

***THE TAIL WAGGING THE DOG.
FROZEN CONFLICTS – THE
PRECURSORS OF TROUBLE TO COME***
FLANKS Working Paper

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„The tail wagging the dog”.

Frozen conflicts – the precursors of trouble to come¹



Frozen conflicts (Source: [Wikipedia](#)).

Frozen conflicts: a very brief (theoretical) introduction

The protracted, post-Soviet conflicts are, unsurprisingly, located in the strategically important area of the Black Sea, within the sovereign territories of the newly independent republics of Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Republic of Moldova (Transnistria) and, more recently, Ukraine (the so-called ‘people’s republics’ of Donetsk and Lugansk). *Whenever similar conflicts occur within the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation they are described as rebellions or terrorist activities and are dealt with ruthlessly, as in the case of the two Chechen wars. They are never ‘frozen’.*

¹ The FLANKS Policy Paper „The tail wagging the dog”. Frozen conflicts – the precursors of trouble to come was prepared by members of the FLANKS project and is available at the project’s website at <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/flanks-project/>

What we are talking about here is the kind of internal conflicts with a historical background related to ethnicity, identity or political control that, at some point, degenerate into military confrontations. Whether it is involved from the very beginning or not, *Moscow then steps in and secures a ceasefire or some other sort of interim arrangement which stops the actual hostilities for a while but leaves the root causes untouched.* In some cases, this presupposes a continued Russian military presence as ‘peacekeepers’ for additional leverage in pursuit of long-term geopolitical advantage.

This and other separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space have their roots in the decisions on the territorial organization of the Soviet state taken prior to the collapse of the Soviet system where internal borders had purely theoretical importance but become real problems once the Soviet project collapsed (See on this issue Kaiser 1994).

Moscow’s interest in generating and maintaining such simmering hotbeds of tension *is to control the whole (sovereign states or strategic spaces) by controlling a part (the conflict zone) in a classical story of the tail wagging the dog.* That is why the description of ‘frozen conflicts’ is hardly appropriate since it suggests a state of immobility in its initial form, prior to the active phase of the hostilities. This notion is obviously false. The actual developments on the ground confirm the existence of a deliberate design behind all those conflicts that can be turned on or off at will to suit a strategic purpose of those who can use them as a lever.

By being involved from the beginning in these conflicts, Moscow establishes also various types of relationships both with those who control the conflict area and with the states concerned. Russia’s involvement could be therefore read in terms of patron-client relationships as well and this should be taken into account as this produces also another type of dynamics (see Popescu 2010).

In the first place, the apparently benign neglect surrounding this type of conflicts has further complicated the situation. A new generation, born since the time of the conflict (as it happened in Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh) was raised and educated under closed and isolated, separatist regimes. Those are ‘citizens’ of unrecognized and unaccountable entities without formal, institutional links to the ‘mother country’ or the rest of the world for that matter. The change of generations makes the prospects of conflict resolution in accordance with the interest of the host countries a lot more complicated than it used to be at the time when the hostilities broke out.

Secondly, the ambiguous legal and political status of those unrecognized regimes forced them to develop survival strategies leading, paradoxically, to their domestic and external consolidation. A kind of perverse *modus vivendi* at the margins of the law and accepted international practice has taken hold and become quasi-functional. Under the ice of the ostensibly frozen conflicts there emerged a plethora of political leaders, power brokers and even transnational business networks. This brings in the whole debate on de facto states – the ones that function more or less as ‘normal’ states but are not recognized by international community as such. The lack of recognition of these states that Russia supports could be viewed as a problem in Russian foreign policy (on this topic, see Flikke and Godzimirski, 2006 and Berg and Ker-Lindsay, 2019).

