Disruptive Element: Frozen Conflicts and the CDRN

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the four separatist territories that make up the Community for Democracy and Rights of Nations and how they derail the western integration efforts of their parent states. This piece touches on the major geopolitical players in the former Soviet Union, the origin of four frozen conflicts and the bureaucratic complications caused by the separatist regions.

About the Author

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Introduction

Relations between Russia and the western world have deteriorated rapidly over the past decade. Policy makers have found themselves at odds with the Russian Federation over numerous issues – from political developments in the middle east to concerns over human rights and civil liberties. Among the many topics that divide Russia and the western world, the eastern expansion of NATO and the European Union remains one of the largest. As of today, four countries within the former Soviet Union have expressed deep interest in joining both NATO and the EU. While different in culture, language and religion they share one common trait: the presence of frozen conflicts within their borders. In this piece I will be examining the way that frozen conflicts have complicated and delayed the EU and NATO integration procedure for these countries and the role that Russia plays in this process.

Bloc Politics

When studying political developments in the former Soviet Union it's critical to understand the role of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). IGOs are a vehicle for cooperation between independent states and can cover a wide variety of policy areas, from collective security to economic cooperation. Membership in an IGO also indicates a greater alignment to a set of ideas or practices.

NATO/EU

The European Union and NATO are important players in the former Soviet Union. The EU and NATO cover different policy areas but feature a large overlap in membership. NATO is a defensive alliance created during the Cold War. Over the past 20 years, NATO has gradually evolved its mission of collective security to include components of peacekeeping and counter terror operations. The European Union is the product of decades of cooperation between Western European countries. The EU functions as a monetary union, a single economic market and a tool for united European foreign policy. Membership in the EU or NATO shows a conformity to western values and cooperation with western leadership. As of now, the European Union and NATO have expanded to include almost all former members of the Warsaw Pact, three former members of the Soviet Union and several Yugoslav republics.

EEU

The Eurasian Economic Union is an organization similar to the European Union. Like the European Union, the EEU seeks to form a single market among its members and coordinate both economic activity and foreign policy. Where the EEU and EU differ is in their leadership and the dynamic between their members. The EEU is composed of four countries - Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. When looking at these four countries we can see Russia's absolute advantage over the other members. Russia is not only the largest in terms of size and population but also in economic and military might. In comparison, power is much more evenly distributed throughout European Union -while Germany may lead the group in economic strength, France and the United Kingdom have a larger foreign policy influence.

GUAM

Officially known as the "GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development", GUAM is a regional IGO of states aspiring for EU and NATO membership. The name is an acronym of its members - Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. GUAM's function is similar to the Visegrad 4 and Baltic Council - to promote regional cooperation during western integration. An example of GUAM cooperation would be the establishment of the Transcaspian trade route. All members of GUAM are pursuing EU-associate status. EU association is not full membership (nor is it a guarantee of future membership) but rather an elevated diplomatic status. EU associates are considered a component of the EU's united foreign policy and are compatible with the EU customs standards and industry regulations.

CDRN

The CDRN is one of the lesser known IGOs in the former Soviet Union. It's membership is made up of unrecognized breakaway states locked in frozen conflicts. Conflicts are deemed frozen when there is no discernible end in sight yet the intensity of combat has significantly decreased. Because the CDRN's members are not recognized by the United Nations and have no formal diplomatic ties to any country the organization acts as the only avenue of international cooperation. Examples of cooperation between CDRN members includes the establishment of a visa regime for CDRN citizens and joint declarations of mutual defense in case of attack. It's worth noting that all members of the CDRN are locked in frozen conflicts against GUAM members.

Conflicts in Context

The frozen conflicts that created the breakaway states of CDRN began during the turbulent years during the collapse of the Soviet Union. The main players in these frozen

conflicts are the newly created post-Soviet states, the ethnic minorities within them and the Russian Federation.

