FROZEN CONFLICTS IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE
The ongoing escalation of tensions in Eastern Ukraine has once again raised the issue of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. According to many observers, the crisis in Ukraine is part of a continuing pattern that began seven years ago with the start of the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict, in which Moscow has consistently sought to intervene in former republics of the Soviet Union in order to advance its own geopolitical goals. Yet, as this report makes clear, the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space – Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria – differ significantly in both their root causes and in how Russia has attempted to resolve them. This report describes Russia’s overarching security concerns in the post-Soviet space, analyzes the important factors at play in each of these frozen conflicts and provides an overview of Russia’s new red lines in the region. The report also includes first-hand assessments from the representatives of Abkhazia and Transnistria as well as the list of recommendations for how to normalize the situation in the region and achieve better interaction between all parties involved.
Are Russia’s frozen conflicts warming up?

With recent signs that the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is heating up, other conflicts in the post-Soviet space are once again in the news. In addition to Ukraine, there are the two frozen conflicts with Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), one frozen conflict with Moldova (Transnistria), and the frozen conflict involving Armenia and Azerbaijan over the future of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, what does the state of a “frozen conflict” actually mean in today’s geopolitical context? And how has Russia shifted its foreign policy in response to these conflicts?

This August report looks into four frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space and then predicts what might happen next in Ukraine. Of all the frozen conflicts analyzed, the situation in Georgia provides perhaps the best clues as to how the Ukraine crisis might develop. Seven years ago, in August of 2008, Georgia and Russia had a direct military confrontation over Georgia’s breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The result is well known, yet its interpretation still differs significantly in Russia and the West. In order to present these differing interpretations on Russia’s frozen conflicts, we turned to both Russian and U.S. experts. Nikolay Silaev presents the Russian side of the story while William Hill counters this with the Western view. In addition, Sergey Markedonov sheds light on Moscow’s new red lines in the post-Soviet space. Finally, Iraklii Khintba and Vitaly Ignatiev provide an insider’s view into the lives of people caught in these two frozen conflicts — Abkhazia and Transnistria. Please do not hesitate to send me an email at e.zabrovskaya@russia-direct.org if you have any questions or suggestions.

Ekaterina Zabrovskaya, Editor-in-Chief

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The crisis in Ukraine underlined how inherent contradictions between the former Soviet republics might emerge as new conflict zones threatening the stability on Russia’s borders and on the European continent more generally.

The crisis in Ukraine has had minimal impact on the nature of Moscow’s engagement with most members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Contrary to alarmist forecasts that Russia’s neighbors would perceive the annexation of Crimea as a potential threat to themselves, the leaders of most CIS countries have shown either understanding or neutrality.

For its part, Moscow has not insisted on unconditional support from its closest partners, or demanded that they share some of the risks incurred in the face of the crisis stirred up by the West and radical forces in Ukraine. Overall, Russia’s relations with its neighbors are developing in line with the trends that took shape before February 2014. Moreover, its high-priority integration projects with neighboring countries are progressing steadily.

Paradoxically, the established system of intergovernmental relations within the CIS — for all the internal contradictions and inconsistencies — has proven to be more stable and flexible than is often thought to be the case.

An important caveat is needed. The concept of the “post-Soviet space” is a broader notion than the “Commonwealth of Independent States.” Georgia left the latter in 2008, and the Baltic States were never part of it.
How the former Soviet republics have changed since 1991

Policy orientation (according to Russian expert Alexei Fenenko)

Integration projects with Russia
Balancing between Russia and other actor
Resisting Russia and blocking its initiatives

Population

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The wealth of nations

GDP per capita in current USD

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SOURCE: WORLD BANK
RUSSIA’S TRADITIONAL ROLE

A feature of the CIS and other unions of post-Soviet countries is that Russia plays a dominating role in all of them. This is not the result of a deliberate policy, but simply due to its overall economic, political and military power. This dominance will continue at least for the next decade, and will remain an important factor in post-Soviet relations.

Over the past decade this status quo has been violated by just two countries: Georgia under Mikhail Saakashvili and Ukraine after the coups d’etat of 2004 and 2014. In these instances the second part of the formula — avoiding overdependence on Russia in internal and external affairs — was interpreted as “oppose Russia by all available means.”

