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De Facto Independent States in the Post-Soviet Territory: A Comparative Study of Transnistria and South Ossetia

Introduction

Though frozen conflicts are often not considered as potentially dangerous, they are very much like chronic illnesses with outbursts of violence occurring unpredictably. Therefore, their “frozenness” does not necessarily make them less harmful or less costly for the states and their population. At the moment, several frozen conflicts are being experienced in the territories of the former Soviet Union. Some of these conflicts resulted in the creation of de facto independent states, two of which are Transnistria (also known as Pridnestrovie) which is located between Moldova and Ukraine; and South Ossetia which is on the Russian-Georgian border.

These disputed states are strategically important for contesting global powers and they have not only political, but also economic importance for several actors. Transnistria is a central point of political and economic contestation for regional power between Russia, the EU and the US. While Russia behaves as the patron of the situation trying to defend Transnistrian interests, the US behaves in a more reserved manner. This is caused to a certain extent by the fact that Transnistria is not the first priority in its foreign policy agenda. At the same time, the EU is also quite reluctant in its responses because a possible power contestation with Russia would be too costly for it at the present stage. In addition, Transnistria is a strategic economic knot for some ethnically Russian business elites, who operate some lucrative businesses there, which are mostly related to heavy industry. South Ossetia is situated at a more strategic crossroad of international interests. The political situation in Georgia is of great importance to
both Russia and the US, who have long been competing for dominance in the Caucasus region. The direction towards which Georgia is heading is also critical for the EU’s economic security and regional hegemonic aspirations. The EU’s Eastern enlargement project fueled the disputes over Transnistria and South Ossetia, since the conflicts have now moved closer to the EU borders and they now pose a remarkable challenge to the EU’s foreign policy and its role as an international mediator.

Though some attempts to understand the underlying reasons behind these conflicts and most importantly behind their frozen nature have been done, the academic and policy research significantly diverges in opinions and approaches towards the possible solutions for these conflicts. In this research paper, I intend to compare the frozen conflicts in these countries to understand the current developments, what roles different factors and actors play in these conflicts and how these frozen disputes can be brought towards peaceful solutions.

**Rationale**

Though frozen conflicts are not usually associated with direct acts of violence, they are extremely costly for the confronting sides. Besides, since frozen conflicts prevent the establishment of robust networks and interdependence between the parties, war can reoccur any moment, leading to escalation of violence and significant human or economic losses. Frozen conflicts also trigger the problem of security dilemma, which in turn can result in returned violence. Therefore, considering the number of frozen conflicts in the contemporary world, it is extremely important to find ways of non-violent resolutions for this kind of disputes. It is also pivotal to find ways in which transition towards warm peace can be implemented, since in the ever more globalizing world with increased interdependence between the states and blurring borders, “freezing” conflicts is not enough, rather, stable and
durable solutions to conflicts are needed. In this research paper, I will try to identify the factors that can lead to a successful resolution of these conflicts.

**Research structure**

The organization of this research paper will be as follows: the flow of the paper will follow the hypotheses. The academic perspective on frozen conflicts in general will be provided and the issues central to the academic discourse on separatist conflicts such as ethnicity, secession and autonomy, international mediation, third party intervention, state making and state breaking will be discussed. In the empirical analysis of this paper, a comparative analysis of the conflicts in Transnistria and South Ossetia along temporal lines will be provided. Hence, the historical background and the current situation of these conflicts will be analyzed together with projections into the close future. I will analyze the reasons for the reoccurrence of violence, if there is any, in the frozen conflicts at stake. The concluding part will, by using the knowledge gained from the comparison, make an attempt to design some domestic and foreign policy implications which can help resolve these frozen conflicts in the most efficient and least violent way.

**Methodology**

This research is designed as a qualitative comparative case study. Case study has been described as a tool of theory building (Neumann 2006) which is frequently utilized in conflict studies (Kacowicz 2004). I am convinced that a comparative case study of these frozen conflicts can help building a deeper theoretical understanding of the issue and identify potential areas for future research. These conflicts are actively in progress and there is no available data set which can be sufficient for conducting quantitative studies on the subject. In addition to that, there is limited number of frozen conflicts in Europe, therefore the comparative analysis of Transnistrian and South Ossetian cases that I intend to perform in this
paper will cover a significant and representative part of these conflicts. The temporal focus of my paper will be on the post-Soviet period, extending from 1991 to the present.

