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PROTRACTED CONFLICTS IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBORHOOD: BETWEEN AVERTING WARS AND BUILDING TRUST

While working to seal off Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia after the 2008 war, Russia promised to play a constructive role in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflict. This paper aims to assess how Russia delivered on its renewed peace-making pledge. It also will spell out how Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova have reacted to the new Russian undertaking to revive negotiations within the Minsk Group, the “5+2” format or other formulas with the direct participation of Moscow. The paper will address how other international stakeholders have adapted to the 2008 post-conflict situation and will uncover the developments relevant for the conflict resolution process in the breakaway regions. It will conclude with an analysis on prospective strategies to be employed by all sides and regional players in dealing with the conflicts in the Eastern neighborhood and what could be done in 2013 to push the negotiations forward.

Key words: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, protracted conflicts, Eastern neighborhood.

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Echoes of the 2008 war

Cementing the deadlock in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

The recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, shortly after the cease-fire mediated by the European Union (EU) was struck, generated dynamics which led Russia and Georgia into what looks like a prolonged strategic deadlock. Great powers reluctantly reverse decisions taken in the past. Prestige rationales, the inertia of the decision-making machinery and the possession of substantial resources enough at least in the short- and mid- run to absorb the high cost of what proves to be a mistaken decision, explains the great powers' lethargy with which specific policies are reappraised and amended. The creeping withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan accompanied by the painful search for an honorable

exit strategy, the confusion of the decision-making apparatus produced by several power transitions at the top of the Politburo, soaring human costs and rapidly dwindling material resources, is the case in point. (Cordovez and Harrison, 1995) Only the combination of domestic and external factors could set the stage for a drastic policy change by the great powers in a relatively short time frame. The Soviet Union's adaptation towards the growing likelihood of Germany's reunification speaks volumes about how sweeping changes at the international level and imperatives of domestic reforms compelled a great power to modify its policy towards a core Cold War frontline issue. (Grachev, 2008, pp.131-162) Looking at the post-conflict situation in Georgia, neither the international context is favorable to the country's reintegration, nor is the domestic pressure from within Russia or the separatist enclaves to a

reconciliation with the Tbilisi authorities. Instead, Russia and Georgia are prisoners of a vicious circle which, as history shows, is not impossible, but will be hard to untangle.

With the end of the military conflict, Russia was busy cementing its military and economic presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia amassed a powerful security contingent in each region (approximately 4000-5000 troops) and deployed tactical ballistic missiles in South Ossetia (Tochka-U) and air defense missile systems in Abkhazia (S-300). It also worked to modernize its air access infrastructure in South Ossetia (helipad near Dzhava) and to expand its foothold on Abkhazia's Black Sea shore (in the port of Ochamchira). As a result, from a military point of view, the separatist enclaves are safe from a conventional attack, while Russia, if needed, is able to split Georgia in two in several hours, by cutting the transport infrastructure (main highways and railways) linking the western and the eastern parts of the country, and to rapidly reach with ground troops the outskirts of Tbilisi. In economic terms, Russia has deepened the detachment of the breakaway regions from Georgia and their dependence on Moscow. In 2009, the construction of the gas pipeline from Dzarikau in North Ossetia to Tskhinvali was completed. Russia significantly increased its direct budgetary support, covering more than 90% of South Ossetia's budget and slightly below 50% of Abkhazia's financial needs. The Kremlin moved to take over the strategic infrastructure, such as the Babushera airport and the railway system in Abkhazia. It also yearned to link the non-recognized republics' development with Russian megaprojects or its military presence. The involvement of Abkhazia in the preparations for the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games and the concentration of South Ossetia's economy on serving the Russian military bases epitomize the Kremlin's approach. On the diplomatic front, Moscow strived to multiply the number of recognitions of separatist enclaves (so far mainly provided by microstates), to portray Georgia as an aggressive state, and to dissuade arms exporters from delivering any kind of weapons to Georgia.

At the same time, Georgia realizing that it cannot change the new status quo in the short- and mid-run, was eager to make Russia pay the price for the new equilibrium on the ground.¹ Tbilisi enrolled the support of the United States (US) and the EU

to impede a worldwide recognition process of the separatist republics. The government was active in mobilizing support in capitals and international fora for Georgia's territorial integrity. To this end, Tbilisi sought to gain recognition of the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by states and international organizations and support for Russia's troop withdrawal. References regarding the occupation status of the separatist republics came from the Lithuanian Seim, the US Senate, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the NATO and OSCE Parliamentary Assemblies. NATO called on Russia to reconsider its decision regarding the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia avoided engaging the leaders in Sukhumi or Tskhinvali opting to develop policies over their heads, aimed directly at the population of the regions (e.g. healthcare, education). Georgia kept without much enthusiasm "talking for the sake of the talk" with Russia in the framework of the Geneva process.² Tbilisi adopted some measures to irritate Russia, such as recognizing the "Circassian Genocide", which took place on the site where the 2014 Olympic Games will be held and unilaterally lifted visas for residents from the North Caucasus. Despite correcting the decision regarding the visa free system, extending its provisions to all Russian citizens and hammering the deal on Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), air communication resumption and the re-opening of the Kazbegi-Lars checkpoint; Georgia's positions with regard to the breakaway regions remained diametrically opposite. The impasse Russia and Georgia reached by 2012 provides little hope for conflict resolution in the foreseeable future, unless relations between Georgia, the separatist republics and Russia will change profoundly.

What about the other protracted conflicts in the Eastern neighborhood?

