



Words and Deeds

Russian Foreign Policy and Post-Soviet
Secessionist Conflicts

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Geir Flikke and Jakub M. Godzimirski

[Abstract] The goal of this report is to examine Russia's policy towards secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space. In order to better understand Russia's policy choices in that sphere, the report addresses three key issues: the internal Russian debate on separatism as a security challenge in the post-Soviet space; Moscow's policies with regard to international institutions, regimes and frameworks; and the rising security agenda of international terrorism.

The report is divided into five sections. The first chapter briefly outlines the scope of the study. The second chapter presents a theoretical framework used to address the issue of Russian policy towards the secessionist conflicts. The third chapter contains a detailed case study of Russian policy towards the secessionist conflict between Moldova and Transdnester. The fourth analyses Russia's policy towards the conflicts between Abkhazia and Georgia and South Ossetia and Georgia, while the fifth chapter presents authors' conclusions. The theoretical framework chosen by the authors of this study derives from two major schools in IR theory – the liberal-institutional one, and the constructivist one. On the one hand they raise the traditional neo-liberal question of the validity of institutions in international relations; on the other hand they ask how the ability of institutional frameworks to address various problems is affected by the identities of the actors who interact in the institutional arena.

The report addresses the issue of Russian policy towards the secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space designed and implemented by President Vladimir Putin's administration. It departs from the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999, where agreements on the withdrawal of Russian forces from both Moldova and Georgia were reached. According to the Istanbul Pact, Russia was to withdraw its forces from these two countries in line with the CFE Treaty. At the same time, however, Russia has been playing an active part in the international community's attempt at finding a viable solution to secessionist conflicts in the same areas. The report analyses how the Putin administration has framed the issue of secessionist conflicts and separatism in statements and doctrines and how this has influenced Russia's policy towards the conflicts themselves and towards the institutions that are actively involved in the work on conflict resolution.

In the authors view, Russia has since the early 1990s pursued an inconsistent and incoherent policy towards the separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space. After having recognized the importance of separatism as a security challenge and threat within Russia and within the post-Soviet space, Russia has however chosen not to translate this approach into a viable and coherent policy towards these conflicts. Instead of pursuing a policy of unambiguous support for the territorial integrity of the states haunted by secessionist conflicts, Russia seems to have adopted a policy of playing the separatist card for its own purposes and has sought to maximize its geopolitical gains and retain some control in the areas that it deems important for the realization of its partly outdated geopolitical strategy. This policy may yield some short-term geopolitical gains, but in the longer term it may undermine Russia's credibility as a predictable and serious international partner, as a 'normal' great power seeking its own new place on the recently redrawn global power map.

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1.0 Introduction¹

Throughout the 1990s, Russia's policies toward secessionist conflicts have been highly ambivalent. Post-Soviet 'frozen conflicts' have offered numerous challenges in regions seen as vital to Russia's interests, attracting the attention of the UN and the OSCE, and producing many initiatives for their resolution. Yet, as of 2006, they are far from resolved. International conflict resolution schemes have not produced consensus, and warnings that the conflicts themselves might 'unfreeze' and become active have been heard with increasing frequency. In addition, Russia's relations with the 'host states' of some of these conflicts have soured, after initial hopes that they would become active participants in a revived CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) cooperation.

This report examines Russia's policy in three conflicts in the post-Soviet space: Moldova–Transdnister, Abkhazia–Georgia and South Ossetia–Georgia. These conflicts surfaced as a direct consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and were to a certain extent defined by this event. Yet, in the course of the 1990s and the early 2000s, new and complex patterns have emerged, with Moscow back-peddalling on several issues linked to military withdrawal and general attitudes to the conflicts themselves. We suggest that three important elements should be taken into account: the internal Russian debate on separatism as a security challenge in the post-Soviet space; Moscow's back-peddalling policies with regard to international institutions, regimes and frameworks; and the rising security agenda of international terrorism.

We start out with a short discussion of the various schools in international relations, querying whether the constructivist school has ignored some of its implicit references to neo-liberal theories in international relations. We raise this question because reciprocity and trust seem to be on the decline between Russia and the major institutions brokering these conflicts. Second, a separate chapter focuses on the institutional framework for addressing these conflicts – basically that of the Istanbul Pact of the OSCE. We analyse how the Putin administration has framed the issue of secessionist conflicts and separatism in statements and doctrines. Thirdly, we offer two detailed case-studies, from Moldova and Georgia, tracing Russia's path from semi-compliance toward a more unilateral and less ambiguous policy. Finally, our findings are summarized in the concluding chapter.

¹ The authors are grateful to the Norwegian Ministry of Defence for financial support to this project. The views defended in this report are those of the authors and are not in any way an expression of the views of the MoD.

2.0 Russia and Separatism: Theoretical Framework

The theory basis of this study derives from two major schools in IR theory. On the one hand we raise the traditional neo-liberal question of the validity of institutions in international relations; on the other hand we ask how the ability of institutional frameworks to address various problems is affected by the identities of the actors who interact in the institutional arena.

We have adopted the definition of institutions provided by Robert O. Keohane and modified by James G. March and Johan P. Olsen. According to Keohane, institutions are ‘persistent and connected sets of rules, formal and informal, that prescribe behavioural roles, constrain activity and shape expectations’.² March and Olsen define institutions as ‘a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and changing external circumstances’.³ They also add an identity dimension to institutions, treating them as ‘carriers of identities and roles’ and ‘markers of a polity’s character, history and visions’.⁴ However, institutions also ‘fashion, enable and constrain political actors as they act within the logic of appropriate action.’⁵ Institutions exist to give order to social relations, reduce flexibility and variability in behaviour, and restrict the possibilities of the one-sided pursuit of self-interest or drives. The actors involved are expected to follow institutional rules – prescriptions based on the logic of appropriateness, and a sense of rights and obligations derived from identity and membership in a political community and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions. According to this interpretation, actors follow the rules because the rules themselves are seen as natural, rightful, expected and legitimate.⁶

However, as March and Olsen rightly point out, actors are influenced not only by their institutional identities, but also by various identities associated with different roles within the organization. They may act according to these identities, without paying much attention to the likely consequences of their behaviour.⁷ To this, however, it should be added that actors are influenced not only by their intra-institutional identities and roles, but to an even greater degree by their ‘extra-institutional identities’ – their own perceptions of their international roles. Actors’ behaviour within institutions is affected by how they perceive themselves, how they perceive their international surroundings and not least by how they perceive the institutions with which they decide to identify themselves. According to Alexander Wendt, the way in which states construct their international identities is a function of how the key structures

² Robert O. Keohane, ‘Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research’, *International Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4 (Autumn) 1990, pp.731– 64.

³ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, ‘Elaborating the New Institutionalism’, *Arena Working Paper* no. 11, 2005, Oslo, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.10.

in a state are inter-subjective, because state identities and interests are largely constructed by these social structures, rather than given exogenously to the system by human nature or domestic politics.⁸ To understand how states construct their international identities, we need to look at states' discourses on their own international role, because 'social structures have an inherently discursive dimension in the sense that they are inseparable from the reasons and self-understandings that the agents bring to their actions.'⁹

This study asks two basic questions.

- Can institutions can serve as mediators or marketplaces for international resolutions and replace old-style geopolitical conditionality schemes with new concerted multilateral efforts?
- How do actors' identities, the way they interpret their international surroundings, formulate their goals and decide to pursue them also in the institutional arena, serve to shape the international environment and affect institutional *modus operandi*?

Thus we are enquiring how Russia's political identity, read through an in-depth analysis of statements and discourses (*words*) and actions (*deeds*), has manifested itself in policy on settling separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space, and what impact this identity has on the way Russia decides to approach these issues within a multilateral institutional framework, primarily within the OSCE.

What then of the validity of making only two case-studies speak for the whole of Russia's security outlook, and attributing its policy to a declining interest in multilateralism? In order to understand Moscow's official policy towards the separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space, these conflicts should be placed within the broader framework of Russia's foreign, defence and security policy. Russian policies might be seen as a *matryoshka*-like construction, with the fear that separatist conflicts may multiply and spread in the post-Soviet space at the very core of this construction. And so we will have to open other '*matryoshka* dolls', to see the content of official policy in other areas and the mutual impact of Russia's policy towards the separatist conflicts and its policies in other fields.

Firstly, if we view internal conflicts as lying at the very core of Russia's foreign, defence and security policies, it becomes natural to see policy towards the post-Soviet space in general as the next *matryoshka* layer. Policy on the separatist conflicts is clearly an important part of official policy towards what has now become known as 'the near abroad'. When separatist conflicts emerged as a consequence of the abrupt collapse of the USSR, Russia seemed totally unprepared, both politically and technically. The near abroad – including the conflicts that emerged in this area – was something completely new, and the Russian political class lacked experience in dealing with or understanding the nature of such conflicts. Russia's policy towards separatist conflicts has become an important part of what could be seen as a

⁸ Alexander Wendt, 'Collective Identity Formation and the International State', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 88, no. 2, 1994, p.385.

⁹ Alexander Wendt, 'The Agent-structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1987, p.359.

policy concerning its post-imperial space. The question of organization and potential re-organization of post-imperial political space is thus a residual challenge of state collapse, but one intrinsically linked to developments within Russia itself.

Second, the many problems of policy coordination in the new Russia have opened another residual challenge. Domestic turmoil in a country pre-occupied with its own reforms produced a visible lack of ability to coordinate the various spheres of policy, on the part of President Yeltsin and his entourage. Instead, these conflicts have been mostly dealt with by the military establishment, thereby becoming part of a *de facto* heritage of Russia's security and defence policy rather than stemming from any strategy in its foreign policy agenda. Even after 1993, when the most violent military phase of these three conflicts in focus here was over, it was the military that was to play the major role in the conflict areas. Russian military presence in the conflict areas was sanctioned either as Russian or international (CIS) peace-keeping, or as Russian deployment based on bilateral agreements that the countries in question were coerced in accepting. As it was mostly the responsibility of the Russian military to handle these conflicts, and Russia's 'opponents' in these conflicts were either separatist quasi-states that sought Russian protection against their new post-Soviet nation-states, Russia could handle these conflicts in a purely realist way, with the use of coercive power – or threat of use of coercive power – as a major ingredient of its policy. But again, realism made this not so much a state strategy, but a *de facto* residual challenge.

Third, as these conflicts were often seen as manifestations of international anarchy and threats to the European stability and security, Russia was given a semi-official mandate to handle the situation in the conflict zones on its own. In that case Russia's post-imperial interests – to retain at least some of the control over parts of the former empire and stabilize the situation around its new perimeter – overlapped with the interests of the main Western and European players who lacked the will and capability to intervene directly in the post-Soviet space. Russia was in a sense given the green light for such operations, especially those aimed at bringing back at least some apparent stability to the region. It was expected that the new Russia, having declared its return to the European fold and embarked on building a democratic system with a functional market economy, would soon become a normal European power – and would behave like one. Thus, Russia's presence could also offer an opportunity for Western-style multilateralism.

Although we may note three reasons why Russia would seek a role in multilateral contexts, we could also find reasons for Russia not to want this. The institutionalized logic of appropriateness does not always overlap with state priorities. To the extent that they do, we should at least introduce the following premise: If Russia wanted to cooperate with Western European institutions and retain its central place in the pan-European CSCE/OSCE network, the country would have to adjust its approach also to these separatist conflicts and work together with other actors to find solutions. If, in the first phase of these conflicts, Russia could play a power game, claiming special rights as the legal, political and power successor to the Soviet Union and acting as a 'fireman' obliged to intervene in conflict zones in order to stop

these conflicts from escalating, then in the long term Russia would have to change its logic. Russia would have to start playing by the European rules, playing a European game – a game with a clear liberal and institutional paradigmatic cut. If the European logic of appropriateness (and not the post-Soviet one) were to be applied – and this was a precondition for being accepted as a member of the enlarged European family – Russia could no longer bully its smaller neighbours, but would have to act like the responsible and constructive European power it wished to be recognized as. Has it done so?

This is the question that we seek to answer in these two cases, by testing the assumptions of neo-liberal theory. Neo-liberal security theory has long hinged on the ‘web of institutions’ argument, according to which the enlargement of the EU and NATO, supported by the OSCE, was to provide incentives for cooperation.¹⁰ This is again coupled to a ‘rationalist’ assumption that states are more prone to comply with exogenous incentives, and that they will respond to these.¹¹ In his study on the impact of international regimes on Russia’s policy choices, Christer Pursiainen asked some important questions – such as whether institutions can enhance cooperation between states, whether international norms and rules do matter, and whether institutions can prevent or contain Russia’s unilateral behaviour and make it behave in a cooperative and non-discordant way.¹² This study will address a similar set of questions, but in another political context.

Specifically, we will examine whether incentives and institutions have been effective in the cases studied. Judging from preliminary evidence of Russia’s ‘deeds’ in the international context, they have not. Russia has proposed semi-domestic solutions to the conflicts, all the while neglecting – and even *de facto* torpedoing – multilateral efforts at conflict resolution. Eventually, a reversed conditionality scheme has been instrumental in prompting Russia to ‘drag its feet’ in terms of the withdrawal of Russian military hardware and personnel.

Is this because institutions have failed to provide sufficient incentives for cooperation? Russia’s inherent preference for bilateralism in international relations is well known, but how does this work in terms of formulating national interests in multilateral institutions – especially when these institutions are to deal with problems in areas that Russia defines as strategically important, areas in which Russia seems to feel it has high stakes?¹³ In the OSCE

¹⁰ This theory is criticized in numerous articles, among others John Mearsheimer, ‘The False Promise of International Institutions’, *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1995, pp. 5–49.

¹¹ For a discussion on rationalist theory and theories of collective action, see Alexander Wendt, ‘Collective Identity Formation and the International State’, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 88, no. 2, 1994, pp. 384–396.

¹² Christer Pursiainen, ‘The Impact of International Security Regimes on Russia’s Behavior’, in: Ted Hopf (ed.), *Understandings of Russian Foreign Policy*, Pennsylvania University Press, 1999, pp. 109–169, p. 110. Pursiainen’s case is explicitly designed toward understanding Russian compliance and non-compliance with norms, institutions and rules in the case of Chechnya, where there are sovereignty issues involved, but also vital humanitarian issues. Pursiainen argues that the core is not incentives, but norm-containment. The incentive would be to be ‘normal’ and recognized as ‘legitimate’. This is a sore spot of constructivism, however, since legitimacy is believed to be a ‘social product’, and thus highly relative with regard to the institutionalized network of norms and behaviour.

¹³ Pål Dunay, ‘The OSCE in Crisis’, *Chaillot Paper*, no. 88, April, 2006, p. 17

literature, arguments on lack of compliance have ranged from ‘reluctance to inability’.¹⁴ But what does it mean that a state is ‘reluctant’ in meeting certain criteria, and what are the consequences of inability – as well as the reasons for both?

Constructivism argues that, in order to understand state behaviour, the focus should be redirected from incentives and exogenous factors, to internal (endogenous) sources and actors’ readings of the system within which they operate. ‘Constructivism’s empirical mission is to surface the background that makes uncertainty a variable to understand, rather than a constant to assume.’¹⁵ In some cases, it would seem reasonable to assume that identities may have an effect on institutional settings. As Pursiainen argues, if ‘states suspect one another of cheating, they disagree over the best possible cooperative solution, if some of them are sure that they will benefit from public goods regardless of whether they cooperate, or if they are uncertain about one another’s preferences and rationality.’¹⁶ The way actors relate to one another has much to do with their mutual perceptions of each other, and these perceptions are in turn deeply rooted in their outlook on the world and in their mental ‘friend’ and ‘foe’ maps. To what extent actors feel uncertain when interacting with each other is thus pre-determined by how each reads the other and the other’s intentions. Bringing these uncertainties to the surface – making sense of them – may be thus a major contribution of constructivism in the study of conflict.

The report links onto this by analysing Russian perceptions of these conflicts, limited here to official statements made by elites and Russian institutions. This includes also the socialization process in international relations – the remoulding of interest through interaction.

Hence the research question could be formulated as follows: what are the primary concerns of Russia, and how can these concerns be linked to readings of post-Soviet security challenges and the overall attempt of Russia to solidify as an actor in the international system? Can we understand institutional failure in terms of a lacking understanding of the rationality of a new actor? Our primary concern here will be the ‘words’ or terms applied to describe the lack of compliance with international conditionality schemes and the general perception or reading of security that informs and guides actions of non-compliance.

Our primary corollary, however, is that the attempt to ‘surface’ intentions will often involve a tacit link to the neo-liberal assumption that institutions matter, and that they can in fact serve as ‘carrots’ for states to reformulate and reconsider national interests. Alexander Wendt has claimed that the neo-realist criticism of neo-liberalism ‘reminds neo-liberalists and critical theorists, normally locked in their own tug of war, that they have a common, non-realist interest in the institutional bases of international life’.¹⁷ More-

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 25.

¹⁵ Ted Hopf, ‘The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory’, *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp. 171–200, p. 188.

¹⁶ Pursiainen, pp. 119–120.

¹⁷ Alexander Wendt, ‘Constructing International Politics’, *International Security*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1995, pp. 71–81, p. 71.

over, Christer Pursiainen argues that ‘constructivism offers conclusions that are complement of those of neo-liberalism.’¹⁸ Having a non-realist common interest is not sufficient, however. A theory has to be checked against institutional evidence in order to assume validity. Are all ‘socialization’ processes designed to fit with institutional demands and incentives? When national interests are reformulated, are they always in compliance with international obligations? In other words: can there be ‘reciprocity’ without compliance?

We believe that the constructivist link to the neo-liberal argument on institutions is overemphasized and lacks empirical foundations. At the theory level, a claim will be made that the active ‘construing’ of interests by a new actor can in fact harbour realist aims. That is to say, by paying too much heed to information about an actor (especially a state’s pronounced self-image), the analysts can easily lose their grip on the deeds of that state. The process of ‘socialization’ of national interests may be more about securing influence and leverage through new legitimacy, but without discarding standard geopolitical scripts and neo-realist behaviour. States may literally pay lip-service to institutions by making certain statements, but at the same time act in ways not necessarily in accordance with their solemn proclamations. The major lesson to be drawn from the separatist deadlock is that the failure of institutions may prompt states to worry increasingly about the relative gains of others – and subsequently their own potential losses – and the vehicle for voicing this may be a more troublesome insistence on some special and ‘privileged’ rights in international relations.

The issue here is not the ‘clash’ of different civilizations in the sense that pre-fabricated ‘identities’ collide over irreconcilable claims. Identities are processed, shaped and reshaped through interaction, we argue, and are not preconceived. Hence, we agree with Peter J. Katzenstein: ‘state interests do not exist to be discovered by self-interested, rational actors. Interests are constructed through a process of social interaction.’¹⁹ We assume that socialization is multi-levelled, however, and may follow standard geopolitical scripts, especially if these geopolitical scripts are important elements of political identity and widely used interpretative tools. Tracking constructivist processes may mean viewing the reshaping of identities and re-formulation of interests as several, perhaps competing processes. Socialization at one level may produce non-compliance at another; interaction does not necessarily lead to internalization of the ideas of others, but may result in the rethinking of one’s own ideas, including the reshaping of identity, the reformulation of interests and the modification of policies.

It is the active formulation of interests that is of interest to us here – not any preconceived interest design leading to a necessary institutional deadlock. Hence, we would not wish to argue that institutions were doomed to

¹⁸ Pursiainen, p. 168. Clearly, the argument here has been that Russia – contrary to logic, as they say, opened up for an observer mission of the OSCE in the Chechen conflict after having opposed it during 1994–95. What it does not discuss is whether or not this has actually been a vehicle for securing Russian compliance with OSCE norms in the conduct of the second Chechen War. Moreover, it does not cover the closure of the observer mission in 2002.

¹⁹ Peter J. Katzenstein, ‘Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security’, in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture Of National Security: Norms and Identities in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 1–32, p. 2.

fail because of some preconceived interest penetrating all levels of the Russian polity. In our view, studying the process itself may help us to understand and reveal some Russian ‘uncertainties’ that in turn may explain how these conflicts became elevated to the level of ‘high politics’.

The next chapter analyses Russia’s commitments from Istanbul 1999 OSCE summit, and how Russia’s fulfilment of these commitments has become an important ‘socialization’ gauge through which external actors have measured its foreign, defence and security policy in the conflict areas. We will also look at how Russia has sought to modify its approach towards these commitments after the new leadership decided to strengthen the country’s international position and counter what have been interpreted as negative developments in its international surroundings.

2.1. The OSCE and Post-Soviet Conflicts: Istanbul

The outbreak of political violence during the armed phase of the post-Soviet secessionist conflicts confronted the international community with a seemingly unsolvable task. The very existence of the quasi-independent states on the territories of Moldova and Georgia, the inability of the local elites to find a working solution to these problems, and Russia’s prominent role in these conflicts stood out as central challenges for international organizations and regimes. Hence, already during the armed phase of the conflicts European and global multilateral organizations – the OSCE and the UN – decided to act in the region. OSCE established its mission to Georgia in 1992 and to Moldova in 1993. The main goal was to promote negotiations between the conflicting parties and support the UN-led peace negotiation process in the zone of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict (1993).²⁰

Similarly, the UN brokered a ceasefire between Tbilisi and Sukhumi in 1993. It established UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) ‘to verify compliance with the ceasefire agreement between the Government of Georgia and the Abkhaz authorities’²¹ and help to set up the Coordinating Council in 1997. In addition, since December 1993 a small group of nations – the so-called Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia, consisting of Germany, France, the Russian Federation, the UK and the USA – has been assisting the UN in finding a solution to the conflict in Abkhazia.²² After the armed and most violent phase of the conflicts was over, these multilateral organizations have continued their engagement, paying considerable attention to the task of conflict resolution.

It was the OSCE Istanbul summit in 1999 that really brought these conflicts to the attention of the international community. Despite the relatively broad agenda of the 1999 Istanbul, the joint declaration which it issued man-

²⁰ <http://www.osce.org/georgia/13199.html>

²¹ For more on the UN’s activities and role in seeking a solution to the separatist conflicts in Georgia see <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig/index.html> and the UNOMIG website at <http://www.unomig.org/>.

²² For more on ‘Groups of Friends of the Secretary-General’ as a diplomatic tool see Jean E. Krasno’s article on this topic at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/subsites/ccpdc/pubs/krasno/kfrfr.htm>

aged to secure a common institutionalized approach to several post–Cold War issues. The setting was by no means ideal for addressing Russia’s concerns. The effect of the Kosovo crisis on Russia’s integrationist aspirations was evident, and the crisis itself induced in policy documents and perceptions a careful revision of Russia’s earlier hopes that the OSCE might become the cornerstone of European security. Even among Russian ‘Westernizers’ there were widespread concerns that Russia had given away too much at Istanbul. The prevailing conviction in Russian politics was that the Istanbul document was ‘weak’, that it did not include incentives for Russia to comply, and that it lopsidedly imposed an alien security regime onto Russia. According to former US Ambassador Vladimir Lukin (Yabloko), the final document from Istanbul ‘contains a series of ambiguous and partially self-contradictory formulations that each party [to the Final Act] may interpret as they like’. Subsequently, Russia should oppose the ‘attempts to redefine the OSCE as an organization primarily for the post-Soviet space and the Balkans’.²³ To the degree that there was a European vector in this, it consisted in activating emerging high-level contacts between Russia and the EU on the basis that Russia should consider making ‘not NATO, but the EU its primary interlocutor in Europe’.²⁴

Since Kosovo, Russia had accustomed itself to viewing the role of OSCE through the prism of subsequent NATO intervention. Russia’s deep-rooted ambition of transforming the OSCE into a separate security organization that would regulate all inter-state relations in Europe (with Russia in a central role) was increasingly perceived as a cul-de-sac, and had prompted elites to re-think the ‘European’ vector in foreign policies altogether.²⁵ This coincided with an attempt to give the OSCE a new revival in the post-Soviet space. The major gain from the Istanbul OSCE conference was that the OSCE had at least proved itself capable of introducing some sort of conditionality in the step-by-step approach to the former Soviet space. The Istanbul Pact made specific statements on all three cases examined in this study, drawing both on the negotiation processes within the OSCE and on the role played by the UN. Concerning the Transdniestrian conflict, the declaration stated that it recognized both the positive role of the ‘peacekeeping’ forces in the region, Russian–Ukrainian mediation as manifested in the document on normalization of Moldova–Transdniestrian relations from 16 July 1999,²⁶ and the Oslo Ministerial meeting. The Istanbul declaration was clear when it came to defining the crux of the problem:

However, there have been no tangible shifts on the major issue–defining the status of the Trans-Dniestrian region. We reaffirm that in the resolution of this problem the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova should be ensured. We stand for the continuation and deployment of the negotiation process and call on all sides and in particular the Trans-Dniestrian authori-

²³ Vladimir Lukin, ‘God posle Stambula’, *NeGa-Dipkur’er*, 9 November 2000.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Julie Wilhelmsen and Geir Flikke, ‘Evidence of Russia’s Bush Doctrine in the CIS’, *European Security*, no. 3, vol. 14, 2005, pp. 387–417, Wolfgang Zellner, ‘Russia and the OSCE: From High Hopes to Disillusionment’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, no. 3, vol. 18, 2005, p. 393.

²⁶ http://www.osce.org/documents/mm/1999/07/458_en.pdf

ties to demonstrate the political will required to negotiate a peaceful and early elimination of the consequences of the conflict.²⁷

This statement could be understood as putting forth certain demands to the Transdniestrian authorities to comply and cooperate with the OSCE process and to take part in an active solution also to other questions – like federalization and power-sharing. The principle of conditionality was also clearly laid out. The summit statement indirectly coupled two processes – the federalization issue, and the continued and future withdrawal of Russian ‘peacekeeping’ forces and ammunition depots.

Recalling the decisions of the Budapest and Lisbon Summits and Oslo Ministerial Meeting, we reiterate our expectation of an early, orderly and complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Moldova. In this context, we welcome the recent progress achieved in the removal and destruction of the Russian military equipment stockpiled in the Trans-Dniestrian region of Moldova and the completion of the destruction of non-transportable ammunition. We welcome the commitment by the Russian Federation to complete withdrawal of the Russian forces from the territory of Moldova by the end of 2002. We also welcome the willingness of the Republic of Moldova and of the OSCE to facilitate this process, within their respective abilities, by the agreed deadline.²⁸

To follow up these processes, the Istanbul document signalled several actions to be taken. A special assessment mission would be dispatched to Moldova for observing the destruction process, and the Permanent Council would consider the prolongation of the OSCE mission to Moldova and the establishment of a voluntary financial fund to be administered by the OSCE.

At the 1999 Istanbul Summit the OSCE also unanimously adopted a statement on the situation in Georgia. The organization reaffirmed its strong support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and stressed the need for solving the conflicts regarding the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia/Georgia – particularly by defining the political status of these regions within Georgia.²⁹ The solution should be based on respect for human rights and development of joint democratic institutions as well as the prompt, safe and unconditional return of refugees and internally displaced persons.³⁰ The OSCE also welcomed the progress in negotiations on the reduction of Russian military equipment in Georgia reached at this summit, lauded the progress that had been made towards solving the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia, expressed its support for the leading UN role in Abkhazia, condemned the acts of ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia, and branded the 1999 presidential elections and referendum in Abkhazia as ‘unacceptable and illegitimate’.³¹

Again, the issue of the political status of the breakaway territories stood at the centre of attention in the summit declaration. As was the case for

²⁷ OSCE Istanbul Summit Declaration, at:

http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1999/11/4050_en.pdf.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Moldova, the final statement explicitly stressed Georgian sovereignty as a core principle. According to the document:

Reaffirming our strong support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, we stress the need for solving the conflicts with regard to the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia, particularly by defining the political status of these regions within Georgia.³²

While the OSCE was the umbrella for the Moldovan federalization process, the Istanbul declaration relied more on the work of the UN in facilitating discussions on solving the status of breakaway territories within Georgia. The UN was given a leading role in this process, while the OSCE was to part in a joint fact-finding mission with the UN on the process of ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia. A similar conditionality process was sketched out by outlining a step-by-step process of federalization and repatriation of IDPs, while quasi-elections in breakaway territories such as Abkhazia were condemned:

We continue to support the leading role of the United Nations in Abkhazia, Georgia. We emphasize the importance of breaking the current deadlock with regard to finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. In this respect we – and in particular those of us who belong to the Friends of the United Nations Secretary-General – are ready to work with the United Nations to prepare and submit a draft document addressing the distribution of constitutional competencies between the central authorities of Georgia and authorities of Abkhazia, Georgia. [...] We consider the so-called presidential elections and referendum in Abkhazia, Georgia, this year as unacceptable and illegitimate.³³

The coupling of the federalization process and the withdrawal of Russian bases and weaponry was tighter in the case of Moldova than with Georgia. The passage on the withdrawal of troops and ammunition from Moldova by the end of 2001 was supported by a special annex signed by Moldovan and Russian authorities, stating that Moldova renounced the right to receive a temporary deployment on its territory. The document did not specify how this ‘temporary deployment’ should be interpreted, however. It might mean either the deployment of a substitute peacekeeping mission, or simply be interpreted as Moldovan rejection of *any* temporary Russian deployment.

The bilateral annex regulating Georgian–Russian relations was different. No specific dates were set for withdrawal of Russian bases and Treaty Limited Equipment (TLE), and there were only indirect references to this commitment in the Istanbul Final Act itself. These were made conditional on progress in Georgian–Russian relations, and also meeting the deadlines of the revised CFE Agreement. According to the Final Act: ‘We welcome progress reached at this Summit Meeting in the Georgian–Russian negotiations on the reduction of Russian military equipment in Georgia’, without any specific references to deadlines.³⁴ This reference was made in the Georgian–Russian annex to the Final Act, where the first articles specified that Russia should meet the ceiling for CFE Treaty Limited Equipment (TLE) by 31 December 2000, and withdraw all TLE from the bases of Vaziani and Gudauta

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

by that same date. Moreover, the Russian military bases of Vaziani and Gudauta were to be abandoned by 1 July 2001.

Although time limits were specified in the cases of Gudauta and Vaziani there were two more bases – Alkhalkalaki in Javakheti, a region with a substantial Armenian minority and Batumi in the semi-autonomous Adzharia – that were left to bilateral negotiations during the year 2000. In the Moldovan case, the conditionality process on federalization and withdrawal of Russian equipment was not primarily a bilateral issue, but a multilateral and institutionalized one. However, the Russian–Georgian annex to the revised CFE Treaty placed it as a bilateral issue. On the other hand, the UN lead in the process of defining the status of Abkhazia was expected to provide a multilateral framework for negotiations on the basis of Georgian territorial sovereignty. Facilitators to the process were the OSCE, which would provide financial backing, the Group of Friends of the UNSG, and the UNSG special representative for Abkhazia and Head of the UNOMIG observer mission to Abkhazia, Dieter Boden.

Even though the OSCE has been aware of the problems in the region, and has been operating in the conflict zones from the outset, this pan-European body has not been able to contribute substantially to permanent solutions, for various reasons. These include the OSCE's consensus-based *modus operandi*, which make it futile to attempt to propose measures not backed by at least one of its members. Moreover, Russia's general view of the OSCE as a less important security organization has also limited the effect of OSCE mediation. After the 1999 OSCE summit, Russia began revising its security and defence doctrines, codifying its new approach to security questions. The issue of separatism played a central role in this revision.

2.2. Putin's Russia and Separatism

The Putin administration initially gave few indications on how it perceived the Western web of security institutions. In part, Putin has been keen to reactivate foreign policies, regain positions and mark Russia's interests in foreign relations. This has engendered a mixture of crisscrossing statements, initiatives and responses, all of which have had as their focal point the resurrection of Russia as a state. Still, when Putin reached the top of Russian politics in 1999 there were at least three reasons why the issue of separatism would occupy a prominent place on his political agenda. The first reason could be labelled the 'imminent' one. The first task Putin set out to deal with when being appointed prime minister, and then elected president, was to tackle what was defined as the existential threat stemming from Chechen separatism. Although the military intervention in the Northern Caucasus – first in Dagestan, then in Chechnya proper – was from the very beginning labelled a counter-terrorist operation, it was obvious that the main goal was to eradicate, once and for all, the source of the separatist threat in this volatile and turbulent region, and thus in Russia itself.

Putin's policies focused on two semi-domestic arenas: the CIS and the transformation of the military so as to make it better prepared to meet the rising challenge of international terrorism and separatism. Putin's presence at the CIS summit in January 2000 reinforced hopes that the CIS would be

transformed into an area for economic cooperation on the basis of several ‘strategic partnerships’ – a buzzword for delaying what Moscow saw as processes of disintegration.³⁵ But reviving economic and political relations within the CIS was not the sole priority. A parallel track in the integration processes was spun around the collective Security Pact of the CIS from 1992 – the Tashkent Treaty, also known as the CST, or the Collective Security Treaty of the CIS. Towards Putin’s inauguration in May 2000, the argument of creating a common CIS footing for combating terrorism in the CIS space was heard with greater frequency. Russian officials began arguing for enhanced Russian military presence and the conversion of old residual bases to permanent, re-furbished and primarily Russian military bases in Central Asia and Caucasus.³⁶

The Transdniester–Moldova deadlock and the conflicts in Georgia were not an obvious focal point for the emerging presidential agenda.³⁷ Russia had made a case for fighting ‘international terrorism’ in Chechnya, attempting to locate it within the realm of a rising terrorist agenda in the international community. Separatism was ‘on the rise’, newspapers reported, referring to the growth of ‘religious extremism, attempts at mass hostage-taking, alteration of existing borders, and overthrow of state power’.³⁸ Whereas Islamist insurgency emerged as a primary focus for presidential security policies, there was no readymade formula for dealing with separatist issues and the rise of quasi-states after the break-up of the USSR. Thus, addressing separatism seemed to comprise at least two separate phenomena – the Islamist challenge, and the residual conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The newspaper *Nezavisimaya gazeta (NeGa)* captured the conceptual confusion by blending Islamism with broader questions of ‘war and peace in Transdniester, Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh’.³⁹

Actually, residual post-Soviet conflict resolution and combating international terrorism had no evident overlaps other than the fact that states weakened by festering conflicts could become transit territories for illegal arms transfers and smuggling. Russian experts seemed to realize that separatism and terrorism should not be confused with each other. Alexander Skakov, head of the Department of CIS Countries of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, stated: ‘there are no grounds for resorting to a broadened definition of terrorism, for example, by identifying it with separatism.’ In his view, separatism should be described as ‘a political movement or regime whose goal is to separate a part from a state, create a new independent state in it and achieve diplomatic recognition of that state by the world community.’ He added that the problem of separatism ceases to exist when the international

³⁵ ‘Strategicheskoe partnerstvo radi ekonomicheskogo razvitiya’, *NeGa*, 20 January, 2000. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2000-01-20/5_partners.html.

