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Russia's policy in the "frozen conflicts" of the post-soviet space: from ethno-politics to geopolitics

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the evolution of Russia's policy in secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space in 1991–2018. The authors differentiate the patterns of Russian policy between the "first" and "second" generation of frozen conflicts. The "first generation" includes four conflicts of an ethno-linguistic nature that arose out of the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Pridnestrov'e and Karabakh). Most commentators interpret Russia's actions in the "second generation" conflicts as centralized, directly controlled by the president of Russia, and driven by Russia's opposition to NATO expansion, and some extend this logic back to the conflicts of the 1990s. However, this article argues that this was not true of Russian policy for the "first generation" conflicts in the early 1990s. In that period the policies of the Yeltsin administration were a product of struggle of different forces both in Moscow and outside of it. The "first generation" conflicts all primarily originated as a result of local grievances. Gradually, shifts in the broader geopolitical landscape in Eurasia, especially the growing confrontation between Russia and the West, led to a reconfiguration of the logic of these conflicts, turning them into the elements of Russian-Western geopolitical opposition.

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The term secessionist (or "frozen") conflicts in the post-Soviet space usually refers to four conflicts of an ethnic or ethnolinguistic nature that arose out of the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s. They led to the emergence of four internationally unrecognized or "de facto" states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Pridnestrov'e (Pridnestrov'e Moldovan Republic, PMR;[1] also Transnistria), and Nagorno-Karabakh; they later formed a "Commonwealth of unrecognized states" (Lynch 2004). The existence of these de facto states is testimony to two factors. First, they reflect the structural legacy of the Soviet Union's ethno-territorial federalism, which made possible the rapid emergence of local nationalist movements during the political opening represented by Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika (1985–91) (Beissinger 2002). Second, they are the result of the imbalance in military capacity

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between the newly-independent states that fought to control the secessionist regions, and the military assets of the Russian Federation, which were deployed (after intensive struggle between different actors responsible for Russian foreign policy decision-making) to a greater or lesser degree on the side of the separatists.

The existing literature concerning Russia's policy towards the post-Soviet conflicts can be divided into three main groups that roughly correspond to the three main theoretical paradigms existing in IR: neorealism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism. The liberal approach that treats Russia's policy as a positive-sum game with other post-Soviet nations and major global actors is mostly absent from the scholarly literature on the post-Soviet conflicts. The neorealist approach tends to describe Russia's policy towards these conflicts as a centralized, zero-sum policy representing Russia's eternal and monolithic geopolitical interests, such as Russia's desire to control its neighbourhood, to avoid NATO enlargement, and to prevent "colour revolutions" that could spread and threaten Russia's own political stability (Mankoff 2011; Stent 2019). Within a realist paradigm Roy Allison's *Russia, the West and Military Intervention* (Allison 2013) considers this issue from a Western perspective, while Sergey Markedonov analyzes the issue from Russia's perspective (Markedonov 2009, 2015a, 2015b). Allison argues that Russia objected strongly to the recognition of Kosovo in February 2008 by the US and many European states, and went on to break with its own tradition by recognizing the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008 (Allison 2013, 2017). The normative legal approach that is contained in the volume edited by Bruno Coppieters and Richard Sakwa, *Contextualizing Secession: Normative Studies in Comparative Perspective* (Coppieters and Sakwa 2003) can be roughly attributed to the liberal institutionalism paradigm, since the conflicts in the post-Soviet space are analyzed through the prism of "just war" theory and other normative aspects of secession.

The majority of publications on this topic are written within the constructivist paradigm, which can be understood to include critical geography and area studies. Russia's policy is seen in the context of specific historical, ethnic, cultural, identity or geographic characteristics. The works of Laurence Broers, Christoph Zürcher, Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff, and Arsène Saparov describe the conflicts in the South Caucasus from various historical and ethnic points of view (Cordell and Wolff 2009; Zürcher 2009; Saparov 2015; Broers 2019). The publications of Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud are devoted to identity issues and their connections with Russia's policy towards different conflicts in the post-Soviet space (Blakkisrud 2016; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016). The works of Vladimir Kolossov, John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal are written within the paradigm of "critical geography", which is very close to constructivism in IR (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolossov 2016; Toal 2017; Kolossov et al. 2019).

All these works recognize that the international system is hostile to the emergence of new states and would-be secessionists face a long and hard struggle for international recognition (Pegg 1998; Hannum and Babbitt 2006). Of the 18 recent cases examined by Nina Caspersen (2012), only two succeeded, two failed, and the remainder are "frozen" in a gray zone of de facto sovereignty (control over the territory in question) without de jure international recognition. With the passage of time, academic attention has shifted from the initial secessionist conflicts to the question of how these de facto states work. These would-be states are able to survive by building up their internal state capacity in terms of the security and welfare of their residents along with some plausible narrative of

legitimacy (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008). They also rely on support from their ethnic diaspora and from outside states – though the latter are reluctant to grant formal recognition, given the strong international norm of territorial integrity. Only in the case of gross violations of human rights is the international community willing to grant recognition.

From our point of view the realist approach accurately captures the dynamics of Russian policy in the late Putin period (and specifically the policy of Russia towards the "second generation of conflicts" such as Crimea and Donbas). However, the authors of this paper believe that the constructivist/area studies model is a better tool for understanding developments, especially in the 1990s and in the early Putin period, given the regional specificity of the "first generation" conflicts, the variability and incoherence of Russian policy, and the role of non-state actors and regional political forces in driving Russian policy. The ethno-linguistic conflicts of the "first generation" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were folded into Russia's realist paradigm after 2008, while the same transformation in the Transnistrian case was very slow, and in Karabakh it did not really happen at all. Presumably, the policy shift towards the realist paradigm that occurred after 2008 could be reversed at some point in the future.