While working to seal off Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, Russia promised to play a constructive role in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistrian conflicts. Therefore, this paper aims to assess how Russia delivered on its peace-making pledge in the aftermath of the conflict with Georgia. It also will spell out how Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova have reacted to the new Russian undertaking to revive negotiations within the Minsk Group, the "5+2" format or other formulas with the direct participation of Moscow. The paper will

address how the other international stakeholders have adapted to the 2008 post-conflict situation and will uncover developments relevant for the conflict resolution process in the breakaway regions. It will conclude with an analysis on prospective strategies to be employed by all sides and regional players in case of protracted conflicts in the Eastern neighborhood and what could be done in 2013 to push forward the negotiations. However, before dwelling into the main analytical part, a few observations regarding protracted conflicts in the Eastern neighborhood are necessary in order to acquire a better understanding of the phenomena and its wider ramifications.

The issue of the protracted conflicts in the Eastern neighborhood is intermingled with several economic and security dossiers which transcend the local or regional dimension. Protracted conflicts are also integrated in the neighborhood policies of the main regional players. Therefore, an analysis of the protracted conflicts helps to understand the multiple interconnections between the political, military, economic and cultural policies of the various actors in the post-Soviet region. At the intra-regional level, conflicts hinder inclusive cooperation in the South Caucasus and explain the geography of new gas or oil pipelines and railway projects. Conflicts are taken in account in Russia's or the EU's external energy policies calculations. At the intra-state level, conflicts are among the factors that impacted negatively on the economic development of states by discouraging or scaring off potential foreign investors, by fueling arms races, which deplete societies of development funds, and by weakening states through artificially accumulated gas debts. Conflicts also hampered democratization by providing an excuse for authoritarian practices allegedly aimed to ensure domestic order and stability necessary to deal effectively with separatists and their external patrons. At the macro-regional level, conflicts are inter-linked with conventional arms control regimes in Europe, in particular with respect to the Southern flank ceilings and the principle of the host nation consent for foreign military presence. Last, but not least, protracted conflicts are embedded in rivalries between regional powers, who use them often to undermine each other's policies and to fend off the encroachments of extra-regional powers in what is regarded as a "sphere of privileged interests".

Nagorno-Karabakh

Renewed negotiations on the Madrid Principles

The armed conflict in the South Caucasus in 2008 temporarily toned down Baku's belligerent rhetoric towards Armenia and reduced the appetite for militarily recovering Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding occupied regions.³ Russia's demonstrated will to use hard power in the region as well as its capacity to cause damage to the critical regional infrastructure, which serves Azerbaijan's economic interests, prompted the rebalancing of the traditionally multi-directional foreign policy of Baku. Thus, in 2008-2010 the Russian vector received additional weight in Azerbaijan's strategic calculations, in particular with regard to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan was worried about the implications of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's recognition by Russia for protracted conflict on its territory. Instead of trumpeting loudly its displeasure with the violation of its neighbor's territorial integrity, Azerbaijan worked to accommodate Russian interests. While the spokesman of the Foreign Ministry qualified Georgia's actions as in line with international norms, Azerbaijan's leadership refrained from criticizing Russia directly. (Today.az, 2008) In a dramatic reversal of roles, SOCAR agreed in 2009 for the first time to export gas to Russia. Later, SOCAR's symbolic volumes of exported gas slowly expanded reaching over 2 bcm (billion cubic meters) in 2012. (Azernews, 2012) In 2008 and 2009, branches of Moscow State University (MGU) and VTB Bank were inaugurated in Baku, further cementing the bilateral human and economic dimension of the relationship. Building on Moscow's declared intentions to prove its honest broker credentials in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan decided to give Russia another chance and to enlist her support to change the status-quo in the conflict area. Turkey's drive to normalize relations with Armenia and the United States' supportive role behind this diplomatic initiative provided an additional boost to Baku's rapprochement with Moscow.

Armenia followed with great concern the military conflict unfolding in Georgia. An eventual success of the Georgian army would certainly, in the opinion of Armenian experts, encourage Azerbaijan's hardliners and would increase popular pressure

on the president to act.⁴ Thus, seen from this perspective, Georgia's failure to re-establish control over South Ossetia was received with some relief in Armenia. It also confirmed that Russia is ready to defend its allies in the region, although there are still doubts in Yerevan at which point of a military clash with Azerbaijan Moscow will decide to intervene and by which means.⁵ The conflict in 2008 severed Armenia's trade transit via Georgia, inflicting heavy economic losses, estimated at \$670 million. After the conclusion of the cease-fire agreement mediated by the EU, Armenia assisted Georgia in repairing the destroyed railway infrastructure. Fortunately for Armenia, the pipeline which delivers gas from Russia via Georgia had not been damaged. Overdependence on terrestrial transit via Georgia (around 75%) is one of the factors which explain Armenia's reluctance, despite Russia's pressure, to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The need for the diversification of the transit routes also propelled Armenia to look for opportunities to re-open the border with Turkey that had been closed in the 1990s as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Thus, in 2008 Armenia responded with pragmatism to the Turkish overtures to normalize bilateral relations. If successful, the process of normalization with Armenia could augment Turkey's position in the South Caucasus, and potentially have an impact on the conflict resolution process in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Experiencing an acute image deficit in the international arena as a result of the war with Georgia and facing Turkey's reassertion attempts in the region, Russia threw its weight behind reviving the work of the OSCE Minsk Group on Nagorno-Karabakh and mediating high-level talks between Baku and Yerevan. Besides giving a face lift to its image, Russia sought to assume a leading role among the Minsk Group co-chairs and to prevent fighting along the Line of Contact, similar to the skirmishes that took place in March 2008. Since August 2008, the Russian president hosted 10 meetings between leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a result, the two sides signed the Meiendorf declaration (2008), the Astrakhan declaration (2010), and the Sochi declaration (2012); these were the first joint documents adopted by Azerbaijan and Armenia since the 1994 truce that suspended the war. Russia also recruited the high-level support of the co-chairs, a fact that was reflected in the G8/G20

