

A European breakthrough is at hand

by Bernard Barthalay

Russian-Georgian conflict does not only imperil the future of relations with Moscow, but EU's credibility could well be seriously jeopardized, and confidence among member states as well. In the short run, the Union's and Russia's common neighbours will feel more vulnerable.

Europeans should not stand any attempt by any state on the continent to settle by force any grievance about minorities wherever they are. Georgians, who long for European guarantees of their security and independence, and Russians, who say they want to be acknowledged as reliable partners, should both restrain themselves from any provocation or intimidation.

Their problem is the same as the ones that opposed Europeans in the past and led to national and world wars: nationals from one country residing on another country's territory, the former prepared to defend the rights of its nationals at any price, the latter to keep its hand on the disputed strip of land. The price we paid in Europe, in lives and loss of freedom, for believing such issues were to be settled by force or for surrendering under threat, is too high for us to witness indifferently to the same being repeated by Georgians or Russians, that is Europeans, whether they are bound to enter the Union or not.

Experience taught us that in such cases diplomacy runs out of resources rather quickly and that any escalation from warnings and threats to ultimatums finds its limits soon, when fire isn't willing to cease because an insatiable need to dominate or to take revenge overrides reason.

Voices are raised in new member states who suffered from Russian oppression to blame Russian military operations louder than in older ones, while passing over Saakashvili's recklessness in silence or justifying it downrightly. Doubts are expressed about the willingness of big member states and readiness of the Union to give a helping hand to Georgians, and even to ensure security and integrity of new member states. Other member states, farther north, don't conceal any more, for years already, that their main security concern is Russia.

The EU's powerlessness, whether the President of the Council succeeds in silencing the guns or not, and for how long, and whether Washington, who might well have interests and concerns of its own, is of some help or not, doesn't escaped Moscow's notice. Without the sort of bold and irreversible move within the Union who would make Moscow understand that Europeans mean business, and that something is decidedly about to change in the European Union, limiting Russia's freedom to manoeuvre, it will all end in disaster.

This move should be able to restore confidence among Europeans and give unity solid foundations, with or without the Lisbon Treaty, and even after its overdue ratification, still in the waiting. This move should come from the French President and from any of his partners willing to share in the initiative and it should address all other member states of the Union: it would consist in sealing a pact binding the peoples indissolubly, founding among the initiators and those who agree a sovereign community, whose foreign, defense and energy policies would be led by a provisional government comprising three high ranking and independent figures. All conventional military capabilities of member states of this new sovereign community would be set under a single staff, accountable to the provisional government.

Furthermore, this pact should decide to convene the constituent assembly of a republic of these states from then on indissolubly united, still members of the European Union, the institutions and policies of which would have to be reformed accordingly.

It will be up to France to herald solemnly she will hand over to the legitimate authorities of the new European republic, as set up by its Constitution, all components of its nuclear deterrent and invite the United Kingdom to commit itself to do the same, if it is willing to sign the pact.

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