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## Frozen Conflicts, De Facto States, And Enduring Interests In The Russian Near Abroad

Brittany A. Pohl

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**FROZEN CONFLICTS, DE FACTO STATES, AND ENDURING INTERESTS  
IN THE RUSSIAN NEAR ABROAD**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

By

Brittany A. Pohl

December 2016

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# **FROZEN CONFLICTS, DE FACTO STATES, AND ENDURING INTERESTS IN THE RUSSIAN NEAR ABROAD**

Defense and Strategic Studies

Missouri State University, December 2016

Master of Science

Brittany A. Pohl

## **ABSTRACT**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in the establishment of fifteen sovereign nations and a number of separatist states concentrated in the greater Black Sea region. The latter, so-called de facto states, are the result of frozen conflicts that emerged as Moscow's grip over its territory weakened in the waning years of the USSR and dormant ethno-religious tensions erupted into internecine conflict. Separatists, ultimately with help from Moscow, were able to enshrine victories on the battlefield through ceasefires with metropolitan states that have held for over two decades. However, the issues surrounding these pseudo-states remain unsettled, and attempts at conflict resolution and reconciliation have been complicated by many factors, including Russian interests and involvement in the region, national historical memory and demographics, and international norms and laws that favor the status quo. This thesis examines the de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, and assesses the extent to which Crimea represents a paradigm shift in Russian policy towards separatist movements. Ultimately, the emergence and intractability of frozen conflicts, the results of Soviet and Russian policies respectively, and the entrenchment of de facto states in the greater Black Sea region contribute to regional instability while ensuring Moscow's continuing hegemony in its near abroad.

**KEYWORDS:** frozen conflict, de facto state, nationalism, separatism, near abroad, greater Black Sea region, post-Soviet space, hegemony

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Kerry Kartchner, PhD  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
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I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Anastasia Grace Auleta.

*Virtus tentamine gaudet.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## Overview

The fall of the Soviet Union not only ended the Cold War and the bipolar world order, it also signaled the death knell of the world's last great empire of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the heels of this institutional collapse came an outbreak of secessionist movements resulting in the establishment of fifteen sovereign, internationally recognized states and a number of de facto states concentrated in the greater Black Sea region (Figure 1). Despite the immediate proliferation of independence movements in the post-Soviet space, statehood has not been universally realized in the twenty-five years since the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), especially among de facto states that emerged in the early 1990s as a result of so-called "frozen conflicts."

The emergence and intractability of frozen conflicts, the results of Soviet and Russian policies respectively, and the entrenchment of de facto states in the greater Black Sea region contribute to regional instability while ensuring Moscow's continuing hegemony in its near abroad. Many of the issues surrounding these de facto states remain unsettled and the region's frozen conflicts are complicated by unique historical circumstances, demographics, and international law, which prevent successful conflict resolution and reconciliation. Within this context, this thesis examines the de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, and assesses the extent to which Crimea represents a paradigm shift in Russian policy towards separatist movements.



Figure 1. Map of the Greater Black Sea Region (Source: Wikicommons)

The first chapter of this thesis provides a frame of reference for looking at frozen conflicts and de facto states in the Russian near abroad and defines key terms and themes. The second chapter discusses Russia's historical role in the greater Black Sea region and assesses its geopolitical imperatives in its near abroad, as defined by its strategic culture. It concludes by looking at the major catalysts that allowed frozen conflicts to emerge in the post-Soviet space. The third chapter looks at five case studies, focusing on their origins, outbreak, Russia's involvement, implications, attempts at reconciliation, and immediate and long-term forecast. It discusses four frozen conflicts from the end of the Cold War, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, and a more recent conflict, Crimea, which may represent a significant shift in Russian policy towards these pseudo-states. The last chapter looks at the current condition of these frozen conflicts and describes the uneasy stasis in which they exist. It also details the legal issues

preventing either reconciliation between belligerents or international acceptance of separate statehood. It furthermore looks at the cost of the status quo and anticipates the ways in which these conflicts will conclude, whether through eventual local and international acceptance of sovereignty, forceful reintegration with metropolitan states, or annexation.

## Definitions

**Frozen Conflict.** A frozen conflict is generally defined as a war in stasis where formalized combat is halted but the underlying causes of the conflict still exist without a permanent peace treaty or agreed upon political framework towards reconciliation. Placing these in the context of inflamed ethno-religious tensions in the post-Soviet space, an article from the Journal of Politics and Minority Issues in Europe explains frozen conflicts as “those in which violent ethno-political conflict over secession has led to the establishment of a de facto regime that is recognized by neither the international community nor the rump state from which the secession occurred.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the involvement of internal and external actors in preventing a resolution to the conflict has also come to define a frozen conflict in the post-Soviet space and distinguishes it from other minority disputes. The metropolitan states from which these regions seceded are either unwilling or unable to alter the status quo towards resolution largely due “to the potential backlash from exogenous actors.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Alice C. Clancy and John Nagle. “Frozen Conflicts, Minority Self-Governance, Asymmetrical Autonomies: In Search of a Framework for Conflict Management and Conflict Resolution,” *International Conflict Research Initiative* (2009): 14.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The term frozen conflict is something of a misnomer as it implies that there is little political or military activity occurring. Unmistakably, these are festering conflicts, with the potential to spillover at any time, as evidenced by the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and outbreaks in fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh since 2014. These conflicts may be held by ceasefires but their underlying causes are still considered very much unresolved in the hearts and minds of the citizens within these states and regions.

**De Facto State.** Frozen conflicts within the post-Soviet space have resulted in the creation of de facto states. De facto states “refer to polities that exist within the boundaries of recognized, *de jure* (i.e. by law) states.”<sup>3</sup> They exist

...where there is an organized political leadership which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capability; receives popular support; and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a defined territorial area, over which effective control is maintained for an extended period of time.<sup>4</sup>

However, these polities exist in a state of legal uncertainty and are not recognized by the international community. They have no lawful claim to their territory as, according to international law, they are recognized as belonging to another legal state. This does not prevent them from trying to enter into relations with other states in order to gain recognition as an independent state.<sup>5</sup>

In order to be recognized as a sovereign state, an entity must fulfill the obligations set forth in the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States of 1933. A territory must have “(1) a permanent population, (2) a defined territory, (3) a government,

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<sup>3</sup> Michael S. Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States,” *Anthropology Today* 30 (2014): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

and (4) the capacity to enter into relations with other states.”<sup>6</sup> The post-Soviet de facto states, namely Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and, most recently, Crimea, fulfill all but the last obligation. The only difference between these polities and a lawful state lies in the former’s non-recognition.<sup>7</sup>

**Nationalism.** Nationalism, at its most basic, is loyalty to a nation extending from a sense of national consciousness. Nationalism drives a population to place emphasis on promoting its nation’s culture, interests, and independence. In *Blood and Belonging: Journey into the New Nationalism*, Michael Ignatieff writes

As a political doctrine, nationalism is the belief that the world’s peoples are divided into nations, and that each of these nations has the right to self-determination, either as self-governing units within existing nation-states or as nation-states of their own. As a cultural idea, nationalism is the claim that while men and women have many identities, it is the nation that provides them with their primary form of belonging. As a moral idea, nationalism is an ethic of heroic sacrifice, justifying the use of violence in the defense of one’s nation against enemies, internal or external.<sup>8</sup>

This understanding of nationalism helps to explain what motivated the territories discussed in this thesis to seek separation from their metropolitan state.

**Separatism.** Separatism is the act of separating a group of people from a larger body on the basis of any number of factors, including ethnicity, religion, and culture. In this context, “Separatism occurs when a subset of a state’s population declares their independence in defiance of the *de jure* state.”<sup>9</sup> In some cases, as with the fifteen former Soviet Republics, separatism resulted in statehood. However, the five case studies

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States,” 3-4.

presented in this thesis have not had their independence recognized by more than a handful of states.

**Greater Black Sea Region.** The frozen conflicts and de facto states that are discussed in this thesis are located in the greater Black Sea region (Figure 1). For the purposes of this thesis, this area includes nations that border the Black Sea and those in its immediate periphery, namely Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Ukraine.

## **RUSSIA'S ROLE AND INTERESTS**

### **Historical Legacy**

Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russia has been the hegemon of most of southeastern Europe and the Caucasus. This area is home to innumerable ethnic and religious groups, a legacy of the empires that have laid claim to these lands over millennia. In order to control the region after its initial conquests, the Russian Empire relied on policies that created and maintained ethno-religious divisions within its holdings. This strategy was later appropriated and used effectively by the Soviets. It has also become something of a guiding principle for the Russian Federation, though it does not presently lay physical claim to territory within the greater Black Sea region, with the exception of Crimea, unlike its predecessor states.

Peter the Great was Russia's first great expansionist, enlarging the Tsardom of Muscovy into the Russian Empire through successful domestic reforms and military campaigns abroad. After victory over Sweden, Peter took the title of Emperor of All The Russias and expanded Russian rule to the Baltic Sea. The tsars that succeeded him were actively engaged in European politics and pushed the borders of Russia to the south and west. Within a few decades, they annexed Belarus, Poland, Ukraine, and Finland. They also acquired further territory along the Black Sea, including seizing Crimea from the Ottomans in 1783 and Bessarabia in 1812. Russia also acquired Transcaucasia from the Ottomans and Persians in the 19th century and fought a long and bloody conflict to

solidify its claims in the North Caucasus from 1817 to 1864. Further territory in Central Asia was later obtained through military campaigns and diplomatic maneuvering.<sup>10</sup>

While it was conducting military campaigns abroad, Russia also had to deal with consolidating power within and establishing its authority over the territories it had already absorbed.

Unlike the traditional empire, most of the acquisitions from this classical imperial period were of territories that had formed their statehood before the Russian takeover, or of populations that put up fights to thwart the Russian advance. Some, like the Poles, had a very strong sense of national identity.<sup>11</sup>

However, many of the states and territories within the greater Black Sea region, including those in Transcaucasia, whose ownership had just been transferred, albeit unwillingly, from one empire to another, had no common historical memory, sense of statehood, or cultural homogeneity. Over the course of its rule by the Russian Empire, however, “...three related processes – the imposition of tsarist rule, the rise of the market and capitalist relations of production, and the emergence of secular national intelligentsias – initiated a long transformation of the ethnoreligious communities of [this region] into more politically conscious and mobilized nationalities.”<sup>12</sup> As this region experienced a nationalist awakening, the Russian Empire met its end and a new political dynasty emerged in Russia.

As a consequence of the Russian Revolution of 1917, almost all of the annexed territories of the Russian Empire seceded. Poland and Finland were able to break away permanently while some, like the Baltic States, only held on to independence for a few

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<sup>10</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 20-21.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 38.



decades. The rest, including states within the greater Black Sea region, succeeded only while Russia was embroiled in a civil war from 1918 to 1921.<sup>13</sup>

This brief experience with statehood fundamentally changed these territories and created a shared sense of history that later allowed them to coalesce with some ease into statehood after the collapse of the USSR. According to Ronald Suny, in the movements for self-determination

...the brief period of independence [was] transformed into a moment of light to contrast with the long, dark experience with Soviet rule, which in turn [was] depicted as the destruction of the national. Repression, forced Russification, imposed modernization, the suppression of national traditions, the destruction of the village, even an assault on nature [were] combined in powerful images that show[ed] Soviet power as the enemy of the nation.<sup>14</sup>

Shared suffering under communist rule was the rallying cry that later allowed the nations in the Soviet near abroad to unify and secede in 1991.<sup>15</sup>

After consolidating power, the nascent Soviet Union worked to solidify its power at home and in its near abroad. Moscow claimed it was creating a federation, though what emerged looked almost identical to the Russian Empire, consisting of a large bureaucracy ruling from an “imperial center.”<sup>16</sup> However, the USSR built its empire along ideological lines, seeking to circumvent the differences in culture, ethnicity, and religion among the peoples in its periphery states in order to actualize the goals of the Russian Revolution of 1917. “Under Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin -- and later in the early years of Stalin's rule -- the Soviet government argued that nationalism was the bane of the imperial system.

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<sup>13</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 101.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 23-24.

They tried to develop policies that would transform the multinational Eurasian space into a unified Soviet, socialist state.”<sup>17</sup>

As the Soviet empire consolidated under Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution and first Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, he argued, “...national separatism would be reduced by central Russian tolerance and a willingness to allow national self-determination to the point of independence...”<sup>18</sup> This was largely met with skepticism. However, Ronald Suny writes in *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, that “...Lenin’s notion that non-Russians would be willing to remain within a multinational state was less a fantasy than another example of his political style, an uneasy combination of hard-nosed realism and the willingness to take extraordinary risks.” To Lenin, “Soviet Russia was conceived not as an ordinary national state but as the first stone in a future multinational socialist edifice.” He maintained a powerful appreciation for nationalism, even as he tried to subvert it, arguing

...nationalism and separatism were neither natural nor inevitable, but were contingent on the sense of oppression that nationalities experienced from imperialism. He remained convinced that nationalism reflected only the interests of the bourgeoisie, that the proletariat’s true interests were supranational, and that the end of colonialism would diminish the power of nationalist sentiments...<sup>19</sup>

As such, he did not oppose Finland, Poland, and Ukraine’s bids for independence and would not task soldiers to forcibly defend the sanctity of the federation. “He was unequivocal in his public commitment to ‘the full right of separation from Russia of all nations and nationalities, oppressed by tsarism, joined by force or held by force within

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Coalson, “How Stalin Created Some of the Post-Soviet World's Worst Ethnic Conflicts,” *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 82.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

the borders of the state, i.e. annexed.”<sup>20</sup> Lenin maintained that the end goal of the USSR would be the eventual merging of nations; however, this would not be done by force.

Countering Lenin’s idealism, the Bolsheviks set up the People’s Commissariat of Nationalities under Joseph Stalin immediately after taking power. From 1917 to 1923, Lenin’s policies towards non-Russian ethnic groups led to tensions with Stalin, an ethnic Georgian. Throughout this time, “Lenin continued to advocate caution and sensitivity toward non-Russians, whereas many of his comrades, most notably Stalin and Sergo Orjonikidze, were less willing to accommodate even moderate nationalists.”<sup>21</sup> During this time, the Commissariat redrew borders and forcibly moved populations, exacerbating ethnic conflict. Its actions created forced borders “in areas where nationality was very fluid, like Central Asia. Most of the modern nationalities that we have [today] hadn't even been formed yet.”<sup>22</sup>

After Lenin’s death, Stalin took over leadership of the Soviet Union and, as the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he deviated from Lenin’s legacy in regards to non-Russian peoples. He recommitted to maintaining irrational border policies and engaged in large-scale deportations of non-Russian ethnic groups out of border territories to make room for the importation of ethnic Russians to various states within the federation, helping create and prolong conflicts that are still present within Eurasia, including some of the frozen conflicts discussed in this thesis.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 83-88.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 88-97.

<sup>22</sup> Coalson, “How Stalin Created Some of the Post-Soviet World's Worst Ethnic Conflicts.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

As these activities were occurring, other, more subversive actions were undermining the integrity of the USSR. The union's founders had unwittingly laid the foundation for its dissolution both through its national policies and bureaucratic structure. The protective measures intended to unify the federation of Soviet states allowed for the rise of nationalist tendencies based largely around ethno-religious lines.

During the Russian revolution and civil war “neither nationalism nor socialism was able to mobilize large numbers of these peoples into the political struggles that would decide their future.”<sup>24</sup> The identity of groups within the empire was largely class-based and strength was found in local and social identity, not in political nationalism. In the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, there certainly was not the same degree of national-cultural identity present in the Soviet peripheral states that later became apparent in the 1980s and beyond. It is largely the result of Soviet policies that many of these identities were formed and strengthened.<sup>25</sup>

As “the first state in history to be formed of ethnic political units, the USSR was a pseudofederal state that both eliminated political sovereignty for the nationalities and guaranteed them territorial identity, educational and cultural institutions in their own language, and the promotion of native cadres into positions of power.”<sup>26</sup> Citizens were denied the right to organize within their states among ethno-religious lines while at the same time being provided with the means to create or strengthen a national sense of identity based on shared cultural experiences. Moscow was strengthening territorial loyalties, which was the opposite of its intentions.

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<sup>24</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 80-81.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Lenin laid the groundwork for many of the ethno-religious issues that plague the post-Soviet space. The USSR was designed to be a federation of republics that were “designated by their nationality and ethnicity.” Each of the Union Republics that were part of the Soviet federation retained some sovereignty, including the constitutional right to secede and other symbols of statehood, including “flags, crests, anthems, and political institutions.”<sup>27</sup> To be fair, many of these “features of sovereignty” were merely window dressing, as power was centrally maintained within Moscow. However, this sense of individuality and distinction among the republics was institutionalized and, rather than pacifying the republics, it incited new or renewed nationalism. For example, at the age of sixteen, each Soviet citizen had to state their ethnicity and record it on the “fifth line” of their Soviet passport. This further institutionalized the sense that each citizen had a dual affiliation, first with the USSR and second with one’s ethnic group. It did not allow for the homogeneity that the Soviets desired.<sup>28</sup>

Stalin’s border and immigration policies and bureaucratic changes also contributed to eventual nationalist-driven conflict. “In 1944, in a bid to gain more votes in the soon-to-be established United Nations organization, Joseph Stalin allowed the republics to have their own foreign ministries...”<sup>29</sup> While Lenin’s policies had allowed for the creation of state structures based around ethnicity, these held little power under Stalin and his successors, “rendering [state] sovereignty a fiction, [as a result] many nationalities became demographically more consolidated within their ‘homelands,’ acquired effective

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 131-132. & Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*, 131-132.

<sup>29</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 11.

and articulate national political and intellectual elites, and developed a shared national consciousness.”<sup>30</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia maintained interest in its near abroad but it had a relatively light footprint, as it was also pursuing better relationships with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the West. However, the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000 heralded a new, or perhaps only renewed, direction for Russia, necessitating its involvement in and the directing of its near abroad. Domestic issues and frozen conflicts within states on its periphery are one area of vulnerability that remains especially susceptible to Russian interference. Putin appears to have looked to the Soviet playbook as how to use and manipulate regional and national conflicts for Russia’s gain, using military, political, diplomatic, social, and economic tools to influence actors in contested regions. The festering of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space has allowed Moscow to renew its hegemony within the region after a post-Cold War lull in activity and take the role of belligerent or benevolent big brother as the situation dictates. While its motivations differ in each case, Moscow has intervened in every frozen conflict discussed in this thesis, both enabling these conflicts to continue while also propping up the *de facto* states that have resulted from them.<sup>31</sup>

In *Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States*, Michael S. Bobick writes, “In situations in which the Russian military intervenes in these contested territories, intervention occurs, not in order to achieve a decisive victory, but rather to keep the *de jure* sovereign at bay...”<sup>32</sup> Russia craves power and influence over its near abroad, a symptom of a strategic culture that sees Russia as besieged by external

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<sup>30</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 124-125.

<sup>31</sup> Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States,” 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

foes, namely the West, and will use any and all tactics to ensure patronage. In Transnistria, for example, Russia provides passports and de facto citizenship to locals, along with other “symbolic and material benefits, primarily humanitarian and economic aid... [Locals] reciprocate in the only way they can: by professing loyalty to Russia.”<sup>33</sup> Russia’s actions have the added benefit of destabilizing the greater Black Sea region and the Caucasus so that Western-leaning countries like Georgia cannot fully assimilate and join organizations such as the EU and NATO. Thus far, Russia’s costs in keeping these conflicts just below the boiling point have been low both materially and politically. It seems likely that it will continue to let conflicts remain unresolved and will continue its active role in sustaining them through maintaining forces in these areas and providing economic and military support to de facto regimes.

