



WAR AS AN INSTRUMENT: THE FIVE-DAY WAR AND POLITICAL CRISIS IN UKRAINE

SERGII GLEBOV*

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The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the still-ongoing hybrid war in the Donbas are quintessential aspects of post-imperial history in the former Soviet space. At the core, these are issues of Russia's imperial ambitions, which have been expressed openly during military incursions against Georgia and Ukraine. At the same time, Russian aggression in the post-Soviet space is based on post-Soviet political norms, where the case of Ukraine in 2008 is instructive. There, no exaggeration is required to state that Ukraine's so-called "political elites" manipulated the Five-Day War – fought between Russia and Georgia in 2008 – to further their own parochial interests in jockeying for influence over the state. Starting on Aug. 8, 2008, martial rhetoric entered the lexicon of Ukrainian politicians, who began to use the terminology of war within and around the country's triangle of political elites: Viktor Yushchenko, Yulia Tymoshenko, and Viktor Yanukovich.

* **Sergii GLEBOV** - Dean, School of International Relations, Institute of Social Sciences; Associate Professor, Department of International Relations; Leading Research Fellow, Center for International Studies, Odesa Mechnikov National University, Ukraine. E-mail: sergglebov@gmail.com

The short version of the story is as follows. Viktor Yushchenko was Ukraine's president, supported by the pro-presidential parliamentary party - "Our Ukraine-People's Self-Defense Bloc" (NYNS); Yulia Timoshenko was the prime minister and leader of the second-largest parliamentary party - the Block of Yulia Timoshenko (BYT); and Viktor Yanukovich was the leader of the largest single party in the Ukrainian Parliament, the Party of the Regions (PR), which was in the opposition. All three figures were maneuvering against each other in advance of the presidential elections in 2010. In this environment, the issue of the Five Days War became a political weapon to be used against President Yushchenko.

The ruling coalition formed by the "orange" parties BYT and NYNS crumbled after NYNS announced it was leaving the coalition on Sept. 2, 2008. That decision was taken immediately following the summer break, the same day BYT and PR voted to establish a temporary investigative commission against the president. Then, both PR and BYT rhetorically supported an accusation made by the so-called temporary investigative commission in parliament on Sept. 26, 2008. The accusation was that President Yushchenko was the leader of a network selling weapons to Georgia in support of Mikheil Saakashvili's regime, and that he broke Ukrainian law in the process. Oct. 8, 2008, BYT (which had been affiliated with the Orange Revolution and its symbolic leader, President Yushchenko) together with PR (which had been humiliated by the Orange Revolution) voted to initiate a parliamentary investigation against the president, which, in turn, was met by the president's decision to dismiss the par-

liament. Next, President Yushchenko called for snap parliamentary elections to be held at the end of 2008. At the time, only 4.9 percent of surveyed Ukrainian experts believed that the ruling coalition broke up because of the Five-Day War, but, at the same time, 47.6% believed there was at least a partial link between two the events.

In any event, President Yushchenko's position was clear: he extended full political support to Georgia during the war against Russia. Bearing in mind the issue of military support provided prior to the war, the opposition, in the words of its leader, former prime minister Yanukovich (who was pro-Russian), made a conceptual conclusion: Yushchenko's political support for Georgia made Ukraine a participant in the conflict. Yanukovich described Yushchenko's personal involvement in the war in the Schmidtian style: "Above doubts, he - as a person, taking into account his relations with Saakashvili, maybe took the right decision. Kum, or not kum, but I saw him baptizing Saakashvili's son. But he had no right to act in the name of the country. Statements by the leaders on the side of Georgia led us today to a conflict situation with Russia."

Insofar as such statements were used as tools in forthcoming political battles, had Ukraine really been a third party to the conflict? Yanukovich also claimed that, resulting from Ukrainian involvement "having no even minor possibility to influence the event, Ukraine made tension on its own frontiers, something unrealistic has happened: during just several days Russia went from a friendly state and strategic partner which Ukraine shares a

common and age-old history with, suddenly turned into an enemy.” Yanukovich blamed President Yushchenko for creating a problem with Russia: “The aim is to quarrel Ukrainian and Russian peoples, to consolidate in citizens’ mass conciseness the icon of Russia as an aggressor, which attacks our country in near future.” Moreover, Yanukovich clearly supported Russia when it recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, calling on Ukraine to recognize them in turn. The opposition leader himself was ready to play with the terms recognition and non-recognition as part of his decisionist rhetoric. Yanukovich’s political rivals immediately reacted by putting him in the same box with Hamas and Hezbollah, who also favored recognition.