Some attempts to study these conflicts in a comparative perspective have been made. For instance, in the article of Berg & Toomla (2009), Transnistria and Abkhazia are compared with all other existing de facto independent states in order to understand why states as Taiwan and Kosovo gain quasi-recognition and why states such as Abkhazia and Transnistria are boycotted. In the study conducted by Isachenko in 2009, Transnistria and TRNC are compared from an economic perspective with an assumption that they maintain their status quo deliberately for economic gains. Berg (2009) draws parallels between Transnistria, TRNC and Republika Srpska on the issue of territorial claims and in the Matsuzato (2009) study, the situation of Transnistria and Abkhazia is compared along religious and transborder nationalist lines. However, the majority of the studies use a very narrow focus, exclusively comparing the cases along a very limited number of issues. In short, to the best of my knowledge, regarding these two cases, no comprehensive comparison embracing a variety of aspects has been published.

**Research Questions**

I plan to compare these cases on political, economic, ethnic and cultural dimensions. My main research questions for this study are: 1) Why did the conflict escalate in South Ossetia and continued to be frozen in Transnistria? 2) To what extent has this been caused by the energy security issue? 3) To what extent has this been caused by the international involvement in the conflicts? 4) Considering the historical and contemporary dynamics, what are the possible future developments in the conflicts in these two regions? 5) Which policy implications can be used to successfully resolve the conflicts in these cases, and hopefully in other similar
situations? On the whole, I aim to contribute to the literature on conflict management, transitions from frozen conflict to cold and warm peace, and de facto independent states

**Hypotheses:**

**H1:** The most important reason driving these conflicts and defining their direction is Russia’s foreign policy.

Though I assume that frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space develop mainly as a result of the combination of the domestic and international political and economic factors, Russian influence on these conflicts seems by far their most important defining factor. I believe that Russia’s foreign policy has been carving the way for the course of these conflicts over their entire lifespan and I also believe that future developments and outcomes of these conflicts will, to a remarkable extent, depend on Russia’s strategic geopolitical interests.

**H2:** The violence reoccurred in Georgia and not in Moldova, because:

a) Russia’s interest in Moldova is more of an issue of prestige, while in the Georgian case Russia’s stance is determined primarily by considerations regarding energy security. Russia’s energy sector, which Russian economy is highly dependent on, can benefit from turbulence in Georgia, while maintaining the status quo in Moldova is more suitable for Russia’s interest.

b) Georgia’s response to the separatism within its territory is much more aggressive, as it anticipates strong support from the US and the EU, while Moldova responds to Russian involvement in a much more moderate way, as it feels the lack of international support.

c) Russia can reveal more influence in the Georgian conflict as it shares a border with Georgia and therefore can directly intervene in the conflict without being constrained by other parties, while Moldova does not border Russia, and therefore,
Russia’s activity in Moldova may be occasionally blocked by Ukraine and other states.

**H3:** Independence is not a necessary condition for the resolution of these frozen conflicts. Future developments will depend both on the resolution of domestic social disparities and on international balance of powers between Russia and its rivals.

I believe that frozen conflicts can be resolved without granting independence to these states provided that a combination of domestic and international factors is present simultaneously. Domestically, it is important to resolve the social disparities between those who advocate secession and those who do not, making sure to establish democratic values and transparency in order to achieve successful and fair power sharing. Internationally, third parties have to tame their strategic interests in the disputed regions in order to ensure a peaceful transition and the wellbeing of people in the region. Hence, international community has to monitor the nature and the extent of third parties’ involvement in these regions.

**Historical Background and Contemporary Developments**

The conflict in post-Soviet Moldova emerged in 1992 (Roper 2001). It was a short-term cleavage mainly between the Transnistrian Republican Guard backed by the units of Russian 14th Army and Moldovan Troops. The conflict resulted in ceasefire and can still be classified as frozen (Lynch 2006). The insurgency in South Ossetia first erupted in 1991 during the collapse of the Soviet Union which resulted in ceasefire in 1992. Then the conflict escalated for a short time in 2004 and reemerged again in 2008, this time attracting significant international attention. The main parties involved in this conflict were Russia, Abkhazia, which is another de facto independent state in Georgia, and South Ossetia on the one side and Georgia on the other. This last wave of conflict has not yet resulted in a warm peace agreement and is considered a frozen conflict.
Today, South Ossetia has very limited international recognition and Transnistria, which is only recognized by South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh (which are all de facto independent states and are not members of the UN), has almost no international recognition. There are some important similarities between the conflicts at stake in terms of 1) the pivotal role played by Russia (Sanchez 2009); 2) post-Soviet legacies and historical institutional structures; and 3) Russian ethnic and cultural heritage shared by the minorities in these regions. However, one major difference remains: clashes in Georgia reappeared in 2008 while Moldovan conflict mainly remained frozen after the incident in 1992. Considering the fact that the conflicts which burst in early 1990s can be partly explained by the extremely instable period of the rocky transition during the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the conflict in 2008 should expectedly be caused by completely different set of factors. Therefore, in this research, I plan to understand exactly what kind of factors created such differences between the regions in question and what can be done to successfully manage these conflicts.

