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Unrecognized Actors from Unrecognized States: Moscow's Puppets or Inevitable Interlocutors

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About the Author

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Moscow's Puppets or Inevitable Interlocutors?

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In 2014 Ukraine experienced revolution, the fall of one government and flight of the president, invasion and occupation of Crimea, and separatist agitation and conflict elsewhere in the east and south. By mid-year two new entities appeared, the self-proclaimed Donetsk Peoples Republic and Lugansk Peoples Republic, in the Donbas provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk bordering on Russia. New local administrations were formed, whose leaders included a mix of previously obscure local figures with others such as Igor Girkin or "Strelkov," clearly from outside the region and the country. War broke out, as forces loyal to Kiev seeking to restore Ukrainian government authority fought local militias assisted by unidentified but clearly Russian troops. An infusion of outside, Russian forces halted a promising Ukrainian advance in August 2014, and representatives of Ukraine, Russia, and the separatist entities reached agreement, brokered by the OSCE, on a ceasefire and roadmap to a settlement in Minsk, Belarus in September 2014.

This first Minsk Agreement quickly broke down, and was replaced by a second set of Minsk accords in February 2015. In addition to the cease fire and other military arrangements, one of the key points of both the first and second Minsk Agreements was that Kiev should agree to some sort of special autonomous political status for the breakaway Donetsk and Lugansk entities. Moscow argued that a special status was necessary to protect the civil and linguistic rights of the ethnic Russian

and Russian-speaking population of the Donbas region. Kiev insisted that the Donbas separatists needed to recognize the legitimate authority in the country and abide by Ukrainian law. In reality, Ukrainian representatives maintained, the Donbas rebels were acting at the behest and direction of a foreign power (Russia) which sought through their actions to reverse domestic Ukrainian political developments seen as unfavorable to Moscow.

Since 2014 Ukrainian debates over the conflict in the Donbas have included considerable discussion whether or to what extent the government should deal with the self-proclaimed representatives of the so-called DNR and LNR. Many Ukrainians, and indeed many international observers and experts argue that the conflict in Ukraine's east did not arise locally but was provoked by Moscow, that the Donbas leaders are simply puppets of Moscow, that the Minsk accords and negotiations erode Ukrainian sovereignty to the benefit of Russia, and that the key to resolving the war in Ukraine's east lies in Moscow. The unacknowledged (by Moscow) deployment of Russian troops in the two entities and the presence of Russian experts working in key positions in the breakaway Donetsk and Lugansk administrations lends credence to these arguments. For both Ukrainian officials and for international officials seeking to resolve the Donbas conflict, among the key questions remains the issue: Should Kiev and the international community simply continue to exert pressure on Moscow (sanctions, public denunciations, and the

like) to end its support for the separatists in the Donbas, or should Kiev and international mediators conduct discussions with self-proclaimed local bodies and officials with the aim of identifying and addressing legitimate grievances?

Donbas as Frozen Conflict

The question whether to negotiate with separatist authorities or to pursue resolution of the conflict with authorities in the capital of the alleged puppet-master is not unprecedented, especially in the territory of the former Soviet Union. As the USSR disintegrated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, national, ethnic and linguistic conflicts broke out in a number of places, generally on the periphery. Armenia and Azerbaijan were drawn into a still unresolved war provoked by reemergence of a longstanding dispute over the inclusion of the ethnic Armenian Autonomous Province of Nagorny Karabakh in Azerbaijan. As Georgia struggled to become independent of Soviet rule, the minority entities within Georgia of South Ossetia and Abkhazia sought to escape rule by an independent Tbilisi government which proclaimed a policy of "Georgia for the Georgians." In Moldova's Transdniestrian region, generally Slavic, Russian-speaking "red directors" of key enterprises resisted the attempts of pro-Romanian elites in Chisinau to leave the USSR and perhaps to join Romania. Perhaps the bloodiest separatist conflict was within Russia itself, where the Autonomous Republic of Chechnya proclaimed its independence in 1991 and fought two protracted wars with Moscow before attaining a modicum of stability with today's extreme authoritarian repression imposed by the Kadyrov regime.