joint declarations of the French, US and Russian presidents on Nagorno-Karabakh in L'Aquila (2009), Muskoka (2010), Deauville (2011) and Los Cabos (2012). In parallel, Russia intensively courted Azerbaijan, playing in the hands of Baku's strategy to torpedo the unconditional normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia. Ultimately, Russia added a nail in the coffin of the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, asserted greater control over the negotiation process on Nagorno-Karabakh and re-asserted its central role in preserving the military equilibrium between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Despite renewed expectations, the negotiations produced few outcomes. The sides committed to seek a solution to the conflict via political means, to encourage confidence-building measures and to exchange prisoners of war and return the remains of officers killed in action. Although some progress was made, Armenia and Azerbaijan have failed to agree on the Madrid Principles tabled in 2007 to guide a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Major stumbling issues seem to be: the deadline of the Armenian force withdrawal from the occupied regions; the guarantee of a terrestrial link between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh; the nature of the interim status of Nagorno-Karabakh; and the timeframe for the organization of a referendum to decide its final status. Looking in perspective, Armenian experts also question the capability of the would-be international peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh to enforce peace and assure the population's security.⁶ Parliamentary elections in May 2012 held, according to international monitors, in a more competitive political environment, have reduced Armenia's leadership space for maneuver regarding talks over the Madrid Principles.

Weapons again speak loudly

After a short period of relative calm during which the "sniper war" however has not stopped, in 2010 both sides made use of bellicose rhetoric and accused each other of obstructing negotiations. Verbal mutual attacks spiraled into a series of border clashes in 2010 along the Contact Line, clashes which continued in 2011 and 2012, prompting experts to warn of a possible escalation of violence into a full scale war. (International Crisis Group 2011) Several developments fed the deterioration of the security situation in the region. The process of Armenia's normalization of relations with Turkey

came to a standstill. The Turkish leadership, openly taking the side of Azerbaijan, argued that the normalization of relations with Armenia should be contingent upon progress on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. (Today's Zaman, 2010) The suspension of the normalization process has pushed Armenia and Azerbaijan to strengthen their security and military ties with their traditional allies in the region. In 2010, Armenia accepted to extend a more robust Russian military presence on its territory until 2044, while Azerbaijan concluded a strategic partnership and security cooperation pact with Turkey. Deepened military ties with regional allies hardened the positions of both sides. In this context, violence along the border became an integral part of the negotiation strategies, with both sides relying on it to send signals and to test the will of the other to continue talks or engage in military action.

Despite the heavy impact of the global economic crisis, the arms race has continued with both Azerbaijan and Armenia acquiring increasingly sophisticated equipment and weaponry. During the summer 2012 incursion, Azerbaijan tested a number of drones from its rapidly expanding drone fleet. The top brass in Yerevan assured that it keeps pace with new military hardware acquisitions, in particular air-defense systems. (Asbarez.com, 2011) As a consequence, Azerbaijan grew increasingly irritated by Russia's arms deliveries to Armenia, which neutralized Baku's effort to sway the military balance in its favor and negotiate from a position of strength. Even some arms transfers from Russia to Azerbaijan, such as the Mi-35M combat transport helicopters or the S-300 missile defense systems, could not quell Baku's anxiety regarding similar cooperation between Armenia and Russia. Armenia's enhanced capability to repel an attack solidified the status quo, making any change of the present equilibrium an even more distant perspective.

The re-settlement of Armenians from Syria fleeing from the civil war in Nagorno-Karabakh and repetitive promises to re-open the newly-refurbished (with assistance of the Diaspora) airport in Sepanakert in 2011, have further heightened tensions. Baku threatened to shoot down any aircraft entering its internationally recognized territory and decried the transfers of Armenians from Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh in an effort to reverse the

negative demographic dynamics in the region. (RFE/RL, 2011; Trend.az, 2012) "Parliamentary" (2010) and "presidential" (2012) elections in Nagorno-Karabakh have not altered the political power distribution in the separatist enclave, but further poisoned the atmosphere between Baku and Yerevan. The outgoing leader of Nagorno-Karabakh was re-elected for another term in office. The "elections" were instrumentalized to demonstrate the separatist region's democratic credentials and to boost its legitimacy at the international level, despite its non-recognized status. In this respect, Nagorno-Karabakh does not differ from the other non-recognized entities in the post-Soviet region. Azerbaijan blacklisted all foreign citizens who observed the voting process in Nagorno-Karabakh and denounced the "elections" as unhelpful to the peace negotiations. (Trend.az, 2012)

Preventing war and maintaining dialogue

As the two sides have resumed their militaristic rhetoric and clashed along the Contact Line, the Minsk Group, instead of pushing for the Madrid Principles, should engage in shuttle diplomacy to cool off the belligerent drive of the conflict parties. The main objective of the international mediators was preventing skirmishes that could lead to major military conflict. With this in mind, mediators put pressure on the two sides to withdraw snipers and implement a mechanism for investigating incidents on the front line. Although none of the initiatives have been implemented, the mediators managed to temporarily restrain Armenia and Azerbaijan. Openly criticizing both sides after a wave of violence along the Contact Line, the Minsk Group co-chairs called on the presidents to prepare their respective societies "for peace, not war". (OSCE, 2011)

