opinion, have been one of the reasons why Russia's trade exchange with the EU has declined more than with other trade partners (by 50% in January-February

2009), and which could be treated as a justification for the measures Russia has adopted to protect its own market.

Moscow's position reveals both the wide range of contentious trade issues between Russia and the EU, and the fundamental differences between the two parties concerning the new framework agreement. Considering that from the EU point of view, regulating the terms of mutual trade should be one of the key elements of the new treaty, the parties are very unlikely to reach agreement unless one of them changes its position. <MaK>

Ukraine: The Odessa-Brody pipeline issue in focus again

The business and technological study for the Odessa-Brody oil pipeline was officially approved by the international company Sarmatia on 24 April. According to the study, using the pipeline to transport Caspian oil to western Ukraine and to transit it to European states would be profitable at all three stages of the project's implementation. Even though members of Ukrainian President Yushchenko's circle have stated that the pipeline's direction would be reversed as of the beginning of 2010, the project's implementation still hinges on whether the president, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and the Ukrainian businessman Ihor Kolomoysky will manage to reconcile their respective interests.

Currently the pipeline transports Russian oil from Brody to Odessa. The first stage of the Odessa-Brody pipeline project only involves deliveries of Caspian oil to refineries in western Ukraine controlled by Kolomoysky's Pryvat group and then pumping part of the oil via the Druzhba pipeline towards Slovakia. Completing this stage does not require major investments (apart from the construction of depots in Brody), and could indeed have already been accomplished last year. At that time, however, the president's decrees concerning the project were ignored by the Tymoshenko government: the PM did not want a project endorsed by the president to succeed, and was unwilling to back the interests of Kolomoysky, with whom Tymoshenko is in conflict.

The success of the project thus depends on whether the president and the prime minister can manage to come to an agreement, and whether relations between Tymoshenko and Kolomoysky will improve. For Tymoshenko, the Russian reaction is also important because she wishes to maintain good relations with the Kremlin, while the Russian leadership is opposed to the project. The situation is complicated, especially since the election campaign is underway in Ukraine, and for this reason it is not certain whether the project will be implemented. <AnG>

Moldova: Conflict between the president and the parliament in Transnistria

In the separatist republic of Transnistria, the conflict between President Igor Smirnov and the parliament is worsening. On 15 April, the Supreme Council voted, after the first reading, for a draft bill containing a number of constitutional amendments, which would expand the parliament's powers at the expense of the president, and eliminate the post of vice-president.

The background to the constitutional dispute is the struggle for power between the two most influential political and business clans in Transnistria, which are currently fighting to position themselves for the presidential election in 2011. The conflict is probably being manipulated by the Kremlin, with the objective of either ousting or pressuring Smirnov, who is too independent politically, and has maintained an inflexible position concerning the resolution of the conflict with Chisinau.

The dispute involves, on the one hand, the Renaissance party, financed by Transnistria's largest business company Sherif and led by the speaker of parliament Yevgeny Shevchuk, and on the other, the country's leader Igor Smirnov and Vice-President Alexander Korolov who controls the Interior Ministry. Shevchuk tried to run in the 2006 presidential election but Moscow blocked his candidacy and endorsed Smirnov. In recent years, however, Shevchuk has succeeded in developing good contacts in Russia. The draft amendments proposed by the Renaissance party have been backed by 39 out of 43 deputies (Renaissance has 25 seats in the parliament), probably because the deputies were convinced that Shevchuk's initiative had been approved by the Kremlin. Weakening Smirnov's position, or replacing him altogether with a more compliant and flexible leader, could be part of the Kremlin's wider plan to resolve the Transnistrian conflict under the aegis of Russia. The fact that the Moldovan leader Vladimir Voronin's position has been dented by the post-election crisis in that country, together with his 'debt of gratitude' to Moscow for supporting him during the elections and the subsequent protests, might facilitate the implementation of this scenario. If the positions of the two key players are undermined, it will be easier for the Kremlin to impose a solution of the conflict that will consolidate Russian influence over the whole of Moldova in the longer term (by creating a federal state and permitting a Russian military presence). <wrod>

CES

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