In the case of Georgia, the balance was restored immediately when power changed hands. Without abandoning the former foreign policy priorities of NATO membership and rapprochement with the EU, the government of the Georgian Dream coalition began the process of normalizing relations with Russia. That includes the restoration and development of trade and economic ties, i.e. securing the benefits of access to the Russian market. As a result, Georgia is returning to the trajectory common, in varying degrees, to most post-Soviet countries.

RED LINES

In explaining Russian policy with respect to the post-Soviet space and its conflicts, some initial theses need to be formulated. Although some will sound abstract, they are important for an understanding of Moscow’s motives and strategies.

Over the past two centuries Russia has waged war on three occasions to protect its very existence (1812-1814, 1914-1918 and 1941-1945). All three of these wars were fought against strong coalitions centered in Western Europe.

This means that Russia’s security policy is based on existential threats from the West. One of the axioms of Russian policy is to prevent the encroachment of Western military infrastructure or military-political blocs on Russia’s borders.

At the same time, since at least the 16th century, with the advent of artillery as the key to military superiority, Russia has been keen to establish unimpeded economic, technological and cultural ties with Western Europe. It is the removal of barriers to such exchange that was the driving force behind the Livonian War and the founding of St. Petersburg.

That is why Russia is so sensitive to the threat of alliances in Eastern Europe that could isolate it from Western European partners.

That Russian strategy should take account of the West’s dual nature as both threat and donor of knowledge and technology is perfectly natural for a “semi-peripheral” country. From this perspective, the priorities of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space are to check the approach of Western military infrastructure on its borders and prevent the creation of a “cordon” separating it from Western Europe.

In Russian eyes the threats as existential and policies to limit these threats are based on real-world experience of international processes and on calculations of the balance of the military and political potential of Russia and its allies, on one side, and likely adversaries, on the other.

Herein lies a key misunderstanding between Russia and the West: Time and again circumstances arise in which the West sees itself as an arbiter, while Russia sees it as part of the problem.

Talk about Russian restrictions on the sovereignty of post-Soviet countries is only pertinent in the context of steps taken to directly or indirectly alter the military-political balance in the vast Russia-West borderlands. Hence Moscow’s suspicions of any regime change attempts in neighboring countries.

Historically Russia has not regarded interaction with the U.S. and NATO in the post-Soviet space as a zero-sum game. For instance, in 2001-2009 Kyrgyzstan hosted an airbase for an antiterrorist coalition in support of the operation in Afghanistan. Russia did not oppose the siting of the base, since it was in solidarity with the U.S. in the fight against international terrorism. This solidarity was greatly undermined by the unilateral actions of the U.S. in international affairs, in particular the operation in Iraq, NATO’s expansion in the post-Soviet space, and plans to deploy a missile defense shield in Europe.

Russia did not even strongly object to the three Baltic countries’ accession to NATO in 2004. Furthermore, whereas NATO membership of the three Baltic countries is tolerable, the accession of Georgia and Ukraine would be wholly unpalatable for Russia. A NATO military presence in the Caucasus and on the Russian-Ukrainian border would make Russia vulnerable. The small potential that existed for peaceful NATO expansion in the post-Soviet space has been used up in the Baltic region.

Russia does not want international crises on its borders. The experience of the past two decades shows that its tasks in the post-Soviet space can be implemented more effectively in a stable environment.
Lastly, Russia is well aware that overall it is weaker than the collective West, and only in exceptional cases can it resort to unilateral action, while hoping at the same time for a swift return to multilateral talks on dispute settlement thereafter.

THE MATRIX OF CONFLICT

The term “frozen conflict” is intended to describe a situation in which fighting has either stopped or become low-intensity, but without a settlement at the institutional level. The term is slippery, because every situation it refers to is unique; not to mention the fact that sometimes the criteria for conflict resolution are not clear-cut.

Therefore, the question of Russian policy in respect of frozen conflicts is meaningless in practice. If one discards the most common theses about the inadmissibility of conflict resolution by force, and about the possibility of broad dialogue and compromise between the warring parties, it appears that Moscow's attitude toward various conflicts has changed over time, and the unique nature of each of them makes it hard to draw comparisons.

