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Soldiers from the breakaway province of Nagorno-Karabakh patrol trenches at the frontline with Azerbaijan in July 2012.

Post-Soviet Frozen Conflicts

The world continues to seek peaceful settlements of regional stalemates

By *per Concordiam* Staff

As the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia prepared to meet in Kazan, Russia, there was cautious optimism that real peace might finally be within reach for the breakaway province of Nagorno-Karabakh. After a round of friendly handshakes and photos for the press, summit host and then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev led Armenian President Serzh Sargsian and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev into the conference room. It was June 25, 2011 – 23 years after fighting between ethnic Armenian separatists and Azerbaijani forces began in the waning years of the Soviet Union – and expectations soared that parties would take their first substantial steps toward a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. But a few hours later, the delegates re-emerged with no agreement. The conflict drags on, unresolved, as do similar conflicts in Moldova and Georgia.

As the Soviet Union disintegrated from 1989 to 1992, several small wars broke out among ethnic minority populations demanding independence from states newly independent of Moscow. Some historians have noted that no large empire had ever broken up with as little bloodshed as the USSR, but in these hot spots, there was more than a little bloodshed. Professor Charles King of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., dubbed the conflicts "the war of Soviet succession."

In addition to Nagorno-Karabakh, Moldova's region of Transnistria and two Georgian provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, remain locked in a state of "frozen conflict" with the post-Soviet countries under whose nominal sovereignty they fall. To most of the world, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain recognized territories of Azerbaijan, Moldova and Georgia, respectively. But each has declared its independence and established de-facto elected governments, though all remain at least partially dependent on support from foreign sources, mostly Russia. "The existing status quo of 'no peace, no war' permits the consolidation of the separatist regimes, encouraging their transformation into effectively independent state-like structures," says Cesclav Ciobanu, a former Moldovan deputy foreign minister, who acted as an envoy for former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the early days of the Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts.

Weak governments and corruption have allowed traffickers of weapons, drugs and humans to make safe havens in parts of these separatist territories. In 2008, Yulia Latynina, a columnist for Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* noted: "South Ossetia is not a territory, not a country, not a regime. It is a joint venture of *siloviki* [slang for Russian security services] generals and Ossetian bandits for making money in a conflict with Georgia." The territories will continue to be more vulnerable to organized crime activities until the conflicts are settled, allowing for the establishment of international security standards and governance based on the rule of law.

Joseph Stalin: Map-maker

All of the conflicts are rooted in Soviet nationalities policy from the Stalin era. Artificial borders were drawn, splitting ethnic groups and combining some with others. In some cases, entire ethnic populations were forcibly transferred to Siberia or Central Asia and not allowed to return until Nikita Khrushchev overturned the deportation orders following Stalin's death. The policy was meant to weaken nationalist and ethnic ties and foster loyalty to the multinational Soviet state. Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms merely broke the seal on long existing conflicts without creating the means to resolve them peacefully. In addition to these frozen conflicts, Soviet era border drawing is responsible for tensions between Russia and Ukraine over the Crimean Peninsula and part of eastern Ukraine, and the nationalities policy also led to separatists conflicts within the Russian Federation's North Caucasus republics.

Russia helped negotiate the cease-fires and deployed "peacekeeping" troops to Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 1992-93, though Moldova and Georgia have long considered their presence an occupation of their sovereign territory. Russia still holds the key to peaceful resolution of the conflicts, even if unable to enforce resolution. The separatist regimes in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia rely heavily on Russian economic and military support. Armenia fills this role for Nagorno-Karabakh, but relies heavily itself on its military alliance with Russia as a deterrent to a renewal of hostilities by Azerbaijan. The cease-fires have held, but there has been scant progress towards resolving the conflicts. As Dmitri Trenin, director of Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in his book *Post-Imperium*: "With regard to Transnistria, as in the case of Georgia and in Ukraine … Moscow was using the frozen conflicts as obstacles to NATO enlargement (for Georgia and Ukraine) or absorption by a NATO country (Romania, in the case of Moldova)." In the meantime, entrenched interests and nationalist sentiment have hardened on all sides, making even peace negotiations politically risky at times, and the separatist regimes are increasingly reluctant to surrender their growing independence, even to their patrons in Moscow.

Nagorno-Karabakh

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the first, the longest and the bloodiest of the ethnic/separatist conflicts of the Soviet break-up, with an estimated death toll ranging from 15,000 to 30,000, depending on the source, and hundreds of thousands more displaced. The region's predominantly Armenian population demanded unification with Armenia and armed conflict began in 1988 – three years before the USSR's final death throes – when the region's parliament voted to secede from Azerbaijan. Soviet authorities struggled to contain the fighting, and when Azerbaijan became independent with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh declared its independence. In an interview with Russian news agency RIA Novosti, Armenian President Sargsian opined that the outbreak of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh triggered the disintegration of the Soviet Union, even if it wasn't the cause.

