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**Pragmatism or prometheism?  
The attitude of Estonia to the conflict  
in Georgia**

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## 1. Introduction

The military intervention of Russian troops in Georgia has become an important factor affecting political relations across the whole region. The common experience of Russian proximity had a significant influence on the political calculations of Eastern European states. This phenomenon was particularly visible in Estonian politics. It resulted in thorough debate that aimed at answering the most fundamental questions concerning the future of the international order. Attempts to re-shape the geopolitical environment and re-establish Russian domination in the so-called “external empire” has prompted a discussion on the most proper and adequate political means of response. Indeed, dramatic developments in Georgia have created a common dilemma for Estonia and the rest of the Eastern European countries.

Two visions of Estonian foreign policy have been challenged. One of them advocated a restrained, modest and pragmatic reaction to the conflict. The other one, like the so-called promethean policy in the past<sup>1</sup>, recommended tough and firm support to the Georgian government against Russia. During the Caucasus conflict of 2008, Tallinn conducted meticulous analysis of the reaction of the US and the EU to find the most satisfying solution in this matter.

## 2. Estonia and the US reaction to the conflict in Georgia

The attitude of the United States to the war in Caucasus was essential for Estonia, because of a number of historical and geopolitical connotations. As far back as 1966 the vice-president of the USA, Hubert H. Humphrey, made a statement that promoted the independence of the Baltic States within the Soviet Union<sup>2</sup>.

During the Georgian war of 2008, the American government once again condemned Russia for its aggressive policy towards its neighborhood. However, the support of US authorities at that time seemed to be insufficient. Moreover, some American experts claimed that for Washington proper relations with Russia should be more valuable than the territorial integrity of Georgia<sup>3</sup>. Of course, these arguments were meaningless since Tbilisi was known as a very reliable US ally in Iraq. Estonia, however, could not feel safe because it had sent 40 troops to Iraq and 140 to Afghanistan. Indeed, the attitude of US to the Caucasus conflict was disappointing, especially for those in Tallinn who believed that the participation in America’s coalitions of the willing would generate genuine partnership with this country. However, receiving substantial support from allied states, particularly

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1 Promethean policy – a term describing the Polish geopolitical project at the beginning of the twentieth century. This policy was designed to promote independence aspirations of non-Russian nations inhabiting the Russian empire. In Greek mythology Prometheus was known as the protector of mankind against the will of the Gods. This policy symbolized the resistance of small and medium states against the power politics of empires.

2 “U.S. Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey's Statement on Baltic Freedom Day,” June 12, 1966, *The Baltic Review*, no. 32, October 1966.

3 Richard N. Haass, “US Should Give up on Solving Georgia Crisis,” *Newsweek*, August 26, 2008.

the US, to a country facing serious security challenges depends on many factors. At that time, it was stressed in Tallinn that very often international commitments tend to be illusory<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, the position of Estonia on this great geopolitical chessboard was and still is much more privileged than the Georgian one. As a member of NATO, Estonia is associated with the US by the Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which commits NATO members to protect any other member which comes under attack. Moreover, the American government has for several years been urging NATO members to create genuine defense schemes for the Baltic States<sup>5</sup>. It has been condemning Russia for all threats addressed to its Eastern European allies as well. For this reason, Tallinn claims nowadays that if the US wants to maintain the position of superpower, Washington should renew its security guarantees for Central and Eastern Europe<sup>6</sup>. Events in Georgia have clearly demonstrated that firm guarantees for Estonia are essential in this matter.

### 3. Involvement of the European Union

During the Caucasus crisis of 2008, Estonia was urging the EU to become a mediator between the two parties of the conflict. Tallinn claimed that the EU had to act especially in order to prevent military aggression. Indeed, the major aim of this policy was to define the Kremlin's actions as illegitimate. Estonian authorities clearly stated that the use of Russian 'hard power' in modern international relations would bring negative consequences<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, a common approach of all member states was particularly advocated since the conflict gave a unique opportunity to show European unity. In fact, Tallinn stated that it was a critical moment to end favoring Moscow<sup>8</sup>.

Russian aggression was condemned in a common manner<sup>9</sup> because, as it was claimed by member states, democracy should not be powerless if it comes to confrontation with autocracy. The conflict was, however, a catalyst for Estonia since it showed the true intentions of European powers towards Russia. Estonia supported EU President Nicolas Sarkozy's mediations<sup>10</sup> because Tallinn believed that the EU must recognize its responsibility for the situation. At the same time, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that Russian steps were not legitimate, which seemed to be similar to the Estonian point of view. Indeed, the Baltic States were not alone in their efforts. It appeared that a cacophony of different voices was avoided. Furthermore, Sweden and Denmark claimed that they did not intend to sacrifice the integrity of Georgia for a future agreement with Russia (PCA II). The British foreign ministry also gave its support to the firm approach of Eastern European states to solve the conflict.

