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Chaos and Conflict in the Kremlin’s Strategy: Russian Foreign Policy in the “Near Abroad”

1. Introduction

I told the hooligans in Tiraspol and the fascists in Chisinau—either you stop killing each other, or else I’ll shoot the whole lot of you with my tanks.  
Aleksandr Lebed’

The collapse of the Soviet Union sparked conflicts on the periphery of its territory that had previously lain dormant for decades. While the political decentralization instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies in the 1980s had granted more local authority to the Soviet Socialist Republics, it also encouraged smaller, previously unrecognized ethnic enclaves to strive for autonomy. Following the Soviet Socialist Republics’ declarations of independence, these smaller enclaves became sites of violent conflict between separatists and the new state governments. The leaders of the newly-formed Russian Federation, meanwhile, were desperate to keep the former Soviet states within Russia’s sphere of influence. Russian policymakers quickly developed a consistent strategy of institutionalizing political uncertainty by manipulating these conflicts to their advantage. By keeping its neighbors divided and weak, Russia could assert itself as the dominant power in the post-Soviet world. This was a distinctly reactive foreign policy strategy in practice: rather than directly intervene in the conflicts to further their interests, Russian leaders allowed independent actors to play a key role in shaping outcomes. These independent actors, such as local elites, ethnic militias, and rogue generals, furthered Russian policy interests despite not being officially linked to the Russian chain of command. The distinction between state-affiliated and independent actors has often been deliberately blurred. Nevertheless, these independent actors sometimes dictated the official Russian response to these

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conflicts in the early post-Soviet era. Russian foreign policy supported separatist movements in a number of conflict zones to keep the former Soviet republics in a state of constant political instability. Russia could then officially impose its power on the “near abroad” by unilaterally negotiating the peace process. This article will examine the disputed regions of Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, and Abkhazia as case studies of Russia’s reactive foreign policy in the former Soviet Union. In each conflict, independent actors have supported the separatist movement and shaped Russia’s official foreign policy response, helping it secure its hegemonic position in the region.

2. Background

This article will adhere to the frozen conflict theory of post-Soviet foreign policy. This theory of geopolitics postulates that Russia aims to maintain stalemated conflicts in neighboring countries for some type of international or domestic gain. Frozen conflicts require the support of a large power that has both a financial or strategic interest in the region as well as the means to sustain the dispute.\(^2\) Russia’s financial and military support in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, and Abkhazia has kept the state governments of Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Georgia relatively weak, allowing the separatist factions to thrive. Charles King argues that independent actors have been instrumental in keeping these disputed regions in a state of perpetual frozen conflict:

The territorial separatists of the early 1990s have become the state builders of the early 2000s, creating de facto countries whose ability to field armed forces, control their own territory, educate their children, and maintain local economies is about as well developed as that of the recognized states of which they are still notionally a part.\(^3\)

The local actors who fought in ethnic conflicts have institutionalized their movements and, with the support of Russia, created quasi-states. King further argues that Russia plays three important

\(^2\) Ciobanu, 2.
\(^3\) King, 525.
roles in these post-Soviet conflicts: 1) Russia has given substantial economic support to separatist movements; 2) negotiations for withdrawal of Russian troops from post-Soviet republics have been linked to favorable resolutions for separatist movements; 3) Russian citizenship and visa policies have favored residents of breakaway regions.\textsuperscript{4} Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Bobick argue that “both separatists and their Russian allies have worked hard to create a daily sense of being under siege from the de jure states and to create an image of the militarized Russian state as a necessary protector of minority rights.”\textsuperscript{5} In each of the three frozen conflicts analyzed in this paper Russia has cooperated with independent actors to ensure the de facto sovereignty of the separatist state, acting as a mediator in the region and thus ensuring that the balance of power tilts in its favor.

3. Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh has long been disputed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although it is officially located within Azerbaijani territory, the region is currently under the de facto control of the Republic of Artsakh (formerly the Nagorno Karabakh Republic), which considers itself an enclave of Armenia. As part of a compromise between Armenian and Azeri leaders, Joseph Stalin established Nagorno-Karabakh as an autonomous oblast with an Armenian-majority population within the borders of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921.\textsuperscript{6} This unstable compromise unraveled in the final years of the Soviet Union, when the largely Armenian population of the region began to protest against the alleged discrimination it suffered under Azerbaijani rule. In September 1991, in the midst of the Soviet Union’s collapse, the Nagorno

\textsuperscript{4} King, 539–541.
\textsuperscript{5} Dunn and Bobick, 407.
\textsuperscript{6} Betts, 163.
Karabakh Republic declared independence mere days after Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan refused to recognize the separatist state and immediately commenced military operations, soon engaging Armenia in a full-scale war over the small territory.