The conflict escalated as both sides acquired heavy weapons from Soviet army depots. By mid-1993, Armenian and Karabakh forces had driven Azeri forces out of Nagorno-Karabakh and all or parts of seven adjacent Azeri districts, creating a buffer zone linking Karabakh to Armenia. Russia brokered a cease-fire in 1994. It has held, though there have been frequent and deadly cease-fire violations by both sides over the years.

Attempts to establish lasting peace have been led by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States, but have so far failed. Nagorno-Karabakh says it wants to maintain de-facto independence, but most ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia proper hope for eventual unification. Azerbaijan won't offer more than autonomy. Ciobanu noted that in 1987, before fighting began, both sides were open to a territorial exchange that could have headed off conflict. But Soviet

Four Post-Soviet Frozen Conflicts

Population

Moldova	3.56 million*
Transnistria	523,000**
Georgia	4.49 million*
Abkhazia	216,000**
South Ossetia	70,000**
Azerbaijan	9.02 million*
Nagorno-Karabakh	145,000**
Armenia	3.1 million*

*2011 World Bank estimate

**2011 UNHCR Freedom in the World Report

Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan population estimates are without breakaway territories.

Contested Area

PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

authorities refused to consider any change of republic borders, seeing it as pandering to nationalism, which they feared would lead to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Early 2012 saw an escalation in deadly cease-fire violations along the "line of contact" and Azerbaijan has been spending heavily from its newfound energy wealth to upgrade its military. Periodic aggressive statements out of Baku do little to reassure, as demonstrated by the June 2012 claim of Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister Ali Gasanov that the armed forces "are ready to clear Nagorno-Karabakh of its 'Armenian occupiers' anytime."

The failure of the Kazan peace initiative, where Azerbaijan declined to sign even a prearranged agreement forswearing the use of force, worries international observers. Lawrence Sheets of the International Crisis Group says the status quo is not an option and the opposing forces will need to reach a compromise or face "more intense violence, raising the danger of dragging in regional heavyweights" Russia, Turkey and Iran. Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers met again in June 2012, under the auspices of the Minsk Group, but agreed only to keep negotiating.

Transnistria

The territory of Transnistria occupies a thin, 100-kilometer-long strip of land that runs along the left bank of the Dniester River, separating it from the rest of Moldova. Transnistria literally means "land across the Dniester." The region declared independence from Moldova in 1990 in response to increased Moldovan nationalism and fears by the primarily Russian and Ukrainian inhabitants that ethnic Romanian Moldova would break from the Soviet Union and reunite with Romania, from which it was separated by the Soviets following World War II. Transnistria, previously part of Ukraine, was attached to the post-war Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

Small scale fighting broke out in 1991 when local militias seized control of state institutions and escalated when the newly formed Moldovan army tried to retake control by force in 1992. Soviet troops stationed in the region intervened and quickly ended the fighting, solidifying the position of the separatists. Russian troops continue to enforce a demilitarized buffer zone. The death toll was light compared to other conflicts, with 300 to 700 people killed.

Despite the ethnic aspect of the separation, Ciobanu said Transnistria is unique among the frozen conflicts, as it "from the very beginning was of a political and not of an ethnic character." Economics was the primary reason Moldovan leaders couldn't bear to part with Transnistria. The region was highly industrialized during the Soviet era, and accounted for a huge part of Moldova's economy. The separatists' primary motivation was to remain within the

Soviet Union. Transnistria has remained so firmly rooted in Soviet identity that it has been referred to as an open-air museum of the Soviet Union. Soviet history and geography are taught in its schools and the national flag and symbols still bear the hammer and sickle.

Resolution of the Transnistria conflict has been painstaking. In April 2012, both sides agreed to "principles and procedures" for further negotiations, scheduled for July at the next regular OSCE meeting. The talks are under the auspices of the "5 + 2 Group," consisting of Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, with the U.S. and European Union as observers. Progress may be attributed to the election of pro-European reformer Vlad Filat as prime minister of Moldova and the December 2011 election of reformer Yevgeny Shevchuk as president of Transnistria, replacing the 20-year, Soviet-style rule of Igor Smirnov, though Shevchuk remains a strong supporter of Transnistrian independence and close integration with Russia.

In contrast to Nagorno-Karabakh, the Transnistria conflict has fewer flashpoints. While there have been minor confrontations, and each side still controls territory claimed by the other, these have not escalated into violence. As Moldova looks to move toward greater European integration, the recent progress may eventually result in a peaceful resolution.