³⁶ For an extensive discussion of this, see Julie Wilhelmsen and Geir Flikke, ‘Evidence of Russia’s Bush Doctrine in the CIS’.

³⁷ A search in the data-base of Putin’s major speeches and press interviews from 1999 to 2005 gave 1 hit on the Transdniester conflict, 0 on Moldova, 4 on the OSCE, basically negative comments with regard to developments on the Balkans and 0 on separatism. Georgia had 65 hits, however, and 59 hits were on terrorism. See Appendix 1 for a full list of Putin’s texts.

³⁸ ‘Antiterroristicheskii vektor oborony’, *NeGa*, 17 March 2000.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

community recognizes the separatist regime, because 'should these goals be achieved, then the separatist regime ceases to be exactly that.'⁴⁰

In the Chechen case, Skakov's remark is definitely a misnomer, but is it relevant for how the Putin administration has read the 'separatist' challenge? Although the security documents hardly embody a coherent approach of today's administration to separatism, we can analyse statements and documents so as to identify whether separatism and terrorism are treated as two separate phenomena. Second, we would have to take into account also the fact of post-Soviet secessionism. The cases studied here were in fact 'Westernized' by an early involvement of the OSCE, and attempts to link them to Russian security interests would mean to re-launch the idea of a specific zone of influence for Russia. From a strategic point of view, this would imply to make two claims: that Western involvement and mediation is a problem, and that Russia has a special political interest in the area.

2.2.1. Putin's approach to separatism and state integrity

Vladimir Putin's views on separatism are closely linked with the issue of the disintegration of the Russian state and the question of protection and safeguarding territorial integrity. When in November/December 1999 Putin published his political manifesto *Russia at the Turn of Millennium* (RTM), the question of territorial and legal integrity of Russia was given a prominent place. He underlined that there were 'more than a thousand federal laws and several thousand laws of the republics, territories, regions and autonomous areas', and that not all of them were compatible with the main criterion on which Russia's political system should be based – that of a strong state. He added that there was a possibility, at that stage of Russian history, that 'the mass of questionable or simply unconstitutional laws' could become critical and that 'the constitutional security of the state, the federal center's capabilities, the country's manageability and Russia's integrity would be in jeopardy'.⁴¹ Although he made no direct reference to territorial integrity and separatism as challenges facing Russia in Chechnya, he clearly indicated that there was a strong link between integrity of the country, the quality of its legal system and the strength of state as the main player.

Similar claims are found in the *Letter to Russian Voters* (LTV) published in many Russian newspapers only weeks before the presidential elections. Also here, Putin made no mention of territorial integrity, but presented his views on the link between the quality of Russian legal system and law enforcement and the situation developing in Chechnya. The situation in Chechnya had nothing to do with separatism or with the Chechens' struggle for self-determination, he wrote. At stake was whether the Russian state could gain the upper hand over banditry: 'banditry was growing stronger', and 'an entire republic, a component of the Russian Federation – Chechnya – became occupied by the criminal world and turned by it into its fortress.' He

⁴⁰ Alexander Skakov, 'Separatism and terrorism in the Caucasus – The Russian position', in *Shaping an Environment for Peace, Stability & Confidence in South Caucasus*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Sandhurst, 2002, p.39.

⁴¹ 1999 Manifesto. See Appendix.

described what Russia was doing in Chechnya: 'we had just to meet the bandits in open confrontation and to rout them.'⁴²

The Chechen issue rose to prominence again after Putin's inauguration as president. In his first of a series of *State of the Nation* speeches (SN) Putin elaborated on various issues related to the debate on separatism and territorial state integrity. Putin effectively pinned the separatist issue as one having a considerable effect on domestic stability. He saw a direct link between the activities of those whom he described as international terrorists, and tensions and problems in Russia: the country was facing a new type of external aggression, with international terrorists were attempting to influence the situation inside Russia. This forced Russia to face 'a systematic challenge to its state sovereignty and territorial integrity', to stand up against 'forces seeking geopolitical reorganization of the world'. In order to deal with both these new challenges and with misinterpretations of Russia's intentions, a further strengthening of the state was needed, in Putin's view. He blamed the way federalism had been practised in Russia after 1993 for many of the problems Russia was now encountering. Putin described Chechnya as 'an extreme example of unsolved federal problems'; developments in that republic had resulted in its territory becoming 'a bridgehead for the expansion of international terrorism in Russia'. Intervention was essential: 'only a counter-terrorist operation could remove the threat of Russia's disintegration.' It was thanks to the Russian professional military that 'the dignity and integrity of the state' could be preserved and the disintegration of the state caused by the actions of international terrorist prevented.⁴³

Putin retained this focus on the strengthening of the state structures as the best means to prevent its disintegration also in his next State of the Nation Speech, delivered in 2001 (SN 2001). The strengthening of the state was described as the 'the strategic objective of the past year', the key to solving all the problems facing Russia. The aim was to turn the Russian state into a strong centralized federation. 'The period of disintegration of statehood is behind us,' Putin stated.⁴⁴ A more detailed account of the importance of these issues was given at his press conference with leading American journalists held in June 2001. At this conference he described the worsening situation in Chechnya as the main source of the separatist threat to Russia, one that had ended in 'a major attack by several thousand armed men on Dagestan under the slogan of separating additional territory from Russia and creating a new state from the Black Sea to the Caspian'. Putin described this attack as direct aggression, and added that Russia was forced to react.⁴⁵ In that way he indicated that halting the threat of disintegration and separatism was the main rationale for Russian intervention in Chechnya and that the threat of separatism was a strategic one.

The issue of building a strong state has returned regularly in Putin's State of the Nation Speeches. In SN 2003, he reiterated: 'our historical experience

⁴² 2000LTV, published on the web on Putin's campaign site at <http://www.putin2000.ru/07/05.html> and reprinted in many Russian newspapers in February 2000.

⁴³ 2000 SNS.

⁴⁴ 2001 SNS.

⁴⁵ 2001 US PC.

bears witness to the fact that a country like Russia can live and develop within its existing boundaries only if it is a powerful state. Russia has always and inevitably been faced with the threat of disintegration in all periods when the country has been weakening, politically or economically.⁴⁶ He described all the efforts and achievements made by Russians in the course of the country's history as 'an exploit for the sake of the country's integrity', while also acknowledging that the people 'had to pay a high price for the restoration of Russia's territorial integrity'.⁴⁷

But how did the strengthening of Russian statehood link into the need to recognize the statehood of neighbouring countries? Putin's conceptualization of this was at first a balancing act – giving credit to the need for 'acceptable solutions', but few indications about security regime preferences. In 2003 Putin held his traditional annual press conference during which he shared with the invited journalists his views on the issue of federal reform in Russia and also spoke about the issue of territorial integrity of another post-Soviet country, Georgia: 'we assume that Georgia has its own legitimate demands and concerns regarding unity of the state and restoration of its territorial integrity.' He added, however, that a solution to the separatist problem in Georgia would have to be achieved in a way 'acceptable for all the parties involved in this conflict, including Abkhazia'.⁴⁸

The repeated focus on territorial integrity and the separatist-terrorism nexus received a new underpinning after the Beslan events in 2004. The internationalization of the struggle against terrorism evident in Putin's earlier statements was supplanted by more dominant hints that Russia might 'go it alone' if necessary. Putin insisted, as at the summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Malaysia in 2003, that the threat to Russia was not separatism in Chechnya, but international fundamentalists and terrorists.⁴⁹ In September 2004, however, Putin made two dramatic speeches in the wake of the tragic events in Beslan, where Chechen terrorists took more than one thousand hostages and over 300 were killed in the events that followed. The terrorist ploy had become 'internalized', as Putin indicated that the goal of this terrorist raid was 'to destroy and split Russia'. He also interpreted Beslan as a part of an international conspiracy aiming at weakening Russia, saying that Russia was in fact 'dealing with direct intervention of international terrorism' and 'with a total, cruel and full-scale war in which our compatriots die again and again', adding to this a statement about the Transdniester conflict as well. Russia's concern for efficient security mechanisms was also made clear. Putin called for the creation of 'a more effective security system' that would help Russia tackle the new threats, while Minister of Defence Sergey Ivanov indicated that Russia might apply appropriate military force against terrorists, even if they were on the territory of other states.⁵⁰ Russian security interests were not ignored either. In his next speech in the wake of Beslan, Putin outlined his new policy for meeting the new

⁴⁶ 2003 SNS.

⁴⁷ 2003 SNS.

⁴⁸ 2003 APC.

⁴⁹ <http://www.rferl.org/features/2003/10/16102003162047.asp> and <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2003/10/1-rus/rus-171003.asp>

⁵⁰ 2004 Post-Beslan. See also Julie Wilhelmsen and Geir Flikke, 'Evidence...?'

threats, identified the goals of the enemies of Russia and stressed that ‘the disintegration of the country’ and ‘the collapse of the state and the break-up of Russia’ were among their major aims.⁵¹

Here it should be noted that Soviet nostalgia never has been an element in conceptualizing the post-Soviet Russian state. However, growing concerns for securing broad appeal internationally and in domestic policies may have introduced a revision of this aspect. In his 2005 State of the Nation speech Putin coupled post-Soviet challenges to the collapse of the Soviet state. He described this collapse as ‘a major geopolitical disaster of the century’, adding that ‘the epidemic of disintegration spread to Russia itself’ and that ‘the country’s integrity was disturbed by a terrorist intervention and the ensuing capitulation of Khasavyurt’ [meaning the 1996 Peace Accord].⁵² While this is in no way an indication of nostalgia, it does illustrate the prevailing security worry about the ‘domino effect’ of this disintegration onto Russia proper. And once again, the solution is to strengthen Russia’s capacities to deal with these challenges. Moreover, it extends the argument of security to the post-Soviet space, thereby securitizing not only internal threats, but also external ones.

Territorial integrity is a concern for all states, and Russia is hardly an exception. On the other hand, strategic concerns may change over time, as may strategic cultures. Russia’s concern with international terrorism has been codified as the major threat to its security, and the concept has also been wrested loose from traditional separatism. On the other hand, the above quoted statements on the importance of preserving territorial integrity and challenges posed by the threat of separatism certainly indicate that the issues of separatism and state integrity occupy a central place in the political agenda of Vladimir Putin. As Putin has set his personal stamp on Russian policy-formulation and policy-making over the past seven years, it is only to be expected that these views will also be reflected in official doctrines on security, defence and foreign policy. In the following section we therefore present a brief analysis of the place of these concepts in official documents adopted during Putin’s time in office.

2.2.2. Separatism and territorial integrity in Russian doctrines

Even before Putin’s team managed to take over Russia in 2000, the issue of separatism as a threat to the country’s integrity was noted in the 1997 National Security Concept (1997 NSC). According to this document, a major goal of the nation’s security policy is to ensure its territorial integrity and to neutralize ‘factors and conditions that facilitate social and inter-ethnic conflicts, ethnic and regional separatism’. Furthermore, ‘negative economic processes serve to aggravate all kinds of centrifugal tendencies on the part of the Russian Federation’s constituent members’ – and this could result in disruption of the territorial and legal integrity of Russia.

A similar assessment of the threat of separatism is found in the first official doctrine signed in 2000 by the newly appointed president *in spe*, Vladi-

⁵¹ 2004 Post-Beslan Reform.

⁵² 2005 SNS.

mir Putin. Russia's National Security Concept 2000 (NSC 2000) presents a list of national interests in the realm of national security. National and religious separatism is identified as one of the most important challenges facing the Russian state. The document lists various factors that promote 'nationalism, political and religious extremism and ethno-separatism' and create breeding ground for conflicts. In addition to ethno-egoism, ethno-centrism and chauvinism, also uncontrolled migration is mentioned as an important factor. That helps to explain why a central aim of security policy was the creation of 'mechanism for preventing the appearance of political parties and public associations that pursue separatist goals and for stopping their activities'.

The new military doctrine made public and signed by President Putin in 2000 (MD 2000) also addresses the issue of separatism. The rise in separatism is defined as an important factor behind the formulation and implementation of the defence policy of the Russian state. The activities of extremist nationalist, religious, separatist and terrorist movements, organizations and structures are mentioned as having a destabilizing impact on the military-political situation. High on the list of main internal threats facing the Russian state are what the document describes as 'illegal activities by extremist nationalist, religious, separatist and terrorist movements, organizations and structures aimed at violating the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and destabilizing the domestic political situation in the country'.

Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, signed by President Putin in 2000 (FPC 2000), lists various international factors and developments seen as having a direct impact on how Russian national interests in foreign policy could be formulated and defended. The growth of separatism and ethnic-national and religious extremism are mentioned among the many factors affecting Russian foreign policy. Among other important developments, the document notes the globalization of the world economy, Russia's exposure to international economic and information threats and what is described as 'military-political rivalry among regional powers'.

A more recent semi-official document of doctrinal character addressing among many other issues also the issue of separatism is the 'Ivanov Doctrine' made public in October 2003 at a meeting in the Russian Ministry of Defence at which also President Putin was present. The document lists the six main internal threats that the country's armed forces are assigned to neutralize. One of these is 'the operation of separatist and radical religious nationalist movements in the Russian Federation'. Among the trans-border threats to Russian security, the document identifies 'the operation of subversive separatist, national or religious extremist groups (supported directly or indirectly by foreign sources) designed to undermine the constitutional regime of Russia'. As to the peacetime tasks of the armed forces, the document specifies the struggle against international terrorism, political extremism and separatism and work on preventing subversive and terrorist acts on the territory of the Russian Federation.

As to the international regimes designed to cope with security challenges, MD 2000 was relatively vague and defensive. The overarching concern for a unipolar world versus that of a multipolar one – and a subsequent emphasis on Russia as a major pole – has also coloured MD 2000. The OSCE is

clearly mentioned in only one context, not as an organization that should be strengthened, but one that should be prevented from being destroyed: ‘attempts to weaken (ignore) the existing mechanism for safeguarding international security (primarily, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE])’ are held to be a major destabilizing element in international relations. Moreover, the Russian military peacekeeping forces are highlighted as a near-*sine qua non* for the continued strength of the OSCE. Contrary to the Istanbul Declaration, MD 2000 states that peacekeeping missions had been ‘entrusted’ to Russian military peacekeeping forces, and conducted in full compliance with international standards:

The Russian Federation carries out rear and technical support, training and preparation of Russian contingents, the planning of their utilization, and operational command and control in line with the standards and procedures of the United Nations, the OSCE, and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

MD 2000 does not provide any additional suggestions about other security organizations other than the CIS Collective Security Treaty, which is to be strengthened. Russian soldiers serving in the CIS structures, and also in so-called CIS peacekeeping operations are to serve on contract. To be sure, there is in MD 2000 one reference to Russia’s multilateral treaties :

Russian troop formations located on the territory of foreign states, irrespective of the conditions of deployment, form part of the Russian Federation armed forces and other troops and operate in accordance with the procedure there established, taking into account the requirements of the UN Charter, UN Security Council resolutions, and the Russian Federation's bilateral and multilateral treaties.

However, MD 2000 makes no mention of the Istanbul Pact, thereby implying that this is not considered a ‘treaty’ in any sense of the word. The preparedness to meet international peacekeeping tasks is made pending on UN mandate and CIS capacities. Symptomatically, the more recent MD 2003 lists a total of four peacekeeping operations with Russian involvement: South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transdnier account for three of them, with a total of 3,000 men. Moreover, MD 2003 also proposes that a separate peacekeeping brigade should be created by 2004, ready to operate on UN or CIS mandate – the latter reflecting the Russian quest for a regional security mandate within the CIS area. However, there is in MD 2003 no mention whatsoever of the OSCE.

The overarching concern about a withering OSCE was repeated in the NSC 2000, together with a clear warning against the challenges of unipolarity. Hence, Russia’s doctrines indicated that the OSCE was by no means seen as an indispensable security organization. Moreover, what the Istanbul Pact had considered obligatory was in the Russian view not mandatory, but clearly conditional. Finally, the doctrines interpreted separatism and terrorism as two different challenges, but gave due attention to both. Subsequently, it might be expected that because Russian policy-makers paid so much attention to separatism in the Russian/post-Soviet context, they would be able to understand other countries’ concerns in the same area.

What the doctrines failed to indicate is how Russia should handle the two cases in this study. Russia’s policies have certainly been forged through presidential authority – but does this fit into the framework of policy heri-

tages from the Yeltsin administration, and the general challenge of separatist conflicts? This brings us to the question of Russian policy towards the secessionist conflict between Moldova and Transdniestria, and towards secessionist conflicts on the territory of Georgia.

3.0 Moldova: The ‘Synchronization’ Strategy

Putin’s policies in Moldova did not start with a clean slate. Firstly, Russia had inherited an institutionalized format from the Yeltsin period, the 3+2 format under the auspices of the OSCE. It was conditionally – in Russian parlance – obliged by the OSCE Istanbul Pact’s emphasis on unconditional – in OSCE parlance – withdrawal of Russian hardware by the end of 2001 (CFE), and Russian troops by the end of 2002. Russian officials had few tools at their disposal other than those provided by the OSCE’s emphasis on a single security space in Europe after Istanbul, and what was available in terms of 3+2 agreements from the mid-1990s.

Secondly, while Russia refocused on the challenges stemming from international terrorism and Islamism, the new foreign and security policy documents made no reference – implicit or direct – to the conflict between the unrecognized Dniestrian Moldovan Republic (DMR)⁵³ administration and sovereign Moldova. As to the ‘Islamist challenge’, it did not in any clear way cover cases of ‘Soviet-style’ secessionism⁵⁴ and economic shadow-politics in the narrow strip of land between Ukraine and the Dniestr. References to economic crime seemed geared more to the prevailing agenda of fighting illegal economic transactions linked to terrorism, not to quasi-statebuilding in the post-Soviet space.

Russia had at any rate to ‘construe’ a new policy, taking into account both the international obligations and the semi-institutionalized policies left behind by the Yeltsin administration. Building on the competence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) seemed the most feasible option. In January 2000 came news reports that Moscow was preparing a new initiative to meet the OSCE Istanbul commitments. The initiative was not new, however, but derived from the negotiations held in the mid-1990s. MFA officials had stated that the primary policy for Moscow would be ‘synchronization’ – working in parallel on withdrawal of Russian troops and a final settlement of the Transdnier conflict.⁵⁵ The MFA statement reluctantly accepted the Istanbul terms of withdrawal by 2002, but suggested two things: firstly, that it was no easy task; secondly, that there should be talk of ‘two time-tables’ – one for withdrawal, and one for a final conflict settlement including the resolution of statehood issues:

Having taken on the by all means not too easy Istanbul commitments [...] to withdraw Russian troops by the end of 2002, Russia takes as earlier as a point of

⁵³ The Russian equivalent of this acronym is PMR (*Pridnestrovskaya Moldovskaya Respublika*). The republic is alternately referred to as DMR, Transdnier and Transdnier. We shall adopt the acronym from the ICG report ‘Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transdnier’, no. 157, 17 June, 2004.

⁵⁴ The initial separatist rationale was not to create a *de facto* state in itself, but to create one within the Soviet Union, in other words – to halt ‘disintegration’ of the Soviet space. This fact is central to understand why the conflict differs from other ‘separatist’ case studies, and also the primary ‘Soviet’ outlook of the entrenched elite in the DMR. See Oazu Nantoi, ‘Transdnier Conflict: What Could the European Union and the US Do?’, Unpublished E-PINE paper, October, 2005.

⁵⁵ ‘Novyy vitok pridnestrovskogo uregulirovaniya’, *NeGa*, 12 January 2000, at: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2000-01-12/5_vitok.html.

departure that the process of withdrawal, as it is legally enshrined in respective documents, should proceed synchronically with a political conflict resolution process. Thus, now there is for all purposes talk about a dual [*dvuedinyy*] time-table – the withdrawal of Russian troops and a final political settlement of the conflict.⁵⁶

This was a clear deviation from the OSCE summit conclusions.⁵⁷ The 1999 Istanbul Pact had not offered any alternative clause coupling Russian troop withdrawal with a final political settlement. Moreover, Russian media portrayed the OSCE's position as unrealistic, and blamed the Western states for persistently trying to 'disentangle' the two processes, by focusing on Transdnestrian compliance and unilateral withdrawal of Russian troops. Hence, *NeGa* wrote: '[The participants in Istanbul] did not clarify whether the OGRV (*Operativnaya gruppа rossiyskikh voysk*) which among other things is fulfilling a peacekeeping mission is not entitled to leave until a final settlement is reached – at least until this function is not handed over to someone else, or changed fundamentally.'⁵⁸

In fact, the Istanbul declaration had been crystal-clear on the issue – unilateral withdrawal within the specified time-table. Thus, Russia had already from the start interpreted the Istanbul Pact in a manner that hinted at a continued role for Russia's armed forces in Transdnester. The argument of 'synchronization' could be interpreted as a reversed conditionality scheme, with the point being not so much to synchronize resolution and withdrawal, as to put final resolution as a condition for troop withdrawal. Moreover, the 'synchronization argument' implied that Russia definitely sought to have a decisive input in a resolution based on earlier agreements from 1994. What then was to be 'synchronized'? Was it Russia's international obligations in accordance with Istanbul? the foreign policy views of the Russian elite? the policies of the CIS? or the positions between the unrecognized DMR and Moldova? In other words, did the Putin administration see the OSCE criteria in the light of 'socialization', or in the light of non-compliance?

As was to be expected, Russia's new initiative failed to elicit a positive response from any negotiators other than from the unrecognized DMR. The DMR Minister of Foreign Affairs, Litskay, endorsed the fact that Russia had made references to earlier stages of the OSCE process not reflected in the Istanbul Pact – namely, earlier agreements on Russia having a leading position as broker, and the 1994 document stipulating that the conflict should be resolved before withdrawal.⁵⁹ The Moldovan MFA followed up swiftly, declaring that Russia had 'interpreted the Istanbul agreement incorrectly';⁶⁰ moreover, that Russia had 'taken on obligation to withdraw unconditionally

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Vlad Socor, 'Russia Dusts off Recipe for Keeping Troops in Moldova', *Jamestown Monitor*, 14 January, 2000. At: http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?search=1&volume_id=23&issue_id=1699&article_id=16725.

⁵⁸ 'Novyy vitok pridnestrovskogo uregulirovaniya'.

⁵⁹ 'SNG: NeGa soobshchaet', *NeGa*, 21 January 2000. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2000-01-21/5_nega.html.

⁶⁰ 'SNG: NeGa soobshchaet', *NeGa*, 13 January, 2000.

and completely by 2002' and that 'the principle of synchronization had been agreed upon only in bilateral agreements in October 1994.'⁶¹

In other words, the 'new initiative' did little more than reinforce earlier disagreements between Moldova and the DMR, and the Russian broker initiative proved to be in discord with OSCE obligations. On the other hand, judging from the international community, the ball was now in Russia's courtyard. Russian press outlets reported on a possible 'room for action' for Russia. Covering the visit of NATO General Secretary George Robertson to Chisinau, *NeGa* quoted Robertson as saying that NATO would not play any direct role in the Transdnier conflict, since this was within the realm of the OSCE, and since the 'OSCE had succeeded in making Moscow concede to the obligations of Istanbul to withdraw'.⁶²

The synchronization argument did not reduce Moldova's willingness to make new proposals preparing for the final withdrawal of Russia from Transdnier. In January 2000 Moldovan officials tried to reinvigorate discussions within the 1994 trilateral (Russia, Moldova, the DMR) Joint Control Commission on 'peacekeeping'. Chisinau proposed the withdrawal of all technical military hardware from the security zone – 66 units in Moldova and 30 units in Transdnier.⁶³ It also proposed to remove the current bilateral and unilateral border crossings, retaining only the trilateral crossing points, and to replace the existing DMR border guard posts with civilian bilateral police control points. The crux of the proposal was clear: if adopted, it would be possible to withdraw the peacekeeping contingency altogether and hand over border-control functions to a trilateral group of 50 persons capable of performing mobile border-control missions.⁶⁴ In essence, this meant meeting the OSCE criteria, and preparing for trilateral cooperation so that Russia could meet the deadlines.

The 'synchronization argument' was aired also in interaction with the OSCE and promoted alongside signals that Russia might default on its CFE and Istanbul obligations. In April 2000, Head of the CIS Committee in the State Duma, Boris Pastukhov, argued that Russia would comply, in principle, with Istanbul, but that removing hardware in accordance with the CFE Treaty would be difficult technically. Pastukhov stated that maximum 10 carriages could be sent at a time, and that removal of all hardware would exceed the OSCE time-table for removal of hardware by the end of 2001.⁶⁵ He also said that Russia would stick to the 'synchronization strategy' in order to 'avoid negative consequences' of a sudden withdrawal.

The OSCE response was an accommodating one. As reported in the Russian press, the head of the Moldova OSCE Mission, William Hill, stated that

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² 'NATO ne budet zanimat'sya pridnestrovskim konfliktom', *NeGa*, 17 February, 2000.

⁶³ 'Novye predlozheniya Kishineva', *NeGa*, 19 January 2000. Moldovan officials held that DMR figures omitted hardware that was not controlled by the DMR, and that the real number was about 150 units. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2000-01-19/5_kishinev.html

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ 'Sobytiya i proisshedsstviya: korotko', *NeGa*, 29 April, 2000. At: http://www.ng.ru/events/2000-04-29/2_brief.html. See also Victor-Yves Ghebali, 'Growing Pains at the OSCE: The Rise and Fall of Russia's Pan-European Expectations', p. 378.

there were more political obstacles than technical ones due to the DMR's failure of compliance, but added that a prolonged mission for Russia 'could not be excluded'.⁶⁶ Positive responses were aired again in May 2000, when Hill hailed Pastukhov's statements that although it would be difficult to comply with Istanbul, Russia would make an effort. The OSCE Mission head once again signalled that the organization would provide funding for withdrawal.

The 'synchronization' argument was coupled with a CIS integration strategy that had greater potential for exercising leverage on Moldovan authorities – energy and gas deliverances. Since 2000, Gazprom has not only been central in providing gas for internal consumption to Moldova, but has also been able to exert considerable leverage over the Moldovan authorities. With its 50 per cent plus one share majority over the Moldova gas company, Gazprom employed halts in gas deliveries as a tool to get the Moldovan authorities to consider a closer association with Russia and the CIS. In February 2000, Gazprom stopped gas deliveries to Moldova, on grounds of accumulated debts by the Moldovan government.⁶⁷ Gazprom officials noted that debts from 1999 stood at USD 190 million and that the Moldovan authorities had paid only 3.4 million in the first part of 2000 for deliveries amounting to 17.6 million.⁶⁸ The Moldovan officials were adamant that Russia was using gas deliverances as a means to increase its political standing. However, attempts to renegotiate debts proved successful,⁶⁹ and Gazprom resumed deliveries in March 2000 under agreement that Moldova would pay for uncovered debts by the middle of that month. In April 2000, Moldovan officials announced that Russia and Moldova had agreed on a pay-back scheme of Moldova's debt amounting to USD 122 million over five years and that a new intention agreement on fixed prices for gas deliveries was to be signed.⁷⁰

Russia's importance as a gas deliverer to Moldova gave rise to speculations that Russia would use this to demand a greater role as security provider for Moldova. Officially, Russia refuted such claims. In April 2000, Russia's ambassador denied allegations that Russia had forced Moldovan officials into accepting a Russian base in Transdnier, and that Russia's primary interest in its relations with Moldova were economic. Russian officials, it was reported, realized that Moldova was a neutral country and that the Constitution did not allow foreign bases on Moldovan territory.⁷¹

On the other hand, Pastukhov's visit had been highly ambiguous as to compliance with the OSCE obligations. Indeed, he actually linked the validity of the Russian–Moldovan gas agreement to the question of recognition of the DMR. Visiting Tiraspol, Pastukhov torpedoed the announced basic treaty between Moldova and Russia by claiming that such an agreement could not be signed unless representatives from the Transdnier regime were in-

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 24 February 2000.

⁶⁸ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 23 February 2000.

⁶⁹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 2 March 2000.

⁷⁰ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 10 April 2000.

⁷¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 13 April 2000.

cluded in the process, and that any bilateral agreement between Russia and Moldova on gas prices would have to take into account the interests of the people in the breakaway region.⁷² Hence, Russia's gas policies might provide leverage on Moldova in the event that Russia failed to gain acceptance as a major broker in the conflict.

Putin's visit to Moldova in June 2000 marked the peak of Russia's 'synchronization approach'. In talks with Pyotr Luchinskiy, Putin said that Russia had no interest in keeping Moldova on a 'short leash' by maintaining Russian forces there. He also confirmed that Russia would respect its international obligations and the Moldovan Constitution, with its explicit ban on foreign bases on Moldovan territory.⁷³ The main proposal made by Putin was to establish a new format for negotiations led by Yevgeniy Primakov – former Minister of Foreign Affairs and father of the 'Primakov doctrine' of great-power balancing between Russia and the West.⁷⁴ The format was basically an advisory one: Primakov would act as a member of the State Duma, and not in the capacity of heading a state committee of any kind.

Clearly, the Putin visit showed that the Russian presidency was prepared to identify Moldova as the primary interlocutor in resolving the conflict. On the other hand, Russia simultaneously dispatched Head of the Security Council, Sergey Ivanov and Minister of Defence, Igor Sergeev, on a separate visit to Smirnov in Transdnier, without successfully stalling attempts by Smirnov to meet with Putin separately in Chisinau. Russian diplomacy was obviously tangled up in a dual track designed to synchronize positions between the parts, if not OSCE policy at large.

3.1. New Disclaimers against the OSCE and Deviation

Although the Putin visit had opened the door for complying with OSCE obligations, Russian disaffection with the OSCE was on the rise. A delegation from the State Duma attended the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in July 2000 but refrained from voting for the 'Bucharest declaration' due to proposed resolutions against human rights violations in Chechnya and the political situation in Belarus. The Russian delegation also claimed to have blocked a sharp Moldovan-Romanian resolution on withdrawal of forces from the DMR.⁷⁵

The Russian delegation did not manage to get the OSCE to change its policies, however. The OSCE was on the contrary in line on the Transdnier issue. The troika (Norway, Austria, and Romania) had in preparing for the Bucharest summit explicitly voiced concern as to the lack of progress in resolving the DMR–Moldova conflict, stressing the need for a rapid with-

⁷² *RFE/RL Newslines*, 27 April 2000.

⁷³ 'Primakov zaymetsya problemoy Pridnestrov'ya', *NeGa*, 20 June 2000.

⁷⁴ For an assessment of the Primakov strategy, see Flemming Splidsboel-Hansen, 'Past and Present Meet: Aleksander Gorchakov and Russian Foreign Policy', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2002.

⁷⁵ 'OBSE ne dolzhna dublirovat' Strasburg', *NeGa*, 12 July 2000. The declaration was according to OSCE press releases adopted by the Romanian chairmanship in the PA. See: <http://www.osce.org/item/5166.html>.

drawal and a decoupling of the question of status from the Istanbul obligations.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Putin's visit to Moldova brought some optimism. At a subsequent Permanent Council meeting on 17 July 2000, the OSCE received a document from Russia outlining the time-table for complying with the Istanbul pact adopted by Putin on 13 July.⁷⁷ Moreover, the Austrian chairmanship expressed hopes that the Primakov commission could bring new life into the process, meeting with Primakov on 26 July in Vienna,⁷⁸ and welcomed Putin's statements in Moldova in June that Russia would proceed in accordance with the Istanbul obligations. Finally, a UK proposal to provide a fund for financing Russian withdrawal also encouraged OSCE leaders to speak of a possible move out of the deadlock.⁷⁹

Russian 'compliance' was based on carving out space for a possible OSCE mandate to allow continued Russian presence in the DMR. The contours of Primakov's shuttle diplomacy were clear already in July 2000, and envisaged getting Ukraine and the OSCE to consider an OSCE mandate for Russia-Ukrainian peacekeeping forces. Moreover, Primakov stated in Vienna, the basis for any resolution would be a 'common state' for Moldova.⁸⁰ This new impetus was made more manifest in September, when Russia tabled a proposal to link 'synchronization' to a joint Ukraine-Russia proposal. A meeting in the Primakov Commission in Moscow was dedicated to a Russian-Ukrainian initiative, which seemed to be a compromise with the Istanbul Pact. Moscow coupled CIS-membership and the DMR status problem in a package and wrapped gas deliverances and debt reconstruction around it. Recognizing Moldova as the primary interlocutor, Moscow had accepted Chisinau as the prime broker of Transdnier's USD 800 million debts to Gazprom in bilateral talks with Moscow.⁸¹ As a result, Moldovan officials came to see the joint Ukrainian-Russian proposal 'On Transdnier's status, guarantees, and the presence of military formations in the security zone' as a positive contribution to settlement.⁸²

Moldova's 'one-on-one' with Russia was paralleled by a freeze in the 2+3 format for negotiations initiated by the DMR. The Tiraspol regime boycotted talks within the five-party group from October 2000 and would resume talks only after the Moldovan presidential elections slated for December that year.⁸³ Hence, the Moldovan authorities were in a position to gain some benefits – but in a vulnerable position in negotiations with their larger

⁷⁶ 'Troika Ministers address pressing OSCE issues at Bucharest meeting', *OSCE Press Release*, at: <http://www.osce.org/item/5159.html>.