Mainly, three issues are central to the frozen conflicts in question: ethnicity, state making and international intervention. Ethnicity is usually a critical factor affecting the initial stage of independence claims by separatist states. State making and international intervention are essential for the de facto independent states both at the initial and ongoing stages of conflicts, whereas future hopes for the resolution of frozen conflicts, as well as their transition towards cold and warm peace depend on international mediation and intervention. Thus, in this research paper, I will concentrate on these three issues and I will analyze the past, present and future of the de facto independent states of Transnistria and South Ossetia

Frozen conflicts as well as ethnic and separatist conflicts occupy a remarkable place in the contemporary academic and policy discourse. Consequently, these two conflicts experienced in the post-Soviet space in which regional ethnic minorities claim territorial independence, have recently attracted increasing international attention. These frozen conflicts have also
gained additional importance after the Eastern enlargements of the EU and NATO (Lynch 2006; Sanchez 2009; Sasse 2009; Strategic Comments 2006). After these enlargements, the conflict zones have moved from remote European periphery right to the borders of the EU (Moldova is a neighbor of Romania, which joined the EU in 2007 and Georgia is a neighbor of a candidate country, Turkey). Besides, there are important security implications for the whole region especially regarding the case of Transnistria, which is being accused of drug and weapon smuggling through its borders. Consequently, it became urgently necessary to find solutions for the conflicts being experienced in these regions.

**Russian Foreign Policy and the Frozen Conflicts:**

Though the real reasons behind the conflicts in Moldova and Georgia are debated in the existing academic studies, I am convinced that the reasons are very complex and consist of multiple factors. It can be decisively said that these frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space are revolving around a set of various issues such as energy security, regional power struggle, global power arguments and the problem of ethnicity and identity.

Some scholars claim that these conflicts stem mainly from transborder nationalism (Cojocaru 2006; Matsuzato 2009; Strategic Comments 2006): from the identity struggle of Russian and Ukrainian ethnic and/or linguistic groups residing on the left bank of the river Dniester in Moldova, and of Ossetians living in the territory between Russia and undisputed Georgia. While Moldovan identity was nonexistent during the Soviet times, it became explicit after the collapse of the Soviet Union when Moldova adopted the policy of Moldovanism and recently Moldovan authorities have increased the ethnic tone in their discourses (Matsuzato 2009, 255). Transnistrian authorities however underscore the concept of mixed identity, not based on ethnicity but on geographical origin for the transnational people who live there (Matsuzato
2009, 255). Others emphasize that these conflicts are conditioned by ethnic grievances, inequality, economic problems and the separatist leadership of the local elites (Roper 2001).

In this respect, I believe that ethnicity has a secondary role in the frozen conflicts in Transnistria and South Ossetia because strategic interests of the players seem to be dominating the scene. I will discuss these interests and their role in instability in detail in the following sections of this paper. At this point, it is logical to cite the opinions in the literature supporting the idea that the issue of ethnicity is at the second plan in the conflicts at stake. It has been claimed that the conflict in Moldova is not an ethnic one, but it is rather caused by the conflicting interests between those who try to restore the policies of Soviet Union and pro-reformists (Tkach 1999, 155). Transnistrian conflict is arguably a predominantly political conflict over territory between Moldova and Russia (Cojocaru 2006, Roper 2001). It is also argued that since there was no ethnicity struggle in the region called Moldova before 1989, the conflict cannot be assumed as an ethnic one (Cojocaru 2006, 263). I believe that ethnicity issue is merely used in an instrumental way by the conflicting parties. It does not have a history and has no strong implications for the conflict. Nevertheless, it is primarily used to gain support from the population by the third parties.