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4 Max Boot, "Eastern Europe Can Only Count on Itself," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2008.

5 James Blitz, "Nato urged to bolster Baltic defence," *The Financial Times*, September 2, 2008 .

6 Ronald D. Asmus, "NATO Must Put its Foot Down," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 2008.

7 *Postimees*, August 11, 2008.

8 Robert Anderson, "Baltic States turn on Russia," *Financial Times*, August 11, 2008.

9 "Joint Declaration of Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish Presidents on the situation in Georgia," August 9, 2008.

10 *Postimees*, August 13, 2008.

The Caucasus crisis has shown that the EU was able to create a sphere for diplomacy in international conflicts. However, this focus on diplomacy also raised the risk of appearing weak and divided over how to deal with Russia. The West condemned Russia for its aggression on Georgia but, simultaneously, it left the door open for the future intensive cooperation with Kremlin<sup>11</sup>. Great Britain, Poland and the Baltic States were pushing for tougher measures to be imposed against Russia. However, on the other hand, for instance France, Germany and Italy were keen on maintaining dialogue with Moscow. This divided approach resulted in a sense of diminishing faith in international organizations.

Finally, despite many commitments, Europe did not help to solve the conflict over Georgia in an effective and comprehensive manner. Within the EU substantial uncertainty about the way the situation would develop, as well as many doubts on the possible directions of Russian policy arose. There was also a lack of sheer determination to block Moscow's aggressive policy. A sense of underestimating the new assertiveness of Kremlin<sup>12</sup> resulted in widespread political illusions and irresponsible empty gestures. It was clear that the EU could not act immediately even if its peripheries were suffering serious conflicts. Moreover, Europe's postmodern tools of foreign policy seemed to be inappropriate to prevail in the conflict between liberal democracy and autocracy<sup>13</sup>. European integration turned out to be shallow, since the reactions of member states showed the domination of national interests over federal interests in this matter.

#### **4. The role of mass media**

The position of mass media in modern conflict is essential, especially when it comes to “winning hearts and minds” of international public opinion. For this reason, politically motivated visions of wars often dominate in the public sphere. During the crisis in the Caucasus this substantial dissonance was extremely evident in Estonia. Moreover, the distortions between the narratives of Estonian and Russian-language media certainly influenced the reception of those dramatic events. Indeed, the possibility to conduct a reliable political assessment of the whole situation was definitely reduced, particularly because the difference between victims and aggressors was, in the conflicting media sources, completely mixed.

Two versions of this conflict were present according to the media in Estonia<sup>14</sup>. According to the first of them, a version which was advanced by Estonian-language media, the Kremlin was an aggressor which initiated full scale attack against Georgia.

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11 *Paevaleht*, August 12, 2008.

12 Richard Holbrooke, “What the West Can Do,” *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2008.

13 Robert Kagan, “The Comeback of Autocracies,” *The Weekly Standard*, August 20, 2006.

14 *Paevaleht*, August 14, 2008.

According to the second version, Tbilisi should be blamed for the war, because it started military operations in South Ossetia, perhaps even to mobilize the West against Moscow. Furthermore, Russian-language media pointed out that Western countries were hypocritical in their pronouncements, because they had willingly recognized Kosovo and claimed that there was a dictatorship in Georgia which was supported by Estonian authorities. Indeed, Russian-language media stated that the Russian military intervention in the Caucasus was the only way to save the lives of innocent Ossetians. In other words, the Russian army didn't start this war, it was just “conducting military operations to impose peace”. At the same time, Russian-language media criticized Estonian and Western journalists for double standards and biased opinions<sup>15</sup>. They claimed that US was the real animator of these dramatic events. The result of the above-mentioned situation was that this anti-American vision of conflict gained popularity in Estonian society, especially among its Russian-speaking inhabitants<sup>16</sup>.

## 5. Promethean policy in practice

According to Estonia, the tragic images of Russian intervention in Georgia were a lesson in political realism. For this reason, Tallinn started to explain actively why it was crucial to hold back the Kremlin's intentions. The words of Vladimir Putin, who suggested that the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the collapse of the Soviet Union, should be treated like a real challenge.

