

## SOME CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE PONTIC CONFLICTS

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***Abstract:** The present paper is devoted to those parts of the Black Sea Region (Basin) which are better known by us, due to our function in Tbilisi as Ambassador of Romania to Georgia between 2006 and 2012. We make in this context the remark that in the framework of that diplomatic mandate, there were opportunities to pay working visits, arranged by the UNOMIG and OSCE Missions, to each of the zones of conflicts, located on the Georgian territory - Abkhazia and South Ossetia, together with other ambassadors from EU countries.*

***Keywords:** Black Sea Region, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, warm conflict, frozen conflicts.*

### **1** Introductory remarks

● The political map of the Black Sea has changed in the last years, as a result of using military force by certain riparian states.

Nowadays there are some sub-regions belonging to this area (e.g. Crimea; Eastern Ukraine; Transnistria/Trans-Dniestr; Abkhazia; South Ossetia) where the recent evolutions have become very complex and sensitive, indicating escalation of military actions and drastically diminishing any prospects for peaceful and lasting solutions.

Therefore, our ideas are based upon direct impressions and informal talks with population living in Suhumi, Gali, Gagra (Abkhazia) and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia), not only taking into consideration some

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information included in theoretical works, otherwise pertinent, but not sufficient.

## **2. Frozen or warm conflicts?**

We never shared, on interpretative level, the term “*frozen conflicts*” which has been broadly used by numerous analysts, diplomats, political decision-makers, high rank officials from many countries, including Romania and from various international bodies (*e.g.* UN, EU, OSCE, CoE, NATO etc.).

Why? Just because in our view on the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia there were on a permanent basis certain military provocations, injuring or even killing innocent people; Russian troops did not leave their places, preferring to change from time to time their mandate (instead of “*occupation forces*” they entitled themselves “*peace-keeping forces*”, “*peace-making forces*” or “*Blue Berets*”).

I had the opportunity to see on the spot some of them at the administrative *de facto* borders with Georgia, on the bridge over Enguri River/Abkhazia or in Ergneti, Tskhinvali and Perevi/South Ossetia, apparently inoffensive, but non-stop ready to react.

These conflicts had always a strong potential of breaking-out in open conflicts, generating a lot of material and human damages. As it is very well known, the moment August 2008 was a culmination of those conflicts, showing the fact that they were not “*frozen*” at all, but just cleverly covered by the actors involved, by good-will statements or fragile peace-initiatives.

Practically speaking, those regrettable events indicated a state of war between two Black Sea riparian countries, situation being very rare in the post-Second World War and the Cold War years. At the same time, the military conflict, which was stopped by the prompt actions undertaken by international community (particularly, the European Union assuring the French periodical EU Chairmanship), put forward some lessons, still valid until now.

## **3. Solutions to the Pontic conflicts**

It is obvious that a lasting and equitable solution for the litigious problems of South Ossetia and Abkhazia cannot be achieved by *law of force*, but only by *force of law*. As a matter of fact, these conflicts, left by

the collapse of the Soviet Union in the years '90, are very complicated, including some games of power, re-interpretations of the history, manipulations of public opinion and *mass-media*. USSR disappeared, but old dreams of domination are still alive.

Therefore, the table of political negotiations remains the only feasible formula for giving proper answers to all pending questions.

Of course, we have in mind, first of all, direct talks among the involved parties: Russian Federation; Georgia; *de facto* regimes functioning in the breakaway regions.

On the other hand, negotiations among some regional and international structures having specific competencies in the field of peace, security and stability of the Black Sea Region should be promoted, on the understanding that such talks and consultations have to be well prepared in advance.

We refer in this respect to NATO, EU and OSCE *inter alia*, but any other interested organization or body should be encouraged to attend this process of collective consideration of the given matters.

During the presence in Georgia, including the period of military conflict with Russia and breaking-down the diplomatic relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, the author of this paper had the opportunity to see on the spot the effective work done by the EU, through its EUMM/European Union Monitoring Mission, Special Representative of Brussels to the Caucasus.

At the same time, we were able to see a rather non-pragmatic and bureaucratic activity from the part of the UN or OSCE, through their bodies, especially set-up, such as UNOMIG in Abkhazia and OSCE Mission in South Ossetia.

A non-significant contribution had so far, in our view, certain regional structures like BSEC/Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and GUAM/Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Republic of Moldova.

But we are quite aware of the fact that, instead of theoretical criticism, an urgent practical approach is needed, with the involvement of all forces able to pay a specific contribution to efforts of solving the Pontic conflicts, which are *conflicts of identity*, by their essence.