The policy of fomenting division between the various ethnic and religious groups within the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union was effective in keeping these territories quiescent. Until the collapse of the USSR and subsequent withdrawal of Soviet political and military control among its periphery states in the early 1990s, these policies worked effectively. However, they did have unexpected consequences, resulting in a nationalist resurgence among border states that led to a spate of frozen conflicts that remain unresolved to this day. Under Putin, Russia is working to regain its influence among periphery states and has returned to imperial and Soviet policies for guidance on how to use unresolved ethno-religious conflicts for its greater national, regional, and international goals.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 8.

## Geopolitical Imperatives

Russia's strategic culture guides its geopolitical imperatives and has led it to adopt a somewhat cohesive policy over the last two centuries in regards to non-Russian peoples with the empire, union, and, now, neighborhood. It is important to gauge Russian motivations and goals in order to appreciate its relationship with the frozen conflicts and de facto states in its near abroad. Its current policies in regards to periphery states were created to serve three goals: to maintain domestic political and economic strength, sustain hegemony within its near abroad, and ensure relevance and effectiveness as an international actor. These imperatives were informed by Russia's history, economic and political priorities, fundamental security concerns, and desire for relevance and prestige.<sup>34</sup>

The West met the dissolution of the Soviet Union with great optimism. However, few seemed to reflect on how the loss of territory and the dismantling of the Russian empire, in all its manifestations, as geopolitical entity that had lasted for centuries would affect Russia and its people.

After all, Russia had not been defeated, occupied, or controlled by outside powers. It was its own elites who had initiated the dissolution of the Soviet empire and the unbundling of the Soviet Union itself. The central thesis in the West was, of course, that by throwing off the imperial burden, Russia liberated itself as much as its former possessions and protectorates, and that it was thus making itself ready for democracy and integration into the community of free, democratic, and market-driven nations. The skeptics believed none of that and feared what they called a Weimar Russia.<sup>35</sup>

More than twenty years later, these worries seem entirely prescient. The economic and social implications of the collapse of the USSR were profound and its effects are still felt within Russia today. Its relations with the rest of the world were similarly affected.

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<sup>34</sup> Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Catherine Yusupov, *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), 93-94.

<sup>35</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 8.



After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation needed to create entirely new foreign and security policies towards the post-Soviet states, policies that would theoretically be much less aggressive and imperialistic than those of the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> While doing this, it also attempted to reconcile and reconnect with the West, something that was not universally accepted in Moscow. Many in Russia believed that the post-Soviet space lay within Moscow's sphere of influence and that hegemony over periphery states was vital to Russian interests. As Russia has historically played a unique role in these regions, the argument went, it therefore had both rights and responsibilities towards them.<sup>37</sup>

After 1991, Russia laid out a number of imperatives intended to make it feel secure as it engaged in rapprochement with the West. First, Moscow maintained that it was essential that it became the chief intermediary between post-Soviet states and the rest of the world. Second, it did not want any country, especially the United States, or regional or international organizations, especially NATO or the EU, to gain a foothold in the region and thereby challenge Russia's position of influence. Third, it wanted to prevent any threats to Russian security or influence within these nations. Fourth, it sought to establish itself as the primary peacemaker and peacekeeper. Finally, it wanted to maintain predominant economic influence without contributing financially to the same extent the Soviet Union did.<sup>38</sup>

This perspective was articulated again on January 25, 1993 when the Russian Foreign Ministry outlined its foreign policy agenda in the "Concept of Foreign Policy of

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<sup>36</sup> Michael P. Croissant, *Flashpoint: The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict and its Implications for Regional States* (Master's thesis, Southwest Missouri State University, 1995), 166.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-181.

the Russian Federation,” which argued for the need to protect its near abroad and assume responsibility “for ensuring stability and human rights and freedoms in the space of the former U.S.S.R.,” including guaranteeing “the protection of rights of Russian citizens living outside the limits of the Federation.”<sup>39</sup> This commitment to the periphery states was redoubled in a November 1993 military doctrine that emphasized the need for Russia to protect Russians outside of its sovereign political territory and allowed for it to deploy troops without international appeal or approval.<sup>40</sup>

Moscow perceives its near abroad as within its exclusive sphere of influence and has acted in many of the separatist conflicts within sovereign states on its periphery. Russia believes that it needs to provide stability to its southern flank and underbelly through expansion and consolidation of Russian influence at expense of other international actors. However, the application of its guiding principles towards separatist movements has been contradictory. For example, it conducted military operations against one of the first post-Soviet separatist movements in Chechnya in 1994. Unlike the other conflicts in this thesis, Chechnya is located within Transcaucasia in Russia. Moscow’s actions, coming at great economic, political, and human cost, were taken to prevent the Muslim republic’s bid for independence and sought to definitively quell the separatist movement there. Moscow explained that it acted to maintain territorial integrity in the North Caucasus due to a fear of rising Islamic fundamentalism<sup>41</sup> However, these actions notwithstanding, its intervention in separatist conflicts in the greater region over the last twenty-five years have not only been defensive and have frequently occurred as a means to sustain, rather than subdue, separatist movements.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 172-180.

Russian policy to reassert hegemony has been met with mixed success. Belarus, Tajikistan, and Armenia maintain close military and economic ties with Russia. However, many other former Soviet states have actively worked to distance themselves from Moscow. This has been met by pushback within Russia. The states in its near abroad were part of Russia's imperial holdings well before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, according to Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Catherine Yusupov in *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*,

Many Russians therefore see these countries as natural partners and allies that are crucial to Russia's national interests. A Russia without significant influence in these countries is less of a descendent of Imperial and Soviet Russia, and is thus less well aligned with Russians' view of their nation and its global role. The refusal of most neighboring post-Soviet countries to align readily and fully with Russia challenges Russia's ability to present itself as a global leader, and this challenge is perhaps more significant at home than abroad. Any country that makes inroads into this region and builds ties with these countries is seen as doing so at Russia's expense.<sup>42</sup>

Its goals have often put it at odds with its former assets. This is not a unique phenomenon.

While post-imperial cores are concerned with compensating for their diminished security, wealth, and assets, post-imperial peripheries are primarily interested in rapidly creating new national-level institutions to control and manage their newly bound territory and possessions... In collapsed multinational empires such structural dynamics will also set into motion a neoimperialist national drive by post-imperial core elites that conflicts with the nation-building agenda of post-imperial peripheral elites.<sup>43</sup>

This "drive" lay somewhat dormant throughout the 1990s but has resurfaced again since 2008 as the Russian Federation tries to reassert itself and challenge post-Cold War international boundaries and norms.

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<sup>42</sup> Oliker, et al., *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*, 93-94.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Cooley, "Imperial Wreckage: Property Rights, Sovereignty, and Security in the Post-Soviet Space," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000/01): 108.

Perceived betrayals by NATO and the West in the 1990s and Russia's own internationally condemned actions against Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008, and Ukraine in 2014 has brought relations between Russia and the West to Cold War-level lows.

Oliker, et al. notes that:

Given the last 200 years or so of Russian history, an outside observer might argue that Russia is remarkably secure. No foreign state is poised to invade it militarily. No enemies are plotting imminent attack. Historically high rates of economic growth persisted for nearly a decade, making Russians substantially wealthier than anyone imagined they could become in the aftermath of the 1998 economic crash.<sup>44</sup>

However, it is clear by public and private statements that Russia feels threatened by the United States and NATO and considers them to be one of the gravest threats to the Russian Federation.

Until recently, Russia seemed uneager to use force to assert its will in its near abroad. It relied mostly on economic and soft power maneuvering along with threats and blackmail. This changed with the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Moscow claims its actions were defensive and intended to deter Georgia from adventurism in its separatist regions. Despite Russia's reasoning, it clearly showed a renewed willingness by Moscow to resort to force.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, "Russia's counterattack was the first case of Moscow using force against a foreign adversary and invading a neighboring country since the Afghan war (1979–1989)."<sup>46</sup>

Following this in 2009, Russia adopted its most aggressive and proactive military doctrine since the 1970s. In it, Russia rejects American global hegemony and lays out

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<sup>44</sup> Oliker, et al., *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*, 83-84.

<sup>45</sup> Oliker, et al., *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Jim Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 28-29.

five guiding principles for military actions. Then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev stated:

‘...protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be, is an unquestionable priority for our country. Our foreign policy decisions will be based on this need. We will also protect the interests of our business community abroad. It should be clear to all that we will respond to any aggressive acts committed against us.’<sup>47</sup>

It is also made clear that Russia perceives that it has “privileged interests” in regions that share historical ties with Moscow.<sup>48</sup>

Adding to the complexity of this doctrine is the fact that Moscow is blurring the definition of citizenship. Russia has a long-standing policy of supplying passports to people living within unrecognized de facto states among its near abroad. According to Jim Nichol of the Congressional Research Service, “Of some 200,000 people in Abkhazia, 150,000 became Russian citizens; so did 100,000 of 600,000 residents of Transnistria... The number of people in Crimea (population: just under 2 million) who hold such passports is estimated to be 60,000.”<sup>49</sup> The creation of new pseudo-citizens means that any conflicts in these areas would affect thousands of Russian passport holders, thereby fulfilling Moscow’s benchmark for intervention.

Russia also maintains a military presence in the states on its periphery that are locked in frozen conflicts. This includes “thousands of military base personnel, border troops, and...peacekeepers.”<sup>50</sup> This was authorized by the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Collective Security Treaty in 1992, which “pledged members to consult in the event of a threat to one or several members, and to provide mutual aid if

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<sup>47</sup> “The Future of Russia's Military: Part Two.” *Stratfor*. August 28, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>49</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 198-199.

<sup>50</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 9-10.

attacked.” This was reiterated in 2002 among the members of the successor Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Its members currently include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.<sup>51</sup>

Fundamentally, the shock of the Soviet Union’s collapse is still instilled in Russian memory. While it does not seek a renewal of its former imperial glory, Russia is still driven by its past, perennial fears and insecurities, and desire for recognition. As Russian scholar Dmitri Trenin explains,

In place of a historical empire and politico-military superpower status, Russia seeks to establish itself as a great power. In the eyes of Russia’s leaders, this means Moscow’s strategic independence from the principal centers of power in the new century: America and China. Shaping a new role after an imperial decline and fall is not easy... Performing the same feat without pooling sovereignty with others is virtually unprecedented.<sup>52</sup>

Russia’s desire to reassert its hegemony through exploitation of regional conflicts among its near abroad is better understood when considered in this context.

## **Catalyst**

The weakening of the Soviet Union in the 1980s allowed for a resurgence of ethno-religious and nationalist movements within the Union Republics. While these tensions had existed since the federation was created, it started becoming a serious problem for Moscow in the 1980s. The rise of nationalist movements came at a time when there was a seeming retreat of leadership and authority from Moscow and a perceived lack of will to impose its power through force. Central leadership was too late in realizing the dangers that its ethnic policies had created. “The Soviet state’s deeply

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, ix.

contradictory policy nourished the cultural uniqueness of distinct peoples. It thereby increased ethnic solidarity and national consciousness in the non-Russian republics, even as it frustrated full articulation of a national agenda by requiring conformity to an imposed political order.”<sup>53</sup> The non-Russian minorities long buried within separate republics still felt a sense of unity that would coalesce into a desire for statehood distinct both from the Soviet Union and from the republic within which they were, in their eyes, arbitrarily bound.

The specific legacies of Soviet rule were instrumental to the emergence of frozen conflicts and de facto states in the greater Black Sea region. The nature of Soviet federalism shaped “understandings of ethnicity and power in the late 1980s and 1990s across the post-Soviet space.”<sup>54</sup> Stalin codified the idea that ethnicity and territory were inherently linked. In this way, ethnicity was territorialized. This prevented the Soviet Union from assimilating its many ethnic groups under one banner and instead the Soviet Union became a nursery of new states. “In general, the consequences of Soviet ethnic and nationality policy turned out to be a sort of time-bomb that tended to explode exactly at the moment when ambitious nation-state-designers crossed, or were about to cross, specific red lines.”<sup>55</sup> These trends, which began under Lenin and continued through the early years of Stalin’s rule, helped consolidate the idea of national identity among the Union Republics by allowing and indeed supporting the teaching of “native languages,

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<sup>53</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 127-130.

<sup>54</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Islam Tekushev, Sergey Markedonov, and Kirill Shevchenko, *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future* (Prague: Medium Orient, 2013), 7.

creating national intelligentsia and political elite, and formally institutionalizing ethnicity in state apparatus.”<sup>56</sup>

As the Soviet Union weakened, groups that had long felt marginalized looked to ethnic ties to mobilize and seek political sovereignty. “The legacy of the Soviet experience was that group rights had to be *territorialized* to mean anything.”<sup>57</sup> Moscow had allowed these different groups to maintain their autonomy while not allowing them any meaningful political power. The existence of separate, completely autonomous regions within the different Soviet Republics led to internal conflicts that were further exacerbated when the Soviet Union finally collapsed, leading to conflict and separatism.

The Soviet Union had furthermore provided the means for these territories to claim their sovereignty. “The existing structures of autonomy gave these peoples ready-made institution to wield against the capitals of the metropolitan states in which they lived; elected parliaments, executive agencies, police forces, universities, and all the trappings of sovereignty were mobilized in the pursuit of independence.”<sup>58</sup>

While these institutions were in line with the Soviet Union’s original intent of creating a state that had evolved beyond nationalism, it instead, “had in fact created a set of institutions and initiated processes that fostered the development of conscious, secular, politically mobilizable nationalities.”<sup>59</sup> The USSR likely should have recognized the paradoxes inherent in its organization decades earlier, as they increasingly found themselves vulnerable to its contradictions. “The explosive power of national identification and the reluctance of the Soviet government to push too hard against it was

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<sup>56</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 102.

<sup>57</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>59</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 126.



demonstrated vividly” in a number of circumstances, including in Georgia in 1978 when nationalists fought to keep Georgian Kartuli as the national language. At this time, anti-Russian rhetoric was not met with punishment.<sup>60</sup> Other would-be separatists did not overlook Moscow’s reluctance or inability to act decisively in this situation.

Increasing displays of nationalism in the 1970s and 1980s surprised Soviet and Western scholars, who had largely come to believe that “...the Soviet state had effectively subdued and integrated the nationalities into the general project of social transformation.” It was expected that even ethnic non-Russians would choose to assimilate into Soviet culture. It was only after fifty years that they began to recognize “the deeply contradictory policies and processes that were creating new capacities for resistance to the creation of a single *sovetskii narod* (Soviet people).”<sup>61</sup>

The Soviet Union attempted to institutionalize and thereby neuter nationalist tendencies in their attempt to legitimize a state based on socialist and communist ideology rather than cultural identity. However, nationalism instead became a source of opposition in the waning decades of the USSR. By 1989, the republics of the Soviet Union had tied their desire for freedom to their desire for national sovereignty. “In this sense, 1989 in Eastern Europe was not merely a series of revolts against communism as a repressive political and social system; it was also a series of national revolts against Soviet domination...”<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, according to Dov Lynch, “*perestroika* had a catalyzing effect in each of the conflicts. The collapse of the centralizing and coercive power of the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 102-123.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>62</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, “Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism,” *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 3 (2009): 333-334.

Communist Party, combined with the introduction of *glasnost* and limited free elections, allowed new political arenas to open, which became theatres in some cases for nationalist and ethnic mobilization.”<sup>63</sup> As the last General Secretary of the Soviet Unions, Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempted transformation of the Soviet system was the ultimate spark that ignited today’s frozen conflicts. Separatist regions were finally allowed to give voice to their issues and mobilize politically. This, coupled with rising fears of ultra-nationalist metropolitan states and the availability of Soviet weapons and troops, allowed separatists in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine to take hold of their destinies and declare independence.<sup>64</sup>

The power vacuum that emerged after the Soviet Union’s collapse allowed for the forcible attempts by many groups to seize power and territory to ensure political self-determination. After the fall of the Soviet Union, there were “164 ethno-territorial conflicts within its territory.”<sup>65</sup> Amazingly, except for the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, and the recent Crimean conflict, “there were no major wars among the Soviet successor states.” The conflicts that arose were largely internecine, occurring between groups within a country.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 26. *Perestroika* was “the policy or practice of restructuring or reforming the economic and political system. First proposed by Leonid Brezhnev in 1979 and actively promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev, *perestroika* originally referred to increased automation and labour efficiency, but came to entail greater awareness of economic markets and the ending of central planning.” *Glasnost* was “the policy or practice of more open consultative government and wider dissemination of information, initiated by leader Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985.” (Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/>)

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>65</sup> Behlül Özkan, “Who Gains from the ‘No War No Peace’ Situation? A Critical Analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” *The Journal of Geopolitics* 13, no. 3 (August 2008): 572-599.

<sup>66</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 7.

After 1991, the newly sovereign former Soviet republics were loathe to give up any of their restored political power as they believed that separatist movements within their territories were part of Soviet and later Russian strategy to weaken the states along its periphery. The autonomous separatist regions that emerged after the Cold War were also mistrustful of the former Soviet states and international system. “The [state] recognition process as a whole was regarded as arbitrary and, worse, as deeply unjust.”<sup>67</sup> To these regions, the boundaries that had been subjectively drawn by the Soviets and which had been legitimized by the international community followed the “principles of political expediency and divide and rule” and had no “consideration for the long-term viability of these units.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, many of the borders drawn by Moscow early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had purposefully divided ethnic groups into different republics, intended to weaken these groups.

It is in this convoluted environment that the frozen conflicts and de facto states discussed in this thesis emerged, with the exception of Crimea. The inherent policies and structures of the Soviet Union, coupled with the weakening and eventual breakup of the USSR, fostered antipathy between the peoples of these states and provided the catalyst for secession.

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<sup>67</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 26.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

## CASE STUDIES

### Abkhazia

**Origin.** The Republic of Georgia (Figure 2) is engaged in two frozen conflicts with de facto states located within its sovereign territory. The first emerged in Abkhazia where deep-seated ethnic and historical tensions preempted separation between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. These issues were compounded by Soviet and Russian policymaking and the actions of both Georgian and Abkhaz nationalist movements of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>69</sup>



Figure 2. Map of Georgia Showing Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjara (Source: CIA World Factbook)

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 27 and Shireen T. Hunter, "Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past," *SAIS Review* 26, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2006): 116-120.

The Abkhaz are a distinct ethnic group separate from other ethnic Georgians that are the descendants of the Circassians, Turkic peoples from the North Caucasus.<sup>70</sup> During the Soviet era, Abkhazia was a relatively prosperous region. Located on the Black Sea in Georgia's northwest, it was a popular vacation spot for Moscow's elites.<sup>71</sup> According to the last Soviet census, held in 1989, the population of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was around 525,000, accounting for almost ten percent of Soviet Georgia's population. Of these, 45.7% were ethnic Georgians, 17.8% were Abkhazians, 14.6% were Armenians, 14.3% were Russians, and 2.8% were Greeks.<sup>72</sup> During the conflict between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, the Abkhazians, despite not having a majority in the region, were able to hold off the Georgian military and, since 1994, have claimed de facto statehood. Unlike Georgia's other frozen conflict in South Ossetia, Abkhazia's stated end goal is independent political sovereignty.<sup>73</sup>

Abkhazia historically served as a buffer zone between the Russian Empire and Ottoman Empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Georgia, including Abkhazia, was granted independence and in 1921 Abkhazia was granted a short-lived independence from Georgia.

