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Russia's Frozen Conflicts and the Donbas

Erik J. Grossman

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the evolution of Russia's use of unconventional warfare within regions that have large populations of ethnic Russians. The purpose of Russian unconventional warfare is usually to counter the growth of Western alliances in the region within the boundaries of international law.

The Kremlin has long used frozen conflicts to extend their reach beyond Russian borders. In Moldova, Russia has backed the pro-Russian regime in the breakaway region of Transdniestria since 1992. In 2008, Georgia faced a conventional Russian invasion in support of the separatist governments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 2014, Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine and began supporting an insurgency of pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas. Analysis of these conflicts reveals the Kremlin's growing understanding of frozen conflicts and the opportunities they present to achieve global and regional objectives. Despite this knowledge, however, Russia's attempts to foment and to exploit a frozen conflict in the Donbas have been a failure.

This article analyzes Russia's legacy of frozen conflicts and Vladimir Putin's use of them, including the Transdniestria conflict in Moldova, the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, and the Donbas insurgency. The article concludes with policy recommendations for the Ukrainian and Western governments.

Legacy of Frozen Conflicts

Armed conflicts that have ended via a cease-fire, whether de facto or de jure, but not a peace treaty, are considered frozen. Taken as a region, the post-Soviet space seems perfectly ripe for the creation of frozen conflicts as they boast "ethnic minorities that are large enough to hope for their own statehood," separatist sentiment, and societal divisions an external actor can exploit.¹ Post-Soviet successor states were left in control of large minorities who had been shuffled around over decades of Soviet-induced migration, and the evaporation of central authority renewed many long-suppressed religious, ethnic, and territorial divisions. This gives Russia, a revisionist power, the local knowledge, influence, and circumstances to foment separatism and exploit frozen conflicts on its periphery.

It is understandable that Russia would seek to freeze these conflicts. The feeling in Vladimir Putin's Moscow is that Russia lost its rightful empire with the fall of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, statisticians such as

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¹ Nadezhda Arbatova, "Frozen Conflicts and European Security," *Security Index* 16, no. 3 (September 10, 2010): 51.

Putin have been forced to watch these newly independent nations turn away from Russia and towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Thus, frozen conflicts are a solution to the problem of creeping Western influence in the post-Soviet space. Russia might not be able to bring these states back under Moscow's control wholesale, but it can effectively siphon off pieces to the Kremlin's benefit.

First, freezing a conflict retains at least some of the buffer zone that is central to Russian identity and strategy. Russia is a country steeped in tradition that includes a 700-year legacy of foreign powers marching across the flatlands of the European plains and central Asian steppes, burning and pillaging as they advance on Moscow. With no geographical barriers or impediments to an enemy, aside from "General Winter," Russia has consistently sought to expand and to maintain a barrier around its heartland. As Robert D. Kaplan writes, "Land powers are perennially insecure. . . . Without seas to protect them, they are forever dissatisfied and have to keep expanding or be conquered in turn themselves. This is especially true of the Russians, whose flat expanse is almost bereft of natural borders and affords little protection."²

Second, suspending the fight immediately halts Western integration in the affected state since NATO and the European Union are unwilling to challenge a Russian military response.³ This aversion was most evident following the Georgian conflict.

Third, the pause provides Russia an opportunity for further infiltrating local governments and economies by acting "as engines for corruption and criminality, and as Trojan horses to block progress."⁴ This corruption is often used as an avenue for money laundering by Russian elites and Putin's allies, most notably in Moldova. In another act of economic corruption, frozen conflicts allow Russia to support its key energy exports by gaining control over "major energy pipeline routes, often at key junctures in pipeline networks" and exert political pressure over the affected countries who are forced to purchase Russian gas.⁵ Many of these pipelines are the product of Soviet investment, and therefore viewed by the Kremlin as Russia's rightful property.

Fourth, frozen conflicts allow Russia to establish a forward presence of armed forces, such as the roughly 9,000 troops currently maintained across South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transdniestria as well as additional GRU and Spetsnaz forces deployed in the Donbas.⁶ These forward troops provide the same sort of deterrence as the trip wire of NATO forces in Europe and extend the immediate reach of the Moscow's intelligence services. Furthermore, the presence of Russian troops in

2 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2013), 155.

3 Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Russia-NATO Mistrust: Ethnophobia and the Double Expansion to Contain 'the Russian Bear,'" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 1 (March 2013): 186.

4 Robert Ottung and Christopher Walker, "Putin's Frozen Conflicts," *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2015.