⁷⁷ 'Moldova Focus of OSCE CiO Meeting with Yevgeniy Primakov', *OSCE Press Release*, at: <http://www.osce.org/item/5207.html>. 'Putin approves time-table for troop withdrawal', *RFE/RL Newslines*, 14 July, 2000.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Roland Eggleston, 'Caucasus: OSCE Leader Optimistic over Karabakh, Transdnier', At: <http://www.rferl.org/features/2000/07/f.ru.000721152949.asp>.

⁸⁰ 'Yevgeniy Primakov "zakryl" problemu Pridnestovya', *NeGa*, 9 August, 2000. The article speculated about the 'secrecy' of the Primakov commission and that the solution provided would imply that Russia would be pushed out of the DMR to prepare for the presence of 'OSCE forces'.

⁸¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 28 September 2000.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 6 November 2000 and *RFE/RL Newslines*, 31 October 2000.

neighbours due to the standstill in the 2+3 process. Gazprom's leverage remained substantial throughout the process, and was targeted at making future Moldovan authorities more receptive to Russia's 'synchronization' argument. In November 2000, Gazprom again warned in a letter to Moldovan parliamentarians that gas deliveries would be reduced, due to lack of payment.⁸⁴

3.2. The Primakov Initiative: 'Synchronization' and Default

Positive expectations from the OSCE in the summer of 2000 notwithstanding, the resumed talks between Russian officials and the DMR/Moldova in 2001 proceeded along other lines than those of the Istanbul Declaration. Apparently, part of the Russian strategy consisted in giving Duma representatives a greater role in parallel talks with the DMR – a strategy with the character of being a two-edged sword. True, members of the conservative fractions in the Duma could probably find a common language with the DMR. On the other hand, their presence could serve to legitimize the Tiraspol regime as having been 'elected by the people'. This was a status eagerly coveted by the Smirnov clan – among other things through numerous Soviet-style appeals made to the Russian president.⁸⁵

The spring of 2001 opened the arena for Duma diplomacy on status in accordance with the 'synchronization' scheme. Boris Pastukhov went to the DMR in March 2001 to prepare for the first visit of Primakov to the DMR in April, ostensibly eager to convey that Russia saw the victory of the Moldovan Communist Party in the February elections as an interesting event that might further the discussion of Moldova joining the Belarus–Russian Union.⁸⁶ Pastukhov used the DMR stage to suggest that Communist leader Voronin should stick to his pre-election pledges, but rejected Voronin's proposal to start with a clean slate in negotiations, referring to the DMR demand that the 1997 Memorandum should serve as the basis for all negotiations.⁸⁷

This was more than an implicit reversal of the Istanbul Pact. In fact, Primakov's first trip to Moldova in April 2001 offered few indications that Russia would change any of its principled positions. Repeating the general outline of Russia's 'synchronization argument', Primakov indicated a default on the CFE obligations included in the Istanbul Pact to remove hardware by the end of 2001. 'No serious politician can claim that the conflict will be resolved by the end of 2001', Primakov stated, and added that 'sooner or later [*sic*] the Russian armed forces will be withdrawn, but this will be done

⁸⁴ *RFE/RL Newswire*, 8 November 2000.

⁸⁵ These appeals were put on the web by the *Olviya Press* news agency in DMR. See 'Uvazhaemy Vladimir Vladimirovich!', *Olviya Press*, 1 May, 2001.

⁸⁶ The Moldovan Communist Party increased its percentage share of the vote from 30% to 50.2%, gaining a majority in Parliament to change the Constitution and elect a President. See Marius Vahl and Michael Emerson, 'Moldova and the Transnistrian Conflict' in: Bruno Coppieters et al., *Europeanization and Conflict Resolution*, Academia Press: Gent, 2004, pp. 167–68. See also 'V Moldavii k vlasti prishli kommunisty', *NeGa*, 27 February 2001, at: http://www.ng.ru/events/2001-02-27/1_authority.html, and 'Smogut li kommunisty ob'edinit dva berega Dnestra?', *NeGa*, 20 March, 2001, at: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2001-03-20/5_kommunist.html.

⁸⁷ 'Rossiya predlagaet aktivizirovat' peregovornyy protsess', *Olviya-Press*, March 2001.

only under certain conditions and on condition that the current delicate balance will not be distorted.’⁸⁸

The ‘delicate balance’ was linked to discussions on the status of the DMR and of Russian forces. Primakov ensured the parties that Russia would remain a guarantor of all agreements between the parties during the talks, and that Russia would also be a primary broker in talks on an agreement between the DMR and Moldova on the status for the DMR. But the Primakov balancing act failed to produce any agreements. The highly biased virtual spin agency of the DMR, *Olviya press*, reported that Primakov was balancing between a unitary state (Moldova) and two federal subjects with equal status (the DMR), but nothing on Russian preferences. Concerning the future status of Russian forces, the Primakov plan facilitated two options: a joint Ukraine-Russian mission under OSCE auspices, or a Russian peacekeeping mission operating ‘on agreement from the parties’.⁸⁹ DMR representatives preferred the second option, and flatly rejected the first.⁹⁰

Apparently, the DMR regime utilized the opportunity to table new proposals. Russian guarantees during negotiations were not enough, as the DMR regime wanted social, economic, military and political guarantees from Russia – that is, everything short of being a constituent part of the federation.⁹¹ DMR representatives in the OKK were especially vigilant in insisting that the format of trilateral ‘peacekeeping’ consisting of the DMR, Moldova and Russia should be retained. According to *Olviya Press*: ‘the most threatening factor today, which can spoil the development of the process of resolution, is the plan to create a “stabilization force under the auspices of OSCE”, an international peace-keeping mission.’⁹²

If the Primakov proposal had been designed to soften DMR demands, it certainly failed. Russia’s ‘guarantor role’ was strangled at birth. The DMR authorities resisted any and all alternative solutions to the ‘peacekeeping’ format, with reference to not allowing ‘blacks, mulattos, Frenchmen or Germans on the soil of the DMR’.⁹³ Moreover, the geopolitical overlays of the Duma initiatives had begun to surface. At a press conference in Moscow on 18 May, Duma representatives announced that Voronin and Smirnov had agreed to join the Union project between Belarus and Russia together, thus removing all discussions about international peacekeeping. According to Duma members, such a ‘solution’ would make ‘the participation of the OSCE in conflict resolution redundant’.⁹⁴ Anonymous sources in the Russian MOD also circulated information that if and when Moldova joined the

⁸⁸ ‘Primakov obsudil strategiyu peregovorov’, *NeGa*, 25 April, 2001. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2001-04-25/5_primakov.html.

⁸⁹ ‘Yevgeniy Primakov shchitaet...’, *Olviya-Press*, April 2001. Quoting the source can be justified by the fact that DMR authorities repeatedly expressed great trust in Primakov’s broker role, and thus had an interest in giving a true report on the contents of the talks.

⁹⁰ ‘Primakov obsudil strategiyu peregovorov’.

⁹¹ ‘Mirotvorcheskaya operatsiya na beregakh Dnestra’, *Olviya-Press*, March, 2001.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ ‘Dialog Kishineva i Tiraspolya stanovitsya konstruktivnee’, *NeGa*, 18 May 2001. At: http://www.ng.ru/events/2001-05-18/2_dialog.html.

Belarus-Russia Union, 'Chisinau might agree to a preliminary stationing of Russian forces in the DMR.'⁹⁵

The second track of finding a political resolution also proved unsuccessful. Visiting Russia shortly after the election, Voronin expressed hopes that the conflict could be resolved by the end of 2001, indicating that Russia's policies had become 'more concrete and more confiding'.⁹⁶ The premise was, however, Putin's guarantees that the one-state solution of a unified Moldova was benched, and that Russia would somewhat diffusely provide security for DMR. Voronin simultaneously rejected the 'equal status' confederative solution proposed by the DMR.⁹⁷

In April and May 2001, prospects for a brokered solution deteriorated rapidly. Russian newspapers started to criticize the 'secretiveness' of the Primakov Commission, claiming that Putin was prepared to 'give away the DMR' in exchange for an international peacekeeping mandate for Russia.⁹⁸ Moreover, DMR officials started a campaign against all steps taken in the discussions on a political solution to the status problem. On 13 May, a scandal erupted when DMR 'border guards' at Bender refused Voronin entry to visit to Noul Neamt monastery in the DMR village of Kitskani – allegedly because they could not provide for his security, but also with claims that proper notification on the visit had not been submitted to the DMR authorities. The DMR regime added fuel to the fire by demanding that Moldova should apologize for 'aggression against the DMR in 1992' and pay USD 70 mill for 'material damages'.⁹⁹

The refusal to let Voronin enter DMR territory sabotaged the progress made in the negotiations. Moldovan authorities claimed that the negotiations on 16 May had progressed on 20 different issues ranging from harmonization of tax and customs, mutual recognition of the legality of documents, and the presence of both Moldovan and DMR press outlets on both sides of Dniestr.¹⁰⁰ At the 20 June meeting in Chisinau, positions were again deadlocked. The decision of the DMR authorities to introduce separate passports from 1 October 2001 was publicly condemned by Moldova, and the DMR authorities once more refused Voronin access to DMR territory to mark the anniversary of the military conflict of 1992 in Bender.¹⁰¹ The Moldovan side was taken by surprise, as this move was made after the decision to mutually recognize documents as having legal force and also followed by an appeal to Voronin on unilateral withdrawal from the Istanbul decision on withdrawal of Russian troops.¹⁰² Talks on a single state also stranded. Moldova's pro-

⁹⁵ 'Kishinev soglasitsya na rossiyskuyu bazu?', *NeGa*, 23 May 2001.

⁹⁶ 'Vopros o statuse Pridnestrov'ya zhelatel'no reshit' v etom godu', *NeGa*, 18 April, 2001.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ 'Sdast li Vladimir Putin pridnestrov'e?', *NeGa*, 28 March, 2001, and 'Yevgeniy Primakov i Boris Pastukhov razoblachayut "NG" pered moldavskimi zhurnalistami', *NeGa*, 28 April, 2001.

⁹⁹ 'Zastarelyy konflikt nachinaet razreshat'sya?', *NeGa*, 19 May, 2001, and Eugen Tomiuc, 'Moldova: Transnistria Denies President Access to Monastery', *RFE/RL Special Report*, 15 May 2001.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ 'Kishinev i Tiraspol demonstriruyut zhestokost', *NeGa*, 27 June, 2001.

¹⁰² 'Lideru kommunistov Moldavii ponravilos' byt 'prezidentom', *NeGa*, 30 June, 2001.

posal to grant wide autonomy to the DMR were rebuked by DMR demands that separate agreements should be made between two equal subjects within a confederative state.

During the summer of 2001, Moldova abandoned all hopes of finding a compromise as long as Smirnov was at the helm. In July, Voronin stated that the republic had been turned into ‘a black hole of smuggling and crime’, and said he hoped that the December 2001 presidential elections in the DMR would bring a new and more constructive leadership.¹⁰³ The response from Tiraspol was not very accommodating, however. A regime spokesman stated bluntly that the new government in Moldova had ‘ignored former agreements and tried to solve the problem by exerting pressure on Tiraspol’.¹⁰⁴

The important point here is that Russian diplomacy had had no success whatsoever in getting the parties to meet. Moreover, all confidence building measures CBM efforts had failed utterly, as the DMR authorities denied Moldova’s president entry to DMR territory. Finally, talks on what to do with Russian military personnel were left pending, and the 2001 deadline for withdrawing military hardware was approaching. Primakov stated laconically that the major obstacles were ‘the inertia of the past’ and ‘lack of trust between the parties’.¹⁰⁵ Russia had proposed a plan, he continued, but would not ‘force this on any of the parties’.¹⁰⁶ The collapse in Russian public diplomacy and the defunct ‘synchronization strategy’ were not mentioned.

3.3. Unsynchronized Withdrawal: Russia Starts CFE Process

Despite the failure of the synchronization strategy, the process of meeting the Istanbul criteria for withdrawal of Russian CFE hardware from the DMR accelerated in the summer of 2001. In June 2001, a protocol on the creation of a bilateral Russian-DMR working group for conversion of hardware and ammunition was set up in the presence of OSCE representative and representatives from Russia’s MOD.¹⁰⁷ In early July, a first public event was arranged to mark the start-up of a coordinated OSCE-Russia effort on dismantling the CFE Treaty Limited Equipment. The event was organized around the destruction of the first of several T-64 battle tanks, and the process was to be repeated with other hardware.¹⁰⁸

Russian MOD officials were adamant that the bilateral protocol would secure sufficient financial compensation to the DMR to safeguard compliance. The form of the compensation was, according to *Izvestiya*, yet to be ‘decided upon’, but Russian authorities facilitated the write-off of gas debts, or the reimbursement of DMR authorities, pending on the sale of hardware

¹⁰³ ‘Vladimir Voronin: otstupat’ nam nekuda’, *Izvestiya*, 8 July, 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/world/article2214>.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Pered bol’shim razgovorom’, *Izvestiya*, 12 July, 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/world/article2409>.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Yevgeniy Primakov: Rossiya dolzhen uchityvat’ geopoliticheskie ugrozy’, *Izvestiya*, 31 July, 2001.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ ‘Kishinev i Tiraspol...’.

¹⁰⁸ ‘T-64: utilizatsiya nachalas’’, *Olviya Press*, July 2001.

on the international market.¹⁰⁹ The DMR's virtual information agencies immediately claimed that Russia was abrogating earlier agreements, and that good pieces of hardware were 'being buried'.¹¹⁰ They also warned of massive protest actions, including demonstrations outside the site of the 14th Army.¹¹¹

Nevertheless, TLE destruction proceeded. By August 2001, Russian media started reporting about the total amount of hardware to be destroyed, and also about the relatively limited progress from 1999 and onwards. *Izvestiya* wrote that the Kolbasna site in the DMR had some 2,504 truckloads of ammunition, 30,000 small arms, 119 tanks, 43 BMPs, 112 BTRs, 220 anti-aircraft units, 33 combat vehicles (PTURS), 14 'Grad' artillery units, 83 artillery units, 32 mortars, 42 reconnaissance vehicles, and 492 engineer vehicles.¹¹² The plan called for destruction or withdrawal of a total of 250 units of TLE by the end of 2001.¹¹³ Also the OSCE could report decisive progress in hardware removal in accordance with the scheme adopted in June. William Hill, head of the Moldova OSCE Mission, stated that Russia had already received USD 50,000 from the OSCE fund, and that Russia was cooperating with the OSCE in Moldova.¹¹⁴

By November 2001, Russian press outlets reported that Russia had completed the first phase of TLE withdrawal by destroying or removing 108 T-64 battle tanks and 125 ACVs even before the time-limit set by the Istanbul.¹¹⁵ What remained were basically small arms (50,000 barrels) and ammunition (40,000 tons), according to *Izvestiya*. But Russia was ultimately unsuccessful in getting the DMR regime to comply or accept both withdrawal and a political solution. In late August, *Izvestiya* stated that Tiraspol would be given an initial compensation of about USD 100 million, perhaps through writing off its USD 400 million debt to Russia for gas deliveries.¹¹⁶ In December, the MOD repeated its intentions to cut gas debts in accordance with the June 2001 protocol, by 50% of the total value of equipment transferred to Russia. This was to no avail, however. By December 2001, a deal on the residuals of military hardware, ammunition and light arms had not been cut with the DMR.¹¹⁷

Concerning the political solution, the stand-off from June 2001 worsened. Following the five-party meeting in August 2001, Voronin lamented that

¹⁰⁹ 'Prodannaya garantiya', *Izvestiya*, 1 July, 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article1929>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ 'Zharkoe leto generala Yevnevicha', *Olviya Press*, 4 July, 2001. In a perhaps more amusing report, *Olviya Press* characterized the disarmament process as a 'barbarian cutting of combat-ready tanks and BTRs'. See: 'Missiya OBSE v Moldove okonchatel'no isportila imidzh etoy organizatsii v glazakh pridnestrovtsev', *Olviya Press*, 3 July 2001.

¹¹² Ibid. Numbers reported by *NeGa* amounted to 49,476 small arms, 805 artillery systems, 655 armored combat vehicles (not specified) and 4,000 vehicles. 'Kishinev soglasitsya na rossiyskuyu bazu?', *NeGa*, 23 May, 2001.

¹¹³ 'Resheniya Stambul'skogo sammita vopolnyayutsya', *NeGa*, 2 August 2001.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ 'Malen'kaya Rossiya', *Izvestiya*, 18 November, 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article9745>.

¹¹⁶ 'Blokadnye igry', *Izvestiya*, 31 August 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article4984>.

¹¹⁷ 'Tanki pod nozhom', and 'Pozitsiya Minoborony Rossii', *NeGa*, 21 December 2001.

there had been little progress concerning the status of Transdnier in negotiations and that he had few expectations for future resolution. The parties continued to disagree on the issue of federalism or republic, and Tiraspol categorically refused to consider a common defence, as stipulated in the 1999 Kiev document.¹¹⁸ Moreover, members of the Duma were increasingly deviating from the Kremlin line of compliance, and openly defending the DMR authorities not only against alleged 'aggression' from Moldova, but also from what was seen as a geopolitical grand plan to evict Russia from its primary sphere of interest. The Duma had on 4 July adopted a resolution calling on the presidents of Moldova, Belarus, Russia and the DMR to hold talks on bringing Moldova and the DMR into the Russia-Belarus Union. When the Duma Speaker, Gennadiy Seleznyov, and Yevgeniy Primakov tried to organize a repeat vote on the resolution, it failed. The resolution was passed with 300 votes.¹¹⁹ In September 2001, numerous resolutions surfaced in DMR virtual agencies, including appeals from parliamentarians of South Ossetia and also the deputy chair of the Duma Committee for ties to CIS compatriots, Georgiy Tikhonov. On 3 September, a Duma delegation visiting Tiraspol also announced that since the Duma had not ratified the Istanbul Pact, Russia had 'all reason not to comply with it'.¹²⁰ Other members of the Duma delegation, basically former members of the radical patriotic Soyuz group, referred to the MOD's decision to destroy and withdraw CFE hardware as a 'criminal act'.¹²¹

The activities of Duma lobbyists undermined prospects for a political solution. In October, the Primakov Commission ended its work and the mandate for conducting negotiations was transferred to the MFA and first deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Trubnikov.¹²² According to Trubnikov, the Russian government was prepared to move the issue forward, on condition that 'the parties do not waste time on petty details, but take the bull by its horns.' The MFA also proposed to open a consulate in Tiraspol.¹²³ Apparently, the MFA believed that this was a compromise with regard to recognition. Officially, Trubnikov announced that Moscow did not consider the future presidential elections in the DMR to be legitimate, since 'Transdnier is a self-proclaimed territory and elections there have no legal base. Thus an evaluation of them should be given from point of view of international law and the international legitimacy of the Transdnier.'¹²⁴

But Moscow was in no hurry to recognize the DMR, let alone worry about the non-compliance of the DMR regime. Instead, the MFA continued to press for the 'synchronization' strategy. Meeting with his counterpart in

¹¹⁸ 'Tozhe rezul'tat', *Izvestiya*, 8 August 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/world/article3790>.

¹¹⁹ 'Deputaty Gosudarstvennoy Dumy Rossiyskoy Federatsii o prisoedinenii Pridnestrov'ya...', *Olviya Press*, 13 July, 2001.

¹²⁰ 'Georgii Tikhonov: U Rossii est' vse osnovaniya ne vypolnyat' stambul'skikh soglasheniy', *Olviya Press*, 7 September 2001.

¹²¹ For details on the pro-DMR lobby in the Duma, see 'Regional Tensions Over Transnistria', *ICG Report*, no. 157, 2004, pp. 18–19.

¹²² 'Oboydemya bez priznaniy', *Izvestiya*, 3 October 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article6912>.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ 'Stenogramma interv'yu pervogo zamestitel'ya Ministra', at: http://www.in.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/68836C554EE4D01743256B1F003DF5CD?OpenDocument.

Chisinau, Igor Ivanov announced in November 2001 that Moldova and Russia had agreed to prepare an agreement on bilateral relations which included a proposed resolution of the DMR conflict in the preamble.¹²⁵ This specifically Russian version of the Istanbul Pact was not coordinated with the OSCE, and was further underpinned by Russian gas-leverage on Moldova. The MFA also stressed that the DMR regime was ready to provide unhindered transfer of ammunition to Russia.

Direct contacts between the Moldovan and Russian presidents were also resumed. When Voronin met with Putin in November 2001, he stated explicitly to the Russian press that the main reason for Moldova to enter into what he termed as a ‘strategic partnership’ with Russia was that Russia had spoken in favour of recognizing Moldova as a unified sovereign country. Moldova was – in return – prepared to give Transdnier and other federal subjects wide-ranging autonomy in federal affairs, he added, although implying that Chisinau did not accept the Smirnov regime as a partner for negotiations. As for the OSCE commitments of Russia, Voronin stated: ‘The fate of the Russian contingency located on the territory of Transdnier, is reflected in the decisions from the Istanbul summit of the OSCE. Russia has clearly stated that it intends to withdraw its military equipment from the territory of Transdnier, in accordance with the decisions taken in that forum.’¹²⁶

Demands from the DMR that Russia should remain the major guarantor of conflict resolution did not abate, however. In November 2001, the Tiraspol regime was increasingly adamant that it had been outflanked by the bilateral rapprochement between Chisinau and Moscow.¹²⁷ Smirnov told Russian press outlets that the Russian State Duma considered Transdnier a ‘zone of strategic interests’, adding that he – as a Russian Transdnierian – would leave the details up to Russia, but that ‘the Russian forces would remain a guarantor against aggression from the other side of Dniestr.’¹²⁸

3.4. CIS ‘Socialization’: New Russian Proposals

The ‘re-election’ of Smirnov as DMR president in December 2001 severely aggravated the situation. In early 2002, the Tiraspol regime started to hold back the withdrawal of ammunition, claiming that Russia had not met the conditions for compensation. On 22 January, *Izvestiya* reported that the Head of the 14th Army, Valeriy Yevnevich, was prevented from inspecting the ammunition depots. Tiraspol claimed that Russia, instead of aggregates from dismantled tanks, had given shovels and saws in exchange for ammunition.

¹²⁵ ‘Shtefan Veliky zzhigaet ogni’, *Izvestiya*, 7 November, 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/world/article9079>.

¹²⁶ ‘Pridnestrovskaya problema uvyazla v melochyakh’, *Izvestiya*, 18 November, 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article9714>.

¹²⁷ ‘Popravit’ dela za nash shchet u nikh ne poluchitsya’, *Izvestiya*, 18 November, 2001. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article9715>.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

Russia responded by simply withdrawing Yevnevich to Russia as deputy head of the Russian infantry peacekeeping forces.¹²⁹

Russia had officially not recognized the DMR elections, but had thrown a few spanners in the wheels for Smirnov's re-election. Moreover, in January 2002, it became clear that the MFA had not abandoned its intention of offering some sort of sovereignty guarantee to the DMR. Meeting with a delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council, Trubnikov underlined that Russia's position was to renew negotiations within the 5-party format, and that any unification would have to be founded on a 'viable guaranteed status' for the DMR.¹³⁰ This materialized during Trubnikov's visit to Chisinau and Tiraspol on 30 January with claims that Russian proposals would offer a new 'vector' in conflict resolution. The MFA suggested signing a bilateral agreement with Chisinau, which was to include a proposal on a 'stabilization force' together with Ukraine.¹³¹ The proposal was allegedly supported by the DMR regime as one that offered 'sufficient security guarantees'. Moreover, Russian media reports claimed that this would alter the impression that Russia was leaving the region forever.

By now Moscow had received enough evidence that the DMR was beligerently refusing all international multilateral conflict resolution efforts and that it had even blackmailed Russia on this account. Nor could there be any doubt whatsoever that the plan would not be endorsed by Moldova. On the contrary, Voronin had clearly expressed his frustration with Russia's hands-off resolution by appealing to Putin to resolve the conflict by throwing in presidential authority and persuading the DMR president to leave office – a remark misquoted in the Russian press as being call to Russia to apply force against the DMR.¹³²

The timing of the presentation of the stabilization force proposal is also interesting. Apparently, Moscow was concerned about too close cooperation between Ukraine and Moldova on border issues. Voronin had sought to address the DMR conflict directly with Ukraine,¹³³ and to invite three European countries (Sweden, Germany and Austria) to assist in enforcing the August 2001 customs regime with the DMR.¹³⁴ This ran contrary to Russian proposals, which amounted to reviving the 5-party format under OSCE auspices by making Voronin agree to meet with Smirnov. Moreover, the Trubnikov visit clearly elaborated on the reversed conditionality scheme. Russia would fulfil the Istanbul Pact, *NeGa* reported, so that the 'OSCE consequently facilitated a status for the DMR that would "solve" the issue of Russian military presence.'¹³⁵

¹²⁹ 'Zakrytaya dver'. Pridnestrov'e khochet – a Moldova ne mozhet', *Izvestiya*, 22 January 2002. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article13167>. See also 'Opyat' ukhodim', *NeGa*, 22 January 2002. At: http://www.ng.ru/politics/2002-01-22/1_leave.html.

¹³⁰ http://www.ln.mid.ru/Ns-dos.nsf/arh/432569D800223F3443256B52003068C3?_Open-Document.

¹³¹ 'Virtual'nye peregovory', *NeGa*, 30 January, 2002. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2002-01-30/5_moldova.html.

¹³² 'Rossiya v roli starshego dvornika?', *NeGa*, 15 January, 2002.

¹³³ 'Virtual'nye peregovory' *NeGa*, 30 January, 2001.

¹³⁴ 'Moldaviya prigrasit tamozhennikov iz Evropy', *NeGa*, 5 February, 2002.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

Russia again coupled the conflict resolution agenda with revival of the CIS and energy issues. In March 2002, Putin announced that Russia would enter into a 'strategic partnership' with Ukraine, and succeeded in pursuing Kiev to join the Eurasian Economic Cooperation with Kazakhstan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Besides the usual public policy declarations on free trade and low custom barriers, Putin explicitly identified energy as the major incentive for cooperation. Moscow wanted Ukraine to join the Central Asian–Russian energy cooperation with its gas pipelines. If so, 'we can influence the European economy strongly, and they will have to take us into account.'¹³⁶

This may have been merely a declaration of intentions, however, as no documents were signed. Nevertheless, Moscow's ambitions were now coming to the surface. Moldova's role in the puzzle was that of a possible applicant country and an energy client. Moscow reiterated its dedication to support Moldovan sovereignty and considered Smirnov a 'complicated client',¹³⁷ or as Putin expressed it, one that could not be invited to the Odessa meeting of the CIS in March 2002: 'it's bad without him, and it's bad together with him.'¹³⁸ This did not alter the fact that Russia wanted to link its primary role as broker to its overall strengthened position in Central Asia and on the European energy market. Symptomatically, Moldova's proposal to invite European custom officers was not put on the summit agenda as Moscow announced that a meeting between Moldovan, Ukrainian and Russian custom officials and border guards including 'colleagues from the DMR' would take place in Chisinau on the next week.¹³⁹

The trilateral effort yielded no results. The DMR regime refused to sign the agreement on joint customs control and demanded that it should be allowed to export goods without clearance from Moldova.¹⁴⁰ The Smirnov regime also elevated the DMR to the level of an independent state by appointing ambassadors to Belarus and Russia.¹⁴¹ Finally, the DMR regime also met with the leaders of other separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which prompted commentators to talk about the rise of a CIS-2 of unrecognized 'republics'.¹⁴² Meanwhile, the OSCE appeared to be sidelined. Although the organization announced its readiness to go ahead with providing funding and equipment for the destruction of ammunition in the DMR, DMR officials blocked all attempts to transfer ammunition from the Kolbasna field to the destruction plant. The emerging political crisis in Moldova also put Voronin under decisive pressure. In March and April 2002, pro-sovereignty movements staged numerous demonstrations against

¹³⁶ 'Energeticheskie problemy na fone mirotvorchestva', *NeGa*, 19 March, 2002.

¹³⁷ 'Nadezhnaya svyaz'', *Izvestiya*, 18 March, 2002. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article15790>.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ 'Energeticheskie problemy na fone mirotvorchestva', *NeGa*, 19 March, 2002.

¹⁴⁰ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 26 March, 2002.

¹⁴¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 29 March, 2002.

¹⁴² 'Nepriznannye prodolzhayut nadeyat'sya', *NeGa*, 27 March 2002. Moscow's role in these meetings has been one of 'hosting' consultations. The leader of South Ossetiya travelled to Tiraspol *en route* via Moscow after consultations in the MFA and the Duma.

Smirnov's foreign policies, and the conflict reverberated in the Moldovan Parliament.

Throughout the political crisis in Moldova, Moscow remained silent to a degree that one could wonder whether the Kremlin had a policy, or no policy at all. Status quo in conflict resolution definitely played into the hands of the Smirnov regime, and severely destabilized internal politics in Moldova. Moscow kept the 5 + 1 format relatively active, but at the same time it engaged in a selective bargaining game, issuing regular reassurances that Russia would comply with the Istanbul Pact, an active strategic partnership with Ukraine and a policy of forgiving non-recognition of the DMR, allowing the DMR regime to engage in all sorts of belligerent blackmailing activities. More than keeping the 5 + 1 structure active, Russia had also watered down the content of the Istanbul Pact by placing its 'fulfilment' in the context of a revived CIS, with Russian energy resources as the major engine for integration.

Despite Russia's unwillingness to confront the DMR regime with an ultimatum, the OSCE continued to express hopes that Russia would comply with the Istanbul Pact. In the beginning of May, OSCE mission head in Moldova, David Schwartz, stated that Russia still had a chance to meet the obligations of Istanbul, and that the OSCE would make all efforts to assist in withdrawing ammunition from the DMR or destroying it on the site.¹⁴³ The equipment provided by the OSCE was not put to use, however – a circumstance that Schwartz attributed not to Russia, but the refusal of the DMR to follow with the time-table.

Despite a new US input in debates on the status of the DMR during the summer of 2002, by late 2002 Russia still showed all signs of not being able – or willing – to comply with the time-table. With Russian ammunition withdrawals stalled throughout most of 2002, the MOD tried in October to secure compliance from the DMR regime by offering debt reduction in exchange for ammunition withdrawal. On 4 October, transport carrying ammunition left, reportedly in line with a document signed in September, offering a USD 100 mill reduction in gas debts.¹⁴⁴ After this, the process again halted. In November, Putin announced that Russia could not deliver on the time-table. He added that Russia wanted to comply, but that the DMR leadership 'is made up of people with whom it's difficult to discuss issues of this kind'.¹⁴⁵

The OSCE had registered that Russia would not be able to withdraw all troops and ammunition. Debates started on whether a new time-table would have to be adopted, whether Russia should return funds or perhaps the Istanbul Pact should be changed.¹⁴⁶ Such an 'all-out' discussion around the OSCE document clearly indicated uneasiness about Russia's inability to pressure the DMR regime to comply. Moreover, Russian gas incentives for

¹⁴³ *RFE/RL Newswire*, 3 May, 2002.

¹⁴⁴ *RFE/RL Newswire*, 29 October, 2002.

¹⁴⁵ Eugen Tomiuc, 'Moldova: Putin, OSCE Say Arms Withdrawal Faces Serious Delays', *RFE/RL Feature Stories*, 12 November, 2002.

¹⁴⁶ *RFE/RL Newswire*, 11 November, 2002.

the DMR were relatively unfavourably distributed onto Moldova. After Putin's statement on not meeting the Istanbul deadline, Gazprom warned Moldova that the debt for 2002 had reached USD 272 million and that the country would have to reduce consumption.¹⁴⁷ Finally, whether simply a 'muddling through' strategy or not, Russia revealed a certain inventiveness in redefining the role of the Russian forces in the DMR, now indicating that they were kept there in order to 'guard ammunition depots'.¹⁴⁸ In November came a bilateral meeting between Voronin and the Russian MFA, where the formula of a 'military guarantee' first surfaced. According to Trubnikov:

[...] the most important factor to complete the process of withdrawing technical equipment [CFE-equipment] and ammunition is further progress in the political settlement of the Transdnister conflict. [...] In our view, this process can be completed by preparing a suitable document. This should imply the inclusion of a 'position' in this document that guarantees the completion of the process by means of a military-guarantee provision, although this is not the only way to secure the fulfilment of the preliminary agreements that should be – and have to be – met between Moldova and Transdnister.¹⁴⁹

The document was not presented at the press conference, but evidently Moscow seemed inclined to keep its forces in the DMR as leverage against a more Western-oriented foreign policy orientation on the part of Moldova. Since October, Voronin had spoken more openly about Moldova's Western vector in foreign policies, and in November even hailed Romanian NATO membership arguing that 'Moldova would have a messenger in the organization'.¹⁵⁰ NATO concerns over DMR intransigence had also surfaced, thus marking a break with the 'hands-off' policies of the first part of 2000. On 8 November, Robertson called on Russia to comply with the Istanbul Pact and expressed concerns about DMR intransigence.

Moscow's repeated and renewed talks about security guarantees evidently satisfied the DMR regime, but blurred the prospects for a political solution. Russia was at any rate in search of a new 'mandate' for maintaining forces in the DMR, and that made any progress in talks with Moldova impossible. In Moscow, Voronin reiterated that the question of the continued presence of Russian peacekeepers in Transdnister was subject to Russia's meeting the OSCE criteria. Expressing an understanding of Russia's problem with making the Tiraspol regime comply, Voronin stated: 'from the position of Chisinau, we can only talk about the political resolution of the Transdnister problem as a factor that will resolve all other problems', and, subsequently, that meeting the OSCE commitments was of utmost importance. Although a bilateral meeting, Tiraspol had sent reporters from the TSV television company, prompting Voronin to comment whether this was all a smokescreen for involving NATO. Voronin refuted the claims, and stated:

¹⁴⁷ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 12 November, 2002.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ 'Stenogramma sovместnoy press-konferentsii', at: http://www.ln.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/2BB4A352A725E4A143256C7F0053E249?OpenDocument.