There were parts of the former USSR where one might have expected separatist dogs to bark, but they did not. Both Crimea, in particular, but also Donbas evinced some popular discomfort at leaving a common state with Russia when

Ukraine gained independence in late 1991. Opposition to rule from Kiev in Crimea was overcome by negotiations during the 1990s of an autonomy agreement, brokered by the OSCE and subsequently hailed by Ukrainian authorities as a possible model for other "frozen conflicts" in the former Soviet space. Elsewhere, unlike their Ossetian and Abkhaz counterparts, ethnic Armenian and Azeri enclaves within Georgia did not experience revolt as the Soviet Union dissolved. Most notably, the Fergana Valley in Central Asia, with a mixed population of Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks, did not experience significant conflict at the time of the Soviet collapse; subsequent unrest in the region has been relatively modest, particularly in light of the seeming potential for ethnic or communal conflict.

If there is an apparent common pattern to all these conflicts, it is the involvement of the Russian Federation. This is hardly surprising, since they are all either on or near Russia's post-Soviet borders, or within Russia itself. As the popular western narrative has grown of Yeltsin the pro-western democrat followed by Putin the anti-western autocrat, important political and historical facts have been obscured. For example, Yeltsin's initial proposal for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) envisioned that Russia would provide border security for all of the former Soviet republics and would lead a common army. The CIS never worked out the way Yeltsin and many of his colleagues envisioned (and hoped), but there has always been a tension between the desire of most of the former Soviet republics for full sovereignty and independent political and security orientation and the aspiration of many of even the most democratic leaders in Moscow to retain a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. This contradiction was for many reasons less of an occasion for disagreement between Russia and its western partners during the 1990s than it became during the 2000s, after NATO

and EU expansion resulted in increased western presence and activity in the post-Soviet states.

In any case, Russia was involved in all of these conflicts of the post-Soviet periphery from the beginning, often for understandable reasons, and not always in a negative way. First of all, when the Soviet Union fell apart there were Russian military forces in all of these countries, which subsequently became involved in one way or another in the conflicts. This was not because Russia invaded; rather, the Soviet forces stationed in each republic became the core of the armies of the newly independent states. However, units with large numbers of ethnic Russians were assigned to Moscow's command, and were supposed to relocate to Russian territory. Some did, but some did not; some officers obeyed Moscow's commands, and some acted on their own authority, as they saw fit in light of local conditions. Russian units fought on both sides in the Azeri-Armenian war over Karabakh, before other Russian forces helped bring about a ceasefire. Russian forces intervened in fighting in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and remained as the core of peacekeeping forces in both regions since the early 1990s. The Russian peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia even received formal U.S. and UN endorsement in 1994. In Moldova, the Russian 14th Army, which was the remnant of the larger Soviet Army stationed in that republic during Soviet times, intervened to stop the fighting in July 1992, which in effect worked to the advantage of the Transdniestrian separatists. A small remnant of that Russian unit remains the core of the present-day peacekeeping operation in Moldova, twenty-five years later.

European and American denunciations of Russian military attacks on Georgia in 2008 and then Ukraine in 2014 have led many western observers and interlocutors to oversimplify these and other actions and to mistakenly see Moscow's involvement and actions in all of these conflicts

on its periphery as the same. This statement is not meant to excuse or apologize for certain egregious aspects of the Russian approach in many of these cases. Moscow often misuses its position as a mediator or peacekeeper to provide support to separatist entities or to pressure metropolitan states into policies or actions favorable to Russia. The assertion of a "privileged sphere of interest" ipso facto imposes often unjustified limitations on the sovereignty and independence of the metropolitan states. Moscow's approach and actions in some cases have hindered the establishment and observance of generally accepted international norms. These and some related issues are legitimate topics of disagreement and discussion for the EU and the U.S. with the Russian Federation.

The Varieties of Post-Soviet Conflicts

However, my own experience in working in the region and with these conflicts leads me to believe that it is a mistake to attribute all one's problems to Moscow, in particular at the expense of understanding the local roots and details of each conflict and of maintaining contacts and conducting ongoing discussions with unrecognized authorities and residents of the breakaway regions. In my estimation, the key to conflict resolution is not always entirely in Moscow. Instead, my preferred metaphor for the way to make progress toward a settlement of any of these conflicts is to find keys or combinations to multiple locks of various origin before one can reach an agreement. The sad fact is that neither Russia, with all its influence and responsibility, nor any other single actor can unilaterally guarantee or produce a resolution of any of these conflicts; however, in just about all of the cases a determined single party can effectively derail or prevent progress toward agreement.

Although the separatist authorities in any one of these conflicts may be extremely dependent on

Russia for the security or political and economic viability of their entities, they nonetheless retain a sometimes limited but still clear capacity for independent initiative or influence on the direction and substance of Russian actions. For example, I witnessed a number of occasions in which Transdniestrian troops or police forces physically prevented Russian military units from preparing or carrying out the destruction or evacuation of Russian military equipment or ammunition stored in the Transdniestrian region. In one instance, one of my OSCE Military Mission Members from another post-Soviet country who as a youth had served in the Soviet armed forces was stunned to witness military units under Tiraspol's command directly countermand and resist Russian orders.