5 John R. Haines, "The Geopolitics of Russia's Networked Energy Infrastructure," *Orbis* 59, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 558.

6 Joshua Kucera, "At Press Conference, Putin Forgets about Military Bases in Armenia, Moldova, Abkhazia . . ." Eurasianet, December 18, 2014; and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas," *Parameters* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 18.

nominally independent nations tacitly reinforces the narrative of Russia's regional dominance.

Finally, abeyance provides a platform for Putin to present himself as a conflict mediator, a key player in international affairs, while managing geopolitical alignment and democratization. By freezing conflicts, Russia blunts democratic revolutions that might spill over its borders. The Rose Revolution (2003) and Euromaidan demonstrations (2013–14), for example, preceded Russian involvement in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively.

Transnistria, Moldova

Transnistria, sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine, is de jure a Moldovan enclave but is de facto an independent state. During the waning days of the Soviet Union, Transnistria declared independence from Moldova, which was seeking closer cultural and political ties with Romania. Romania had deposed its own communist government through violent revolution in 1989 and was firmly aligning itself with the West. Standing in contrast was Transnistria, which was “Russophone, industrialized, and the home of the 14th Soviet Army.”⁷ Of particular concern was a newly passed language law that declared Romanian as the official state language and moved to extend its use in legal, cultural, and educational spheres. This move frightened the Russified population of Transnistria who “viewed this shift away from Soviet (Russophone) norms as ‘Romanianization,’ a phenomenon that threatened non-Romanian speakers with persecution, disenfranchisement, and death.”⁸ This suppression of Russian culture therefore represents one of the earliest cases of Russophobia, which the Kremlin views as an attack on Russia as a civilization, and in turn demands a state response to protect ethnic Russians. This is a concept Putin later employed to justify interventions in Georgia and Ukraine.

When the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic became independent in 1991, it claimed sovereignty over the breakaway region. At the same time, pro-Russian leaders in Transnistria declared independence from Moldova, which was confirmed in a plebiscite quickly followed by presidential elections.⁹ Transnistria had hoped to remain a federalized part of the Soviet Union, but only weeks after its elections the Soviet Union was dissolved. After several border skirmishes between Moldovan police and Transnistrian paramilitary forces, Moldova invaded and captured the secessionist city of Bendery. The rebels were near collapse when the 14th Army intervened and drove the Moldovan forces into retreat. The following month, leaders negotiated a cease-fire with the line serving as the de facto border between Transnistria and Moldova.

Today, Russian, Transnistrian, and Moldovan peacekeepers enforce the arrangement. Russian political influence and financial support allows the Transnistrian government to function as a quasi-independent state. Russia has also employed the favored tactic of passportization: at least one-fifth of Transnistrians hold Russian passports as do “the

7 Michael S. Bobick, “Separatism Redux: Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia’s *De Facto* States,” *Anthropology Today* 30, no. 3 (June 2014): 4.

8 Bobick, “Separatism Redux,” 6.

9 Helge Blakkisrud and Pal Kolsto, “From Secessionist Conflict toward a Functioning State: Processes of State- and Nation-Building in Transnistria,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2011): 183.

vast majority of Transnistrian state officials.”¹⁰ Yet despite these close ties, it seems Russia prefers to keep Transnistria frozen rather than to allow it to become formally independent. Russia may not be able to force Moldova back into the fold, but freezing the Transnistrian conflict has weakened Moldovan sovereignty and frozen its western integration for the past 25 years. This uncertainty has served to trap Moldova in a geopolitical gray zone between East and West and forced it to act as a vehicle for Russian corruption and money laundering.¹¹

South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia, Part I

Like Moldova, Georgia’s two frozen conflicts came about during the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1989, South Ossetia demanded to be acknowledged as an autonomous republic, and antigovernment protests in Abkhazia began after Georgia attempted to open a branch of the Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University in the capital. Georgia also introduced a language law that required “a Georgian language test for entry into higher education,” instituted national holidays, created military units comprised exclusively of native citizens, and promoted “the resettlement of Georgians in areas dominated by minorities.”¹² Skirmishes between state forces and separatist militias began in late 1989. The conflict escalated in 1991 when Georgia declared independence from the Soviet Union in a referendum in which neither South Ossetia nor Abkhazia participated. At this point, Russia takes a turn in its foreign policy direction.