Thirdly, the ‘freezing’ of conflicts has significantly enhanced Russia’s ability to influence, manipulate and control regional developments, directly or indirectly. In fact, the unrecognized regimes have acted, wittingly or not, as effective levers of Russian geopolitical action at least in the sense of distracting attention from issues that really matter. Moreover, *having successfully tested with impunity the tools provided by the existence of protracted conflicts, Moscow has been tempted to use them again in other places and has not hesitated to do so.* The application of this strategy in the separatist regions of Donbas, in Ukraine, is a direct consequence of the fact that previous conflicts have remained unresolved. (This again brings into the discussion Russian views of the current international order, drawing from analysis of Russian interests and Russian views of the history of the post–Cold War period – see on this topic [Radin, Andrew](#) and [Clint Reach](#), 2017)

Fourthly, there is a „pay back” element in Russian general approach to frozen conflicts, revealing Moscow thinking about these conflicts in more general terms. Speaking at a press conference in January 2006, Vladimir Putin called for universal principles to settle the frozen conflicts: “We need common principles to find a fair solution to these problems for the benefit of all people living in conflict-stricken territories... If people believe that Kosovo can be granted full independence, why then should we deny it to Abkhazia and South Ossetia?”) (RFE/RL 2006). This line of argument became official Russian policy, and gained in legitimacy following Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008, and its subsequent recognition by a large number, predominantly western and pro-western countries (Wolff 2007).

It stands to reason that, so far, the ability to keep the protracted conflicts alive has served the aim of perpetuating Russian control and, in some cases, military presence in the territories of its Black Sea neighbors against the sovereign will and constitutional dispositions of the concerned countries. In this sense any further procrastination in conflict

resolution is a favorable outcome from the Russian point of view. And conversely, any sign of Russian intention to ‘unfreeze’ a conflict indicates a purposeful quest to obtain further advantages.

The Euro-Atlantic community will have to be more vigilant with regard to renewed Russian attempts to give a semblance of legitimacy to their otherwise unlawful military presence in parts of the wider Black Sea region. Taking advantage of the ‘conflict fatigue’ and the understandable desire to speed up the return to a relative state of normality on the part of some, mainly west European, political actors, *Russian diplomacy has been actively pushing various forms of ‘federalization’ in the countries (R. of Moldova and Ukraine) that are facing Moscow-sponsored separatism.* This is particularly evident in the insistence to legalize a ‘special status’ for separatist entities through constitutional amendments or other legal dispositions that would give them *de-facto* veto power over vital matters of foreign and security policy at a national level. The cases in point are Ukraine (enclaves of Donetsk and Lugansk) and the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria).

In this text we are not going to review the frozen conflicts (for a general presentation of the frozen conflicts see: Flikke and Godzimirski2006 and Popescu 2010), just to underline the main features of them, in order to illustrate the theoretical premises, which we just exposed.

Frozen conflicts: Nagorno-Karabakh



Map of the Conflict Zone in a Regional Context, [International Crisis Group](#), 2019

The current conflict has its roots in 1988 (see Introduction), when Karabakh demonstrators demanded the region join Armenia to create a unified, singular republic. These protests were followed by an Armenian government declaration on June 15, 1988, to accept Nagorno-Karabakh as a new province; however, this was immediately followed up by an Azeri vote reasserting ownership over the region. The movement turned violent by 1991 and full-scale war broke out in 1992. Both sides „committed human rights abuses, making the conflict notable for its large population movements, as refugee outflows shifted the overall ethnic balance of not only Nagorno-Karabakh, but also Azerbaijan and Armenia proper”. A ceasefire was signed in May 1994, but not before Karabakh Armenians were in control of 14% of Azerbaijan, including sharing a border with Armenia proper (Sprague 2015).

The OSCE Minsk Group (today co-chaired by France, the US and the Russian Federation) was launched in 1992 in an effort to find a peaceful settlement to the conflict. Over the last three decades there have been repeated efforts to find solutions, and many efforts have been made to cut through the Gordian knot of the conflict. The popular designation of Karabakh as a frozen conflict has been based upon „the absence of full-scale war, backed by conventional military deterrence and an arms race; and with a fragile self-regulation by the conflict parties. After the failure of so many peace initiatives, the ’international

community' increasingly seems to have opted for an approach to Karabakh focusing on conflict management and long-term peacebuilding" (Melvin 2014).

The elements of the status quo that has operated for the past two decades around Karabakh are, however, coming under increasing pressure: „a conflict that began in local ethnic and socio-economic issues, has increasingly taken on an inter-state character centered upon the rivalry between Armenia and Azerbaijan" (Ibid.).