However, the August 2012 extradition from Hungary and the pardoning of Ramil Safarov, convicted for murder on ethnic grounds of an Armenian officer while attending a NATO course in 2004, has led to a rapid deterioration of bilateral ties. Armenia severed its diplomatic ties with an EU member state (Hungary) and took a break from the negotiations. The glorification of Safarov by the Azeri government and the generally weak critical reaction of Azerbaijan's society proved that emotions with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and ethnic intolerance are still running high, frustrating any attempts to narrow the inter-societal

gap which separates the two sides. Violence migrated from the border line to the virtual space, opening a new dimension to the conflict. In the aftermath of Safarov's pardoning, governmental and media outlet websites in Armenia and Azerbaijan experienced an unprecedented wave of cyber attacks. According to media reports, approximately 40 websites in Armenia and 20 websites in Azerbaijan became victims of "cyber wars". Hackers managed to take out for more than one day Azerbaijan's official presidency webpage. (Abrahamyan, 2012)

With peace talks effectively stalled, international mediators worked to nudge the conflict parties to re-launch dialogue. Although by the end of October, the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan reiterated their commitment to continue negotiations towards reaching a peaceful solution, there are no signs that would point to an even modest progress in the upcoming talks. The certification of the airport in Stepanakert by the Armenian Civil Aviation authorities in October 2012 and promises to operate a first flight between Yerevan and Stepanakert is likely to flare up more disputes between the two countries, ultimately poisoning the peace talks.

Transnistria

Reviving talks

In the aftermath of the armed conflict in Georgia in 2008, the Moldovan president was invited to Sochi, where he held talks with his Russian counterpart on new approaches towards the Transnistrian conflict. The Russian side pledged to support progress in the peace talks. In March 2009, the Kremlin sponsored a trilateral declaration signed by the Russian and Moldovan presidents as well as the leader of Transnistria. The process took another turn in September 2009 when the post-electoral crisis in Chisinau brought to power the Alliance for European Integration (AEI). The ruling collation moved to re-assert Moldova's stance on the unconditional evacuation of Russian military stockpiles from Colbasna and the troops guarding it. Chisinau expressed the need to replace, after almost 20 years of peace in the region, the "peacekeepers" with civilian monitors under an international mandate. In parallel, Moldova initiated a diplomatic campaign to build wide international support to re-launch formal negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict and strived to build direct dialogue with Tiraspol in

order to restore the connections that were severed during last decade. Moldova's progress on the road to European integration was envisioned to produce a positive impact on the conflict resolution process in the long run, by making Moldova more attractive for the population of Transnistria. In a relatively short period, the Moldovan and Transnistrian leaders had 3 formal or informal meetings (1+1); the work of the bilateral experts groups dealing with sectoral issues was revived; passenger rail traffic between Chisinau and Odessa, which goes via Tiraspol, was resumed; and a principled agreement to re-establish telephone communication was reached.

In the early stages, the US lent its support to Moldova's efforts. The US ambassador to Moldova met the separatist's leader Smirnov in 2010 and hosted talks between the chief negotiators in Chisinau. The US also worked actively to diffuse tensions between the two sides over human right abuses in Transnistria. As the negotiations process moved from an informal (2010) to a formal phase (2011), the US switched its focus by channeling most of its support via the OSCE Mission to Moldova to ensure the successful implementation of the confidence-building measures.⁷

The EU assumed a bigger role in Transnistria; an evolution facilitated by the breakaway region's re-orientation of trade towards the European market. Besides investing in the viability of Moldova's statehood, the EU encouraged more direct talks between Chisinau and Tiraspol and gradually increased the financial assistance for confidence-building projects. The EU proposed to include the Transnistrian regions into the Moldova-Ukraine inter-regional cooperation under the Euroregion "Nistru" framework. In February 2010, the Union suspended the travel ban against the Transnistrian leadership and raised the issue of the resumption of the "5+2" talks. To lure Russian support, Germany launched the Meseberg Process in 2010, which aimed to enhance EU-Russia cooperation in the security field, in exchange for palpable progress on the Transnistrian dossier.

Throughout 2010 and 2011, Russia's position oscillated between exerting pressure on the Transnistrian leadership and, at the same time, delaying the decision to re-launch the "5+2" negotiations. While Smirnov proved to be a reliable soldier guarding Russian geopolitical interests

in Transnistria for two decades, Moscow grew increasingly uncomfortable in its dealings with him. The Kremlin was scheming to replace him with a more compliant leader at the “presidential elections” scheduled for December 2011. Russia hoped that the alternation of power will internationally improve Transnistria’s murky image. Thus, ahead of the “elections”, Russia suspended its financial aid to Transnistria, raised with Tiraspol the issue of the region’s gas debt to Gazprom, and harassed Smirnov’s family through its law-enforcement bodies.

While planning the power transition in Tiraspol, Russia was working after the November 2010 early elections in Moldova to foster the center-left coalition headed by Communists, which the Kremlin favored. This explains Russia’s reluctance in 2010, despite the combined efforts of France and Germany during the Deauville trilateral summit, to reset negotiations on Transnistria. However, Russia was not completely against the re-launch of the “5+2” formal talks (understood by the Kremlin as substantial progress) as, according to its calculations, it would be a fair price for a greater say in EU security matters if the Meseberg Process were to succeed.