Initially, Soviet and Georgian troops cooperated to try to contain and disarm militias in South Ossetia, but after the newly elected Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia refused to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and refused to condemn the attempted Soviet coup in 1991, he became persona non grata in the eyes of the Kremlin.¹³ In June 1992, Russia started launching attacks on Georgian military units and villages. After this intervention, Abkhazia declared independence from Georgia and by the end of 1992, Gamsakhurdia’s successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was negotiating a cease-fire with Moscow. Later that year, a peacekeeping mission froze South Ossetia—with Georgians, Russians, and South Ossetians acting as enforcers along the cease-fire line.

The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict continued for two years. In that time, three separate Russian-mediated cease-fires fell apart.¹⁴ Offensive Abkhazian action, with Russian support, seizing territory and cities from the Georgians, broke the third cease-fire. At the same time, Georgia was beset by a “revival of the Zviadist rebellion [supporting Gamsakhurdia] . . . threatening the complete collapse of the Georgian state. At this stage (in October 1993), Shevardnadze flew to Moscow and agreed that Georgia would join the Commonwealth of Independent

10 Bobick, “Separatism Redux,” 6.

11 Agnia Grigas, “Moldova: Stepping Out of Europe’s Grey Zone,” *American Interest*, March 9, 2018.

12 Dennis Sammut and Nikola Cvetkovski, *The Georgia-South Ossetia Conflict*, Confidence Building Matters 6 (London: Verification Technology Information Centre, 1996), 10.

13 Sammut and Cvetkovski, *Georgia-South Ossetia Conflict*, 28.

14 S. Neil MacFarlane, “On the Front Lines in the Near Abroad: The CIS and the OSCE in Georgia’s Civil Wars,” *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (September 1997): 513.

States.”¹⁵ Following Georgia’s ascension, Russia intervened to crush Gamsakhurdia’s supporters and deploy troops along the line of contact. By 1994, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict was frozen with Russians, Georgians, Abkhazians, and United Nations (UN) personnel acting as peace enforcers.

The Georgian scenario has many similarities to the Moldovan scenario. The implementation of language laws drastically increased tensions. South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transdniestria had all hoped to remain a part of the Soviet Union or Russia, and turned to violence when the country from which they separated declared the referendums invalid. Like Transdniestria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were on the losing side of a battle with state forces until Russia’s intervention, the nature of which was also in part “a reflection of decisions made by independent-minded generals.”¹⁶ These regions are also embroiled in peace talks that have not presented Russia with any preferable alternative to maintaining the status quo.

There are, however, key distinctions between these scenarios. Unlike supporting the government of Moldova, Russia supported the Georgian opposition leader to help launch a coup to oust the uncooperative Gamsakhurdia. The increased involvement was due to three factors: Georgia is more historically important to Russia than Moldova; Georgia buffers Russian borders—as does South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which also borders the Black Sea; and Gamsakhurdia’s active spurning of Russia’s overtures for Georgia to become part of the federation. Many in the Kremlin likely viewed this as a personal affront—former vassals should not refuse the policy of a superpower.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia, Part II

The Russian-Georgian war has been referred to as the product of a security dilemma rather than overt Georgian or Russian ambitions. For Georgia, the frozen conflicts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia represented an untenable source of insecurity and illegitimacy that drove Georgia to become more secure by trying to resolve the issue.¹⁷ For Russia, Georgia represented a peripheral strategic interest that was taking power away from Moscow. Russia’s paranoia seemed justified after Georgia’s Rose Revolution ended with the ousting of the Russian-compliant Shevardnadze and the institution of democratic reforms. The new government stated its goals as returning South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Georgia and integrating more closely with the European Union. As both sides implemented measures to secure their interests, neither could accurately determine aggressive or defensive maneuvers by the other.¹⁸

The war started with either a Georgian offensive into South Ossetia, South Ossetian terrorist attacks on Georgian forces, or Russian military exercises that were merely screens for an invasion. The security dilemma made a confrontation so likely that, for the purposes of this article, the antagonist is inconsequential.¹⁹ Georgian forces captured the

15 MacFarlane, “On the Front Lines,” 514.

16 Sammut and Cvetkovski, *Georgia-South Ossetia Conflict*, 13.

17 Cory Welt, “The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 1 (January 2010): 64–65.

18 Welt, “Thawing of a Frozen Conflict,” 65.

19 Welt, “Thawing of a Frozen Conflict,” 92–93.

South Ossetian capital, and Russia responded with a combined arms counteroffensive. As Russia pushed into Georgia, Abkhazian forces opened a second front and attacked the Kodori valley. By the end of the five-day campaign, Russia occupied numerous Georgian cities and South Ossetians began cleansing Georgians from local villages. The conflict ended with a cease-fire on August 12, 2008. Russia withdrew its troops back into South Ossetia and Abkhazia in September, and formally recognized these states as independent. In response to the war, the West levied condemnations that were “firm in rhetoric but compromising in reality.”²⁰