By the end of 1921, the Bolshevik Red Army reasserted control over the Caucasus and Abkhazia became a Union Republic of the USSR. In 1931, Stalin incorporated the region into the Transcaucasian Federation, which included Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. When the federation dissolved in 1938, Abkhazia was attached to the Georgian

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<sup>70</sup> Hunter, "Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past," 116-120.

<sup>71</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 65 and Rick Fawn, "The Kosovo—and Montenegro—Effect," *International Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2008): 273-274.

<sup>72</sup> Tekushev, et al., *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future*, 18.

<sup>73</sup> Clancy and Nagle, "Frozen Conflicts, Minority Self-Governance, Asymmetrical Autonomies: In Search of a Framework for Conflict Management and Conflict Resolution," 21.

Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) as an autonomous region, a downgrade from its previous status as a Union Republic.

The Soviets maintained control of the region and encouraged migration of non-Abkhaz into the region, “in order to make the Abkhaz a minority within their own homeland.”<sup>74</sup> Tbilisi also pursued policies independent of Moscow to ensure that Abkhaz nationalism was kept repressed. These actions contributed to Abkhazian discontent as they felt they had been arbitrarily annexed and forced into political subordination to Georgia. This anger grew throughout the Soviet period.<sup>75</sup> “As Georgian nationalism flourished in the late 1980s, the Abkhaz population, and especially a section of the local elites, became increasingly restive, fearing their possible cultural and ethnic disappearance within Georgia.”<sup>76</sup> Under the auspices of *glasnost*, the Abkhaz began to call for independence.<sup>77</sup>

Seeing an opportunity provided by the weakening of the Kremlin’s military reach and attempts at political and economic liberalization throughout the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Abkhazia acted.<sup>78</sup> Initially, leaders only wanted Abkhazia to regain its Union Republic status as the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia. However, as Soviet power continued to wane, Abkhazia became fearful of what actions Tbilisi would take when left unchecked by Moscow. Abkhazian leadership changed tactics and warned Gorbachev and Moscow of an imminent ethnic conflict. To forestall this, they demanded Abkhazia’s secession from Georgia.<sup>79</sup> When this yielded no change, the Abkhaz formally declared

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<sup>74</sup> Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 116-120.

<sup>75</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 27 and Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 116-120.

<sup>76</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 27.

<sup>77</sup> Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 116-120.

<sup>78</sup> Tekushev, et al., *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future*, 27.

<sup>79</sup> Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 116-120.

that it was a Union Republic in August 1990, essentially calling for secession from Tbilisi.<sup>80</sup> This act was quickly annulled by Georgia, who had the legal prerogative to do so. However, its actions resulted in mass demonstrations in Abkhazia that eventually had to be put down by Russian troops.<sup>81</sup> Ethnic tensions rose even further with the election and short-lived presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in October 1990.<sup>82</sup>

In July 1991, the Abkhaz Parliament declared that the nation would revert to its 1925 constitution, which described Abkhazia as an independent Soviet Republic united by a special union treaty with Georgia.<sup>83</sup> In response, Georgia attempted to reconcile with Abkhazia over some of its grievances. However, negotiations broke down by 1992. The Abkhaz then proposed a treaty relationship that would have established “confederal relations with Tbilisi that would have preserved Georgia’s territorial integrity.” However, this proposal was ignored and when the Georgian president was forced into exile in 1992 and replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, the subsequent power struggles within Tbilisi gave Abkhazia the opportunity to move forward with its plans for independence. Abkhazia voted to secede on July 23, 1992 and within three weeks, Georgia responded by launching a military offensive.<sup>84</sup>

**Conflict.** Georgia crossed into Abkhazia to forcibly restore its territorial integrity on August 14, 1992. Initially, the Georgian troops, a mix of government forces and local militias, did well. However, by the end of 1992 the Abkhaz had regrouped and rearmed

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<sup>80</sup> Arman Grigoryan, “Concessions or Coercion?: How Governments Respond to Restive Ethnic Minorities,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 185.

<sup>81</sup> Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 116-120.

<sup>82</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 27-28.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>84</sup> Grigoryan, “Concessions or Coercion?: How Governments Respond to Restive Ethnic Minorities,” 186.

“with the support of volunteers from the North Caucasus and [Russia],” and they forced the Georgians back.<sup>85</sup>

Georgia was not in a position to engage in a protracted conflict. As such, it had the UN broker an initial ceasefire in July 1993.<sup>86</sup> However, it was broken by an Abkhaz offensive in September 1993. They captured the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi, forced all Georgian troops from the region, and expelled much of Abkhazia’s ethnic Georgians.<sup>87</sup> In May 1994, Georgia and Abkhazia agreed to a “framework for a political settlement and the return of refugees.” Russian troops acting under the auspices of CIS were deployed as peacekeepers on the border of Abkhazia and Georgia.<sup>88</sup> In the end, the thirteen-month war killed around ten to fifteen thousand people and resulted in the displacement of over 250,000 people, mostly ethnic Georgians.<sup>89</sup>

The conflict has remained relatively dormant, with a few flare-ups. In May 1998, fighting broke out when Georgian partisans attempted to take over part of the Gali district, where thousands of displaced Georgians resided. This effort was rebuffed and some 40,000 ethnic Georgians were expelled. In late 2001, the conflict seemed primed to ignite again, when both Abkhazia and Georgia accused each other of engaging in air strikes on each other’s territories.<sup>90</sup> Recent salvos have been limited to political and diplomatic maneuvering and while both sides remain entrenched, there is little reason to expect a outbreak in fighting.

**Russia’s Involvement.** Russia has played a significant role in the Abkhazian

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<sup>85</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 29.

<sup>86</sup> Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 116-120.

<sup>87</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 28-29.

<sup>88</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 24-30.

<sup>89</sup> Robert McMahon, “Eurasia's Troubled Frontiers.” *Foreign Service Journal* (December 2011): 56-61.

<sup>90</sup> Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 116-120.



conflict and reportedly supported both Tbilisi and Sukhumi at different points during the fighting. Ultimately, Moscow tipped the scales when it helped Abkhaz fighters push Georgian troops out of the region in 1993. Furthermore, its peacekeeping forces continue to play a destabilizing force, largely because they do not maintain themselves as an impartial force.<sup>91</sup> The continuing presence of Russian peacekeepers, drawn initially from the same troops that Tbilisi claims were involved in the conflict on the Abkhaz side, continues to be a point of contention.

At the time of the conflict, Russia had four military bases within Georgia, including one in Abkhazia. While Russia did not incite the Abkhaz conflict, it certainly helped exacerbate it. During the war, it was accused of providing Abkhaz fighters with “heavy artillery, air cover, and missile launchers.” Tbilisi also contends that Russian planes based in the Black Sea engaged in bombing campaigns to support Sukhumi.<sup>92</sup> While these claims have yet to be substantiated, and are unlikely to ever be, it is clear that Russia’s actions of training fighters and providing materiel to the Abkhaz cause was fundamentally important to Georgia’s inability to end the conflict. As Alexander Cooley writes in *Imperial Wreckage: Property Rights, Sovereignty, and Security in the Post-Soviet Space*, “Without the active involvement of Russian forces stationed in the region, the conflict could not have escalated to the point of a decisive Abkhazian victory.”<sup>93</sup>

The continuation of this conflict and the unresolved status of Abkhazia’s statehood serve Moscow’s interests in a number of ways. Not only does it allow Russia to continue to hold a military, political, and economic presence in internationally recognized

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<sup>91</sup> McMahon, “Eurasia's Troubled Frontiers,” 56-61.

<sup>92</sup> Cooley, “Imperial Wreckage: Property Rights, Sovereignty, and Security in the Post-Soviet Space,” 121-122.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 123.

Georgian territory, it also prevents Tbilisi from developing stronger regional and international ties, especially with NATO, which does not offer membership to states with territorial disputes.

**Implications.** This conflict continues to have an outsized impact on regional development and security. In its immediate aftermath, economic losses amounted to almost \$11 billion. Much of Abkhazia's industry was destroyed or looted and its tourism sector was destroyed. Abkhazia has also been under trade sanctions since 1996 and it has largely reverted to subsistence farming. The nation is dependent on support from international agencies and nongovernment organizations to provide basic social services for its citizens.<sup>94</sup> Another result of the 1996 CIS embargo that "permitted the direct import only of food products, medical supplies, petroleum products, and household items" was that many Abkhazians have "resorted to trade along undetected or illegally sanctioned passageways, including the de facto borders, as well as at its seaports."<sup>95</sup> The security threats facing a de facto state also necessitate giving the military and security apparatuses undue influence and funding. This comes at the expense of other governmental agencies that could conceivably use the nation's limited resources for more robust political, social, and economic development.

Georgia continues to be affected by this conflict as well. It was burdened with over 200,000 displaced persons from Abkhazia at a time when it was still recovering from post-Soviet economic stagnation.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Russia continues to have a presence within legal Georgia territory and Moscow's 2008 recognition of Abkhazia's

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<sup>94</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 65.

<sup>95</sup> Stacy Closson, "Georgia's Secessionist De Facto States: From Frozen to Boiling," *Russian Analytical Digest* no. 40 (May 2008): 2-5.

<sup>96</sup> Tekushev, et al., *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future*, 40.

independence “has contributed to an increase in Russian military, economic and political influence in Abkhazia.”<sup>97</sup> The rise of smuggling and other criminal activity on Georgia’s borders further undermines its security. Lastly, the continuation of this unresolved conflict keeps Georgia from becoming more integrated with the West and prevents it from achieving NATO membership, one of its most important security goals.

**Attempts at Reconciliation.** Though the UN has led negotiations since 1994, there has been little progress in resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Displaced persons are unable to return to their homes, skirmishes occur periodically between the two forces, and Georgia continues its trade restrictions on Abkhazia.<sup>98</sup> According to Shireen Hunter in “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,”

The main impediment to peace now is the conflict between the Abkhaz insistence on self-determination, and the Georgian insistence on territorial integrity. Moreover, Tbilisi is adamant that ethnic Georgian refugees from Abkhazia be allowed to return to their homes. Even if compromise could be reached on the issue of independence, the Abkhaz are unlikely to accept the return of Georgian refugees, because this would once again make them a minority within their own country.<sup>99</sup>

Georgia continues to view Abkhazia as an autonomous republic within the Georgian state and blames the Russian Federation for interfering and prolonging of the conflict.<sup>100</sup> To Tbilisi, the “integration in February 1931 of Abkhazia in the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia offers an incontestable argument... [that] Abkhazia is an indivisible part of the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>98</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 30.

<sup>99</sup> Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 118.

<sup>100</sup> Tekushev, et al., *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future*, 20.

Georgian territory.”<sup>101</sup> There has been little deviation in this policy over the last twenty years.

Abkhazia continues to develop institutions of statehood in hopes of receiving international recognition.<sup>102</sup> Currently, however, it is only recognized by its fellow post-Soviet de facto states, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh, and, since the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, that states of Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru.<sup>103</sup>

**Forecast.** Ironically, given Russia’s mistreatment of the Abkhaz minority during its imperial and Soviet rule of the area, Abkhazia now depends on Russian protection to ensure its de facto sovereignty.<sup>104</sup> It has, however, attempted to develop a political system independent of Moscow. “The Abkhaz arguably also [have] a sharper sense of their own history and ethnicity, and [take] their independence seriously, despite their great political and economic dependence on Russia.”<sup>105</sup> While there is still strong, near universal resistance to rejoining Georgia, Abkhazia appears to also be incrementally moving away from Russia. In 2006, an opinion poll found that 68% of Abkhazians favored joining the Russian Federation while only 25% preferred an independent Abkhazian state. In 2011, this drastically reversed with 73% of respondents favoring Abkhazian independence while only 25% were in favor of joining Russia. In the same poll, only 0.6%, mostly the few remaining ethnic Georgians within the territory, favored rejoining Georgia.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Popescu, Adriana. “European Neighborhood Policy and the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: European Union’s Approach.” *Analele Universității din Oradea, Seria Relații Internaționale și Studii Europene* no. 3 (2011): 190.

<sup>102</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 30.

<sup>103</sup> Tekushev, et al., *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future*, 19.

<sup>104</sup> William H. Hill, “Reflections on Negotiation and Mediation: The Frozen Conflicts and European Security,” *Demokratizatsiya* (2010): 222.

<sup>105</sup> Hill, “Reflections on Negotiation and Mediation: The Frozen Conflicts and European Security,” 222-223.

<sup>106</sup> Tekushev, et al., *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future*, 14, 115, 120.

As Abkhazia continues operating as a de facto state, it is becoming more confident of its abilities to survive as an independent nation.<sup>107</sup> Georgia, meanwhile, remains dedicated to restoring its territorial sovereignty, though without committed outside mediation and reconciliation efforts, this conflict is likely to linger for decades.

### **South Ossetia**

**Origin.** South Ossetia (Figure 2) is the second de facto state within Georgia. While the frozen conflict between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali is largely ethnic in nature, it differs from Abkhazia in that many Ossetians wish to rejoin with North Ossetia within the Russian Federation, preferring annexation to independence.<sup>108</sup> To the West, this conflict appeared to be better managed than the one in Abkhazia in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, this abruptly changed with the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the largest conflict in Europe since the Kosovo War in 1999.<sup>109</sup>

Much like other frozen conflicts in this region, the origins of the South Ossetia dispute are contested. The Ossetian population consists of two main ethnic groups located in what is now North and South Ossetia. The Russian Empire conquered North Ossetia in the 18th century and South Ossetia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the Russian Revolution, North and South Ossetia pushed for the unification of their states. However, keeping to its policy of divide and rule, Stalin split the regions in 1922 into the Autonomous Region of North Ossetia within Russia and the Autonomous Oblast of South Ossetia within Georgia. Both North and South Ossetia petitioned again in 1925 to

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>108</sup> Hill, "Reflections on Negotiation and Mediation: The Frozen Conflicts and European Security," 222.

<sup>109</sup> Sergey Markedonov, "Regional Conflicts Reloaded," *Russia in Global Affairs* no. 4 (December 2008).

establish a unified Ossetia. However, they were rejected, though North Ossetia would later be upgraded to an Autonomous Republic.<sup>110</sup>

Under the Soviet Union, South Ossetia experienced no significant interethnic issues.<sup>111</sup> Unlike Abkhazia, South Ossetia retained an ethnic majority throughout this time. In 1989, the population was around 100,000 people, 66% were ethnic Ossetians, 29% were Georgian, and the rest were a mix of Russian, Armenian, and Greek.<sup>112</sup> However, similar to Abkhazia, rising nationalism in Tbilisi during the period of *glasnost* in the 1980s frightened many South Ossetians. One of the catalysts for conflict were reports that Tbilisi was considering making Georgian Kartuli the official language of the country. “This was a most unwelcome prospect for the South-Ossetians, only 14 percent of whom could function in the Georgian language.”<sup>113</sup> In response, they voted in 1989 to upgrade their status to that of an Autonomous Republic, though it kept the territory nominally under Georgian authority. Fueled by nationalism, the Georgian Parliament rejected the vote and revoked South Ossetia’s autonomous status, precipitating an armed conflict.<sup>114</sup>

**Conflict.** The resultant war, waged from 1991 to 1992, caused over two thousand deaths, significant infrastructure damage to the region, and the displacement of over 50,000 ethnic Ossetians, who later crossed into North Ossetia. A ceasefire was called in

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<sup>110</sup> Fawn, “The Kosovo—and Montenegro—Effect,” 273 and Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 119-120.

<sup>111</sup> Fawn, “The Kosovo—and Montenegro—Effect,” 273.

<sup>112</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 30-31.

<sup>113</sup> Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 119-120.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. and Hunter, “Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past,” 119-120.

June 1992, brokered by Moscow, and a trilateral peacekeeping force was deployed, again led by Russia.<sup>115</sup>

Tensions rose again in 2003 after Georgia's Rose Revolution. President Mikhail Saakashvili, fresh off a victory against separatists in Georgian Adjara (Figure 2), "made the reassertion of Georgian authority over South Ossetia a top priority of his administration." Saakashvili also wanted to reorient Georgia to the West, pitting him against Russia.<sup>116</sup> In 2004, Saakashvili began an offensive to counter smuggling operations in South Ossetia. He tightened border controls and sent in hundreds of security personnel and, reportedly, guerilla forces into the territory. As a counter, Russia allegedly sent in "several hundred paramilitary elements from Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Russia."<sup>117</sup> Clashes between both sides ended inconclusively.

Subsequent peace talks between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali in 2005 led to an offer by Georgia for South Ossetia to attain "autonomy equivalent to North Ossetia's in Russia, plus quotas for representation in the national parliament, executive branch, and judiciary." However, as this offer came after what many in South Ossetia perceived to be Georgia's inability to change the status quo militarily, it was summarily rejected and South Ossetia voted in November 2006 to reaffirm its independence from Tbilisi.<sup>118</sup>

The frozen conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia escalated again in August 2008. This was the third such conflict between them since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike the previous two, Russian armed forces were openly involved. In fact,

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<sup>115</sup> Fawn, "The Kosovo—and Montenegro—Effect," 273 and Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 30-31.

<sup>116</sup> Hunter, "Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past," 119-120.

<sup>117</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 24-30.

<sup>118</sup> Closson, "Georgia's Secessionist De Facto States: From Frozen to Boiling," 2.

Moscow played a significant role in escalating tensions prior to the conflict. In March 2008, the State Duma had outlined two conditions for potentially recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence. They were "Georgia's accession to NATO and use of force against the two self-proclaimed republics." Furthermore, President Putin directed financial assistance to both South Ossetia and Abkhazia in order to deepen ties.<sup>119</sup> Russia also engaged in military brinksmanship with Tbilisi, which finally resulted in open conflict.

War broke out in August with a Georgian offensive against Tskhinvali, the administrative capital of South Ossetia, and Russian troops dispersed throughout the region. Russia responded with a counterattack that drove Georgian troops from South Ossetia. Russian forces then launched further air, land, and sea attacks within Georgia and emplaced troops in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It followed up with a political volley by later recognizing these de facto states' claims of independence from Georgia.<sup>120</sup>

By August 12, Russia had achieved its military and political goals. Then-President Medvedev declared that "the aim of Russia's operation for coercing the Georgian side to peace had been achieved and it had been decided to conclude the operation.... The aggressor [Georgia] has been punished and suffered very heavy losses."<sup>121</sup> For its part, Georgia accepted a French-brokered ceasefire that "left Russian forces in control of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and 'security zones' in undisputed Georgian territory."<sup>122</sup> The plan also committed Georgia

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<sup>119</sup> Markedonov, "Regional Conflicts Reloaded."

<sup>120</sup> Cory Welt, "The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War," *Europe-Asia Studies* (University of Glasgow) 62, no. 1 (January 2010): 63-64.

<sup>121</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 26.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.



...not to use force, to halt hostilities, to provide full access for humanitarian aid, to withdraw Georgian forces to the places they were usually stationed prior to the conflict, to withdraw Russian forces to positions prior to the outbreak of hostilities (although they were permitted to implement security measures in the zone of the conflict until international monitors were in place), and to open international discussions on ensuring security and stability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>123</sup>

By all measurements, this was a successful campaign and ceasefire for the Russian-allied Abkhazia that left Georgia with both damaged military and economic infrastructure and diminished domestic and international political standing.