¹⁵⁰ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 12 November, 2002.

The thing is that the Transdniester problem has attained not only an internal Moldovan character. It is a threat to the stability and security of the whole region, and the policies of Transdniester is based not only on an anti-Moldovan position, but also on an anti-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-human position concerning the citizens of Transdniester. [...] This is why we must think about this jointly, and here I first and foremost have the OSCE in mind. And when I talked about this [meaning his speech at the Prague NATO meeting], I had in mind the strengthening of the position of the OSCE in resolving the conflict.¹⁵¹

The Porto summit held in December 2002 revealed the OSCE as a not very strong organization. Moreover, instead of offering solutions, Russia's inputs seemed to indicate that the OSCE was a weak organization without real influence on Russian choices.¹⁵²

3.5. The CIS and Gas: Moscow's 'Federal' Intermezzo

Russia's most visible success at Porto was achieving an extension of the time-limit for withdrawal. The report of the chairman in office made this clear: 'we were very pleased with the language adopted at the Porto Ministerial declaration and with the Russian commitment to withdraw and destroy all the equipment and ammunition stationed in Transdniester until the end of 2003'.¹⁵³ Moreover, the OSCE meeting conclusions also included a phrase that indicated an acceptance of Russia's position that 'necessary conditions' had to be met before withdrawal. The Moldovan delegation thus added in an interpretive statement that 'necessary conditions' in no way should be interpreted as political, but as 'technical arrangements'.¹⁵⁴

The OSCE also seemed set on renewing the old 5+1 format under a new mandate. Rather than the 'unitary state' proposal, the OSCE should facilitate talks on a federal structure for a unified Moldova. At Porto, the Russian action-plan for the federalization of Moldova was supported by the OSCE, enabling Russia to raise the issue bilaterally with Moldova, while retaining the initiative as a major broker. William Hill, whose mandate was renewed in January, stated in February that negotiations would be reinvigorated and that talks would be held on a weekly basis. Moreover, the OSCE had decided to give priority to talks in 2003 by appointing a permanent representative for settlement.¹⁵⁵ As for Russia's ambition to seek an OSCE mandate for third-party peacekeeping, the Porto meeting produced a decision that the Permanent Council should review OSCE peacekeeping: however, as noted by Wolfgang Zellner, the major incentive for Russia to consider this an option was on the decline.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² See Victor-Yves Ghebali, 'Growing Pains...', pp. 379–381. Ghebali argues that the politics of the Putin administration from the onset of 2000 has been sculpted as an 'assault' designed to challenge the weakness of the organization.

¹⁵³ 'Tenth Meeting of the Ministerial Council, 6 – 7 December 2002', MC/DOC/1/02, 7 December 2002, p. 70.

¹⁵⁴ 'Interpretive Statement Under Paragraph 79 (Chapter 6) of the Final Recommendations of the Helsinki Consultations', MC(10).JOUR/2, 7 December 2002.

¹⁵⁵ *RFE/RL Newswire*, 3 February 2003.

¹⁵⁶ Wolfgang Zellner, 'From High Hopes...', p. 394.

Debates on the ‘orientation’ of Moldova continued. Moldova’s bilateral meeting with the USA and renewed US interest in supporting Moldova had led commentators to remark that Russia was losing out in defining the parameters of the Moldovan resolution.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, the fact that Moldova would have the chairmanship of the Council of Ministers in Council of Europe was interpreted as a move of Moldova toward Europe and a subsequent decline of Russia’s ability to secure its major concerns – a political resolution to the DMR conflict and the protection of economic interests.¹⁵⁸ The second pole of orientation was the CIS. In February 2003, the bilateral meeting between Voronin and Putin confirmed the contours of a competing agenda between the OSCE framework and the CIS integration model. The presidents had discussed economic cooperation, both bilaterally and within the Eurasian Economic Cooperation, and Putin announced that Russia would take part in the privatization of Moldovan companies as the ‘only logical step towards partners in the CIS’. As for the Transdnister conflict, Putin stated that the aim of Russia’s brokering position was to define ‘a guaranteed status for Transdnister while preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova’.¹⁵⁹ This was not a declaration, but a principle, Putin stressed.

As the single most powerful partner in the CIS, Russia had already used its privileged position as ‘broker’ to privatize the Rybnitskiy metallurgical factory, which generated half of the total income of the DMR budget. Moreover, there were Russian plans to take over the Dnestrovskiy GRES, which delivered energy to the region, and Gazprom had risen to prominence as a foreign policy tool. Addressing the giant on its 10th anniversary, Putin stated that it would never be sold off in pieces, and that the company was a ‘powerful lever of political and economic influence in the world’.¹⁶⁰

Moscow’s increasing emphasis on economic leverage was paralleled by rising tensions around the conflict resolution plan. In February, Voronin had invited the DMR regime to co-author a new Constitution for Moldova, and stated that he would present a constitutional draft to the negotiating group.¹⁶¹ The proposal was endorsed by the DMR regime, with the special twist that Smirnov believed Moldova to abandoned ‘former ambitions’ and finally accepted talks at the level of equals.¹⁶² When the parties met on 27–28 February 2002, the EU and the USA exerted leverage on the process, imposing a visa ban on the DMR regime for not having facilitated compliance.¹⁶³ On 21 March 2003, the DMR imposed a reverse travel ban on Moldova’s president and his government, causing an outrage in Chisinau.¹⁶⁴ At the end of March,

¹⁵⁷ ‘Lidery SNG pogovoryat o nabolevshem’, *NeGa*, 28 January, 2003. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2003-01-28/6_sng.html.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Mezhdru Kishinevym i Tiraspolem’, *NeGa*, 27 January, 2003. At: http://www.ng.ru/courier/2003-01-27/12_moldavia.html.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Priznanie v nepriznannosti’, *Izvestiya*, 7 February, 2003. At: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article29825>.

¹⁶⁰ *RFE/RL Newsline*, 18 February, 2003.

¹⁶¹ *RFE/RL Newsline*, 11 February, 2003.

¹⁶² *RFE/RL Newsline*, 18 February, 2003.

¹⁶³ *RFE/RL Newsline*, 28 February, 2003.

¹⁶⁴ *RFE/RL Newsline*, 24 March 2003.

Chisinau reported that the DMR had started preparations for war, and that to talk of progress in the constitutional process was futile.

Russia's reactions to the visa ban were highly ambiguous. The MFA at first stated that the imposed regime should be applied with caution. Towards the end of March, Trubnikov travelled to Tiraspol to talk to the 'client', and the MFA limited itself to noting that this would not help to bring 'mutual understanding' between the parties.¹⁶⁵ But the DMR response did not prompt Moscow to reduce its claims to primacy. On the contrary, *Izvestiya* reported that Putin would take control over the process. Paraphrasing what Russia repeatedly interpreted as a deadlocked OSCE process, the newspaper reported that the preparation of a Constitution for a federal unitary had started and was to be adopted by the respective parliaments, after which a Constitutional Assembly should be established.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, the Tiraspol regime had sent a plan to the Russian MFA on a 'military-guarantee operation', which reportedly was an operation similar to earlier proposals – however, not 'under the auspices of international organizations, but led by Russia'. The MFA had confirmed the information, but underscored that this was but one of several means to guarantee the interests of Tiraspol, and that it had to be discussed in the five-format. Finally, *Izvestiya* stated, the result was to be the presentation of an intentional agreement in the autumn of 2003, with Putin as the 'peacemaker'.¹⁶⁷

The *Izvestiya* article suggests that the stakes had been raised considerably. The Moldovan president had started a balancing effort, drawing increasingly on bilateral US support and political support from the EU to counter Russian endorsement of DMR positions. In April, Romania pushed for Moldovan inclusion in the EU Stability Pact for the Balkans, and NATO and EU endorsement of Moldova's position in the DMR conflict was made clear.¹⁶⁸ EU foreign policy spokesman, de Oyeda, stated that the EU would play a far more active role in resolving the conflict, and insisted on Russian compliance with Istanbul. Moreover, Romano Prodi endorsed a Moldovan proposal to set up a joint Ukrainian-Moldovan border mission to prevent smuggling from the DMR over Ukrainian territory.¹⁶⁹

In May, Russian officials again went public, flagging the idea that the Russian forces should simply be transformed into a post-settlement peacekeeping unit or stabilization force. After also the OSCE had begun to talk about a peacekeeping mission, MFA official Yakovenko stated that Russia's forces should 'play a dominant role' in any mission.¹⁷⁰ Again, the backbone of this argument was the synchronization strategy – Russia's peacekeeping forces should remain in Transdnier until the need for a military guarantee for post-conflict settlement had been recognized by all, and provided by

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ 'Dnestrovskiy futbol', *Izvestiya*, 1 April, 2003.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 10 April, 2003.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 6 May, 2003.

Russia.¹⁷¹ Apparently supported by the argument that the DMR was a *de facto* territorial unit, Moscow seemed to feel that Russia's troops were already *de facto* OSCE peacekeepers. Yakovenko stated that Russia's forces were indeed 'highly valued' by the OSCE, while also making it clear that Russia was not to blame for the delay.¹⁷²

As the Russians pushed their forces as *de facto* peacekeepers, the OSCE could again report about concerns in stalled negotiations. While the talks had made progress on the issue of federalization, they stalled in June on the joint commission for a future constitution of Moldova. Moreover, the OSCE now more readily rebuked Russia's insistence to retain the forces there as 'peacekeepers'.¹⁷³ On the other hand, the OSCE did not seem clear as to whether to insist on compliance with Istanbul, or to offer an OSCE-initiated alternative. On 8 July, OSCE chairman Jaap de Hoop Scheffer had, according to some reports, said that OSCE peacekeepers would have to be sent in the event of failure to find a solution, and that this should be a small, lightly armed peacekeeping force¹⁷⁴ – not a 'stabilization force' to facilitate post-resolution peacekeeping. These rumours later surfaced in Moldova as an EU force with an OSCE mandate, and were supported by the Voronin opposition. The Moldovan president countered that there was no such invitation, that the focus on the military aspects of the resolution was exaggerated, and that he would not be a 'gravedigger of the CIS'.¹⁷⁵

To all appearances, the 'OSCE force' was a trial balloon. Mere mention of it was sufficient, however, to prompt sharp resistance from the DMR, which hung on to retaining the Russian force there as the sole guarantee not only of the political process, but also post-settlement.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, Russian press outlets reported that Head of the Presidential Administration, Aleksandr Voloshin, had visited Chisinau and tried to talk Voronin into halting the withdrawal of Russian forces due to the precariousness of the conflict resolution efforts.¹⁷⁷ The Russian MFA also countered the proposal of an EU force in Moldova/ the DMR. According to Yakovenko, talks about this could only 'distract the attention of the participants from the more vital questions of conflict resolution' – implying that for Moscow the major issue was to prolong the stationing of Russian forces while blocking all efforts at adopting new post-conflict parameters.¹⁷⁸ Yakovenko reiterated the 'synchronization' argument: 'as long as the need for a military presence facilitating conflict settlement is not clearly defined, the present system of joint peacekeep-

¹⁷¹ See 'Otvét ofitsial'nogo predstavatelya MID', at: http://www.in.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/72F8DF746219F25643256D67004F8025?OpenDocument.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 30 June, 2003.

¹⁷⁴ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 8 July, 2003.

¹⁷⁵ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 25 and 28 July, 2003.

¹⁷⁶ 'Strannaya igra v yedinnom gosudarstve', *NeGa*, 16 July, 2003. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2003-07-16/5_strangegame.html.

¹⁷⁷ 'V Moldavii mozhet poyavit'sya rossiyskaya voennaya baza', *NeGa*, 10 July, 2003. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2003-07-10/5_moldavia.html.

¹⁷⁸ 'Rossiya protiv prisutstviya mirotvorcheskogo kontingenta ES v Moldove', *Strana.ru*, 19 July, 2003.

ing forces should continue to work', and added that the acting peacekeeping mission in the DMR had been 'highly valued in the Istanbul Pact'.¹⁷⁹

Again, this was a strictly Russian interpretation of the Istanbul Pact. Moreover, the OSCE had no leverage to deal with a possible Russian default on withdrawal. Even when Scheffer made this proposal official in September (this time speaking of a 'post-conflict peacekeeping unit') OSCE coordinator William Hill retorted that the issue was 'still under consideration'.¹⁸⁰ All discussions on any sort of post-conflict settlement were contingent on one single factor – a political solution to the federal issue. But the vagueness of the Porto conclusions had not added to the substance of what 'necessary conditions' should amount to. The only certain factor was that Russia was clearly not happy about being left out of the resolution, let alone accepting a US/ EU-led initiative in the OSCE process.

Russia's counter-balancing of NATO in the region was also obvious. Concerns that new NATO members were not parties to the CFE-2 had emerged already in August 2002; and in June 2003, Russia pinned delays in implementing the CFE-2 on Washington, arguing that the USA had jeopardized the CFE-2 by linking its ratification to Russian compliance with Istanbul.¹⁸¹ The Russian representative to the Russia-NATO Council (RNAC) argued in July that non-ratification of the CFE-2 was fraught with threats of a new Cold War, and that Russia's meeting the deadline for withdrawal from the DMR was 'not connected to the CFE Treaty'.¹⁸² Although the EU had earlier served as an alternative to NATO-led security in this balancing act, there were few indications Russia would accept any EU alternative for the DMR/Moldova deadlock.

Russia's decoupling strategy might have sprung from the conviction that Moscow had complied in part with the CFE, but had been shut out of the political resolution process. In other words, Russia's synchronization strategy was starting to peel off in terms of cashing in credits for contributions. Moscow had yet to re-claim authorship of the political solution. As the December 2003 OSCE ministerial meeting in Maastricht approached, the Kremlin did just that

3.6. The 2003 Watershed: The Kozak Memorandum

By autumn 2003 there were considerable uncertainties as to whether the OSCE actually had ownership of the resolution of the DMR conflict. To be sure, the authority of the organization had been beefed up. US diplomats stated in August that the federalization plan would facilitate Moldova's integration into European structures, solidify it as a unified federal state, and end a decade of divisions.¹⁸³ The EU/US visa ban on the DMR regime had an

¹⁷⁹ 'Otvét ofitsial'nogo predstavatelya MID Rossii A.V. Yakovenko na vopros rossiyskikh SMI po pridnestrovskoy problematike', *MID press release*, 18 July, 2003.

¹⁸⁰ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 8 September, 2003.

¹⁸¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 30 June, 2003.

¹⁸² 'Ya ne vstretil ni odnogo kosogo vzglyada', *Izvestiya*, 15 July, 2003.

¹⁸³ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 7 August, 2003.

effect as well, defining the source of the deadlock as the DMR regime. Given Russia's repeated calls to the OSCE that the DMR had halted Russia's compliance, the EU/US visa ban should indeed be acceptable to Moscow.

In August, the DMR and Moldovan authorities completed their joint work of drafting a constitution to be presented for the OSCE, Ukraine and Russia. The draft was not made public, but parts of it were published in *Olviya Press*, the notorious virtual spin-centre of the DMR.¹⁸⁴ Success was turned into new disappointments in September, when William Hill warned that the talks had come down to the tricky issues of status, and balancing Moldovan proposals of an asymmetric federation with DMR demands for equal status.¹⁸⁵ Hill also indicated that an OSCE mission consisting of 600–800 military personnel from the member countries was taking shape. He denied having said anything about an EU force, and made no secret of the stakes for the OSCE, making it look almost as an institutional beauty contest in Russian–OSCE cooperation. Russia needed a solution just as badly as did the OSCE, Hill stated, since: ‘they continue to have this arc of unresolved conflicts on their southern and south-eastern flanks. It would also be a significant success for the OSCE. The OSCE has had successes in the Baltics. It has had successes of different kinds in the Balkans. But in the conflicts in which we are involved in the former Soviet Union (...) this is the closest we have got to a resolution [of the crisis]’.¹⁸⁶

Russia had indeed continued to have such conflicts on its fringes, but wanted a stake also in solving them in accordance with its own interests. In fact, the efficiency and authority of the OSCE was also at stake, as Russia intensified its unilateral approach to the DMR resolution. As progress stalled, Voronin met with Putin in Yalta, reporting to him about the decisive phase of negotiations. Voronin stated that the first part of the constitution, on human rights, had been written, while the second part – on separation of powers – was still to be agreed upon.¹⁸⁷ Putin linked on to the process by appointing yet another special envoy for conflict resolution, Dmitriy Kozak, who squarely defined his role as assisting the Russians in the DMR.¹⁸⁸

The details of the work around what became known as the Kozak Memorandum are not known, but the Kremlin started a shuttle diplomacy from September and onwards, accompanied only by a sharper tone from William Hill that Russia should abide by the new time-table from Porto and withdraw from the DMR. There are sufficient indications, however, that Russia monopolized the process of defining the status of the asymmetric federation, coupling this not only to a default on revised Istanbul time-tables, but also indefinite prolongation of the Russian troop presence in the DMR.¹⁸⁹ Minis-

¹⁸⁴ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 8 August, 2003.

¹⁸⁵ Roland Eggleston, ‘Moldova: OSCE Envoy Says Delay Threaten Timetable for Draft Constitution’, *RFE/RL Feature Stories*, 19 September 2003.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 22 September, 2003.

¹⁸⁹ This fact is confirmed by William Hill, who has spoken out against allegations that the OSCE has been endorsing the Kozak memorandum from 2004 and onwards. Hill underlines that the first version of the federalization agreement was negotiated in Zagreb and Kiev, and handed over in September–October 2003. Hill underscores that there was a ‘dual track’ reso-

ter of Defence, Sergey Ivanov, stated on 6 October that Russia again might ask the OSCE for a new time-table, adding that ‘the base in the DMR is a heritage from Soviet times, and the largest in Europe’.¹⁹⁰

Moscow had designed this as a Russian contribution to the OSCE federalization process. When the Kozak Memorandum surfaced on 18 November, it was dedicated wholly to the federalization and status problem. It proposed that Moldova should become an asymmetric federation consisting of two subjects – Gaguzia and Transdnier. The federal centre should regulate currency exchange, have control over state property and foreign policy, while questions of custom regulations, electoral rights, law enforcement and the federal budget should be negotiated with the subjects.¹⁹¹

However, Russia did not refrain from offering clauses clearly indicating a prolonged role for Russian forces. The republic should be completely demilitarized, with no military forces own. Finally, unification should take place gradually, through the adoption of a new constitution put to referendum. This referendum should be held by 31 October, elections to the Senate by 1 February 2005, to the Council of Representatives by 30 April, and presidential elections by 31 May. The Moldovan language should be state language for the federation, with Russian having the status as official language.¹⁹²

Russian press outlets stated that the Memorandum was a preparation for the Maastricht summit, and a process coordinated by Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE with the parties of Moldova and Transdnier.¹⁹³ The Memorandum was depicted as a breakthrough in settlement. Although it was not presented to Chisinau and Tiraspol, *Izvestiya* claimed that it had been ‘coordinated with them’. *NeGa* claimed that Russia had prepared a ‘real base for the unification of Moldova’, and that Moldova and Transdnier had practically accepted the plan.¹⁹⁴

The suggestion that it was coordinated with the OSCE proved unsubstantiated. In fact, the clause on ‘demilitarization’ had, if not an annex, then at least a hidden premise: the Memorandum made not mention whatsoever of any obligation to pull out Russian forces.¹⁹⁵ On the contrary – Minister of Defence, Sergey Ivanov, raised the stakes again in November, announcing that Russia would not withdraw in 20 years, stating that this was in compliance with the ‘transition period’ of the Kozak Memorandum.¹⁹⁶

lution agenda, and that the OSCE numerous times urged to bring the two together, but with no result. ‘Ambassador Hill’s Response to Vlad Socor’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 1 August, 2005. At: http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2370088.

¹⁹⁰ *Press obozrenie, Internet gazeta*, at: <http://press.try.md/view.php?id=33598&iddb=Main>

¹⁹¹ ‘Kishinevu i Tiraspolu predlozhen plan ob’edineniya’, *Izvestiya*, 18 November 2003: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article41166>.

¹⁹² ‘Moskva pomirit Kishinev i Tiraspol’, *NeGa*, 19 November 2003. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2003-11-19/5_moldova.html.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ ‘Assimetrichnaya federatsiya’, *NeGa*, 20 November 2003. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2003-11-20/5_opros.html.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ ‘Chto stoit za neozhidannoy otmenoy vizita Vladimira Putina v Kishinev?’, *NeGa*, 26 November 2003. At: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2003-11-26/5_kishinev.html.

The Kozak Memorandum may have been ‘millimetres from federalization’, but it was certainly far from OSCE compliance.¹⁹⁷ Even Russian media reported that preparations for Putin’s visit to Moldova on 25 November had been conducted in ‘complete secrecy’, which was hardly in line with Russia’s insistence on transparency in OSCE affairs.¹⁹⁸ When the trip was cancelled due to Voronin’s reluctance to sign the Memorandum, Moscow presented another version. Russian newspapers quoted official sources as saying that a ‘normal bargaining process had taken place, but some Western politicians had interfered, also on behalf of the EU’.¹⁹⁹ In fact, the bargaining process had been far from normal. Russia had utilized its position as an interlocutor privilege in the OSCE-five format to inform the Tiraspol regime and Moldova of the special conditions implicit in the Memorandum. Hence, Kozak had – according to *NeGa* – secured support from Kiev for the plan and received backing from the DMR regime to keep Russian peacekeepers there for a longer time. Igor Smirnov had responded by pushing two conditions for supporting the Kozak Memorandum: the Russian language should have official status as a state language for the whole federation, and that Russian troops should not be withdrawn for the next 30 years.²⁰⁰

After the aborted signing of the Kozak Memorandum, Russian officials became increasingly more outspoken in lambasting the OSCE and Moldova for torpedoing Russian efforts. Igor Ivanov apparently did not interpret Voronin’s decision not to sign as that of a sovereign state pulling out of a Russian-initiated initiative that put the issue of withdrawal of Russian military forces from Transdnister on perpetual hold. In the view of the MFA, Moldova had ‘yielded to the pressure of some states and organizations’. Moreover, since the document had been ‘agreed upon by all parties’, it was clear that there had been ‘interference of some states in the internal affairs of the CIS’.²⁰¹

The Kozak Memorandum engendered a meeting between OSCE representatives and the MFA in Moscow. MFA officials continued to state in the press that the Memorandum had created new opportunities. According to MFA official Yakovenko: ‘The adoption of the memorandum proposed by Russia on the basis principles of statehood for the unified Moldova republic has given a unique chance to reach a final and comprehensive resolution of the conflict in the near future’.²⁰² Russian reinsurances notwithstanding, the December 2003 Maastricht meeting left Russia in practical isolation from the major outputs of the meeting, as also recorded in Russian press outlets. The fact that Russia did not sign the Final Document, or the statements on Georgia and Moldova, did not reverberate in Russian press outlets as a matter of grave concern, however. *Izvestiya* reported this as a matter-of-fact dis-

197 ‘V milimetre ot federalizma’, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 27 November 2003.

198 ‘Chto stoit za neozhidannoy otmenoy vizita...’

199 Ibid.

200 Ibid.

201 ‘Memorandum po pridnestrovskomu ureguliruvaniyu ne udalos’ podpisat’ iz-za vneshnego davleniya’, *Izvestiya*, 25 November 2003. At: <http://news.izvestia.ru/politic/news66927>.

202 ‘Za zakrytymi dver’yam’, *Izvestiya*, 1 December 2003. At: <http://www.izvestia.ru/georgia/article41685>.

agreement between Russia and the USA, and not ‘isolation’. Russia had simply not ‘had time to pull the forces out of Moldova’, the article stated, and quoted Ivanov as repeating that ‘we have been witnessing interventions in Georgia and Moldova not from the part of Russia, but from the part of other states’.²⁰³ Moreover, the minister once more reiterated that Russia in no way accepted the ‘conditionality’ clause of linking the ratification of the CFE 2 agreement to the ‘so-called commitments of the Istanbul pact’.²⁰⁴

It may well be that Russia had calculated the costs of confronting the USA and the OSCE on this issue and found that it would not result in intolerable harm. Russia’s push/ pull moves prior to the Maastricht meeting were at any rate linked to what had been a dominant sentiment within the Russian elite since 2000 – the OSCE was a dispensable organization. Hence, the *Izvestiya* article ended on a note that simply confirmed the prevalent elite view on the OSCE, quoting a leading expert from the Centre of Defence Information, Ivan Safranchuk: ‘The OSCE is an extremely weak player on the European arena. [...] It is a dying European institution with a very narrow specialization and without any influence whatsoever. Thus, the fact that we have ended up in some isolation in the OSCE should not worry us one bit.’²⁰⁵

3.7. Maastricht and Beyond: Big Politics

Clearly, the presentation of the Kozak Memorandum did not imply a radical shift in Russia’s perception of the Istanbul Pact. The specific conditionality introduced by Russia in the OSCE process has been evident ever since 2001. Russia has sought to gain political benefits from conflict resolution and insisted on having a special role as mediator in the conflict. Moreover, Russia has ignored the blatant non-compliance of the DMR regime and done little to make it change its views, even though the OSCE has several times encouraged Moscow to use its influence on the DMR in a positive manner.

This policy has been counterproductive with regard to finding a final settlement, but it has also enabled Russia to front further demands as to defining the premises of European security policies. Russia’s ‘reverse conditionality’ scheme has been present from the beginning of 2000, with several additional ‘rounds’ since then. Russia’s message to the international community – that it has been under pressure from the DMR and has thus failed to comply – has turned the resolution into a ‘crisis spiral’, sending it yet higher and higher on the international agenda. If there is such a thing as a ‘crisis spiral of disarmament’, the DMR conflict is surely a case study in point.

Beyond Maastricht, Russia attempted to explain the origin of the Kozak initiative. The official Moscow version was that Russia had been invited by Moldova in February 2003. According to deputy minister of foreign affairs, Vyacheslav Trubnikov, Russia had responded to ‘numerous calls from Moldova’s leader to assist in the work of a new constitution based on the

²⁰³ ‘Na vstreche OBSE v Maastrichte Rossiya okazalas’ v odinochestve’, *Izvestiya*, 3 December, 2003: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article41808>

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

federalization principle'.²⁰⁶ The MFA emphasized that Russia had complied with the CFE Treaty in removing ammunition, and that 2003 had been a peak year in withdrawing from the DMR. Yet, the statement suggested a different format than that of the 3+2, namely that it was Russia that had taken the lead in work on the constitution, with the consent of the DMR Moldova.

Russia then added further 'conditionality clauses' to the resolution. Symptomatically, attempts to start from scratch after Maastricht and coordinate two separate plans produced few results. The five-party group resumed its work in early 2004, trying to sort out the federalization issue. At the Sofia meeting on 26 and 27 January 2004, some amendments – this time reportedly building on the Kozak plan – were adopted, but the issue itself remained in limbo. Russia repeated its intentions to withdraw ammunition, but not troops from the DMR.²⁰⁷ It added a new condition: opening a Russian Consulate in Tiraspol to safeguard the interests of 70,000 Russians in the DMR. The original invitation to co-author a joint constitution was also derailed. A new proposal suggested that the DMR was to become a 'federal subject', but that it should write its own constitution and have separate legislation and separate budgets.²⁰⁸

When the proposal was put on the table, the DMR regime denied OSCE inspectors access to the Kolbasna ammunition depot for as long as negotiations continued between Russia and the separatist regime on the time-table for Russian troop withdrawal.²⁰⁹ This was unacceptable to by the OSCE mission, since it violated the right of the OSCE to verify withdrawals. Moreover, it clearly accentuated that Russia's obligations were towards the DMR regime, and not towards the OSCE and the Istanbul Document. Finally, the very idea that the DMR regime should be in any position to 'negotiate' seemed to imply an element of quasi-sovereignty for the DMR regime that was quite out of tune with the federalization process itself.

The OSCE chairmanship had a keen interest in repairing the impression of a crisis in Russia–OSCE relations. Bulgaria's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pasi, stated in connection with the visit of the new chairmanship to Russia in February 2004 that there was no 'crisis in confidence' between Russia and the OSCE, adding that the 'OSCE would lose its meaning without Russia'.²¹⁰ The major concern of the chairmanship seemed to get the tripartite negotiations back on track and to pick up the loose ends after the Kozak Memorandum and Russia's subsequent 'harsh criticism' at the Maastricht meeting in December 2003.

However, it was becoming more and more obvious that the OSCE process was about to lose its meaning also with Russia. On 23 February, the DMR regime rebuked the Sofia document as not being in line with regional

²⁰⁶ 'Interv'yu pervogo zamestitelya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii V. I. Trubnikova ITAR-TASS po tematike SNG i aktual'nykh mezhdunarodnykh problemam', *MID Press Release*, 2 February 2004.

²⁰⁷ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 17 February, 2004

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 19 February, 2004.

²¹⁰ 'Solomon Pasi: Mezhdru Rossiey i OBSE net nikakovo krizisa doveriya', *Izvestiya*, 16 February, 2004: At: <http://www.izvestia.ru/world/article44335>.

interests, and inferior to the Kozak Memorandum. The DMR had apparently returned to demands that the DMR should be called a 'state', and not a federal subject. Moreover, the DMR reiterated the official Moscow view that Russian forces should remain in the DMR until the conflict was resolved.²¹¹

During the spring of 2004, the Tiraspol regime was increasingly eager to tell Russia what it expected from a resolution, and Russia increasingly more eager to grant legitimacy to the regime. Before the planned reopening of the negotiations on 21 April 2004, Igor Smirnov made a trip to Russia, officially to receive the decoration of 'Glorious Russia' (*Slava Rossii*), but also for talks with Duma deputies from *Rodina* and officials in the MFA.²¹² Without clarifying in detail the extent and contents of talks, Smirnov announced that he expected no progress from the resumption of the negotiations, and that the Tiraspol regime would insist on holding parallel referendums in Moldova and Transdnier on a federal agreement. Smirnov also echoed Russian OSCE positions in claiming that the essence of Moldova failing to sign the Kozak Memorandum was that the 'US is trying to push Russia out from the region', which he supported by stating that US personnel had led the OSCE Moldova mission eight times.²¹³

During the spring of 2004 there were few signs that the OSCE process would lead to resolution of the conflict. Repeated announcement from the OSCE office that the 3+2 negotiations would resume did not solve the imposed deadlock. The group met in March and April 2004, and although the latter meeting brought the federalization issue back on the agenda, also these negotiations ended inconclusively.²¹⁴ The fact that both the EU and the USA had tried to help by supporting the 3+2 format and expressing a will to facilitate resolution failed to provide new impetus to the process.²¹⁵ True, European states tried to keep the bilateral talks with Russia warm. The EU had renewed the visa ban on the DMR regime in February 2004, while select states kept Russia in on talks. At a meeting with Dominique de Villepen in Paris on 5 March 2004, Villepen stated: 'we understand the concerns of Russia with regard to CFE-2 and will find solutions'.²¹⁶ Launching a new EU–Russia 'permanent consulting mechanism', France also spoke of adopting new rules for crisis management between Russia and the EU. Yet, Russia showed few regrets as to the declining status of the OSCE and the fate of the Istanbul Charter. Ivanov repeated earlier concerns about the 'artificial linkage between ratification of the CFE-2 and the fulfilment of the Istanbul Charter of withdrawal of forces from Transdnier and Georgia'.²¹⁷

The effect of EU declarations did not become apparent, however. During the summer of 2004, the DMR regime closed down Moldovan schools for

²¹¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 23 February, 2004.

²¹² 'Lider Pridnestrov'ya khochet poiti po puti Kipra', *Izvestiya*, 15 April, 2004: <http://www.izvestia.ru/world/article65484>.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 29 April, 2004.

²¹⁵ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 26 April 2004.

²¹⁶ 'Chetyortka podaet primer Evrosoyuzu i NATO', *Izvestiya*, 5 March 2004: <http://main.izvestia.ru/russia/article45034>.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

teaching in the Latin script, and Moldova's authorities were becoming increasingly concerned about the privatization of DMR companies by Russian investors.²¹⁸ Russia's response was that the DMR should take a 'balanced approach', and wait with administrative action until a political solution could be reached.²¹⁹ The DMR in turn referred to separate 'constitutional provisions' of the DMR, thus effectively ruling out any talk of a joint constitution, and eventually provoking Moldova to withdraw temporarily from the 3+2 negotiation format.²²⁰ The EU fully agreed with the OSCE that the DMR's actions were 'provocative and irresponsible',²²¹ and took note of Russia's announcement. Moscow responded by calling the Moldovan decision to halt negotiations a 'cause for concern', and urged the Moldovan authorities to refrain from escalating the conflict, lest it be 'brought out of political control'.²²²

The effect of the July stand-off led to a radical severance of ties between Moldova and Russia. By December 2004, Moldovan authorities had grown increasingly impatient with Russia's failure to fulfil the 1999 OSCE. At the OSCE Sofia meeting on 6 and 7 December 2004, the Moldovan representative referred to Russia's presence as a 'foreign occupation' of Moldova, prompting Moscow to issue a special statement on 15 December 2004.²²³ The MFA statement is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it identified Moldova's refusal to sign the unilateral 'Kozak Memorandum' as a prime reason for what the statement carefully framed as the severance of 'Moldova–Transdnister relations'. The presentation of the memorandum itself may have had the characteristics of a poorly coordinated unilateral ultimatum, but this was not reflected in official statements from Moscow. Rather than complying with multilateral institutionalized conditionality, the MFA created a reverse conditionality by stating: 'the reason the withdrawal of Russian weapons [has been halted] is known: the deterioration of Chisinau–Tiraspol relations after the refusal of the Moldovan authorities to sign the Kozak memorandum – a document which represented a real solution [to] the Transdnister conflict.'²²⁴

Secondly, the MFA statement linked the Russian presence to a mission that did not comply with OSCE provisions and deadlines on withdrawal: 'a group of Russian military still remains in Transdnister after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the 14th Army, and it has a unique mission: to guard the depots with Russian weapons, which are to be withdrawn to Russia.'²²⁵ In other words, the MFA was insisting on a 'peace-keeping' mandate, without specifying terms for withdrawal. This statement accorded poorly with the process itself, since Russia had failed to comply

²¹⁸ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 16 and 18 July, 2004. According to reports, the DMR had sold off companies to the value of 10,2 mill USD throughout 2003.

