Ukrainian events and phobias in Transcaucasia

The crisis in Ukraine has not yet reached its final conclusion, but we can already hear the question: Where in the territory of the former Soviet Union should we expect a new explosion? The South Caucasus is considered a favorite in this respect.

There is the eternally restless Kyrgyzstan. However, its instability is habitual.

There is also Moldova, which is preparing to sign an association agreement with the EU this summer, and where not only the uncontrollable Transnistria but also Gagauzia, as well as a couple of other areas, predominantly populated by Russian speakers, are looking towards Russia.

Nevertheless, the South Caucasus still stands apart. Predictions about the great instability, sneaking up into the region, have become so regular and ominous, that the situation began to resemble the “Rookery” from the famous novel by Ilf and Petrov – everyone knew that it would catch fire, but nobody knew when. Let us try to understand how serious the situation is, and how justified the fears are.

Azerbaijan

Baku has distanced itself from all the integration processes, fearing that participation in multilateral alliances will force it to sacrifice part of its sovereignty. Ilham Aliyev is categorically unwilling to do this, believing that his country’s membership in the CIS is more than enough. Active participation in the alliance of Turkic states does not commit Azerbaijan to anything. Some humanitarian projects for the sake of the Almighty, as many as possible. However, if some serious economic relations were to occur within the alliance, the complaisance of Baku is questionable. It is not by accident that Azerbaijan has joined the Non-Aligned Movement, thereby emphasizing its neutrality and equal detachment from military and political blocs.

Baku wants to cooperate with the West, with Russia, and with the East on an equal partnership basis. Moreover, it wants to cooperate without political overtones. The Russian vector here is intensified by the unresolved Karabakh conflict - here, any small serious deviation, and no one will guarantee Azerbaijan that the status quo of its former autonomy will be preserved, and this not in favor of the former mother country.

Baku traditionally does not trust the West. The authorities explain the periodic activation of the opposition, which has repeatedly resulted in diplomatic scandals, as the result of the West’s machinations. Nevertheless, in general, the West, being preoccupied by the Azeri energy resources and having relatively easy access to them, is loyal to the current authorities. The criticism of Aliyev and his entourage is obviously formal, and while there is oil and gas, the Azerbaijani authorities can feel at ease. However, no one can predict what might happen when the country drops out from the circle of large energy players, and this, according to the experts in the field of energy, may occur in 2020, when the country’s oil and gas production will decline. Given that a large part of petrodollars are spent and will be spent on the purchase of weapons, wholly unnecessary weapons, and the Karabakh issue is still far from being resolved in the Azerbaijani scenario. Moreover, the global trend of territorial redistribution does not serve
Azerbaijan’s goals.

Now, thanks to the sale of energy resources, the authorities are able to maintain internal stability and keep promising the moon to society. However, will society be that tolerant, when the flow of hydrocarbon money is reduced? Perhaps then, Baku’s indifference to alliances will change, in favor of interest for strong partners. Today, this is characterized by a statement of Ilham Aliyev: association with the EU is not the path of Azerbaijan, while the Customs Union (CU) does not present any interest for Azerbaijan – we have our own line.

Laying out the specifics of his country’s line, the political scientist Rasim Musabekov told the author: “Our policy is to ensure a pace of socio-economic and demographic development that is higher than in the neighboring countries, and this is bearing fruit. If before the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan accounted for about 40% of the population and a somewhat smaller share of the total size of the economy of the South Caucasus, then currently, Azerbaijan accounts for over 60% of the population, and over 70% of the total GDP. The country also accounts for almost 90% of the investments, export potential and foreign reserves of the region. Our task is to find additional markets for our energy resources, to cooperate directly with the maximum number of partners.”

Thus, an explosion in Azerbaijan is improbable in the nearest future. In general, this state of affairs is convenient for the West and for Russia, the opposition is weak, the authorities have the resources to ensure internal stability. The main sources threatening destabilization are found in the Nagorno-Karabakh, and to much lesser extent national minorities, who occasionally speak about their rights. The least threatening – are possible clashes with Iran. However, Nagorno-Karabakh will not escalate any conflict by itself – it is satisfied with the current situation. The minorities are disorganized and for now, they cannot pose a serious danger to the center, while problems with Iran can be solved by operational negotiations.