Skeptics may claim that this was all a pre-arranged charade staged for the benefit of credulous western officials. Perhaps, but I doubt it. Leaders in Tiraspol blocked demilitarization efforts in the region in part to ensure a continuing Russian troop presence, but also to seek payoffs for their eventual cooperation. Even with a complete withdrawal of equipment and ammunition, the Russian troops specifically designated as "peacekeepers" are almost certainly not leaving until a settlement is achieved, a point included in agreements with both Chisinau and Tiraspol. I also witnessed Transdniestrian officials actively lobbying Russian officials in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2000 and 2003 I observed the leadership in Tiraspol refuse to accept Russian drafted and sponsored political initiatives that they feared would move the settlement process in directions the Transdniestrians considered unfavorable to themselves.

Moscow actually has a rather unsuccessful record in managing the political processes in the separatist entities in these post-Soviet conflicts. The leadership in Nagorny Karabakh since the beginning of the conflict has been self-chosen, and beginning with Robert Kocharian, members

of the Karabakh leadership have generally been dominant in Armenian politics. In Abkhazia in both 2004 and 2011 and in South Ossetia in 2011 independent candidates for president who did not have Moscow's support (and in at least one case who were actively opposed by Russia) ended up victorious. Their triumphs were followed by hasty visits from Moscow to work out a new *modus vivendi* with the new and not entirely welcome leadership. In South Ossetia in 2011 Moscow exerted significant pressure to hold a new election in which their preferred candidate could be elected, but not without provoking considerable local resentment.

In Moldova in 2011 Russian authorities decided to get rid of long-time separatist leader Igor Smirnov, but were stunned when their preferred candidate lost decisively to the independent, former Speaker Yevgeniy Shevchuk. Ukraine's breakaway Donbas entities have recently seemed to be undergoing a process that reminds an outside observer of events in Moldova's Transdniestrian region in the years immediately following the end of the military conflict in 1992. The local leadership has shaken out to eliminate or change some of the more independent-minded, less cooperative locals with imports from Russia or more congenial figures with a local background. Soldier of fortune types who played important or highly visible roles in the early days of the conflict, such as Igor Girkin, are either removing themselves from the scene, or suffering mysterious "accidents" or outright assassination.

Many observers claim the Donbas is becoming yet another "frozen conflict," similar to Transdniestria, Abkhazia, or South Ossetia. The situation in the region may well develop along these lines should implementation of the Minsk Accords continue to fail. However, the Donbas entities have not yet developed a long-term economic basis for survival, should the political process end up in a protracted stalemate. For example, both the separatist entities

and metropolitan states in Georgia and Moldova have come to depend heavily on remittances from citizens and residents working abroad, many of them in Russia. Transnistria retained from Soviet times a number of large enterprises which engaged in significant export trade with EU countries, as well as extensive smuggling and tax evasion throughout Southeastern Europe. Before the 2008 war South Ossetian, Georgian, and Russian officials maintained a major smuggling route from the Near East into Russia and Europe. As in Soviet times, Abkhazia remained an attractive, if somewhat bedraggled, lower-price tourist destination. Abkhaz workers played a significant part in construction of the Sochi 2014 Olympiad.

How To Deal With Separatist Entities

So what approach should European and North American states take toward the unrecognized separatist entities? Should western governments stick to the position that these entities and Moscow's support for them are in violation of international law, and insist on their unconditional return to the recognized states? If instead one chooses a policy of engagement, what sort of contacts or exchanges (if any) should EU and U.S. representatives have with separatist authorities? And what expectations (or hopes) should western authorities hold for such contacts?

First and foremost, Russia is the strongest external actor throughout this region, its influence is pervasive and predominant, and no long-term settlement of any of these conflicts will be reached without Moscow's participation and consent. Recognition of this reality, however, need not be a counsel of despair. While current Russia-EU and Russia-U.S. relations make any near-term progress unlikely, that does not mean that both relations with Russia and the situations in the conflict areas cannot be managed so that: first, they do not get appreciably worse; and second, that some of the

practical bases for eventual resolutions may be established and maintained. Such an approach envisions pragmatic, technical contacts and cooperation with separatist representatives and populations, without sacrificing key points of principle involving the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the metropolitan states involved.