²¹⁹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 22 July, 2004.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 27 July, 2004.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 16 December 2004.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

with OSCE conditionality on the withdrawal of ammunition depots leading up to the 2003 Maastricht ministerial meeting.

In sum, the Russian position must be understood as an unconditional demand that Moldova should recognize the Transdniester authorities as legitimate – thus the reference to the severance of relations between Tiraspol and Chisinau. Moscow showed less concern for the fact that the Moldovan authorities responded immediately by renouncing the MFA statement as interference in internal Moldovan affairs and a deliberate stretching of the ‘peace-keeping’ mandate from 1992. Moldovan authorities made clear reference to principles of sovereignty as echoed in the Istanbul Pact, arguing that they could not forcefully be pushed into signing the Kozak memorandum and that Russia’s repeated reverse conditionality was a blackmail process, and not an effort at conflict resolution.²²⁶

3.8. Conclusions: Fewer Words, More Deeds

If Russia’s policy from 2001 to 2004 had been one of repeated statements about its willingness to comply with Istanbul and the inability to make the DMR comply with anything involving a Russian solution and troop presence, the years 2003 to 2005 brought about a series of concrete actions from the Russian side. This was reinforced by the massive shift in Ukraine during the Ukrainian presidential elections in 2004. The engagement of EU and bordering states opened the door to a more active and westward policy for Ukraine, a factor that definitely challenged Russia’s efforts to solidify the CIS. Moreover, some held that Russia had now lost any opportunity to serve as a facilitator of the DMR conflict, and that Moscow had confused integration with dominance in the post-Soviet space.²²⁷

Moreover, in early 2005, EU awareness of the conflict was on the rise. In February, EU High Representative for the CFSP, Solana, announced that a special EU representative for the DMR conflict would be appointed.²²⁸ Aspiring EU-member Romania also raised in talks with Putin the issue of becoming a party to conflict resolution, linking it to the wider security sphere of the Black Sea region. This was further boosted by strengthened bilateral ties between Ukraine and Moldova on solving the DMR conflict. Yushchenko announced renewed Ukrainian efforts to resolve the conflict, and focused explicitly on bilateral relations with Moldova, thereby creating a new mechanism that paralleled the original 3+2 format.

After the March elections that gave to Voronin a second term, Moldova put new demands to Russia to withdraw its troops, while also calling for an enhanced negotiation format, to consist of EU and US observers and Romania.²²⁹ Also in March, Voronin launched the ‘three-D’ initiative (demilitarization, decriminalization and democratization) in the EU, supported by

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Lilia Shevtsova, ‘Rossiya – 2005: logika otkata’, *NeGa*, 25 January, 2005. At: http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2005-01-25/1_otkat.html.

²²⁸ *RFE/RL Newsline*, 11 February 2005.

²²⁹ *RFE/RL Newsline*, 10 and 16 March 2005.

Ukraine and Romania. The Moldovan initiative came in response to a Russian Duma resolution of 18 February calling for sanctions against Moldova's wine and tobacco products.²³⁰ After a government meeting on 16 March, it was announced that sanctions were in the pipeline; and Gazprom also declared that it would raise the prices on gas exports to Moldova to European market prices.

Moscow's insistence on retaining the old format has also been challenged by a new reconfiguration of foreign policies led by Ukraine. The Ukrainian–Moldovan rapprochement proved to be a viable track for introducing new options. In April, Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Borys Tarasyuk, announced that his country would take decisive steps to enforce border control on the DMR–Ukraine border: 'We don't want our national boundaries to be open to smugglers', he stated.²³¹

The subsequent Yushchenko plan launched in May 2005 paved the way for making border issues a bilateral affair between Moldova and Ukraine, under the regional umbrella of GUAM, a regional alliance of democratizing states (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Azerbaijan). Moreover, the OSCE seemed inclined to include other parties in the 5+1 format. In 2005, the Slovenian chairmanship expressed some optimism as to resuming the talks on a settlement and welcomed the decision to expand the negotiation format to include observers from the EU and the USA. The OSCE has also acknowledged Ukraine's initiative of May 2005 as a new impetus. Visiting Kiev in October, the OSCE chairman, Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, commended Ukraine's president for the initiative and for giving the process a new push forward.²³² At the meeting of the Group of Five in Ljubljana on 21 October, he welcomed the observers from the USA and the EU, saying that their presence would reinvigorate the OSCE's work toward a lasting settlement.²³³

The reconfiguration of multilateral initiatives notwithstanding, the issue of DMR status and Russian 'peacekeepers' is still pending. The DMR has continued its line of intransigence, criticizing the OSCE for applying 'double standards' in refusing to send observers to the 11 December 2005 elections in the breakaway republic.²³⁴ Moreover, in September 2006 a quasi-referendum on independence was held in the DMR, which would indicate that the DMR has not been prepared to accept anything but statehood and Russian military presence. Russia's 'reverse conditionality scheme' also seems intact, with a sharper edge against Moldova. The statements of Minister of MFA Sergei Lavrov in a bilateral meeting with Romania on 8 November 2005 confirmed at least that Russia still holds that Russian troops should remain in Transnistria until a final settlement is reached. Lavrov noted that they are playing a 'positive role', 'fulfilling their mandate', and should be

²³⁰ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 23 February, 2005 and 'Moldavii prigrozili s okhotnogo ryada', *NeGa*, 21 February 2005. The Duma motion was supported unanimously by 375 votes.

²³¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 26 April, 2005.

²³² 'OSCE Chairman Welcomes Ukrainian President's Initiative to Balance and Energize the Transnistrian Settlement Process', *OSCE Press Report*, at: <http://osce.org/item/16703.html>.

²³³ 'OSCE Will Intensify Efforts to Settle Transnistrian Issue', *OSCE Press Report*, at: <http://osce.org/item/16726.html>

²³⁴ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 24 October, 2005.

considered as guarantors for guarding the ammunition depots, which he referred to as ‘one of the largest in Europe’.²³⁵ Elements of ‘reverse conditionality’ were also present in Lavrov’s explanation of previous failures. ‘We want the parties to follow the agreements reached within the OSCE through the mediation of Ukraine and Russia’, he said, adding that the process of withdrawing ammunition from Transdnister had been going well in 2003, until it was ‘blocked by the Chisinau leadership’.²³⁶ Lavrov also stated in an interview with Romanian press that Russia welcomed the parties’ support of the new format with EU and US observers, and seemed to imply that the Russian five-party process had always been ‘transparent for the international community and for European political structures’ and in coherence with the overall ambition of ensuring stability and security in the region.²³⁷

In other words, Moscow’s MFA has kept reiterating that fulfilment of the Istanbul Pact of 1999 was not a commitment that Russia has taken on, but one that would be met only after final resolution had been achieved. An MFA statement issued in connection with the 15th anniversary of the CFE Treaty still rejected what it termed the ‘artificial conjunction’ between the CFE-2 Treaty and the ‘so-called Istanbul commitments’. Interestingly, the statement suggested that Russia had never seen the OSCE document in a security regime perspective. Russia’s MFA echoed numerous earlier statements on CFE-2 by stating: ‘the Russian Georgian and Russian Moldovan agreements have a bilateral character and do not imply any commitments for Russia as regards third countries’ [*sic*].²³⁸ Hence, the future of the CFE-2 – a ‘cornerstone of European security’ – would depend solely on the Western partners.

What then of Russia’s commitment to multilateralism? The Kozak Memorandum sidetracked the issue of troop withdrawal, promoted a demilitarization scheme based on Russian troop presence, and put the issue of withdrawal on perpetual hold. Hence, some analysts hold that Russia has become more outspoken about its true intentions in the Transdnister case. In November 2005, MFA spokesman Vyacheslav Kovalenko stated that Russia increasingly – and perhaps throughout the whole process – viewed the westward orientation of Moldova as a source of concern. Russia’s *quid pro quo* argument that Moldova should remain a demilitarized and neutral state (Kozak) was linked to issues like ‘Moldova’s changing relations with NATO’, Moldova’s role in GUAM and ‘attitudes toward the OSCE’ – the latter hinting at displeasure at Moldova not having supported the Russian proposal to include CIS observers in the OSCE electoral observer missions.²³⁹

²³⁵ ‘Stenogramma vystupleniya’, at: http://www.ln.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/_CA0CE0468BD7854EC32570B300635AF9?OpenDocument

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ ‘Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del’, at: http://www.ln.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/B9997F84965C86BCC32570B60039DC93?OpenDocument.

²³⁸ ‘Zayavlenie Ministra inostrannykh del’, at: http://www.ln.mid.ru/Brp4.nsf/arh/_EF69648585AD94ACC32570BE002B4342?OpenDocument.

²³⁹ Vladimir Socor, ‘Russia acknowledges punishing Moldova’s Westward orientation’, *Jamestown Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 11 November 2005.

It should come as no surprise then, that Russia has made the lack of transparency an argument for a non-performing OSCE. At a meeting in Belgrade on 7 November, Lavrov spoke for a reform of the OSCE, citing 'numerous non-transparent procedures in OSCE monitoring'. In conducting missions, the OSCE should work together with the Council of Europe and NATO's Parliamentary Assembly, as well as with 'observers from the CIS', Lavrov noted. To Moscow, this is an argument underlining that Russia is not only against what it sees as the forced democratization of the post-Soviet space, but is also concerned that Russian-led 'democratization efforts' like the Kozak plan have been foiled. Hence, Lavrov emphasized: 'one should not believe that the CIS observers pursued any other aims during the monitoring of electoral processes'.²⁴⁰

In practice, Russia's protection of the DMR regime has reduced the validity of this argument. The problem with the Kozak plan was that it defaulted on Istanbul commitments, while paying heed to the DMR regime's intransigence. Moreover, non-compliance has effectively hampered the political consolidation of Moldova, prompting many to label Moscow's strategy as one of 'managed instability' in the post-Soviet space.

²⁴⁰ 'Stenogramma vystupleniya', at: http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/_2fee282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/b53849916c4e64e4ecc32570b3002bf4ac?OpenDocument.

4.0. Russia, Georgia and Separatism

This chapter analyses Moscow's policy towards two separatist conflicts that have been haunting Georgia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and that still remain unresolved – the conflicts between the Georgian central authorities and the 'breakaway republics' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This chapter consists of five parts. The first presents a brief analysis of the historical trajectory of these two conflicts, indicating their similarities and differences and paying some attention to the attempts of Russia – and other actors – to influence the outcome. The second part outlines developments in these conflicts between 1999 and 2003. In the third part we look at development in the conflict zones after the 2003 power shift in Georgia. The fourth part contains a detailed analysis of Russian official and non-official discourse on and action in conflict zones, while the fifth part offers our summary and conclusions.

4.1. Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – pre-2000 Trajectory

Located in the western part of Georgia, Abkhazia is one of the two quasi-states established on Georgian territory in the wake of a bloody conflict that broke out in the final years of Soviet rule. This conflict contributed indirectly to the demise of the Soviet project by unleashing a wave of Georgian nationalism that resulted in mass demonstrations, in the bloody confrontation with Soviet troops on 9 April 1989, and, eventually, in Georgia's declaration of independence on 9 April 1991.

Abkhazia (Apsny, or the Country of the Soul in Abkhaz, and Apchazeti in Georgian), is a *de facto* independent but not internationally recognized state. Located in northwestern Georgia on the Black Sea coast, it has a long land border with Russia and land border with the rest of Georgia following the Inguri River. The country occupies an area of 8.6 thousand square km, slightly more than 12 per cent of the territory of Georgia. The capital is Sukhumi (Sukhum in Abkhaz).

According to most recent estimates there are approximately 300,000 people living permanently on the territory controlled by the Abkhazian authorities. According to the last Soviet census from 1989, the population of this region than was 525,000. Ethnic Georgians were the largest ethnic community, accounting for 45.7 per cent of total, while the titular nation, Abkhazians, comprised 17.8 per cent of the population. Among other ethnic groups living on this territory, the most numerous were Armenians (14.6 per cent), ethnic Russians (14.3 per cent), and Greeks (2.3 per cent). It is estimated that in the wake of the armed phase of the conflict, most ethnic Georgians were forced or decided to leave, and likewise for almost half the Russians and Armenians living there.

After many centuries of more or less independent statehood – sometimes in union with the Kingdom of Georgia – Abkhazia was formally incorporated into the Russian Empire by a manifesto of 17 February 1810. After the

February revolution of 1917, Abkhazia formed a part of the Mountainous Caucasian Republic. On 31 March 1921 an Abkhaz Socialist Soviet Republic was established; and in December that year a treaty was signed with Georgia and a federative Georgian Abkhaz state was created. This arrangement lasted until 1931, when Abkhazia was incorporated into Georgia as an autonomous republic. During 1970s and 1980s a wave of national revival swept over Abkhazia. The main demand was the secession from Georgia and incorporation into the Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic (RFSSR). This national revival culminated in the adoption on 25 August 1990 of the declaration on the sovereignty of Abkhazia.

A similar wave of national revival swept over Georgia itself. On 31 March 1991 Georgia held a referendum on restoring its independence. With the motion supported by 90.08% of those who voted, the Georgian parliament adopted a declaration of independence on 9 April 1991 restoring the Georgian state. On 26 May 1991 Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected President of Georgia. A turbulent period ensued, forcing the Georgian authorities to set aside the resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia. The apparent stalemate in relations between the Abkhaz leadership and the Georgian central authorities lasted until July 1992, when the latter sent troops intended to put an end to Abkhazia's drive for independence. When the Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet proclaimed the state's sovereignty on 23 July 1992, the Georgian State Council responded two days later, declaring the Abkhaz independence declaration null and void. To put an end to what the central authorities in Tbilisi saw as the Abkhaz mutiny, 3000 armed members of the Georgian National Guard were sent to Abkhazia in mid- August 1992 and armed clashes broke out. The first of the series of ceasefires was reached in direct talks between the Georgian and the Abkhaz side already on 15 August 1992; the second was finally brokered by Russia on 31 August 1992, but neither ceasefire proved lasting. On 3 September the parties met in Moscow, with the Russian side as a broker, and agreed that a new ceasefire should enter into force on 5 September.

After almost two months of bargaining and horse-trading a new round of talks was held in early December 1992 in Gudauta, Abkhazia. This resulted in the signing on 15 December of five agreements on ending military action and the withdrawal of all heavy arms and troops from the front.

However, tensions remained acute and a long-term solution to the conflict was not in sight, so a new round of negotiations was arranged in Moscow in May 1993. On 14 May Presidents Shevardnadze and Yeltsin agreed on a ceasefire that came into effect on 20 May. This agreement was also to result in the withdrawal of heavy weapons and artillery from the region and the resumption of tripartite Russian–Georgian–Abkhaz talks on solving the conflict.

In July 1993 talks were held in Moscow, and on 27 July in the Russian resort of Sochi a provisional ceasefire was signed by Shevardnadze and the Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba. Russia would send peacekeeping troops to the conflict area, armed forces were to be withdrawn from the zone of conflict and the UN was to send an observer mission (UNOMIG) to monitor the agreed ceasefire. On 25 August 1993 Shevardnadze established a special commission to work on a final settlement of the conflict with Abkhazia. The

Georgian authorities withdrew all heavy equipment and some units from the frontline, as agreed in the Sochi Agreement. The Abkhaz side, however, decided to use this opportunity and the changed balance of power to seize the military initiative, launching a massive offensive on 16 September that drove all the Georgian forces out of Abkhazia by the end of the month.

This military success was ascribed to many factors. These include the parallel offensive launched by the supporters of the ousted Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the covert help given to the Abkhaz side by Russia – or certain Russian leaders – and Georgia's compliance with the Sochi Agreement, which left the republic without heavy armaments and thus contributed to the quick demoralization of the Georgian troops and their chaotic flight from Abkhazia. President Shervardnadze described the Georgian defeat as 'a great moral and political blow', and accused Russia of complicity.²⁴¹ Although Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev called on the Abkhaz to lay down their arms and observe the 27 July ceasefire and stated that Russia had imposed economic sanctions on Abkhazia,²⁴² the situation on the ground did not change. The Abkhaz troops, supported by volunteers from the Caucasus and indirectly by Gamsakhurdia supporters, took effective control of the whole pre-war Abkhaz territory. Georgia had suffered a military and a political defeat. It had to accept, albeit unwillingly, Russian help and respond positively to Russia's 'invitation' to join the CIS.

The most acute and bloody phase of the conflict in Abkhazia reached a temporary solution when two days of negotiations in Geneva under UN auspices ended on 1 December 1993 with the signing of an eight-point memorandum of understanding by Georgia and Abkhazia. The agreement, described by Swiss mediator Edouard Brunner and by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Boris Pastukhov as an important step toward a political settlement of the Abkhaz conflict, committed both sides to desist from using force during negotiations. It further provided for the exchange of all prisoners, the return of refugees, the deployment of additional international observers, and the preparation by UN and CSCE experts of proposals on the future status of Abkhazia.²⁴³

Work on finding a working solution to the conflict continued. On 14 May 1994, the Abkhaz and Georgian sides signed in Moscow the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces. This agreement provided for the deployment of a CIS peacekeeping force that was to separate the warring parties and monitor compliance with the agreement, while UNOMIG was to monitor implementation of the agreement and observe the operation of the formally CIS but *de facto* Russian force.

On 26 November 1994 Abkhazia adopted a new constitution that described the country as independent state, and elected its first parliament and president – moves that put a heavy strain on the already tense relations between Georgia and Abkhazia. Georgia managed to get support for its policy towards Abkhazia at the CIS summit in Moscow in January 1996, and a de-

²⁴¹ *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 29 September 1993.

²⁴² *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 30 September 1993.

²⁴³ *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 1 December 1993.

cision was made by this body to impose economic blockade on the break-away region until it recognized the territorial integrity of the Republic of Georgia. However, in November 1996 elections were held to the local parliament in Abkhazia, a step that was widely interpreted as Abkhazia's confirmation of its drive towards full independence from Tbilisi.

On 3 October 1999, 90 per cent of the population of Abkhazia voted to endorse the 1994 Constitution that defined Abkhazia as an independent republic. A full 99 per cent of voters supported the incumbent president, Vladislav Ardzinba, who was re-elected for a further five-year term.²⁴⁴

The 1999 vote in Abkhazia put a temporary end to discussions on the future status of the region. Abkhazia has established itself as a *de facto* but not a *de jure* independent state, not recognized by any other member of the international community. This has come at a high human cost, especially to the non-Abkhaz population of the region. According to various sources, some 2000 people died in connection with fighting in 1992 and 1993; and 250 000, mostly ethnic Georgians, were forced to leave their homes. Taking into consideration these casualties and the human cost of the conflict, and bearing in mind that the conflict broke out in an area defined as strategically important by many regional and global actors, it is hardly surprising that many of them have become involved in hitherto futile attempts at finding a working solution to this confrontation between the Abkhaz minority demanding the right to self-determination, and Georgia seeking to protect its territorial integrity.

The very same dilemma on which of the two rights should be given priority – the right of groups to self-determination, or the right of states to protect their territorial integrity – was also at the core of the second of the separatist conflicts that broke out in Georgia in early 1990s.

South Ossetia (capital: Tskhinvali) is located in the central part of Georgia. It is almost completely surrounded by Georgian territory, the small exception being the border area between South Ossetia and its sister republic in the Russian Federation, North Ossetia. With its territory of 3,900 square km South Ossetia occupies approximately 5.5 per cent of Georgia's total territory of 69,700 square km. In 1990, the population of South Ossetia was approximately 100,000; Ossetians comprised 66 per cent and Georgians 29 per cent, but half of the families in the region were in fact of mixed Georgian Ossetian descent.²⁴⁵ The South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (AO) was declared on 20 April 1922 on the territory of Soviet Georgia. Many Georgians hold that the South Ossetian AO was established by the Bolsheviks so as to create permanent sources of tension that would help Moscow to control Georgia more easily.²⁴⁶

One reason for the outbreak of the conflict in the 1990s was the policy of local political elites, who launched national projects and refused to recognize the interests of the Georgian state in South Ossetia and of the ethnic minori-

²⁴⁴ *RFE/RL Newswire*, 5 October 1999.

²⁴⁵ Alexei Zverev, 'Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988–1994', in Coppieters, B. (ed.) *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Brussels: VUBPRESS, 1996.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

ties living in Georgia. The political phase of the conflict began in autumn 1990, when the local authorities proclaimed the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic. This, they declared, was to form a part of the Soviet Union, and no longer be an autonomous region within the borders of Georgia. Responding to this move, central authorities in Tbilisi decided to deprive the region of its autonomy and even changed its official name to 'the Tshkinvali district'. Contrary to recommendation of the central Georgian authorities, South Ossetia took part in the March 1991 referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union,²⁴⁷ while refusing to participate in the referendum on independence from the Soviet Union held in Georgia on 31 March 1991²⁴⁸ and in presidential elections held in Georgia on 26 May 1991.²⁴⁹ The conflict sharpened when, on 9 April 1991, the Georgian leader and the future president of the country said that the autonomy of South Ossetia, abolished in December 1990, was not to be restored, although 9 April proclamation indirectly guaranteed the right to free development of all minorities within Georgia. On 21 December 1991 – a mere four days before the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union – South Ossetia voted for independence from Georgia; this vote was confirmed by a popular referendum held on 19 January 1992. As the results of these two referenda were not recognized by the central Georgian authorities, this declaration of independence was seen as an attempt to violate the principle of the territorial integrity of the newly independent Georgian state.

The first clashes between Georgian police and military units and local militia broke out in late 1990. On 12 December, the Georgian Parliament declared a state of emergency in parts of South Ossetia, but that failed to end the violence – for instance, on 27 December, some 2,000 people stormed a police station in Tskhinvali and held a group of Georgian policemen hostage until a local man who had been arrested earlier was released.²⁵⁰ In January 1991 the conflict intensified, with many casualties on both sides.²⁵¹ On 21 March TASS reported that a meeting of leaders of rival Georgian and Ossetian armed groups had agreed on a ceasefire, but this agreement did not survive.²⁵² The clashes continued throughout most of 1991, but in November that year the Georgian authorities lifted the state of emergency in South Ossetia, hoping that this would ease tensions in the region. On the same day, however, there were reports that the South Ossetian Oblast Soviet had ordered the mobilization of all men aged 18 to 60 as rumours spread of imminent attack by Georgians.²⁵³ Interethnic violence continued, culminating with the death of 28 people in Tskhinvali, which was shelled by Georgian units on the night of 8 June 1992.

After this peak of violence and many unsuccessful attempts on the part of Georgian troops to defeat the South Ossetian militia, the new Georgian

²⁴⁷ *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 18 March 1991.

²⁴⁸ *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 2 April 1991.

²⁴⁹ *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 27 May 1991.

²⁵⁰ *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 2 January 1991.

²⁵¹ Elisabeth Fuller, 'South Ossetia: Analysis of a Permanent Crisis', *Report on the USSR*, vol.3, no 7, 1991, pp.20–22.

²⁵² *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 21 and 25 March 1991.

²⁵³ *RFE/RL Daily Digest*, 27 November 1991.

leader, Eduard Shevardnadze, was forced to accept Russian mediation in the conflict. On 22 June 1992 he signed the so-called Dagomys Agreement brokered by President Boris Yeltsin of Russia.

The agreement stipulated the withdrawal of all armed forces from the region, the setting up of a 1500-strong tri-national peacekeeping force from Georgia, Russia and Ossetia, and the establishment of the Joint Control Commission that was to monitor and control the activity of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces. The peacekeeping force, deployed on 14 July, consisted of 700 Russian, 500 Ossetian – and only 33 Georgian soldiers.²⁵⁴ According to Shevardnadze, Georgia had no choice but to accept the terms of the agreement because ‘the Georgians were not ready for war and they were defeated.’ He blamed the defeat on his predecessor, Zviad Gamskahurdia, and added that Georgia ‘couldn’t afford to be at war any longer’. In that situation a negotiated settlement, imperfect as it was, was the sole solution available.²⁵⁵ The Dagomys Agreement managed to put an end to the violent phase of the conflict, which, according to various estimates, had resulted in approximately 500 deaths, but it failed to solve any of the political issues that were – and still are – at the core of the problem. On 10 November 1996 Ludvig Chibirov was elected president of South Ossetia, and in December 1997 the local parliament voted to establish an independent South Ossetian republic which was to enter the CIS. In May 1999 parliamentary elections were held in South Ossetia, a move that led to further strengthening of *de facto* independence and to further isolation in Europe. The elections were recognized neither by the OSCE nor by Tbilisi, which saw them as a political challenge to the country’s territorial integrity.

4.2. Georgia and Separatist Conflicts – 1999–2003 Dynamics

Since 1999, the situation in both conflict zones – in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia – has clearly deteriorated. In addition to the regular outbreaks of armed clashes between various groups in the conflict zones, there have been growing Russian/Georgian tensions: Russia accusing Georgia of harbouring terrorists, and Georgia accusing Russia of openly supporting separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and undermining the territorial integrity and security of Georgia.

On 11 July 2000 Georgia and Abkhazia signed a protocol outlining measures to prevent new destabilization in southern Abkhazia. It was the fourth of that sort, the previous ones being signed in summer 1997, spring 1998 and in January 2000. In all these documents, the parties agreed to refrain from the use of force for resolution of the conflict, to reduce the number of police and troops deployed by each side in the conflict region and to cooperate in fight against cross-border smuggling and crime.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ Carolyn Ekedahl, and Melvin A. Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze*, London: Hurst & Company, 1997, p.264.

²⁵⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2006/03/8-030306.asp>.

²⁵⁶ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 12 July 2000.

This protocol did not, however, prevent hostilities from breaking out again in April 2001. When the Abkhaz security forces detained three Georgian guerrillas in the Gali region, Georgians responded by kidnapping five Abkhazian soldiers, and the tensions rose again. It also seemed that the chances for finding a political solution to the conflict remained rather bleak. The Abkhaz president Ardzinba objected to the formulation that defined Abkhazia as an integral part of Georgia. He decided to reject the draft document prepared by the UN special envoy for Abkhazia, Dieter Boden, on the division of responsibilities and powers between the central Georgian authorities in Tbilisi and the Abkhaz government in Sukhumi within the framework of a federal Georgian state.²⁵⁷

Fears that the conflict could escalate materialized in August–October 2001. The fighting resumed between Abkhaz forces and armed irregulars, including a group of Chechen fighters (probably led by Ruslan Gelaev), infiltrating the region from the Georgian side (probably with the consent of the Georgian authorities).²⁵⁸ Although the forces engaged in these renewed fighting were later withdrawn – or rather were forced to withdraw in the face of stiff opposition from the Abkhaz units – the operation was seen as Georgia attempting to solve the Abkhaz question in a violent manner, and as a possible preparation for the next war with Abkhazia.²⁵⁹

Again the Georgian authorities decided to play a political card: President Shevardnadze renewed his offer to Abkhazia, stating that the area would be given maximum autonomy within the borders of the Georgian state.²⁶⁰ This offer was promptly rejected when Abkhaz Foreign Minister, Sergei Shamba, said that accepting would mean violating the constitution of his republic, according to which Abkhazia was an independent country, and that relations with Georgia could be developed only as inter-state relations.²⁶¹ On the other hand, Abkhazia would be willing to join Russia as an ‘associated state’, retaining its formal independence but becoming a part of the Russian economic and legal space.²⁶²

While fighting was still going on in the Kodori Valley, on 11 October 2001 the Georgian parliament adopted a resolution calling for the withdrawal of CIS peacekeeping forces from the region. Not until 17 January 2002 was agreement reached on the withdrawal of Georgian troops from the Kodori Valley; and on 31 January 2002, the Georgian authorities, despite their warnings from October 2001, agreed to extend the mandate of the CIS peacekeeping forces until the end of June 2002.

In the meantime, the Abkhaz leadership rejected a new UN-drafted proposal on the settlement of the conflict, presented by Shevardnadze as an ‘historical compromise’. The document proposed that Abkhazia should acknowledge that it was a constituent part of Georgia, recognize Georgia’s ter-

²⁵⁷ *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, vol. 4, no. 17, 6 May 2001.

²⁵⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2001/10/5-not/not-261001.asp> and *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, vol. 4, no. 34, 12 October 2001.

²⁵⁹ *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, vol. 4, no. 35, 22 October 2001.

²⁶⁰ <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2001/10/15/shevardnadze/>

²⁶¹ <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2001/10/16/independence/>

²⁶² <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2001/10/18/abkhazia/>

ritorial integrity by recognizing its current borders, and allow the return of Georgian displaced persons to Abkhazia. In return, Georgia was to allow Abkhazia to preserve its constitution and state bodies for an unspecified period of time. Also this proposal was turned down by the Abkhaz leadership, on the grounds that the country's constitution defined the Republic of Abkhazia as an independent state, and that Abkhazia was not interested in becoming a part of a larger state.²⁶³

Notwithstanding these solemn statements of principle on independence, the Abkhaz authorities decided to ask Russia officially to grant Abkhazia special status as an 'associated member' of the Russian Federation. In their opinion, such a solution – which would mean closer political, economic and social ties with Russia – would not contradict the constitution: Abkhazia would formally remain a subject of international law and an independent country.²⁶⁴ One reason for this call for greater rapprochement between Abkhazia and Russia was the changing situation in the region, and especially what was seen as growing interest of the United States, as shown by the increasing US military presence.²⁶⁵

In March 2003 a Russian–Georgian agreement on solving the conflict in Abkhazia was reached in Sochi, after talks conducted by Vladimir Putin and Eduard Shevardnadze. The most important points in this agreement were as follows: Georgians who had been displaced following the conflict in Abkhazia in 1992–1993 were to return to their abandoned homes, first in Abkhazia's southernmost Gali district and then elsewhere in the region; rail communications were to be re-established between Sochi and Tbilisi via Abkhazia; to protect the returning Georgians, a Georgian–Abkhaz–Russian police force was to be deployed in Gali, and the region was to have a similar multinational local administration. Further, the CIS/Russian peacekeeping force in the Abkhaz conflict zone was to remain until either the Georgian or the Abkhaz government should request its withdrawal, whereupon the peacekeepers' duties were to be devolved to the multinational police force; and the Inguri Hydroelectric Power Station in Abkhazia was to be repaired in order to provide Abkhazia, western Georgia, and parts of southern Russia with electricity.²⁶⁶

This Sochi Agreement proved to be but one of many, mostly futile, attempts at finding a lasting solution to the conflict. In 2002 a similar plan was presented by the Adjar leader Aslan Abashidze, who was at that time Shevardnadze's special envoy for the Abkhaz conflict. Only weeks before the Sochi Agreement was signed, another proposal had been presented during a brain-storming session organized in Geneva by the five member states of the Friends of the UN Secretary General group – France, Germany, Great Britain, the United States and Russia. They proposed that three bodies be created – to focus on economic problems, the repatriation of displaced persons, and political issues – as a step in the process of solving of the con-

²⁶³ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 15 January 2002.

²⁶⁴ <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2002/03/01/associated/>

²⁶⁵ <http://lenta.ru/articles/2002/03/22/battle/>

²⁶⁶ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2003/03/11-130303.asp>

flict.²⁶⁷ All these proposals were rejected by the Abkhaz side, which also refused to take part in the talks on conflict resolution scheduled to take place under the UN aegis on 23 September 2003 in Tbilisi.²⁶⁸

As to the dynamics in South Ossetia was concerned, the situation deteriorated for many reasons: political processes in South Ossetia itself, the policy of the Georgian leadership who attempted to destabilize the situation by using military force, and the policy of Russia, which, in the opinion of many observers, did not always behaved like an impartial actor but sided with South Ossetia. In December 2001, in the second round of presidential elections not recognized by Georgia or by the European institutions and boycotted by the Georgian population of the region, Eduard Kokoiev (Kokoity) was elected as the second president of the breakaway republic. In May 2002 the South Ossetian authorities sought closer cooperation with Russia and Abkhazia as a way of dealing with what was seen as increased pressure from Georgia.²⁶⁹ In July 2002, South Ossetia warned Georgia that it would shoot down any Georgian aircraft violating its airspace.²⁷⁰ September 2002 saw many rumours that the South Ossetian authorities had decided to mobilize some local units to protect South Ossetia and Russia against 'bands of international terrorists' and Chechen separatists gathering in the border areas, seeking to infiltrate into South Ossetia.²⁷¹ Then, in October 2002, President Shevardnadze ordered the Georgian Ministry of Interior to implement measures to combat organized crime on the territory of South Ossetia, to which the South Ossetian side reacted rather nervously, seeing this move as an attempt to change the situation in the conflict zone.²⁷²

On 1 July 2003 President Kokoity decided to dismiss several key political figures, among them the ministers of defence and of justice, heads of the country's Security Council, Security Committee and of its custom service.²⁷³ Only three days later, he openly expressed will to join the Russian Federation, saying that this decision was based on the results of the 1992 referendum on that issue conducted in South Ossetia.²⁷⁴ In August 2003, the political crisis in South Ossetia deepened further, and the president dismissed the whole government.²⁷⁵ In November 2003, in connection with destabilization of the political situation in Georgia proper, where President Shevardnadze was forced by the 'Rose Revolution' to leave his post, the authorities of South Ossetia declared a state of emergency in the region. A similar step was taken by the authorities in another separatist state on the territory of Georgia, Abkhazia.²⁷⁶

²⁶⁷ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2003/02/270203.asp#2-tca>

²⁶⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2003/09/33-260903.asp>

²⁶⁹ <http://www.lenta.ru/vojna/2002/05/31/osetia/>

²⁷⁰ <http://www.lenta.ru/vojna/2002/07/30/ossetia/>

²⁷¹ <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2002/09/11/mobilization/and> <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2002/09/11/refutation>

²⁷² <http://www.lenta.ru/vojna/2002/10/03/osetia/>

²⁷³ <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2003/07/01/osetia/>

²⁷⁴ <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2003/07/04/sosetia/>

²⁷⁵ <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2003/08/14/kokoity/>

²⁷⁶ <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2003/11/23/emergency1/>

It was clear that what had been taking place in Georgia would have great consequences for the future of relations between the separatist republics and Georgian central authorities. The events of November 2003 in Georgia marked an important watershed in many respects: new elites were ready to take over power, and these elites professed an integrationist approach to the West. Their outlook on the world and their views on the future of Georgia and its relations with the separatist regions, with Russia and with other local and global centres of power, were to change the political and the ideological framework for work on finding a solution to the country's problems.