While all four conflicts have seen repeated and ongoing peace talks, none of them have shown any substantial movement towards a negotiated settlement. That said, to describe them as "frozen" is somewhat misleading, in that these conflicts did not stand still over the past 30 years. The situation on the ground has continued to evolve, with important political and economic developments. In some cases they experienced rapid "thawing" (as in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008) before reverting to a new quasi-"frozen" condition. Russian policy also underwent profound changes over time. At the beginning, in the early 1990s Russia's democratic leadership in part saw a common interest with the leaders of the newly-independent states in preserving the territorial boundaries inherited from Soviet federalism. By the 2000s, Moscow's policy had shifted from managing ethno-territorial and ethno-linguistic conflicts on Russia's periphery to geopolitical rivalry with the West, which can be seen as a response to NATO's eastward enlargement to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999. The final policy shift was signalled by Vladimir Putin's speech to the Munich security conference in 2007 (Putin 2007). In addition to NATO expansion, this change in Russian policy was the product of the consolidation of power under President Putin, the revival of the Russian economy, and Putin's sense of betrayal by the West following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan (2003–05).

As a federal state where ethnic minorities account for 20% of the population, as a matter of principle the Russian Federation itself had a strong interest in deterring secessionist movements which might provide a precedent for separatist forces within its own borders (such as Chechnya). However, the conflicts examined here are the product of very specific local conditions, and Russian policy correspondingly reflected these local particularities. Russian policy has been driven more by pragmatic calculations of national interest than by adherence to abstract political or legal principles. At various times the Russian authorities and policy intellectuals (such as the "Eurasianists") have tried to outline principles which might shape Russian foreign policy towards such conflicts, in terms of protecting ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers, and "compatriots" (*sootechestvenniki*) (Kazantsev 2014; Laruelle 2015; Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). But no consistent

doctrine emerged, and there were substantial differences over time in the pattern of Russian interventions across the four conflicts of the "first generation".

This article analyses the trajectory of Russia's policy towards these four conflicts from 1991 to 2018, summarized in Figure 1. Three of them took place in the South Caucasus (the fourth one, Transnistria is analyzed here for comparative purposes). Two other conflicts that emerged in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990-s did not remain frozen: they turned into full-scale wars – each of which did result in a lasting peace. The Chechen wars for independence (1994–96) and (1999–2000) ended up with Chechnya remaining in the Russian Federation (albeit with a high degree of informal autonomy). The Tajik civil war (1992–97) resulted in a peace agreement and a power-sharing government, brokered by Russia and Iran (Driscoll 2015). It should be noted that while the conflict in Chechnya involved secession, the conflict in Tajikistan did not, although it did have a sub-ethnic dimension.

The secessionist movement in Karabakh is quite distinct from the other "first generation" cases. It was the first such conflict to erupt in the former Soviet Union, in 1988, and Moscow's policy from 1988 to 1991 was predicated on the imperative to maintain the integrity of the Soviet Union. By the time the conflicts in Georgia and Transnistria broke out in 1992, that logic had evaporated. Another important difference is that Karabakh became a confrontation between the sovereign states of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Broers (2015) suggests that it is more appropriate to see Karabakh in a deeper historical context, as a product of an "enduring rivalry" rather than as a "frozen conflict". Finally, it is not so easy to fit the Karabakh conflict into the frame of geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West. The West had conflicting interests in the region: some Western elites strongly backed Azerbaijan, because of its oil wealth and its potential as a strategic buffer against Russia and Iran. Others backed Armenia, because of the legacy of the Armenian genocide and the active presence of the Armenian diaspora. Likewise, Moscow was conflicted: recognizing the value of Azerbaijan as a partner, but drawn increasingly into a strategic alliance with Armenia (which was willing to grant Russia rights to military bases on its territory). The Transnistrian conflict also has some specificity since it was not purely ethnic one, it can be more accurately described as a "pro-Romanian versus pro-Russian confrontation".

If these are the "first generation" of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the events in Ukraine after the revolution of 2014 can be seen as "second generation" conflicts since they erupted long after the dissolution of the USSR. Unlike the first generation, the Ukrainian conflicts have not yet resulted in de facto states, since the Minsk accords treat the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) as part of Ukraine,[2] and Crimea is officially seen by Russia as its integral part (though this is not recognized by Ukraine and most of the rest of the world[3]). The "second generation" conflicts in Ukraine also involved a high degree of Russian participation in the early stages of the conflict, and were widely seen as the result of the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Finally, the "second generation" conflict in Ukraine is not so "frozen", since low level military clashes continue in Donbas.

However, there are some similarities between the "first" and "second" generation conflicts. As in Ukraine, over time Russia became heavily involved on the side of the breakaway regions of Pridnestrov'e, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, while their opponents in the Georgian and Moldovan governments mostly aligned themselves with liberal,

Years	1991 – 1999	2000-2018
Key long-term foreign and security policy objectives	Integration into the democratic Western community	Regaining the status of a great power; strategic independence of Russia from the West; keeping balance of forces with NATO
Aims of the policy on "frozen conflicts"	Stabilization of post-Soviet space; avoiding secession in Russian North Caucasus	Retaining influence in the post-Soviet space; opposition to NATO enlargement and Western influence
Degree of opposition to the West on specific issues concerning separatist conflicts in the former Soviet Union	Low, started to increase to the middle of the 1990s and especially to the end of the 1990s due to the growth of influence of conservative and anti-Western elements in the government	High in the early 2000s, very high after 2008, apex of confrontation after 2014
Influence of non-state and local domestic actors on decision-making process and realization of Russia's policy	Very high	Low
Character of policy	Non-strategic, contradictory	Strategic, more coherent

Figure 1. Comparative analysis of Russia's policy towards "frozen conflicts" in the Yeltsin and Putin periods. The first period includes the Yeltsin presidency (1991–1999). The second includes Putin's first two presidential terms (2000–2008), Medvedev's presidency (2008–2012), and Putin's third and fourth terms (2012 until now).

pro-Western forces. This similarity is especially obvious in the case of 2008 Russian-Georgian war, which signalled a shift from the "first" to the "second generation" of conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

Most commentators (especially realists) interpret Russia's actions in the second generation conflicts as centralized, controlled by one person (the president) and driven by Russia's opposition to NATO expansion (Mearsheimer 2014). But it is much harder to make the case that geopolitical rivalry with the West was behind Russian policy towards the first generation conflicts. Also, it is clear that in both the earlier and later periods, Russian policy was largely driven by the vagaries of personal rivalries, bureaucratic politics and "standard operating procedures" of the sort analyzed by Graham Allison in his classic critique of the "rational actor model", *Essence of Decision* (1971). The super-presidential republic established in Russia under the 1993 Constitution formally established a very high centralization of foreign policy decisions. However, in reality the policies of the Yeltsin administration were a product of both public and non-public struggles of various political forces in Moscow. In the early 1990s the Russian governmental machinery was paralyzed by the battle between democratic (pro-Western) and conservative (anti-Western) forces. The political paralysis in Moscow meant that many decisions concerning regional conflicts were made not in the nation's capital, but by separatist organizations on the ground (such as the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus, participating in the war in Abkhazia); by regional leaders (such as those of North Ossetia and Krasnodar region); or by former officers and generals of the Soviet Army who chose which side of the conflict they would support (in Pridnestrov'e, Abkhazia, Karabakh and Tajikistan).