Furthermore, remarkable amount of academic attention is concentrated on third parties’ involvement in these conflicts. Some scholars argue that the reasons for these conflicts may be rooted in Russia’s foreign policy which not only supports separatist governments, but also prevents the resolution of the status quo (Lynch 2006; Sanchez 2009; Korobov & Byanov 2006) because of its strategic geopolitical and economic interests (Tkach 1999). Others blame the US, NATO (Strategic Comments 2006) and the EU’s ENP (European Neighborhood Policy) (Sasse 2009). Russia responds with increased attention to the conflicts both in Georgia and in Moldova due to NATO’s recent expansion closer to its borders, which may continue with the possible memberships of Georgia, and to a lesser extent of Ukraine, creating a more
alarming situation for Russia. While Russia struggles to include the CIS countries into its security system Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and integration project Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) in addition to claiming leadership in CIS countries’ energy distribution, the US tries to fragment this geographical area (Kakachia 2011: 16) by opening the prospect of NATO membership for the CIS states or by promoting bilateral partnerships with them. By doing so, the US also tries to resist Russia’s energy monopoly in the region (Kakachia 2011: 16).

There are also opinions in the literature that these de facto independent states themselves prevent the changes in the status quo. It is argued that they greatly benefit from their ambiguous and unrecognized status, since they are able to have attractive economic deals with third parties (Isachenko 2009). Transnistrian elites have several exclusive agreements with Russia which significantly benefit them. Most notably, they can enjoy preferential discounts on Russian gas and energy.

With these in mind, I believe that the conflict in these two regions is sustained by the conflicting interests of multiple actors and I believe that the continuation of the conflict will almost entirely depend on Russia’s discourse.

**Energy Security vs. Prestige**

Caucasian region is of paramount importance for Russia’s foreign policy not only because of concerns related to prestige and Russia’s international image, but first and foremost due to the issue of energy security. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus regions are of utmost importance for Russia strategically (Kakachia 2011) as well as for its main rivals such as the US, NATO and the EU (Suny, 2010).

Controlling Georgia politically is an important goal in Russian foreign policy. Georgia is the transit country through which pipelines carrying Azeri and Central Asian oil and gas pass.
there is a Russia-friendly regime in Georgia which cooperates with Russia on policies regarding the distribution of energy, Russia at least theoretically will be able to control the Central Asian and Caspian Sea oil and gas transfer route, clinching its monopoly in energy supply and distribution to Europe. Under the current political situation, Georgia is the only country in the region through which Azeri gas and oil from the Caspian Sea can be channeled into Turkey and then into Europe without passing through Russian territory. Except for Russia, the neighbors of Azerbaijan through which the pipelines can theoretically pass are Georgia, Armenia and Iran. Since there are deep and longstanding problems between Azerbaijan and Armenia and since the Iranian regime is not trusted by the West in any sense and even economically sanctioned, the pipelines cannot pass through these two countries and there seem to be no plans to use them as transit countries in the foreseeable future in the agenda of the Western political spheres. So, Georgia is the key country in the region for Russia in order to be able to increase the power of its monopoly in the European energy market. By the same logic, it is also the key country for the EU in order to decrease its energy dependence to Russia and create alternative and stable sources and routes of energy for its energy hungry members. The EU, realizing the possible long term consequences of heavy dependence on Russian energy, tried to challenge the Russian monopoly on the distribution of gas by initiating the Nabucco project which will create another route for the Azeri gas to pass through Georgia and come to Turkey from where it would be distributed to the entire EU region. It should also be emphasized that Nabucco project enjoys the support of the US, too. Although Russia officially states that it does not oppose the Nabucco project, it is a well known fact that this project is not on par with Russian interests in the lucrative energy sector. Russia actively supports other energy projects in the region, such as the South Stream, as rivals for Nabucco, and this support may further deepen the Western dependence on Russian gas.
The reoccurrence of violence in the region during the Russian-Georgian conflict between 7th-16th August 2008 showed that the EU’s concerns about being dependent on Russian energy are well-grounded. Due to the re-escalation of tension in the region, on 12th August BP, one of the two biggest shareholders of the South Caucasus Pipeline, decided to suspend the gas supply passing through this pipeline (Kakachia 2011: 16). Consequently, the EU was forced to buy gas from Russia at the prices Russia dictated. Besides, Russia also tries to keep its most active presence in the Caucasus in order to undermine any major energy project which can decrease the EU’s dependence on Russian energy.

For the US, maintaining strong presence in the Caucasian region is also tremendously important, since it represents an important step towards reaching its implicit goal of absolute global hegemony. The US sees the Russian dominance in the newly independent post-Soviet countries contrary to its interests. Before 2008, the US tried to keep its presence in Georgia by providing terrorism-prevention and fighting training for the Georgian military (Suny 2010, 21).