Almost from the outset, Moscow has played a key role in the Karabakh conflict. Despite Armenia's decision to follow Russia's lead even on Ukraine, however, Russia appears to have signaled a readiness to rebalance its position between Yerevan and Baku by, for example, pursuing arms sales to Azerbaijan: just in 2013, media reports publicized the fact that Russia would sell weapons to Azerbaijan worth an estimated \$4 billion (Ibid.)

According to the International Crisis Group, in early 2019, progress to settle the issues seemed palpable. But the rapprochement has not led to renewed peace talks.

The principal problem, however, is that even if Baku is open to granting Nagorno-Karabakh considerable autonomy – many in Baku point to the Åland Islands, Northern Ireland and South Tyrol as examples – anything short of independence is unacceptable to Yerevan. The Armenian side rejects any plan in which Nagorno-Karabakh returns to Baku's direct control, whether in the short or long term. De facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh say they have built „a functional entity whose economy is growing despite political and legal pressure from Baku" (International Crisis Group, 2019).

In this respect, the Nagorno-Karabakh „frozen conflict" is very similar to the Transnistrian conflict in Republic of Moldova. The main purposes of Russia in the region are fulfilled: both Armenia and Azerbaidjan are caught in the conflict and unable to get out. *Any prospects for UE or NATO extension in the region (in 2013, Armenia announced the decision to seek accession to the Customs Union of Russia, and not to proceed with the EU Association Agreement) are ruled out.*

The frozen status of the conflict serves Russian strategy goals in a very effective way.

Frozen Conflicts in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia)



Separatist regions in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) ([Euractive](#)).

The conflicts related to the two separatist regions in Georgia – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – have their origins in Soviet and pre-Soviet politics in the (South) Caucasus. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia had enjoyed substantial autonomy throughout the Soviet period and even though the population of both regions was ethnically mixed, it was not until the late-1980s onwards that tensions emerged. However, since 1988, Georgia has experienced two violent ethnic conflicts, a short two-phase civil war (Cornell 2001) and a full-scale war with Russia (Asmus 2008).

The national movement in Georgia became radicalized after Soviet troops crushed a demonstration in April 1989. Calls for independence and the legal proclamation of Georgian as the only official language in August 1989 provide the background against which ethnic tensions escalated into full-scale violent conflict: while Georgians aimed to (re-) establish a national Georgian state, Abkhaz and South Ossetians wanted to preserve, and remain within, the Soviet Union and sought close cooperation with Russia (Wolff 2007).

The regions have been supported by Russia ever since.

South Ossetians belong to the same ethnic group as the people of North Ossetia (now an autonomous republic of Russia which is considered to be the indigenous homeland of Ossetians). South Ossetians „not only boycotted the political process in Georgia, but also declared their region’s independence, while Georgians effectively abolished South Ossetia’s autonomy with the proclamation of Georgia as an independent, unitary state with no

internal borders” (Ibid.). Tbilisi failed to restore full Georgian control over South Ossetia in the face of **well-organized, highly motivated and Russian-backed resistance**. The defeat of Georgian forces paved the way towards the OSCE-mediated Sochi Agreement of June 1992, which established a permanent ceasefire and a military exclusion zone. It was followed by the deployment of an OSCE Observer Mission and a Russia-led CIS peacekeeping force, as well as the creation of the so-called Joint Control Commission, „meant to facilitate cooperation between the sides on a day-to-day basis” (Ibid.).

In Abkhazia the geopolitical context was similar. Following Georgia’s declaration of independence in 1991, and the simultaneous abolition of Abkhazia’s autonomy, the Abkhaz immediately reinstated their 1925 constitution, defining it as an independent state united with Georgia on the basis of special union treaty and proceeded to declare their desire to leave Georgia and remain part of the Soviet Union/Russian Federation. This quickly escalated into open violence with Georgian forces. Backed by North Caucasian, in particular Chechen, fighters, as well as Russian air support (Wolff 2007), the Abkhaz quickly recaptured most of the territory initially lost. In May 1994 the Moscow Agreement established a permanent ceasefire line with military exclusion zones on either side. In parallel, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 854 establishing the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG). The Russia-dominated CIS also dispatched a peacekeeping force to the region.