In this context, promethean policy, according to Estonian officials, ought to be aimed at overcoming the Russian *divide et impera* approach in the post-Soviet sphere<sup>17</sup>. Many influential experts claim that the Kremlin intends nowadays to influence all Eastern European members of NATO to the extent that they would become neutral strategically. Moreover, it wants to maintain the *status quo* when it comes to relations in the post-Soviet sphere, and persuade its neighbors that the choice of strategic orientation shouldn't be conducted without Russian consent. Moscow's instruments of foreign policy are associated still with disinformation, blackmail and intimidation. From this point of view, it is much more appropriate to speak about the return to the history rather than its end. The Russian so-called “close neighborhood” has become a line of geopolitical contest. In this sense, a promethean policy is focused on the moral obligation to stand against Russian politics. This approach is connected with the intention to isolate the Kremlin<sup>18</sup>, on the grounds that the policy of aggression should be stopped immediately. Appeasement can only lead to tragedy, since democracy and autocracy can never cooperate.

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15 *Postimees*, August 12, 2008.

16 Olga Ivanova, “Biased US Media Takes Georgia's Side,” *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2008.

17 *Postimees*, August 27, 2008.

18 *Postimees*, August 14, 2008.

Estonian officials claim that Russia has chosen Georgia but that, in the future, the Kremlin will be inclined to “defend” the life and dignity of its citizens in another former Soviet republic, leading to a situation which resembled the “falling domino” theory. For this reason, it is an essential part of promethean policy to promote the membership of Georgia in NATO. Estonia, Georgia and the other states neighboring Russia have common historical experiences and should express together that their own aspirations are much more important than Moscow's intentions.

Furthermore, the cooling relationship between the EU and Russia should become a tool for economically sanctioning Russia. This would help to emphasize that Russian offensive behavior could only led to the reduction of economic and financial cooperation<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, Estonian president Ilves argued that the conflict should be seen in a broader international context, because Georgia's problems with Russia should be treated as inseparable from the European one<sup>20</sup>. In fact, Estonia wanted to create a sufficient counterweight to the Kremlin. A very important element of this policy was to maintain close relations with the US and to promote European values.

It should be mentioned that from the very beginning of its independence, Tallinn stressed the importance of relations with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. For this reason, Estonia supported the interests of these states, especially in their disputes with Moscow. Furthermore, the Estonian diplomatic academy educated a number of Georgian officials, and awarded scholarships for Georgian researchers and scientists. During the conflict of 2008, the practical dimension of the promethean policy was realized by the humanitarian support given by Tallinn to Tbilisi. Furthermore, Estonia sent to Georgia experts in the area of cyber security<sup>21</sup>.

Another aspect of this approach was and still is focused on the problem of energy security. According to Estonia, which is highly dependent on Russian energy sources, the Energy Charter should become an important element of its foreign policy<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, Tallinn, during negotiations between the EU and Russia on the new partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA II), wants to clearly emphasize that the ratification of the Energy Charter by Kremlin is one of Estonia's conditions.

At the same time, Tallinn intends to continue the development of its own military capabilities, because in this situation a failure to attend to issues of defense would be simply reckless and irresponsible. Moreover, as a member of NATO, Estonia ought to fulfill its commitments and extend funds on military competences. Experts claim that the country should be prepared to survive for at least 30 days without any substantial support from its allies<sup>23</sup>. That is why it ought to make a larger commitment to its own defense, starting with doubling its, currently very low, military

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19 “President Ilves in Tbilisi: the Georgian people have our firm support,” *Office of the President*, August 13, 2008.

20 “Estonia's President Says Georgia Crisis Has Changed Everything,” *Radio Free Europe*, August 14, 2008.

21 *Postimees*, August 18, 2008.

22 *Postimees*, August 22, 2008.

23 *Paevaleht*, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

spending. The Estonian army should focus on the defense of Tallinn and maintaining the connection with its southern allies. Additionally, core relations with the common neighborhood should be strengthened through trade, aid and common policies to make any potential Russian imperial policy extremely expensive<sup>24</sup>.

## 6. Pragmatism first?

Despite all moral obligations, fidelity to the above mentioned ideas could become counterproductive. According to the mythology, Prometheus's fate was tragic. For its efficiency this kind of approach requires a degree of stability in political alliances. Of core importance in this situation is the will to cooperate not only with former Soviet republics but also with Western partners. Otherwise, promethean policy could become a sort of ballast that resulted in seclusion, a sense of Russophobia and confrontation.