**Russia's Involvement.** Similar to Abkhazia, South Ossetia's continued existence as a de facto state is the result of Russia's desire to maintain a presence in its near abroad. In the early 1990s, claims were raised that Moscow was encouraging Ossetian separatists as a means to maintain influence over Georgia. While many of these assertions rest on circumstantial evidence, Russia cannot claim that it played a passive role in the 1991-1992 conflict, though some Russian troops undoubtedly acted on their own volition in supporting the Ossetian cause. However, Russia was clearly an active participant by the end of the conflict and later helped negotiate a ceasefire in 1992 and led peacekeeping efforts in the region.<sup>124</sup>

Moscow's role in inciting conflict was much more transparent a decade and a half later, when Russia made a committed and unambiguous policy towards deterring Georgia from forcibly resolving its issues with South Ossetia. "Unlike individual Russian servicemen who acted spontaneously in the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-1993, Moscow did not merely support the Russian army's operation. The Kremlin called it 'an operation to compel Georgia toward peace,' aimed at saving the Ossetian people from a

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Hunter, "Borders, Conflict, and Security in the Caucasus: The Legacy of the Past," 119-120.

full-scale humanitarian catastrophe.”<sup>125</sup> This conflict also had important geopolitical implications that undoubtedly influenced Moscow’s decision to intervene.

The threat of Georgia’s ascension into NATO likely served a fundamental role in provoking Russian action in 2008. Russian strategic culture rests on its sense of being a besieged state and the threat of a Western-allied state bound by a treaty of collective defense with Russia’s current and historic adversaries compelled it to action. Putin is also an opportunist by nature and he likely perceived an opportunity for Russia to undermine NATO and the United States by inciting Georgia to start a conflict it could not win before it was bound by Article Five obligations.<sup>126</sup> “By roundly defeating a U.S. friend, the Russian leadership aimed to undermine Washington’s credibility as a security patron of pro-U.S. governments in the CIS.”<sup>127</sup> Moscow’s actions were incredibly effective. The result of the five-day war was that “the United States seemingly demonstrated its unwillingness to put itself in danger to defend a friend, while Russia [showed] it had no such problems.”<sup>128</sup> Along the Russian periphery, NATO countries questioned Washington’s dependability and the efficacy of their security guarantee.

Coupled with Putin’s goading, American ambiguity over its commitments to defend Georgia potentially led Saakashvili to start a conflict he had no way of winning.

Without active American political and, more importantly, military support, Georgia had

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<sup>125</sup> Markedonov, “Regional Conflicts Reloaded.”

<sup>126</sup> Article Five of The North Atlantic Treaty enshrines the principle of collective self-defense. The Treaty states: “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.” (Source: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm))

<sup>127</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 31.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

no chance in achieving victory, though Saakashvili may have believed his U.S.-trained forces could achieve some success against the separatist. Because of this miscalculation by Tbilisi, Russia achieved many of its stated and implied goals during the conflict. In a 2011 speech to Russian soldiers based in Vladikavkaz on the Georgian border, Russian President Medvedev said that NATO would have expanded to many post-Soviet republics but for the Russo-Georgian War. If Russia “had faltered back in 2008, the geopolitical situation would be different now... and a number of countries which (NATO) tried to deliberately drag into the alliance would have most likely already been part of it now.”<sup>129</sup> The conflict provided Russia with a relatively low-cost way to test American resolve in defending states with which it does not have formal security guarantees. America’s lack of a military response had the effect of increasing Russian confidence at home and lowering faith in America internationally.

Since the conflict, it has been reported that Russian aims were not only to consolidate control over Georgia’s breakaway regions but also to depose then-President Saakashvili through occupying the capital by directly “killing or arresting Saakashvili, or indirectly by triggering his overthrow...Saakashvili’s survival as the popularly elected president was a major accomplishment of the diplomacy of the EU and the United States that ended Russia’s offensive.”<sup>130</sup> Russia may not have accomplished all of its goals but it certainly capitalized on what it saw as a vulnerable relationship between Georgia and the West. Saakashvili’s miscalculation soured his popularity at home and abroad. His

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<sup>129</sup> Denis Dyomkin, “Russia says Georgia War Stopped NATO Expansion,” Reuters India, May 21, 2011, <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-60645720111121>.

<sup>130</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 27.

coalition also suffered a number of domestic scandals, which led his party to heavy losses in Georgia's 2012 parliamentary elections.<sup>131</sup>

**Implications.** The intractability of the South Ossetian conflict has deeply impacted local, regional, and international actors. South Ossetia is plagued by economic weakness, political instability, and criminal elements in its society. The first South Ossetia war in the 1990s caused significant damage to industry and infrastructure and the displacement of nearly half its population.<sup>132</sup> The second conflict also resulted in what Georgia calls the ethnic cleansing of over 20,000 Georgians from South Ossetia, around one-third of the region's pre-war population.<sup>133</sup> It has yet to recover. South Ossetia remains to be largely dependent on Russia for both economic and military survival.<sup>134</sup>

This conflict continues to plague Tbilisi. It is unable to unify its country and must invest heavily in its security and military infrastructure at the expense of social, economic, and political development. The closed borders between South Ossetia and Georgia also has serious economic implications. However, the most important consequence of this conflict is that it prevents Tbilisi's greater integration with the West. It joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) program in 1994 and was assured that it would eventually become a full-fledged NATO member in the late 2000s. However, the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 had many questioning that promise.

After the August 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, several allies raised heightened concerns that Georgia was not ready to be granted a MAP because of the destruction of much of its military infrastructure by Russia, the uncertain status of

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<sup>131</sup> Brian J. Ellison, "Russian Grand Strategy in the South Ossetia War," *Demokratizatsiya*, 2011: 346-347.

<sup>132</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 30-31.

<sup>133</sup> Welt, "The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War," 63-64.

<sup>134</sup> Closson, "Georgia's Secessionist De Facto States: From Frozen to Boiling," 3.

the breakaway regions, and the uncertain quality of conflict decision-making by Georgia's political and military leadership.<sup>135</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2008 war, Tbilisi was largely blamed for its outbreak and it continues to work to regain trust among its Western security partners.

The conflict has also affected Russia both positively and negatively. It has allowed Moscow to maintain a physical presence on its periphery. However, its needling of Tbilisi and incitement of the 2008 war resulted in the withdrawal of Georgia and Ukraine from CIS.<sup>136</sup> As Tbilisi restores its ties with the West, more issues may emerge from Russia's presence in Georgia's separatist regions.

**Attempts at Reconciliation.** The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and Moscow's subsequent recognition of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence has set back reconciliation efforts between these territories and Tbilisi. Russia is the only state with the power to resolve these conflicts. However, it has shown no real desire to do so. The international community is impotent to force reconciliation without Moscow's support and dependence on Russian involvement ensures that it can dictate the terms of its role in the region. As long as Moscow sees the continuation of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in its best interests, there will be little change on the ground. Likewise, Tbilisi has not changed its opinion on the status of South Ossetia and continues to look for ways to reconcile the breakaway region with Georgia as a whole. However, it is unlikely that Georgia will attempt to force reintegration within the foreseeable future, given the disastrous results of the 2008 war.

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<sup>135</sup> "The Membership Action Plan (MAP) is a NATO programme of advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance. Participation in the MAP does not prejudice any decision by the Alliance on future membership. Current participants [as of October 2016] are Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro." (Source: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_37356.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37356.htm)) and Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 49-50.

<sup>136</sup> Markedonov, "Regional Conflicts Reloaded."

**Forecast.** South Ossetia is working to develop instruments of statehood in hopes of receiving international recognition or Russia's blessing to reunify with North Ossetia. The latter seems unlikely, as Russia made no moves to annex South Ossetia following the 2008 war. This response was dictated by political expediency and realism, as it would be difficult to absorb the deeply impoverished South Ossetia.<sup>137</sup> Prior to the 2008 war, only other post-Soviet de facto states, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh, recognized South Ossetia. Since the conflict, Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru granted recognition to Tskhinvali.<sup>138</sup>

### **Nagorno-Karabakh**

**Origin.** The unresolved conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (Figure 3) continues to contribute to greater regional instability. While this region has been subject to competing claims of ownership for centuries, the situation deteriorated and took an especially bloody turn in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and again during the fall of Soviet Union. A stalemate in Nagorno-Karabakh, characterized as one of “no peace, no war,” has persisted for the last twenty years, though the situation is much more volatile and dangerous than other frozen conflicts in the region. Frequent outbreaks in fighting on the border and increasingly bellicose rhetoric by leaders in Armenia and Azerbaijan lead observers to believe that the conflict may escalate quickly.

Nagorno-Karabakh lies at the crossroads of empires and has been subject to conflicts over its sovereignty for centuries. While the area is small, around 1,700 square

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<sup>137</sup> Closson, “Georgia's Secessionist De Facto States: From Frozen to Boiling,” 3 and Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 30.

<sup>138</sup> Tekushev, et al., *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future*, 19.

miles, it was, until recently, home to an ethnically and religiously diverse population. Throughout much of history, it was forcefully passed back and forth between the Ottoman Empire and Persian Empire. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Empire, a rising power in the volatile Caucasus, annexed the area. While Russian control was largely uncontested until the 1917 revolution, it was unable to prevent large-scale ethnic clashes that engulfed Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1905 and continued intermittently until the communists reestablished control of the area in 1921. Tens of thousands of Armenians and Azerbaijanis were killed, which entrenched a deep hatred between the two groups that was only kept in check as long as the Soviets held absolute control over the region.<sup>139</sup>



Figure 3. Map of Azerbaijan Showing Nagorno-Karabakh (Source: CIA World Factbook)

<sup>139</sup> “The Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute: Then and Now,” Stratfor, July 13, 2014.

In 1922, all the states of the Caucasus were incorporated into the Soviet Union, forming the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic.<sup>140</sup> Within a year, the territory was organized into the modern states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The contested area of Nagorno-Karabakh was designated as an autonomous region and was attached to Azerbaijan by Stalin, then the Soviet Nationalities Commissioner. This was done largely for economic purposes and in order to keep Azerbaijan from being ethnically homogenous.<sup>141</sup>

Tensions simmered between Baku and its non-Azeri citizens for over 65 years. In 1987, capitalizing on Moscow's weakness, Karabakhi citizens began demanding unification with Armenia. A year later, supporters of the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh rallied in Yerevan and, in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, a referendum was held both without Moscow's blessing and against Azerbaijan's wishes.<sup>142</sup> Violence broke out in both Armenia and Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh was ethnically cleansed of Azerbaijanis. There were further atrocities committed by Baku and Yerevan including the "massacre of more than 600 Azerbaijani civilians of Khojaly city by Armenian and Russian forces in February 1992 and the Azerbaijan central government's shelling of Stepanakert in 1992."<sup>143</sup> These actions mirrored the pogroms that had occurred in the region earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the conflict quickly escalated, with both sides seeking revenge and attempting to assuage historical prejudice and hatred. This

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Sergiu Celac, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Question: An Update*. Vrije Universiteit Brussel. May 20, 2000; Liz Fuller, "Fighting In Nagorno-Karabakh: War Or War Dance?," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 8, 2014; and Aytan Gahramanova, "Paradigms of Political Mythologies and Perspectives of Reconciliation in the Case of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," *International Negotiation* (2010): 133-152.

<sup>142</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 19-23.

<sup>143</sup> Gahramanova, "Paradigms of Political Mythologies and Perspectives of Reconciliation in the Case of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," 133-152.



unfortunately came as Moscow withdrew from the region, leaving no external force to check the passions that had been suppressed, but not diminished, for the better part of a century.

**Conflict.** Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan was particularly prepared for the war that emerged in 1988. Fueled by almost a century of repressed anger and hatred with no outlet, the war turned ugly very quickly. In the end, however, Armenia clearly had the advantage. There were strong class distinctions between the two countries that had emerged during the Soviet period. Armenians were urbanites and generally more educated and wealthy than their rural, unskilled Azerbaijani counterparts.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, many Armenians served as officers in the Soviet military while “Azerbaijanis were prevented from serving in the upper echelons of the Red Army, [and were] restricted to non-combat positions such as labor or construction battalions.”<sup>145</sup> While Armenia was given tacit support by Russia, Moscow actually supplied weapons and materiel to both sides, helping to prolong the conflict. Azerbaijan looked to Iran and Turkey, who was then fighting a Kurdish insurgency, for limited aid and military training. At the same time, Baku experienced a military coup that toppled the president and placed ex-KGB chief, Heydar Aliyev, in power.<sup>146</sup>

As such, Azerbaijan was ultimately unable to compete militarily with Armenia. As a result, a ceasefire was brokered in July 1994 by Russia and Kyrgyzstan and signed by representatives of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh. All sides promised to

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<sup>144</sup> Ruben Harutunian, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Moving from Power Brokerage to Relationship Restructuring,” *International Negotiation* 15, no. 1 (2010): 57-80.

<sup>145</sup> Umut Uzer, “Nagorno-Karabakh in Regional and World Politics: A Case Study for Nationalism, Realism and Ethnic Conflict,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2012): 245-252.

<sup>146</sup> Gahramanova, “Paradigms of Political Mythologies and Perspectives of Reconciliation in the Case of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” 133-152 and Uzer, “Nagorno-Karabakh in Regional and World Politics: A Case Study for Nationalism, Realism and Ethnic Conflict,” 245-252.

work towards finding a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh question.<sup>147</sup> In the end, there were over 20,000 to 30,000 casualties on each side from 1988 to 1994. The conflict also resulted in over one million refugees and displaced persons, over three-fourths of which are Azerbaijani. Somewhere around 15 to 20% of Azerbaijani land, including Nagorno-Karabakh and seven other regions, fell into Armenian hands.<sup>148</sup> The territory of Nagorno-Karabakh became a self-declared republic. However, it is currently not recognized by any major state, including Armenia.<sup>149</sup>

**Russia's Involvement.** Russia has benefited enormously from the conflict. It has effectively played both sides of the issue in order to prolong the fighting indefinitely. From these actions, Russia has profited economically, increased its influence in the region at the expense of the United States and West, kept Armenia as a tribute state, and prevented Azerbaijan from fully emerging as an energy competitor.<sup>150</sup>

Armenia remains dependent on Russia for trade and other economic support and recently joined a Russian-dominated customs union.<sup>151</sup> Russia is Armenia's top foreign investor and is responsible for a quarter of all trade. Also, Armenia's safety is guaranteed by Russia. It houses somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 Russian soldiers on its soil at any given time and has provided Russia with a lease to the Gyumri military base until 2044. "Moscow's military presence in Armenia is the single greatest deterrent to large-scale military action from Azerbaijan, which cannot and will not fight Russia

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<sup>147</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 19-23 and Thomas De Waal, "Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 52, no. 4 (2010): 159-176.

<sup>148</sup> Kamer Kasim, "American Policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Implications for its Resolution," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2012): 230-244.

<sup>149</sup> De Waal, "Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process," 159-176.

<sup>150</sup> Sergey Markedonov and Maxim A. Suchkov, "The Caucasus after Ukraine," *The American Interest*, January 6, 2015.

<sup>151</sup> Robert Kaplan and Eugene Chausovsky, "The Caucasus: Laboratory of Geopolitics," *Stratfor*, January 1, 2014.

militarily.”<sup>152</sup> Armenia is also a signatory to the CSTO which pledges that it will provide and be provided mutual aid if attacked. Other members include Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Recently, the Armenian president, Serzh Sargsyan, said, “the strategic partnership between Armenia and Russia is ‘the nucleus of Armenian security,’ and that membership in the CSTO... is the ‘real guarantee of Armenia’s security.’”<sup>153</sup>

However, Azerbaijan also looks to Russia to supply arms and other supplies. In August 2013, after a visit from Putin to Baku, it was reported that the two countries signed an arms deal worth an estimated \$4 billion.<sup>154</sup> Despite this relationship, Russia and Azerbaijan are, in many ways, competitors in the energy market. Russia holds strong leverage over the markets that Azerbaijan hopes to supplant and Moscow continues to use Nagorno-Karabakh as a tool to prevent Azerbaijan from gaining closer ties to the West and from fully developing a robust regional energy infrastructure.<sup>155</sup>

Recently, Russia made a number of overtures to both Armenia and Azerbaijan and offered to mediate a peace deal for Nagorno-Karabakh. Critics argue that President Putin is “seeking to cast himself as a peacemaker and to alleviate the damage done to Russia’s image by its actions in Ukraine and the downing of the MH17 flight.”<sup>156</sup> Outside observers question his motives for a number of reasons, including Russia’s

...continuous contribution to the militarization of the region by supplying both conflicting parties with arms; a massive propaganda campaign blaming the West, and primarily the U.S., for the increase in tensions; and, as even some Russian experts admit, attempts to replace the [Organization for Security and Co-operation

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<sup>152</sup> “In the Caucasus, Russia Secures Its Position by Exploiting Regional Tensions,” *Stratfor*, June 26, 2013.

<sup>153</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 10.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* 17-18.

<sup>156</sup> Armen Grigoryan, “Russia Seeks Increased Control of Karabakh Resolution After Clashes Between Armenia and Azerbaijan,” *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, August 14, 2014.

in Europe (OSCE)] Minsk Group mediation efforts and to compel Armenia and Azerbaijan to accept Russia's special role in the region.<sup>157</sup>

Putin hopes to operate outside the existing framework of the Minsk Group and, through this, pull both Armenia and Azerbaijan closer under Russia's sphere of influence. While Russia does not want to see an end to the conflict, it hopes to maintain appearances that it is doing everything in its power to find a peaceful solution.<sup>158</sup>

At the same time, Russia cannot allow this region to slip deeper into conflict. If a new war broke out, Moscow knows that it would likely be drawn in to play a more active role than in the previous conflict. This would be damaging to its prestige as de facto hegemon of this region. Furthermore, a conflict has the potential to incite similar separatist wars in the North Caucasus within Chechnya, Dagestan, or Ingushetia.<sup>159</sup> Even with these concerns, Moscow "...is not genuinely interested in a resolution of the conflict and is able to frustrate the peace accord at any moment."<sup>160</sup>

**Implications.** Though the war over Nagorno-Karabakh has been under a cease-fire for twenty years, it is still very much a part of the ethos of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict has defined their role in the world since the fall of the Soviet Union and it will continue to do so until the conflict is resolved.

In many ways, Azerbaijan is the pivot of the entire Caucasus region. Georgia looks to the West for support while Armenia is still tied to Russia. However, Azerbaijan remains doggedly independent and has the potential to be a true leader in the region. Despite this opportunity, Baku has muddied its rise to international prestige by dedicating

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Closson, "Georgia's Secessionist De Facto States: From Frozen to Boiling," 4.

<sup>159</sup> Stephen B. Riegg, "Russia Can't Let Nagorno-Karabakh Slip Into War," *The Moscow Times*, August 11, 2014.

<sup>160</sup> Anar Valiyev, "Nagorno-Karabakh: Twenty Years Under Damocles' Sword," *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 2 (2012): 297-202.

time, money, and effort to demanding retribution for the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Azerbaijan sees the conflict as a national humiliation and has pledged to regain its territory at any cost. As such, it has spent the last twenty years building up its military infrastructure with single-minded focus. Azerbaijan technically has the legal right to the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh as the international community and the UN Security Council have repeatedly upheld its status as the *de jure* state.<sup>161</sup> However, Armenia remains in possession of the land and until Azerbaijan forcibly pushes out Yerevan's troops, the situation will remain unsettled.

Due to vast oil and gas reserves, Azerbaijan has experienced an economic boom and it currently has a GDP many times larger than its neighbors.<sup>162</sup> With its expendable revenue, Azerbaijan has enlarged its arms cache exponentially. From 2003 to 2011, Azerbaijan increased military expenses from \$135 million to \$3 billion and it currently spends more on its military than Armenia does on its entire federal budget.<sup>163</sup> This increase in military expenditures has also led to a boost in confidence and bellicosity from Azerbaijan's leadership. In 2010, President Ilham Aliyev said, "Negotiations [over Nagorno-Karabakh] will continue whilst we have hope that territorial integrity will be restored... If we consider this to be impossible, then the state of Azerbaijan... can at any time restore its territorial integrity through military means."<sup>164</sup>

However, Azerbaijan must face the reality that Russia serves as a guarantor of Armenian and, by default, Karabakhi sovereignty. Tensions have only increased in the

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<sup>161</sup> Uzer, "Nagorno-Karabakh in Regional and World Politics: A Case Study for Nationalism, Realism and Ethnic Conflict," 245-252.