Saakashvili’s ascent to power in 2003 created a new situation as the new president made restoration of full sovereignty across the entire territory of Georgia a key campaign promise (he had success in regaining the control over Adjara in April 2004). In August 2008, as tensions escalated between Tbilisi and both Tskhinvali (the capital of South Ossetia) and Moscow, fighting flared once again. Before the five-day war was over, Russia had deployed naval, ground and air forces deep into Georgia (Asmus 2008).

After the five-day war Moscow recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent. Moscow raised the issue of Kosovo as a precedent for international recognition of Abkhazia as early as 2006.

The current Georgian government has responded with what it calls “strategic patience” (Vartanyan 2020). This posture is linked to a 2012 decision by Georgia’s leadership to normalize relations with Russia. The normalisation decision „has led to a modest increase in trade and greater cultural exchange between the two countries”. It has also led Tbilisi to mitigate sources of friction that could undermine the normalisation process. Consequently, the Georgian government „has not attempted to stop efforts at **borderisation** (a

borderisation policy seeks to entrench the separation of the breakaway regions from Georgia, severing many ethnic Georgians from family, essential services and livelihoods) – in fact, it has even disrupted protests by its own citizens against Russia’s actions” (Ibid. 2020).

To understand Russian goals, we have to understand Russia’s outside role and presence in the two breakaway regions.

The main objectives Russia sought to achieve were geopolitical, including „transforming Georgia into an unsuccessful model of state consolidation, political democratization, and economic development and thereby discouraging other post-Soviet states from emulating Tbilisi's pro-Western path... Terminating Georgia's progress toward NATO inclusion... Applying pressure on neighboring states inhabited by Russian minorities or embroiled in separatist disputes (including Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Republic of Moldova)” (Bugajski 2010). According to the former Assistant Deputy Secretary of State Ronald Asmus, „it was a conflict that was prepared and planned for some time by Moscow, part of a broader strategy to send a message to the United States: that Russia is going to flex its muscle in the twenty-first century” (Asmus 2008).

If covert Russian support was crucial prior to the 2008 war, since then, Moscow’s overt political, military and financial assistance has become yet more central to the way in which both Abkhazia and South Ossetia function. Russian border guards control the lines that separate both regions from the rest of Georgia. Russia also has military bases in both regions with missile installations, which have extended the reach of its military over much of the Black Sea coast (Vartanyan 2020; on Russian-Georgia relations see Japaridze 2014).

Republic of Moldova (The Transnistrian conflict)



Republic of Moldova, including Transnistria (Source: www.blackseanews.net)

Beginning as the Soviet Union was collapsing (see Introduction), the Transnistrian conflict originally „pitted pro-Romanian forces on the right bank of the Dniestr River against left-bank separatists who identified with their Soviet heritage” (Remler 2013). Russian military forces stationed in the region sided with the separatists in the brief armed phase of the conflict in 1992, after which most of the left bank plus the key right-bank city of Bender ended up in the self-proclaimed “Transnistrian Moldavian Republic.” In fact, it was not only a regional conflict, but also an inter- state conflict (Russia/Republic of Moldova), and *a geopolitical conflict*. .

There have been no armed clashes in Transnistria since 1992. This has reduced the urgency of a settlement both for the parties to the conflict and for the international community. Still, there is no shortage of would-be peacemakers. Since there are few ethnic or religious differences separating the two sides, „neophytes often believe this is the easiest of all frozen conflicts to resolve—the “low-hanging fruit” that might provide a mediator with a quick and easy accomplishment” (Remler 2013).

Yet psychological divisions running throughout Moldova are deep. In 1919, present-day right-bank Moldova became part of Romania, and the present-day left bank ended up in Soviet Ukraine where a rump Moldovan Soviet republic was established. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a treaty of military support and territorial division between Germany and the Soviet Union, gave the right bank to the USSR in 1940. Present-day inhabitants of Moldova whose families were persecuted by the Romanians who recaptured „Bessarabia”

in 1941 tend to be pro-Soviet in outlook. By contrast, those whose families were persecuted by the Soviets (in 1940 or when they returned in 1944) tend to have a more nationalistic pro-Romanian outlook. These are not religious or ethnic differences (Romanians versus „Moldovans”), but they are every bit as real (Ibid.; on Republic of Moldova identity see Dungaciu 2015).

