“Milk war” and “Hot war”: different wars – same goals

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1. Introduction

This paper tries to apply a political security concept to a recent development in the Russian – Belarus relationship, aiming to draw connections with the Russian – Georgian war and the surrounding political reality in general. Analyzing the whole situation in this way will provide a possibly different perspective on the development of the process and understanding of it as a part of something bigger than merely the development of certain events and issues.

Everyday we hear the word security, we hear about the problems of security, we hear about security of ourselves, about security of our societies, our countries, etc. But what does security really mean nowadays?

Security is not what it used to be, or what it is mostly associated with. As Barry Buzan defines in his book, security is not only about military threats, it is much wider than that; and he introduces his typology of security, dividing it into five sectors: military, economic, societal, political, and environmental (Buzan 1991). And in all five sectors, the referent object is different.

As Buzan describes it, security is a move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue as a special kind of politics or as above politics, and at the same time securitization is a more extreme version of politicization (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998, 23).

In order to securitize something, a securitizing actor, by stating that a particular referent object is threatened in its existence, claims the right to extraordinary measures to ensure the referent object’s survival (Taureck 2006). Thus the issue moves from the sphere of “normal politics” into the realm of emergency politics, where the issue is no longer dealt with by the rules and regulations of normal politics, democratic rules, and regulations, but by the ones of emergency politics. Security thus no longer has a given meaning, but is anything a securitizing actor says it is.

But at the same time, in order to have “successful securitization”, three main steps need to be taken, which ensures that not everything can become a
security issue. Those steps are: 1) identification of existential threats, 2) emergency action, and 3) effects on inter-unit relations of breaking free of rules (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998, 23-24).

The first step towards securitization is called a securitizing move, which is presenting an issue as an existential threat, by, for example, stating that: “If we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant (because we will not be there or we will not be free to deal with it in our own way)” (Taureck 2006). In theory, a securitizing move is an option open to any issue, as once the securitizing actor has convinced the audience that something is an existential threat and there is a need to go beyond existing regulations and binding rules, the case could be defined as an example of securitization.

But in practice, securitization is far from being open to all units and their respective subjective threats, it is essentially based on power and capability and therewith the means to socially and politically construct a threat (Taureck 2006). Furthermore, it is important to mention that securitization usually has its origin and has its reason.

Political security is about the organizational stability of the social order; its heart is threats to state sovereignty, focusing on non-military threats to sovereignty, it is about threats to legitimacy (being an internal threat) or recognition (being an external threat) either of political units or of the essential patterns among them (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998, 141-145).

In the political sector, existential threats can be defined in terms of ideology of the state and not only in terms of sovereignty of the state. The processes that challenge the norms, rules, and institutions that represent and set up that regime could existentially threaten a regime (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998, 22).

Thus the political security of the state is, in a way, defending its political ideology. As political ideology and national identity are the ideas that hold the state together and, at the same time, these ideas in general make up, together with a physical base and institutions, the three components which state consists of. Therefore, threatening the political ideology of a state means threatening the stability of the political order, as also does questioning the ideology that legitimatizes the government (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998, 150).
There were two specific cases of security and political security between Russia and its neighbors – Byelorussia and Georgia. The cases were different in forms, different in contents, and different in consequences.

2. “Hot war” between Russia and Georgia

On August 7, 2008, war broke out between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Georgia over South Ossetia, a tiny separatist republic that had declared its independence from Georgia back in 1991. The Kremlin accused Tbilisi of starting a military attack on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali in order to regain control over its breakaway region, which was, according to the official Russian position, the reason for the military invasion by its troops into Georgia in order to defend Russian citizens, which make up most of the population of the region.

Russian forces poured across Georgia's borders in the country’s two separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and crushed the Georgian army in a five-day war, moving deep into the post-soviet republic, nearing its capital Tbilisi, destroying the country’s economic infrastructure and disrupting communications among different regions in it. Shortly after the war, Moscow recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries.

Officials in Tbilisi claimed that a Russian column of a large number of tanks and armored vehicles had advanced into South Ossetia before the Georgian attack on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali. Thus, the military action from the Georgian side was an attempt to defend its territory and its population from foreign aggression.

On the 25th of August 2008, both houses of the Russian parliament issued a resolution calling on President Dmitry Medvedev to recognize the independence of the two breakaway regions of Georgia: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The next day, on the 26th of August, President Medvedev issued two decrees recognizing these two regions as independent countries (Russian Federation 2008).