Acceleration

The Transnistrian conflict passed an important watershed after the defeat in December 2011 of the Kremlin-backed candidate by the independent Yevgeni Shevchuk in the “presidential” race in the breakaway region. The successful election of the president in Moldova in March 2012, which averted new early elections and ensured greater political stability, provided an additional boost to the negotiation process. The combined effect of the two events helped build and sustain in the first half of 2012 the positive dynamics around Transnistria. The formal talks re-launched in Vilnius in November 2011 gathered pace with the help of Ukrainian diplomats.⁸ Progress was facilitated by Transnistria’s propensity to gain more autonomy through balancing between Russia, Ukraine and the EU. Tiraspol was eager to draw financial assistance from the EU in order to enhance its room for maneuver with Russia and to tackle the difficult domestic economic situation.⁹ After 3 rounds of talks, the sides agreed on the principles and procedures of the negotiations process as well as on the agenda

which was divided in 3 thematic baskets: socio-economic aspects, humanitarian and legal aspects, and political and security issues. Tiraspol also lifted the customs duty imposed on imports from Moldova in 2006. It also began the retransmission of the “Moldova 1” state-owned channel on its territory and sent an observer to attend the EU-Moldova negotiations on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Shortly after, Chisinau and Tiraspol agreed on the resumption of the freight railway communication and the creation of 2 joint customs posts in Transnistria to serve it.

Ukraine organized in Odessa the first meeting between Prime Minister Filat and the leader of Transnistria Shevchuk. Thereafter, the leaders met 6 times in either formal or informal settings. Kyiv’s constructive position was further reflected in the support for the demilitarization and internationalization of the present “peacekeeping” mission in Transnistria and actions towards the demarcation of the Moldova-Ukraine border on the Transnistrian segment. To uphold the positive momentum, the EU lifted the travel ban against the Transnistrian leadership and committed €28 million more to supplement the funds (€12 million) allocated for confidence-building measures between Moldova and Transnistria for the 2012-2015 period.

The Russian factor: putting on the breaks

As Moldova overcame political deadlock and talks on a new political and economic treaty with the EU rapidly advanced, the value of Transnistria as a lever Russia enjoys against Chisinau increased. To prevent unfavorable changes of the status quo around the conflict and to derail Moldova’s European drive, Moscow acted to curb Tiraspol’s autonomy and to instrumentalize the conflict in order to hamper Moldova’s integration with the EU. As a longtime Russian expert confessed, “Russia is not going to wait and see how Moldova with the EU’s help prepares to absorb Transnistria”.¹⁰

The first step in this direction was the appointment of the Deputy Prime Minister responsible for the military-industrial complex, Dmitri Rogozin, as special presidential representative for Transnistria and co-chair of the Russian-Moldovan Commission for Economic Cooperation. The nomination of the highest-ranking governmental official since the involvement of the deputy head of the presidential

administration, Dmitri Kozak in 2003, to deal with Transnistria, signaled the Kremlin's increased focus and concern regarding developments on the Transnistrian dossier. From his early days in office, Rogozin acted to intensify communication with the new Transnistrian leader, who was not inspiring much trust in Moscow. He also worked to spoil the direct dialogue between Chisinau and Tiraspol, which was perceived as marginalizing Russia's mediator role. His discourse sought to revive Romania's threat regarding Moldova's statehood, but at the same time, to weaken the Moldovan state by fomenting a split between the executive in Chisinau and the autonomous region of Gagauzia. (Socor, 2012) He employed bulldozing tactics to secure the opening of a Russian consulate in Tiraspol, needed to boost the institutional capacity to distribute Russian passports in the region.

Russia applied economic "sticks and carrots" in Moldova and Transnistria. Until spring 2012, Moscow withheld financial aid to Transnistria, while normally covering 70% of the separatist's enclave budget deficit. After several trips to Moscow, Shevchuk managed to secure \$30 million channeled to buttress Transnistria's currency reserves and two tranches (almost \$21 million in total) of direct budgetary support. (Unimedia, 2012) In an effort to counterweight the EU's financial offer, Russia promised to provide approximately \$95 million in 2013 for various programs targeting the infrastructure, the telecommunication sector, and social and economic development. (Noi.md, 2012) In a further effort to de-link Transnistria from Moldova, the Kremlin began fostering humanitarian and economic connections between Transnistria and the Russian regions. Mimicking the EU, Russia advertised the idea of a Eurasian region called "Transnsitria", which would forge cooperation between Transnistria and regions from Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia. (Novosti Pridnestrovia, 2012) To derail Moldova's European integration, Moscow conveniently switched back the responsibility for the gas debt from the old Transnistrian leadership to the government in Moldova. Besides demanding that Moldova quit the Energy Community with the EU, the Russian side linked the price for gas in a new contract with Moldova to settle a gas debt of \$4.1 billion, a major part of it was accumulated by Transnistria. (Itar-Tass, 2012)

The Kremlin strived to ensure that Transnistria will coordinate its position more closely in the "5+2" talks to prevent agreements which Russia did not approve of, such as the one in Vienna in April 2012.¹¹ Russia dispatched a FSB officer to become the deputy head of Transnistria's KGB. It also began the modernization of the former military airport in Tiraspol and introduced without authorization heavy-caliber infantry weapons into the "security zone" separating Moldova and Transnistria. Explaining the latter as a mistake, the Russian side nonetheless blamed Moldova for being non-cooperative with regard Transnistria's outreach initiatives. (Kommersant.md, 2012)

Soon Transnistria began correcting its policy line, synchronizing it with Russia's stance. The chief of the Transnistrian security service resurrected the "besieged fortress" narrative, accusing Moldova of preparations to host a NATO military base in Bulboaca. (RIA Novosti, 2012) He was echoed by Transnistria's "foreign minister", who claimed that in the light of security threats, the "peacekeeping" mission should be bolstered. (Moldova.org, 2012) The head of Transnistrian diplomacy also exposed a more isolationist economic outlook, denouncing the region's orientation towards European market as artificially shaped and hinting that economic agents should return to Transnistria's traditional markets in the east. (TV PMR, 2012) To support this move, the head of the "central bank" has not ruled out the possibility of using the Russian Ruble in parallel with the Transnistrian currency.