<sup>162</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Why America must step up its role in Resolving Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 2014.

<sup>163</sup> Valiyev, "Nagorno-Karabakh: Twenty Years Under Damocles' Sword," 297-202.

<sup>164</sup> Tracey German, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia: Security Issues in the Caucasus," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2012): 216-229.

last decade and “regular military exercises between Armenia and Russia, and on the other side between Azerbaijan and military partners such as Turkey and Georgia, have also increased feelings of enmity and mistrust between the two sides.”<sup>165</sup> In general, however, Azerbaijan has eschewed binding military alliances. It does maintain formal relationships with Turkey and Israel, however, which includes arms sales.<sup>166</sup>

Armenia has followed a different track. International audiences vilified Armenia’s policies during the Nagorno-Karabakh War, especially its use of ethnic cleansing, and it has lobbied heavily in order to restore its reputation, especially with the United States.<sup>167</sup> While it currently leans on Russia for support, it also maintains cleverly managed diplomatic relations with opposing countries despite being effectively boxed in by its enemies, Azerbaijan and Turkey, on two fronts. However, it suffers from its isolation and by not having “direct trade or diplomatic links with two of its neighbors.”<sup>168</sup> Armenia’s hope is that time will validate its claim and eventually relations with its neighbors will normalize.<sup>169</sup>

As Armenia and Azerbaijan deal with their shared history and issues in idiosyncratic ways, the ceasefire along the 175-kilometer border between the Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan remains tenuous. Some estimates indicate that there are over 20,000 soldiers on each side over the contested border, some within yards of each other.<sup>170</sup> Despite such a heavily militarized perimeter, there are only six international monitors that ‘watch’ the area, though they need special permission to even get there.

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<sup>165</sup> “Downing of an Armenian Helicopter Stokes Tensions in an Old Conflict,” *Stratfor*, November 12, 2014.

<sup>166</sup> “In the Caucasus, Russia Secures Its Position by Exploiting Regional Tensions.”

<sup>167</sup> Cornell, “Why America must step up its role in Resolving Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict.”

<sup>168</sup> German, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia: Security Issues in the Caucasus,” 216-229.

<sup>169</sup> De Waal, “Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process,” 159-176.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-176.

There are dozens of deaths each year of civilians and military personnel from sniper fire, mines, etc. and these numbers have risen in recent years.<sup>171</sup> There were more border skirmishes and deaths on the borderlands in 2014 than in any year since 1994. There has also been an increase in the use of high-caliber weapons, notably when Azerbaijan shot down an Armenian MI-24 combat helicopter that it claimed had entered Azerbaijani airspace in November 2014.<sup>172</sup>

Other countries play a large role in this conflict, perhaps more so than in any other frozen conflict on the post-Soviet periphery. Turkey is a significant actor and in many ways it serves as a counter to Iranian involvement. Ankara has close military ties with Baku but poor relations with Armenia. In fact, the Turkish-Armenia border has been closed since 1993 in order to show solidarity with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Turkey and Azerbaijan also share religious and cultural roots. They have a significant military cooperation and have engaged in numerous military exercises, including a joint exercise in 2012 with Georgia. In 2010, Azerbaijan and Turkey signed a ten-year “strategic partnership and mutual assistance agreement [in which] if one of the sides is attacked by a third country, the sides will provide reciprocal aid.”<sup>173</sup> Turkey is also an important customer and transit country for Azerbaijani gas and oil. Though Turkey has historically been wary of Russia’s presence in the greater Black Sea region, Moscow holds strong leverage over Ankara, including being their main energy provider. Turkey may be prevented from coming to Baku’s aid if Russia threatens to cut off power.

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<sup>171</sup> Lawrence S. Sheets, “A ‘Frozen Conflict’ That Could Boil Over,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2012.

<sup>172</sup> “Downing of an Armenian Helicopter Stokes Tensions in an Old Conflict.”

<sup>173</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 15.

While Iran aided Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh War, it has historically maintained a contentious relationship with Baku. Though their populations are both Shiite Muslim, Azerbaijan is a secular country with ties to Israel and the United States. In the last decade, there have been a number of incidents with foreign agents from both sides infiltrating the other's country.<sup>174</sup> In 2012, "Iran accused Azerbaijan of harboring Israeli intelligence agents... That same month, Azerbaijan sentenced seven individuals... it claimed had been trained in Iran to carry out terrorism, including plans to bomb the Israeli embassy."<sup>175</sup> Iran maintains much better relations with Armenia. Ultimately, Iran is not vested in a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and, though it does not support Russian intervention in the region, it would try to prevent Western powers and Turkey from gaining a stronger foothold in the Caucasus.

Armenia and Azerbaijan's immediate neighbor to the north is the Republic of Georgia. After the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia fixed its sights on the West and away from Russia. However, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War showed the West's unwillingness to defend Georgian sovereignty and recent elections brought more pro-Russian politicians to Tbilisi. This may be dangerous for Azerbaijan as Georgia has been helpful in providing Baku with alternative routes for its oil and gas pipelines. Azerbaijan is increasingly worried that Russia may use Georgia as leverage against Baku. However, Georgia is profiting from the current situation and while it would likely want to see an

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<sup>174</sup> Sheets, "A 'Frozen Conflict' That Could Boil Over."

<sup>175</sup> Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 16.



end to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it may not actively engage in promoting peace unless prompted by the United States or other Western powers.<sup>176</sup>

**Attempts at Reconciliation.** Even before the ceasefire was in place after the Nagorno-Karabakh War, the OSCE formed a committee, later called the Minsk Group, consisting of Russia, the United States, France, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, in order to find a peaceful resolution to Nagorno-Karabakh. Over the past twenty years, there have been a number of meetings and summits. However, no major resolutions have been agreed upon.<sup>177</sup> In February 2010, in response to increased incidents on the border, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, “If Russia, the U.S., and France had worked hard within the past 20 years, none of these problems would have emerged.”<sup>178</sup> While the issue is more complex than that, there is a fundamental lack of urgency about this conflict that many see as misguided, especially as tensions have risen over the last two years.

**Forecast.** This conflict will not find a peaceful resolution if left to the main belligerents. Armenia and Azerbaijan see each other as mortal enemies and local media and political leaders have done little to quell nationalist sentiment that vilifies the other side. “Both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides perceive possessing Nagorno-Karabakh as a cornerstone of their national identity.”<sup>179</sup> However, the international community has been unable to resolve the conflict. Russia, the state most suited to mediating a resolution has instead prolonged the conflict and derailed any true attempts at peacemaking.

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<sup>176</sup> German, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia: Security Issues in the Caucasus,” 216-229.

<sup>177</sup> “The Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute: Then and Now.”

<sup>178</sup> De Waal, “Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process,” 159-176.

<sup>179</sup> Gahramanova, “Paradigms of Political Mythologies and Perspectives of Reconciliation in the Case of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” 133-152.

It is evident that this conflict has served to limit growth and stability not only in the nations and territories involved, but in the greater Black Sea region. It has prevented integration with Europe at large and has hurt relationships within its neighborhood. Financially, both Armenia and Azerbaijan are suffering from this frozen conflict. Azerbaijani oil and gas must take costly routes bypassing Armenia. Consequently, Armenia is losing millions on transit fees that are now going to Georgia, Iran, and Turkey. Furthermore, this conflict prevents Armenia from trading with two of its neighbors and makes it dependent on Russian support and goodwill.<sup>180</sup>

The current situation is untenable and, if left unchecked, it will ultimately lead to war. Analysts note that inflammatory rhetoric is at an all-time high. President Aliyev said in August 2014, “The war is not over. Only the first stage of it is.”<sup>181</sup> Clashes over the summer of 2014 claimed more lives than at any other time since 1994 and Armenia and Azerbaijan are engaged in an arms race, one that Armenia is increasingly unable to match without the support of Russia. As Moscow increases its presence in Armenia, Azerbaijan will feel increasingly trapped and mistrustful of Western allies who they perceive as having abandoned the Caucasus and Crimea to Russian machinations.<sup>182</sup> Azerbaijan is increasingly the dominant military force in the region and is losing hope for a diplomatic solution. If it sees an opportunity, it may not hesitate to strike. Even if Baku and Yerevan do not act in a premeditated fashion, the border is heavily militarized and it may take only a single accident to spark a conflagration.

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<sup>180</sup> Valiyev, “Nagorno-Karabakh: Twenty Years Under Damocles' Sword,” 297-202.

<sup>181</sup> “Nagorno-Karabakh: A Mountainous conflict,” *The Economist*, September 6, 2014.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

## Transnistria

**Origin.** Moldova (Figure 4), a landlocked country that lies between Romania and Ukraine, has been in a longstanding conflict with the self-proclaimed separatist region of the Republic of Transnistria since it declared independence on September 2, 1990. While fighting has largely ceased since a short war in 1992, it remains a potential flashpoint between the West and Russia.<sup>183</sup>



Figure 4. Map of Moldova Showing Transnistria (Source: CIA World Factbook)

<sup>183</sup> W. Alejandro Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* no. 22 (2009): 153.

Transnistria remains something of an interesting anomaly among the other conflicts described in this thesis in that the initial motivation for breaking away from its metropolitan state was not driven by ethnic or religious issues, but was guided by elites. However, it has metastasized into an ugly, intractable ethnic struggle. While historically the Dniester River has divided the Slavic world from the rest of Europe, the conflict between the peoples on either side of its bank was not inevitable prior to 1989, which makes it different than any other post-Soviet conflict.<sup>184</sup>

The modern state of Moldova came into existence after the fall of the Soviet Union. It was historically a contested region between Russia and Romania. In 1918, Moldova, then called Bessarabia, declared its independence from Russia and united with Romania. This union lasted until Bessarabia was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940 as a result of the German-Soviet Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which divided much of Eastern Europe.<sup>185</sup> At this time, Transnistria, which had been a territory of the Russian Empire from 1792 to 1924 and Ukraine from 1924 to 1940, was joined, unwillingly, with Bessarabia. When the territory came under the control of the Romanians from 1941 to 1944, the Transnistrians viewed this as an occupation, and it was a scarring experience that has resonated throughout its recent history.<sup>186</sup>

Moscow regained control of the region in 1944 and Bessarabia was formally annexed in 1947 and renamed the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic.<sup>187</sup> During this time, the Soviets sought to rework the allegiances of the Moldovan people and transform

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<sup>184</sup> Aurora Bencic and Teodor I. Hodor, "Transdnistria: Ethnic Conflict or Geopolitical Interests?," *Eurolimes*, (2011): 409-411.

<sup>185</sup> Sanchez, "The 'Frozen' Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue," 155.

<sup>186</sup> Natalia Cojocaru, "Nationalism and Identity in Transnistria," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences* 19, no. 3/4 (2006): 269.

<sup>187</sup> Sanchez, "The 'Frozen' Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue," 155.

the nation into a cohesive body, though once subsumed into the larger Soviet leviathan. “Soviet propaganda promulgated the idea of a ‘Moldovan people’ with a ‘Moldovan’ language and culture, distinct from the Romanian one.”<sup>188</sup> The creation of a distinct Moldovan political identity was not easy. When the Moldovan Union Republic declared its independence on August 27, 1991, its last claim to independence had been in the 15th century.<sup>189</sup>

When the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic declared itself independent and claimed the name the Republic of Moldova, it was fundamentally different than the other newly created post-Soviet states. Moldova is composed of people from various ethnic groups with a history that the Soviets had attempted to rewrite and impose upon them. Many Moldovans are of either Romanian or Russian descent, the latter the result of Russian migration during the Soviet era, and there were no clear indications that the state would be able to hold itself together.<sup>190</sup> As such, Soviet occupation was important for what would later become the state of Moldova in that it provided a shared experience for the Moldovan people. The lack of centuries of common history and identity were less important than the shared experience of Romanian occupation and Soviet subjugation.

Interestingly, Soviet attempts to create a cohesive Moldovan state were not applied to Transnistria, a 400 kilometer strip of land on the “left bank” of the River Dniester between Moldova and Ukraine.<sup>191</sup> According to Natalia Cojocaru in “Nationalism and Identity in Transnistria,”

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<sup>188</sup> Cojocaru, “Nationalism and Identity in Transnistria,” 263.

<sup>189</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 31.

<sup>190</sup> Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” 155.

<sup>191</sup> Matthew Rojansky, *Prospects for Unfreezing Moldova's Frozen Conflict in Transnistria* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 1.

During the Soviet era the opposition between ‘we, the Transnistrian Moldovans’ and ‘they, the Bessarabian Moldovans’ evolved... ‘Soviet propaganda had always implied that Bessarabians are capitalists, indolent people who speak another language. This ideology was well indoctrinated in the psychology of Transnistrian people and came to resemble enmity toward the Bessarabian Moldovans.’ The difference between Transnistrian and Bessarabian Moldovans was emphasized through unofficial policies of the Communist Party. Transnistria was the area from which the majority of elites from Soviet Moldova were recruited. The ‘left-bankers’ were considered more loyal to the Soviet regime and more politically reliable than their counterparts from the former ‘bourgeois’ Bessarabia.<sup>192</sup>

Though nominally the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic consisted of Bessarabia and Transnistria, there was a deep divide between these areas. Transnistria had a longer history of cooperation with the Soviet Union and did not have the Romanian influence that Bessarabia did, other than four traumatic years spent under Romanian rule during World War Two. As a result, Transnistria acclimated to Soviet rule much quicker than the rest of the SSR. It easily Sovietized, shedding its past and working to create a new identity not tied to Romania. Its people wrote books celebrating non-Romanian Moldovan culture and history and changed its Latin alphabet to a Cyrillic one.<sup>193</sup>

According to data from a 1989 referendum, Transnistria had a population of about 555,000. Some 40% were ethnic Moldovans, 28% were Ukrainian, 24% were Russian, and 8% identified with other groups.<sup>194</sup> While Transnistria also boasts an ethnically diverse population, Russian is the official language and Russia seen as its protector and savior from Romania. Matthew Rojansky notes in *Prospects for Unfreezing Moldova's Frozen Conflict in Transnistria* that

Anecdotal evidence indicates that Russian speakers in Transnistria still generally think of Romania as the villain and Russia as the hero in a historical narrative dating back to World War II, when Bucharest was allied with Nazi Germany. Russian speakers therefore associate modern Romanian nationalism with

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<sup>192</sup> Cojocaru, “Nationalism and Identity in Transnistria,” 263-264.

<sup>193</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 32.

<sup>194</sup> Bencic and Hodor, “Transdnistria: Ethnic Conflict or Geopolitical Interests?,” 404.

revanchist fascism, a narrative heavily informed by the persistence of a World War II memory shaped by Soviet ideologists throughout the Slavic core of the post-Soviet space, and in overt conflict with a neo-nationalist historical narrative among many of the post-Soviet and post-Communist states in Eastern Europe, including Romania.<sup>195</sup>

This divide within the country was not an issue until the late 1980s as Moscow began losing power among the SSR. During this time, a movement within Moldova, led by a group called the Moldovan Popular Front, publicly challenged Soviet policies and attempted to pull Moldova away from the Soviet Union. Initially, they campaigned for a return to its original language and Latin script. Transnistrians were worried that this rise in Moldovan nationalism would lead the country towards unification with Romania and that Transnistria, in turn, would lose its identity and become marginalized.<sup>196</sup>

While an alphabet may appear to be a minor issue, “the protection and defense of a nation’s language is such a deeply emotional nationalist cause, for it is language, more than land and history, that provides the essential form of belonging, which is to be understood.”<sup>197</sup> Chişinău passed a controversial language law in 1989 that “(1) declared Moldovan the state language of the republic; (2) mandated the transition to the Latin alphabet; (3) recognized the unity of the Moldovan and Romanian languages; and (4) laid out a programme for extending its use in government, education, and other related spheres...”<sup>198</sup> It has been argued that this was the final trigger of the frozen conflict that currently engulfs Moldova.

Moldova’s language law led to increased tensions in the country as Chişinău sought closer cultural and political ties with Romania. Worried about what this would

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<sup>195</sup> Rojansky, *Prospects for Unfreezing Moldova's Frozen Conflict in Transnistria*, 2.

<sup>196</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 31-33.

<sup>197</sup> Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, 10.

<sup>198</sup> Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States,” 4-5.

mean, the Transnistrians were proactive and, from 1989 to the fall of the USSR, residents in Transnistria voted on a number of proposals and referendums seeking to boost local autonomy against rising nationalism in the rest of Moldova. This included seeking the rights to disengage with Chişinău politically, thereby freeing the region to join with the Soviet Union. These plans were stymied when the Soviet Union collapsed. At this time, there were many discussions within Moldova about the nation's identity and orientation and Chişinău had to deal with political, economic, and cultural and language issues resulting from its newfound independence.

While the conflict between Moldova and Transnistria is said to be one of elite manipulation, it is clear that elites from both sides made fundamental errors.<sup>199</sup> The Moldovans quickly replaced many of the Russian-leaning Transnistrian political leaders in the country and threatened economic warfare and the suspension of subsidies to the region.<sup>200</sup> The Moldovan people also made no secret of their desire to shed themselves of their Soviet past. In response to these actions by Moldova, independent militias within Transnistria sought to consolidate power in its territory. "Every move in Chişinău that pulled the republic further away from Moscow was met by a countermove in Transnistria that drew the region itself further from Chişinău."<sup>201</sup> As explained by Michael Bobick, this laid the groundwork for the conflict to come as Transnistrians increasingly saw the move away from

...Soviet (Russophone) norms as 'Romanianization', a phenomenon that threatened non-Romanian speakers with persecution, disenfranchisement, and death. Violence directed at Russian speakers in Moldovan cities, increasingly shrill nationalist rhetoric and armed attempts by the Moldovan state to assert its

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<sup>199</sup> Hill, "Reflections on Negotiation and Mediation: The Frozen Conflicts and European Security," 224.

<sup>200</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 33.

<sup>201</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 33.



sovereignty over Transnistria contributed to a heightened sense of threat internalized by residents...<sup>202</sup>

As Chişinău did not assuage these threats, Transnistrians sought to take matters into their own hands.

**Conflict.** The war between Moldova and Transnistria, when it came, was short and decisive, in no small part due to Russian involvement. The fears of political, economic, and cultural marginalization mobilized much of the Transnistrian population and a little less than a year before Moldova gained its own independence from the USSR, Transnistria declared its separation from its *de jure* state, with the intent to rejoin with Moscow.

In December 1991, after election of the Transnistria Moldovan Republic's first president, Igor Smirnov, paramilitary forces loyal to the new Transnistrian regime engaged in a wave of low-scale violence against police stations and other authorities that remained loyal to Chişinău.<sup>203</sup> This escalated into a larger military conflict in March 1992. Transnistria was aided by contingents of Russian Cossacks and the Russian 14th Army, which had been stationed there since 1956.<sup>204</sup> This conflict reached its peak at the town of Bendery in June when Transnistrian forces and "volunteer" Cossacks and Russian Army members routed Moldovan police that had been sent to restore Moldovan authority over the town.<sup>205</sup>

As a result of these decisive victories, a ceasefire was called on July 21, 1992. Transnistria, with outside help, had managed to consolidate control over most of its

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<sup>202</sup> Bobick, "Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia's De Facto States," 4-5.