With this war, an atmosphere of fear, dread, or even horror was created in the region; and such brutal victories will never receive approval by the nations of the Caucasus. But at the same time, with its quick victory over Georgia, even though very predictable if we compare the military potential
of great Russian and small Georgia, Moscow undeniably earned authority in the Caucasus region, where strength is seen as the highest virtue, and where, in fact, it has almost cult-like status. The Kremlin demonstrated that it remains the main power in the region and is capable of solving issues with its own rules and with its own methods. Simultaneously, Russia’s rushed recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which it controlled anyway, has produced the prospect of a prolonged standoff with the West.

The Georgian government of Mikheil Saakashvili is well recognized as a pro-Western and pro-NATO government. Thus, many asked whether this war could be seen as a military operation to eliminate the Western-oriented government of Mr. Saakashvili, whom Mr. Putin once vowed to "hang by his balls". Russia, in open violation of the cease-fire agreement with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, has never withdrawn its troops to pre-war positions. Instead, it has strengthened its units in Georgia and has between 5,000 and 7,500 soldiers in the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both of which Moscow now treats as independent states (The Washington Post 2009).

According to the cease-fire agreement with President Sarkozy, both sides agreed on the following points: 1) not resort to force; 2) definitively cease hostilities; 3) give free access to humanitarian aid; 4) Georgian military forces must withdraw to their usual barracks; 5) Russian military forces must withdraw to the lines occupied before the start of hostilities. Until an international mechanism is put in place, Russia peace keeping troops will implement the security measures; 6) open international discussions over security and stability modalities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Euractiv 2008).

Conflict, once more, focused the world's attention on the region, giving substance for reflection on the issues of how does this war change the political reality in the world, how does it change the relationship of Russian with the rest of the world, as well as what does this speedy victory give to Russia.

The war indeed changed the political reality surrounding the Russian Federation and it forces, or at least shows a possibility to look at various events involving Russia through a different prism, trying to find a link between the events. This kind of new and dissimilar analysis of an episode of political life allows explaining and seeing that episode differently than at the beginning.
The international community did not agree with Russia’s actions and is opposing its intentions. The situation was compared with the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 1939 and the Munich agreement of 1938. Russia’s steps were described as building a new Berlin wall, this time across the sovereign territory of Georgia (Havel, V., Adamkus, V., Laar, M., Landsbergis, V., De Habsbourg, O., Bendit, D., Ash, T., Glucksmann, A., Leonard, M., Levy, B., Michnik, A., Ramoneda, J. 2009).

The Kremlin, in order to justify its actions in thus raising tension, from the first day of the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia till now, seeks support for its decision on the international level. Recognition of Kosovo, in comparison, is supported by more than sixty states from all over the world, which was not the case with Russia’s decision. Moscow needs to and tries to prove the correctness of its actions and to add legitimacy to them by gaining support from other states.

3. “Milk war” between Russia and Belarus

Russia obviously wanted its neighbour and ally Belarus to support its decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to do the same. When once again talking about the issue, Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev mentioned that “Russia has always had a simple position – we think that it is a country's sovereign right whether to recognize or not to recognize new subjects of international law. But of course, we are not indifferent to the fate of these two states. We are glad that worldwide support for them is growing” (Schwirtz, M. 2009). Belarus did not follow the “Russian way” and did not recognize those two breakaway regions, and this started to cause problems to the country in its relationship with Russia.

Due to the financial crisis, Belarus was seeking financial aid, which included negotiations with the Russian Federation regarding a loan. In autumn 2008, Russia agreed to give Belarus a loan of 2 billion USD, but later on, as Belarus needed more finances, it asked for an additional 100 million Russian Rubles, which they were refused (Butrin, D. 2009). At the same time, some Russian TV channels were banned in Belarus (Charter 97 2009). Later on, the President of the Republic of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, blamed Russia for not helping its strategic neighbour (Interfax 2009).
Here, it needs to be highlighted that these two neighboring countries have very close cultural and political connections. Belarus is a close commercial partner for Russia, the gas-transit price through Belarus is substantially cheaper than the price paid by Russia for transit through Ukraine, 80% of all Russian road-transit goes through Belarus, and Belarus provides Russian factories with many and various products. At the same time Russia is the main importer of Belarusian products (Mamontov, V., Reut, A. 2009), 93% of all Belarusian milk and meat products export goes to Russia.

The problem for Belarus is that it does not want to lose the support of the west, as the country has many times been warned not to recognize the two separatist regions; such recognizing would mean for Belarus non-inclusion in the European Union’s Eastern Partnership plans, which offers economic assistance, trade concessions, and consultations on security (Castle, S. 2009). Subsequently, Belarus has been included in the EU’s Eastern Partnership (European Union 2009). At the same time, at the end of May 2009, the World Bank agreed to provide Belarus with a loan of 125 Million USD (World bank 2009).