It would be more productive to present the conflicts in the post-Soviet space as a matrix, with values assigned to indicate the extent of the bloodshed (the “bitterness” factor) and the importance of the geopolitical context (the “geopolitics” factor).

The bitterness factor shows how much the parties are willing to compromise, the extent to which violence and the memory of violence permeates their relations, and the mutual exclusivity of their visions of the future. The geopolitics factor indicates the degree to which the conflict plays a part in the general Russia-West dispute over the post-Soviet space.

That said, the position of any given conflict in the matrix is not be set in stone. It is free to move in accordance with the actions of the warring parties and third countries.

ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

Russia's approach to settling the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was determined by several factors. First, its own experience of the threat of fragmentation and armed separatist movements meant that it was unwilling to consider revising the boundaries of CIS countries. Second, Russia took great pains to stabilize Georgia, largely through military support for Eduard Shevardnadze. Third, Russia's special responsibility for peace and stability in the post-Soviet space was generally recognized by the West, with which Moscow had no antagonisms on the scale of those of the past decade.

Moscow made many attempts to settle the two conflicts. But the obstacle to the settlement was the memory of violence: There was a permanent threat of renewed hostilities. As per the Abkhaz national project, which formed particularly during the conflict years of the early 1990s, Abkhazians inside Georgia faced an existential threat.

Russian and Western diplomats put forward fewer initiatives to settle the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, which was essentially eclipsed by the Georgian-Abkhazian feud next door. Since 1992 the Joint Control Commission, made up of representatives from Georgia, South Ossetia, North Ossetia and the Russian federal authorities, has been in operation. Despite the ferocity of the conflict, its severe humanitarian consequences, and the mutually exclusive elements in the Georgian and South Ossetian national projects, interaction between the two ethnic communities “on the ground” has frequently been active and positive.

The situation around the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts changed after the arrival
The principal difference between the Ukrainian conflict and other conflicts in the post-Soviet space is that the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics do not insist on independence.

of Mikhail Saakashvili as president. His attempts to “unfreeze” the conflict, in particular by deploying troops and police forces in South Ossetia in summer 2004, created a new set of problems. The strategy of the Georgian government was aimed at pushing both conflicts into the narrative of the Georgian-Russian confrontation and integrating the latter into the context of the rising discrepancies between Russia and the U.S. on a range of European security issues. Thus, both conflicts were part of the same geopolitical context, which for Russia was associated with existential threats.

Not without reason did Russia suppose that Georgia expected its NATO aspirations to be rewarded with Alliance patronage for a military operation to establish control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow could not allow such an operation — and not only for humanitarian reasons. Such scenario would also be an indication that Russia’s position on security matters on its very borders could be ignored even by a relatively weak country like Georgia.

The original text of the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan proposed international discussions on the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Its implementation would remove the issue of recognition of the two republics as independent states and would preserve, at least legally, the territorial integrity of Georgia. However, the Georgian government rejected this point, which left no option to ensure the safety of residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia other than recognition of their independence.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh is quite different. The protracted fighting with heavy losses on both sides, the fragile cease-fire with continuous clashes and frontline skirmishes, and the very active (especially in Azerbaijan) propaganda of hate make it extremely difficult to achieve a settlement.

Nonetheless, there is a stable agreement between the key intermediaries — the members of the Minsk Group — on the principles of settling the conflict. Even the sharp deterioration in relations between Russia and the U.S. has not undermined this accord. In July 2015 U.S. co-chair of the Minsk Group, James Warlick, described the Karabakh issue as “an area where the views of Moscow and Washington actually coincide.” It is this accord that enables the intermediaries to just about keep the lid on armed confrontation in Karabakh.

TRANSNISTRIA

The Transnistria conflict has a low bitterness factor. There have been no relapses into violence. The conflicting parties cooperate on a wide range of issues. At the same time the geopolitical context of the Transnistria conflict is significant. Under the 2003 Kozak Memorandum, the only obstacle to a resolution of the conflict was the clause on the stationing of Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria.

At the eleventh hour Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin, following a meeting with the U.S. ambassador, refused to sign their already initialed agreement to settle the conflict. For Russia, its continued military presence in this strategically important area was and remains important in terms of its own security.