Armenia

Unlike Baku, Yerevan, to the contrary, has been active in both directions of integration, although both Brussels and Moscow warned it against overlapping membership in the two organizations. Yerevan thought deeply, and chose an association agreement with the EU.

One could detect some resentment in this unexpected decision of the authorities. The thing is, that ever since the inception of the Customs Union and of the Eurasian Economic Community, Armenia had repeatedly expressed its desire to join the organization, but this initiative was not supported by the members of the CU. Yerevan was especially hurt by the indifference of Moscow. The reason for this cold attitude is the fact that Armenia’s enthusiasm for the European integration process seemed excessive to Moscow. One could only guess about Moscow’s discontent, while Brussels did not directly force the signing of the association agreement with Yerevan, but strongly encouraged it by compliments.

All that changed during a short September meeting in Moscow between the presidents Vladimir Putin and Serzh Sargsyan. The Armenian leader announced his readiness to join the CU, which meant an automatic rejection of European integration. There were some protests in Yerevan, but these were not supported by the public. Then it was time to ask: what were the hopes of the Armenian leadership, was it deprived of political maneuvers because of the Karabakh problem?

Yerevan analyst Boris Navasardyan believes that the Armenian authorities have not fully worked out the situation, or hoped that Moscow would turn a blind eye to it, as the association agreement did not have any military or political components, and the agreement concerned internal reforms and trade relations with the EU. However, this did not work, and the authorities were faced with a tough choice.

Obviously, Brussels understood the hopelessness of Armenia’s situation and, expressing the regret about Yerevan’s change of the course, said they were not going to abandon their work with Armenia. Informed sources in Yerevan confirmed that consultations are ongoing on the mid-bureaucratic and diplomatic level, and the main goal for both sides is to leave the possibility for cooperation open, but without making any commitments, and in the case of Yerevan, there is also the desire to receive some financial aid.

However, realizing Armenia’s hopelessness in the choice of integration project, the West seems to have no intention to pretend to understand its unconditional support for Russia on the Crimean issue. The West was pleased with the Armenian authorities, as long as they could stick to complementary policies, but their unambiguous bias in favor of Moscow cannot suit it any more. Therefore, the instant activation of pro-Western forces in Armenia, NGOs, existing on Western grants, and other agents of influence, seems natural. The current Armenian authorities can probably feel relaxed until the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire, which will be celebrated on
April 25, as no one dares to darken that sacred date. However, one should be ready for new events in May. There are grounds for this: a catastrophic deterioration of the socio-economic situation, worsening material and living conditions, which have led to an outflow of Armenians to foreign countries in search of better futures. This started long ago, and has continued year after year. Apparently, the authorities cannot change this situation, and the government itself remains an oligarchic party. It is quite possible that this unrest will be willingly supported by the West, which has ceased being satisfied with the policy of the Armenian authorities. In this respect, the situation in Armenia is more serious than in Azerbaijan.

Georgia

Five wars and two revolutions, a complete devastation and even famine were experienced by this country in the post-Soviet era. Yet, one thing has remained unchanged - the country’s foreign policy, which over the years has strengthened its pro-West course. Today, it has started to wobble. This was not without some help from the West. More precisely, because of the statement made by U.S. President Barack Obama - that NATO would not expand at the expense of Ukraine and Georgia.

Ukraine is one thing. The country has never aspired to enter NATO, a large part of the population has always been against it, and if Kiev suddenly began to talk about a possible accession to NATO, it was just to spite Moscow. Georgia, hoping once and for ever to find shelter from all the threats under the umbrella of the alliance, is quite a different thing. Of course, it hoped to find shelter mainly from Russia.