4.2.1. OSCE and conflicts in Georgia 2000–2003

The OSCE addressed the issue of the solution of the separatist conflicts in Georgia also in its official documents from the five meetings of the Ministerial Council that have taken place since the 1999 Istanbul Summit. In its official statement from the 2000 Vienna Meeting of the Ministerial Council, the OSCE Chairperson welcomed the increasing cooperation between Georgia and the OSCE and again expressed the full support of the organization for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Also activities of the newly established monitoring operation on the Russian Georgian border were described as a success. On the other hand, the OSCE expressed concern with regard to the introduction of visa regime for Georgian citizens by Russia. The OSCE reconfirmed the UN's leading role in Abkhazia, welcomed progress made within the 'Geneva Process' and reiterated its highly critical statement on ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia. Also the successful completion of the Joint Assessment Mission to Gali district in November 2000 and Russia's support for its activities were lauded. As to the situation in South Ossetia, the OSCE welcomed 'the successful meeting of experts from the region within the framework of the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict settlement process' held in Baden (Vienna) between 10 and 13 July 2000. At this meeting status-related questions were discussed in a constructive manner, and for the first time. The OSCE urged Russia and Georgia to sign an economic rehabilitation agreement for the area affected by the conflict, encouraged 'the establishment of a legal framework for refugees' and displaced persons' housing and property restitution' and expressed concern with regard to the criminality in the region 'caused by the destabilizing accumulation of small weapons'. The organization also noted progress in reducing Russian military equipment in Georgia and expressed hopes that Russia would to fulfil its Istanbul commitments in the area by completing the planned reductions by 31 December 2000 and withdrawing from Tbilisi/Vaziani and Gudauta military bases by 1 July 2001.²⁷⁷

At the 2001 Bucharest Meeting of the Ministerial Council, the OSCE reaffirmed its stance on the issue of separatist conflicts in Georgia and expressed its commitment to supporting the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. The organization welcomed developments in the peace process in South Ossetia, expressed appreciation for the efforts of various countries and bodies – including the European Commission and Russia – in the work on finding solutions to such problems as the issue of

²⁷⁷ http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/2000/11/4170_en.pdf

small and light weapons in the region, or the schedule for the work of the Joint Control Commission and of experts. Also the financial support of the EU and the signing of the Georgian–Russian Agreement on economic rehabilitation were welcomed. With regard to the situation in Abkhazia, the OSCE again confirmed the UN’s leading role in this process and the importance of the Geneva Process. The organization condemned the shooting down of the UNOMIG helicopter on 11 October 2001, urged the honest fulfilment of all agreements, called ‘for the resumption of a constructive dialogue aimed at achieving a comprehensive settlement, including defining the political status of Abkhazia as a sovereign entity within the state of Georgia’ and again expressed concern for human rights in Abkhazia. The work of the OSCE Border Monitoring Operation was also acknowledged, and the closure of the Russian base at Vaziani and the withdrawal of equipment from the Russian base at Gudauta were described as important steps towards the implementation of the 1999 Istanbul commitments. At the same time, the OSCE called for resumption of Russian–Georgian negotiations on final closure of the base in Gudauta and legal transfer of its infrastructure, and expressed hope that the parties could reach agreement on the duration and modalities of the functioning of the remaining Russian military facilities in Georgia. The OSCE also welcomed the ‘the aspiration to good neighbourly relations and development of cooperation that was manifested at the meeting between the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and the President of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, on 30 November 2001, as well as the agreement to establish a joint commission to investigate the reported cases of bombardments in the border areas of the territory of Georgia’.²⁷⁸

At the 2002 meeting of the Ministerial Council in Porto, the OSCE had to ‘state with regret that in recent months the positive dynamics of the peaceful process in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia have been considerably disturbed’. This forced the OSCE to ‘encourage the sides to promote dialogue and increase efforts at all levels to facilitate political negotiations and the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)’ and to support ‘the efforts of the Joint Control Commission on stabilization of the situation’. The OSCE saw also a greater role for the EU as a financial supporter of the negotiation process and provider of funding for ‘economic rehabilitation, which is imperative in achieving progress towards a full scale settlement’. The OSCE commended the establishment of the Special Co-ordination Centre on interaction between law enforcement bodies of the parties, and the activities of the Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) Command and the OSCE Rapid Reaction Programme addressing the basic needs of Georgian and Ossetian communities in exchange for arms and munitions voluntarily handed over to the JPKF. The organization also looked forward to further progress in work on defining the political status of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia within the State of Georgia.

With regard to the situation in Abkhazia, the OSCE again reconfirmed the leading role of the UN in the work on settling this conflict. It noted with regret that ‘no substantial progress has been noted in overcoming the precarious stalemate that remains on the core issue of the Georgian Abkhazian

²⁷⁸ http://www1.osce.org/documents/mcs/2001/12/4173_en.pdf

conflict – the future status of Abkhazia within the State of Georgia’, and called upon the parties to resume constructive dialogue and accept the document on the distribution of constitutional competencies between Tbilisi and Sukhumi that had been elaborated under UN auspices as the basis for future negotiations. In addition the OSCE welcomed the results of the joint UNOMIG-CISPKF patrolling of the Kodori Gorge, which had helped to reduce tension and enhance stability in the region. The OSCE supported the UN efforts to open a branch office in the Gali District, the existing UN Human Rights Office in Sukhumi and ‘the desire of the parties to complete negotiations regarding the duration and modalities of the functioning of the Russian military bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki and the Russian military facilities within the territory of Georgia’. Finally, the OSCE acknowledged ‘the significant contribution to stability and confidence in the region made by the OSCE Border Monitoring Operation’.²⁷⁹

4.3. The 2003 Watershed and Separatist Conflicts

In November 2003, Shevardnadze was forced to leave; and his successor, Mikheil Saakashvili, was formally elected the country’s new president with overwhelming support in January 2004. These two events heralded the opening of a new chapter not only in the recent history of Georgia and the post-Soviet space, but also in the history of Georgia’s relations with Russia and Georgia’s attempts at solving the separatist problems that had haunted the country since it regained independence in 1991.

In his recent study on Georgia, Dov Lynch identifies the main features of Saakashvili’s strategy of dealing with the separatist challenge in Georgia as a strategy based on ‘one premise and four policy lines’.²⁸⁰ The premise was that the existing status quo could not be accepted. The four policy lines were as follows: (1) the new president ‘sought to ensure greater coordination of policy in Tbilisi’; (2) he decided to strengthen the military component of the policy; (3) the new elite decided to make a differentiation between the separatist authorities in the regions in question and their population, and to appeal to the people by presenting future reunification with Georgia as beneficial from an economic perspective; (4) the new Georgian authorities determined to give a greater say in solving these conflicts to other international actors, thereby further internationalizing the conflicts and turning them into a topic of multilateral policy involving a wide range of actors, and not an issue to be settled by means of a bilateral Russian–Georgian track. The new Georgian authorities also decided that solving what was seen as a lesser challenge, the conflict in South Ossetia, should be prioritized, as this might also pave the way for a solution in Abkhazia.

However, this new strategy encountered rather stiff opposition from those who were to be removed from power. Both the South Ossetian and the Abkhaz authorities were prepared to meet this new political and military challenge. They decided to take special measures when the political crisis in

²⁷⁹ http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/2002/12/4174_en.pdf

²⁸⁰ Dov Lynch, *Why Georgia Matters? Chaillot Paper*, vol.86, 2006, Paris: ISS-EU, p. 38.

Georgia climaxed in November 2003 with the ousting of Shevardnadze. In January 2004, the South Ossetian authorities warned that Georgia was making preparations for a military solution of the conflict,²⁸¹ while the Abkhaz authorities, fearing that launching of an offensive against the separatist republics could be used to consolidate the newly won political power, rushed to propose signing of a treaty on peace and the non-resumption of hostilities with Georgia.²⁸²

In May 2004, the Georgian authorities managed to get rid of Aslan Abashidze, a regional leader who for many years had been challenging central authorities in Tbilisi in Adjara and whose ouster could not be prevented by Moscow support. This success made other regional rebels nervous, with many wondering who was to be the next to follow in Abashidze's footsteps.²⁸³ In May 2004, Georgia strengthened its military presence in the conflict zone in South Ossetia by sending in more troops to the region.²⁸⁴ Although this move was interpreted by the South Ossetian side as preparation for a full-scale military operation against the non-recognized republic, both sides managed to reach agreement on easing of tensions in the region.²⁸⁵ This agreement survived, however, for only a few months. A new armed confrontation – the gravest in the recent phase of the conflict – took place in July and August 2004, when new clashes erupted between the Georgian and Ossetian troops in the region.²⁸⁶ The conflict escalated even further when some unidentified troops (representing what was later described as 'third force') launched attacks on Georgian troops in the conflict zone.²⁸⁷ After many days of fire exchange in which 24 Georgian soldiers were killed and 50 wounded, both sides managed to agree to a ceasefire and the withdrawal of all troops from the conflict area.²⁸⁸ In the wake of this new wave of hostilities in South Ossetia, the Georgian president declared that his country was on the brink of war with Russia, pointing out that Moscow's policy towards the conflict in South Ossetia and its open support for the separatists were the main causes of the new crisis in bilateral relations.²⁸⁹

In Abkhazia the new Georgian leadership proposed a new peace plan according to which a federal state made up of two units – Georgia and Abkhazia – was to be created, with Abkhazia granted all the rights of a sovereign state except for the right to internationally recognized independence. This peace plan envisaged also the signing of agreements on the non-

281 <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/01/26/osetia/>

282 *RFE/RL Newslines*, 09 January 2004 and <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2004/01/1-090104.asp>

283 For more detail see <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2004/05/18-110504.asp> and <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2004/05/20-200504.asp>

284 <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/05/31/georgia/>

285 <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/06/03/agreement/>

286 For more details on clashes in July see <http://lenta.ru/articles/2004/07/08/osetia/> and <http://lenta.ru/articles/2004/07/11/oset/>; on clashes and situation in August see: <http://lenta.ru/articles/2004/08/12/osetia/>

287 <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/08/17/third/>

288 <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/08/17/talks/> and <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/08/19/conflict/>

289 <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/08/24/war/>

resumption of hostilities and on resolving future disagreements exclusively by peaceful means, through negotiations.²⁹⁰

In his speech to the UN General Assembly on 21 September 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili presented a new peace plan and a road map for resolving the conflicts with the breakaway regions. This three-stage plan for a peaceful, non-violent solution to the problems in relations between Tbilisi on the one hand, and Sukhumi and Tskhinvali on the other, proposed the introduction of a set of confidence-building measures, including demilitarization of the conflict zones and the deployment of impartial UN observers along the border between Abkhazia and Russia, and the granting of the fullest and broadest form of autonomy to both regions. This plan was, however, almost immediately rejected by both separatist republics. Abkhaz presidential aide Astamur Tania repeated that Abkhazia was an independent state and would not accept any plan that offered less than that, while foreign minister of the Republic of South Ossetia, Murat Djioev, declared that South Ossetia 'will under no circumstances become part of a Georgian state'.²⁹¹

The rejection of the Georgian peace plan by the separatist leaders apparently frustrated Saakashvili. In 2005 he seemed still to believe that the best solution would be to get Abkhazia and South Ossetia to rejoin Georgia by offering them economic benefits and by making them understand that 'there is no point in holding out in the hope of eventual international recognition of their proclaimed but unrecognized independence, and voluntarily agree to autonomy or federal status within Georgia'.²⁹² However, he did not completely rule out the possibility of a military solution to the conflict when, in January 2005, he declared that the international community would not condemn the use of military force if the South Ossetian leaders continued to reject all offers of political compromise.²⁹³ In July 2005, at an international conference in Batumi, to which representatives of South Ossetia and Russia had been invited but did not attend, Saakashvili renewed his offer to South Ossetia. However, some of his other moves and statements – like the appointment of the more hawkish Irakli Okruashvili as defence minister in 2004 or his remarks from January 2005 – could indicate that he might consider a military action to put an end to the South Ossetian secession.²⁹⁴

With respect to the situation in Abkhazia, there were some signs of rapprochement between Georgia and Abkhazia when their delegations discussed practical issues connected with stabilizing the situation in the region and implementing confidence-building measures in August 2005. However, it seemed that also the new Abkhaz leadership (elected after several rounds of elections in which Russia failed to insert its candidate and had to agree to a compromise solution) was not willing to grant to Georgia any concessions concerning Abkhaz independence. When asked to comment on the best solution to the conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia, newly elected Abkhaz president Sergei Bagapsh replied: 'two neighbour states – Georgia and

²⁹⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2004/06/23-100604.asp>

²⁹¹ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2004/09/37-240904.asp>

²⁹² <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2005/02/7-170205.asp>

²⁹³ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2005/02/7-170205.asp>

²⁹⁴ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2005/07/25-290705.asp>

Abkhazia', and cited the Czech and Slovak example to underline that such a solution could be possible and accepted by the international community.²⁹⁵

In September 2005 a series of events exacerbated tensions between South Ossetia and Georgia. First, on 18 September South Ossetia and North Ossetia signed an agreement on 'peace, neighbourhood and cooperation'. Commenting on that, the South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity stated that he saw the future of South Ossetia in union with North Ossetia and within the Russian Federation. Then, on 19 September, several official guests from Abkhazia, Russia, Transdnister and Nagorno Karabakh arrived in Tskhinvali to take part in 15th anniversary celebrations of South Ossetian independence, and an agreement on economic and humanitarian cooperation was signed by Abkhaz and South Ossetian presidents. The day after, South Ossetia celebrated the 15th anniversary of its non-recognized independence. On that occasion a military parade was organized in Tskhinvali, with Russian military equipment put on display. On that very same day, Tskhinvali was shelled – presumably by Georgians – and 11 persons were injured. The next day saw a similar attack directed against two Georgian villages in the region, this time from the South Ossetian side. The signing of an agreement with North Ossetia, the celebration of South Ossetian independence, the participation of the Russian delegation in this event and the shelling of Tskhinvali and Georgian villages were all seen by the Georgian authorities as acts of provocation and as confirmation of Russia's double role in the conflict. Especially the Russian presence in Tskhinvali and the failure of the Russian peacekeepers to prevent attacks were noted by the Georgian side. The Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Nino Burdzhjanadze, accused Russia of playing contradictory roles and said that 'Russia has to make a choice – it can be either a peacekeeper and a civilized state or a state that supports separatism and terrorism'. She also called on the Georgian Parliament to reconsider Russia's role in the conflict zones and ask for withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from their areas of dislocation on the territory of Georgia.²⁹⁶

On 11 October 2005 the Georgian Parliament approved a resolution setting a deadline of 10 February 2006 for the Russian peacekeepers to show that what they were doing was in compliance with their mandate. It stipulated that Georgia would demand they be replaced by an international peacekeeping force if they could not demonstrate their ability to act in a proper way by that deadline.²⁹⁷ On 15 February 2006, the Georgian Parliament, apparently not satisfied with the performance of the Russian contingent, voted unanimously in favour of a motion on the withdrawal of the Russian peacekeeping force from the conflict zone in South Ossetia and on the abjuring of the June 1992 Dagomys Agreement, which had provided the formal framework for deployment of this peacekeeping force. The reasons for these drastic moves were described as the extremely 'negative performance' of these troops and Russia's permanent 'attempt to annex South Ossetia'.²⁹⁸ Such

²⁹⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2005/08/27-150805.asp>

²⁹⁶ For a Russian reading of this situation see <http://lenta.ru/articles/2005/09/22/ossetia/>. To learn more on these recent tensions see also <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2005/09/34-300905.asp>.

²⁹⁷ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2005/10/2-TCA/tca-121005.asp>

²⁹⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2006/02/6-170206.asp>

accusations against Russia were not the first ones. Both former president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze,²⁹⁹ and the incumbent president, Mikheil Saakashvili,³⁰⁰ have many times accused Russia of playing a dirty game and of having a hidden agenda in Georgia. In order to judge to what extent these serious accusations are right or wrong, we need to examine the role played by Russia in the work on trying to settle these conflicts. This is the main subject of the next subchapter.

4.3.1. The OSCE and conflicts in Georgia 2003–2005

The OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Maastricht in 2003 also paid some attention to developments in Georgia. Most of the ministers taking part in this meeting welcomed the peaceful solution of the recent political crisis in Georgia, the ‘Rose Revolution’ – and expressed the opinion that this development would contribute to peace and stability throughout the region. However, in their opinion, the peace process in South Ossetia remained without tangible progress, so they called upon all parties to intensify their work towards a peace settlement and to continue efforts at confidence building and implementation of programmes to facilitate the return of refugees and internally displaced persons. The security situation in Abkhazia – especially in the Gali region – was described as fragile. The ministers declared that they were prepared to ‘actively support efforts to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and to help promote an agreement on the return of refugees and IDPs’, and called ‘upon the parties to resume constructive dialogue on the basis of the document on the distribution of constitutional competencies between Sukhumi and Tbilisi that has been elaborated under United Nations auspices.’ Most participants also expressed regret that ‘no agreement could be reached on inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of agreed language concerning the complete fulfilment of the Istanbul Commitments’.³⁰¹

In 2004, the OSCE Ministerial Council met in Sofia. On this occasion, most ministers expressed appreciation for OSCE efforts to defuse tensions in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and welcomed the recent meeting of the parties’ high-level representatives in Sochi. In their opinion, ‘the agreement on a phased demilitarization of the region, to be carried under the active monitoring by the Joint Peacekeeping Force and the OSCE Mission in Georgia, should be conducive to re-establishing confidence.’ They also expressed hope that ‘the agreement of the Joint Control Commission to conduct a high level meeting, with the assistance of the international community, will give a new impetus to a lasting peaceful resolution of this conflict in Georgia.’ As to the situation in Abkhazia, the ministers recommended ‘further cooperation between the OSCE and the United Nations on the UN-led conflict settlement process on Abkhazia’.³⁰²

²⁹⁹ On Shevardnadze accusations see: <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/01/20/occupation/>

³⁰⁰ On Saakashvili’s accusations see: <http://lenta.ru/news/2005/09/28/lands/>

³⁰¹ http://www1.osce.org/documents/mcs/2003/12/4175_en.pdf

³⁰² All quotations from the official OSCE document on 2004 Sofia meeting of the Ministerial Council at http://osce.org/documents/mcs/2005/02/4324_en.pdf

The Thirteenth Meeting of the Ministerial Council of the OSCE, held in December 2005 in Ljubljana, adopted a special statement on Georgia. The meeting once again expressed support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, for the ongoing democratic reforms in the country and for efforts at peaceful settlement of the conflicts. While welcoming 'the initiatives taken towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia', the meeting also expressed regret that 'the positive dynamics of the peace process have been disrupted by violent actions' in recent months, and called 'for full implementation of agreed measures for stabilization of the situation in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in Georgia, in particular the early and complete demilitarization of the zone of conflict'. Participants welcomed the steps taken by the Georgian side, in particular the Peace Plan based upon the initiatives of the President of Georgia presented at the 59th UN General Assembly, to serve as a basis for peaceful settlement of the conflict. The meeting encouraged the leaders of Georgia and South Ossetia to meet in order to intensify the peace process, and pledged further support of the OSCE in that process. The OSCE expressed satisfaction with the quadrilateral cooperation (the OSCE, EU, UNHCR and UNDP) in the framework of the rehabilitation programme in the zone of conflict funded by the European Commission, aimed at creating the necessary conditions for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons. In its special statement on Georgia, the OSCE also reconfirmed the particular role to be played by the UN in settling the conflict in Abkhazia, and the will to increase its own activities in 'in the human and economic and environmental dimensions'. The OSCE regretted that a joint UN OSCE human rights office in Gali district could not be opened, as this would, in the opinion of the meeting, 'contribute to the improvement of the human rights situation in the region and thus promote the creation of conditions for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons in safety and dignity'. The OSCE voiced support for deployment of the UN civilian police component in Gali district and called on the Abkhaz side to allow it.

The meeting also welcomed the Joint Statement issued by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and Georgia on 30 May 2005 in Moscow, and the results of the negotiations on the time-frame, mode of functioning and withdrawal of Russian military bases in Batumi and Akhal-kalaki and Russian military facilities on the territory of Georgia. Hope was also expressed that further progress in the ongoing negotiation process could enable a multinational mission to Gudauta.³⁰³

4.4. Russia's Role in the Conflict Solution: Words and Deeds

The report of the UN Secretary-General on the situation in Georgia and Abkhazia, issued on 16 March 2006, concluded that 'without serious efforts to also address the core political issues of the conflict, prospects for a sustainable solution to the conflict will remain distant'.³⁰⁴

³⁰³ This and all above quoted statements from 2005 Ljubljana Ministerial Council meeting stem from the official OSCE document at http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/2005/12/17487_en.pdf

³⁰⁴ http://www.unomig.org/data/file/806/060317-SG-REPORT_Eng.pdf

On the eve of the 31 January 2004 Security Council meeting, a Western diplomat from one a member state of the 'Friends of the UN Secretary General for Abkhazia' group stated that Georgian concerns over Russian activities in Abkhazia were valid. However, he admitted that publicly antagonizing Russia would not help to improve relations, because 'You won't find a resolution to the Abkhaz conflict when you have bad relations with Russia'.³⁰⁵

Commenting on the situation in Abkhazia and the attempt at his life in 2005, Abkhaz Prime Minister Alexander Ankvab revealed details of the country's economic dependence on Russia: in recent years the budget existed solely on paper, and the republic could not have survived without subsidies from Moscow.³⁰⁶ His statement clearly indicated that Russia had been playing not only a military-political but also an important economic role in the conflict zones as an actor directly supporting the separatist regimes.

In 1991 Elizabeth Fuller described the prospects for solving the conflict in South Ossetia as rather dim – 'the current situation is in effect a deadlock, with full-scale fighting prevented only by the presence of USSR MVD troops'.³⁰⁷ Fifteen years later, the situation would appear to be as complicated and volatile as in 1991 – the sole difference is that USSR MVD troops have been replaced by Russian peacekeepers whose impartiality is questioned by the Georgian authorities, who want them replaced by a more impartial contingent.

The Russian presence in the conflict zone – not only military and political – is therefore seen, and not only by the Georgian authorities, as a part of problem. Dov Lynch³⁰⁸ describes this role in the following way:

First, one should note that the 'independence' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia depends heavily on Russia (...). For here, it is enough to say that the Russian intervention played a key role in the conflicts in the early 1990s and has been instrumental in consolidating the status quo since then – a status quo that has been vital for the survival of the separatist 'states'. The Russian role in these conflicts has been complex, combining peacekeeping operations with various forms of support to the separatist regions.

That these regions view Russia not as a neutral peacekeeper but as supporting them in the fight against the central authorities in Tbilisi is also proven by the quest of these two regions for even closer cooperation with Russia. This could include the creation of a common state, by acquiring the status of an 'associate member of the Russian Federation', as mooted by Abkhazia, or even joining the Russian Federation through unification with North Ossetia, which is the strategy adopted by the South Ossetian elites.³⁰⁹

Therefore, in order to understand what role Russia has been playing in the regional separatist conflicts in Georgia, we need to understand what po-

³⁰⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2004/02/6-060204.asp>

³⁰⁶ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2005/04/12-080405.asp>

³⁰⁷ Elisabeth Fuller, 'South Ossetia: Analysis of a Permanent Crisis', *Report on the USSR* vol.3, no.7, 1991, pp.20–22, at p.22.

³⁰⁸ Lynch, p.36.

³⁰⁹ <http://www.lenta.ru/story/ossetia> and <http://lenta.ru/articles/2006/03/23/ossetia/>

litical and strategic goals Russia has been pursuing in the region. Further, we need to see what role in the pursuit of these goals has been assigned to the Russian military and political presence in the conflict zones.

Here we will focus on two aspects of Russian policy – declarations and statements on conflicts in Georgia and Russian–Georgian relations made by major Russian policy-makers; and Russia’s actions in the conflict zones, actions not necessarily in accordance with these solemn statements. In focus is therefore the gap between words and deeds in Russian policy towards the conflict zones in the post-1999 Istanbul period.

Any discussion of the Russian approach to and possible involvement in the two separatist conflicts haunting Georgia has to be based on a realistic assessment of the actual influence of various Russian actors on the process of decision- and policy-making in Russia. We start by presenting the official Russian reading of Georgia at the point when Vladimir Putin was taking over presidential duties from his older predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. We examine statements on these conflicts made by the real arbiter of the Russian political scene, Vladimir Putin, and his institutional co-players in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Igor Ivanov and Sergei Lavrov), the Ministry of Defence (Sergei Ivanov), the Security Council and the Russian State Duma. The combined approach of this group of actors can be taken to represent Russia’s official position on these two conflicts. In turn, we may expect this official approach to be translated into political action by the state institutions tasked with implementing the country’s official policy. By analysing statements made by representatives of the official Russia and examining the actual deeds of the institutions which they head, we hope to reconstruct some patterns in Russian action and identify the discrepancy between stated goals and actual actions in two important separatist conflicts.

This in turn will probably reveal some more general patterns of Russian handling of the separatist conflicts in an area that is defined as crucial for Russian foreign and security policy, an area where Russia is forced, often against its will, to interact with Western and pan-European institutions that are interested in helping the parties involved settle their disagreements in line with the generally accepted European standards of conflict solution.

The fact that Russia has to interact with Western and pan-European institutions causes some problems not only for Russia itself and the countries in question, but also for the institutions Russia is expected to cooperate with. If these problems are to be overcome a better understanding of Russia’s policy is needed, and this is not possible unless we examine specific policies towards settling the separatist conflicts in Russia’s direct neighbourhood. Although we are mainly interested in interpreting and understanding the policy choices of official Russia and the incumbent Russian regime, it is important to present Russian mainstream views as well as views from elsewhere along the Russian political spectrum and forces that may impact on long-term Russian policy. Only by studying the views and the actions of official Russia against this broader background will we be able to identify actual and potential challenges that Western and pan-European institutions may face when interacting with Russia in areas of separatist conflict.

Relations with Georgia and the Russian approach to the separatist conflicts in Georgia are a part of Russian policy towards the whole region. In his essay on the Caucasian track in Russian foreign policy published in 2000 Stanislav Cherniavskiy, the head of section in the Fourth CIS Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, outlines the goals of the Russian Federation in the region as follows:³¹⁰

Russia's priorities in the Caucasus are to bring about reliable stability and help our friendly neighbour advance toward democracy and economic progress. At the same time we are trying to approach relations with the three countries in a balanced manner while this, of course, does not rule out having more advanced relations in this or that area with those of them which are ready to reciprocate.

Cherniavskiy describes the situation in the conflict areas of the region as an 'explosive situation of neither peace nor war'.³¹¹ He underlines Russia's efforts to bring peace to the region by pointing at the diplomatic activity and Russian military presence as the most important instruments in helping the countries of the region to 'defuse enmity and mistrust that arose between the Caucasian states during the period of their nascent independence'. In his view, the best way of addressing the problems in the region would be to 'expand dialogue between the sides', although he also sees a role for international organizations and even for other countries with interests in that region – including countries from outside the region.

Later in the text this Russian diplomat writes of Russia's interests in the region. These interests could be divided into two groups – intraregional interests and extra-regional interests. For the first group, the main goals are stabilizing the situation, settling conflicts and eliminating their consequences, building good-neighbourly relations and equal partnerships, normalizing economic ties, unblocking transport routes and protecting the legitimate interests of Russian communities.³¹² As central areas of regional cooperation, he mentions joint efforts at combating terrorism as the most important task, noting that 'eradication of terrorism and banditry in the Caucasus would do much for local security and stability.'³¹³

As to the extra-regional dimension, Cherniavskiy is clear: Russia's main goal in the entire region is 'preserving the existing balance of forces there, preventing the appearance along our southern border of military structures from states outside the region'.³¹⁴ Georgia's and Azerbaijan's closer cooperation with NATO is presented in the next paragraphs as the main challenge for Russia, and military-political pressure from NATO is seen as 'leading to a change in the existing pattern of interests and balance of forces in the Caucasus'.³¹⁵ Thus there should be no doubt that it was the increasing presence of NATO in the region that most worried Russian policy-makers.

³¹⁰ Stanislav Cherniavskiy, 'The Caucasian track of Russia's foreign policy', *International Affairs (Moscow)*, vol.46, no.5, 2000, pp.152–164, here at p.152.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.153.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p.156.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p.157.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Despite what was seen as NATO incursion in a region that Russia saw as an important strategic area, Russia was still willing to honour its bilateral and multilateral commitments in disarmament and adhere to the CFE-related decisions of the 1999 Istanbul Summit on withdrawal of military hardware and bases from Georgia. It promised that, by the end of reduction process, the number of Russian heavy equipment would not exceed 153 tanks, 241 armoured infantry vehicles and 140 artillery systems.³¹⁶

From the Russian perspective the best way to address the regional problems was, however, not working together with outside actors, who were to be given a limited role in the region, but instead what had been defined already in 1996 as ‘the Caucasian Four’ – an intra-CIS group of leaders comprising the presidents of Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, which was to discuss solving regional problems within the CIS framework. Also increased economic cooperation, especially trade between the countries of the region, was seen as a way of addressing regional security problems.

An important area where Russia had a central role to play was the settlement of regional conflicts between the separatist movements and central authorities. Two such conflicts had to be settled in Georgia, and Russia’s role in the work on solving these conflicts has become an important part of the Russian–Georgian bilateral agenda. How, then, did Russia read the situation in these protracted conflicts in the beginning of the Putin era, and what role did Russia see for itself in the settlement of these conflicts?

As far as Abkhazia was concerned, in 2000 Russian policy-makers felt that the most important tasks were to reopen bilateral talks, move toward full-scale settlement of the conflict and definition of the status of Abkhazia, continue work on the delimitation of powers between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, sign a protocol on the return of refugees to Gali region, and reach agreement on the end of hostilities and lasting peace. In the Russian view there were, however, important obstacles impeding a peaceful and lasting solution of the Abkhaz question. These were provocations by some unidentified groups of Abkhaz and Georgian militants and criminals who gathered in the area, leading to further aggravation of the situation; and Georgian preparations for a military solution of the conflict and its further internationalization under what was described as the ‘West’s patronage’.³¹⁷

The situation in the Georgia–Ossetia conflict was described in a more optimistic way, as being ‘quite satisfactory’, not least due to the fact that the Russian peacekeeping battalion had ‘been maintaining stability in the region for several years now’ and that, thanks to high-level Russian mediation, bitterness in relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinkvali had been removed.³¹⁸ However, the final settlement of the conflict would have to wait until Tbilisi showed goodwill in economic matters.

³¹⁶ Ibid., p.158.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 155–156.

³¹⁸ Ibid., p.156.

Another official Russian analysis of relations between Russia and Georgia from 2003³¹⁹ lists the major elements of this relationship as follows: the issue of terrorism; the problem of Georgia's geopolitical choice; domestic economic, political and social problems in Georgia; the America factor; Russian interests in the region; the issue of Georgians living in Russia and Russians living in Georgia; and regulation of bilateral relations by signing the 'Big Treaty'. Also noted were the issue of regional cooperation, the settlement of the separatist conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and finally the question of Russian military presence in Georgia.

Especially this last issue has been discussed not only between Georgia and Russia, but within the European multilateral framework as well. Russia's military presence in the region has become an important element of its regional strategy and its policy in the conflict zones. This presence may take various forms, from military bases to peacekeeping forces deployed in conflict zones.

The original goal of the Russian military presence was presented rather frankly by the then Russian Minister of Defence Pavel Grachev during his visit to Tbilisi in February 1994. On this occasion, he announced that Russia would maintain four military bases in Georgia and that the main task of the Russian forces in the region – and there were to be 23,000 Russian soldiers deployed in the region – was to protect the region against outside threat, a task consistent with the CIS collective security treaty.³²⁰ This military presence was to be regulated by a Treaty on Russian Military Bases in Georgia signed on 15 September 1995 between Georgia and Russia, in a situation when Georgia found itself forced to accept the Russian conditions in return for what was seen as somewhat dubious Russian help in the wake of Georgia's military defeats in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – defeats for which Russia itself was partly blamed. The agreement on Russian bases in Georgia has, however, never been ratified by the Georgian Parliament. In 1999, at the OSCE Istanbul Summit, Russia and Georgia signed a joint declaration on the future of Russian military bases on Georgian territory. Both parties agreed that the Russian side was to undertake to reduce, by no later than 31 December 2000, the levels of its TLE located within the territory of Georgia in such a way that they will not exceed 153 tanks, 241 ACVs and 140 artillery systems and no later than 31 December 2000 to withdraw (dispose of) the TLE located at the Russian military bases at Vaziani and Gudauta and at the repair facilities in Tbilisi. In addition the Russian military bases at Gudauta and Vaziani were to be disbanded and withdrawn by 1 July 2001. The Georgian side was 'to grant to the Russian Side the right to basic temporary deployment of its TLE at facilities of the Russian military bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki' and to 'facilitate the creation of the conditions necessary for reducing and withdrawing the Russian forces' with financial support for this

³¹⁹ Aleksandr Chigorin, 'Russian–Georgian relations', *International Affairs (Moscow)* vol. 49, no.4, 2003, pp.125–138. For an interesting analysis of Russian policy towards and interests in the region, placed in the broader context, see Vladimir Degoyev, 'Wider Europe's Horizons in the Caucasus', *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol.2, no.4, 2004, pp.106–117 and Alexei Malashenko, 'Postsovetskiye gosudarstva yuga i interesy Moskvyy', *Pro et Contra*, vol.5, no.3, 2000, pp.34–47, Dina Malysheva, 'Konflikty u yuzhnykh rubezhei Rossii', *Pro et Contra*, vol.5, no.3, 2000, pp.7–33.