<sup>203</sup> Sanchez, "The 'Frozen' Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue," 157-158.

<sup>204</sup> Sanchez, "The 'Frozen' Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue," 157 and Bobick, "Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia's De Facto States," 4-5.

<sup>205</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 33.

territory. Around 1,500 people were killed in the conflict and the ceasefire, which was mediated and enforced by Russia, called for a trilateral peacekeeping operation consisting of Russian, Moldovan, and Transnistrian forces along the Dniester River.<sup>206</sup> As of 2011, there were over 1,400 Russian forces, formerly of the 14th Army, based in the area.<sup>207</sup> These forces also guard a massive Soviet-era arsenal at Kobasna.<sup>208</sup>

In Transnistria, the conflict is seen to have solidified its place as a sovereign, independent state. Natalia Cojocaru writes that

In the Transnistrian mass media, the military confrontation of 1992 is presented as a ‘sacred war against the genocide by nationalistic Moldovans.’ The armed conflict is still viewed as a valid justification for separatism, and in collective memory it is ‘a war for truth, justice and independence.’<sup>209</sup>

This view is as strong now as it was in the early 1990s and such beliefs have made reconciliation appear futile.

**Russia’s Involvement.** Russia has played the most significant outside role in this conflict militarily, economically, and politically and Moscow continues to serve as the security guarantor of the Transnistria de facto state. “It is also important to remember that the initial Transnistria ambition was not independence, but to remain with the Soviet Union; Moscow’s involvement in the dispute was initially to use the separatist movement to press the leadership in Chişinău...”<sup>210</sup>

From the outset of the conflict in 1990 to its ceasefire in 1992, Russia played an important military role and likely played a decisive role in preventing the restoration of Chişinău’s central authority over Tiraspol. During the conflict, “the 14th Army’s

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<sup>206</sup> Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” 157-158.

<sup>207</sup> McMahon, “Eurasia’s Troubled Frontiers,” 57-58.

<sup>208</sup> Rojansky, *Prospects for Unfreezing Moldova’s Frozen Conflict in Transnistria*, 1.

<sup>209</sup> Cojocaru, “Nationalism and Identity in Transnistria,” 266.

<sup>210</sup> Hill, “Reflections on Negotiation and Mediation: The Frozen Conflicts and European Security,” 224.

commanders allowed the transfer of personnel and weapons from their stockpiles to robust the separatists' ranks." They reportedly "gave the separatists 24 tanks, 12 combat helicopters, 37,000 machine and submachine guns, as well as 120 cannons..." The 14th Army also went to battle with the Transnistrian forces against Moldova.<sup>211</sup>

Furthermore, in the ceasefire brokered by Moscow, Russia installed 6,000 peacekeeping forces within Transnistria.<sup>212</sup> Russia currently maintains around 1,500 troops in the region, with less than half serving as peacekeepers. "The idea that Russia is a protector of Transnistria and its ethnic minorities has become a pillar to justify the continuous presence of the 14th Army in the de facto state" and the continued presence of these troops is "a visible symbol of the Republic of Moldova's 'limited' sovereignty."<sup>213</sup> According to Michael Bobick, the presence of Russian troops in Moldova helps to

...thwart Moldova's European aspirations...European efforts to transform the peacekeeping mission to an international, civilian mandate have thus far failed. Far from being a neutral force, Russia occupies the role of aggressor and peacekeeper, which marginalizes Moldovan attempts to re-assert its sovereignty over the region.<sup>214</sup>

This helps Russia maintain a foothold in Europe and allow the perception of strategic depth. It also serves to physically and psychologically box in Moldova and Ukraine.<sup>215</sup>

Russian interest in Transnistria also serves an important geopolitical goal. The Dniester River historically played an important role as a buffer separating the Slavic world from the rest of Russia. Transnistria seems committed to maintaining that legacy. "Transdnistrian leaders have publicly stated that they have a historical mission to resist

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<sup>211</sup> Sanchez, "The 'Frozen' Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue," 162-163.

<sup>212</sup> Bencic and Hodor, "Transdnistria: Ethnic Conflict or Geopolitical Interests?," 406.

<sup>213</sup> Sanchez, "The 'Frozen' Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue," 163.

<sup>214</sup> Bobick, "Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia's De Facto States," 4-5.

<sup>215</sup> Rojansky, *Prospects for Unfreezing Moldova's Frozen Conflict in Transnistria*, 3-6.

Western expansion and they have promised to continue to defend Russia's geopolitical interests in the heart of the Balkans.”<sup>216</sup>

Some analysts believe that Moscow’s abiding interest in this territory also comes from its economic interests. Transnistria could not survive without economic assistance and trading with Russia. In “Reflections on Negotiation and Mediation: The Frozen Conflicts and European Security,” William Hill argues that on Russia’s end, its “attitude on Transnistria is formed and influenced more by the economic and commercial factors involved in the continued existence of an unrecognized, unregulated entity in southeast Europe with an economy based heavily on foreign trade.”<sup>217</sup>

In all, Russian military and economic support is essential for Transnistria. The de facto state would not have survived the last two and a half decades without Moscow’s financial and political aid. This includes facilitating travel for Transnistrian citizens. Of a population of around 550,000, some 100,000 to 140,000 hold Russian passports, including the majority of Transnistrian state officials.<sup>218</sup>

**Implications.** Currently Transnistria operates as a de facto state. It has a tripartite government; security forces, including an army, police force, and border security; and an economy with its own currency and tax system.<sup>219</sup> However, other than the three de facto separatist states in the Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, no nation recognizes Tiraspol, not even Russia.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Bencic and Hodor, “Transnistria: Ethnic Conflict or Geopolitical Interests?,” 411.

<sup>217</sup> Hill, “Reflections on Negotiation and Mediation: The Frozen Conflicts and European Security,” 224.

<sup>218</sup> Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States,” 4-5.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” 158.

While Transnistria has some industrial capacity, including a steel sector, the country is largely dependent on aid from Moscow. It struggles with crime and since the war “it has been generating economic, social, and human rights problems for the inhabitants of both banks of the Nistru...”<sup>221</sup> Moldova itself is one of the poorest countries in Europe and is severely underdeveloped.<sup>222</sup> This is even worse in its breakaway region. There are few opportunities for honest employment in Transnistria. As a result, most of the population is involved in illegal trading activities, which take advantage of Transnistria’s geographical location between Ukraine and Romania.<sup>223</sup> “Indeed, due to poorly regulated borders, it is widely believed that Transnistria is a major node in European and global arms, drugs, and human trafficking networks.”<sup>224</sup> Transnistrian officials have been accused by many international organizations of turning a blind eye to the proliferation of money laundering, smuggling, and weapons trafficking within its borders.

In Alejandro Sanchez’s article, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” he details some of Transnistria’s most pressing issues including governance by mafia-like elites, prolific human rights violations, smuggling, racketeering, attacks on the press, human trafficking, prostitution, and weapons trafficking of everything from missiles, sub-machine guns, and nuclear materials that have been traced to conflicts in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Africa. It has been reported that many of the weapons being trafficked through Transnistria are

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<sup>221</sup> Oleh Protsyk, “Moldova’s Dilemmas in Democratizing and Reintegrating Transnistria,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 4 (July/August 2006): 30.

<sup>222</sup> Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” 156.

<sup>223</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 66.

<sup>224</sup> Rojansky, *Prospects for Unfreezing Moldova's Frozen Conflict in Transnistria*, 2.

currently being produced in factories there as well as being repurposed from old Soviet stockpiles.<sup>225</sup>

**Attempts at Reconciliation.** Since 1997, the OSCE has led “5+2 format” talks. That is, it has managed a conflict resolution process with seven nations, including Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, and Ukraine. The United States and EU serve as observers. While these talks have worked to quell some crises, they have not resulted in any meaningful framework towards conflict resolution.<sup>226</sup> Transnistria continues to reject any calls to rejoin Moldova and oppose the expansion of peace talks.<sup>227</sup>

As in the case of many of the frozen conflicts discussed in this thesis, it has been over twenty-five years since these territories have existed as a cohesive unit. Many citizens have no memory of Moldova and Transnistria existing as a single state. This will be difficult to overcome.<sup>228</sup> Moldovans mistrust Transnistrians and view them as entrenched Russophiles. They worry that Transnistrians do not share European values and would derail attempts by Chişinău to further partner with the West.<sup>229</sup>

Transnistrians, having existed in its own de facto state for decades, are largely content, even in their poverty, and feel secure with Russia as their guarantor of sovereignty. They feel deep mistrust towards Moldova and “being brought up and educated in the environment created by the very specific propagandist machine of Tiraspol, inhabitants of the left bank gradually developed a belief... that they constitute a

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<sup>225</sup> Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” 168-172.

<sup>226</sup> Rojansky, *Prospects for Unfreezing Moldova's Frozen Conflict in Transnistria*, 2.

<sup>227</sup> McMahon, “Eurasia's Troubled Frontiers,” 58.

<sup>228</sup> Rojansky, *Prospects for Unfreezing Moldova's Frozen Conflict in Transnistria*, 2.

<sup>229</sup> Natalya Belitser, “Transnistrian Conflict: State of Affairs and Prospects of Settlement” in *Frozen Conflicts in Europe: Searching for Pragmatic Solutions and Promoting Reconciliation*, edited by Anton Bebler (Bled, Slovenia: The Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia, 2012), 15-20.

‘people’, a separate ‘nation’ endowed with a right to the external self-determination...”<sup>230</sup>

It is unlikely that they will ever willingly seek to rejoin Moldova. The question of Transnistria joining a greater state usually revolves less around their rejoining with Moldova as it does their annexation to Russia. Transnistria consistently calls for absorption within the Russian Federation, though Moscow does not appear to be enthused by the idea. Transnistria’s “drawbacks are related to its territorial discontinuity with the Russian Federation... landlocked position and awkward configuration of its narrow strip of land on the left bank of the Dniester River.”<sup>231</sup> It also provides few political benefits for Russia. Recent calls for annexation by Tiraspol have been exacerbated since the Crimea conflict annexation and it often cites an internationally unrecognized referendum held on the issue in 2006 where Transnistrians voted overwhelmingly to rejoin Russia. Some 97% voted in favor of future integration into Russia.<sup>232</sup>

While Russia has not leapt at this offer, it is clear that they would have powerful leverage if they wanted to resolve this frozen conflict, especially as the international community has placed little effort in finding a solution to this issue. “Lacking international recognition [Transnistria and other de facto states will continue]... as havens for smuggling, corruption and trafficking in everything from drugs to people.”<sup>233</sup> Though this conflict is frozen, like others in the region it has the potential to spiral quickly, though it would take a major incident resulting from these conflicts to actually galvanize the international community to push Chişinău and Tiraspol towards reconciliation.

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<sup>230</sup> Belitser, “Transnistrian Conflict: State of Affairs and Prospects of Settlement,” 16.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>232</sup> Shaun Turton, “A Sunday With ‘Separatists,’” *Slate*, May 2, 2014.

<sup>233</sup> McMahon, “Eurasia's Troubled Frontiers,” 58.

**Forecast.** There are few signs that this conflict will be resolved with any expediency. At the same time, it is unlikely that fighting will break out again. “Chişinău understands, particularly due to the 2008 summer war in Georgia, that Moscow will actively support Transnistria, as it did in 1992, and little aid can be expected from NATO.”<sup>234</sup> Though Moscow is increasing its presence in the Transnistria and conducts military exercises regularly, there is little sense of urgency within the region.<sup>235</sup>

While the Transnistrian economy is stunted and they remain dependent on Russian economic support for its survival, Moldova is doing almost as poorly. From Tiraspol’s perspective, there seem to be few compelling reasons to consider rejoining Moldova. In referendums, Transnistria has consistently voted to maintain its independence from Moldova, while indicating its desire to join Russia. While Moscow does not want Transnistria to rejoin with Moldova, it has not indicated that it would like for the region to join the Russian Federation.<sup>236</sup> However, with recent events in Crimea, threats of annexation may carry more weight than at any time in the previous decades.

## Crimea

**Origin.** On its surface, the frozen conflict in Crimea bears many similarities to others in the post-Soviet space. Each emerged after a shared history of centuries of Ottoman rule followed by over two centuries under Russian imperial and communist

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<sup>234</sup> Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” 173.

<sup>235</sup> “Moldova Protests Russian Military Exercise In Transdnier,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 18, 2016.

<sup>236</sup> Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” 160-161.



control, resulting in serious internal ethnic and cultural issues.<sup>237</sup> In Crimea, the problems preceding the 2014 conflict had been festering for some time. However, the situation as a whole does not fit neatly into the paradigm of the other frozen conflicts discussed in this thesis. Furthermore, Russian involvement in this secessionist movement was a clear deviation from its involvement in previous conflicts and the result, an annexation of sovereign Ukrainian territory to Russia, may represent a new model for Russian policy in its near abroad.

Crimea (Figure 5), a territory of some 26,200 square kilometers, has existed as an independent state for less than four decades of its history. It has otherwise been ruled by a series of hegemons, including: "...the Greeks, Bulgars, Scythians, Romans, Gots, Huns, Khazars, Kievan Rus, the Byzantine Empire, Venice, Genoa, Kipchaks, the Mongol Golden Horde, Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, Soviet Russia, Soviet Union, Germany, Soviet Union again and Ukraine..."<sup>238</sup> It became a colony of the Russian Empire in 1787 after Russia wrested the territory from the Ottoman Empire in a series of conflicts. At the time, the peninsula was called the Taurida Governorate. In the centuries since, Crimea has undergone a dramatic demographic, cultural, economic, and political transformation. The territory was once home to a large population of Muslim Tatars and Turks who were forcibly removed from the region or killed after the Russian Empire took over. What followed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a policy of forced Russification of the remaining population through compulsory schooling, military service, and conversion to Orthodox

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<sup>237</sup> Anton Bebler, "The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea," *Teorija in Praksa* no. 52 (2015): 197.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-218.

Christianity. There was also a massive resettlement of ethnic Russians to the area starting in 1783, which displaced many of the indigenous inhabitants.<sup>239</sup>



Figure 5. Map of Ukraine Showing the Crimean Peninsula (Source: CIA World Factbook)

After the collapse of the Russian Empire and the rise of the Soviet Union, Crimea underwent further changes. In 1917, the Taurida Governorate was split, with much of the peninsula, less the port city of Sevastopol, which hosted the main naval base of the Russian Republic's Black Sea Fleet, forming the Crimean People's Republic. The rest of the governorate joined the Ukrainian People's Republic. In October 1921, after the Soviet Union regained much of its control over former holdings, Crimea was given the name the Crimean ASSR and it became a subunit of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Crimea was incorporated into the Soviet Union only a year later and remained as part of the USSR with the exception of three years of occupation by the Third Reich

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

from 1941 to 1944. After World War Two, Crimea was stripped of its autonomous status and became a simple oblast or state of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.<sup>240</sup>

This lasted until 1954 when control of the Crimean Oblast was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as a symbolic gesture marking the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “Russo-Ukrainian reunification.”<sup>241</sup> Sevastopol continued to be directly administered by Moscow as it controlled the fate of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet.<sup>242</sup> Propaganda aside, this transfer was likely completed in order to provide a large labor force to Ukraine. However, it clearly violated Articles 14 and 18 of the Soviet constitution, which required consent between Soviet Socialist Republics before any changes were made to their borders. “Therefore, even in Soviet terms the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine was illegal, unconstitutional and clearly illegitimate.”<sup>243</sup>

Crimea was subject to further upheaval during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During this time, Ukraine voted to maintain Crimea as an autonomous republic within Ukraine. However, this was done without the consent of the people of Crimea, many of who wanted to rejoin with Russia. In reaction, in February 1992, the Crimean ASSR changed its name to the Republic of Crimea without Ukraine’s consent and in May 1992, the Crimean parliament declared the state’s independence and passed its first constitution. It was later amended at Kiev’s insistence to specify that Crimea was part of Ukraine and very quickly afterwards Crimean independence was voted null and void by

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 200-201.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 44-45.

<sup>243</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 199-202.

the Ukrainian parliament.<sup>244</sup>

The issue over Crimea's ownership was, and remains, a surprisingly sensitive one for Russians within the new Russian Federation.

Indeed, the Crimea was the only territory outside of the perimeter of the new borders of the Russian Federation about which most Russians, irrespective of their political orientation, felt strongly....[However,] in 1991, Yeltsin chose not to insist on the restoration of the peninsula to Russia, in exchange for Ukraine's renunciation of its portion of the Soviet nuclear arsenal deployed on its territory.<sup>245</sup>

This was a strategic decision by Moscow, emotions notwithstanding. At face value, Ukraine could potentially become a threat. As the Soviet empire faced collapse in Moscow, Kiev appeared poised for resurgence, despite institutional and economic issues.

Ukraine [was] the largest new state to be created in Europe [in the 20<sup>th</sup> century]; 52 million people in a territory the size of France, a nation with an army of 600,000 men; the legatee of an imperial arsenal that [made] it the third nuclear power in the world; the sixth largest naval power by virtue of its claim to part of the Black Sea fleet moored in Sevastopol; a nation of enormous natural wealth ranging from the coal and steel of the Donetsk basin to the agricultural abundance of the black-soil lands.<sup>246</sup>

At the time, it seemed prudent for Moscow to relinquish Crimea to Ukraine instead of raising tensions with its former satellite.

Russia again agreed to uphold Ukraine and Crimea's post-Soviet borders when it signed a treaty with Ukraine in 1997 recognizing the boundaries that existed at the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union, thereby legally conferring and confirming Crimea's status as belonging within Ukraine.<sup>247</sup> However, this still did not solve the problems between Moscow and Kiev over the peninsula. Some of the many issues between these states specifically dealing with Crimea included "the division of the Soviet Black Sea

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 201-202.

<sup>245</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 44-45.

<sup>246</sup> Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, 106.

<sup>247</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 45.

Fleet between the two states, the basing rights of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, the Russian use of military facilities in Crimea, [and] the number and status of Russian military personnel in Ukrainian territory.”<sup>248</sup> Furthermore, Kiev alleged that since 1991 Moscow had “covertly supported and controlled the actions of Russian separatists in Crimea and also maintained a sizeable contingent of its own civilian (FSB) and military intelligence (GRU) agents.”<sup>249</sup>

For its part, the newly sovereign Ukraine faced many domestic problems in the early 1990s. At the fall of the USSR, Ukraine appeared to have the requisite requirements for successful statehood. However, it had been a part of Russia for centuries and had not existed as an independent entity since the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Kiev needed to find a way to hold its state together. Momentum was on its side initially as rising nationalism that had emerged as a result of Soviet policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* helped make the case that “there always was a Ukrainian nation; that it had been suppressed for centuries; that it has at last found its freedom...” However, Moscow “was not wrong when it dismissed nationalist feeling here as weak, marginal, and easily suppressed.”<sup>250</sup> There was no consensus in Ukraine on how to proceed and define its new state. Furthermore, conflicting demographic elements would make achieving consent difficult.

In the Russified east, Soviet rule was popularly supported, whereas in the West, the Soviets were seen as occupiers. As noted by Anton Bebler, during the late 1980s,

Western Ukraine was convulsed with student demonstrations, strikes, and religious processions. The mistake that cost Gorbachev his empire was to believe a new Soviet man had been created here. He was to discover how bitter, enduring, and unforgiving national memory can be... As in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and

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<sup>248</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 202-203.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 106-107.