From the other side, Russia banned 500 types of Belarusian milk products (Ria novosti 2009); in just two days, during which time Belarusian politicians called this decision political, Russia banned an additional 800 types of milk products (Ria novosti 2009). President Lukashenko, calling it a political decision and, in addition, raising an issue of banning Belarusian sugar and tractors, heavily criticized this decision. He connected all those problems between the two countries to the issue of recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Mamontov, V., Reut, A. 2009), admitting the link between these economic issues and the recognition of Georgia’s two break-away regions.

Russia itself denied those accusations, insisting that banning milk products from Belarus was not a political decision and was connected only to economic regulations, claiming that Belarus’ importing of milk products was breaking rules previously agreed upon, that non-market, low prices for the Belarusian products damaged the development of the same kind of production in Russia itself (Ria novosti 2009).

At the same time, the chief sanitary physician of Russia, Gennadiy Onishenko, declared, after conducting analyses, that Belarusian milk products had serious problems (Interfax 2009). But in just a few days, Russia’s Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, revealed that negotiations between
the two countries regarding the deliveries of Belarusian milk products were ongoing and there were already some agreements on the issue (Rambler media group 2009).

This might bring into question the truth of the statements regarding the non-political reasons for banning the milk products. Should we assume that all those errors of Belarusian trading and their damage to the Russian economy just suddenly became visible to the Russian authorities? Should we assume that all those problems mentioned before were solved in just few days or could be solved in such a short period of time?

The negotiations Mr. Putin was talking about probably did not go so well, as on June 14 the president of Belarus boycotted a planned summit meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), where The Collective Security Agreement was designed to be signed among all the members of CSTO (Solovjov, V., Gabuev, A. & Grib, N. 2009), which was giving Russia the possibility to consolidate ties with its neighbors and end their flirtation with Western allies (Berry, E. 2009). In the end, the agreement was signed anyway, but without Belarus and Uzbekistan; President Lukashenko, who argued that any agreement without participation of all the member states was illegitimate, criticized this signing (Rambler media group 2009).

Response from Russia regarding the decisions of Belarus came very quickly, as a new problematic issue was raised by the Public Joint Stock Company Gazprom, concerning the rise of gas prices for Belarus as well as the demands concerning the debt to the Russian company for natural gas already used (Solovjov, V., Gabuev, A. & Grib, N. 2009).

Belarus did not wait long with its reaction, as just on the following day Minsk announced the decision to toughen custom controls on its border with Russia, calling it “symmetrical response” (Interfax 2009). In just a few days, after negotiations between the two countries, Belarusian milk products were allowed to be imported to the Russian Federation (Lobas, T. 2009), and later that same day the Belarusian side announced withdrawal of their decision to toughen custom controls on its border with Russia (Ria Novosti 2009). As a reason for the so-called “milk war”, the amounts of imported milk products were mentioned by the Prime Minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin, but nothing was mentioned about the previously raised issue of the quality of the products (Ria Novosti 2009).
At the same time Mr. Putin mentioned that negotiations with Belarus were going on and that they are very important, especially during the world economic crisis, once more highlighting the importance of Russian aid to Belarus, meaning low prices for gas as well as financial aid to this country (Ria Novosti 2009). Later on, the list of Belarusian milk products again, allowed to be imported to Russia, was doubled (Ria Novosti 2009).

Here, one could again raise the question mentioned before, that have all the problems regarding the quality of the Belarusian milk products, as well as the risk of damaging Russian milk production and the economy in general, been solved in just a few days and disappeared as suddenly as they appeared? Or might there be some other explanations as well for such development of the events?

Belarus maintains a considerable interest in having Western support. President Lukashenko when meeting EU External Relations Commissioner Benito Ferrero-Waldner did not hide this. The Belarusian president openly declared that his country is honestly willing to have a good relationship with the EU, “even though some might not like it to happen” (Charter 97 2009), hinting at Belarus’s eastern neighbor. Mr. Lukashenko once more underlined the importance of financial credits and resources and of financial aid in general from the EU to Belarus (Charter 97 2009). Besides this, on June 22, 2009, the Belarusian national bank announced that it had approached the International Monetary Fund in order to ask for an additional one billion USD in addition to the 2.46 billions USD credit agreed upon before (National Bank of the Republic of Belarus 2009).

4. Conclusion

After everything mentioned above, those actions of Russia towards Belarus could be seen as an example of securitization, securitization of trade aspects of bilateral relations, which is symptomatic, especially during a financial crisis. Russia decided to securitize relations with Belarus to force it to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For Belarus it was a direct threat to its own political security, already highly unstable due to a high degree of intermingling between Russian and Belarusian political and security spheres.

Securitization usually has its origins in political affairs, and in this case it was the “Hot war” between Russia and Georgia. As for the reasons for the
securitization, which also usually can be drawn out, in this case it was to force Belarus to recognize the separatist republics. In other words, Russia moved the discourse into the military sphere using words like “Belarusian milk is a threat to Russia!” etc. What is the reason of this speech act? – clearly, to force Belarus to do something it opposes.