Russian leaders initially aimed to support both the Armenian separatists and Azerbaijani forces. Azerbaijan’s decision to reject membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1992 prompted Russian leaders to adjust their strategy. In a retaliatory move, Moscow began to support only the Armenian separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh. This support was conducted “both at the level of corrupt local commanders, who were simply selling the weapons for private profit, as well as at the state level owing to Moscow’s desire to keep both sides dependent on itself.”

Members of the Russian military participated in the conflict as mercenaries, blurring the lines between official and unofficial support. There are a number of clear examples of Russian units going “rogue” to help Armenian separatists. Perhaps the bloodiest example occurred in 1992, when Russian military forces from the 366th regiment in Nagorno-Karabakh helped Armenian forces massacre a number of Azeri civilians in Khojaly. The regiment was subsequently ordered to leave Nagorno-Karabakh, but many soldiers remained to fight as mercenaries alongside the Armenian separatists. These mercenaries recruited Russian Special Forces soldiers from the 7th Army still stationed in Yerevan with monetary incentives and the promise that they would not be punished for desertion. Despite having left their posts against official orders, the Russian military command did not officially recognize the

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7 Ciobanu, 95.
8 Ibid., 99.
9 Ismailzade, 110.
10 Ibid., 104.
11 Ibid., 105.
12 Goltz, 102.
13 Ibid.
Special Forces soldiers’ desertion for over a year.\textsuperscript{14} Russian military actors at various levels of command intervened heavily and clearly in the conflict to benefit the Armenian separatists with the tacit consent of Moscow.

Russian meddling was not limited to mercenary military excursions, however. The Russian government withdrew military forces from Azerbaijan a full year ahead of schedule, hoping that the resulting power vacuum would encourage the Azerbaijani military to stage a coup.\textsuperscript{15} Once the Azerbaijani leader Surat Husseinov forced the nationalist, anti-Russian government to flee Baku, the Russian response was swift: within an hour of the announcement of the regime change, Russia officially ended its support for separatist Lezgin groups in the north of the country and ceased its propaganda campaign against Azerbaijan in the state media.\textsuperscript{16} The new Azerbaijani government agreed to join the CIS, and Russia subsequently offered to help train the new Azerbaijani military.\textsuperscript{17}

Russian foreign policy was designed to manipulate both sides in the conflict and to position the Russian government to control the peace process and determine the future of both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Russian peace proposals have since been “centered on the deployment of a Russian-controlled monitoring force” in Nagorno-Karabakh, promoting the view of continued Russian presence in the area as a peacekeeping force.\textsuperscript{18} This process institutionalizes uncertainty in the region and ensures Russian power over negotiations. As the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continues to periodically erupt in violence, Moscow’s recent efforts to broker peace in the region “could allow it to increase its already substantial influence in an energy-rich

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 115–116.
\textsuperscript{17} Betts, 178.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
region that is a key focus of EU plans to diversify gas supplies from Russia.”

Throughout the region, the Kremlin’s dual goal of economic and militaristic imperialism has informed its support of Armenia and Azerbaijan, linking CIS membership and the sphere of influence to material aid. Wendy Betts argues that “Russia’s specific goals in relation to Armenia and Azerbaijan are to establish a military presence in both countries and to increase its involvement in Azerbaijan’s oil pipeline development projects.” Both independent Russian actors and the Kremlin perceive a threat from EU economic interests. Moscow has repeatedly spoken out against pipeline projects that would reduce Azerbaijani dependence on Russian infrastructure, such as the 2006 Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline. Betts argues that political decisions by Armenia and Azerbaijan have had direct consequences for Russian support:

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia began backing Armenia, arguably because it allowed the stationing of Russian troops on its territory. When Azerbaijan joined the CIS and accepted Russian troop deployments, Russia switched allegiances and began training the Azerbaijani military.

Russian support for Azerbaijan and Armenian separatists has waxed and waned, but the Kremlin has showed it can play both sides to its advantage.