This helps to explain the sudden changes in policy of the Yeltsin government regarding conflicts in Pridnestrov'e and Abkhazia. In Pridnestrov'e, Moscow initially approved the transfer of Soviet weapons to the new Moldovan army and instructed the Soviet 14th Army to adopt a position of neutrality; but the 14th Army subsequently joined the fight against Moldovan forces. In Abkhazia Moscow at first approved giving Soviet weapons to the Georgian army and backed President Eduard Shevardnadze against the deposed president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, but later supported Russian volunteers fighting on the side of Abkhaz separatists. After the separatists won the war, Russia then reversed again by introducing an economic blockade of Abkhazia. Russia's policy regarding the conflict in Karabakh was ambiguous from the outset, driven by a desire to preserve a strategic partnership with both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It is clear that Putin's policy has been much more centralized and consistent than that of Yeltsin. Especially since Putin's "Munich speech" in 2007 (Putin 2007), his strategic goal of pushing back Western influence in the post-Soviet space is apparent. However, in Putin's foreign policy, even at the height of the "new cold war", experts say that policies were sometimes the product of hidden struggles of internal political forces (Minchenko 2015; Zygar 2016). Unfortunately, in the absence of reliable information about the foreign policy decision-making process, Russia's actions can be interpreted in completely different ways by outside observers.

Many critics argue that Russia is not just a participant in the "frozen" conflicts, but that it started all of them in pursuit of its strategic goals (Sivitskiy and Tsarik 2015). Evidence for such a strategy is seen in the works of Russian conservatives and, especially advocates of neo-Eurasianism such as Aleksandr Dugin (Laruelle 2008). The latter is often seen as

the ideologist of the creation of a "Eurasian empire" headed by Russia. However, the extent to which there is an ideological overlap between Putin and Dugin is unclear. Dugin criticized Putin for not intervening more aggressively in the Donbas conflict, and as a result Dugin was ousted from his position as department head at Moscow State University (RBC 2014). On the other side, many Russia experts portray Russia's policy as responding to the actions of other players (Sakwa 2016). A survey of leading Russian international relations scholars showed that a significant number assessed Russia's policy as "reactive", responding to circumstances rather than forming them (Mel'vil' 2009). Similarly, some argue that Putin is more a tactician than a strategist, and lacks clear long-term policy goals (Galeotti 2016; Ekspert 2017).

The goal of this article is to shed light on the patterns of formation of Russia's policy on the "frozen conflicts" by analyzing the evolution of Russia's policy in each of the four "first generation" conflicts in the post-Soviet space, each of which are complex and still highly contested in the literature. First of all, we would concentrate on changes and inconsistencies in Russia's policy and the reasons for them.

Russia's policy in the conflict in Abkhazia

In the early 1990s, at the same time that Russia was struggling to reassert sovereignty over the separatist Muslim republic of Chechnya, it eventually found itself supporting the efforts of the people of Abkhazia to secede from Georgia. This paradoxical outcome was due, in no small part, to the role of independent actors in shaping Russian policy towards the Abkhaz struggle.

In 1921 Abkhazia was initially proclaimed an independent Soviet Republic, and then joined the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Republic (according to a union treaty with Georgia). That body was dissolved in 1936, although by that time Abkhazia had already become an autonomous republic within Georgia in 1931. During the Soviet period, there was considerable migration of Georgians into Abkhazia. According to the 1989 census the 93,000 Abkhaz made up only 18% of the population of Abkhazia, and Georgians 45% (Demoskop 2017). A Georgian law declaring Georgian the official language was met by Abkhaz demands for an upgrading of Abkhazia to union republic status. That in turn led to protests in Georgia, and the brutal suppression of one such protest in Tbilisi on 9 April 1989 by Soviet troops, leaving 19 dead, was a turning point in the movement for Georgian independence.

Vladislav Ardzinba, a historian and future president of Abkhazia, was one of the first voices to speak up for the Soviet Union's smaller ethnic minorities after he was elected to the First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR in 1989. As an intellectual connected to the liberal Russian intelligentsia, he was not originally a part of any conservative, anti-democratic and anti-Western political movement in the Soviet Union. He argued that in the event of the withdrawal of a union republic from the USSR, any autonomous region within that republic should have the right to self-determination (Ardzinba 1989). The Georgian parliament passed a new law mandating that public institutions in Abkhazia switch over to the Georgian language (as opposed to Russian, which had been the prevailing language of instruction). Meanwhile, forces loyal to the central authorities in Tbilisi, headed by Eduard Shevardnadze, were opposed in western Georgia by supporters of the deposed president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. To combat them and to protect the railway

from Russia to Georgia, Shevardnadze sent Georgian troops into Abkhazia on 10 August 1992 – a plan that was agreed in advance with Moscow (Dzhindzholiya 2017). Russia gave to the Georgian government a significant amount of military equipment, which proved essential to the operation (see for example, the memoirs of Viktor Baranets, a member of the Russian General Staff) (Baranets 1999, 238–247). At that time the Kremlin viewed Shevardnadze, the former Soviet foreign minister, as an ally of Russia in the fight against the ultra-nationalist supporters of Gamsakhurdia. Russia was also concerned to secure road and rail routes through Georgia to Armenia (which was blockaded by Azerbaijan and Turkey).