Having more actors, each with its priorities and styles of work, it is obvious that the process of political debates should be based on mutual

respect of all positions, without any attempt for monopolizing the talks or excluding *ab initio* certain parties.

For instance, it is our personal conviction after many years of considering the respective matters in their multilateral aspects and nuances, lights and shadows, that *de facto* Abkhaz and South-Ossetian regimes' representatives have to be invited to all talks and consultations.

Some feelings of *nostalgia* or political pre-judgments, originated in a long history of the respective ethnic communities (during the periods of *tsars* and, later on, during and after the Soviet empire) have to be overcome and to adopt realistic and reasonable positions.

It is also our strong conviction that the establishment of diplomatic relations with both separatist regimes will not facilitate, but on the contrary, will make more difficult the normalization of situation.

One should recognize that the diplomatic offensive of Moscow in this direction was a *fiasco*, even on the level of Russian very good friends in the world, who hesitated to follow those optimistic steps.

A few years ago, governmental authorities in Tbilisi launched a very good initiative, encouraged by the European Commission: a comprehensive and coherent program devoted to the gradual integration of the two regions through social development and humanitarian actions for the population of Abkhazia.

This short and medium-term program includes many ways and means, such as: medical care; scholarships for secondary and university students; books and other information materials; contacts on the level of NGOs; cultural activities; links among religious institutions.

Assistance for small and medium-sized enterprises; trade activities for small groups of farmers (apples, nuts, potatoes, hazelnuts, honey) entry visas; local transport facilitations (by bus) - all these without important financial or logistic implications, could be envisaged by the administrative bodies.

When I visited Abkhazia, some years ago, I personally could see several positive effects of the implementation of above-mentioned program on the population living in Gali, Ochamchire, Suhumi, Gagra and Pitsunda.

Perhaps, a similar program could be done for the population of South Ossetia.

We keep in mind that the respective region is situated in the proximity of Georgian Capital (just 30 kilometers between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali), as well as the fact that there is an urgent need for economic and social assistance provided to the local people, living in a poor area, without any concrete perspectives for development and rehabilitation in the forthcoming years.

Speaking about the Black Sea in general, the great Romanian diplomat Nicolae Titulescu declared in June 1936 at the Conference on Straits, held in Montreux/Switzerland: “Everything having a certain connection to the Black Sea presents for my country an interest in the highest degree, because through the Black Sea and the straits goes the only our access to the free sea” (1, p.530).

Almost a quarter of century ago, in Istanbul, the eleven Heads of State or Government established the Black Sea Economic Cooperation / BSEC, agreed by consensus “to ensure that the Black Sea becomes a sea of peace, stability and prosperity, striving to promote friendly and good-neighborly relations” (3, p.40).

“Acknowledged that the region is already faced by serious conflicts and that there is the danger of new tensions arising”, the high level representatives emphasized “the need for peaceful settlement of all disputes” (4, p.47).

It is to be mentioned that the President of Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin was present in Istanbul on 25th June 1992 and signed the above-mentioned two basic documents. No comments...

The events which happened at the beginning of this new year in the secessionist regions represent, in our view, very serious reasons of concern for the whole international community.

Russian President signed, in the first week of February 2015, a law ratifying a “strategic partnership” treaty between his country and Abkhazia in the social, economic, military and humanitarian spheres. A similar bilateral document is expected to be finalized and signed, in the coming months, by Russian Federation and the breakaway South Ossetia.

#### **4. What about the nearest future?**

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are only two of the conflicts occurred in the Black Sea Region (in the broad sense of the notion) after USSR’s

collapse; it is important to add the conflicts in Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as more recent conflictual situations in Ukraine.

Nobody expects a quick and global solution for all these problems perpetuated in more than two decades. Each litigious territorial topic has a specific historical, juridical, political, diplomatic and spiritual background which cannot be underestimated or resolved over night.

Tremendous efforts, doubled by good-will feelings, are needed, especially now, when new paradigms of power are present in the *Pontus Euxeinos* space. It is indeed a very complicated *state of affairs*, but not impossible to be solved in a way or in another.

The international community considers only the peaceful way, more difficult and time-consuming, but much more beneficial for everybody.

We sincerely hope that the recent events happened in Crimea will not have a *domino effect* and that the presence of great military powers in the Black Sea, will lead to a relaxation of political climate, not to an undesirable increasing of threats and dangers of war in that region and in the world as a whole.

The Black Sea could and should remain - as the ancient Strabon wrote in his book "*Geography*" - a friendly sea to all strangers, a *Pontus Euxeinos* (*apud*: 2, page 1).



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