In the summer of 2012, Transnistria hindered the process of the border demarcation between Ukraine and Moldova, forcing Ukrainian diplomats to hold additional talks with Tiraspol to unlock the process.¹² In the autumn, the "5+2" negotiations and the accomplishments of the working groups registered almost no progress, partially due to Transnistria's increasing demands, an opinion shared by Russian diplomats. (Kommersant.md, 2012) Moreover, Transnistria reversed its decisions on the customs duty regarding imported goods from Moldova and stopped the retransmission of the Moldovan private news channel 'Publika TV' and the state-owned 'TV Moldova 1'. As Transnistria was multiplying its demands and refusing to engage in talks covering the 3rd thematic basket (political and security issues) and Russia became more assertive, Moldova's position grew more defensive. Chisinau

increasingly suspected Tiraspol of looking for a change in the status quo which would pre-empt the country's reintegration. Commenting on the change of fortunes of the Transnistrian conflict, a diplomat involved in the mediation recognized that "without some even minor accomplishment by the end of the year, the positive momentum in the talks is likely to die out."¹³

Looking ahead

As the circumstances around the protracted conflicts in the Eastern neighborhood do not inspire much optimism, what should we expect in 2013 and what can be done to make some headway?

The promise of a peaceful power transition in Georgia

The inception in October 2012 of a peaceful transition of power in Georgia, which will continue to unfold in 2013 (presidential elections) is good news for the region. In a relatively short time, the new leadership in Tbilisi has shown the will to amend the previous approach to the protracted conflicts and relations with Russia. While the objectives remain the same, the way the government intends to accomplish them is different.

Firstly, there is an obvious change in tone with regard to the separatist authorities. Instead of labeling them "puppet regimes" that are not worth engaging with, the new Georgian executive announced its intention to talk directly with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. Secondly, the minister for reintegration called for the amendment of the 2008 Law on Occupied Territories, several provisions of which have been criticized by the Venice Commission and the EU as impeding the exercise of some basic rights and cementing the isolation between Georgia and the breakaway regions. Modifications will probably lift some restrictions on freedom of movement and trade activities between Georgia and its separatist regions. The initiative of the new reintegration minister to recognize the identification documents issued by the separatist authorities and to re-open railway traffic between Georgia and Russia via Abkhazia are in tune with the de-isolation approach advocated by new Georgian leadership. Thirdly, the new government yearns to normalize its relations with Russia within the limits imposed by the imperatives of the country's reintegration. This policy line fits into the population's perception

that despite perceiving Russia as a main security threat, it is longing to have normal economic relations with its northern neighbor. Thus, the prime minister appointed a special envoy for the relations with Russia, showing an interest to discuss directly with Moscow a full range of bilateral issues, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In another accommodating move, 'PIK TV', the only Georgian public channel broadcasts in Russian, covering the North Caucasus and the European part of Russia was taken off air, and at the same time, several cable operators in Georgia re-introduced in their TV packages Russian channels whose retransmission was suspended after the 2008 armed conflict.

As the "everything but recognition" strategy is still very much in its gestation stage, it opens new opportunities for the EU's "non-recognition and engagement" policy towards the breakaway regions of Georgia. The EU has to encourage Tbilisi to ease its modalities, adopted in 2010, for the engagement of organizations working in the occupied territories, which complicated their activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. With the modalities significantly liberalized, the EU could support more vigorously confidence-building measures in the conflict areas and other international organizations could follow it. The EU should seize the moment and re-energize the Geneva talks, in order to nudge the sides closer towards the adoption of the non-use of force declaration, which would include Russia. Also, the EU should make additional efforts to resume the Abkhazia incident prevention and response mechanism meetings suspended by Sukhumi in March 2012. In more general terms, the EU and the US have to remind the new government in Tbilisi of the importance of its policy towards Adzharia and ethnic minorities living in Georgia for the credibility of its conflict resolution efforts. Given the precarious nature of peace in the region and the potentially destabilizing effect of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games, the EU has to extend the EUMM mandate, which is due to expire in September 2013.

The task for the Georgian government and the EU to break the vicious circle that hampers the trust-building exercise is not easy. There will not be any miracles overnight. The memories of war are still fresh. The position of the Abkhazian leadership towards Georgia and the EU hardened throughout 2012. Sukhumi regards Georgia's attempts to open up Abkhazia as a trap that seeks to undermine its

“statehood”. The Abkhazian leadership decided to enhance its control over the activities of international humanitarian organizations by erecting some obstacles in their work. Economically depressed South Ossetia with a substantially shrinking population and a heavy Russian military presence increasingly resembles a closed military garrison. Nonetheless, projects to provide potable and irrigation water across the conflict areas in South Ossetia financed by the EU indicate some space for the implementation of confidence-building measures.

It is difficult to gauge whether Russia will tolerate to some extent Georgia’s direct outreach towards the separatist enclaves or whether it will act quietly in the early stages in order to escalate tensions, which will make re-rapprochement implausible. Beyond a few positive remarks from Moscow, it is equally difficult to predict the Russian reaction to Georgia’s “reset” proposal. The shoot-out between Georgian forces and North Caucasus rebels on the Russian-Georgian border in the summer of 2012 obviously points to the existence of common security threats that could facilitate the resumption of the bilateral dialogue. Supposedly Russia would wait for a full transition to take place in 2013 in order to engage in any substantial talks with Georgia. Regardless whether Moscow will reciprocate or not, the post-soviet history of high level Russia-Georgia relations should restrain overly enthusiastic expectations about quick and substantial improvements in bilateral relations once the power transition in Georgia is completed. If Russia will reciprocate it will be from a position of strength, perceiving Georgia as the party needing improved relations with the Kremlin in order to recover its lost share of the Russian market; to fend off pressure on its citizens working in Russia; and, generally to recuperate to some degree a sense of security.