Abkhazia

Abkhazia is located in the northwest part of Georgia. It is flush with the Russian Federation's border and is on the eastern half of the Black Sea. Abkhazia is the home of the Abkhaz people and spent much of its time in the Soviet Union as an autonomous oblast. The first conflict between the Georgians and the Abkhazians began between 1992 and 1993. After years of tensions between Georgians and Abkhazians, Abkhaz separatists declared themselves independent and began organizing themselves for armed rebellion with the intent of creating an independent Abkhaz state. Georgia responded with a counter-attack and planned to retake the territory. Georgia struggled to regain the separatist lands and eventually called upon the OSCE and international community to mediate some sort of ceasefire. While officially neutral in the conflict, Human Rights Watch has found significant evidence that shows unofficial Russian support for Abkhaz separatists in the form of weapons and Russian irregular volunteers (HRW). As of now, Abkhazia is considered an autonomous region of Georgia with its own functioning government in Sukhumi.

South Ossetia

South Ossetia is located in the northernmost part of central Georgia. It is inhabited by native Ossetians and Russians. The territory known as "North Ossetia" is located in the Russian Federation. South Ossetia was considered an autonomous Oblast during the Soviet Union but was administered by the Georgian SSR. In 1990, South Ossetia declared it's independence from Georgia. Georgia refused to recognize any sort of independence from the region and considered

such a declaration to be an infringement of its sovereignty. While the USSR (and later Russian Federation) proclaimed neutrality during the conflict, some Georgian reports show overt signs of Russian intervention in support of the Ossetian separatists. Eventually, a ceasefire was brokered between the Georgians and South Ossetians with a status of semi-autonomy granted to the contested territory. Part of this deal included the creation and deployment of a multinational peacekeeping brigade in South Ossetia. During the 2008 surge of fighting between the Georgian military and Ossetian fighters, the Russian Federation intervened in support of the Ossetians and launched a counterattack against Georgia.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Unlike the other breakaway states of the CDRN, Nagorno-Karabakh does not border Russia nor does it contain a significant amount of Russian speakers. Nagorno-Karabakh was an autonomous oblast located within Azerbaijan with an Armenian majority. It's separated from Armenia by a thin strip of Azeri territory. While autonomous the area was considered a part of Azerbaijan. During the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Nagorno-Karabakh declared itself independent from Azerbaijan and voiced its intent to integrate into Armenia-proper. Azerbaijan refused to recognize this declaration. After months of mounting tensions, the Armenian military launched an offensive to connect Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. The following war between Armenian-backed separatists and Azerbaijan nearly escalated into an interstate conflict. Eventually, the OSCE brokered a tense ceasefire and a peacekeeping mission was established. While low-level skirmishes continue along the border with Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh enjoys limited autonomy and good relations with Armenia.

<u>Transnistria</u>

Transnistria is a small strip of land located in Moldova's eastern half. The area runs vertically along the Moldovan-Ukrainian border and has a population of approximately 500,000 people. Transnistria was part of a larger Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Union. This autonomous entity covered what is today Transnistria and parts of Moldova and Ukraine. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, many ethnic Russians within Moldova were concerned about the future of Russian language and identity in the newly formed republic. Russians living in Moldova felt threatened by the formal establishment of Romanian as the national language. After months of increasing tensions between Moldovan and Russians living in Moldova, the residents of Transnistria declared themselves the "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic" ("PMR") and established Tiraspol as their capital. Initially there was little response from the Moldovan government. It wasn't until Moldovan authorities began clearing barricades and roadblocks set by the PMR that small-scale conflict between separatists and Moldovans. The conflict was mostly limited to skirmishes and minor clashes with police. While the official stance of the USSR was neutrality towards the conflict, extensive evidence and personal accounts attribute the 14th Soviet Guards Army to collaborating with the Transnistrian separatists. The 14th army was stationed near Odessa and provided material support and training to the separatists in addition to engaging Moldovan forces in combat. As of today, Transnistria remains in a state of limited sovereignty and contains a joint Ukrainian-Russian-Transnistrian peacekeeping force.