UKRAINE

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine is similar. Despite the fighting, casualties and humanitarian consequences, the prospect of a settlement with the preservation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity (as of March 18, 2014) has not died. The principal difference between this conflict and other conflicts in the post-Soviet space is that the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR) do not insist on independence. The status of the breakaway territories is already settled and provided for in the documents signed by the parties: the Minsk Protocol of September 5, 2014, and the Minsk II package of measures of February 12, 2015.

In accordance with these documents, the DPR and LPR remain part of Ukraine on condition of autonomy. If the cease-fire had been effectively maintained over the past six months, the conflict could be assigned a low bitterness score.

The geopolitical context of the Donbas is important. Ukraine’s foreign policy tug-of-war was one of the causes of the mass protests in Kiev in February 2014. The internal conflict in Ukraine was a major (but not the only) factor in the sharp deterioration in Russia-West relations. Russia wants Ukraine to be
stabilized on a guaranteed non-hostile (i.e. not anti-Russian) basis. Judging by the results of the Normandy Four meetings, this approach is shared by France and Germany. The question of whether the U.S. has the same view remains open. The paradox lies in the fact that Ukrainian officials are now calling for the conflict to be frozen and the settlement to be effectively rejected.

**HOW THE MAJOR POWERS CAN HELP**

Russia and its Western partners would be advised to recognize that they cannot be totally neutral in resolving conflicts in the post-Soviet space. It should also be remembered that the world knows very few examples of conflict resolution on the basis of reconsolidating a ruptured state. Breakaway Chechnya’s return to Russia is perhaps the only instance, yet this merely underlines how long and complicated the recovery process can be.

Nor should we forget that the resolution of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia is an argument in favor of the managed division of formerly integrated states, not their restoration. The conflicts in the post-Soviet space are at various stages of the settlement process. The circumstances do not suggest a common approach to resolving these conflicts. The major international players who mediate — or claim to mediate — conflicts should remember that the prospects for settlement depend on the willingness of the parties involved.

The 20-year history of conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space is littered with failed peace initiatives. In fact, the choice faced by the major powers is whether they hold the inhabitants of conflict areas hostage to their geopolitical contradictions. They control the extent to which the geopolitical context is isolated from the conflict settlement process. This means that a broad, equitable and mutually-binding discussion of security in Europe is still relevant. The events of recent years should have convinced everyone on the continent that attempts to build such a system on the basis of unilateral action by NATO or the European Union are counter-productive.

A fitting precedent here is the discussion of ways to apply the economic part of the Association Agreement between Kiev and Brussels under the EU-Ukraine-Russia format. Also required is an institutionalized form of cooperation between NATO and the CSTO, no matter how unattainable that may seem at present. But what is needed above all is a new agreement on European security, the groundwork for which could involve a reassessment of the conflicts in the post-Soviet space, but only after having securely ruled out the factor of geopolitical schism on a shared continent.
The thawing of Russia’s frozen conflicts

As conflicts broke out in the post-Soviet space, the Western strategy by and large was to support the territorial integrity of states. That approach is now being tested during the current Ukraine crisis.

Sam William H. Hill
THE CURRENT SITUATION IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

The situation around Nagorno-Karabakh and the standoff between Azerbaijan and Armenia continue to be extremely dangerous. Neither Baku nor Yerevan appears to be at all willing to engage in any of the serious compromises necessary to resolve this conflict.

In the meantime, Armenian and Azerbaijani armed forces remain in close proximity to one another. Violent incidents along the line of contact are a regular occurrence, and there are no serious physical barriers to rapid, serious escalation.

Some unilateral Russian efforts at mediation in recent years have not produced a settlement, but these do not appear to have seriously weakened the Russian, French, and U.S. cooperation as Minsk Group co-chairs.

NEW TENSIONS IN MOLDOVA

In Moldova, political settlement negotiations resumed in late 2011 after a hiatus of almost six years. However, the results of the resumed talks have not been particularly impressive, and the positions of Russian and Western mediators and observers generally diverge, with Moscow almost always supporting Tiraspol and the U.S. and EU supporting Chisinau.

The outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine appears to be causing Kiev to re-think its positions on this conflict, with results that are not fully evident or predictable. The presence of Russian troops in Transnistria continues to be a point of bitter disagreement between Moscow and the West.