An important role in the unleashing of the conflict in Abkhazia was played also by the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, founded in August 1989 in Abkhazia's capital, Sukhumi. By 1991, it had its own armed detachments. Moscow feared that this Confederation would promote separatism not just in the South Caucasus but also in the North Caucasus, among the national republics that were part of the Russian Federation. In September 1992, at the request of Georgia, Russian prosecutors arrested the President of the Confederation Musa Shanibov on charges of terrorist activities. However, after rallies in his support in the North Caucasus, Shanibov was released. Armed detachments of the Confederation played an important role in the war in Abkhazia in 1992–1994.

The paradox is that when the conflict began, the Tbilisi government was seen as Russia's ally, with Moscow adopting a position of benevolent neutrality. In contrast the Confederation was seen as an opponent of the Kremlin. But over time the Abkhaz war turned into a Russian-Georgian confrontation. This partly was due to the fact that different players on the Russian side, including special services, supported different sides of the conflict. Some of these actors were ideologically motivated, and others were fighting for money (*Izvestiya* 2016). Russia's control of its own military assets was very weak in the early 1990s. The head of the Armed Forces of Abkhazia, Ardzinba, had a relationship with the former head of the Analytical Department of the KGB of the USSR, Colonel Otari Arshba (Abkhaz by nationality).[4] There is also a view that some Russian special services (GRU) were linked during the war in Abkhazia to the forces of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus (Sirin 2011; Kozlov 2015). Chechens and Adygeis made up the bulk of the Confederation's volunteers from the North Caucasus. The head of the Adygei volunteers, Sultan Sosnaliev, became defence minister of Abkhazia, while Chechen field commander, Shamil Basaev, was deputy defense minister. (Basaev later became notorious for his terrorist actions against Russia in the first Chechen war, 1994–96.) A number of Russian Cossacks also fought on the side of the Abkhaz, including some who had taken part in the war in PMR. Pro-Western democrats in the Russian government, who sympathized with Georgia, did not have the authority to prevent North Caucasian militants or Cossacks from participating in the war. On the other hand, conservative elements in the Russian state, including regional officials in the adjacent Krasnodar territory, actively facilitated the transfer of militants and their weapons to Abkhazia (Krivosheev 2001; Khramchikhin 2008).

By 1993, Abkhaz forces had recaptured all the major cities and expelled the ethnic Georgian population, some 240,000 people, from the province. In desperate straits, Shevardnadze turned to Russia for help. He agreed to Georgia joining the CIS and allowed Russia to keep their military bases on Georgia territory. In return, Russia ensured that

the Abkhaz offensive would not cross over into the rest of Georgia, enabling the Georgian army to suppress the Zviadist insurgency, which was happening simultaneously in Georgia. On 14 May 1994, under Russian mediation, a ceasefire was signed and a force of CIS peacekeepers – in reality the same Russian airborne troops already stationed there – was established to patrol the 12-kilometre deep "safety zone" along the administrative border between Abkhazia and Georgia, monitored by a UN Observer Mission. The only area of Abkhazia that Georgia controlled was the southern part of the Kodori Gorge.

To the mid-1990s the post-Soviet states that were facing secessionist conflicts deepened their ties with European and, in general, Western structures, in the hope that this support would help to resolve the conflicts in their favour. By virtue of international recognition, these states had international legitimacy working in their favour. The year 1997 saw the creation of the GUAM bloc, comprising Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, as these countries sought a common solution to their problems. In 1999 Georgia and Azerbaijan left the CIS Collective Security Treaty, which was reformed on Putin's initiative into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002. This trend of geopolitical polarization (between pro-Western GUAM and pro-Russian CSTO) was exacerbated by the discussion of the prospects of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova joining NATO and/or the EU, and by the signing of association agreements with the EU by several post-Soviet countries. These steps were seen by all parties involved as an alternative to the integration proposed by Russia within the framework of the CIS or the new Eurasian Economic Community (created in 2000, and replaced in 2014 by the Eurasian Economic Union).

This trend to reframe the "frozen conflicts", including Abkhazia and South Ossetia, under the broader geopolitical logic of the confrontation between Russia and the West was reinforced by the emergence of a stronger, more centralized decision-making process in Moscow after 2000, when Putin came to power. This geopolitical transformation was vividly realized in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where the question of Georgia's possible accession to NATO led to the "five-day war" of 2008 between Russia and Georgia. The trend reached its logical apex in Ukraine in 2014, when to a significant extent it was the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West that in and of itself caused the regional conflict. Similar trends of evolution of Russian policy can be observed in the other first generation "frozen conflicts".

Officially, until March 2008, in accordance with a CIS summit decision, Russia maintained a ban on trade, economic and transport ties with Abkhazia, which created serious economic difficulties for this de facto state. During the first few years after its introduction (in the period of Yeltsin's presidency) the ban was quite strictly enforced, but it was gradually relaxed after Putin came to power. Moreover, the majority of the population of Abkhazia in the period of Putin's presidency received Russian citizenship, enabling them to travel to Russia irrespective of the trade ban and receive Russian pensions (Achba 2016). When Russia recognized Abkhazia in 2008, it stopped granting Russian citizenship to citizens of Abkhazia. On 26 August 2008, after the war with Georgia, Russia officially recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but very few other countries followed suit, leaving them in limbo as "partially recognized states".[5]

Russia's participation in the conflict in South Ossetia.

It would be the political conflicts over the Georgian province of South Ossetia that triggered in 2008 the first full-scale war in the post-Soviet space with the direct involvement of Russian military forces. The Ossetians are historically divided between Russia (North Ossetia) and Georgia (South Ossetia). According to the 1989 census 334,876 Ossetians lived in Russian North Ossetia, 164,055 Ossetians lived in Georgia, 65,233 of them in South Ossetia (alongside 28,000 ethnic Georgians) (Vsesoyuznaya 1989).

The conflict in South Ossetia has deep historical roots. After the fall of the tsarist empire there were uprisings in the present-day territory of South Ossetia against the newly-formed Georgian Democratic Republic. After the formation of the USSR in 1922 Georgia became a Soviet republic, with South Ossetia as an autonomous region within Georgia, while North Ossetia became an autonomous republic within the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic.