Russia’s objectives were as much regional as they were global. Russia had invested a considerable amount of political and military resources in the region such as staffing the local government with ethnic Russians and the passportization of the populace, which made them official Russian citizens.²¹ Globally, Russia was facing a crisis. Between 2004 and 2008, 11 former Soviet or Soviet-satellite states joined the European Union, 7 joined NATO, and Georgia and Ukraine were promised NATO membership.²² From a national security perspective, the war in 2008 may have been inevitable, but it was also an opportunity for the determined Russia to stop oppositional expansion: the territorial integrity of the frozen space and the safety of Russian citizens could serve as a pretext for action.²³ Russia has strayed from flagrant violations of international law that might see it on the receiving end of a UN-sanctioned regime change. Thus, Russia operates within the Kremlin’s interpretation of international norms, such as the responsibility to protect, which it applied to the Russian citizens of South Ossetia.²⁴ By freezing South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and enshrining itself as their protector, Russia was granted a free hand to intervene in an area it considers part of its strategic interests.

The 2008 conflict started as the result of a security dilemma. But its outcome was due to a Russian strategy of manipulating frozen conflicts to achieve foreign policy objectives. Like Moldova, Georgia possessed the necessary preconditions for creating a frozen conflict. Unlike Moldova, Russia recognized these preconditions and then set out to exploit them. In this, it was undoubtedly successful beyond the Kremlin’s expectations. In just five days of campaigning, Russia secured its protectorate states and ended NATO expansion. More importantly, the victory heralded a new era of Russian revisionism and Western hegemonic decay. These factors would eventually lead Russia to target the other country that was promised NATO membership at the Bucharest summit: Ukraine. In this new theater, the Kremlin would actively foment the necessary preconditions for creating a frozen conflict. What started as an accident in Moldova and evolved into an opportunity in Georgia would culminate as dedicated strategy in Ukraine.

20 Nona Mikhelidze, “After the 2008 Russia-Georgia War: Implications for the Wider Caucasus and Prospects for Western Involvement in Conflict Resolution” (background paper, The Caucasus and Black Sea Region: European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Beyond conference, Rome, February 6–7, 2009), 2.

21 Roy Allison, “Russia Resurgent? Moscow’s Campaign to ‘Coerce Georgia to Peace,’” *International Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November 2008): 1147.

22 Allison, “Russia Resurgent,” 1165.

23 Allison, “Russia Resurgent,” 1146.

24 Allison, “Russia Resurgent,” 1151–52.

Donbas, Ukraine

Compared to the examples above, the Crimea is not frozen. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution requesting the international community “not to recognize any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.”²⁵ Although Russia was viewed as a peacekeeper in Moldova and Georgia, it has been overtly described as an occupier in Crimea. Of greater interest in the context of this article is the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Donbas, which represent Russia’s understanding of frozen conflicts as part of strategy. In 2007, the European Union offered Ukraine an association agreement. This agreement “remained on the table throughout 2013, even as Kyiv failed to meet key, public EU demands for political reform.”²⁶ Indeed, the European Union also recognized Ukraine’s strategic importance. With EU and NATO prospects looming, the Euromaidan demonstrations necessitated greater Russian involvement in the region to address its security concerns.

Ukraine boasted the key ingredients needed for a frozen conflict: an ethnic minority “large enough to hope for their own statehood,” separatist sentiment, societal divisions, and Russia as the external actor.²⁷ These circumstances had thus far been muted through democratic processes, a tradition of peaceful power sharing and turnover, and the election of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich.²⁸ Through a mixture of Russian pressure and promises, Yanukovich abruptly cancelled the implementation of the EU-Ukraine association agreement. This action led to the 2013 student protests, which the Yanukovich government responded to with force, thereby sparking Euromaidan. The revolution violently ousted Yanukovich in favor of a pro-EU government. Although governments are sometimes excused, at least marginally, for their use of force against protestors under the notion of “keeping the peace,” the violent ousting of an elected government official in Ukraine was something new. Just as Sulla’s march on Rome shattered the *mos maiorum* of Roman politics, so too had the “flagrant use of force by protesters with the tacit support of opposition parties removed the major constraint that had previously kept the political struggle in Ukraine peaceful.”²⁹ Militias in the Donbas were formed to protect locals from a perceived ultranationalist threat, a concept bellowed loudly by Russian television that described Euromaidan as a fascist takeover. These militias were quickly buttressed by Cossacks, Russian “volunteers,” and Russian sympathizers within the Ukrainian armed forces.

