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RESOLVING POST-SOVIET "FROZEN CONFLICTS": IS REGIONAL INTEGRATION HELPFUL?

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Abstract

Regional conflicts are arguably the most disturbing heritage of the USSR. Ironically, they are gradually becoming cornerstones for a renewed foreign policy of Russia. That can have long-lasting consequences: from disrupting regional stability to a massive geopolitical change in a strategically important Black Sea/Caspian region. Regional conflicts are also penetrating the agenda of world politics. The end of pure Westphalian principles of the world order emancipated numerous unprecedented challenges, strengthened by nationalism, separatism, and non-conventional warfare. That created a challenge for political science and conflict studies, a challenge which could be compared and contrasted to the problems once posed by the Cold War. These challenges require a scientific inquiry into the nature of internal conflicts, particularly of the "frozen" ones, as well as the impact they have upon regional security arrangements and methods of conflict management. Recent developments in the Caucasus are a continuation of old problems, which are likely to remain for an undetermined period of time. Coping with those problems is one of the most important tasks not only for the foreign policies of states involved, but also for the whole system of regional security.

Keywords: *"frozen" conflict, regional security, integration, Black Sea Economic Cooperation, GUAM, regional conflicts.*

Introduction

The so-called "frozen conflicts" are among the toughest challenges to Black Sea regional security, as well as to the national interests of several post-Soviet states. They include: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova.

The conflicts vary in scope, history, and management options, but are structurally similar. Contributing factors, such as weakness of states, economic depression, and external support, are in place in each of the conflicts. Moreover, they create similar threats for national security of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. Artificially "frozen" or deescalated, none of the conflicts has been fully resolved. Along with traditional geopolitical challenges, they are also sources of transnational threats.

Common wisdom holds that regional integration is one of the best possible responses to this sort of problem under given circumstances. But, despite numerous attempts to put the "frozen

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conflicts' into the framework of different integration projects, they are still far from being resolved. Arguably, they are even further from resolution than ever before.

That poses a dilemma. Is regional integration ineffective in dealing with the conflicts of identity or separatism? That would mean that the liberal approach to conflict management, in a broader sense, is losing its attraction. Or is there something special about either the conflicts themselves or the environment they are developing in?

Managing Problems of Identity: Theory

Modern internal conflicts result from differences in identity within societies. This pluralism can be of any nature, but mostly it is either ethnic or ideological.

Most current theories of ethnic conflict assume that managing ethnic/ideological differences is better than eliminating them[1]. With 285 politically active minority groups[2] inhabiting just about 200 states, ethnic problems are inevitable. Combined with ideological, religious, and internal political differences, they provide a broad basis for various types of internal political conflicts. Given the effects of globalization and growing interdependence on a global scale, it is not possible to solve the problems of identity by eliminating ethnic, religious, ideological diversities either through genocide and ethnic cleansing or by artificially constructing an isolated homogeneous society. This leaves policymakers with the only option of managing, not eliminating the differences. The strategies may vary. Usually they target different causes for internal conflicts, trying to ameliorate ethnic security dilemmas, minimize levels of discrimination, and provide effective power sharing.

All that is important for internal post-Soviet conflicts. They result from an interaction of factors, among which structural and political factors are the most important. The combination of a weak state and aggressive local elites produces an ethnic security dilemma, under which state norms and regularities can no longer limit mutual mistrust, suspicion, and violence between ethnic groups. This combination is strengthened by economic disruptions, political instability and rising cultural discrimination. With some minor variations, all those factors could be observed in the initiation stage of the "frozen conflicts".[3]

They also possess another common feature. With the exception of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the role of the Russian-speaking minority is huge[4]. It opens up an opportunity for continuous Russian support of the Transnistrian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian self-

[1] For details see Michael E. Brown, (ed.) "The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict" (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); Barbara Harff, Gurr T., "Ethnic Conflict in World Politics" (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004)
[2] Minorities at Risk Project (2005) "Minorities at Risk Dataset." College Park, (MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management). Retrieved from http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/ on: 11/25/2008
[3] See Kaufman, Stuart J., "Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War" (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) for differences in elite-driven and mass-driven internal conflicts in the former USSR republics
[4] See Minority Rights Group International Data: on http://www.transnistria.at
http://www.minorityrights.org/5195/transnistria-unrecognised-state/transnistria-unrecognised-state-overview.html
on Abkhazia at
http://www.minorityrights.org/1928/abkhazia-unrecognised-state/abkhazia-overview-unrecognised-state.html
on Southern Ossetia at http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=1914&tmpl=printpage

proclaimed states. The Russian involvement in those conflicts not only raises doubts about the objectivity of Russian mediation, but also transforms their structures, increasing asymmetry and diminishing chances for a mediated settlement.