Containing the negative spillover of the electoral season in Armenia and Azerbaijan

The presidential elections in Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2013 will leave an imprint on the peace talks. Although the race in Armenia promises to be a more competitive exercise, Azerbaijan’s president will face similar public constraints as his Armenian counterpart not to compromise on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The legitimacy of both political regimes partially rests on their rhetoric

and capacity to defend or to re-claim Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupied territories around it. In the case of Armenia’s outgoing president, who is a war veteran in Nagorno-Karabakh, the issue cannot be decoupled from his individual war experience. In both countries, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is an important identity marker, which shapes the national discourse and the self-identification of the citizens. Therefore, neither the outgoing presidents nor the candidates could manifest any intention to reach consensus with the rival side, which could be interpreted as a sign of weakness.

The spiraling tensions on the frontline in 2012 exclude even the slightest hint of a deal on the Madrid Principles in the run up to the elections. Thus, in 2013 the actors will publically revert to more maximalist positions, making dialogue behind closed doors, if at all, unproductive. Under these circumstances, the Minsk Group objective should be to keep the dialogue open, which in itself represents a basic confidence-building measure. It will also have to manage to keep the tensions around the possible opening of the airport in Stepanakert from escalating into a dangerous military-diplomatic stand-off, which could sever the bilateral dialogue. However, pushing the two sides further to withdraw snipers from the frontline will be of little avail, as they serve as an important ‘contactless’ tool of the tit-for-tat strategy.

Putin’s return to the Kremlin has visibly scaled down the Russian president’s interest in becoming more involved in mediating the talks between the conflicting sides. Since formally re-claiming power in May 2012, Putin has not hosted a single round of talks in the trilateral format, which was extensively employed by its predecessor. Having experience in dealing with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Putin is likely to adopt a hands-off approach, increasingly delegating the mediation mission to his foreign minister. He mostly will keep a close eye on maintaining the military balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Anticipating no concrete breakthroughs in 2013, Putin will thus keep a low profile in the mediation efforts, ensuring however a functional military equilibrium, which will keep the chances of an armed conflict at a minimum ahead of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. The agreement concluded in September 2012 between Russia and Armenia on the joint production of small arms with a perspective to deepen cooperation in the defense

industry field is indicative of the Kremlin's approach. Russia's status-quo stance will further deepen the irritation of Azerbaijan. Baku's position on the re-negotiation of the Gabala radar station lease to Russia in 2012 confirms this. Azerbaijan asked for a higher rent (\$300 million per annum) and adopted an uncompromising attitude. After several rounds of negotiations, Russia refused to accept the rent hike and decided to leave Gabala.

In spite of the gloomy prospects regarding progress on "high politics", namely the Madrid Principles, 2013 should not be a wasted year. It could be exploited to initiate some "low politics" projects that will prepare the ground at the micro-level for a sustainable peace between societies, by addressing the basic needs of communities. A "people first" approach, that would aim in the early phases to develop and implement a set of military confidence-building measures involving militaries and local authorities along the recognized international border between Azerbaijan and Armenia, a border closed since the early 1990s, should be considered. These measures would reduce the existing risks and enhance the security of civilians, drilling holes in the imaginary walls which separate societies. This experience could potentially be transferred to the communities living near the Contact Line. (Huseynov, Poghosyan and Oliphant, 2012, pp.7-34) A peaceful interaction at the local level could be a powerful example of how intolerance can be overcome and prove in practice that the advantages generated by cooperation outweigh situations of tense isolation between communities. The border village of Sadakhlo in Georgia, which until 2007 was a place where Armenians and Azerbaijanis were vigorously trading with each other, serves as a strong reminder that the history between the two societies is not only confined to war and hatred.

As EU officials have committed on many occasions to support the negotiation process in order to advance on the path of conflict resolution, the EU special representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia could play a role in facilitating an agreement regarding basic confidence-building measures between Azerbaijan and Armenia along the official border line. This could compliment what the EU already does at the level of civil societies to support peace-building in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There should be no illusions about a rapid deal. Although stagnation on

"high politics" issues will certainly make progress difficult, the focus on "low politics" is worth a try. If successful, as experts point out, not only could it be replicated on the frontline, but it would inverse the entire logic dominating the process, proving that small achievements at the level of "low politics" can positively spillover into "high politics" after Armenia and Azerbaijan leave their respective electoral battles behind.

Resurrecting positive momentum in the Transnistria talks

Of the four protracted conflicts in the Eastern neighborhood, the resolution process is the most advanced in Transnistria. Though the sides do not discuss the political status of the region yet, they embarked on the complex trust-building exercise that aims to reconstruct the links between societies severed over last two decades. However, by the end of 2012 the early enthusiasm shared by international mediators on the possibility of a rapid progress has evaporated. Some diplomats see that "Shevchuk's stellar moment has passed and Russia is in full control again."¹⁴ Moreover, Tiraspol's chief negotiator, who has been seen by EU officials as a new and promising face of Transnistrian diplomacy, grew less constructive with each visit he made in Russia. The upgraded version of the Transnistrian public diplomacy sought to get rid of the obstructionist image inherited from Smirnov, to be proactive and to subtly redirect the responsibility for the eventual lack of progress on the Moldovan side.¹⁵ As Tiraspol reverted to a "fortress under siege" discourse and hardened its position in the talks, it will be difficult for Transnistria in the upcoming year to defend and extend its public diplomacy gains registered in the first half of 2012. The obstruction of the progress in the talks will probably induce a change of attitudes towards Transnistria internationally.