4. Transnistria

Transnistria—the narrow strip of land between the Dniester River and the western border of Ukraine—is another region on the periphery of the former Soviet Union that has been entangled in a frozen conflict. Officially an autonomous territorial unit within the Republic of Moldova, the region is currently under the de facto control of the separatist Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. In the mid-1980s, the unprecedented regional political liberalization that

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19 Farchy.
20 Betts, 172.
21 Cornell and Ismailzade, 77.
22 Betts, 172.
resulted from Gorbachev’s policies incited a wave of Moldovan nationalism within the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In response, the East Slavic population of the state concentrated in the Transnistria region attempted to establish it as a separate Soviet socialist republic. During the attempted coup against Gorbachev in 1991, secessionist Moldovan authorities took advantage of the political instability by arresting Transnistrian officials. In retaliation for the Moldovan separatist movement, Gorbachev “began supporting the Transnistrian separatists—who were at least friendly to Moscow—to provide leverage against the separatist Moldovans.”24 While Moscow’s support for different sides in the escalating conflict wavered, independent actors intervening in Transnistria, such as General Aleksandr Lebed’ and his 14th Army, would prove instrumental in guiding the Soviet and later the Russian government’s foreign policy.

Following Moldova’s declaration of independence in 1991, the Soviet 14th Army stationed in Transnistria supported the separatist movement and “slid increasingly toward intervention, with the encouragement of military leaders in Moscow.”25 More than half of the command personnel of the 14th Army were local residents and “many would have resisted transfer to Moldovan subordination or withdrawal to Russia.”26 General Lebed’ commanded his troops without official authorization from the military authorities. However, as Brian D. Taylor argues, although

General Lebed’s statements and activities are often interpreted as the deeds of a rogue general, two things are clear about his activities in the summer of 1992: he acted under orders from Moscow, and his primary objective was to ensure that the 14th Army remained subordinate to Moscow.27

24 Kaufman and Bowers, 130.
25 Ibid., 132.
26 Taylor, 214.
27 Ibid., 215.
Lebed' and his 14th Army ostensibly intervened against official orders, but his role in securing the de facto independence of Transnistria clearly followed Moscow’s interests in the region. As a result of his actions, Lebed' became a popular political figure, finishing third in the 1996 Russian presidential election.28 As the conflict became stalemated, Lebed' and the 14th Army relinquished their control over the region, allowing the local military leaders in Tiraspol, the capital city, to maintain the separatist state’s security.29 Intervention by independent actors proved decisive in maintaining the separatist movement and creating a frozen conflict in Transnistria.

The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic has now existed as a de facto state for over twenty years. Moscow’s involvement is superficially minimal. Dunn and Bobick argue that although both Russia-aligned independent actors and the Russian state

are the primary enablers and supporters of Transnistria as a polity, there is no formal “chain of command” structure that links the Transnistrian leadership to Moscow patrons. Rather, Transnistrian elites act within a set of unarticulated, informal boundaries of political action shaped by the pervasive sense of threat.30

As in other similar conflicts, Russian troops have also acted as arbiters of the peace process: as of 2014, “in Transnistria, 1,500 Russian soldiers maintain the peace in a conflict in which Russia occupies the roles of aggressor, provocateur, and peacekeeper.”31 The remnants of the 14th Army are recognized as vital to maintaining peace between Moldova and Transnistria. The institutionalization of the frozen conflict has vastly benefited the Kremlin, as soft power over Moldova radiates into Central Europe with minimal costs to the Russian government. The frozen conflict has prevented Moldova from joining either the EU or NATO.32 As the Russian

28 Kaufman and Bowers, 135.
29 Ibid., 136.
30 Dunn and Bobick, 408.
31 Ibid., 410.
32 Both organizations do not allow countries with ongoing conflicts to apply.
government effectively established methods of control and coercion, the international community accepted the Russian presence in Transnistria and the conflict began "to lose the quality of a continuing international crisis which had characterized it for most of a decade." Transnistria has since become a "forgotten" conflict, with little to no international pressure from the West to resolve it.

5. Abkhazia

Abkhazia is a region on the eastern coast of the Black Sea nominally within the borders of the Republic of Georgia but currently under the de facto control of the separatist Republic of Abkhazia. As in the two other case studies examined in this paper, policies implemented in this region at the early stages of Soviet rule would play a key role in sparking conflict during its collapse. When the Red Army gained control of the region in 1921, it established the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia. In 1931, Stalin revoked the republic’s status, incorporated it into the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, and began to implement policies that actively suppressed Abkhazian culture. The decentralization of political power during the final years of the Soviet Union encouraged a wave of Georgian nationalism that was met with anti-Georgian sentiments among the Abkhazian population. These tensions erupted into violent conflict in 1989, prompting a swift response from Soviet leaders. While Gorbachev had originally sought to enlist the Georgian leadership as allies against his conservative political opponents in Moscow, this effort was undermined by his support for the recognition of autonomous regions. This was the case for the Abkhazian Republic, which demanded recognition and support to