The collapse of the Soviet empire "thawed" the conflict in South Ossetia. In August 1989 the Ossetian public movement Adaemon Nykhas ("The Word of the People") protested a new law mandating the use of the Georgian language, and proposed uniting North and South Ossetia. In January 1992 South Ossetia passed a referendum declaring local Ossetians' desire to secede and join the Russian Federation, which led to a renewed onslaught by Georgian militias authorized by President Gamsakhurdia. The conflict was frozen due to the signing on 24 June 1992 by presidents Yeltsin and Shevardnadze of the Sochi (Dagomys) agreement on the principles of conflict settlement. Moscow saw North Ossetia as an important ally in the struggle to contain separatist sentiments in the North Caucasus (especially the separatist movement in Chechnya, which had contacts with Gamsakhurdia). A peacekeeping force of three battalions – Russian, Georgian and North Ossetian – was deployed, along with an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Observer Mission.

The "Rose Revolution" of 2003 which toppled President Shevardnadze led to the first "unfreezing" of the conflict. The new President Mikheil Saakashvili closed down the wholesale Ergneti market, which gave traders from Georgia access to Russian buyers and played a pivotal role in the South Ossetian economy. The prominent role of smuggling in this cross-border trade indicates the substantial role that organized crime played in this and other conflicts in the post-Soviet space. After the market was closed, armed clashes resumed in July 2004. Saakashvili was vociferously anti-Russian: he blamed Moscow for the Ossetian conflict, and demanded the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers. In 2006, Georgia accused Russia of supplying South Ossetian troops with heavy weapons, financing its ministry of defence and issuing Russian passports to the South Ossetian population (Allenova 2008).

At the same time as Saakashvili was stepping up his efforts to reintegrate South Ossetia with Georgia, he also pushed for NATO entry, holding a referendum on the subject in January 2008. This was, of course, strategically very important for Putin's government. The US was prepared to offer Georgia (and Ukraine) a NATO membership action plan, but that was thwarted by its European partners at NATO's Bucharest summit in April 2008, where only a vaguer commitment to Georgia's NATO membership was given. Thus the South Ossetia conflict became submerged into the broader geopolitical conflict between Russia and NATO. The latter entered a new phase in February 2008,

when the US and other European countries granted diplomatic recognition to Kosovo, over Russian objections. Kosovo had broken away from Yugoslavia in 1999 as a result of NATO's military intervention. Russia saw it as an example of the application of "double standard" in the Western approach and as a precedent of a successful separatist movement.

On 7 August 2008 the "five-day war" between Russia and Georgia broke out in South Ossetia. The Russian (and Ossetian) and Georgian sides have opposing explanations of why the conflict broke out. According to the Russian version, Saakashvili sent Georgian troops to occupy South Ossetia, killing two Russian peacekeepers in the process (Cheterian 2011). Saakashvili on the other hand claimed he was reacting to Russian and Ossetian provocations. Russia responded rapidly, driving back the Georgian forces with air strikes and armoured columns, and military action spread to Abkhazia, with Georgian forces driven from the Kodori gorge. French President Nicholas Sarkozy persuaded Moscow not to occupy Tbilisi and overthrow Saakashvili. It is worth mentioning that Russian and French (English) versions of the Medvedev-Sarkozy agreement differed,[6] which created the basis for consequent mutual accusations of violating the agreement. In the course of the war the ethnic Georgian inhabitants of South Ossetia were expelled: as opposed to Abkhazia the degree of forced displacement of ethnic Georgians in the first phase of the conflict in 1991–92 had been quite limited, and Georgian communities still lived in South Ossetia until 2008.

In the wake of the "five-day war", on 26 August the Russian government announced that it would grant diplomatic recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since 2008 Russia has significantly strengthened military and economic ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian-Georgian relations improved after Saakashvili's defeat in the 2013 elections, but this did not lead to a significant change in the situation in the conflict zones. The geopolitical stand-off between Russia and the West meant that these two conflicts remained "frozen", with no immediate prospect of any change in the situation on the ground.

Russia's participation in the conflict in Pridnestrov'e (Transnistria)

Pridnestrov'e first arose as a special autonomous unit in the Soviet period. From 1924 to 1940 there existed the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), part of the Ukrainian SSR, on the left (east) bank of the Dniester (Nisriu) river. It had a capital in Tiraspol and three official languages reflecting the main ethnic groups residing there (Moldovan, Ukrainian and Russian). Some Moldovans considered themselves a separate ethnic group, others – part of the Romanian people (Galushchenko 2002). In 1940 the Soviet Union occupied Bessarabia on the right bank of the Dniester, formerly part of Romania, after which the Moldavian SSR was established.

While the conflict in Transnistria was not ethnic as such, in the clash of pro-Romanian and pro-Russian orientations it was also driven by some basic ethno-political elements. During the perestroika period (1985–91) a significant part of the Moldovan intelligentsia, who formed the Popular Front of Moldova, started arguing that Moldovans and Romanians were one and the same people, speaking the same language – although Stalin had ordered Moldovan to be written in Cyrillic script (Kharitonova 2008). These moves were opposed by the inhabitants of Pridnestrov'e, which was majority Russian-speaking,

and who opposed a new August 1989 language law which declared Moldovan to be the sole official language and converted it to the Latin script. But the protests in Pridnestrov'e were more a social phenomenon, rooted in the region's industrial complex, than an ethnic movement, and was framed in a discourse of Soviet nostalgia (Mason 2009). In 1990, a new parliament was elected in Moldova, in which the positions of the Moldovan nationalists strengthened, and there were street clashes between Pridnestrov'e autonomists and Moldovan nationalists. In the wake of the failed August 1991 coup, on 27 August Moldova declared its independence. On 2 September 1991, a congress of the deputies of Pridnestrov'e in the capital Tiraspol approved a new Constitution which recognized the USSR constitution, and in November 1991 the Supreme Council adopted the name of *Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika* (PMR).