Overall, the escalation of violence in 2008 in Georgia helped Russia establish its position firmly, causing all the other players to revisit their position. The EU stated that it would not support Georgia in its fight against Russian forces and one of the reasons behind this decision is definitely Europe’s heavy dependence on Russian energy. Even the US was forced to reconsider its relationship with Russia, accepting to agree for consensus which would accommodate Russia’s interests in the region (Suny 2010). It has been argued that maintaining the status quo in the Caucasian region is beneficial for Russia, since the current situation provides it a chance to reestablish its power-presence in the region (Suny 2010). Carrying this argument one step further, I claim that Russia benefits not only from maintaining the status quo in South Ossetia, but also from all sorts of turbulence in the region. Firstly, with Russia’s military power in mind, it is possible to argue that Russia can use minor
distress in the region in order to demonstrate its strength to the Western powers it contests with. Secondly, by creating temporary shocks in the region, Russia obtains a chance to demonstrate the EU its hegemony in the energy sector. Finally, by messing the political situation in Georgia, Russia can increase its bargaining power in the negotiations for gas prices. Therefore, it can be assumed that under current conditions, Russia is expected not to be willing to resolve the conflict in Georgia in the near future.

**Higher International Support = Higher Aggression?**

One of the most important differences between the policy responses in the Moldovan and Georgian cases is related to the degree of tolerance involved. Georgia demonstrates much more aggressive responses towards Russia’s actions than Moldova. The reason for that is twofold. On the one hand, Georgia’s and Moldova’s anticipations of the international support significantly vary. Moldova was not enjoying a US support as strong as the support that Georgia had at the time. Although Transnistria is in the zone of the EU’s security interests, Kishinev authorities often have to try to press for more active involvement by the EU, which usually stays as a mere observer rather than as an active participant. The EU, faced with a threat to spoil its relationship with Russia and reluctant to use hard power, supports Moldova in a rather timid way.

On the other hand, Georgia used to receive a strong US support not only in diplomatic but also in a directly militaristic way. As discussed earlier in this paper, the US troops provided training for Georgian military forces and approached the attempts of democratization and the Rose Revolution in Georgia with enthusiastic support. Counting on this support and knowing that Europe’s energy security depends to a certain extent on its sovereignty as a state, Georgia felt free to show much more irritation in its dialogue with Russia. Thinking that the international support is on its side, generally pro-Western oriented Georgian President
Mikheil Saakashvili acted aggressively to oppose Russia’s position on South Ossetia and initiated the conflict. Nonetheless, the ten day long military crisis in the Caucasus in the summer of 2008 proved to be a clear watershed for Georgia regarding the international support for its cause. Russia has successfully demonstrated the world that it is not willing to release its grip in the Caucasus and that it is ready to ignite conflicts with hard power should its position in the region be attempted to be jeopardized. Therefore in the end, the international community had to change its position on the situation. Both the EU and the US significantly withdrew their diplomatic support for the unification of South Ossetia with Georgia.

Moldova is less aggressive in its policies and responses regarding the separatist region compared to those of Georgia. The international community, too, is significantly calmer in its approach towards Transnistria’s ambiguous situation at least for the time being. To be precise, soft power is being used in the Transnistrian conflict: the EU delicately negotiates with Russia and Moldova using diplomatic means. The US, by the same token, demonstrates a more tolerant approach. The benefits of Transnistria to Russia or Moldova are, no doubt, crucial, however, the cost benefit analysis done by both sides must have revealed that these benefits are not worth using hard power in the region.

**Border Sharing and Accountability**

It is generally accepted that Russia’s position on Transnistria is softer and more tolerant compared to its position on South Ossetia. One reason for that stems from the fact that Russia does not share borders with neither undisputed Moldova nor Transnistria. Because of this, Russia is constrained in its actions. Since the disputed zone is not adjacent to Russia’s territory, Russia has to act in a way more or less approved by the international community, at least by Ukraine which is situated between Russia and Moldova. However, in the case of
Georgia, where the conflict takes place at Russia’s border, Russia does not have to provide as much account for its actions to other states or international organizations. The fact that Ukraine lies between Russia and Transnistria has the potential of constraining Russia’s behavior a great deal. Russia is obliged to deal with and get the consent of Ukraine if it plans to intervene in the area. Ukraine, in turn, passes through a very bumpy political period and demonstrates policy fluctuations. Like a pendulum, Ukrainian domestic policies swing from pro-Russian to anti-Russian, pro-NATO to anti-NATO. Hence, Russia currently cannot rely on Ukraine for long-lasting support. Russia has to be very strategic and diplomatic with Ukraine, which has the potential of being a candidate country for the EU in the near future, in order to be able to control the situation in Transnistria. This situation rules out aggressive policies in the region to a great extent.