Second, on the regional and local level, the metropolitan authorities and separatists have significant overlapping and common interests in many of the following non-political, technical areas: local economic activity, trade, and transport; infrastructure preservation and repair; social welfare; communications; education; public health; crime prevention and policing; and environmental protection. None of the separatist entities can properly manage concerns in these areas by themselves; over the long run the metropolitan states need access to and cooperation with the separatist entities in order to address adequately many concerns arising in these areas. In addition, cooperation is both necessary and desirable for the application of universal norms or regimes, for example, childhood vaccinations or joint actions against pandemics.

Metropolitan authorities in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova often assert that the best way to deal with local issues is for separatist leaders simply to accept the authority of the national government and legislation, and allow national authorities into these regions to do their jobs. While such an approach might be the best in the abstract, after a quarter century we should know that in practice it is likely to produce only continued stalemate. The challenge of a more pragmatic approach is how to manage contact with and participation by separatist representatives in addressing practical and technical issues without also providing acceptance and recognition of their separation from the metropolitan state or of any specific rights

or eventual status within the recognized state. In short, decisions on technical issues should promote popular welfare, but should not dictate or pre-determine the results of negotiations on the substance of an eventual political settlement.

Even if national authorities and separatists can agree to focus only on technical issues, experience has shown that progress is usually extremely difficult. Disagreements over who engages in seemingly insignificant actions of local government rapidly escalate into struggles over status and recognition. In Moldova, Chisinau and Tiraspol have found it almost impossible to find common ground on recognizing license plates or high-school diplomas issued by local authorities on the left bank. Over many years Tbilisi and Tskhinvali engaged in seemingly endless disputes over minute issues of local authority and policing. Management and repair of old Soviet utilities and infrastructure which crosses new local, regional, and national borders have been issues of constant dispute and discord. Attempts to repair or replace such infrastructure, such as proposals by the 2006 Belgian OSCE Chair in South Ossetia, have generally foundered on the political ambitions of local actors.

There are significant benefits to be derived short of attaining political settlements by engaging separatist representatives and fostering technical contacts and cooperation between the authorities of the recognized states and the separatists. My own experience in Moldova in assisting in the removal of all of the Russian Federation's heavy weaponry and half of its immense stores of ammunition demonstrates that significant security improvements – while admittedly incomplete – can still be attained. Key aspects of education, jobs, public health, and environmental quality for local residents can also be pursued. For example, despite fluctuations in the political situation over the years, public and private representatives and

groups in Moldova, Ukraine, and Transdniestria have steadily produced initiatives involving flood control, water quality, and fish stocks in the Dniestr River.

There is another, hidden benefit from a policy of engagement and technical cooperation. The post-Soviet conflicts have separated and cut off most contacts between people who used to be residents of the same state and community, however good or bad their mutual relations may have been. After twenty-five years a new generation has grown up with little or no knowledge of or personal acquaintance with the people on the other side. Technical cooperation maintains people to people contacts which – while not guaranteeing reconciliation – could be a helpful factor if and when movement at some future time becomes possible once again on conflict resolution and status.

For the moment prospects for improvement in all of these post-Soviet conflicts seem gloomy. However, it would be a mistake to presume that improved relations with a more cooperative Russia will automatically lead to progress or resolution of these conflicts. Russia will have to be part of any solution, but so will a knowledge and understanding of local history, conditions, grievances, and aspirations. It is also a mistake to assume that western attention to all these conflicts at this time is not particularly useful, since there is little chance of quick settlement. External engagement and involvement can offer technical, but still important benefits to local populations. Such engagement and involvement will also give western representatives and governments the knowledge and experience to take maximum advantage of opportunities for progress when the current chilled atmosphere of east-west relations eventually warms.

A Note on Sources: The literature on these conflicts is relatively limited and not widely known outside of expert and academic circles. Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* is a good recent survey. Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* is a good study of the origins of the conflicts in the Caucasus and Moldova. Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*, and De Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* are excellent accounts of the wars in the Caucasus. William Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad, and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transdnistria Conflict* is a comprehensive account of the Transdnistrian conflict. Arbatov, Chayes, Chayes, and Olson, eds, *Managing Conflict in the Former Soviet Union: Russian and American Perspectives* contains excellent accounts by Russian scholars and experts on the origins of the post-Soviet conflicts. Of contemporary Russian experts, Sergei Markedonov's multiple works offer probably the best perspectives on these conflicts and Russian attitudes and policies toward the near abroad; *Turbulentnaya Evraziia* is his most comprehensive work.

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