Abkhazia

Fighting began in Abkhazia in 1992 following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Abkhazia had not voted for independence yet, and the majority of its population at the time was ethnic Georgians, but the Abkhaz and Russian population was increasingly vociferous about breaking away from Georgia. Georgia's newly independent – and nationalistic – government sent security forces to establish their authority. After heavy fighting, Georgian forces were driven from the region by the end of 1993. The fighting cost an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 lives. A formal declaration of independence came in 1999. The conflict remained frozen, with frequent contact between the parties and an agreement foreswearing the use of force, until the Russia-Georgia war of August 2008, when Abkhaz forces, backed by Russia, took advantage of the conflict over South Ossetia to push remaining Georgian forces out of Abkhazia.

Georgia's historical claims on Abkhazia are based on Abkhazia having been part of an ancient Georgian kingdom, and more recently, Abkhazia's inclusion in the short-lived Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921) before it was conquered by the Bolsheviks. Georgia has offered Abkhazia wide autonomy in a unified federal state, but the Abkhaz insist on maintaining de-facto independence. In June 2012, Abkhazia accused Georgia of instigating "terrorist activities" inside Abkhazia.

A commission counts ballots for Abkhazia's presidential elections in Machara in August 2011. Georgia considers the election illegitimate.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Georgian soldiers hold flags honoring colleagues who died fighting in South Ossetia.

EPA

Russia recognized Abkhaz independence following the 2008 war and maintains military peacekeepers in the region, as well as providing extensive economic support. Like in Transnistria and South Ossetia, Russia attempts to influence the politics and lobbies strongly for its favored politicians. However, unlike the other regions, Abkhazia has resisted too much Russian interference as a violation of sovereignty. Given the recent hostilities and Abkhazia's determination to remain independent, most observers see little chance of Abkhaz reintegration into Georgia in the near future.

South Ossetia

The first ethnic violence in South Ossetia broke out in 1989 as Georgians, angry that South Ossetia had asked the Soviet government to change its status to a Soviet Republic separate from Georgia, clashed with Ossetian nationalists. The violence escalated in 1991 and continued for a year until a cease-fire was signed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze after the deaths of more than 1,000. In 1992, South Ossetia voted to secede from Georgia and requested integration into the Russian Federation and union with the Russian republic of North Ossetia. The cease-fire generally held until 2004, when hostilities erupted briefly after new Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili undermined the South Ossetian de-facto government in an attempt to force resolution of the conflict and bring the province back into Georgia. A new cease-fire ended the fighting, which generally held until the Russia-Georgia war of 2008.

This frozen conflict flared up most recently when Georgian forces entered South Ossetia in August 2008. Russia responded quickly and forcefully, driving the Georgians from the province and even threatening the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. Georgia claimed it took action to thwart attacks against their forces by South Ossetian militia, but these claims were judged to be unsubstantiated by an international commission assigned by the Council of Europe. Several hundred Georgians, Ossetians and Russian soldiers were killed in the five-day war.

As with Abkhazia, Russia (and four other states) recognized South Ossetia as an independent nation following the war. Russia has deployed a large peacekeeping force and allocated millions of euros for rebuilding and economic development. Russia has substantial political influence, and most South Ossetians favor eventual integration into Russia.

The price of peace

More than 20 years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, these four conflicts remain unresolved and all could erupt into armed conflict, as the 2008 war in South Ossetia demonstrated. Some of the regions are more stable than others. Transnistria and Moldova, for example, appear to be making real progress toward peace. Alternately, trenches full of soldiers surround Nagorno-Karabakh, and sporadic but frequent clashes could explode into outright war. Continuation of frozen conflicts hampers regional development, trade and economic growth, making losers of all parties.

Russia has always been best positioned to help resolve the conflicts peacefully. However, some accuse Russia of encouraging and supporting separatists for geopolitical gain, especially in Georgia and Moldova. Russia's position is complicated by its own running separatist conflicts in the North Caucasus. International observers wonder how Russia can support independence for Abkhazia or Transnistria if the same principles don't apply to Chechnya or Dagestan.

The international community has maintained a policy of territorial integrity, but also adheres to the democratic principle of self-determination. In these breakaway provinces, these two important principles of international law don't always mesh, especially when borders were drawn by a totalitarian state as part of a "divide and rule" philosophy. To find peace, regional leaders and international facilitators, including the EU, Russia and the U.S., will need to compromise to find a balance acceptable to all parties. As Albert Einstein once said: "Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding." □

The topic of frozen conflicts was previously addressed in per Concordiam Vol. 1 Issue 2.