Meanwhile, armed clashes continued and volunteers from different parts of Russia began to arrive in Pridnestrov'e. They were conservative, pro-imperial forces hostile to the Russian leadership headed by Yeltsin. (Later, many of them would participate in the 1993 anti-Yeltsin putsch in Moscow.) Some Ukrainian nationalist groups also took part in the Pridnestrov'e conflict, fighting for the rights of Ukrainians and for the return of the PMR to Ukraine (Sergeev 1992). On 18 December 1991 Russia recognized the independence of Moldova, including the territory of Pridnestrov'e, followed by Ukraine on 21 December. Boris Yeltsin's government saw the PMR forces as natural allies of pro-imperial and pro-Soviet forces in Russia. In early 1992, Russia (as the legal successor to the USSR), represented by General Evgenii Shaposhnikov, donated to the Republic of Moldova arms and some units of the Soviet Army located on Moldovan territory controlled by the Chisinau government. Meanwhile, fighting broke out in Dubossary, and soldiers of the former Soviet Army located in PMR territory joined in on the side of the separatists. They were given the status of "military formations, under the oath of the Commonwealth of Independent States", under the commander-in-chief of the CIS Shaposhnikov in Moscow. On 1 April 1992, Yeltsin issued a decree subordinating these units to the Russian Ministry of Defence, and they were allowed to swear an oath of allegiance to Russia (though some instead swore loyalty to the PMR). In June 1992, officers of the 14th Army refused to obey their commander, General Iuriy Nemkachev, accusing him of collaborating with the Moldovan Ministry of Defense (Kheresh 1998; Lebed 2000; OA 14 2000). In response Moscow sent in General Aleksandr Lebed (a Ukrainian by ethnicity) as commander. Lebed had played an important role in undermining the August 1991 coup in Moscow, but the Yeltsin government was happy to see him leave the Russian capital.

On 8 July units of the 14th Army, on Lebed's orders, shelled Moldovan troops and forced them to pull back. Lebed was hailed in Russia as a peace-maker, though he later fell into conflict with the PMR authorities, whom he accused of corruption, and resigned in 1995. In Moldova, the nationalist wing was discredited by having incited and lost a civil war: left-wing forces came to dominate the parliament. On 21 July 1992 in Moscow, President Yeltsin and Moldovan President Mircea Snegur, in the presence of the head of the PMR Igor Smirnov, signed an agreement on the principles of the settlement of the conflict. Since then, however, despite numerous negotiations mediated by Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, no agreement on the status of PMR has been reached. Despite what Russia and PMR regard as an economic blockade by Moldova, joined by Ukraine (*Rossiyskaya gazeta* 2014), PMR has created its own economic system and is a regional player

capable of blocking any initiatives for a peaceful settlement of the conflict that do not meet the interests of the Pridnestrov'e elite. The PMR has also served as the informal leader of the "CIS-2", the bloc of internationally unrecognized states, including Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Karabakh (Sergeev and Berezintseva 2000). Inter-ethnic relations within Pridnestrov'e are relatively calm: there was no ethnic cleansing of minority populations (Protsyk 2009). A September 1992 language law in PMR gave Russian, Ukrainian and Moldovan equal status (though Moldovan must be written in Cyrillic). Meanwhile, in Moldova itself by the end of the 1990s ideas of unifying with Romania had fallen off the national agenda.

In 1995 Joint Peacekeeping Forces were established in the PMR consisting of 3100 Russian, 1200 Moldovan and 1200 PMR troops. At the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999, the Yeltsin government promised to withdraw Russian troops from the PMR and Georgia. Yeltsin was criticized for making this pledge in Russia by both conservative and centrist forces. In 2003, Russia came up with a proposal for a federal state (named the "Kozak Memorandum" after the lead Russian negotiator, Dmitriy Kozak), which gave Russia the right to keep its troops in the PMR for 20 years as a guarantor of peace. However, under Western pressure the plan was rejected by Moldova, even though the left-wing government of President Vladimir Voronin initially supported the proposal.

Russia's policy towards Pridnestrov'e has been complex and somewhat chaotic, with competing factions in Moscow using the conflict to advance their interests. In the 1990s, the Yeltsin administration was inclined to compromise with the Moldovan government. But gradually the interaction between Moscow and Tiraspol intensified, in part due to pressure from Russian conservative and army circles, who came to see PMR as their ally in the re-creation of the USSR, or at least in stopping Western influence. It is worth recalling that creating a "land corridor" to Pridnestrov'e was a key part of the plan for a "Novorossiya" (New Russia) on the territory of Eastern Ukraine that was floated by conservative circles in Moscow in 2014 (Odesskii 2015).

Russia and the Karabakh conflict

Bloody conflicts between (Christian) Armenians and (Turkic and Muslim) Azerbaijanis had erupted during and after the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 within the Russian Empire. The genocide of Armenians in 1915 in neighbouring Turkey was a powerful force shaping Armenian nationalism over the next century. Nagorno Karabakh is a mountainous province predominantly inhabited by Armenians that became a part of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan in 1923 as an autonomous region (*oblast'*). At various points during the Soviet period Armenians asked Moscow to transfer the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast'* (NKAO) to Armenia, without success. On occasion in the 1960s, social and economic tensions in Karabakh escalated into riots.

Encouraged by glasnost, the Armenians formed a Karabakh Committee to press for union with Armenia (Griffin 2004; de Waal 2013). On 20 February 1988, the NKAO People's Deputies formally requested a transfer from Azerbaijan to Armenia. That step triggered communal violence in Azerbaijan (the Sumgait massacre), and inside Karabakh itself. Some 400,000 Armenians would flee Azerbaijan and 700,000 Azerbaijanis left Armenia, Karabakh and other districts of Azerbaijan controlled by Armenian forces.

After a devastating earthquake in December 1988, President Mikhail Gorbachev imposed direct administration over the NKAO. The leaders of the Karabakh Committee were arrested and interior ministry units cracked down on Armenian activists (Krivopuskov 2007, 394). However, in January 1990 Soviet troops violently suppressed popular protests in Baku and other cities, which meant Azerbaijanis lost faith in Moscow as an ally. Many of the Russian democratic forces in Moscow sympathized with the Armenians: for example, the St. Petersburg liberal activist Galina Starovoitova was elected as a People's Deputy of the USSR from Armenia in 1989. In contrast to the case of Pridnestrov'e, where conservative forces in Moscow supported the secessionists, in Karabakh the conservatives wanted to keep Karabakh within Azerbaijan. The difference is in the timing: Karabakh erupted in 1988–89, when saving the Soviet Union still seemed like a viable strategy. By 1992, when fighting erupted in Pridnestrov'e, that was no longer the case.