Both ameliorating the security dilemma and providing effective power sharing mechanisms are problematic under these circumstances. Theoretically, conflicts like those in Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan are best solved through strategic liberalization. This approach entails a long-term transformation of a societal structure with the view to erase any forms of discrimination and provide equal access to power for various ethnic groups, thus minimizing the rationale for violent uprisings. Unlike rapid democratization, it does not provoke a quick rise in nationalistic ideology and rhetoric, since it puts higher value on aggression-limitation tools and discourages "win-or-lose" approaches in dealing with other ethnic groups. Strategic liberalization is targeted at a stage-by-stage construction of a democratic society, in which both strengthening of a state and power sharing are achieved through implementation of democratic norms and institutions.

Post-Soviet internal conflicts exemplified this conflict management model. A transition from totalitarianism to democracy was underway, ethnic minorities were engaged into the security dilemma, while the states were weak. Improvement of democratic institutions, protection of the rights of minorities, and enhancement of mutual trust were seen as landmarks for conflict transformation and subsequent conflict settlement in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.

The strategy failed in all cases. Backed by Russia, separatist leaderships in Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia opted to continue the struggle, while the respective parent states proved too slow in implementing effective power sharing and building confidence among all ethnic groups. As a result, the conflicts became "frozen" with an equilibrium established between the state power and the leadership of the self-proclaimed states in each case.

The strategic liberalization approach failed for many reasons, among which a lack of democratization would be the most significant. External factors, as well as a tough economic situation, made success even less likely.

The best alternative to strategic liberalization is regional integration. Theoretically, it helps to overcome internal difficulties by providing a broader context for resolving all sorts of contradictions. Common institutions compensate for state weaknesses, helping to cope with the security dilemma. In the long run, elements of a common identity are created and shared. All that minimizes the destructiveness of internal conflicts, opens up opportunities for cooperation and makes violence obsolete.

Neofunctionalism tells us that, due to the spillover effects, integration can convert economic interdependence between states into political harmony[5]. It is a slow process with no guarantees, which requires "political will" to be employed. When employed, it can use an increased interdependence to maximize the economic costs of violence and thus minimize incentives for aggression. Unlike strategic liberalization, this approach is a regional-level one, and assumes that regional integration can both be economically beneficial and politically stabilizing.

[5] For more details see Ernst B. Haas, "The Obsolescence of Regional Integration Theory" (Berkeley: University of California Institute of International Studies, 1975)

Keeping abovementioned theoretical assumptions in mind, this paper will now assess how regional integration strategy was put into action in dealing with the problem of post-Soviet "frozen conflicts".

Black Sea Economic Cooperation

The Black Sea Economic Cooperation was established in 1992 (since 1998 it has been officially named the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation) to unite 12 countries with a view to strengthen economic cooperation in the Black Sea region. This went in line with the general tendency of regionalization and also helped in resolving specific problems which appeared on the regional agenda after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

But it did not prevent violent conflicts in several member-states. Regional cooperation did not make any impact on dynamics of the conflicts, including the escalation stages. Why did it happen?

There are two principal problems. First, the OBSEC concentrates almost all of its activities on economic issues, particularly on the problems of production cycles. Since most of the member-states are integrated into alternative highly developed integration structures (such as NATO and the CIS), no political or security issues can be effectively solved within the Organization. Thus, when faced with internal violence Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan – all members of the OBSEC – could not rely on this multilateral format for mediating and conflict settlement.

Secondly, economic cooperation within the OBSEC is not an integration process. There are no spillover effects, no supranational institutions, and no common norms of legislature. The depth of cooperation rarely goes further than joint economic projects.

Political context is also problematic. Political interests, if any, are too diverse and often contradictory. Some OBSEC members are NATO countries, which means Russia will certainly not allow political issues to be resolved within the format of the Organization. Three states – Russia, Ukraine, and Turkey - are competing for regional leadership, relying on military, oil, transition potential and organizational strength as primary resources. This competition is far from providing positive effects for stabilizing "frozen conflicts".

This makes any peacebuiling or mediating activity sporadic and ineffective. As an organization, the OBSEC does not interfere into any of the conflicts, and only attempts by individual member-states rarely take place. Concepts for more fruitful intervention are vague. The security issues are at best secondary in the OBSEC activities and are closely connected to the economic dimension of security. Taking this into account, we might assume that a closer interconnection of political stability and economic development will lead to a greater involvement of the Organization into political issues, although this involvement will surely remain limited. Mostly these perspectives are in one way or another linked to energy production and the transportation potential of the region. The more developed, interdependent, and integrated into the European energy market the region is, the more chances for political stability at regional and national levels it gets. However, due to

organizational and functional peculiarities, the OBSEC is unlikely to provide this sort of a spillover.