**Secession = Solution?**

General conflict theories regarding separatist conflicts and state making through conflicts diverge (for example see Tilly 1985; Ayoob 2008; Taylor & Botea 2008). Thus in his fundamental work Tilly (1985) claims that historical conflicts in Europe generally played the role of a perfect instrument for state making. On the other hand, it is argued that in the conditions of the Third World, wars lead to state failures rather than state making and that state making is possible only in case of a presence of a core ethnic group (Taylor & Botea 2008). Ayoob (2008), however, argues that state making comes much before nation making, hence, according to him, there is no need for a core ethnic group. Here, it has to be emphasized that there is no single ethnic group in Transnistria. The population of Transnistria is more or less equally split into three parts among the three major ethnic groups: Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians. In Transnistria, identity is a transnational concept. However, South Ossetia has Ossetian majority comprising up to 60 per cent of the population. Consequently, I wonder how exactly the issue of ethnicity can affect these conflicts. Will ethnically more
homogenous Ossetia succeed state making and will ethnically heterogeneous Transnistria fail to do so? The answer to this question may reveal the role played by ethnicity in state making to a certain extent.

Some scholars argue that the resolution of separatist conflicts is impossible without a durable and stable agreement on the creation of a new independent state. According to these scholars, only a separation of warring parties into two separate and absolutely independent states is capable of stopping violence and mistrust between them. Moreover, they claim that solutions not including separation, such as creation of autonomous regions will significantly deepen ethnic and identity struggles and eventually lead to new outbursts of conflicts (see for example Snyder 2000; Brubaker 1996; Chapman & Roeder 2007; Deiwiks 2010). Besides, some studies demonstrate that the existence of separatist groups in autonomous regions further separates them from the state majority which boosts separatist groups’ belief in their power and inevitably creates incentives for new conflicts (Deiwiks 2010).

It is often debated in the academic and policy works whether resolutions of frozen conflicts are possible without the secession of the disputed territories from their current states. In order to understand the possible ways in which the situation will develop in Georgia and Moldova, it is important to analyze the general theoretical positions on separatist conflict resolution. According to some scholars, ethnic and separatist conflicts can be successfully resolved by the creation of autonomous regions without the actual secession of the minority groups from the state (see for example Lake & Rotchild 1996; McGregarry & O’Leary 1994; Horowitz 2003). What is more, many scholars argue that secession is in fact not a solution, but a move which further aggravates the disputes between the conflicting sides. Hence, Horowitz (2003) claims that secession prevents the resolution of the conflicts and deepens the misunderstandings between the warring parties. Misunderstandings and the lack of stable political dialogue between the new state and the existing parent state can of course result in a
worsened security dilemma, which can lead to a new escalation of violence. A real solution for the problem of separatism is accepted to be the successful accommodation of the interests of various groups within the territories of a single state (Horowitz 2003). Hence autonomy, which can accommodate various interests in such a way that ethnic or identity groups receive a right to exercise power over issues of special importance to them (Ghai 2000), while the responsibility of macro issues remain in central state organs, appears as a reasonable and more promising solution. Besides, it has also been argued that ethnofederalism lowers the probability of the reoccurrence of violence (Cohen 1997).

If these theoretical perspectives are applied on the cases of Transnistria and South Ossetia, it is possible to assume that the solution of the conflicts will entail significantly more complicated measures than simply federalist or secessionist approaches. First of all, I assume that since these conflicts are not ethnic in their kernel, secessionism and independence cannot provide a credible and durable solution. These disputed areas are situated at the crossroads of various international actors. Besides, South Ossetian region is deeply connected with energy issues while Transnistria is generally accepted to be a heaven for weapon smuggling, both of which can be accepted as important spoilers of the conflict resolution process. Based on the analysis above, I am of the opinion that no matter whether these de facto states are granted independence or federal structures are established, the conflicts will continue until the contestation between the major international actors is resolved or at least settled. In fact, I believe that independence would worsen the existing situation even further because this would significantly hamper economic progress in both Transnistria and South Ossetia. It is necessary to realize that currently both Transnistria’s and South Ossetia’s economies are heavily dependent on other states. If they are granted independence, their economic dependence would intensify, exposing them more to the interests and manipulations of the patron states. This, in turn, would increase the contestation between the patron states and their
international rivals and may result in the projection of new conflicts onto the international arena.