THE GEORGIA-RUSSIA WAR

The Georgia-Russia War of 2008 greatly complicated the attainment of any lasting resolution of the conflicts in South Ossetia or Abkhazia. It is easy to agree with and accept almost all of the conclusions of the Tagliavini Report, with respect to the missteps, misdeeds, and mistakes on the part of both Georgia and Russia. The renewed hostilities make it unlikely that either the local Abkhaz, Ossete or Georgian populations will be reconciled any time soon.

In particular, Moscow’s decision to afford diplomatic recognition to South Ossetia and Abkhazia has made it extremely difficult for Western interlocutors to find common ground with Russia on resolving these conflicts.

Some Russian representatives and observers cited Western recognition of Kosovo as an independent state in early 2008 as a precedent for Russia’s action with respect to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

One might easily question the wisdom of using a Western move in the Balkans, which Moscow criticized at the time, as a model for its own action in the Caucasus. Not even Russia’s closest allies and partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization were
willing to grant such recognition, irrespective of the position they took on responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities in Georgia.

CRIMEA AND THE UKRAINE CRISIS

One might reasonably argue that the current war in Ukraine is a delayed consequence of the break-up of the Soviet Union. The status of Crimea was questioned repeatedly during the early 1990s, but votes that occurred at the time indicate that at least a small majority appeared to favor remaining a part of Ukraine.

During the 1990s, assisted by the OSCE, Kiev engaged in negotiations with Crimean authorities that produced an agreement on autonomy, which seemed to resolve that dispute without bloodshed. However, the Orange Revolution of 2004-2005 and then the events of 2013-2014 revived the issue.

Irrespective of Moscow’s claims, the bulk of Western opinion generally views the seizure and annexation of Crimea in March 2014 as initiated and directed from outside, rather than the result of a spontaneous, indigenous popular movement.

EASTERN UKRAINE, THE NEWEST FROZEN CONFLICT?

Touching upon the question of the possibility of new conflict zones to emerge in proximity to Russia, it is necessary to point out that there is a war in Eastern Ukraine being fought right now on Russia’s doorstep. Russia and the West appear in near total disagreement over the reasons for this conflict.

Even when Russia and some of its major interlocutors can agree on how to approach a settlement, such as the Minsk II accords, they do not appear capable of implementing these agreements. The presence of high-level NATO visitors in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine or elsewhere, does not seem to be a sign that the West has any intention of escalation.

Such visits are, however, evidence that the West by and large remains committed to its long-standing, well-established position of support for the full independence and sovereignty of these post-Soviet states. Similarly, the presence of U.S., Canadian, or UK trainers in Ukraine is not an indication of any desire to go to war with Russia. Ukraine has a sovereign right to provide for its own defense, and to seek assistance for that where possible.

If Moscow were more transparent about its relationship to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and more forthcoming in brokering a resolution, Kiev might feel less of a need to seek military assistance.

RUSSIA’S ROLE IN RESOLVING THESE FROZEN CONFLICTS

As the largest state in the region, with deep historical, cultural, economic, and personal ties with the other states and peoples in the region, Russia cannot be excluded and must play an important role in the settlement of all these conflicts. No reasonable person would argue that Russia has no interests and should have no influence in its neighbors and the states in the region.

The key objection of many Western officials and observers is how Russia has chosen to pursue those
interests and to exercise that influence. Coercive measures, such as embargoes on Moldovan wines, fruits, and vegetables; prohibitions on Georgian wines and mineral water; or threats to reduce or cut off natural gas deliveries to Ukraine, seem more likely to make more enemies in those countries than to convince policymakers to adopt positions favorable to Russia. Such coercive reactions also provide more ammunition for that group of Western policymakers and observers which argues that Russia is simply bent on dominating the countries around it, and, therefore, must be met with further sanctions and isolation.

NORMALIZING RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST

Relations between Russia and its major Western partners and intermediaries have grown so embittered that it will take a long time and considerable effort to bring them back close to what might be considered “normal.” Nonetheless, all involved need to try. The most dangerous conflict now is not one of the four “frozen conflicts,” but the war in Ukraine, which could easily heat up again.

While there are indisputably plenty of Russophobes scattered throughout the West, they are far from a majority. However, there is a majority in the West that supports full independence and sovereignty for all of the former Soviet states.