Lately, Transnistria portrayed itself as a champion of unilateral steps made towards Moldova, which have allegedly not been reciprocated. Any attempts to corner Chisinau in this way is futile. Russia's open pressure to bolster Transnistria's position will put Moldova in a more defensive mood. In retrospect, the new leadership in Tiraspol has been undoing the effects of the decisions taken by its predecessors as a reaction to new customs regime on the border between Ukraine and Moldova. Despite claims of an economic blockade and a humanitarian disaster

provoked by the new customs regime, around 700 Transnistrian economic agents were registered as legal persons in Chisinau and penetrated the European market benefitting from the asymmetric trade preferences awarded to Moldova by the EU. Thus, while Transnistria maintains some discriminatory measures against Moldova introduced in 2006, its economic agents enjoy without restrictions the fruits of Moldova's trade regime with the EU. Moldova's constructive approach towards the resumption of the economically important for Transnistria freight railway traffic and proposals to lift the EU travel ban of the Transnistrian leadership expose the emptiness of the unilateral steps narrative promoted by Tiraspol.

2013 will be important in many ways for the quality of the negotiations and the general prospects of the Transnistrian conflict resolution process. Firstly, the course of the year will show if the positive momentum in talks can be revived and sustained. Freedom of travel (railway passenger traffic, transportation issues and the opening of the Gura Bacului bridge across the Nistru) and cooperation in combating crime should be prioritized. Besides the efforts of the international observers to keep the dialogue going, Ukraine's presidency of the OSCE could provide an additional boost to the negotiations in the "5+2" format and direct talks between Chisinau and Tiraspol mediated by Kyiv. Ukraine appointed a special representative of the OSCE for protracted conflicts who visited Tiraspol in November 2012. Given the improved bilateral relations with Kyiv, Moldova should use the Ukrainian channel to patiently continue talking to Tiraspol. Secondly, 2013 is the year when Moldova will probably conclude talks on an Association Agreement and a DCFTA with the EU. It also can set the stage for a visa-free regime with EU in 2014. As the negotiation process nears its end, Russia as a sponsor of an alternative integration design in the post-Soviet region will be tempted to exercise more pressure to prevent Moldova's drift towards the EU. The energy lever, combined with the escalation of tensions in Transnistria, could be the Kremlin's answer to these developments. Regardless of Russia's spoiler tactics, Moldova has to stick to its EU agenda and reiterate its stance on the need to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. At the same time, the EU has to continue to diplomatically and financially support Moldova's European integration

and work together with the US in order to discourage Russia from the militarization of Transnistria and instead start withdrawing its arms stockpile from the breakaway republic.

Finally, Moldova's DCFTA with the EU will eliminate the unilateral trade preferences in 2013. As Transnistria played the role of the passive observer during the first rounds of negotiations on a DCFTA and showed little interest to be covered by the new trade regime with the EU, its export-oriented economy that is substantially dependent on the EU market is poised to suffer. It is very unlikely that the Eastern markets could compensate the exodus from the European one. Moreover, once the DCFTA is in force in Moldova and in some foreseeable future in Ukraine, Transnistria will be sandwiched by the EU trade regime, making the Eurasian integration of Transnistria a far-fetched idea. Thus, in 2013 the EU has to double its efforts to convince Tiraspol to take a more active approach in the DCFTA negotiations, in exchange for assistance to ensure legal harmonization with EU standards. In order to achieve this, the EU has to focus primarily on the new Transnistrian leader, whose agenda and capacity to deliver on electoral promises to improve life of his citizens will be undermined by the loss of the European market. The EU should also engage the business community in order to stimulate the Transnistrian leadership's will to stay connected to the European market. At the same time, the EU has to think creatively about a reserve plan in order to minimize the disruptive effects in case Tiraspol will definitively decline to take part in the DCFTA.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that each protracted conflict in the Eastern neighborhood is going through different phases. These range from small-scale military clashes along the frontline and attempts to initiate basic confidence-building measures (so-called "no peace, no war") to more sustainable peace and the promotion of complex measures to foster trust, which could lead to conflict resolution. The escalation of minor incidents into a full scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh cannot be ruled out. Thanks to presence of the European monitors in Georgia, the chances for violence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to resume have been significantly reduced. The probability of military conflict in Transnistria, despite attempts to ignite the atmosphere, is

extremely low. Each conflict poses diverse challenges, requiring different types of actions from the international mediators and observers. In some cases, they must focus on preventing war; in other cases, they have to maintain a fragile peace or invest in confidence-building measures aimed at fostering links previously suspended by war and preparing the ground for a sustainable settlement of the conflicts.

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Endnotes

- 1 Interview with an expert, Tbilisi, 2011.
- 2 Interview with an official, Tbilisi, 2011.
- 3 Interview with an expert, Baku 2011.
- 4 Interview with an expert, Yerevan, 2011.
- 5 Interview with an expert, Yerevan, 2011.
- 6 Interview with an expert, Yerevan, 2011.
- 7 Interview with a US official, 2012.
- 8 Interview with an EU official, Brussels, 2012.
- 9 Interview with an EU official, Brussels, 2012.
- 10 Interview with an expert, Moscow, 2012.
- 11 Interview with a Russian expert, 2012.
- 12 Interview with an EU official, Chisinau, 2012.
- 13 Interview with a diplomat, Chisinau, 2012.
- 14 Interview with a diplomat, Bucharest, 2012.
- 15 Interview with an EU official, Brussels, 2012.

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