Finally, international mediation of frozen conflicts accumulates scholarly attention since it is directly related to the possible resolution of these conflicts. It is claimed in the literature that though separatist conflicts involving more or less ethnic tones are difficult, if not impossible, to resolve completely, they can be frozen for a very long time and violence can in fact be avoided (Lake & Rothchild 1996). Besides, it is suggested that successful international mediation that would lead to the creation of a stable peace which will not be abandoned even after the mediators leave the field (Bercovitch & Simpson 2010) can be achieved if the mediators ensure power sharing (Lake & Rothchild 1996; Bercovitch & Simpson 2010). Such power sharing shall involve negotiations of the benefits after the warring parties surrender their arms (Bercovitch & Simpson 2010). Power sharing can be achieved by ensuring political rights and equality through “consociational democracy” (Kaufmann 1996, 155; also for the importance of democracy see Bercovitch & Simpson 2010), or by guaranteeing that the benefits are equally accessible and evenly distributed even on the grassroots levels (Press-Barnathan 2006).

It is also argued that clear formulation of peace agreements with all the points of the agreement being carefully and comprehensively listed is crucial for successful mediation (Bercovitch & Simpson 2010; Ayoob 2008), which will encourage the creation of trust between the parties resulting in the resolution of the security dilemma, a common phenomenon observed in the frozen conflicts (Kaufmann 1996). The creation of mutual trust will also stimulate the transition towards warm peace with robust interstate cooperation and economic relationship between the former enemies (Press-Barnathan 2006). Though all of these factors are extremely important for the possible resolution of the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, I also believe that special attention needs to be paid to holding back the
selfish interests of the third parties participating in the conflicts, perhaps reached most effectively through the pressure from the international community. I strongly believe that the de facto independent states in the post-Soviet space, because of their strategic importance, should be utilized by the confronting third parties as areas of cooperation, not areas of war.

The question, however, remains: how can international cooperation in solving these conflicts be achieved in the most efficient way? The war in 2008 has demonstrated that it is not a good idea to play with Russia. It seems irrational to get involved in armed disputes with a country with such a strong military potential as Russia. Russia has demonstrated that it is willing to fight hard in order to defend its interests in the Caucasus, a region in which Russia thinks it has every right to intervene in case something is threatening the Russian interests there. Therefore, it seems useless to resist Russia’s actions there in a military way. To be precise, the costs of resisting can be too high and disproportionate with the possible gains. On the contrary, I argue that a peaceful solution in the form of a dialogue needs to be reached.

Most importantly, a dialogue between Russia and the US needs to be achieved. The EU seems to be playing a more marginal role in the discourse of the conflicts, especially in the Georgian one, and it remains a more passive actor. The EU engages in the conflicts and tries to benefit from the situation by attempting to decrease Russia’s influence in the region when the conditions are favorable. However, the EU does so in a passive way. It does not seem to be insisting on having a say in these conflicts, it does not have enough hard power to intervene and to try to change the situation. Furthermore, the EU is well aware of the dangers associated with competing with Russia in hard power, so it has a more reserved approach and does not want to spoil its relationship with Russia, especially since it is afraid of the possible economic pressure coming from Russia if the relationship between them is somehow spoiled.
In this situation, the outcome of the conflicts will most probably depend on Russia’s stance as it has already been expressed and Russia’s stance will largely depend on the competition dynamics in the region. If Russia and the US manage to build a comprehensive dialogue, then the situation is more likely to be resolved by granting the de facto states autonomy, not the right to secede. I propose that the most logical would be for the US, Russia and the EU to benefit from these regions as spaces for cooperation in other diverse issues as well, not for contestation. The US, the EU and Russia can work on finding efficient solutions which can increase the efficiency of energy and resource transfers. It is well-known that Russia under Putin’s rule was (Evans 2008) and during Medvedev’s successive administration is interested in deeper economic and political cooperation with the EU. Russia continues to dominate the EU’s agenda by its hegemony in the area of energy, however the EU should not consider Russia solely as an energy provider whose hunger for profit should be tamed. There are other issues as well that need bilateral cooperation between the parties. The EU still has some important incentives to offer to Moscow. It seems that Russia has to be compensated on other aspects by the EU and the US if a stable solution is desired to be reached in these frozen conflicts. I believe that more credible and sound economic negotiations can result in visible success: The EU can offer Russia a broader scope in trade partnership and it may consider facilitating the movement of Russian people and workforce within its borders, while Moscow in response can ease its grip on the energy monopoly that it currently enjoys. This can be especially helpful considering the future developments in the Nabucco project. At the moment, Russia senses the inevitability of the completion of this new pipeline, therefore, if no dialogue is built, it is likely to continue messing up the political situation in Georgia even further, since instability in the region may put the Nabucco project under suspension or at least may delay the completion of it and this may in turn increase energy risks for the EU. Furthermore, I believe that if a firm dialogue starts between Russia and the EU regarding the
Caucasus region, a stable balance between the conflicting interests indeed can be achieved. This will most probably have remarkable implications on the Transnistrian case as well. Russia may hence be more likely to take a step back in its position on Moldova because as I argued above, Transnistria is an arena more of a Russia-EU, than of a Russia-US contestation.