³²⁰ Ekedahl and Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze...*, p.270.

process provided by some OSCE states. In addition ‘during the year 2000 the two Sides’ were to ‘complete negotiations regarding the duration and modalities of the functioning of the Russian military bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki and the Russian military facilities within the territory of Georgia’.³²¹

At the same time, Russian military presence in the conflict zones was regulated by a CIS agreement on CIS peacekeeping forces to be deployed in the conflict zone in Abkhazia and by the 1992 trilateral Russian–Georgian–South Ossetian agreement on peacekeeping force.³²² Both peacekeeping operations were faced with some grave problems. In the case of Abkhazia the most important feature was that only one country, Russia, was involved, and this country bordered on the area of conflict. This has made the position of Russian peacekeepers ‘extremely vulnerable and leaves ill wishers free to interpret any of their actions to benefit the opposing party and accuse them of violating neutrality’.³²³ As far as the peacekeeping operation in South Ossetia was concerned, the problem there was the presence of contingents resenting the parties to the conflict. This situation was seen as violating the principles of peacekeeping, and yet ‘it has proven itself not only acceptable, but sufficiently effective under the concrete conditions’.³²⁴

In 2003 Pavel Baev described the role of Russian troops deployed in the region as follows: ‘Russian troops, still deployed in the region, have de facto become guardians of continuing existence of several breakaway quasi-states (Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia)’.³²⁵ In his view, an important reason was that Russia had uncertain motivations for resolving the frozen disputes, as resolution would reduce the need for Russian military presence in the region and could thus be detrimental to its ability to exert influence in an area still seen as geopolitically important.

This may also explain why Russia was not able, or willing, to meet the deadlines set in the 1999 Istanbul statement on Russian military bases in Georgia. It was not until 2005, after many discussions in bilateral and multilateral forums, and after being put under pressure by its important cooperation partners, that Russia agreed (on 30 May 2005) to withdraw the last of its troops from Georgia by no later than 31 December 2007.³²⁶

Russia’s reluctance to live up to its obligations from 1999 may be explained in many ways. This reluctance is also a good example of the gap be-

³²¹ http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1999/11/4050_en.pdf

³²² To learn more on specific CIS related peacekeeping issues see Vladimir Iakovlev, ‘Peacekeeping in the CIS: military aspects’, *International Affairs (Moscow)*, vol.48, no.2, 2002, pp.12–18.

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p16.

³²⁵ Pavel Baev, ‘Russia’s Policies in the North and South Caucasus’ in Dov Lynch, (ed.) *The South Caucasus: a Challenge for the EU*. Paris: ISS-EU, 2003, pp.41–52.

³²⁶ For further details on that agreement see <http://lenta.ru/news/2006/03/31/agreement> and <http://lenta.ru/articles/2005/05/31/base/>. Also <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/06/6ce7af0c-e79a-4990-9752-9c70ed435b0f.html> and <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/05/401c4c6e-277a-4ff3-bd7a-3348d441e304.html> offer insights in the agreement on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia reached on 30 May 2005.

tween what is stated and what is done by Russia in its relations with Georgia and in its policy towards the separatist conflicts.

To illustrate how extensive this gap between words and deeds is, and to see whether there is any closing of this gap, let us start by tracing the evolution of President Putin's views on the separatist conflicts in Georgia. We can then compare these views with the actual actions of his subordinates responsible for implementing Russian policy in the region.

4.4.1. Russian official discourse and action

The Abkhaz and South Ossetian understandings of Putin's possible role in conflict solving were based on the idea that both territories are important for Russia, as their very existence may help Russia to pursue its goals and interests in the post-Soviet space. It was evident that this policy line, with its focus on the overlapping interests of Russia and the quasi-states established in the post-Soviet space, would be used as the main argument for closer cooperation by the leaders of these non-recognized state formations.

Even when Putin was appointed 'acting president' by Yeltsin, the leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia expressed immediate interest in meeting him and involving him in the process. In April 2000, Ludvig Chibirov, president of the non-recognized Republic of South Ossetia, said that he intended to seek a meeting with Putin and to ask him to intensify Russia's efforts in finding a solution to the conflict.³²⁷

The Abkhaz leadership welcomed the request made by Putin to extend the mandate of the Russian peacekeepers until 30 June 2000 – a decision which Putin described as being in keeping with the interests of Russia. This move was welcomed by Astamur Tania, aide to Abkhaz President Vladislav Ardzinba, who spoke of the CIS peacekeepers as the sole guarantors of peace and security in the region.³²⁸

When Putin was elected president, both South Ossetian and Abkhaz leaders rushed to congratulate him, as well as expressing hopes that he would step up Russia's involvement in seeking a solution to the conflicts in which they were involved. Ardzinba's aide, Astamur Tania, said that in his opinion Putin viewed Abkhazia as an important part of Russia's sphere of strategic interests. Ludvig Chibirov of South Ossetia expressed hope that Putin's victory at the polls would result in more Russian involvement in the efforts to find a working solution to the conflict in South Ossetia.³²⁹

But how has Putin himself read the separatist conflicts in Georgia? As far as the origins of the conflicts are concerned, he puts the blame on the Georgian authorities, saying that 'they [the conflicts] arose following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, when Georgia, which had gained its independence, announced that it was abolishing the autonomous

³²⁷ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2000/04/14-070400.asp>

³²⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2000/03/2-tca/tca-310300.asp>

³²⁹ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2000/03/290300.asp>

status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This was the foolish decision that ignited these interethnic conflicts.’³³⁰

On another occasion Putin elaborated on the matter by saying: ‘The situation in South Ossetia is tense and is a cause of concern for us. I think it makes no sense to dispute the decisions that were taken with regard to South Ossetia because the documents exist and we have copies of the documents that abolish South Ossetia’s autonomous status. They were signed by Gamsakhurdia. We can make them available to the press. As for Abkhazia, the decisions were taken *de facto*, without any legal confirmation. But the latest statements by the leaders of Abkhazia will, I think, confirm what happened in reality. And do we even need statements? Life itself provides the confirmation. The fact that a war took place and caused numerous victims points to mistakes having been made.’³³¹

How does Putin view the solution to the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia? Here his views have undergone a certain evolution, one that may reveal – or at least herald – a change in Russian policy as well. In 2003 he was asked a direct question on whether Abkhazia and South Ossetia could some day join Russia and become part of the Russian Federation: would it be worth taking Abkhazia and also South Ossetia into the Russian Federation and thus prevent a new war? Putin’s response was clear: We have stability, peace and harmony in our region and we want it to stay this way because these are very valuable things. He added that Russia itself had been facing a similar challenge:

Only recently, ensuring our territorial integrity was one of our most acute problems and pressing priorities. I think you would agree that this task has been resolved, overall. [Then he went on to say that] Russia could not use double standards by fighting separatism at home and supporting it abroad, and that the country was to respect the principle of territorial integrity as recognized by the UN as well as its international commitments. But we cannot follow these principles by applying them only to ourselves and not giving this right to our neighbours. This is why the principle of territorial integrity is recognized by international law, and as a member of the United Nations, we will respect our international commitments.³³²

The settlement of the conflicts in question should be based on the concept of preserving Georgia’s sovereignty and ‘restoration of its territorial integrity’. On the other hand, Putin has frequently underlined a need to find a solution that ‘that is acceptable for all the parties involved in this conflict’,³³³ ‘with

³³⁰ Putin presented these views at his press conference with Leonid Kuchma on 19 August 2004 in Sochi – the text is available at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/08/19/1819_75649.shtml.

³³¹ Press Conference Following a Meeting with President of Armenia Robert Kocharian in Sochi on 20 August 2004 at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/08/20/0000_75746.shtml

³³² Excerpts from the President’s Live Television and Radio Dialogue with the Nation, 18 December 2003 www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2003/12/18/1200_type82916type82917_type84779_57480.shtml

³³³ Excerpts from the 2003 Annual Press Conference at 2003 available at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2003/06/20/1712_47467.shtml

the interests of all the peoples living on that territory taken into account³³⁴ and ‘in such a way as not to harm the interests of the people living in these regions’.³³⁵

Without going into details, we may note that this focus on what he termed the ‘interests of the people living in these regions’ provided Putin with a convenient rhetorical phrase he could use in the later stages of the debate on the future of these territories, in a situation when the worsening relations between Georgia and Russia had made Russia more inclined to follow a tougher line towards the Georgian authorities. Before moving on the analysis of these new tones in Russian official debate on separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space in general, and in Georgia in particular, we should look at Putin’s views on how these conflicts should be solved and what role he has envisaged for Russia in this.

According to Putin ‘there are no military means’ to solve these conflicts, as military means ‘will only lead to a further worsening of the situation and a widening of the divide between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia’. In his view, ‘both sides must acknowledge each others’ lawful interests and find a compromise’.³³⁶ He described a similar solution as the sole viable option in South Ossetia as well. In 2004 he said: ‘There can only be one way out and that is to sit down at the negotiating table’. He added that two other things had to be done in order to find a viable solution – the parties have to ‘come to an agreement’ and they have to ‘have the political will to implement the agreements reached’.³³⁷ At the same time Putin ruled out the use of economic and military pressure as a way of solving such conflicts. In responding to a journalist’s question on conflicts in the CIS area at the press conference at the 2004 Astana Summit of CIS leaders he said: ‘We believe that economic pressure, and even more so military pressure, will not solve the problem. In other words, this is not the road that will lead us to peace.’³³⁸

As to Russia’s role in the settlement of these conflicts, Putin’s view has been that Russia must act as a mediator and guarantor of the agreements. ‘Russia is ready to act as mediator in settling any of the complex issues that we have inherited the empire that was the Soviet Union.’³³⁹ In another public statement he elaborated further:

Russia, like the other CIS countries, is ready to make what contribution it can to settling these conflicts and restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity. But we are not going to take on functions that it is not our role to have and we are not going to take sides. We want to see these conflicts settled in such a way that all the people living on this territory will accept the decision and come to an

³³⁴ 2004 APC at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/12/23/1806_type8_2915_81700.shtml

³³⁵ Excerpts from the President’s Live Television and Radio Dialogue with the Nation, 18 December 2003 www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2003/12/18/1200_type829_16type82917_type84779_57480.shtml

³³⁶ President Putin’s discussion with journalists in Sochi, 27 March 2004. The text of Putin’s statements is available at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/03/27/1922_62500.shtml

³³⁷ *ibid.*

³³⁸ http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/09/16/2122_type82914type82915_76889.shtml

³³⁹ http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/12/06/1232_type82915_80868.shtml

agreement amongst themselves. We are only willing to play the part of intermediary and guarantor of the agreements reached, the agreements that can be reached if good will is shown.³⁴⁰

What were, according to Putin, reasons why Russia should engage in trying to solve these conflicts? For one thing, Russia knew much better than anyone else ‘what was the whole complexity of these problems’ and had ‘a sincere interest in settling of these conflicts’, and that it wanted ‘the region to be a region of stability’. Putin also underlined that Russia ‘does not want and will not take responsibility for completely settling these conflicts’. What Russia wanted was ‘to play a constructive part’ by serving as mediator.³⁴¹

Since Russia – at least according to the above-quoted official statements – was not interested in being the sole actor in the work of conflict settlement it is important to see who else (in addition to Russia itself and the conflicting parties), the official Russia was willing to accept as partners in that work. From Putin’s statements we note that he envisaged an important role for the CIS; that he accepted, at least in the early period of his presidency, a role for the USA; and that he made no mention of either the OSCE nor the UN or the EU in the context of regulating the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is not to say that Russia as such has not been willing to work together with these multilateral organizations in solving problems in Georgia – it simply means that President Putin has not bothered to mention these organizations in official statements on Abkhazia and South Ossetia available on his official website. In light of what has been said earlier on Russia’s preferences as to the format of the group to address regional issues in the Southern Caucasus, this silence concerning the UN and OSCE may not be totally incidental. For instance, when Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov was speaking, at the UN forum, on separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space and ways of dealing with them, he made it clear that he considered peace enforcement on the basis of Article 7 of the UN Charter an inappropriate approach for trying to resolve conflicts in CIS states. He here also referred to the conflicts in Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh, and the Transdnierster.³⁴²

As for Putin’s attitude to the US role in conflict solution, he addressed this issue in two statements from 2002 – a period of huge expectations for the future Russian–US strategic partnership. In the Joint Declaration on the New Strategic Relationship between the Russian Federation and the United States signed in Moscow on 24 May 2002, the leaders of the two countries stated: ‘In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, we recognize our common interest in promoting the stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all the nations of this region’ and that Russia and the United States would ‘co-operate to resolve regional conflicts, including those in Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh, and the Transnistrian issue in Moldova’.³⁴³ The Joint Statement on Counterterrorism Cooperation signed by Presidents Putin and George W. Bush stated that ‘as members of the Friends of the UN Secretary-

³⁴⁰ V. Putin’s press conference with Leonid Kuchma on 19 August 2004 in Sochi – the text is available at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/08/19/1819_75649.shtml.

³⁴¹ http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/09/16/2122_type82914type82915_76889.shtml

³⁴² <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2003/09/260903.asp>

³⁴³ <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2002/05/93744.shtml>

General on Georgia, the Russia and United States remain committed to advancing a peaceful, political resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.’ They pledged to ‘work closely with all relevant parties to these conflicts to reduce military tensions, address civilians’ security concerns, and foster a lasting political settlement that preserves Georgia’s territorial integrity and protects the rights of all of those involved in the conflicts’.³⁴⁴

These solemn declarations notwithstanding, cooperation on settlement of the separatist conflicts has since halted. The growing US presence in the Caucasus has been seen by most Russian policy-makers as a challenge to Russia’s interests and not as an opportunity to be used for jointly addressing regional problems. This US growing presence and role as a force supporting the ‘colour revolutions’ in the region, combined with the ascent to power of a new generation of politicians in Georgia, have had huge impact on bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia. This in turn has backfired on the prospects for settling these conflicts. Today neither Georgia nor Russia seem willing to base their dealings on a sober assessment of their mutual relationship, but have instead gradually embarked on a policy of insulting and annoying each other.

In June 2001 at his meeting with US journalists, Putin said that ‘we (Russia) have a difficult relationship with Georgia exclusively on issues relating to the fight against terrorism.’ To this he added: ‘this is essentially the only problem that we have in interstate relations’ and that Russia was ‘doing everything to preserve stability in Georgia’.³⁴⁵ He also offered some hints as to what was causing some of the tensions in bilateral relations by pointing at talks on withdrawal of Russian forces and bases from Georgia, while underlining that Russia has been providing ‘real support to Georgia in the economic sphere’. In discussing bilateral relations with Georgia, Putin also touched on the human dimension: he noted that there were between 600,000 and 700,000 Georgians living and working in Russia who every month were sending between 150 and 200 million US dollars back to Georgia, and that Russia was ‘creating conditions for these people’.³⁴⁶

Two years later, when asked by a Georgian journalist what Georgia could do to ease tensions with Russia, Putin repeated his opinion, saying that ‘Georgia must ensure that its territory is not used as a base from which to launch attacks against Russia. That is all we ask for.’³⁴⁷ At the same time Putin denied that there was a growing crisis and even conflict in bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia, conflict that could be related to separatist conflicts in Georgia: ‘At regular intervals we hear that the conflict is taking on a bilateral Russian–Georgian character. Nothing of the sort is the case and it cannot be the case.’³⁴⁸ In Putin’s opinion the separatist conflicts had emerged due to the policy of the Georgian authorities in the beginning of

³⁴⁴ <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2002/05/93746.shtml>

³⁴⁵ 2001 US PC.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ 2003 APC.

³⁴⁸ Press conference with Leonid Kuchma on 19 August 2004 in Sochi – the text is available at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/08/19/1819_75649.shtml

the country's independence, when they decided to deprive South Ossetia and Abkhazia of their autonomous status; what was happening in 2004 was 'a relapse of what happened at the beginning of the 1990s'.³⁴⁹ This was also one reasons why Putin decided to reject the idea of going to Tbilisi in order to settle the bilateral Russian–Georgian disputes because, as he himself put it, 'this visit would not be appropriate in the current situation.'³⁵⁰ In that manner Putin indirectly accused the new Georgian leadership of re-igniting the interethnic conflicts and making Russia react by abstaining from direct contacts with the Georgian leadership.

One month later Putin had the chance to discuss these issues with his Georgian counterpart at the CIS Summit in Astana. At the press conference held after the summit on 16 September, the two leaders exchanged views on Russia's role in Abkhazia. The Georgian authorities had been infuriated by Russia's decision to reopen railway connection between Moscow and Sukhumi, a move that was seen as contradicting the 1996 CIS decision on economic blockade of the breakaway region. What was even worse, as seen from the Georgian side, was the fact that Russian Railways was at that time one of Russia's four-state run 'natural monopolies'. The decision to reopen this railroad connection had to be taken at the highest political level. Moreover, high-ranking Russian officials took part in the celebrations marking the reopening. Georgia decided therefore to put this issue on the CIS agenda. And indeed, the CIS countries – including Russia – reaffirmed 'their commitment to refrain from undertaking unilateral actions directed against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia'.³⁵¹

When Putin was asked what impact reopening the railway connection between Russia and Abkhazia could have on relations with Georgia, he apparently became annoyed. He answered that he did not believe that any economic blockade could help settle the conflict, and that 'all previous decisions, today's decisions, and the 1996 decision, do not impose restrictions on the commercial activities of non-state organizations'.³⁵² The Georgian president reacted to this statement by saying that he was glad to hear that the Russian president reiterated that the CIS agreements were still in force, but he also added that the Georgian authorities were 'really surprised by the presence of the chief of the state-run railroad organization, Mr. Fadeev, in Sukhumi and the demonstration of the fact that the chief of the state-run organization participates in direct contacts with the separatists, as this was formally prohibited by the CIS agreements'.³⁵³ Thereupon the two presidents decided to continue this discussion in other surroundings and not at a joint press conference. The meeting between Saakashvili and Putin lasted for several hours, and no official comments were given on the outcome of discussion. This meeting also probably marked the end of a period of high expectations on the possibility of fruitful cooperation between the two leaders, who both represented the new generation of post-Soviet politicians. Their meet-

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Giorgi Sepashvili, 'CIS Summit Reveals Rift in Russo-Georgian Relations', 2004 at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=7852>

³⁵² www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/09/16/2122_type82914type82915_76889.shtml

³⁵³ Giorgi Sepashvili, 'CIS Summit Reveals Rift in Russo-Georgian Relations'.

ing in Astana was the fourth one at which they could discuss various issues affecting relations between their countries. The first meeting had been held only weeks after Saakashvili's election – they met in Moscow for four hours on 11 February 2004. President Saakashvili said that 'he extended the hand of friendship to Russia and that this hand was not ignored.' Their second meeting took place on 3 July 2004 within the framework of an informal CIS meeting in Moscow, and the next one on 27 August 2004 in Kazan, where both presidents attended the CIS meeting of heads of states. It was at this meeting that Saakashvili told Putin that after the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia, the country would not allow any other foreign troops to be stationed on its territory – a stance from which he later retreated under what Russia interpreted as US pressure. As a result of this decision to withdraw from his offer given to Putin, the latter made some acidic comments on leaders who 'do not meet their commitments'. The climate of cooperation between Georgia and Russia was negatively affected by this souring of relations between the two leaders. What happened in Astana – and more generally in relations between Georgia and Russia – was therefore caused not only by conflicting interests but also, to a certain extent, by poor personal chemistry between the two leaders.³⁵⁴

That this was definitely the case is proven by Putin's remarks on the ability of Georgian leaders to pursue their political goals and on their dependence on the West. In August 2004 Putin described the main problem in relations between Georgia and Russia – and in work on settling the separatist conflicts – as the problem of reliability of the partners involved in this process and their ability to coordinate their policies:

If things are going to continue as they have been of late with a commission including government officials reaching an agreement in the morning, only to be then disavowed by other government officials come evening, it will be impossible to get any work done and there will be no results at all. We very much hope that all the participants in this process will show political maturity and responsibility, above all in the interests of their own peoples.³⁵⁵

At Putin's annual press conference in December 2004 a Georgian journalist asked Putin why Russia directly interfered in political processes in Abkhazia in connection with presidential elections there, and said that that this interference evoked 'the anger of not only the Georgian leadership but also of the whole West'. Putin responded angrily by asking in return whether the link between Georgian leadership's anger and that of the West was due to the fact that the Georgian leadership 'gets its salary from Soros'. He warned Georgia that any 'desire to use some levers of power to solve the problem' would antagonize Russia.³⁵⁶

Putin went even further when he addressed the issue of Georgian Russian relations at his annual press conference in January 2006. Replying to a question on the reasons for the worsening relations between Georgia and Russia, the Russian president identified 'the inability of individual politicians in Georgia to make a proper assessment of the situation in relations with Rus-

³⁵⁴ *Izvestia*, 14 June 2006.

³⁵⁵ www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/08/20/0000_75746.shtml

³⁵⁶ http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/12/23/1806_type82915_81700.shtml

sia' as the main reason. He then accused the Georgian side of insulting Russia, warning that 'such a policy towards Russia will not improve the situation of the Georgian public' and that 'the responsibility for this lies with the Georgian authorities'.³⁵⁷

In May/June 2006 tensions in Georgian–Russian relations increased even further. Georgia accused Russia of boosting its military presence in the conflict zones and Russian peacekeepers in the region of behaving in an illegal way. In turn, Russia accused Georgia of preparing for a military solution of the problems in South Ossetia.³⁵⁸ Russian Minister of Defence, Sergei Ivanov, specifically linked Russia's military presence in Georgia with the process of implementation of the CFE Treaty.³⁵⁹ He said the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zone was the only factor preventing an outbreak of war, and that they would therefore 'implement their mandate to the end, until all political agreements are in existence'.³⁶⁰ This was not the first time that Ivanov linked the situation in the conflict zones with the withdrawal of Russian forces. In August 2002 he had announced that Russia would to withdraw military personnel and equipment from the Gudauta military base in Abkhazia only if the Georgian leadership could manage to create the necessary security conditions. Commenting on protests by local residents who feared that Russian withdrawal could lead to a new Georgian attack on Abkhazia, Ivanov had said that Russia 'will not leave over their bodies' – meaning that their interests would be taken into account when preparing for the planned withdrawal.³⁶¹ These remarks underlined the importance of the military component of Russia's policy towards Georgia and the separatist conflicts on its territory.

Russia has also other instruments it can use to pursue and achieve its goals in that region. Destabilizing the political situation in Georgia by supporting the forces opposed to the current regime can be one such tool. The re-emergence in Moscow of Igor Giorgadze (former top Georgian security official accused by Georgia of conspiring against the country's elites and organizing attempts on the lives of Georgian leaders), and the talk of granting him political asylum in Russia has been widely interpreted as an attempt by Moscow to strengthen the anti-Saakashvili opposition in Georgia.³⁶²

Moscow has also used economic instruments to influence the situation in Georgia and in conflict zones. Although the then Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov said in 2002 that imposing economic sanctions on Georgia was not planned – because 'sanctions are not a tool of Russian diplomacy' and because they would primarily affect the population at large,

³⁵⁷ 2006 Annual Press Conference of Vladimir Putin held in Moscow on 31 January 2006. Quotations from BBC Monitoring Putin's annual news conference for international journalists – full text. Source: RTR Russia TV, Moscow, in Russian 0900 gmt 31 Jan 6, provided by *Johnson Russia List* no. 30 2006, posted 1 February 2006.

³⁵⁸ 'Taking Lands Away', *Kommersant*, 2 June 2006, posted on 2 June 2006 at JRL 2006 no. 128. For good coverage of the row on Russian peacekeepers in Georgia see www.lenta.ru/story/peacekeepers/

³⁵⁹ *RFE/RL Newsline* 1 June 2006. For more on that see *RIA Novosti* 'CFE Treaty unviable, out of touch with reality – Russia diplomat' posted on 1 June 2006 at JRL 2006 no. 137.

³⁶⁰ 'Taking Lands Away' and <http://lenta.ru/news/2006/05/31/ivanov/>.

³⁶¹ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2001/08/2-tca/tca-030801.asp>

³⁶² For more on this case see: <http://lenta.ru/articles/2006/05/24/giorgadze/>

who ‘are not responsible for some of the actions of their leaders’³⁶³ – such sanctions were indeed introduced in 2006: the Russian authorities first warned³⁶⁴ and then banned the import of Georgian wine and mineral water to Russia.³⁶⁵ Also what happened to Russian energy supplies – gas and electricity – in January 2006, when two pipelines and the electricity line were blown up in a well-coordinated operation on Russian territory was widely interpreted as a warning to Georgia, a country almost totally dependent on energy supplies from Russia. Although it is still unclear who stood behind these actions, and Russia’s reputation as a reliable supplier of energy suffered considerably in connection with this event, the action and the disruption of energy supplies sent shock waves through Georgia and reminded the Georgian leadership of Russia’s dominant position in the region. This impression was further strengthened when Georgia was forced to accept higher prices for Russian gas. This affects the Georgian economy and daily life of thousands of people, as well as making it more difficult for Saakashvili’s team to deliver in the economic arena, which has been an important element of the Georgian president’s strategy for dealing with the political, economic, social and separatist problems of his country.

Putin and other Russian politicians have mentioned the Georgian diaspora living and working in Russia – and the importance of remittances sent by this diaspora to Georgia. This could offer a hint as to what Russia might do in order to harm the Georgian economy. Introducing a visa regime for Georgian citizens – but not for those living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia – could be interpreted as the use of legal means justified by the fight against international terrorism to limit the number of Georgians citizens allowed to stay and work in Russia. This in turn – especially in combination with other measures – could have a devastating impact on the Georgian economy.

On the other hand, Russia seems to be giving direct and indirect support to the economies of the separatist regions in Georgia. It has opened its borders to products from these regions, has allowed Russian companies – also state-owned ones, like the railways – to operate in these regions, and has decided not to work together with the Georgian authorities in their fight against organized crime and shadow economy on the territory of the separatist units. This seems to be the stated goal of Russian policy, at least if we are to believe Vladimir Putin, who already in 2004 stated, with respect to Abkhazia: ‘the territory is small, and so is the population, and they have a very vulnerable economy. We are prepared to be close and support the development of that economy.’³⁶⁶ Further proof that Russia has been pursuing a double track in its economic policy was provided on 8 July 2005: the State Duma adopted a non-binding resolution calling on the cabinet of Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov to impose new and higher prices on Russian natural gas exported to the Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, but ex-

³⁶³ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2002/10/1-rus/rus-211002.asp>

³⁶⁴ http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=03&y=2006&id=DC25271E-4F8B-4CFC-BD30-930EBC82FFA1

³⁶⁵ For good coverage of that issue see Maciej Falkowski, and Bartosz Cichocki, ‘Russian Economic Sanctions against Georgia and Moldova’, *East Week. Analytical Newsletter*, Issue 38, 20 April 2006, published by Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw.

³⁶⁶ http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/12/23/1806_type82915_81700.shtm

cluded from that policy the breakaway regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdniester.³⁶⁷

Developing and maintaining good contacts with the leaders of the separatist regions provides Russia with effective tools for influencing situation in the conflict zones, and indirectly in Georgia and throughout the region. Vladimir Putin has been asked many questions on Moscow's official policy towards Russian officials' contacts with these leaders. In 2004 he had to answer a question on the visit to Abkhazia of an official Russian delegation in connection with the stalemate in the local presidential elections. Raul Khadjimba, the candidate supported by Moscow, was confronted by an 'independent' Sergei Bagapsh, and both of them claimed victory. Putin answered by saying that he would not pretend 'that they were there solely as private individuals. But all our actions were designed to settle the internal political conflict on that territory.'³⁶⁸ But, one might add, this was a conflict caused by direct interference in the political process in that unrecognized state: Moscow, having first given direct support to one of the candidates, was forced to accept his defeat and work together with his rival to find a solution to a political crisis brought about partly by its own policy.

In 2006, at a joint press conference with Saakashvili, Putin was asked a direct question on whether Russia was not supporting separatism by receiving separatist leaders in Moscow as if they were the presidents of independent states. He replied: 'I don't think so, because Russia is one of the participants in the settlement process and how can we work towards a settlement if we can't meet with the parties to the conflict?'³⁶⁹

However, it seems that Putin was not completely frank on this. Only five months earlier he had issued a statement that could indicate a substantial shift in Russian policy towards separatist conflicts and preparation for the use of the most powerful – though dangerous and two-edged – tool of dealing with the separatist challenge in the post-Soviet space: namely, recognition of the separatist regimes and their potential close cooperation with Russia in the future. At his annual press conference held in Moscow on 31 January 2006 Putin warned that Russia might reconsider its stance and policy towards the separatist conflicts in Georgia. This new Russian approach to solving the problems in Abkhazia and Georgia could be based on what Putin described as principles that 'have to be universal' and on 'precedents (that) exist in international life'.³⁷⁰ What Putin was referring to was the discussion on the future status of Kosovo. In this connection he asked a question that was not solely theoretical: 'If someone believes that Kosovo can be granted full state independence, then why should we refuse the same to the Abkhaz or the South Ossetians?'³⁷¹ Although he immediately added that this did not mean 'that Russia will also immediately recognize Abkhazia or South Ossetia as independent states', Putin underscored that such precedents exist and

³⁶⁷ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2005/07/110705.asp>

³⁶⁸ http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2004/12/23/1806_type82915_81700.shtml

³⁶⁹ www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/06/14/0920_type82914type82915_107133.shtml

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

that ‘we need commonly recognized, universal principles for resolving these problems’.³⁷²

On the one hand, this approach was not completely new. Many Russian politicians, especially those representing more radical views, had already called for recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence. However, it marked an important new tone in the official debate on the future of territories wanting separation from their respective states. Therefore, Putin’s statement probably signalled not only a shift in rhetoric, but also a shift in the way of handling these two conflicts. He made this statement even though, as one Russian analyst has put it, ‘To support foreign separatism means to throw stones at your neighbours while living in a glass house’.³⁷³

Four months later, and a scant two weeks prior to the Georgian–Russian summit in St. Petersburg at which the two presidents were to discuss issues of importance for their bilateral relations, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs followed on the path opened by Putin and issued an official statement on the situation in the conflict zones. The statement sowed doubt about the Georgian authorities’ ability to control their own territory, and opened for recognition of South Ossetian independence based on the principle of self-determination rather than that of territorial integrity. The statement read: ‘We respect and honour the principle of territorial integrity. As things stand, however, for Georgia this integrity is a possibility rather than a reality. South Ossetia’s position is based on the right to self-determination, another principle recognized by the international community’.³⁷⁴ Moreover, on the very same day another official MFA statement supported the principle of treating the will of the people as the ultimate source for political decisions: ‘The people’s will is the ultimate authority for whoever populates any given territory. At least, this is how international laws treat referendums.’ Surely, then, this must indicate a modification of Moscow’s approach to the question of post-Soviet separatism.³⁷⁵

4.4.2 *Russian alternative discourses and actions*

This approach is representative not only of the highest echelon of Moscow politics but also of the ‘average Russian’. That is proven by statements of members of the State Duma from various factions, and by the results of public opinion polls mapping the views of the general public on these issues.

When some Russian politicians were asked to present their opinions on the results of the meeting between Saakashvili and Putin held in St. Petersburg on 13 May 2006, many of them emphasized that Georgia’s claims on the separatist territories lacked historical legitimacy. Some, like Unity’s Gadzhimet Safaraliev (first deputy head of the State Duma Committee for

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Leonid Radzikhovskiy, ‘Georgiophobia’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol.2, no.4, 2004, pp.126–132.

³⁷⁴ Ibid. and ‘Yuzhnaya Osetiya bezhit ot Saakashvili’, *Izvestia*, 2 June 2006. A detailed analysis of this statement can also be found at: <http://lenta.ru/news/2006/06/01/integrity/>

³⁷⁵ An interesting analysis of possible Russian policy in that area can be found in Sergei Markedonov, ‘Unrecognized Geopolitics’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol.4, no.1, 2006, pp.68–79.