Hungary, nationalism and national revival here mean returning to Europe... Being a European here means not being Russian.<sup>251</sup>

Such fundamental differences in perspective between east and west Ukraine were significant and did not lessen over the next decade. In the east, and especially in Crimea, demographics are not in Kiev's favor. The 2001 Ukrainian census found that Crimea's population consisted of 58% ethnic Russians, 24% Ukrainians, and 12% Crimean Tatars. Much of the ethnic Russian population was resistant to assimilation with the larger Ukrainian state. Over the last twenty-five years, and especially since 2014, there has been an increase in the number of Russians moving to the peninsula and an exodus of ethnic Ukrainians and Tatars from Crimea.<sup>252</sup>

The pro-democratic Orange Revolution in 2004 and 2005 further worsened ties between Ukraine and Moscow. Russia was afraid that this revolution would herald Ukraine's eventual membership into NATO, a red line for Moscow. It believed that Ukraine lay within its historical sphere of influence and that the West's incursion into this space presented an existential threat. "Since the mid-1990s, Russians have come to accept Ukraine as a separate state, *but they still did not exactly consider it a foreign one*. In the elite and to some extent also popular mind, Kiev remained 'the mother of Russian cities.' NATO accession would turn this part of Russian national patrimony into a Western bulwark against Russia."<sup>253</sup> Moscow believed Ukraine would turn against Russia, creating a divide between the countries on everything from religion to trade. Furthermore, Moscow worried that it would have to deploy troops to its border, cut defense industrial

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>252</sup> Bebler, "The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea," 197-218.

<sup>253</sup> Trenin, *Post-imperium: A Eurasian Story*, 90-91.

links with Kiev, and move its fleet in the Black Sea to make room for the U.S. Navy.<sup>254</sup>

Based on recent events, it seems likely that “Russian contingency plans for the annexation of Crimea were probably prepared and regularly updated for at least two decades.”<sup>255</sup> Furthermore, the decision to annex Crimea, as will be described in the next section, was likely decided as far back as 2008 when the NATO summit in Bucharest opened the possibility of Ukrainian and Georgian membership. However, immediate invasion plans were postponed temporarily after the pro-Russian politician Victor Yanukovich became the President of Ukraine.<sup>256</sup>

**Conflict.** The military, economic, and political issues between Ukraine and both Crimea and Russia smoldered for over two and a half decades. The ethnic-Russian Crimean population had been restive since the early 1990s and resisted assimilation with Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia maintained a military presence within Sevastopol and

...the presence of Russian Armed Forces on the territory of a legally independent successor state offered not only psychological comfort but also, when needed or feared, physical protection for separatists [in Crimea]. This protection allowed them to carry out illegal referenda [in 2014], to proclaim and subsequently defend the secession.<sup>257</sup>

In February 2014, a series of protests broke out in Ukraine against the ruling regime in what would be called the Euromaidan Revolution. On February 22, 2014, following the deaths of dozens of protesters, President Yanukovich was overthrown and he, along with a group of high-level Ukrainian officials with close ties to Moscow, fled to Russia. During the power vacuum before the interim government could restore order, Moscow carried out its operation to annex Crimea. The speed, success, and covert nature

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 203.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

of this operation clearly indicate that these plans had been set for some time.<sup>258</sup>

On February 26, 2014, clashes orchestrated by Moscow pitted pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainians protesters against each other near parliament in Crimea's capital Simferopol. The pro-Russian protesters blockaded the parliament building, which was later occupied by pro-Russian gunmen, and demanded secession from Ukraine. They also pleaded for intervention from Moscow. The next day, armed and masked individuals, ostensibly agents from Moscow, seized and barred entrance to government buildings throughout Crimea. During an emergency session of the Supreme Council of Crimea, which was held under armed guard, Sergey Aksyonov of the Party of Russian Unity, an ethnic Russian from Moldova, was appointed the new Prime Minister of Crimea. The council also voted to terminate the Crimean government and hold a referendum on the status of the peninsula.<sup>259</sup>

By February 28, 2014, deputies of the Russian State Duma submitted an amendment to the constitution on admitting new territories to the Russian Federation. "The draft specifically justified the incorporation of parts of Ukraine into the Russian Federation on the grounds of alleged Ukrainian discrimination against national minorities."<sup>260</sup> That same day, in Crimea, "local self-defense" militias, assisted by "little green men" who later turned out to be Russian forces,

...seized the strategically important Perekop Isthmus, blocked or cut off all land, sea and air connections of Crimea with the rest of Ukraine, took over all Crimean ports and airports, radio and TV stations, blocked and occupied all installations of the Ukrainian Army and Navy, and illegally expropriated practically all their stocks of arms and ammunition.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid. 203-204.

<sup>259</sup> Bobick, "Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia's De Facto States," 3-4 and Bebler, "The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea," 203-205.

<sup>260</sup> Bebler, "The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea," 203-204.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 204.



Their actions “diminished Ukraine’s ability to exert control and maintain order. Existing Russian military and naval installations in Crimea led to confusion as to whether these ‘little green men’ were legally allowed to be there according to the terms of a 2010 basing agreement.”<sup>262</sup>

The conflict was a testament to the Russian ability to conduct hybrid warfare, the combining of traditional means of military power with other types of non-military power. Russia commanded fewer than 10,000 assault troops and an unknown number of masked “little green men.” The latter are a mix “of regular infantry and anti-terrorist police units with a secret chain of command...bearing no insignia or visible ranks on their combat fatigues.”<sup>263</sup> Their loyalty is intended to be ambiguous and, during the early hours and days of conflict, conceal the state identity of the invading force to prevent easy attribution.

The success of Russia’s three-week operation was due to three main factors, as enumerated by Anton Bebler in “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea.” Russia was able to draw on its marines that were legally stationed in Sevastopol and who could be used for reconnaissance and other missions prior to the conflict without raising suspicion. Furthermore, all of Crimea’s important strategic assets were located in close proximity, especially its main airport. This allowed for the “quick insertion of air-transported troops and speedy acquisition of targets.”<sup>264</sup> Last, according to Bebler, Ukraine’s military, for lack of information, training, or loyalty, did not effectively defend Crimea. Anton Bebler writes that

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<sup>262</sup> Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States,” 3-4.

<sup>263</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 205.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

...the Ukrainian military personnel stationed in Crimea were not given orders to resist and thus all 190 military installations and most weapons were surrendered to the invaders. About 20,000 Ukrainian military personnel capitulated without a shot being fired. Moreover, most of them switched their loyalty and opted to remain in Crimea. Most of the Ukrainian Navy was also captured by the Russian military without resistance. The Ukrainian commanding officers did not try to sail off with their ships and crews in order to reach mainland Ukrainian ports. Only several serviceable aircraft of the Ukrainian Navy escaped the capture. The Crimean police either failed to act or cooperated with the Russian Special Forces and Crimean separatists.<sup>265</sup>

However, “although the Russian Armed Forces de facto occupied Crimea, they did not establish a military occupation regime.”<sup>266</sup> It seems likely that at the time Moscow was still deciding whether to annex the territory completely or to allow it to perpetuate as a de facto state.

**Russia’s Involvement.** The extent of Russia’s support to separatists in Crimea and its annexation of the peninsula signifies a dramatic departure from how it previously dealt with secessionist movements in its periphery. However, there were many who predicted such action. In 1993, Michael Ignatieff, in his book *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, presciently wrote:

The Crimea is the most contested ground in Ukraine. If Russians are ever likely to fight Ukrainians, it might be here. Ethnic Russians outnumber Ukrainians in the peninsula; all are stridently aware that the Crimea was ceded by Stalin’s successors to Ukraine only in 1954. There are Russian separatists here... who want to break away from Ukraine and seek to restore the Crimea’s status as an autonomous republic, which it enjoyed before the Second World War.<sup>267</sup>

Since the fall of the USSR, Russia had opposed Ukraine’s greater integration with the West and its aspirations for NATO membership. After the Crimea conflict, Russia made it clear that its motivations were purely geopolitical. NATO’s spread ““directly in front of the Russian house,’ ‘on Russia’s historic territories’ remains to President Putin and to the

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, 132.

Russian elite utterly unacceptable.”<sup>268</sup> Ukraine has been a vital territory to Moscow and “Crimea is psychologically much closer to the hearts of many Russians and particularly of the Russian military than any of the four other ex-Soviet territories.”<sup>269</sup>

In 2006, Russia made clear its interests in regards to Crimea. Putin said that “The Crimea forms part of the Ukrainian side and we cannot interfere in another country’s internal affairs. At the same time, however, Russia cannot be indifferent to what happens in the Ukraine and Crimea.”<sup>270</sup> The Russian pretexts for its dramatic intervention in this conflict are similar to its claims in other frozen conflicts on its periphery. Michael Bobick argues that the Crimea example followed the same template as almost every other post-Soviet intervention in which

...a sudden power shift to a ‘nationalist’ government alienated those who see themselves as ethnically or linguistically outside of the nation. This perceived threat, coupled with Russian military backing, creates the conditions for the emergence of a hitherto non-existing nation. Next, constituent holders of sovereignty are called forth through the most democratic of all processes, the referendum. Finally, Russia stabilizes the situation with a one-sided peace agreement (Transnistria), annexation (Crimea), or international recognition (Abkhazia and South Ossetia).<sup>271</sup>

Russian involvement in this conflict serves a number of purposes. First, it helps protect its military assets in Crimea. Second, it halts in its tracks any NATO expansion that includes Ukraine. It also shows Russian groups abroad that Moscow can be depended upon. This is sharply juxtaposed with the West’s failure to answer Georgia’s call for aid in the 2008 war and Ukraine’s plea for help in 2014. Russia’s involvement also renews hope among other Russian secessionist movements and among de facto states in the

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<sup>268</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 214.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>270</sup> Stephen Blank, “Russia and the Black Sea’s Frozen Conflicts in Strategic Perspective,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 41-42.

<sup>271</sup> Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States,” 6.

greater Black Sea region. Furthermore, it reinvigorates Russia's place as the power broker in the region and reasserts its hegemony along its periphery and self-claimed sphere of influence. Any resolution to this or the other frozen conflicts in the region will need to go through Russia. Finally, it puts the rest of Eastern Europe and the United States on notice. This conflict was a highly planned covert operation that was executed near-flawlessly. It provides a tacit threat to other states along Russia's northwestern border, especially Poland and the Baltic states, and shows Russia's willingness to use kinetic force to achieve its goals. And, for the first time in decades, Moscow's goals may include the forcible redrawing of international borders.

**Implications.** The Crimea situation is unique in post-Cold War Europe. It has stoked concerns over a revanchist, neo-imperialist Russia. While Moscow's actions can be understood as preemptive, in order to forestall NATO expansion on its borders, it can also be seen as a "renunciation of the balance of power in the Euro-Atlantic area formed after the end of the Cold War and as a demand for a redefinition of legitimate 'zones of interest' in Europe. It could be also taken as a stern warning to other ex-Soviet republics to behave."<sup>272</sup>

In order to legitimize the Crimean annexation, a 'people' needed to be created that could then call for sovereignty and the right to self-determination. This narrative was important to justify annexation. "An occupation had to be staged on humanitarian grounds – who or what these forces were protecting and from what remained unclear – and self-determination occurred under the watchful eye of masked men with guns..."<sup>273</sup> However, a referendum was called for on March 16, 2014. Importantly, there was no time

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<sup>272</sup> Bebler, "The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea," 215.

<sup>273</sup> Bobick, "Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia's De Facto States," 3-4.

allowed before the referendum for debate over the issues facing Crimean citizens. After February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Russian security personnel had blocked off land and air access to Ukraine and had taken over or shut down all television and printed media. During this time, Crimea was subject to persistent disinformation. “The intense propaganda campaign, almost like that seen during the Cold War, depicted the interim Ukrainian authorities in Kiev as ‘fascists’ or ‘neo-Nazis’ who had presumably threatened the Russian and Russian-speaking population with ‘genocide.’”<sup>274</sup> Furthermore, the referendum did not include the options to stay as part of Ukraine or to declare Crimea’s independent statehood.

Reportedly, over 81% of the population voted. Of these, 97% voted to separate from Ukraine and integrate with Russia.<sup>275</sup> Ukraine and some ethnic groups within Crimea, including the Crimean Tatars, reject these results. However, even though it is likely that the results of the referendum were inflated to legitimize Crimea’s annexation into the Russian Federation, much of the Russian-speaking minority in Crimea overwhelmingly supported it.<sup>276</sup>

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, the “Constitutional Law on admitting to the Russian Federation the Republic of Crimea and Establishing within the Russian Federation the New Constituent Entities the Republic of Crimea and the City of Federal Importance Sevastopol” was passed in the Russian Federal Assembly and signed by President Putin. Crimea and Sevastopol were officially accepted as new units of the Russian Federation.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 206.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid. and Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s De Facto States,” 3-4.

The resolution of the initial stages of this conflict and integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation was seen as a paradigm-shifting event. Russia has had few qualms in supporting separatist movements on its periphery. Indeed, “it has become clear that while Russia will deal with any secession within its borders in the harshest manner (i.e. Chechnya), it has no problem supporting secessionist movements abroad... if these groups are pro-Moscow.”<sup>278</sup> However, it had never taken the steps to integrate these de facto states into the Russian Federation before, despite Transnistria repeatedly asking and voting for the privilege of doing so. Other separatists in the region as well as the international community believed that this represents a change in how Moscow deals with the nations and conflicts on its periphery. However, though this success seems to have given Moscow a confidence-boost and allowed it to be more active in the region and world, notably Syria, there have not been other moves to resolve conflicts on its periphery or further integrate any more territory with the Russian Federation.

Since 2014, nations and de facto states have interpreted Moscow’s actions in different ways. Tbilisi had been a strong ally to Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union and Georgia perceives the Ukrainian crisis “as a microcosm of the bigger geopolitical standoff between Russia and the West, rather than as a *sui generis* crisis that arose out of various domestic political developments.”<sup>279</sup> It is worried that Georgian territory will be next on Moscow’s agenda and it has renewed its drives to become more integrated with the EU and NATO. However, though South Ossetia and Abkhazia seek stronger ties with Moscow, it is unlikely that they would be absorbed into the greater Russian Federation, according to Sergey Markedonov and Maxim A. Suchkov.

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<sup>278</sup> Sanchez, “The ‘Frozen’ Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue,” 164.

<sup>279</sup> Markedonov and Suchkov, “The Caucasus after Ukraine,” *The American Interest*, January 6, 2015.

Though the worry that Moscow will incorporate the breakaway regions into its territory is certainly not farfetched, it is based on the assumption that it is now the Kremlin's strategy to multiply 'Crimean precedents' all across the post-Soviet space. The reality, however, is that Moscow has shown little appetite to extend the precedent to the Caucasus...<sup>280</sup>

Though it has signed new treaties with these territories, Moscow repeatedly rebuffs calls to change the status of these regions' borders and incorporate them into the federation.

Azerbaijan has been wary since the Crimean conflict, fearing intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh on Armenia's behalf. Yerevan looked upon Moscow's actions in Crimea favorably and it has pushed closer to Russia since the annexation in hopes that Moscow will provide further support to its claims in Nagorno-Karabakh. "There is growing sentiment across the political spectrum that the 're-incorporation of Crimea into Russia' justifies Yerevan's striving to win back 'Armenia's historical lands' in Nagorno-Karabakh."<sup>281</sup> As such, since the spring of 2014, that conflict has heated up. The summers of 2014, 2015, and 2016 saw the most ceasefire violations since the conflict reached an armistice in 1994.

However, in *The Caucasus after Ukraine*, Sergey Markedonov and Maxim A. Suchkov claim that there is little to be gained from further annexations, calling into question the idea that Crimea represents a major policy shift for Moscow in regards to separatist movements.

The truth of the matter is that Russia has little additional leverage to gain from outright annexation, and in fact would be only multiplying its liabilities, both economic and in the security realm, should these wayward territories be joined to it. And therein lies a potentially serious trap for Moscow. If the Russian-backed regions present the Kremlin with a direct plea for annexation, it will face an unpleasant choice: either disappoint its clients or further antagonize the West, cementing its reputation as a pariah state for more than a generation to come...

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

Nevertheless, none of this means that Russia will forswear annexation eventually...<sup>282</sup>

At this time, Moscow does not seem likely to apply the Crimea precedent to other conflicts. However, it does show that Moscow takes its role as hegemon and protector of foreign-born ethnic Russians seriously and it may not hesitate to act militarily if another such situation arises.

**Attempts at Reconciliation.** The Crimean conflict is ongoing, though little has been done to reverse Russian gains. There are also issues with other separatist regions within Ukraine, including Donbass. The diplomatic situation there seems dire. On September 1, 2014, the OSCE arranged for a ceasefire. The resultant Minsk Protocol was signed by Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), and the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) and a follow-up was agreed to on September 19, 2014, which banned offensive operations, halted flights by combat aircraft over the region, and arranged for OSCE mediation. It was never effectively put into place and completely collapsed by January 2015. Another attempt at a ceasefire, Minsk II, was signed in February 2015 but it has also been largely ineffective.<sup>283</sup>

Moscow cancelled a meeting during the G20 Summit in September 2016 to discuss the Minsk ceasefire. Since then, there has been a steady increase in violence between separatist and Ukrainian forces. Russia has taken the opportunity to blame Kiev for its inability to maintain a lasting ceasefire and is using this crisis to deepen the divide between Ukraine and the West. In August 2016, Putin accused Ukraine of plotting terrorist attacks and said, "I think it is clear now that today's Kiev government is not

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> "Protocol on the Results of Consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine*, September 8, 2014.



looking for ways to solve problems by negotiations, but is resorting to terror.”<sup>284</sup> Michael Kofman writes that while

...the separatists have not abided by the terms of the ceasefire, Europeans have been pushing Ukraine to fulfill its side of the bargain for over a year now without much success. Russia is banking on the fact that U.S. and European leaders have no alternative plan for freezing this conflict, and will further lean on Kyiv to start giving Moscow what it wants rather than see the Minsk framework publicly unravel.<sup>285</sup>

As this plays out, Kiev is losing support internationally as many of the powers that could make an impact, namely the United States, are more focused on conflicts elsewhere and do not wish to actively confront Russia.

**Forecast.** Since 2014, the political and legal impasse between Ukraine and Russia over the status of Crimea has created a new frozen conflict in the greater Black Sea region. While the self-proclaimed Republic of Crimea adopted a new constitution in April 2014 and a formal annexation was approved by Russia in March 2014, the international community still recognizes Crimea as belonging to Ukraine. The Ukrainian parliament has repeatedly reaffirmed that Crimea is its territory. However, there seems to be little that it can do to enforce its claim. Ukraine has closed its borders with Crimea and cut off all rail and road connections. Russian Prime Minister Medvedev declared that the present status of Crimea was a non-negotiable “closed chapter.” This conflict is likely not over but it raises the specter and fear of a more militarily adventurous and less cautious Russia both in Ukraine and elsewhere in the region.<sup>286</sup>

President Putin’s actions in Ukraine have upended the post-Cold War European order. In the 25 years since the dissolution of the USSR, Europe sought deeper political

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<sup>284</sup> Michael Kofman, *The Crimean Crisis and Russia's Military Posture in the Black Sea*, War on the Rocks, August 19, 2016.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 196-219.

and economic ties, as evidenced by the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which created the European Union and a single European currency, the euro. The post-war European paradigm also included the belief that borders would be maintained, with few notable exceptions, even as borders themselves seemed to lose relevance among the many nations in Europe who are part of the Schengen Agreement. However, the idealism, and perhaps naiveté, of post-Cold War Western leaders has been checked, and Russian actions along its periphery have increased tensions with its neighbors and the United States. While more actions to forcibly rewrite borders, as Russia has done with Crimea, do not seem imminent, they are no longer outside the realm of possibility.