33 Kaufman and Bowers, 145.
35 Petersen, 190.
37 Petersen, 193.
protect the ethnic Abkhazian population against discriminatory Georgian policies. The conflict broke out into a full-scale war following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declarations of independence by both Georgia and Abkhazia in 1991 and 1992.\(^{39}\)

In an extensive study of ethnic conflict in the Caucasus, Svante Cornell posits that “the Russian support [for Abkhazia] seems to initially not have been sanctioned at the highest echelons of power.”\(^{40}\) By August 1992, members of the Russian military were clearly intervening as independent actors—against official orders—in favor of the Abkhazian separatists.\(^{41}\) The independent actors in Abkhazia were not technically connected to any Russian chain of command during the conflict. During the conflict, the Abkhazian separatist leadership sought support from the Confederation of Mountain Peoples, a paramilitary group operating in the northern Caucasus “which fought on the side of the Abkhazians against the Georgians although they were officially citizens of Russia.”\(^{42}\) The separatists also relied on local Russian military units, which at the very least fought for the perceived interests of Moscow. These interests were stated explicitly in 1993, when Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev contradicted President Yeltsin’s public condemnation of the separatists by demanding the removal of all Georgian military forces from Abkhazia.\(^{43}\) A report by Human Rights Watch stated that “who gives the orders [in Abkhazia] cannot be determined.”\(^{44}\) Militias and local Russian units operated freely, but maintained strong ties to Moscow. Human Rights Watch also found evidence of former KGB officers’ presence in the conflict, as well as possible connections.

\(^{39}\) Petersen, 194–5.
\(^{40}\) Cornell, 160.
\(^{41}\) Kaufman and Bowers, 135.
\(^{42}\) Ozhiganov, “The Republic of Georgia: Conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” 377.
\(^{43}\) Hopf, 231.
\(^{44}\) Human Rights Watch, 12.
to forces in the employ of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. This chaos played to the Kremlin’s advantage in its future relations with Georgia.

The Kremlin used uncertainty and violence in Abkhazia to effectively weaken the fledgling Georgian state and maintain power over it. In 1992, “as the war grew into a stalemate, official Russian policy aligned more closely with the opinions of Russian forces in the region.” Support for Abkhazian separatism became a useful weapon to wield against Georgian ambitions in the post-Soviet world. Alongside increased support came Russian proposals of a federal state for Georgia, instead of a centralized government. Russia established its central role in managing the conflict by engaging in peacekeeping missions and negotiating truces in 1993 and 1994. According to Human Rights Watch’s report on Abkhazia, “Russia’s forcible assertion of a neutral’s rights has gradually become less and less distinguishable from its assertion of a special role to maintain peace and security in what it refers to as its ‘near abroad.’” The Russian government used actions by independent Abkhazian separatists as a building block for the maintenance of control over Georgia at large. Human Rights Watch maintains, “Russian policy appears to have been explicitly predicated on Georgia’s membership in the CIS.” The Commonwealth of Independent States has been the most effective organizational tool for preserving Russian hegemony over the former Soviet Union. These Russian actions preface the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, before which Georgia tried to “escape” the Russian “near abroad” and move closer to the EU and NATO. At this point, the frozen Abkhazian conflict was reignited, as Georgia tried to extricate itself out from under the Kremlin policy of imperialism.

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45 Ibid., 51.
46 Petersen, 198.
47 Cornell, 184.
48 Human Rights Watch, 38.
49 Ibid., 45.
Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Abkhazia, like Transnistria, has become a “forgotten” conflict, in which the Russian “peacekeeping” mission is passively accepted by the international community. Over the years, the Russian government has consistently applied (with some success) to various international institutions for legitimization of its peacekeeping activities in Abkhazia.\textsuperscript{50} Alexandros Petersen argues that “two major reasons account for the lack of knowledge and absence of mainstream study of the conflict: there was little coverage of events during the conflict, and there has been little exploration of the conflict since.”\textsuperscript{51} This silence has allowed Russia to maintain a peaceful image on the world stage while exerting immense power over the future of Georgia, especially in terms of veto power over the country’s European ambitions.