Moreover, since Romanians share close ethnic ties with Moldova, from time to time, Moldova is claimed to want unification with its Western neighbor Romania. If Romania wants to make a contribution to the solution of this frozen conflict, it should discredit these rumors officially, since such rumors trigger ethnic separatism in Transnistria and makes the already bumpy situation in the region more grave.

In a nutshell, I believe that the most logical step to be taken in order to reach stability in these regions is for the EU to set the stage for cooperation between Russia and the US, and creation of a comprehensive dialogue between Russia and the EU. Such cooperation, however, will be possible after frozen conflicts are first pushed towards a cold peace.

**Conclusion**

In this research paper, I have argued that the most important factor defining the dynamics and outcomes of the de facto state disputes in Moldova and Georgia is very likely to be Russia’s foreign policy. The reason why clashes reoccurred in Georgia and not in Transnistria was directly related to Russia’s position in the international arena. Since Transnistria is a region of symbolic meaning for Russia’s juxtaposition with the West in general and the EU in particular, it is not rational for Russia to waste resources on military involvement in Moldova. Besides, Russia’s main historical rival, the US, has modest presence in Moldovan region which also to a large extent defines Russia’s position. On the other hand, Russia has much more interest in Georgia: The Caucasus region is not only the central chub for Russia’s energy security vis-à-vis the EU, but it is also a crucial point of Russia-US contestation over the
regional hegemony in the entire Caucasus region and a gate to Asia. Therefore, Russia is much more willing to involve in violent contestation with anyone who threatens its position over the control of Georgia.

As my hypothesis has predicted, it seems that Russia’s actions in Moldova are considerably tamed by the fact that Transnistria does not border Russia. Hence, Russia has to provide account for its actions to the international community and Ukraine, if it is to intervene in the situation militarily. South Ossetia, as opposed to Transnistria shares a border with Russia, therefore Russia is considerably more independent in its actions against Georgia. Finally, in the beginning of this paper, I have hypothesized that the secession of de facto independent states is not a solution for the frozen conflicts. I have demonstrated that since the conflicts at stake are not directly based on identity issues, the secessionist attempts will fail to resolve political confrontations in Transnistria and South Ossetia. Moreover, I tried to show that secession will most likely further exacerbate the situation in these two regions and perhaps even result in new flashes of violence, since by receiving independence status Transnistrian and South Ossetian states may become more vulnerable and more attractive spots for contestation among the global powers.

I suggest that the most successful solution for the conflicts at stake would be the creation of dialogue between Russia on the one side, and the US and the EU on the other. In the 21st century, it is more logical to seek peaceful diplomatic solutions than to involve in long lasting painful violence. Besides, I believe that the EU has important leverage on Russia in terms of its soft power. It has many attractive incentives such as free movement of people or enhanced trade to offer Russia to make it ease its grip on energy monopoly over Europe.

The scarcity of primary data on the frozen conflicts in Transnistria and South Ossetia can be named as one possible limitation challenging this study. Nevertheless, all the researchers who
do not involve in ethnographic fieldwork in the area assumingly face the same obstacles. Consequently, I suppose that in this sense, this paper is not more handicapped than the majority of other studies on the subject which use secondary data. This shortcoming can be addressed in the future studies which among others can also concentrate on the questions which at the current stage of the research remain open ended. What can help the EU and Russia reach an agreement on energy which would benefit both sides? What implications will Russia’s convincing victory of the 2008 War in Georgia have on Russia’s position in the Caucasus region? How will the completion of the Nabucco project impact Russia’s hold of the situation in Georgia and finally how will the new power system in Georgia led by the opposition to Saakashvili change Russia’s attitudes towards South Ossetia and what implication will it have on the global balance of power?
Bibliography