In Transnistria, the identity issue was far more complicated. The term "Transnistria" or "localities on the left bank of the Dniester", according to the official name of this territory in the governmental documents of the Republic of Moldova, refers to the territory established in 1990 as an internationally unrecognized region with administrative headquarters in the capital city of Tiraspol. In 1989, the structure of the population in Transnistria was: Moldovans/Romanians 39,3%, Ukrainians 28,3%, Russians 25,5%. In fact, the control held in the region by the institutions of the Republic of Moldova as well as its political presence in the public life of Transnistria are close to none.. According to the preliminary data of the Transnistrian population census carried out by the unrecognized authorities in Transnistria in 2015, the total population of Transnistria was 475,373 people and the total population at the end of 2017 would be 469,000 after estimates made according to the latest Census of 2015 (the Statistical Yearbook of the MMR Statistics Service, 2017). In 2015, the largest ethnic groups in 2015 were 161,300 Russians (34%), 156,600 Romanians/Moldovans (33%), and 126,700 Ukrainians (26.7%) (on perceptions of the people living in Transnistria, see Cojocari, Dungaciu, Cupcea 2019).

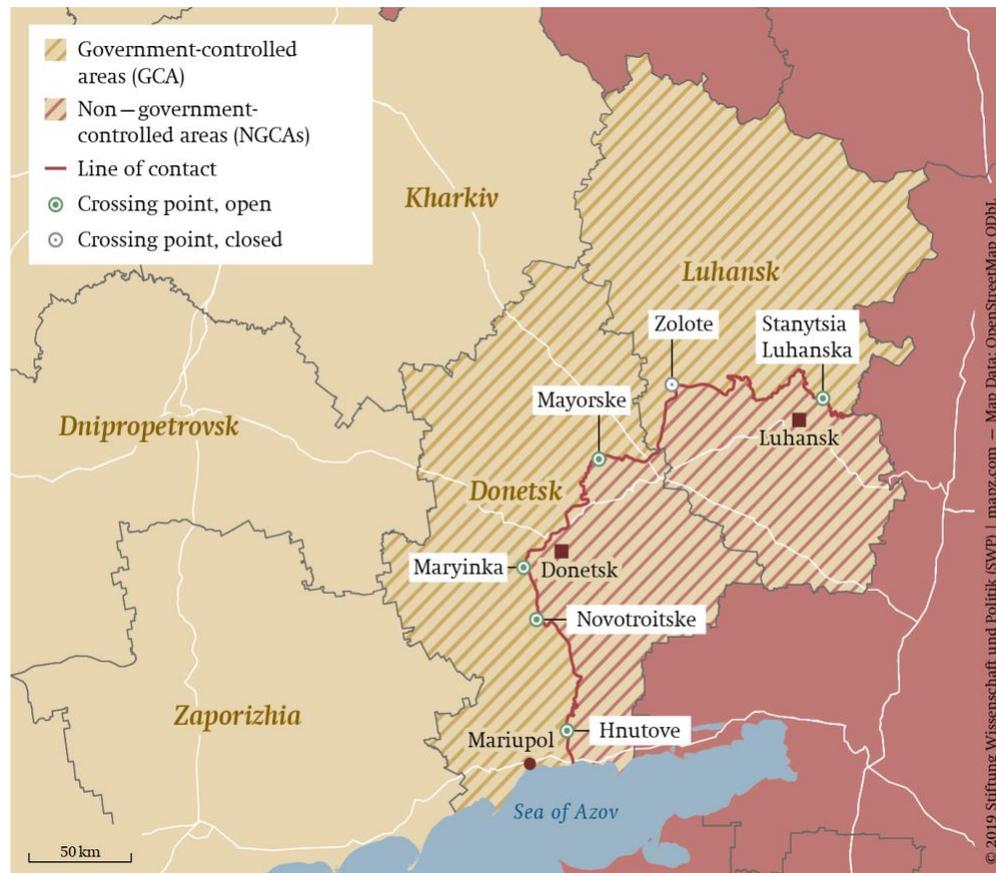
Each side wants peace–on its own terms. As in other protracted conflicts, although the sides may hope that the conflict will be resolved, after almost thirty years without a settlement they no longer expect it to happen anytime soon and have adapted to that expectation. As a consequence, both sides view negotiations not as a process leading to a solution but as an opportunity for short-term political gains over their opponent.