To the extent that Western leaders and observers perceive Russia’s actions or policies to be restricting the independence and sovereignty of these states, it will be difficult to near impossible to build better relations and true partnerships between Russia and many major Western intermediaries.

FROM THE AUTHOR

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Start, re-open, and/or ensure a blunt, private dialogue at senior working levels between Russia and its chief Western interlocutors about the situation in Ukraine and other important, disputed issues in the former Soviet space. The point is not to recite eloquent fictions to one another, but to acknowledge areas where there are genuine differences in perceptions, to identify red lines and bottom lines of all involved, and to focus on common elements or areas of agreement that might be pursued in the interest of reducing tensions and building confidence, while managing areas of clear disagreement.

2. Consider areas and issues that might be entrusted to the mediation or intermediary role of neutral actors (or as neutral as one can achieve), either through the OSCE or the UN. The presence of Russian, U.S., EU, or NATO representatives has rightly or wrongly become a red flag in some areas. Where practical or possible, movement toward other intermediaries or mediators might be a positive step.

3. Encourage authorities in the metropolitan states and in the breakaway entities to focus on what powers or competencies of governance they really need, rather than on absolutist demands, such as a centralized unitary state or independence. More realistic wish lists may become the basis for ultimate settlements; absolutist demands rarely will be.

4. Think seriously about whether possession of Crimea and independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia are worth long-term rocky relations with the EU and the U.S. While some Western states may come to accept such faits accomplis, many others likely will not. A large number of key Western states never recognized the incorporation of the Baltic States into the U.S.S.R. While this alone did not lead to war, it did help prevent the U.S.S.R. from attaining full acceptance and reconciliation with much of Europe.
Sergey Markedonov talks about the nature of frozen conflicts and assesses the chances that the Ukrainian conflict might end in military confrontation.

Russia Direct: How has the perception of frozen conflicts changed since Crimea’s incorporation into Russia?

Sergey Markedonov: I usually describe the changes in perceptions as the “Crimean spectacles.” This trend emerged last year, shortly before the referendum in Crimea. Today this trend is dominating. The “Crimean spectacles” mean that ethno-political conflicts in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and, to a lesser extent in Transnistria, are assessed in the context of Crimea. In particular, [the conflict along the borders of] South Ossetia and Abkhazia is seen as a sort of precursor for Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Likewise, such logic is broadened to Transnistria. If we look at the recent statement of the General Secretary of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, who said that Moldova will soon be the next hot spot, Transnistria is seen as an upcoming “aftertaste” of the so-called annexation of Crimea.

However, all these conflicts differ significantly. The decisions on South Ossetia and Crimea were undertaken independently of each other. In 2008, the question “Who is next?” was most significant and many experts talked about Crimea, Transnistria or even Nagorno-Karabakh. But shortly after the war between Russia and Georgia, the German TV Channel ARD broadcast an interview with then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who said that Crimea was not a disputed territory and Moscow didn’t give any signs that it was going to reassess the status of the peninsula. Not only did Putin make statements that Crimea was a part of Ukraine, but also Russia made some moves to extend the Big Agreement on cooperation between Russia and Ukraine, which was based on the recognition of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. It indicates that the Russian logic is not like the one described by the Western media and politicians. It’s not the logic of the proactive move. It’s a reactive logic, which means responding to problems as soon as they arise.

RD: But what about Putin’s speech during the 2008 NATO-Russia summit in Bucharest when he warned that further NATO expansion would provoke Russia to incorporate Crimea; Ukraine would no longer exist as a unitary state and Abkhazia and South Ossetia would become Russia’s buffer zones?

S.M.: These warnings were expressed not formally, but rather, emotionally. Yet, when Western opponents give this example, they tend to present Russia’s policy as a one-sided move: Moscow wanted to do something and finally did it. We should not forget about NATO’s expansion from the other side. If there were any frameworks in place — no NATO expansion, no ignoring the interests of Russia — Russia would not have behaved in the way that it finally did.

RD: Following your logic, NATO expansion is a sort of “red line” for the Kremlin. Could other events — like...
NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe or American military assistance to Ukraine — be seen by Moscow as new red lines that will lead to a much graver conflict?