GUAM

GUAM could do that. Unlike the OBSEC, GUAM was established as a framework for solving the problems of regional security along with developing economic cooperation in the Black Sea/Caspian region. In 1997 Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova founded the forum, with Uzbekistan joining in 1999 and leaving in 2005. Throughout its history, GUAM has given the highest priority to energy security issues, promoting development of the Caspian oil/gas fields and securing diverse energy supply routes to Europe[6]. Security issues threatening these routes demanded a greater institutionalization than in the case of the OBSEC, thus leading to establishment of an annual summit and the Committee of National Coordinators.

That seemed to open up additional options for conflict management. Aiming to enhance regional security, the member-states elaborated a more or less coherent view on how this security should be achieved. They agreed to strengthen cooperation within various international organizations, to reinforce the cooperation with NATO, to provide mutual assistance in conflict settlement and crisis management, and last but not least - to fight against separatism, terrorism, and extremism. A framework for managing "frozen conflicts" seemed to be set.

Following the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine, GUAM's activity received an additional democratic flavour, with the official name transformed into GUAM – Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. Democratization was seen as an effective tool for both settling internal conflicts and developing into a geopolitical opposition to Russia. Both aims were problematic, and both influenced further developments of internal conflicts in Moldova and Georgia. Moreover, both seem to be failures.

The key problem with an effective conflict management is a lack of interdependence and democracy. Member-states are still minor trade partners for each other (e.g., Ukraine's major trade partners are the EU, Russia, and Turkey), with their economies primarily dependent on European and Russian markets. Under these circumstances the very concept of a region could be doubted, since opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation are smaller than those for development of trade with third countries. Inter-state cooperation remains highly sensitive to energy markets and political instability.

As in case of the OBSEC, GUAM can be boiled down to several joint projects, mainly in energy. That is absolutely insufficient for a regional free trade area, which once was an aim of the member-states. Ukraine's accession to the WTO makes this goal obsolete. It looks like each of the members will join the global economy individually.
GUAM was aimed at another important achievement. Its members were and still are willing to form a regional cooperation framework to facilitate negotiations over possible EU and NATO membership and strengthen their negotiation positions. This provides impetus for more active political and security cooperation, given the fact that both the EU and NATO are

[6] See http://guam-organization.org/ for more details

strategically interested in regional stability in the Black Sea/Caspian area. But quite surprisingly, this sort of integration efforts has had an opposite impact on regional conflict development.

By connecting their efforts to enhance regional security to a broader NATO/EU context, GUAM countries challenged the regional balance of interests, first and foremost with regard to Russia. Putting more emphasis on political issues such as democracy resulted in a shifted perception of GUAM in Moscow. Before 2004 it was mainly seen as a competitor on the European energy markets. Following the "Orange revolution" in Ukraine, geopolitical and foreign policy orientations in the region have changed. Ukraine's declared active pro-Western strategy was unacceptable for Russia. Part of this strategy was strengthening GUAM and its closer cooperation with the EU and NATO. Thus, in Moscow's view, it quickly turned into a geopolitical contender.

That was risky, given the fact that all member states had "frozen", delayed, or potential internal conflicts on their territories with a strong Russian influence in all cases. Joint regulation mechanisms in GUAM were still absent, security cooperation remained weak. In short, the separate balance of forces in each conflict was more decisive than common mediation procedures. As a result, GUAM member-states remained vulnerable to Russian attempts to use its influence in contested regions to undermine the credibility of local political leadership.

Russian strategy in the "frozen conflicts" has gradually changed from mediation to a direct support of separatists. Ukraine's initiative to resolve Transnistria conflict – the Yuschenko plan, initiated at the GUAM summit in April 2005 – was later blocked by the Russian-backed leadership of the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Republic. Russia has also intervened in the conflict in 2006, when a crisis broke out over Transnistria's illegal export system. Ukraine introduced more strict documentation rules for export from the territory of Transnistria, thus endangering income collected by the leadership of the separatist republic. Russia responded with significant diplomatic pressure in favor of Transnistria.

In 2006 an exotic "Community for Democracy and Peoples' Rights" was founded in Sukhumi, the capital of the separatist Georgian territory of Abkhazia. It united Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia, and Transnistria – the three self-proclaimed unrecognized states – in an effort to legitimize their political activities. The joint memorandum of the Community dated 27 November 2006, was a sharp criticism of GUAM's initiatives to regulate "frozen conflicts" through the UN General Assembly. It also completely supported the Russian strategy in all three conflicts[7]. Finally, Russia directly supported separatist South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the recent war in Georgia.