In summer 1989, Azerbaijan began a transport blockade of Armenia, and Armenia retaliated by closing the border with the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan (located to the west of Armenia). By 1990, the fighting had escalated to artillery fire across the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. After the failed Moscow coup, on 28 August 1991 Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union, and on 2 September, the Karabakh Council of People's Deputies declared its independence from Azerbaijan, and proclaimed the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). In December 1991 Soviet interior ministry troops withdrew from Karabakh, which opened the way to a full-scale war. Most of the former Soviet army units in Transcaucasia were located in the territory of Azerbaijan, so it received more equipment than Armenia.

Armenia was not formally a party to the conflict, but its support of NKAO was obvious. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in retaliation for the occupation of Kelbajar by Armenian forces in April 1993. Some international terrorists, including some from Afghanistan, fought for Azerbaijan in Karabakh (Taarnby 2016). In May 1992 Armenia joined the Russian-led CIS Collective Security Treaty at its founding meeting in Tashkent: Azerbaijan did not join until 1994. Armenia became strategically dependent on Russia in order to neutralize potential Turkish intervention in its dispute with Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, the Armenian international diaspora mobilized in support of Karabakh (the 3 million Armenians living in the Republic of Armenia are dwarfed by the estimated 8 million living in diaspora, the two largest groups being in the US and Russia). Thanks to the Armenian lobby, the US Congress passed an amendment to the Freedom Support Act in 1992 blocking aid to the Azerbaijani government until Azerbaijan stopped its actions against Karabakh (Cornell 2001; Gregg 2002). Thus, in the early stages of the conflict the position of both Russia and the US regarding security guarantees for Armenia turned out to be quite close.

Armenian military victories led to the ouster of two presidents of Azerbaijan in 1992 (the unelected Ayaz Mutalibov) and 1993 (Abulfaz Elchibey, the country's first popularly elected president), resulting in the return to power of the former Communist leader Heydar Aliyev in June 1993. Aliyev met with Yeltsin, who made some serious efforts to broker a peace settlement that would involve guarantees for Karabakh autonomy while leaving it under Azerbaijani sovereignty. That was unacceptable to Karabakh, and in October 1993 the fighting resumed. Russia brokered another cease-fire agreement which came into force on 12 May 1994. The war left Armenian forces

occupying seven districts of Azerbaijan beyond Karabakh itself, and they offered to return those territories if Azerbaijan gave up its claim to sovereignty over Karabakh. Baku refused to budge. In turn, the Karabakh Armenians did not trust the promises of security and autonomy given by Baku if they recognized Azerbaijani sovereignty. Karabakh did not merge with Armenia (something that was unacceptable to Russia), and claimed to be an independent state, though it was not recognized by anyone. In reality Armenia has played a key role in supporting the Karabakh Armenians, and there was fusion of the Karabkah and Armenian political leadership (Kaufman 1998, 34). In 1993 one of the Karabakh military commanders, Serzh Sargsyan, was appointed minister of defense of Armenia; Robert Kocharian, elected president of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994, went on to become president of Armenia in 1998. Sargsyan succeeded him in that post in 2008.

In 1992, the OSCE established the Minsk Group to settle the Karabakh conflict. Between 1992 and 2005, the Minsk Group presented four different proposals to the conflicting parties, but no mutually acceptable compromise could be found. Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev reactivated the process, holding joint meetings with the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in 2008, 2010 and 2011. In 2009, at meetings in Switzerland brokered by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Turkey and Armenia agreed to normalize relations, but the deal fell apart after the Turkish parliament (due to significant Azeri influence) insisted on solving the Karabakh dispute first. After that, Russia lowered its level of diplomatic activity with respect to Karabakh. In April 2016, fighting again erupted on the 160-mile line of contact between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces, with numerous casualties. Russia helped to de-escalate the crisis.

Azerbaijan's oil wealth enabled it to cultivate ties with Western allies and outspend Armenia on its military. As a result, over time, Armenia became even more strategically dependent on Russia. In 2001 Putin signed a deal promising increased economic cooperation with Armenia in return for a 10-year extension on the lease for its military base in Gyumri. In 2010, the lease was extended until 2044 and Russia pledged support in the event of an outside attack on Armenia. Due to its strategic dependency on Russia, in 2013 Armenia agreed to join the Customs Union with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, ending its negotiations to sign an association agreement with the EU. Thus, the growing opposition between Russia and the West in the post-Soviet space has pulled Armenia deeper into Moscow's orbit.

However, Russian policy in Karabakh retains elements of ambiguity. Russia supplies arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, although Azerbaijan is unhappy that Russia delivers weapons to Armenia at lower prices, or free of charge altogether within the framework of the CSTO. Russia also has a strong energy relationship with Azerbaijan, which exports some of its oil through a pipeline to the Russian port of Novorossiysk.

Although Armenia has a military alliance with Russia based on a bilateral agreement as well as on Yerevan's participation in CSTO, at the same time it tries to maintain good relations with the West. After the 2018 democratic revolution in Armenia that deposed the political influence of the so-called "Karabakh clan" of Sargsyan and Kocharian this policy even strengthened. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, tries to develop relations with both Russia and the West (especially through participating in various projects for the transport of oil and gas to Europe as an alternative to Russia). So, as opposed to the three other frozen conflicts (Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia), the Karabakh

conflict has a minimum degree of influence of the Russian-Western geopolitical confrontation.

Conclusions

The first generation of "frozen conflicts" originated in legal and political ambiguities that were structural features of Soviet federalism. The architecture of the Soviet Union provided "titular" nationalities with cultural and political institutions in their autonomous republics, which provided a foundation for the subsequent separatist movements. The separatists themselves explain these conflicts in a narrative of historical grievances and ethnic or ethno-linguistic antagonism (some of them pre-dating the Soviet era), an account which has grown increasingly inflexible and dogmatic over time. Given that the conflicts are couched in terms of existential identity politics, it has been hard to find compromise solutions. Russia was involved in these conflicts to a greater or lesser extent from the outset, and while claiming a role as an "honest broker" it came to be seen as a participant favouring one side over the other.