At the same time, Yanukovich got caught in a web of double standards while trying to combine Schmidtian and Realpolitik approaches, moving between the two whenever it was convenient. Speaking about the impossibility of using military force, he suggested in a normative sense that “to do this, of course, you need to resolve the issue of double standards first. Because of the precedent that was allowed in case of recognition of Kosovo’s independence, the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia has emerged. And now to stop this very dangerous trend, it is necessary to hold an emergent meeting of the UN Security Council, where the new rules must be worked out, international laws that would, first of all, never allow the application of double standards.”

Yulia Tymoshenko’s position on the Five-Day War found a middle ground between normative and universal approaches. She was ac-

cused by the president’s camp of having kept silent during the military conflict, and was subsequently blamed for having connections to the Kremlin, which ultimately decided to support her in the forthcoming presidential elections. Her side’s reply was not emotional, but diplomatic: that foreign policy is the prerogative of the president and the prime minister has no right to intervene. However, Tymoshenko later expressed her position on the war: “My position as to the conflict in Georgia is clear, understandable and causes no doubts. It totally matches the position of the EU, which recognizes the unity and sovereignty of the Georgian territory.”

In the end, Ukraine’s political orientation was thrown into doubt by the conflicting approaches of the three political figures regarding the Five-Day War. Those approaches ranged from clearly pro-Russian, anti-Saakashvili, and anti-American (Yanukovich), to a well-balanced “European” approach (Tymoshenko), to an overtly pro-Georgian, anti-Russian, and pro-American stance (Yushchenko). Each of these approaches illuminated competing versions of Ukrainian national identity in the post-imperial, post-Soviet space.

Are these identities imposed on the Ukrainian electorate by political elites seeking to manipulate the Five-Days War to gain or hold on to power? Or do they reflect more organic aspects of Ukrainian society? In any case, Yushchenko attempt to express Ukraine’s “Western” or “European” identity by delinking the country from Russia was a clumsy effort toward Ukraine’s self-identification as a European country. Ukrainian attempts to alter

its post-Soviet identity in such a manner were doomed to invite fierce opposition from Russia, which was determined to keep Ukrainian identity semi-constructed or even deconstructed, and thus unable to articulate a national identity separate from its ties to Russia.

Resulting from all this was the fear that Ukraine could be Russia's next target after Georgia. The image of Russia as an aggressor was already a point of concern in 2008; it had been evoked during campaigning for the US presidential election, when vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin criticized Barack Obama for "offering a weak response to Russia's invasion of Georgia, which Palin said would encourage Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to invade the Ukraine. In August, when the two sides were fighting, Obama condemned Russia's action and called for diplomacy and restraint by both countries."

Even before the Five-Day war, polls showed a tendency among Russians and Ukrainians to see relations between the two countries as trending downward. After the war, the main evidence of Ukraine's identity shift in the direction of the West was the public's increased willingness to join NATO. The obvious rationale was that doing so would enhance Ukraine's security and guarantee its protection against a possible or even probably Russian threat. In February 2007, 17 percent of the population spoke in favor of NATO. By May 2008, 22 percent; and by September 2008 - 31 percent.

There was another major issue that surfaced during and immediately following the Five-

Day War, one that had both military and civil dimensions and reflected reactions to the official Russian explanation for its military actions in Georgia. This was the issue of dual citizenship, which emerged as a possible tool for the use of force against other states. While defending Russian citizens in South Ossetia, Russia raised the Ukrainian authorities' fears about Ukrainian citizens holding dual citizenship with the Russian Federation. The Ukrainian authorities had the normative right to worry: according to Ukrainian law, it was and still is prohibited to hold citizenship of any other country.

Even then, it was obvious that the weakest link in Ukraine's territory was Crimea, a region that could become a potential point of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In Ukraine, there was a fear that Russia, in seeking to justify a military attack on Ukraine, would use the cover of protecting Russian citizens in Crimea from the "anti-Russian" authorities in Kyiv. As we know, such a scenario, which was used against Georgia in 2008, was eventually used against Ukraine in 2013 and 2014.

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Georgian Institute of Politics
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge
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