The bottom line of these developments was that joint but unsystematic efforts taken by GUAM member-states turned out to be ineffective, due to a lack of institutional power and resources. Efforts to create an area of regional integration failed due to an inability to build up economic ties not only among states, but also within the state boundaries with a view to include the separatist regions into an interdependent economic interaction. GUAM does have

[7] Joint Memorandum of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Southern Ossetia dated 27 November 2006 at http://community-dpr.org/declaration/declaration_full.php?nid=52&
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a significant political "pillar" for its activity, but it is not based upon economic cooperation. In any case, Russian counter-actions make conflict settlement through this Organization problematic.

NATO and the European Union

Concerning NATO and the EU the question is simple: will joining both or either of these organizations help solve the "frozen conflicts"? Since joining the European Union looks a very distant opportunity for any of the GUAM states, we'll mostly speak of NATO as a system of collective security and thus a tool for resolving internal conflicts.

By far, the sequential chain of events looks quite opposite: joining NATO, for instance, will be possible *after* the conflicts are settled. But the political leadership, especially in Georgia, keeps relying on NATO mechanisms to find solutions for long-lasting problems of separatism.

There are two principal problems with NATO as a tool for internal conflict settlement:

1. Primary sources of conflicts are structural, political, and historical. NATO is not effective in dealing with any of these challenges. The Alliance remains predominantly a system of inter-state security, with very few opportunities to regulate internal conflicts. Examples of such conflicts in NATO member-states (such as Turkey) are enough to see this lack of opportunities. Founded like a traditional interstate coalition, NATO has not changed so much as to meet challenges from an internal state level. It is even less suited for managing transnational or civil risks. At the same time, separatism in the "frozen conflicts" is kept alive by weaknesses of the states, lack of legitimacy, economic instability, and historical/cultural peculiarities.
2. NATO involvement into any of the "frozen conflicts" may, in fact, worsen the situation by transforming "frozen" internal conflicts into escalating and, possibly, interstate conflicts. This is particularly the case in Georgia.

The European Union could provide a much broader way to conflict settlement. Being a common market and a common political space, it could help resolve the ethnic security dilemma, build effective power sharing mechanisms, and guarantee cultural autonomy. But there are also obstacles, which make this scenario unrealistic in the short- and midterm perspective:

1. The level of democratisation in the states concerned is insufficient for creating a framework for managing the conflicts. The separatist areas are governed by local elites, isolated from the society, who benefit from the existing status quo. Thus either strategic liberalization or rapid democratisation would require a long transition period.

2. The abovementioned states are just too far from joining the EU.

Taking all that into account, one might say that the EU and NATO mechanisms will not be used to resolve the "frozen conflicts" in a direct manner. It looks more like they can serve as a model of creating a framework for conflict settlement. The very ideology and values behind

Euro-Atlantic integration could help in building more democratic societies, which in turn will bring about more chances for solving internal conflicts.

Conclusion

Managing "frozen conflicts" is problematic. Structural factors are too strong, ethnic divisions are too complicated, and economic interdependence is too low. Combined with a set of Russian interests in the region, the conflicts pose a serious challenge for regional security.

Attempts to solve the problem through strategic liberalization have, by and large, failed. Democratization is too slow, and civil society remains underdeveloped. This prevents effective power sharing, creates discrimination, and enables aggressive rhetoric of local elites. Turning to some forms of regional integration seems reasonable. Regional integration helps establish mutual benefits, provides economic gains, and facilitates the activities of international organizations and regimes. In the long run it creates common political regulation procedures and norms, and establishes elements of a common identity.

It did not work in the cases of "frozen conflicts". But this failure is more due to specific features of the conflicts, than to the approach itself. For various reasons regional integration projects failed. There is some economic cooperation, but this cannot substitute for integration processes when it comes to dealing with internal conflicts. Levels of economic interdependence among the countries of the region remain comparatively low, while no spillover effects take place.

Regional integration could be effective, but it should be meaningful. Implementation of democratic procedures, legislating for protecting minority rights, encouraging of "win-win" approaches in conflict management – all that could be strengthened by integration. However, institutional and normative basis is to be created in the societies first. Until that is accomplished, integration would rather help to preserve problems and difficulties.

Integrative processes, effective for conflict management, should be economically based and follow the logic of a gradual increase of interdependence. In this regard, the example of the European Union could play an important role. Integration will be a success if it creates benefits for ethnic minorities and lessens the ethnic security dilemma. But it will become a failure if it substitutes interdependence and practical cooperation with slogans and political rhetoric.