To crush the insurgency in its infancy, Ukraine targeted a militia group, led by former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Igor Strelkov, that had taken over the key city of Slavyansk.³⁰ Generously described as incompetent, the Ukrainian recapture of Slavyansk took over two months. In that time, Donetsk and Luhansk declared their independence

25 UN General Assembly, Resolution 68/262, Territorial Integrity of Ukraine, A/RES/68/262 (March 27, 2014), 2.

26 Paul Kubicek, “Dancing with the Devil: Explaining the European Union’s Engagement with Ukraine under Viktor Yanukovich,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 25, no. 2 (2017): 144–45.

27 Arbatova, “Frozen Conflicts,” 51.

28 Serhiy Kudelia, “The Donbas Rift,” *Russian Social Science Review* 58, no. 2–3 (2017): 212–34.

29 Kudelia, “Donbas Rift,” 216.

30 Kudelia, “Donbas Rift,” 221.

and fortified their positions. The insurgency also had the time it needed to achieve military parity: “By the middle of July, the militia moved from guerrilla raids and infantry battles to tank battles and remote duels using rocket artillery” with Russian assistance.³¹ Despite this setback, by the end of the summer campaign, Ukraine was on the offensive. As in Moldova and Georgia, Russian troops directly intervened to stop the separatist governments from being overrun. Thus in the battle for Ilovaisk, Ukrainian state forces were soundly defeated.³²

Early in the Donbas unrest, Russia initiated talks toward a resolution that would allow Donetsk and Luhansk “to choose their own government, legislative authorities and governors” as well as manage their economic affairs.³³ This solution, a semiautonomous Donbas acting as a buffer zone, was the best Russia could imagine. If the region could not achieve semiautonomy, Russia was prepared to freeze the conflict with a cease-fire agreement. In these negotiations, the United States, United Kingdom, and France consistently rejected proposals of limited sovereignty in the Donbas.³⁴ Russia thus turned to the frozen state and successfully achieved a cease-fire agreement in 2014. Russia could have exploited this frozen conflict for decades, but Russian-backed separatists crossed the cease-fire line and launched the Debaltseve offensive. Pursuing objectives such as cities, industrial centers, and airports “showed the extent to which Moscow was willing to support the opposition in gaining its strategic objectives, even justifying these military operations at the UN as self-defense.”³⁵ By applying the lessons learned by the Abkhazian breaking of the cease-fire in Georgia, Moscow attempted to shift the cease-fire line and establish a more strategic position before letting the freeze set in.

Given the dearth of territorial exchanges after the Debaltseve offensive, some have described the Donbas as frozen, but the characteristics are far more violent than those associated with Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.³⁶ Numerous cease-fires—such as the Easter cease-fire on March 30, 2018, which failed on its first day—have been implemented and violated by both parties, suggesting two key developments. First, Ukraine and the West are more aggressive and determined to blunt Russian aspirations. Second, Russia has either not achieved the strategic positioning it desires or it has lost control over the actions of its separatists. Thus, a more accurate analysis would categorize the Donbas and Ukraine as being in a low intensity civil war.

In Moldova and Georgia, Russia acted openly and without Western interference, thus allowing it to use all military measures available to achieve a quick victory and to dictate the terms of any cease-fire agreements. In the Donbas, Russia is facing Western military and political support for the Ukrainian government. Because of this, Ukraine does not need to negotiate with Russia on its own nor negotiate

31 Kudelia, “Donbas Rift,” 226.

32 Jamie Dettmer, “Should the U.S. Arm Ukraine’s Militias?,” *Daily Beast*, November 24, 2014.

33 Sergey Lavrov (Russian Foreign Minister), interview with *Voskresnoye vremya*, Moscow, March 30, 2014.

34 Lance Davies, “Russia’s ‘Governance’ Approach: Intervention and the Conflict in the Donbas,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (2016): 735.