The result of such a strategy is predictable: official negotiations in the “5+2” format – which brings together the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Russia, Ukraine, the EU, and the United States plus the two sides in the conflict – were devoted to fostering informal talks and trying to turn them into renewed official negotiations.

Ukraine and the Minsk Agreements as a representative case of Russian approach to frozen conflicts

There are two „frozen conflicts” in Ukraine – the DNR and LNR; Crimea has also resulted in a conflict at the higher strategic level, with huge implications for Russia’s relations with

other powers that have introduced sanctions against Russia, but Crimea cannot be considered, in our understanding, as „frozen conflict”.



Source:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2019 (https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/assets/Research_Paper/2019RP05/images/2019RP05_fhs_002.png)

While there are similarities between Transnistria, Abkhazia and the current war in Donbass, where the unrecognized Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic – backed by Russia – have taken *de facto* control of areas in the Donbass region in eastern Ukraine, the conflict in Donbass is not a frozen conflict yet as ceasefire violations are keeping the fighting at a low tempo. However, we predict a frozen future for this conflict as well. In fact, the strategies used by Russia and the main strategic goals are similar to those Russia sought to achieve in Transnistria, Abkhazia or South Ossetia – the geopolitical ones (See theoretical Introduction).

The first Minsk Agreement that was to put an end to the crisis in Ukraine was signed in early September 2014. In February 2015, Germany's Angela Merkel and France's François

Hollande stepped in to put an end to the phase of this bloody conflict, brokering a “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”, known as Minsk II. The product of a marathon all-night negotiating session, Minsk II offered a detailed roadmap for resolving the conflict. The 13 point-plan began with a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front lines, to be monitored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Ukraine promised to implement constitutional changes to provide for “decentralisation”; in exchange, all “foreign armed formations” were to be withdrawn and Ukraine would regain control of its state borders.

Ukraine insisted on a full ceasefire before moving forward with the political elements of the deal. Russia, in turn, accused Ukraine of failing to fulfill its political promises. Domestically Ukraine’s former president, Petro Poroshenko, faced staunch resistance to an agreement that grants Moscow most of what it wanted, saddling Kiev with responsibility for the separatist territories while giving them enough autonomy to hinder Ukraine’s Western integration.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have proposed in 2019 to resurrect the Normandy format (Russia, Germany, France, Ukraine) at the level of heads of state and governments, after more than two years of inactivity. It was obvious that – at least – the French president regarded Ukraine’s presidential election as “opening a window of opportunity” for the Minsk and Normandy processes to advance along those lines. Merkel, Macron, and a lame-duck Poroshenko all agreed that a Normandy summit should convene in France in early June 2019, on the fifth anniversary of the creation of this format, but the planned meeting was postponed and took place in Paris in December 2019, with the newly elected Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky replacing Petro Poroshenko. However, the conflict in Ukraine is far from being resolved as the positions of negotiating parties seem to be irreconcilable.

- First, all parties seem to agree that “the Minsk agreements do not work”. One reason they do not work the way Moscow designed them against Ukraine, is because Ukraine, apparently, has immunized itself militarily, legally and politically from those “agreements”’ destructive potential.
- Secondly, Russia fiercely defends the system of Minsk “agreements” and forums because this system helps to preserve Russia’s gains in Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions.
- By the logic and sequence of steps proposed, Ukraine was to make pre-emptive, irreversible sacrifices of sovereignty, without any assurance that Russian forces would withdraw or that the two armed “people’s republics” would abdicate.