In each case, the separatist movement won the status of a "de facto state" through force of arms. The leaders of the internationally-recognized states which claimed sovereignty over these territories believed, not without reason, that Russia made a serious contribution to these military successes. In Georgia and Azerbaijan, the separatists' success was aided by the collapse of national governments (Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia; Ayaz Mutalibov and Abulfaz Elchibey in Azerbaijan) – developments which nationalists in those states (especially in Georgia) also attributed to Russian interference. Russia's role in the military success of Karabakh is less clear-cut. In all cases an important role in mobilizing external supporters was originally played by ethnic, historical, cultural or religious ties in neighbouring states (or ethnically linked regions of Russia) or in the global diaspora – which had originally no direct relation to the strategic interests of Russia or the Western powers.

These conflicts all had local origins, being triggered by mass grievances that provided a platform for political entrepreneurs in the regions involved. Over time, as the conflicts grew more intense they drew in external actors on one side or the other – with Russia being the largest player in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, the local parties to the conflicts showed great flexibility in interacting with various external players. Over time, shifts in the broader geopolitical landscape in Eurasia (Kazantsev and Sakwa 2012; Lukin 2014; Lukin 2016), especially the growing confrontation between Russia and the West, led to a reconfiguration of the logic of these "frozen conflicts" from ethno-politics to geopolitics. The creation of GUAM by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova in 1997 was the first sign of this geopolitical transformation.

Western support for GUAM member-states became clear for the Russian elite after the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999, where under Western pressure the Yeltsin government promised to withdraw Russian troops from Moldova and Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia). In Russia Yeltsin was strongly criticized for making this pledge by both conservative and centrist forces, which was a sign of coming deep changes in the Russian policy towards the former Soviet Union. The year of 1999 was not only the time of the Istanbul summit, it was also a year when NATO's eastward enlargement included Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and it became clear that there would be further enlargements. In 1999 the second Chechen war started, Yeltsin resigned and

Putin became acting president of Russia. So, 1999 should be considered as a year when the pattern of Russia's policy towards the "frozen conflicts" started to change (although the final change of the paradigm happened only around 2008).

The analytic narrative laid out in this article shows that there are general patterns in Russian policy towards the conflicts in the post-Soviet space, which evolved over time, from Yeltsin to Putin. At the same time, comparative analysis indicates that the specific particularities of each case must also be taken into account. For example in the early 1990s the Karabakh movement was seen as a threat to the structure of Soviet federalism, whereas the secessionists in Pridnestrov'e and South Ossetia saw Moscow as their saviour. Moscow started to support South Ossetia from the beginning of the 1990s, but Yeltsin's government originally did not support the separatist movement in neighbouring Abkhazia. In both cases it was connected to the dynamics of separatist movements in the Russian North Caucasus. Putin gradually changed Russian policy towards "frozen conflicts", but he maintained the trade ban on Abkhazia until the Russian-Georgian war of 2008.

By the mid-1990s Russia had adopted a policy of "freezing" these conflicts: ending the fighting but not bringing about a lasting peaceful resolution. At first, Russia benefited from these conflicts, as the secessionist uprisings led to the fall of anti-Russian governments in the respective internationally-recognized states, and their entry into some of the post-Soviet integration structures initiated by Russia (the CIS and its Collective Security Treaty Organization). In the Yeltsin period, Russian policy was somewhat ambiguous, and was driven by the actions of players on the ground and the barely-concealed struggle between liberal (pro-Western) and conservative (anti-Western) forces within the Russian state. The Yeltsin government, beset by internal divisions and in desperate economic straits, was too weak to craft or impose long-term solutions to the conflicts in the former Soviet republics (with the exception of Tajikistan). However, Russia's failure to resolve the "frozen conflicts" in the 1990s led the leaders of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova to increase their orientation to the West.

After Vladimir Putin's accession to the presidency, we see more centralization in decision-making; a more active role for Russia; and more direct strategic confrontation between Moscow and the West, growing over time. In opposition to potential NATO enlargement and later in the geopolitical context of the "new cold war", Russia was ready to "thaw" these conflicts, and use them to push back Western influence in the region. This was evident in the Georgian "five-day war" in August 2008, and in the second generation of conflicts that broke out in Donbas and Crimea in 2014. These have now joined the ranks of the "frozen conflicts" of the "first generation": no large-scale military operations, no discernable movement towards peaceful resolution and high influence of geopolitical logic of the "new cold war". The change of patterns of Russia's policy since 1999 (defined to a significant degree by Moscow's response to NATO enlargement) described in this paper is among the most important factors that defined evolution from the first to the second generation of the "frozen conflicts".

Notes

1. This is the name used by the current Pridnestrov'e administration, which in Russian means "At the Dniester". The full official title is the Pridnestrov'e Moldovan Republic (PMR).

Moldova refers to the territory as Transnistria ("Across the Nistru"), Nistru being the Moldovan name for the Dniester river.
2. The Minsk accords, signed by Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic on 5 September 2014, set terms for an end to fighting in the disputed regions.
3. As of April 2018 eight states had acknowledged Crimea as part of the Russian Federation: Afghanistan, Bolivia, Cuba, Kyrgyzstan, Nicaragua, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.
4. Arshba, Otari Ionovich (biography), the author of the publication is unknown, http://fedpress.ru/person/1770570. Accessed 6 January 2018.
5. Only six nations and five UN members followed Russia's lead and recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia respectively, and Vanuatu and Tuvalu subsequently withdrew their recognition.
6. The Medvedev-Sarkozy plan was originally written in French and then translated to Russian. The English and French versions of point 6 gave international guarantees for security ***in*** South Ossetia and Abkhazia (that is, these are the territories, where security should be guaranteed), while Russian version could be understood as international guarantees of security *of* South Ossetia and Abkhazia (that is, treating them as states or quasi-state entities, the security of which should be guaranteed) (Lenta.ru 2008).

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