## CONCLUSION

### Stasis

The conflicts over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, and Crimea have reached points of uneasy equilibrium. “Unrecognized by the international community, prey to organized crime, mired in economic misery, scourged by ethnic cleansing, and seared by recent memories of war, these hard-pressed territories have clung to their independence, ever fearful that the states from which they seceded will reabsorb them.”<sup>287</sup> While the metropolitan states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine are too weak politically, economically, and militarily to retake their breakaway states, they have not given up hopes of doing so. The underlying issues of these conflicts have not been resolved and without oversight by the international community, they are likely to become a strategic liability for states both within and outside the region.

The conflicts discussed in this thesis have many similarities. Each de facto state shares a history of centuries of Ottoman rule followed by over two centuries under Russian imperial and communist rule, resulting in profound ethnic and cultural problems.<sup>288</sup> During much of the Soviet era, these territories, composed of ethnic minorities distinct from their metropolitan states, were neither allowed freedom of cultural and ethnic expression, nor were they forced to assimilate with the culture of the state to which they were attached. At the same time, they were allowed regional and ethnic administrative systems that supported the growth and development of nationalist secessionist movements that rose to prominence in the 1980s during the waning years of

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<sup>287</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, vii.

<sup>288</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 197.

the Soviet Union.

Except for the most recent conflicts in South Ossetia and Crimea, all the other frozen conflicts in this thesis have been held by ceasefires since the early 1990s that “enshrine[d] the victory of separatist forces on the battlefield...”<sup>289</sup> Most de facto states are host to Russian peacekeeping forces and despite being monitored by international organizations, little progress has been made in over two decades of negotiations. “Separatist entities have used [this time] to pursue state-building projects, reflected in the creation of an array of institutions and the development of a discourse of statehood and sovereignty among their elites and populations.”<sup>290</sup>

They have also tried to find different justifications to appeal to states for greater international recognition. If the right to self-determination based on ethnic identification were not enough, these territories have also claimed rights to independence based on historical and moral reasons. In “appealing to history, the de facto states claim that their current incarnation represents but the latest phase in a long tradition of statehood.”<sup>291</sup>

Transnistria claims historical statehood from when it was an autonomous region in Ukraine before the Second World War whereas Armenia claims that Nagorno-Karabakh had autonomy under Persian rule. This appeal to historical precedent is useful; it helps justify past and present struggles and violence in order to establish claims for the future.

Furthermore, “[a]ll the separatist authorities insist on an inherent moral entitlement to self-determination when faced with ‘alien’ and ‘imposed’ rule.”<sup>292</sup> Some have attempted to claim statehood following the precedent set by Israel after World War

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<sup>289</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 38-39.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 48-50.

Two. They feel a sense of entitlement after having suffered genocide at the hands of their metropolitan states.

However, despite fulfilling most requirements for statehood, these territories have been relegated to a condition of legal ambiguity with little hope for recourse in international law.<sup>293</sup> At some point during most of these conflicts, “the separatists appealed to and begged the Russian Federation to be admitted into it. So far, only Crimea has become legally (and to a lesser extent, substantively) an exception. Unlike... other cases, it was promptly admitted and became reunited with the Russian Federation.”<sup>294</sup> However, these pseudo-states “are playing the long game, in which not losing means winning.”<sup>295</sup>

Metropolitan states have firmly placed blame at these conflicts’ non-resolution with Moscow. According to Dov Lynch,

Vasily Sturza, then the Moldovan presidential envoy to the negotiations with the PMR, made the point bluntly in July 2000: ‘The resolution of the conflict depends exclusively on the Russian Federation. Transnistria is an unrecognized state invented from nothing, invented by Russia. Without Russian political and economic support, this invention would not have been possible.’

Similarly, an Abkhaz parliamentarian-in-exile in Tbilisi characterized all the post-Soviet conflicts not as civil wars but as “military-political conflicts between these new states and Russia.”<sup>296</sup> Moscow has served an indispensable role in both aiding these separatist movements at their nascence and “ambiguity in Russian policy has done nothing to help resolve them since. The ‘Russia factor’ permeates these conflicts, with Moscow involved

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>294</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 197-198.

<sup>295</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 142.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 41.

at all levels and in myriad ways.”<sup>297</sup> The concerted efforts to distribute Russian passports and claim citizens in these territories has further complicated these conflicts and given Moscow legal recourse in intervening in these areas, allowing for the “presence of Russian Armed Forces on the territory of a legally independent successor...”<sup>298</sup>

There does not appear to be much momentum towards changing the status quo in any of these conflicts, especially as many internal drivers help in perpetuating these de facto states. The leadership within these territories insist on preserving absolute sovereignty. They maintain that their states fulfill all necessary requirements for statehood as laid out in the Montevideo Convention of 1933. The Abkhazian president, Vladislav Ardzinba, said in 1999 “Statehood doesn’t need to be recognized by the international community. It is sufficient if it is declared by the people themselves.”<sup>299</sup>

Each of the de facto states discussed in this thesis maintains “a system of organized political leadership with popular support and that provides basic governmental services to a given population over a specific territory over which effective control is maintained over a significant period of time.”<sup>300</sup> While this is empirically true, the level of services provided by the central authority in each de facto state varies. Abkhazia maintains the daily running of three branches of government but is unable to provide social services to its population and depends on the support of the UN and NGOs. In fact, the amount of money brought in from international humanitarian aid organizations far exceeds Abkhazia’s total government budget. Furthermore, while the central authority maintains security services to defend its sovereignty, it is unable to ensure law and order

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Bebler, “The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea,” 198.

<sup>299</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 42-43.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

across its territory, especially in the Gali district. There are also competing security forces, including Russian troops, Georgian paramilitary groups, and armed ethnic minority groups that roam largely unchecked.<sup>301</sup>

Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, conversely, have much stronger central authorities. These territories have rebuilt some of their infrastructure since their conflicts in the early 1990s and the central security forces maintain effective control within the state and along its borders. That is not to say they are without problems. They also suffer from a total “collapse of industrial production, widespread... unemployment, and the deep impoverishment of their populations.”<sup>302</sup> Despite their issues, each of these de facto states claim that their situations would improve if they were given the chance to operate as equal members of the international community.<sup>303</sup> These territories are well aware that that their frozen conflicts are not over. War could conceivably resume at any moment. The de facto states perceive peace as a temporary thing and they know that while they are working just to survive, the metropolitan states are surpassing them militarily and economically.<sup>304</sup>

The Abkhazian defense minister once remarked ““The whole world helps the Georgian armed forces... Who is Georgia preparing to fight? Against Russia? No. Against Turkey? No. They are preparing to fight Abkhazia. All of the preparations are designed against Abkhazia.”<sup>305</sup> In response, de facto states continue to prepare new generations for conflict. Universal male conscription is the rule rather than the exception.

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 44-47. and Closson, “Georgia’s Secessionist De Facto States: From Frozen to Boiling,” 14.

<sup>302</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 45-47.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 45-49.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 42-58. and Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, 19-23.

<sup>305</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 58.

It helps to socialize, integrate, and assimilate young men into the state's culture. The persistence of a sense of existential threat has distorted the relationship between the civil and military aspects of government. Security services and the military largely dominate the political processes of these states, hurting economic and social development. Furthermore, the persistence of these conflicts has poisoned these populations against the international order and rule of law. Power and blunt force are seen as the only way to deter and to ensure survival. There is a marked distrust of the international community and of peacekeeping and reconciliation efforts, which hinders the resolution of these conflicts.<sup>306</sup>

Another internal driver to the continuation of these conflicts is that these *de facto* states suffer from subsistence syndromes. They are all essentially failing or failed states that are able to maintain institutional fixtures of statehood but cannot provide basic services for their citizens. These territories are still trying to recover from the collapse of the Soviet system and the destruction of their infrastructure from the wars of the 1990s.

The enduring threat of war has combined with economic mismanagement to produce hyperinflation, de-monetized economies, the collapse of social services, and the extensive criminalization of economic activities. These problems have been exacerbated by the legal limbo in which all of these *de facto* states exist, as nonrecognized strips of no-man's-land.<sup>307</sup>

There has been little progress made towards economic reforms in these states and many turn to illegal activities to survive. Dwindling and aging populations compound these issues.<sup>308</sup>

While these internal drivers are significant, perhaps the most powerful causes for the perpetuation of these frozen conflicts are external drivers, including the actions of *de*

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 42-62. and Bebler, "The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict over Crimea," 196.

<sup>307</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 63.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 42-64.



*jure* states, Russian intervention, and support by other nations and organizations. First, the actions of the metropolitan states have been detrimental to reconciliation. They each tried to forcibly restore their sovereignty and, when that failed, they have tried to repeatedly compel their separatist states through economic, political, and military means.<sup>309</sup>

Second, Russia has played an integral role in the outbreak and continuation of these conflicts. As explained by Dov Lynch,

Since the end of the wars, which the separatist forces won partly with Russian assistance, Russian policy toward these conflicts has retained enough ambiguity to reinforce the status quo and protect the *de facto* states. Russian engagement operates on several levels, illustrating the multifaceted role that Russia plays in contributing to the inertia surrounding these conflicts.<sup>310</sup>

Russia maintains peacekeeping forces along the *de facto* borders of these separatist territories and continues to provide political and military support to some if not all of these states. Its peacekeeping forces and support for separatist movements in sovereign states played an important role in Russian strategy and, in many cases, initial peacekeeping forces in these frozen conflicts were drawn from Russian forces already in the conflict zone that provided support to separatist forces during these conflicts.<sup>311</sup> As it stands, “Russian peacekeeping troops guard the new borders separating the parties. These new borders have allowed the separatist authorities to get on with state building while the presence of Russian troops deters the metropolitan states from large-scale aggression.”<sup>312</sup> This keeps these conflicts from achieving a resolution.

The presence of these forces continues to undermine the faith of both the *de facto*

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>311</sup> Bencic and Hodor, “Transnistria: Ethnic Conflict or Geopolitical Interests?,” 406.

<sup>312</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 74-76.

and metropolitan states in international peacekeepers and diplomacy. The UN and OSCE do not mandate Russian peacekeeping operations. The difference between Russian and international peacekeeping missions, according to Dov Lynch, is that

...Russian operations are not deployed to advance 'international peace and security,' although this may be one of their declared secondary goals. According to Russia's Military Doctrine, first enunciated in November 1993 and reiterated ever since, Russian operations are deployed to advance Russian state interests – this is their primary objective... Russian operations have consistently sought to alter the prevailing distribution of power in these conflicts in a way that would advance Russian state interests. In short, Russian forces are more players than referees. Moreover, Russia's military presence has served to offset the weakness of the de facto state armed forces and exacerbated the weakness of the metropolitan armed forces. The balance of power on the ground is clearly strengthened in favor of the separatists... In addition, active Russian support of the separatist forces has reinforced Moldova's and Georgia's tendency to dismiss the legitimacy of the separatists, who are seen as the fifth column of an aggressive external power.<sup>313</sup>

Russian peacekeepers operate in a very ad hoc manner. They do not follow standard rules of engagement, have no timetables for withdrawal, and repeatedly integrate warring parties into their forces. For instance, "In Moldova, the former 14th Army (now a much-reduced Russian Operational Group) has adopted a peacekeeping role despite having a history of supporting Transnistrian separatist forces."<sup>314</sup>

Furthermore, the international community and NGOs help perpetuate these conflicts by providing funds and humanitarian support. In helping de facto states with the day-to-day running of their governments, they are preventing these territories from dealing with the realities of running a sovereign country and may be preventing them from seeking to reconcile with the state from which they separated.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>315</sup> Closson, "Georgia's Secessionist De Facto States: From Frozen to Boiling," 3.

The longer these conflicts linger unresolved, the greater the potential that they will reignite and draw in outside actors. According to Dov Lynch, these conflicts have local, regional, and international implications.

The separatist states have an impact on the security of the states from which they have seceded – the metropolitan states – and on wider regional developments. Close to two million people have been displaced by these wars, putting serious strain on the new states of Moldova, Georgia, and especially Armenia and Azerbaijan. The economies of these new states are all deeply affected by the existence of the unrecognized states. The self-declared states have presented external powers with opportunities to intervene in the region. Russia has used its peacekeeping operations in Moldova and Georgia as a means to retain influence over those two states. Conditions within the de facto states have exacerbated problems of organized crime in the post-Soviet space. The legal limbo in which they exist has made them breeding grounds and transit zones for international criminal activities.<sup>316</sup>

Ultimately, it is impossible to quantify the social, humanitarian, political, and economic costs of the conflicts within the greater Black Sea region. Locally, these conflicts have prevented the development of economic infrastructure, stunted political growth and transparency, and caused states to invest heavily in their security apparatus at the expense of all other sectors of their states. Furthermore, the legally ambiguous status of these states means that many are economically reliant on other countries and are thus beholden to them. Also, they look to illegal means to support their people, either by turning a blind eye to their citizens' activities or by officially sanctioning them.

Regionally, the continuation of these conflicts obstructs the creation of a comprehensive European order as well as the integration of willing nations<sup>317</sup> Russian exploitation of these issues has served its geopolitical goals well and the West has been unable to find an effective strategy to counter Moscow. While the nations involved in

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<sup>316</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 7.

<sup>317</sup> Blank, "Russia and the Black Sea's Frozen Conflicts in Strategic Perspective," 24.

these conflicts, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine, perceive a clear delineation between the West or Russia, few are able to balance between the two effectively. However, many, like Georgia, are looking specifically to the United States for support. While the United States maintains many interests in the region, it is neither willing nor able to provide a security guarantee to these nations and pit itself against Russia, as Georgia disastrously learned in the 2008 war.

These conflicts have also been detrimental to economic growth. Blockades between states in the Caucasus prevent the exploitation of natural trade routes. A 2000 study by World Bank argued that opening borders within these states would increase Azerbaijan's GDP by 5% and Armenia's by 30% almost immediately. "In a region where macroeconomic stability has not led to improvement of people's lives, the opening of borders for free trade could make a substantial contribution to the economic transition of these states and alleviate the general poverty of the population."<sup>318</sup>

Internationally, these conflicts have put a strain on many of the major political and security organizations. NATO is unable to expand in nations where there are ongoing territorial disputes and the OSCE is seen as impotent as they have been unable to broker any lasting deal or reconciliation. Furthermore, any one of these conflicts, as seen in Crimea, has the potential of launching a regional war that could grow even larger and pull in international powers. "Conflicts that seem to be too remote geographically and too quiescent militarily to pose a threat to the wider international community are often more dangerous than they appear."<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., viii – ix.

## Resolution

**Legal Issues.** “Fifteen new states arose from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recognized by the world and admitted into the club of states, they acquired the protective shield of a body of law developed expressly to protect states, with sovereignty as the foundational norm.”<sup>320</sup> However, the promise of statehood was not applied universally among groups within the post-Soviet space. In addition to the fifteen post-Soviet states, five other “states” declared their independence following the dissolution of the USSR, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria. The separatist movement in Chechnya within the Russian Federation was brutally crushed. However, the other four, paradoxically with Moscow’s blessing, have persisted, and despite achieving de facto statehood, they exist in a state of legal ambiguity and limbo. “If, in past centuries, there existed myriad forms of political organizations – from states to empires, city-states to dependencies – there are few shapes left at the start of the twenty-first century. There are states, and there is little else.”<sup>321</sup> Without the protection of legal statehood, these polities remain isolated with few to no rights.

International norms and paradigms are unlikely to change, ensuring that these conflicts will find no recourse in international law. As a result, the de facto states of the greater Black Sea region have begun to perceive their situation as the result of a betrayal of the UN promise of self-determination.

The UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples) of December 14, 1960 set forth many of the rules of the current regime. The declaration stated that all peoples have the right to self-determination and to determine freely their political status and forms of political, economic, and social development... Self-determination

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<sup>320</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, xi.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

became a legal and moral right to all non-self-governing territories that are distinct from the country that administers them.<sup>322</sup>

The de facto states of the greater Black Sea region are legally lacking in only one thing for statehood, acceptance by other states. In remaining unrecognized, these states have little to no voice in the existing international framework, because only a sovereign nation-state holds any rights or power. “De facto states raise the question as to whether the existence of the state is a formal condition proclaimed by outsiders, or a condition of effective governance of a defined territory, with a population that is accepting of being subject to that governance.”<sup>323</sup>

In *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, Dov Lynch points out that there is a difference between the principle of the right to self-determination and the rules applying them. “The UN declaration denounced ‘any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country.’”<sup>324</sup> Also noted by Lynch, this attempted to mitigate the effects of decolonization by

...enshrining both a limited notion of self-determination and a juridical definition of criteria for new states...The rule was also expanded to include intrastate sovereignty: self-determination by all peoples was out of the question, and secession was condemned outright. The constant border changes and state territorial shifts that had been the fabric of international affairs until the middle of the twentieth century were condemned as illegal and disruptive to order.<sup>325</sup>

What has emerged since has been an attempt to maintain the world's borders as they were at the end of the Second World War. There are still many legal barriers to de facto states

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>323</sup> Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia's De Facto States,” 3-4.

<sup>324</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, 17-18.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

and while they continue to be unrecognized by other sovereign nations, there is likely little recourse to their situation within international law.

**Moving Forward.** The frozen conflicts that emerged in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Crimea after the Cold War have been impervious to resolution. While some seem more likely to flare up than others, namely Crimea and Nagorno-Karabakh, it is unlikely that these conflicts will remain unresolved indefinitely. From 2014 to 2016, Crimea was annexed to Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh suffered the most border casualties since its ceasefire two decades prior, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia gained recognition of their independence by Russia and a handful of other states, and tensions between Transnistria and Moldova rose, in no small part because of Russian military activity within the region. Such heightened tensions over a short time period, coupled with fears of Western retrenchment, do not bode well for the future of these frozen conflicts. It would only take a small spark to ignite a conflagration that could entangle the entire region.

Resolution of these conflicts will likely occur in one of three ways. First, there could be acceptance of the status quo whereby the separatist movement and *de facto* state will gain international recognition and be able to join the brotherhood of states. The longer these conflicts persist, the more likely this will be the outcome. Second, the *de facto* states, through military or political means, could be reabsorbed into their original *de jure* state. If this was the result of a concentrated diplomatic effort, it would require a much more concerted effort by outside organizations and states than is currently occurring. Reintegration through military means is also a possibility, though it would be more jarring geopolitically and would require significant development of military assets

and personnel by a metropolitan state. If Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, or Ukraine were to restore its sovereignty kinetically, it would likely disrupt the current balance of power in the region. Finally, a *de facto* state could be annexed to another state following the precedent set by Russia in Crimea. This seems unlikely, as only Transnistria has shown a consistent desire for annexation. Furthermore, annexation may ignite a larger regional conflict.

In spite of these three options and the seeming paradigm shift by Russia in regards to how it treats separatist movements in its near abroad since 2014, the prospects for near-term resolutions to these frozen conflicts are dim. The underlying issues between the states involved will not resolve themselves organically and Russia is not likely to withdraw itself from each of these conflicts and states, despite increasing political and economic cost. At this time, the only way a solution will be reached is if one party forcibly changes the status quo militarily or if members of the international community are able to gather support to change the situation diplomatically. However, this would require Moscow to be in a position of significantly diminished power and influence.

While the United States may be drawn into any of these conflicts, it currently only serves a diplomatic role. There is little hope of dislodging Russian influence in this region, though the United States can continue to gain stronger economic and political ties with the *de jure* metropolitan states and *de facto* separatist states and seek ways to foster reconciliation between them. It is in the United States' best interests to invest its political and diplomatic capital wisely before these conflicts flare-up and potentially threaten its allies and interests.



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