Some Estonian politicians claimed during this conflict that restrained politics would be the best solution. Since 1991, the Kremlin has been warning of the discrimination of Russians in Estonia. For this reason, in a tense situation over Georgia, Tallinn should avoid disputes with Moscow. Moreover, its politicians ought to moderate the tone of discussions in order not to fuel internal conflict with the Russian minority<sup>25</sup>. Indeed, repeated radical statements could lead to an explosion of conflict, so the support given to Georgia should not be far-reaching.

Furthermore, in relations with Kremlin there was no need to behave inconsequently because peaceful post-Soviet times came to an end. Estonia should avoid, in particular, an inconsistent foreign policy. On the one hand, for president Ilves the territorial integrity of Georgia was essential. On the other, Estonia has recognized the independence of Kosovo, which seemed to be the direct inspiration for Russia and South Ossetia. Some Estonian officials claimed that this kind of approach could create double standards so, in fact, there was no need to hurry in such an important matter.

According to Moscow, Estonia was supporting Finno-Ugric separatism on the territory of Russia<sup>26</sup>. In this way, the Kremlin has been criticizing the Baltic States from the early 90's. What is more, Russia has supported political turmoil in Estonia. For this reason, strong declarations by Tallinn give strength to the arguments of those who accuse Estonians of anti-Russian hysteria. In fact, the political support given to Georgia exposed Tallinn to the possible economic sanctions from Moscow. That is why the language of accusation should be avoided as well as the escalation of historical claims towards Russia. Tallinn could implement the language of mediation, as the EU did<sup>27</sup>.

Very often all new security dilemmas are not shared by the whole international community. For this reason, Estonia shouldn't behave in a reckless way, mainly through the expression of strong

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24 Gary Schmitt, "Georgia in NATO Will be the Best Revenge," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2008.

25 *Paevaleht*, August 16, 2008.

26 "Estonian leader denies seeking Russia's breakup," *International Herald Tribune*, July 30, 2008.

27 *Paevaleht*, August 12, 2008.

emotions and drastic steps, no matter how tempting this approach would be. A pragmatic policy could endure the rise of Russian power and accommodate this new situation<sup>28</sup>. From this point of view, all firm signals from Tallinn that aimed at supporting Georgia were political mistakes.

## 7. Summary

The intervention of Kremlin in Georgia underlined the common dilemma of the Eastern European states. The course of policy taken by those countries during dramatic developments in Caucasus resembled in fact “promethean” policy. It was particularly visible in the statements of Estonian officials who had chosen open and strong support to Tbilisi rather than pragmatic and moderate path of reaction in this matter.

It should be emphasized, however, that Tallinn drew the conclusion from the ambiguity of the US and Western European countries policy towards Russia. The reaction of the US to the conflict was perceived by Tallinn as disappointing and insufficient. The Estonian officials claimed, however, that there was substantial difference between the position of Estonia and Georgia in the geopolitics. The membership of Tallinn in NATO was the cornerstone of the confident policy of Estonia during the crisis.

Moreover, Estonia was particularly preoccupied with the unity among EU member states over the situation in Caucasus. It should be stressed that this postulate was partly fulfilled. The common approach of EU member states was achieved, since the Russian aggression was condemned by the capitals of Western Europe. The conflict, however, showed genuine approach of some European powers towards the Russian Federation, mostly by remaining open for the future intensive cooperation with Kremlin. Estonia and other Eastern European states conducted active policy to emphasize the need of maintaining the independence of Georgia. At the same time a number of Western policy-makers tended to present empty gestures disguising the domination of national interests and malfunctions of the value-based EU foreign policy.

Tallinn became aware that influential Russian minority in Estonia should be taken into account while designing Estonia's foreign policy towards post-Soviet sphere. Because of the substantial role of Russian-speaking mass media, it was imperative to moderate statements and narratives in order not to fuel ethnic tensions in Estonia.

Estonia's “promethean” policy during the conflict was intended to create a sufficient counterweight to Russia. A very important element of this approach was associated with the maintenance of close relations with the US and European Union. A lack of proper support from the transatlantic powers could result in failure and, in the end, bring negative consequences. That is why,

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<sup>28</sup> *Postimees*, August 11, 2008.



of core importance for this concept was the solidarity among Western democracies to stand against an aggressive tendencies of Russia's foreign policy.

It ought to be pointed out that, in case of a lack of the above-mentioned common determination, Estonia shouldn't behave in a reckless manner by expressing strong emotions and taking anti-Russian approach. Tallinn ought to take steps in order to create significant support and solidarity among NATO and EU member states that would allow to implement the “promethean” policy without potential costs of this project.

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