Here, we could indicate a parallel between those actions of Russia and the issue of the threats, in particular, to a certain category called “Security of and against supranational, regional integration”. As Buzan claims, this kind of formation, that is, supranational or regional integration, can begin having security discourses in which the political actors, being states or nations, themselves become threats when they react against integration, on the basis of their fear of this integration or the integrating organization (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998, 157-158).

Russia clearly sees this kind of threat in Belarus, when the latter does not follow the deeper integration process with Russia and is flirting with the EU and trying to normalize and possibly improve its relationship with the west. The “Hot war” between Georgia and Russia did not stay out of President Lukashenko’s attention; it definitely showed the Belarusian leader the costs of possible disagreements with its Eastern neighbour. The actions of Russia towards Georgia influenced the Belarusian president to look for improved relations with the EU, especially when the circumstances for doing so were suitable, as the EU by that time had already decided to change its policy towards the regime of President Lukashenko.

Kremlin leaders well know that too much pressure on Belarus could leave Lukashenko with no choice but sustaining close cooperation with the EU and moving away from cooperation with Russia and its satellites from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which essentially would weaken Russia’s geopolitical positions. But at the same time Russian leaders know that Belarus very much depends on Russia, as described above, and it will be extremely difficult for the country to have its relations with Russia closed down.

Belarus’s improving relations with the West is a threat to Russia, as Belarus is in its zone of influence, its near abroad. Russia needs Belarus, its strategic partner, to be more involved in the integration agreement and process between the two countries, as well as in the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which would mean supporting Russia’s external politics, thus
supporting the ideology of Russia’s government. Belarus is threatening Russia by its refusal to cooperate.

As we discussed above, the recognition of these two separatist regions indeed is very important for Russia. When talking about relationship with the west concerning this recognition, Russia’s foreign minister Mr. Lavrov mentioned the information war, which is still going on. The minister explained that the voices from west, suggesting Russia change its decision and recognize the territorial integrity of Georgia and pull its troops from Georgian territory, are just “echoes of the old thinking”, which will pass one day (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009).

Belarus is not the only country that finds the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a part of the political discussion and political trade when it comes to negotiations with the Russian Federation. In the beginning of September of this year, the president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, visited Moscow to discuss weapons and energy deals with president Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin.

After the meeting with the Russian president, at the press conference, Chavez announced that “Venezuela is joining in recognition of the independence of the republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia” (Schwirtz, M. 2009) and soon would establish diplomatic relations with them. In response, the Russian president announced to the press Russia’s commitment to supply Venezuela with an array of new weapons, “We will supply Venezuela with all the weapons that they request; we will supply tanks among the deliveries. Why not? We have good tanks. If our friends order them, we will deliver” (Schwirtz, M. 2009).

One may suggest that these actions are further attempts on the part of Russia to expand its authority in Latin America and at the same time weaken U.S. influence in the region. At that same meeting in Moscow, President Chavez admitted that the weapons are needed to stand up to Washington and avoid repetition of the past when his country “was in slavery thanks to the actions of the Yankee empire” (Schwirtz, M. 2009). But in this cooperation development, the issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was not just a nice gesture; when commenting on the Venezuelan president’s decision, Prime Minister Putin said that Venezuela’s recognition of the provinces helped towards realizing Russia’s goal of “making international politics more democratic” (Eckel, M. 2009). Whatever this “more democratic” could mean in the understanding of the Kremlin, it is a part of Russia’s current
external politics, and the government of the country is trying its best to gain support for it all over the world.

Shortly after these developments, in the middle of September, a member of the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada) from the opposition Party of Regions, Mr. Anatoliy Tolstoukhov, told journalists that if the leader of his political party, Mr. Viktor Yanukovych, wins the presidential elections, Ukraine would definitely support Russia’s decision and recognize the two separatist regions. He said that Russia was in the right when defending its citizens in Georgia, and, regarding the recognition, he admitted that he was glad to hear of Venezuela’s decision; but at the same time the politician suggested that it is even more important to support this process in the post-Soviet region (Rambler media group 2009). There is no secret made of the long-time pro-Russian position of this Ukrainian party and its close contact with the Kremlin, which once more supports the idea that recent developments between Russia and Belarus were less economic and more of a political tool for convincing a neighboring country to make a certain decision.

Russia has a huge impact on Belarus, and this is once more understood after everything written above; therefore, we could see political security issues in all those steps taken by Russia, which might seem to be economic at the first sight. But then sometimes those “economic” decisions look strange, especially when talking about the results, during a period when Russia itself has huge economic problems, which appear to be getting only worse, at least in near future (Bloomerg, T. 2009).

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