\textbf{6. Conclusion}

These three case studies show that Russian foreign policy is defined by systematic uncertainty. The Russian government supports various factions in internecine conflicts on the fringes of the former Soviet Union to keep these regions in a state of constant political instability. Russia can then bolster its position in the “near abroad” by acting as an arbiter of peace and keeping its neighbors in a vulnerable geopolitical position. Since the founding of the post-Soviet Russian state, its government and military have pursued their foreign policy interests through the use of both official military forces and independent actors. The political scientist Ted Hopf argues that the Russian government’s use of independent actors in the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union was a deliberate strategy: “instead of reasserting command over the previously autonomous military forces, [the Russian state] either encouraged them to continue

\textsuperscript{50} Hopf, 237.
\textsuperscript{51} Petersen, 188.
violating international norms, remained silent, or issued conflicting orders.” Independent actors, volatile and yet beholden to Moscow, continue to play the crowning role in maintaining uncertainty in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, and Abkhazia. Each of these regions also provides specific political and economic benefits for Russia. Maintaining conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh allows Russia to maintain regional dependence on its energy infrastructure while weakening the political power of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The forgotten conflict in Transnistria weakens Moldova’s ability to integrate with Western political structures. Russia continues to wield the Republic of Abkhazia as a weapon against the Georgian government. Russia continues to support these separatist states despite the “freezing” of military conflict by granting legal benefits to their residents. Between 1998 and 2008, about 100,000 Transnistrians (about one-fifth of the region’s population, who are internationally recognized as Moldovans) became Russian citizens in accordance with the Russian parliament’s legal provisions. At the same time, and especially during 2002–2003, Russian citizenship was offered to the majority of the population of Abkhazia. While these conflicts have been institutionalized and forgotten, the Kremlin has enacted similar policies elsewhere, especially in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

Whether the Kremlin’s reactive foreign policy will be effective in Eastern Ukraine remains to be seen. However, it already shows signs of turning into a “forgotten” conflict, as international recognition of Russian “peacekeeping” in the Donbas does not seem to be far off. Two years after the beginning of separatist insurgency in Eastern Ukraine, Maria Altshuller argued, “although Russia’s interference in Ukraine was a hot topic in 2014, especially in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, the issue has now faded from the West’s public

52 Hopf, 226.
53 Ciobanu, 69.
54 Ibid., 134.
consciousness despite the problem being far from resolved.” Russian involvement is only increasing, however. Independent actors have created an uncertain situation that masks Russian power in the region. Mirroring initiatives in Transnistria and Abkhazia, citizens of both the Luhansk and Donetsk Republics can now apply to receive Russian citizenship. Russia has resisted and will resist any attempts to force it from the negotiating table on Eastern Ukraine. The ongoing conflict prevents Ukraine from entering either NATO or the EU, thus keeping the country within the Russian sphere of influence.

Russia’s reactive foreign policy approach, such as its support for independent actors and the institutionalization of quasi-states and peacekeeping forces, has allowed it to maintain significant power within the former Soviet Union. Former Soviet republics have been effectively stunted in their political and economic growth, weakening resistance to Russian power. In this foreign policy formation, “regions become levers with which Russia can undermine Western political ideologies, challenge unipolar superpower rule, and alter its geopolitical standing with the West.” However, outright aggression by the Russian state can threaten this formation. Russia’s recent annexation of Crimea, although couched in terms of supporting separatism, was a clearly aggressive move. This was a deviation from the reactive foreign policy used in previous conflicts: Moscow’s actions did not institutionalize a quasi-state or a frozen conflict but instead established complete state control over the peninsula. In this context, the annexation of Crimea represents a potentially dangerous misstep in Kremlin foreign policy.

Russia’s recent annexation of Crimea may suggest a shift towards a more aggressive foreign policy approach. This could prove harmful for Russian interests as Moscow’s reactive

55 Altshuller.
56 “Moscow to start distributing Russian passports in the occupied Donbas.”
57 Dunn and Bobick, 410.
foreign policy has relied in large part on the inattention and tolerance of foreign powers. Although the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, and Abkhazia have become “forgotten,” the EU and US might be prompted to intervene if Russia continues to take aggressive measures in the “near abroad.” Furthermore, Russian foreign policy can give too much latitude for commitments to independent actors, who may not be controllable during and post-conflict. On the other hand, withdrawal of support by Russia would probably spell collapse of separatism in these regions, providing a powerful incentive to stay within preset Kremlin boundaries. As Pal Kosto argues, “for most quasi-states, the support from an external patron is crucially important, and their survival chances would be drastically reduced should it be withdrawn.”\(^{58}\) The question of how to counter the Kremlin’s foreign policy in the “near abroad” remains. The only semi-successful attempt has been NATO’s “Partnership for Peace”, which has slowly attempted to bring countries like Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova into the EU sphere of influence.\(^{59}\) For the time being, however, it seems that Russian foreign policy has proved sustainable in the long term.

\(^{58}\) Kolsto, 733–734.  
\(^{59}\) Ciobanu, 144.
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