S.M.: Actually, Russia drew these red lines long ago and they haven’t significantly changed: NATO expansion is acceptable for the Baltic States, but not for the core territory of the former Soviet Union. Russia’s red lines were clearly expressed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his deputy Grigory Karasin in their statements on Transnistria. In fact, they framed them within two extreme viewpoints: Lavrov said if Moldova gives up its neutrality and enters NATO, Russia will raise the question about the status of Transnistria, while Karasin added that Russia would like to see Transnistria as autonomous within Moldova.

At first glance, there is a contradiction in their statements. But there is no contradiction. It’s just two frameworks that require taking into account Russian national interests. This means that Russia’s new red lines — NATO military exercises and assistance to Ukraine or Georgia — are hardly likely to provoke a war. But what can really lead to a war is a question of status. For example, if Ukraine or Georgia join NATO tomorrow, then serious escalation in the confrontation is highly likely.

RD: After the Minsk II Agreements, there were signs that Ukraine could become another frozen conflict, with many observers pinning hopes on this scenario. What is your assessment?

S.M.: I would be happy if the Ukraine conflict were frozen. As soon as both sides finally understand they could totally destroy each other, the conflict might be frozen. The problem is that the West’s position is that it’s only Russia that should be to blame for the development of the Ukraine crisis. So, many in Ukraine probably disregard the possibility of compromise and prefer to wait, when the West exerts pressure on Russia through sanctions or others means. I respect this position, but it doesn’t lead to compromise.

Regarding Russia, the danger is that it is very difficult to say what the Kremlin wants. But it’s possible to say what Russia doesn’t want. It doesn’t want the same type of failure [in Donbas] as it was in the case of the Republic of Serbian Krajina [a self-proclaimed Serb republic within the territory of Croatia during the Croatian War of Independence in 1991-1995; the rebels from this republic were defeated by Croatia’s army because of the lack of support from Yugoslavia, which they wanted to join – Editor’s note].

Probably, we will witness some attempts to unfreeze conflicts and flex muscles. And if these attempts fail and all stakeholders understand this, they might come up with a compromise. After all, the Minsk Agreements, with its flaws and contradictions, resulted from the failure of all sides to reach their goals. Today there might be attempts to reassess these agreements and there will be Minsk III, Minsk IV, etc. The only positive moment in this situation is that all players are talking about commitments to these agreements, although they question them.

RD: What should Russia do to avoid exacerbating the Ukrainian conflict and prevent other protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space from unfreezing?

S.M.: It should at least not intensify confrontation. It should take more of a defensive (not offensive) policy, because the intensification of the conflict could lead to toughening sanctions, which will aggravate economic challenges and, finally, result in failure. The failure is even more dangerous in the current context, because it could fuel emotion-driven thinking among Russian political elites and take them away from pragmatism.
The lack of international recognition for Abkhazia represents a serious obstacle in building full-fledged relations with the world. In this regard, the consolidation of Abkhaz-Russian ties is a determining factor in Abkhazia’s development as a sovereign and prosperous state.

The signing of an Abkhaz-Russian agreement on joint efforts to protect the state border of Abkhazia in 2009 was followed in 2010 by an agreement on a joint military base (up to 4,000 Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia). Agreements in financial, economic and social spheres ensure Russian funding for social and economic development programs in Abkhazia and for the payment of pensions to Russian citizens residing in the republic. As of Dec. 31, 2014, Russia had remitted around 35 billion rubles (around $625 million) in total.

Against the difficult financial and economic backdrop in Russia and other post-Soviet countries, and the processes of devaluation and inflation, the leadership of Abkhazia is striving for self-sufficiency. President Raul Khajimba has introduced the phrase “engagement of internal reserves” into the political lexicon, by which he means elimination of the shadow economy, improved collection of taxes, customs and other payments, optimization of staff numbers at state-financed institutions, introduction of non-cash forms of payment, and legislative reform in the area of tax and business.

As a result of measures taken in the first half of 2015, the state budget performance plan was exceeded by 3.5 percent in terms of revenue. Growth was up 23 percent compared to 2014 and 10 percent compared to 2013.

Relations with Georgia since August 2008 have developed under the paradigm of non-military confrontation. Though toning down the aggressive rhetoric, Georgia’s new government, which took office in 2013, has failed to break the inertia of recent years. The new administration, like the old, refuses to sign an agreement with Abkhazia on the non-use of force. Thus, technically Georgia remains at war with Abkhazia.