What does Russia want when dealing with frozen conflicts in general and in Republic Moldova and Ukraine („near abroad”)

As I have mentioned before, these conflicts are located in the post-Soviet space/near abroad where Russia still wants to have a say and influence in order to prevent other actors from filling this space. Russia wants to control frozen conflicts because this control gives Moscow an impression of controlling the states where these conflicts are located and thus have them included into a sort of Russian sphere of influence and interests. This will serve Russia's two other strategic objectives – securing of the country's borders and preventing others from filling the strategic space Russia's deems its own exclusive zone of influence and interests. This strategic logic has been clear in Russia's dealing with frozen conflicts in the whole post-Soviet period and is still clearly visible in Russian approach to those conflicts today, also in the context of Minsk agreements.

This examination of Russian policy towards the frozen conflicts needs also to take into consideration the Russian costs-benefits calculation. It is important to see what is the Russian understanding of the costs of such a policy for Russia and the benefits Russian can achieve by conducting such a policy. RAND Corporation report ([Radin and Reach 2017](#)) examining Russian views of the current international order provides some interesting clues on these questions. The main conclusion is that Russia's underlying foreign policy interests „have remained relatively consistent since the end of the Cold War”. These interests „include maintaining Russia's territorial integrity, preserving the regime, exercising dominance within Russia's “near abroad” (meaning Russia's perceived sphere of influence, which Russian analysts characterize as the former Soviet Union minus the Baltic states), securing noninterference in domestic affairs as a fundamental principle of global governance, and pursuing political and economic cooperation as a partner equal to other great powers” (Ibid. ix).

How this examination of Russian strategic objectives can help understand Russian policies towards the frozen conflicts in Ukraine and Republic of Moldova, that need to be interpreted in the broader context of debate on Russia's exercise of power in the “near abroad”?

1. First, holding on to Transnistria as a potential military outpost in the rear of Ukraine, as well as a potential base for “transnistrianization” of Moldova through some form of federalization can help Russia achieve some of the objectives. Transnistria has no serious military value against either Ukraine or Moldova at present, but this might change in the future, if Russia sets its sights on nearby Odessa again, as it did in 2014. However, Transnistria may prove its value to Russia at some future time, only if

Western diplomacy remains complacent about removing Russia's residual military presence, and if Western diplomacy cooperates with Russia (as it intermittently attempts) toward devising some "special status" for Transnistria. Such "special status" could provide Russia with a dual-use weapon against Moldova in Transnistria and against Ukraine in Donbas.

2. Russia wants to be reassured that Republic of Moldova and Ukraine would not engage in close cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in any form. NATO helping Moldova to dispose of expired, toxic pesticide stocks, or Moldovan platoon-size units rotating as peacekeepers in the Balkans, are acceptable to Russia, but . ammunition disposal in Kolbasna should be treated as the internal business of Pridnestrovie and Russia.
3. Third, Russia wants to preclude any form of political unification of Moldova with Romania. The balance of political forces and public opinion in Moldova (maximum 20 percent for unification) practically guarantee non-unification with Romania in the foreseeable future; and neither is Romania keen on this score (let alone the West). But Russia wants non-unification forever and hopes to see Moldova's political system reconfigured by conferring blocking power to Russia-friendly forces.
4. Russia's concept of "permanently guaranteed neutrality" is central to this agenda. Republic of Moldova is a neutral state under its own constitution, but Russia seeks additional guarantees – both internal and external ones – to deprive Republic of Moldova of its freedom of choice in the future.
5. As far as Ukraine is concerned, the shutting trap consists of Kyiv's unilateral concessions to Moscow (to legalize the Steinmeier Formula, to accept a permanent "special status" for the Donetsk-Luhansk territory under Russian control).
6. The final document of the Normandy summit in Paris (2019), "Common Agreed Conclusions," heavily favours Russia: "The Minsk agreements continue to be the basis of the work of the Normandy format, whose member states are committed to their full implementation."; A full ceasefire all along the frontline is to be introduced before the end of this year (2019). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Special Monitoring Mission (OSCE SMM) shall monitor the ceasefire, "using its mandate to the full extent and receiving safe access throughout the territory" (diplomatic allusions to Russia and its proxies restricting the SMM's operations systematically for the last five years); The four leaders "express interest" in agreeing, within the Normandy format and the Minsk Contact Group, all the legal aspects of the permanent "special status" of the Donetsk-Luhansk territories, in accordance with the Minsk "agreement." And the four leaders "consider it necessary to incorporate the 'Steinmeier formula' into the Ukrainian legislation." (Socor 2019).