Methods of Disruption

Border Uncertainties

        As a result of these separatist conflicts, Georgia and Moldova have had significant

trouble in securing the integrity of their borders. This is a particular problem in areas along the

Russian Federation. These separatists states have become conduits for human trafficking, arms

smuggling and other black market trades (E.P 2006). This is due to the inability of proper

authorities to enforce the law (C.E.U 2000). Many EU members have voiced concern that the

inability for Moldova and Georgia to limit black market activity within their borders shows that

they are unfit for EU associated status (E.C 2014). To further complicate things, recent events

have shown that the borders of these areas are fluid. Separatists have gradually moved the

Abkhazian and South Ossetian borders further and further southward since the ceasefire

(Elleson). This past summer, sections of a BP pipeline in Georgia fell under control of separatist

forces.

Separatist Citizenship and Passports

        Many GUAM members are in the process of negotiating a visa-liberalization plan with

the European Union. This would minimize the need for visas and document checks when

traveling to and from the EU. Such an agreement would also open the possibility of visa-free

travel throughout the European Union. Unfortunately, the existence of separatist and semi-

autonomous states has complicated this process. This is due to the unclear citizenship status of

people living in separatist areas and an ongoing debate whether or not the visa regime would

apply to them. There are three types of passports held by CDRN residents:

        1: Soviet Passports
        It's very common for elderly residents of separatist areas to hold documents issued by the

Soviet Union. In many cases it is unclear which country their citizenship would be transferred to.

If man living in Abkhazia holds a Soviet passport with "Georgian" marked as his nationality, who holds liability over him? It is worth noting that almost all Soviet passports are currency considered invalid.

2: Separatist Passports
All four members of the CDRN have issued their own form of passport. They are almost entirely invalid for international travel (Civil.ge). This is due to both the unrecognized status of the countries issuing the passports and the lack of counterfeiting prevention in the document. The main use for separatist passports is for travel within the CDRN. Many holders of separatist issued passports are considered stateless persons (Hewitt).

3: Foreign passports
It's very common for CDRN residents to hold passports issued by foreign countries. The most common foreign passport among CDRN residents is a Russian passport. Passports issued by GUAM members are also used by those living in separatist regions. The exception to this is Nagorno-Karabakh, where Armenian passports are the norm.

Russian Media and influence

While Russia pledged neutrality during the separatist conflicts its support for the CDRN's break-away governments is undeniable. Russian influence is visible at many levels. The lowest level is in the day to day interactions of CDRN residents. Russian language is the mother tongue of a majority of CDRN citizens. While this makes sense in a location like Transnistria, this trend is even visible in areas like South Ossetia where majority of the residents identify as "Ossetian". Russian language is also used in schools and governments across the CDRN (including the

CDRN Secretariat's website). The most accessible and available form of media in the CDRN comes from Russian sources like RT, Sputnik and TASS.

When we look towards the functions of governments within the CDRN, Russia's influence persists. Many politicians in the CDRN, such as former President Smirnov of Transnistria, have extensive ties to Russia's political system (Oleksy). This includes the financial operations of breakaway states. The Russian Federation's monetary support for the members of the CDRN ranges from financial assistance and loans to the subsidization of pension programs and social services (Puiu).

The most visceral display of Russia's influence over CDRN members is its military presence. While officially part of peacekeeping operations, Russia has used its peacekeeping brigades for its own gain. We've seen the mobilization of peacekeeping forces as a sort of deterrent towards Russia's neighbors. During the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict, most of the Russian offensive was conducted by military units stationed in breakaway territories (Deibert). Over the past two years, Russia has issued mobilization and readiness drills to its forces stationed in Transnistria in response to the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict (Day). The usage of peacekeeping brigades in national defense policy questions the true motives of Russia's military presence in the CDRN.

The Future

The future of the CDRN is uncertain. There have not been any serious efforts to push for international recognition of separatist independence nor is there a strategy to reintegrate breakaway states. A recent surge in fighting between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan has raised questions about the long term sustainability of these frozen conflicts. Many predict that as the conflict in Eastern Ukraine gradually winds down that a semi-autonomous region may form

in Donetsk and Luhansk. While it's difficult to say what the future holds for these pseudo states, it will be impossible for Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova to integrate into the EU or NATO as long as the current frozen conflicts continue.

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