Moreover, Tbilisi has erected artificial barriers to restrict Abkhazia’s international contacts. For instance, the Law on Occupied Territories, adopted by Georgia in 2008, stipulates mechanisms for restricting foreign economic activity in Abkhazia. By exerting pressure through the governments of the relevant countries, Georgia has repeatedly terminated the contracts of Western firms with counterparties in Abkhazia.

Restrictions have also been imposed on visits by foreign nationals, who are allowed to enter Abkhazia only through the territory of Georgia. Those who enter Abkhazia through Russian territory could face prosecution in Georgia.

Abkhazia, in turn, has adopted various workarounds to raise foreign capital — from Russian and Turkish sources. European funding is seeping into Abkhazia through humanitarian development projects implemented by international non-governmental organizations and specialized UN agencies.
Matthew Dal Santo, a Danish Research Council post-doctoral fellow at the University of Copenhagen, met Transnistria’s Deputy Foreign Minister Vitaly Ignatiev in Tiraspol, where they discussed the frozen conflict in Transnistria as well as post-Soviet Russian identity.

Matthew Dal Santo: Transnistria has spent a long time negotiating with Moldova about its status. How does Transnistria envision its future relations with the Moldovan government in Chisinau?

Vitaly Ignatiev: In accounts published in the foreign press it is possible to come across a number of assertions: that Transnistria’s pursuit of independence and the Russian vector for our republic’s development only serve the interests of certain political forces and that, allegedly, no real conflict actually exists, and so forth. In this connection, I must emphasize that the aspiration for independence is the will of Transnistria’s people expressed more than once in a number of nationwide referenda. We want to be independent and are pursuing integration with Russia — as the people have decided — and the people’s decision remains the most important thing in a democratic society.

Therefore, Transnistria has consistently followed a course for legal recognition of its statehood and its convergence with Russia. In turn, we have proposed to Chisinau a “civilized divorce” and, further, a peaceful, mutually beneficial and open co-existence as sovereign and friendly states. We are convinced that precisely such a format of further relations will be the most effective from the point of view of both security and economic and political cooperation.

MDS: How would you describe relations between Transnistria and Russia?

V.I.: Ours are relations between a country, a civilization, a whole cultural and historical world on the one hand, and a part that has been artificially separated from it on the other. Transnistria remains an inseparable part of the Russian world. In the West, perhaps, this isn’t fully understood, not least because the international media have created a slanted idea of Transnistria in people’s minds. Frankly, it would never occur to you that Denmark were not a part of Europe, would it? On both a geographical and a historical-cultural level Denmark is part of Europe. In the same way, Transnistria is part of Russia. Historically, Transnistria was not part of Moldova or Ukraine but of the Russian Empire. Today, the situation hasn’t changed — the citizens of Transnistria associate themselves with Russia and the Russian world. They rejoice in its successes and share its tribulations. Russia replies in kind: It keeps the peace in Transnistria, supports our republic in every domain, helps build the future and is always ready to come to our assistance.

MDS: What is the most important thing for Westerners to understand about Transnistria’s foreign policy?

V.I.: The most important thing for Westerners to understand is that in Transnistria people are the same as everywhere else — they are people with the right to free self-determination, the right to be prosperous, to defend their own rights and interests. The world has to stop looking at Transnistria as some indeterminate territory, as if it were just a “fragment of the Soviet Union.” Instead, the world has to see Transnistria as a state possessing lawful sovereignty, a state that has friends, partners and enemies in the global community, a state with its own economic and political connections, interests and goals. If Transnistria’s foreign policy were viewed as the foreign policy of any other state, everything would be in order and nothing would seem unusual. We have to avoid using double standards in evaluating developments in world politics.
EDITOR’S PICKS

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COMING UP IN SEPTEMBER

Russia Direct REPORT

How Russian Society Has Changed Since Ukraine

Notwithstanding the ongoing confrontation with the West over Ukraine and the recent economic downturn, public opinion polls carried out in Russia over the past year show that Russian citizens are by and large positive about the direction the country is headed. Why is that? And how have the perceptions of Russians towards the world changed over the past year?

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