7. The Paris summit has shown that Ukraine remains basically isolated in the Normandy format. The summit's decisions, however, fully contradict the positions that Zelenskyy embraced in line with Ukraine's interests and tried to defend at the Paris summit (Socor 2019).
8. The truth is that, today, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine are in a weak position for negotiation, with Russia that wants to take advantage of the context. By making concessions at the level of the "small steps" in Republic of Moldova (vehicle registration plates, different telephone codes, accreditation of the "State" University of Tiraspol degrees, etc.), the Republic of Moldova will only affect the context in which it will negotiate the political and security aspects. To make concessions now means to affect Transnistria's political status in the future, because the measures accepted today are part of the future „special status" of the region. Plus, the negotiation 5 + 2 is done at the same time with the negotiations between Kiev and Moscow held on the status of Donbas. *Any concession made by Chişinău will affect Kiev and vice versa. Russia is waiting for the weakest link to break so as to accept an "extended autonomy" (meaning federalization) in Donbas or Transnistria, in order to apply the pattern to its neighbor as well.*

Can Ukraine and Republic of Moldova „reintegrate" the separatist regions? A reckoning



Disputed territories in the former USRR (Source: [BBC](#)).

1. The economic dimension of the „frozen conflicts" is also important. „Federalization" will allow Russia to end financial support for Transnistria (just as it would no longer pay for Donbas were it to obtain federalization there too), which is an important issue under the circumstances in which Moscow also has to economically manage

the crisis in the Russian Federation, Crimea's integration, and intervention in Syria. Additionally, considering the debt of over USD 6 billion for gas Transnistria has to pay to Russia, debt which would thus be paid from the Republic of Moldova's account, any shred of Chişinău's autonomy would completely disappear.

2. Kiev has repeatedly insisted that the Donbass must, and will, be brought back into the Ukrainian fold. But the consequences of this gift would be ugly. Kiev would likely face an all-out war with the abandoned separatists, one that it would probably win, but then have to follow with enormous investments to fix the devastated region and try to win the hearts and minds of its anti-Kiev population. Estimates of how much it would cost to undo the damage done by Russia start at \$20 billion, according to economist Anders Åslund; Ukraine's entire budget amounts to about \$26 billion (Åslund 2015).
3. No less debilitating for Ukraine would be the political consequences of reintegrating the occupied Donbass. Several million anti-Western voters would be brought into the fold, to vote against Ukraine's pro-Western reforms. The pro-Russian political forces that ruled and still rule the region would get a second life. And the oligarchs and thieves who mismanaged the Donbass for decades would return to power. The Donbass would then play the same retrograde role it has played in Ukrainian politics since independence in 1991. Political tensions would increase, East-West polarization would return, Kiev would be rendered politically and economically impotent, and Putin would have achieved what he wanted all along – a thoroughly unstable Ukraine, minus the cost of funding a low-level conflict in an economically doomed enclave.
4. The „nuclear solution” is this: Faced with Moscow's pressures, and not only those, Ukraine and Republic of Moldova should stop any negotiation with Russia, aware that nothing good can come from it. Ukraine and the Republic of Moldavia must be offensive, not defensive, and not allow Russia to gain ground, at the negotiation table, and in the political file, after winning the military one. This can take place *by declaring Donbas and Transnistria territories occupied by Russia and establishing a dividing line/administrative border which separates the territories occupied by Russia from the rest of the territory*. Neither the Republic of Moldavia nor Ukraine has the force to deal with these territories. They should leave them – without recognizing them or giving them up! – to the management of Russia. Let the Russian Federation pay and maintain them, not be controlled politically by Moscow (and through them control both states) and be financed by Chişinău, Kiev, the EU or the USA.

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