Obama’s statement fell on fertile ground. Pro-Russian forces, supporters of Eurasian integration, have intensified their activities in Tbilisi. They periodically organize events and processions that usually end in clashes with supporters of Western integration. In such cases, the police, depoliticized by the new authorities, work on keeping the opposing groups apart, which in general, is reduced to non-interference in fisticuffs.

The Georgian Orthodox Church is very influential and active. Its ministers in their sermons openly and without any metaphors or oedipal techniques instruct their congregations in the spirit that the West is an absolute evil, undermining the foundations of Christianity, whereas Russia, sharing the same faith, almost alone is resisting the diabolical intrigues and temptations of the West. This kind of agitprop cannot help bearing fruit – now Georgian churches are never empty.

Year after year, Georgia has meticulously fulfilled all the requirements to become a member of the alliance. One program of cooperation with NATO was replaced by a subsequent one, at a higher level. Georgian troops participated in special operations of the bloc in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. By the way, in Afghanistan, the Georgian contingent is the largest after that of the U.S. Moreover, their service there is not just formal. They are not simply guarding objects of low level of security, and for the small Georgia, losing a few dozen of its young citizens has become a national tragedy. Tbilisi has repeatedly been visited by senior NATO officials, including Secretary Generals, who thanked Georgia for its help and left with the assurance that “the question of Georgia’s admission has been practically solved, and it is a matter of time.”

New authorities, who replaced Saakashvili and Co., decided to continue the pro-Western course. Integration into NATO was declared a priority. At the September summit of NATO in Wales, Georgia should receive the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP). This is the last step in joining the alliance.

Events in Ukraine, withdrawal of Crimea from its composition and its annexation by Russia, has prompted the Georgian leadership to turn to Brussels with a request to speed up the admission of Georgia to the bloc, freeing it from the mandatory implementation of the MAP, which inherently, can be regarded as polishing the existing achievements. Tbilisi was hoping that given the Ukrainian events, Paris and Berlin, the main opponents of Georgia’s admission to NATO, would mollify their stance. However, this did not happen. Conversely, the verdict, contrary to expectations, was pronounced by Washington - the main Georgian patron in the international arena.

Tbilisi believes that they have suffered elementary betrayal, and does not even want to listen to the fact that Obama’s statement may be dictated by tactical considerations, namely, by the desire to reduce tensions, created in former Soviet space. At one time, when the Warsaw Bloc was dissolved, the West also “tactically” assured Russia that the alliance would not to expand eastwards. However, within a year, the bloc stood close to Russian borders. Moscow has no particular reasons to trust Obama’s statement, but it can extract some dividends from the state of affairs, which has been created in Georgia because of this statement.

In Georgia, supporters of Eurasian integration popularize the following theses. The West does not need Georgia, as such, and NATO needs only Georgian land for their bases and Georgian soldiers as combat units. NATO and the West
offered little support during the August war with Russia. Relations with Russia were spoiled precisely because of the pro-Western aspirations of the Georgian authorities. The West is not in a hurry to admit, on a large scale, Georgian products to their markets, while Russia did this. This recapitulation of facts ended in the question: What is more beneficial for Georgia - friendship with the West or with Russia? A great contribution to the answer to this question, as we have already noted, is made by the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has the highest prestige in the society.

To what extent is destabilization in Georgia possible? The probability is apparently higher than in the neighboring countries. The society is divided, and if there is a social demand for a change in foreign policy orientation, and the government, as it should in such cases, reacts to it, then the West, which has invested a lot in Georgia and considers it to be its outpost in the South Caucasus, will definitely dislike this, and hence all the consequences. The probabilities of a reciprocal or proactive intervention from Moscow are considerable. Let us say, South Ossetia remembers its claims to the Truso Gorge, located in Georgia. Separatists can become more active in Javakheti, a region populated mainly by Armenians, who, according to various, but not confirmed data, have Russian passports, i.e., they are citizens of the Russian Federation. We should not exclude provocations in the Abkhaz-Georgian border area. In short, there are many options for destabilization – and time will show which of these might be activated or remain dormant.

*Yuri Simonyan, a columnist of Nezavisimaya Gazeta, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".*