Local self-government) held that Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's inclusion in Georgia was the result of arbitrary decisions taken by the Soviet authorities – including Stalin, who was of Georgian origin and who used his power to make Georgia greater – and that the will of the peoples in question should be decisive in solving these territorial disputes. Safaraliev added that Russia should not forget that some 80 per cent of the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are Russian citizens; they have little in common with ethnic Georgians, whereas they have many 'relatives' in Russia.³⁷⁶

Member of the State Duma Committee on Security, Aleksei Volkov of Unity, also stated that the will of the peoples in question should determine where they want to belong politically. According to Volkov, the position of South Ossetia, which could document the country's belonging to Russia, was more legitimate than that of Georgia; moreover, he said, Russia should take into consideration that 90 per cent of those living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are 'our Russian co-citizens'.³⁷⁷ Nikolai Ezerskii, representing the Communist Party of the Russian Federation in the State Duma Security Committee, presented a different view. He maintained that the inclusion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia should be treated as legitimate because it was based on the expressed will of these nations. He added that all the problems in relations between Russia and Georgia are caused by the fact the Georgia pursues not its own goals and policies, but those of the United States: 'every positive step will be actively countered by a strong power that does not like the Georgian–Russian rapprochement'.³⁷⁸ Yurii Shararandin, head of the Committee for Constitutional Law of the Federation Council, commented on the MFA statement on Georgia: 'the people of South Ossetia have the right to raise the question of self-determination' – especially in a situation when similar problems have been solved in similar ways in the former Yugoslavia. Head of the Committee for CIS Affairs of the Federation Council, Vadim Gustov, was more reluctant when asked to comment on the MFA statement on Georgia. Everything was possible, he said, but one thing was the statement and another thing was that it would be impossible to realize this policy, because 'neighbours should have at least some feeling of tact' when interacting one with one another.³⁷⁹

What then of popular views on these conflicts? In March 2006, members of the general public were asked what Russia should do with respect to these conflicts. According to the results published by VTsIOM, 40 per cent of those surveyed believed that Russia should help South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh and Transdniestria to become independent states, 23 per cent agreed that peoples should have the right to self-determination, while 26 per cent opined that Russia should pursue a policy aimed at securing the return of these regions to their respective states.³⁸⁰ Here we should note that many Russians in fact support the wish for independence expressed by people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moreover, they see Georgia as one of the

³⁷⁶ <http://www.prognosis.ru/news/region/2006/6/15/ps.html>

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ 'Yuzhnaya Osetiya...'

³⁸⁰ lenta.ru/news/2006/03/30/free

least Russia-friendly countries, placing Georgia firmly on the ‘enemy’ side of the popular Russian friend–foe map. According to a 2005 survey, 38 per cent of Russians felt that Georgia was Russia’s foe – only Latvia (with 49 per cent of the ‘negative vote’) and Lithuania (with 42 per cent) came out higher on that 2005 ranking of Russia’s enemies.³⁸¹

Whether Russia will decide to recognize the results of possible referendums and separatist states themselves will depend on many factors. The main question is whether Moscow needs to take this drastic step in order to influence the situation in the region, or whether it may decide to employ other measures without risking confrontation with the West and criticism of various international bodies.

The path Russia seems to have been pursuing in its relations with the separatist regions in Georgia can be best described as a policy of soft incorporation by way of Rossianization. By that term, we understand here the effects of the policy of granting Russian citizenship to the population of the two regions in question. Those ethnic South Ossetians and Abkhaz who are granted Russian citizenship become *Rossiane* – citizens of the Russian Federation. As members of the community of Russian citizens, their interests and security are, as stipulated in various official documents on foreign, security and defence policy, to be protected by the Russian state. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have sought a sort of unification with Russia. South Ossetia plans a reunification with North Ossetia and wants to become a federal subject of the Russian Federation.³⁸² Abkhazia has been seeking the status of an ‘associate member’ of the Russian Federation,³⁸³ calling on Russia to protect it against Georgia by referring to the fact that 80 per cent of its inhabitants are Russian citizens.³⁸⁴

Russia started issuing Russian citizenship to inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2001. Although the regulations were tightened with the introduction of the Bill on Citizenship in Russia and rejection of the Communist proposal on almost automatic granting of Russian citizenship to inhabitants of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdniestria,³⁸⁵ by 2002, half of the population in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had Russian citizenship.³⁸⁶ By 2005 this figure had risen to more than 84 for Abkhazia³⁸⁷ and to 90³⁸⁸ or even 98 per cent³⁸⁹ in South Ossetia. At his press conference in 2003 President Putin tried to present the granting of the Russian citizenship as a gesture of good will: ‘having granted Russian citizenship to some 650,000 former citizens of Georgia who have settled permanently in Russia, Moscow could not then deny citizenship to those Abkhaz – also citizens of Georgia – who

381 <http://lenta.ru/news/2005/06/09/friends/>

382 For more information on that process see: <http://www.lenta.ru/story/ossetia/>

383 <http://lenta.ru/news/2006/05/04/cis/>

384 <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2005/02/14/abkhazia/>

385 <http://www.rferl.org/reports/ucs/2001/10/42-241001.asp>

386 <http://www.rferl.org/features/2002/06/13062002160009.asp>

387 http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=08&y=2005&id=AE423B015_A5C-4200-9D5F-1B38C7527387

388 <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2005/11/39-041105.asp>

389 <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2004/06/2-tca/tca-140604.asp>

requested it.³⁹⁰ In fact, however, this explanation does not hold water. That the Russian authorities – most probably (given the way the political system works) acting on the orders of top politicians – have provided between 80 and 90 per cent of the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia³⁹¹ with Russian citizenship has created a qualitatively new situation in the region. It has angered the Georgian authorities, who accuse Russia of double standards.³⁹²

Having granted citizenship to so much of the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia may assume yet another role. It may now act not only as a third part in the conflicts between Tbilisi and its rebellious regions, but also as an actual party in the conflict. What Russia may choose to define as the interests and security of its citizens could be at stake, for instance in the case of renewed fighting in the conflict zones.

Thus far, Russia has opted not to play this citizenship card – but even a superficial analysis of official documents on foreign, security and defence policy reveals that Russia may be compelled or willing to play this card in the future. As an unidentified Russian military source claimed in 2004, Moscow could ‘have a moral obligation to intervene in the event of Georgian military aggression that led to the death of Russian citizens’.³⁹³ With so many citizens to be defended against Georgia, Russia could have more than enough pretexts to intervene – to act against ‘the suppression of rights of citizens of Russian Federation abroad’ as stated in Russia’s Military Doctrine 2000; or to prevent or put an end to ‘infringement on the rights and interests of Russian citizens in foreign states’ and ‘ensure the security of Russian citizens in armed conflicts and situations of instability’ as stated in the 2003 ‘Ivanov doctrine’;³⁹⁴ or ‘to protect the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad on the basis of international law and operative bilateral agreements’, as stated in Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept 2000; or to ‘defend the legal rights and interests of Russian citizens resident abroad’, as stated in the National Security Concept 2000.

This does not necessarily mean that Russia will employ any of these formal pretexts to intervene to defend the separatist regimes, under the guise of defending its own citizens. To what extent Moscow is likely to be interested in playing this card will depend on many factors, domestic and external. Among domestic factors the decisive ones may be the need to further consolidate the regime by launching a new small victorious war, like that launched in 1999 to promote Putin. Or we might witness a nationalistic turn, with the post-Putin regime developing in a more Eurasian direction, with greater focus on strengthening Russia’s role in the post-Soviet space. The

³⁹⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2003/01/5-300103.asp>

³⁹¹ South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity describes this as follows: ‘At present, South Ossetia is de facto part of Russia, because 90% of the citizens of the unrecognized republic are Russian citizens who have Russian passports’. Quoted from JRL 2006 no. 128.

³⁹² On her visit to Moscow, Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Nino Burdjanadze said that while Russia was fighting against separatism in Chechnya, it simultaneously decided to fuel separatist sentiments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by offering Russian citizenship to the local population. Quoted from <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2004/11/2-tca/tca-021104>.

³⁹³ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2004/06/2-tca/tca-140604.asp>

³⁹⁴ For more on that specific document see: Jakub M Godzimirski, *Russia’s New Military Doctrine?*, *Shortinfo from DNAK*, no.8 Oslo: The Norwegian Atlantic Committee, 2003.

issue of protecting Russian citizens might be used to launch a post-Soviet reunification project, with Abkhazia, South Ossetia and perhaps Transdniestria and Belarus as the first chunks to be reincorporated into 'the Post-Soviet Union – Light'. This Eurasian Motherland Russia project, today promoted by Motherland Party (Rodina), could become an attractive alternative to the Kremlin, especially if relations with the West should take a turn for the worse and Russia began looking to the East.

A Russia that embarks on a more assertive line in relations with the West, rejecting the Western model of political and economic development, a Russia no longer constrained by its economic weakness but flexing its energy muscle in order to achieve its goals in the post-Soviet space and elsewhere – such a Russia might have a far lower threshold for intervening in Georgia and perhaps incorporating some Georgian territories. After all, Georgia is seen as a Western outpost in the Caucasus, a thorn in Russia's CIS flesh. This would be a different Russia from the one following the path of Westernization and paying more than lip-service to democracy and cooperation, while continuing to adopt democratic and market reforms of its own choosing.

In order to understand this possible anti-Western turn and its effects on Moscow's policy towards Georgia, towards the separatist conflicts and towards Russia's commitment to withdraw its military forces from bases in Georgia, we need only to look at what policy would have been pursued towards the separatist conflicts and towards Georgia, if Russia had been ruled by more nationalistically-inclined political forces.

A good indication is provided by an analysis of statements and actions of two political figures representing the nationalistic wing of Russian politics. In 2004, Dmitrii Rogozin, the then head of Motherland (Rodina) party, sought to get the Russian State Duma pass a bill on the incorporation of the separatist regions in Russia. In proposing this bill, Rogozin said that it should apply to territories with an ambiguous international status. He added that passing of the bill and its ensuing implementation would solve most of the separatist problems in the post-Soviet space: 'if the bill is adopted, we will eliminate the problems of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniesic'. Under the bill, citizens in the republics would be allowed to decide in referendums whether they want to be unified with Russia. In turn, Russia would not require any international treaty, as the vote would need to be approved only by both chambers of parliament and the president in order to be valid.³⁹⁵ Rogozin has repeatedly shown that he meant what he was talking about. In February 2002, when chairman of the State Duma International Relations Committee, he said Russia should react to the planned deployment of US troops in Georgia by recognizing the self-declared Abkhaz republic and South Ossetia.³⁹⁶ In July 2003, during his visit to Abkhazia, Rogozin stated that Russia would not allow that 'a single drop more blood is spilled in Abkhazia', and added that Russia was drafting a response to the Abkhaz parliament's appeal to grant Abkhazia associate membership of the Russian

³⁹⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2004/12/101204.asp>

³⁹⁶ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2002/03/010302.asp>

Federation.³⁹⁷ In June 2004, Rogozin again visited Abkhazia and again promised his hosts that Russia would protect Abkhazia against what he described as Georgian aggression; further, that he would work for Russian recognition of Abkhaz independence and lifting of the economic sanctions imposed by the CIS in 1996.³⁹⁸

Another notorious Russian nationalist is Vladimir Zhirinovskii, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and twice presidential candidate. Also Zhirinovskii has pursued an active policy towards the separatist conflicts in Georgia. In 2004 he went on a political show to Abkhazia together with a group of Russian tourists and 40 State Duma deputies, and said that Russia should think about integrating Abkhazia.³⁹⁹ In a later interview he advocated recognition of Abkhaz independence, stating that Abkhazia had ‘separated from Georgia forever’ and that the country was interesting for Russia ‘simply because it wants to be with us, because it is ready to be an associate member or a member of the CIS or to join the Russia–Belarus Union, or to form any alliance except being a part of Georgia’.⁴⁰⁰

By noting that Abkhazia was willing to cooperate more closely with Russia, Zhirinovskii made a clear reference to the question of reciprocity – which, according to Russian officials, should be the main guiding line for Russia’s policy in the region. In line with this idea Russia, should develop relations with those who are interested in developing relations with Russia. Since Georgia has been causing trouble by accusing Russia of foul play in the region and inviting even Russia’s geopolitical rivals to become a part in the Caucasian equation, Zhirinovskii’s call for closer cooperation with Abkhazia is not so far from what could be described as the official – or at least mainstream – line of Russian policy towards Georgia and separatist states. For instance, on 6 March 2002 the overwhelming majority – 364 for, 3 against – in the State Duma voted for a non-binding resolution on the US military presence in Georgia which stated that this presence might complicate the already difficult situation in the region, and expressed hope that this would not lead to a military solution of the separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴⁰¹ The same resolution warned that if the peace talks between Tbilisi and Abkhazia and South Ossetia were to take a negative turn, the Duma was prepared to consider other ways of dealing with the issue of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence, and that this approach would be based on these two regions’ ‘expressions of free choice’. This move has been interpreted as the Duma’s warning that it could consider recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence and even their admission into the Russian Federation.⁴⁰²

A further example of how more conservative political players link Russian policy in the Caucasus with the Western presence in the region and

³⁹⁷ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2003/07/170703.asp>

³⁹⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2004/06/2-tca/tca-150604.asp>

³⁹⁹ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2004/08/120804.asp>

⁴⁰⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2004/08/180804.asp>

⁴⁰¹ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/securitywatch/2002/03/10-150302.asp>

⁴⁰² For more on that see <http://www.rferl.org/features/2002/03/06032002092252.asp> and <http://lenta.ru/articles/2002/03/22/battle/>

Georgia's pro-Western turn as being against the reciprocity principle was provided in May 2005 by the former head of the International Cooperation Department of the Russian Ministry of Defence, General Leonid Ivashov. Asked how Russia should react to developments in Georgia, he said that Russia should deploy its military units in Abkhazia and South Ossetia because 'the Caucasus has already been incorporated into the NATO zone of responsibility, and we need a military political response in that direction.'⁴⁰³ Three years earlier, when the Russian authorities were considering military action against what they described as terrorist bases in Georgia, the same General Ivashov had advocated a more nuanced policy approach. At that time he had claimed that seeking closer cooperation with separatist leaders in Abkhazia, Adjara, and South Ossetia, developing direct economic ties with separatist regions and activating the Russian diaspora in Georgia would serve Russia's interests in the region and harm Georgia more than a military operation, which might undermine Russia's international position.⁴⁰⁴

These statements clearly show that the Russian reading has seen the situation in Georgia in purely realist terms – especially when the USA decided to strengthen its presence in the region and give Georgia substantial support in its fight against international terrorism and separatism. The emerging US military presence resulting from the growing US interest in stabilizing the situation in this strategically important area has provoked nervous reactions and playing of Russia's separatist card in Georgia, especially by those less pragmatically inclined to the US presence than President Putin and his close advisers.⁴⁰⁵ Commenting on that issue, Gleb Pavlovskii had said on 28 February 2002 that the presence of US troops in Georgia should not be seen as a threat but rather as an opportunity: 'with every American blow on our enemies we are increasing our security, saving the lives of our soldiers, and gaining time for our own rearmament.' He added: 'this advantage should be used and instantly converted into adequate foreign and domestic policies', and went on to accuse 'retired Moscow generals and experts' of 'making noise each time they see Americans'.⁴⁰⁶

This pragmatic approach to the US presence and influence changed when Washington decided to play a more substantial role in re-configuring the political landscape of the post-Soviet space. The role of the USA – and more generally that of the West – in the democratization of the post-Soviet republics, as symbolized by their support to the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, has made Moscow reconsider its policy. These Western moves were widely interpreted as infringing on vital Russian interests in the post-Soviet space. They contributed to changing Russia's policies towards the West, towards those seen as Western 'agents' in the post-Soviet space and even towards the solution of post-Soviet conflicts. The shift in official policy towards these conflicts should be therefore understood within the broader context of the development of Russia's relations with the post-Soviet space and with the West – and not solely

⁴⁰³ <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2005/05/180505.asp>

⁴⁰⁴ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/securitywatch/2002/10/36-151002.asp>

⁴⁰⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/securitywatch/2002/03/9-080302.asp>

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

or necessarily as an issue in bilateral relations between Russia and countries with a separatist problem.

4.5. Russia and Separatist Conflicts in Georgia: Summing up

Problems in relations between Georgia and Russia have continued. In May 2006 there were serious concerns as to what the foreseeable future could bring. A list of the issues contributing to this souring of relations and rising tensions was presented by *Izvestiya* on the eve of the planned meeting of the two countries' leaders in St. Petersburg on 13 June 2006.⁴⁰⁷ Georgian complaints against Russia included Moscow's support to separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the ban on importing Georgian wine and mineral water to Russia, increasing prices for Russian energy supplies (gas), introduction of a visa regime for Georgian citizens, and Russia's refusal to hand over Igor Gieorgadze, former Georgian security chief accused by Georgia of terrorism and organizing attempts at Georgian politicians. On the Russian list of complaints were Georgia's aggressive policy in the post-Soviet space and the export of 'colour revolutions', Tbilisi's attempt to join NATO as soon as possible, Tbilisi's threat of use of force for settling the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts, provocations against Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the anti-Russian insults hurled by leading Georgian politicians.⁴⁰⁸

When the two leaders agreed to meet in St Petersburg it was in order to address these concerns and discuss ways of settling their disputes. The most recent chapter in the debate on the future of Georgian–Russian relations was therefore written on 13 June 2006, when Russian President Vladimir Putin met with his Georgian counterpart Mikheil Saakashvili to discuss problems in bilateral relations. In their remarks at the end of the meeting, both leaders paid considerable attention to the issues that have been influencing their bilateral relations, including the situation around the separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space. President Putin focused on growing economic cooperation between Russia and Georgia, while President Saakashvili pointed to problems linked with the issue of 'aggressive separatism': this he described as the main regional challenge and, in his words 'not in the interest of any party'.⁴⁰⁹

However, the Russian public was highly sceptical to the possibility of improving relations with Georgia. When asked by *Izvestia* what would be the impact of the Putin–Saakashvili meeting, 91 per cent said that as long as Saakashvili remained at the helm of Georgian politics, there would be no improvement. Only 6 per cent opined that the meeting could contribute to opening a new and serious dialogue between Russia and Georgia.⁴¹⁰

This pessimistic assessment of the future of Georgian–Russian relations – and thereby the prospects for solving the separatist conflicts in Georgia – can

⁴⁰⁷ 'Polnaya gamardzhoba na beregakh Nevy', *Izvestiya*, 14 June 2006.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/06/14/0910_type82914type82915_107085.shtml

⁴¹⁰ 'Polnaya gamardzhoba...', *Izvestia* 14 June 2006.

be explained in many ways. In order to understand Russian attitudes towards Georgia and its separatist problems we need to grasp the Russian worldview and the Russian reading of that world out there.

Moscow's policy can be interpreted as a result of Russia's realist reading of the international scene where a zero-sum power game is being played. When separatist conflicts are addressed from that angle, the most important issue becomes the question of power relations and ability to influence other countries, to prevent the situation from developing in a direction detrimental to national interests. The separatist movements are seen as manifestations of anarchy on the international stage, but they can also provide an opportunity to influence the situation in the countries concerned. Russia's realist power has been on decline since 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed in what was recently branded by Vladimir Putin as a 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century'. For that reason, Russia may fear that any change in its international environment – especially one involving the traditional geopolitical rival, the USA – could prove detrimental to Russia's position. In 2003, Pavel Baev⁴¹¹ summed up his assessment of Russian policies in that region by pointing out that Russia was a status quo power that worked towards further stabilization of existing power balances and the preservation of deadlocks in local conflicts. Three years later, most of Baev's conclusions still seem valid. Indeed, Russia has even decided to go further and reconsider its policy towards the separatist regimes, opening for their formal recognition in a situation when relations with the West are deteriorating and Russia can flex its energy muscle to pursue its international goals without taking into account the Western logic of appropriateness. In that context both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are read as 'geopolitical assets' that can be used to weaken Georgia and undermine the US presence and influence, in what is seen as a new chapter of the geopolitical Great Game. This geopolitical approach was presented in its pure form by Valeri Batuev, expert commentator with *Vremya MN*, when he described the issue of Abkhazia as a territorial one: 'it represents a further exit to the Black Sea' and for that reason 'it isn't advantageous for Russia to give Abkhazia to Georgia.'⁴¹²

Others, like Vladimir Lukin, then State Duma Deputy Speaker from the liberal Yabloko party, held that Moscow's policy towards the separatist regimes was mostly caused by the lack of coordination and an overly geopolitical reading of the situation. This policy could therefore be interpreted as a result of the Russian political culture, characterized by the departmentalization of policy-making and implementation⁴¹³ and a focus on geopolitical and realist reading of international relations.⁴¹⁴

Interpreting Russia's policy towards Georgia before the Rose Revolution, Lukin said that this policy was being driven by an influential group within

⁴¹¹ Pavel Baev, 'Russia's Policies in the North and South Caucasus' in Dov Lynch, (ed.) *The South Caucasus: a Challenge for the EU*. Paris: ISS-EU, 2003, pp.41–52.

⁴¹² <http://www.rferl.org/features/2001/10/10102001130206.asp>

⁴¹³ On the institutional dimension of policy making see Dmitrii Trenin and Bobo Lo, *The Landscape of Russian Foreign Policy Decision Making*, Moscow: Carnegie Center, 2005.

⁴¹⁴ On how Russian elites tend to read international relations see Marina A Lebedeva, 'International Relations Studies in the USSR/Russia: Is there a Russian National School of IR Studies?' *Global Society* vol.18, no. 3, 2004, pp.263–278.

the Russian establishment. This was, he said, a group that ‘considers Georgia unreliable’, and ‘for that reason Russia must try to hold on to its influence wherever it is possible to do so, which means in those regions that are not controlled by Georgia.’ Although Lukin himself had opined in 2003 that this policy was ‘strategically incorrect’, because Russia needed ‘close and special ties not just with Abkhazia, but with a Georgia that has the same sort of relations with Abkhazia’ and needed ‘to ensure that those ties are comfortable for Abkhazia, and for Georgia, and for Russia’,⁴¹⁵ as of the year 2006 it seems that Russian policy towards Georgia and its separatist conflicts is still driven by the same feelings of insecurity concerning Georgia. It is now evident that the change brought about by the Rose Revolution did not transform Georgia into a more reliable partner of Russia – rather the contrary. Moscow’s policy towards Georgia is to even greater degree driven by fears of Georgia loosening its ties with Russia and the post-Soviet space, fears that Georgia might permanently leave the Russian sphere of exclusive influence. In that context, Russian policy towards separatist conflicts in Georgia could be interpreted as a policy of not letting Georgia go over, to the West. This policy can be compared to that adopted by Russia towards the Baltic states on the eve of the EU and NATO enlargement decision, when Moscow hoped that the fact that the border treaties with the three Baltic countries had not been ratified by Russia would make it impossible for the three to meet the 1993 EU Copenhagen and 1995 NATO entry criteria.

By directly and indirectly supporting separatist regimes in Georgia and thereby destabilizing the situation in Georgia itself, Russia may be hoping that Georgia’s way towards Western institutions – the EU and NATO – may be either much bumpier, or even closed off. Russia may expect that neither organization would be willing to accept a new member with unresolved separatist conflicts on its own territory, conflicts in which Russia – which is defined by both organisations as a strategic partner – may have its own stakes and agendas. In that sense, then, Russia’s policy towards separatist conflicts in Georgia has an institutional dimension. The goal of this policy is not to promote Russian rapprochement with these two Western institutions (which probably would have been the case if Russia had continued on its Westernization path), but to prevent another state actor from joining these institutions by making it impossible for this actor to meet the formal entry criteria.

Russian policy towards separatist conflicts in Georgia has also a ‘constructivist dimension’, as it is result of specific mental and political categorization moves made by Russian political elites. Once Georgia had defined itself as an actor seeking closer cooperation with the West, that is Russia’s most important constituting Other, Georgia – whether Shevardnadze’s Georgia or Saakashvili’s Georgia – was placed on the same side of the Russian friend/foe mental divide as the West. Moscow’s policy towards the separatist conflicts in Georgia is therefore also a function of the Russian attitude towards the West and the norms and values represented by the West.

On the other hand, the forces behind the separatist movements in Georgia represent the ‘Soviet element’, clearly interested in restoring a sort of a

⁴¹⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2003/07/26-250703.asp>

‘post-Soviet Union Light’. They seek closer cooperation with Russia as the natural core of the post-Soviet restoration project, a project to be based not on Western norms and values but on a synthesis of Soviet and post-Soviet norms and values, all with a clear post-Soviet, Russian or Eurasian flavour. That reading defines Georgia as a pro-Western and Westernizing Other. By contrast, it defines the separatists as those who are becoming more and more like ‘Us’, not least through the policy of Rossianization – an institutional and formal application of the purely constructivist approach of turning Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists into ‘Us’ and not ‘Them’ – Rossians, citizens of Russia.

5.0. Conclusion

A single case study cannot provide full-scale information about the priorities of a state's foreign policy. Nor can it yield exhaustive information about the international system at large. Seeing security in a 'grain of sand' can, however, reveal how these grains continue to affect the machinery of international relations and how states frame their primary security interests. Moreover, it may offer some interesting and revealing conclusions about International Relations theory in general.

This study began with the assumption that we should understand Russia's priorities as a process of *socialization*, but not necessarily as one ending on that note. That Russia has wanted to play by institutional and liberal rules could be explained in various ways. It could be the result of Russia socializing and internalizing European norms and rules of political behaviour, implying that Russia sought to change its political identity. Moreover, since these conflicts were residual ones, one could also argue that Russia did not actually have any vital interests in these conflict zones. Subsequently, the Russian presence in these areas did not necessarily serve the interests of Russia, but those of the local separatists. To the extent that the Putin administration realized this, it would seek to socialize the Russian elites into OSCE conflict resolution processes, and meet the CFE withdrawal criteria. Any hesitation here could subsequently be interpreted as a fear of security voids in Russia's perimeter – thus Russia's argument in Transdniestria that the forces should remain until the conflict was settled. As for Georgia, the US presence and training could also help to alleviate Russian fears of a sudden security void in the secessionist areas, combined with the presence of residual troops with a 'CIS' mandate.

Our case studies do not confirm this, however. As observed by Keohane and Martin, 'the functioning of institutions depends heavily on the operation of reciprocity, both specific and diffuse'.⁴¹⁶ It seems clear from the Transdniestria case that reciprocity has not worked. Russia blames the 'biased' focus of the OSCE, and accuses the organization of having a hidden agenda. The other OSCE countries, however, have increasingly recognized that Russia has, from the very start, employed a 'reversed conditionality scheme' (the synchronization argument) – not based on the Kremlin's lack of leverage on internal political processes, but aimed at excluding multilateral organizations from playing prominent roles in conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space. The lack of reciprocity has produced confrontational rhetoric over the viability of the organization itself, also at the inter-state level.

Moreover, if socialization of elites was a strategy, then this would put Russia's outright dissatisfaction with the OSCE in a strange light. What Russia has expressed great displeasure with is the OSCE's role as a watchdog and promoter of democracy, seeing the Western use of the OSCE as a tool of

⁴¹⁶ Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, 1995, 'The Promise of Institutional Theory', *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 39-51.

‘forced democratization’. Although official OSCE documents published in the post-Istanbul period have reiterated that the organization, together with the UN, should have a leading role in work on solving frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the current debate on the OSCE indicates that the organization seems to be in a deep trouble. This crisis within the OSCE has been recognized in many recent studies.⁴¹⁷ Since the adoption of the Istanbul Charter on European Security (1999), the single most inclusive security organization in Europe has been said to be experiencing ‘growing pains’.⁴¹⁸ The OSCE has failed to reach a consensus on a final document in three of its five last ministerial meetings.⁴¹⁹ From January to May 2005, the organization was left without a working budget, due to Russia’s opposition to the allegedly biased political profile of the OSCE. It would not be difficult, then, to attribute this to a covert realist strategy. What seems to be at stake, at least from the Russian point of view, is the future of the post-Soviet space. By reducing the importance of the OSCE, Russia seeks to retain a dominant position from which it can confront and deter other great powers. The deliberate Russian citizenship policy in the secessionist areas of Georgia testifies to this. Russia sees this space as a civilizational project where it holds a special position as the sole power.

The issue of reciprocity is also a problem. Reciprocity implies, to a certain extent, compliance in the OSCE context. For its part, Russia has been reluctant to view the Istanbul Pact as a regime, or even an obligation. To the extent that it has, the culture of grand bargains seems to have been an underlying condition. Russia has singled out the EU as a major partner, often linking issues about compliance with a more effective and interest-based dialogue with the EU on security issues. The problem here is of course that the OSCE is the single most inclusive organization for EU norms. Rejecting OSCE norms means disqualifying as a ‘European’ power. Moreover, if this rejection is accompanied with an active foreign policy based on sticks and carrots towards countries with festering secessionist conflicts, any rapprochement with the EU becomes even less feasible. Russia’s decoupling of the Adapted CFE Treaty and the Istanbul Pact has served as a *quid pro quo* for what Moscow sees as lack of OSCE reciprocity. This argument has been slower in coming, but has definitely been designed to make a statement that can challenge the web of institutions argument. It is not necessarily so that the Western web is tight enough to ensure compliance from Russia. On the contrary, Moscow’s policies in this web have induced uncertainty among smaller states as to the intentions of Russia.

This said, Russia has complied in part in the withdrawal of CFE equipment, but feels that it has not been properly rewarded by the European states and the West at large. It could be argued that this is a core problem. Russian perceptions of ‘reciprocity’ are pinned not on institutions, but on grand bargains. Thus, Russia’s explicit conditionality in OSCE affairs has hinged on recognition as a European power, not merely as one among 55 members in

⁴¹⁷ Pál Dunay, ‘The OSCE in Crisis’.

⁴¹⁸ Victor-Yves Ghebali, ‘Growing Pains at the OSCE: The Rise and Fall of Russia’s Pan-European Expectations’.

⁴¹⁹ Wolfgang Zellner, ‘Russia and the OSCE: From High Hopes to Disillusionment’.

the OSCE. Some hold that, although Russia has not complied fully with the Istanbul Pact, Moscow has been ‘inching toward full compliance’,⁴²⁰ and we should clearly assume that a ‘European’ power should be able to exercise sufficient pressure on an unrecognized quasi-state to secure compliance with its own international obligations. The Russian ‘inability’ argument appears very strange in this respect. As for reluctance, it seems pinned on one factor alone – the granting of the status as ‘peacekeeping’ power in post-Soviet conflicts.

We have not wished to make this study a study of the OSCE as such. On the other hand, we would agree that a substantial element in the crisis of confidence within the OSCE is the fact that all the organization’s efforts to make a difference in the resolution of post-Soviet secessionist conflicts have been effectively derailed. As the conflict resolution process has halted, and the institutional crisis within the OSCE has deepened, analysts have come to ask whether there is any way to unfreeze both the conflicts and ‘counter Russian manipulation of secessionist regimes in Georgia and Moldova – Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia and Transnistria’.⁴²¹ This would be difficult, due to Russia’s lack of interest in making norms a prerequisite for multilateral foreign policies. In fact, the crisis within the OSCE seems to have received little resonance in Russia. The organization is generally dismissed as one that matters only on the margins of Russia’s national interests, and has an inherently biased focus when it comes to the post-Soviet space.⁴²²

In sum, ever since the early 1990s Russia has pursued an inconsistent and incoherent policy towards the separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Although Russian elites have clearly and early recognized separatism as a security challenge and threat within Russia and within the post-Soviet space, they have not managed to translate this into a viable and coherent policy towards these conflicts, a policy of unambiguous support for the territorial integrity of the states haunted by the separatist spectre. Instead Moscow has adopted a policy of playing the separatist card for its own purposes. It has sought to maximize its geopolitical gains and retain some control in the areas that it defines as important for realization of the country’s partly outdated strategy, which has remained rooted in an overly realist and geopolitical outlook on the ‘outside world’. In the short term, this policy may yield some rather dubious geopolitical gains. In the longer term, however, it may well serve to undermine Russia’s credibility as a predictable and serious international partner, as a ‘normal’ great power seeking its own new place on the recently redrawn global power map.

⁴²⁰ Pál Dunay, p. 39.

⁴²¹ John Löwenhardt, ‘The OSCE, Moldova and Russian Diplomacy in 2003’, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2004, pp. 103–112, p. 103.

⁴²² For criticism of the Russian view on geographical bias of observer missions, see: Vladimir Shustov, ‘OSCE’s Place in Europe’s Security Architecture’, *International Affairs (Moscow)*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2002, pp. 38–48, p. 44.

Appendix 1.

Corpus of Putin's texts used in the analysis of his discourse

Date	Full Name	Reference
1999 12 31	Russia at the Turn of Millennium Manifesto	1999 Manifesto
2000 02 24	Putin's Letter to Russian Voters	2000 LtV
2000 05 07	Putin's Inauguration Speech	2000 Inauguration
2000 07 08	State of the Nation Speech	2000 SNS
2001 06 16	Ljubljana Press Conference	2001 Ljubljana
2001 06 18	Press Conference with US journalists	2001 US PC
2001 04 03	State of the Nation Speech	2001 SNS
2001 12 25	National Phone-in with Putin	2001 Phone-in
2002 04 18	State of the Nation Speech	2002 SNS
2002 06 23	Annual Press Conference	2002 APC
2002 10 26	Post-Dubrovka Speech	2002 Post-Dubrovka
2003 05 16	State of the Nation Speech	2003 SNS
2003 06 20	Annual Press Conference	2003 APC
2004 05 07	Inauguration Ceremony	2004 Inauguration
2004 05 26	State of the Nation Speech	2004 SNS
2004 09 04	Post-Beslan	2004 Post-Beslan
2004 09 14	Post-Beslan Reform Speech	2004 Post-Beslan Reform
2004 12 23	Annual Press Conference	2004 APC
2005 04 25	State of the Nation Speech	2005 SNS
2006 01 31	Annual Press Conference	2006 APC

Appendix 2.

Abbreviations

BMO – Border Monitoring Operation

BSEC – Black Sea Economic Co-operation

CACO – Central Asian Co-operation Organization

CFE – Treaty Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States

CISPKF – Commonwealth of Independent States Peacekeeping Forces

CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization

EAPC – Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council

EU – European Union

G8 – Group of the seven leading industrial nations and Russia

GRU – Russian Military Intelligence

GUAM – Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova

GUUAM – Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova

HCMN – High Commissioner on National Minorities

ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross

IDPs – internally displaced persons

JCC – Joint Control Commission

JPKF – Joint Peacekeeping Forces

MVD – Ministry of Interior (Russia)

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

ODIHR – Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

OSCE – Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

PMR – Transdniester Moldovan Republic

SCO – Shanghai Co-operation Organization

UN – United Nations

UNDP – UN Development Programme

UNHCHR – UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees

UNOHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

UNOMIG – United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia

VTsIOM – All-Russian Institute for the Study of Public Opinion