35 Davies, “Russia’s ‘Governance’ Approach,” 742.

36 Maria Tsvetkova, “Ceasefire Brings Limited Respite for East Ukrainians,” Reuters, July 21, 2015.

from a disadvantageous position. The increased Western involvement has invited more Western scrutiny, condemnation, and reprisals in the form of economic sanctions. Furthermore, if Moscow is perceived to invade Ukraine openly, the West may have justification for not only intervening to remove Russian forces but also to extend the intervention to Moscow itself. These conditions force Putin to operate on a level of official deniability, however dubious, to deny the West a *casus belli*. This “doctrine of deniability” was at first advantageous to allowing Moscow to support separatist movements covertly. Since Russia has been forced to remain at this level, however, they have been unable to exercise the authority necessary to keep the movements both effective for and subservient to the Kremlin’s aspirations.

Given these considerations, one can say Putin’s attempt to strategize a frozen conflict in Ukraine has been a success, but the outcome of that strategy has been a failure. Regardless, Russia has clearly learned from its experiences in Georgia and Moldova to lay the groundwork for intervention and to create the conditions for a frozen conflict early. Russian television focused on the violent far right elements of Euromaidan, decried supposed human rights violations against ethnic Russians, provided operational support to catalyze and to sustain resistance movements, and recognized the breakaway regions as cultural identities separate from Kiev. The scenario demonstrates the separatist movements are not under the purview of Russian authorities.

Strelkov, the former FSB officer who took over Slavyansk, likely went beyond any mandate he might have received from Moscow. He had expected Russian forces to drive into the Donbas, as they had in Crimea once the independence referendum was carried out, but Moscow refused to even recognize the vote as legitimate.³⁷ In negotiations to end the conflict or to implement cease-fires, Russia has proved unable to control the separatism it fomented. Recognizing this shortcoming, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, “We shouldn’t pretend that those people (opposition) will readily obey. They live on their land, and they are fighting for it.”³⁸ Russia used separatism to create chaos in a space that could then be exploited. But this paradoxically left the separatists prone to acting outside Russian interests.

The Donbas scenario proves that while Moscow’s understanding of frozen conflicts has evolved, so too has the West’s, which has been employed to curb Russian ambitions. Russia is therefore presented with four options moving forward. First, it can aim for a frozen status akin to Transnistria-Moldova. Second, it can withdraw from the Donbas and allow Ukrainian state forces to resume control either totally or as part of a power-sharing agreement. Third, it can recognize or annex the Donbas and gamble that the West will not respond. Finally, it can choose to sustain the low intensity civil war and find uses for it such as staging false-flag attacks to increase domestic support or by using the conflict space as a testing ground for military technology.

Putin will likely pursue the first direction. Freezing the Donbas would benefit Russia’s economic and geopolitical circumstances far more than the other options. But Russia seems willing to maintain the

37 Kudelia, “Donbas Rift,” 221.

38 Sergey Lavrov (speech, 51st Munich Security Conference, Munich, February 7, 2015).

low intensity civil war until that goal is accomplished. A low intensity civil war provides opportunity for political exploitation and military development; critically, it allows for Russia to remain prepared should an opportunity to freeze the conflict present itself, thus finally achieving the desired end state.

Policy Recommendations

The West has made great strides in combating Russian exploitation of frozen conflicts by refusing to negotiate peace agreements that recognize the autonomy of the Donbas regions and by refusing cease-fires where Russia acts as the primary peacekeeper. Western sanctions need to be upheld and strengthened, including the implementation of America's secondary sanctions on companies that do business with Russian firms. Any new peace agreement should include measures acknowledging Ukraine as the sole government and authority within its state borders, and any cease-fire agreements should preclude Russian peace enforcers.

For Ukraine, the tradition of peaceful political struggle destroyed in 2014 needs to be reestablished, along with the monopoly on violence that Ukraine once enjoyed over its society. Ukraine should undergo a renewed campaign to remove the governments in Donetsk and Luhansk by seizing or destroying the separatists' buildings and infrastructure. The airs of legitimacy for the "republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, which give it leverage over peace negotiations, must be eliminated. Further, the fact that Russia does not retain control over the militias opens an opportunity for their corruption. Ukraine should focus on pliable militia leaders who may be bribed with payments and government posts as well as former militia members who can be incorporated into state forces.

To help address the lack of economic opportunity in the Donbas, Ukraine should make and fulfill pledges for greater economic investment in the region with Western assistance if needed. Ukraine should repeal the language law implemented in 2017, which banned teaching minority languages in schools; increase the representation of ethnic Russians throughout the government; marginalize far-right movements; and acknowledge the violence of the Euromaidan demonstrations to include taking steps towards reparations for destroyed property and loss of life.

If the West determines that supporting Ukraine—and its reclamation of the Donbas—against Russia are security priorities, then the key recommendation is to take a more aggressive stance. The West should increase its involvement in the Donbas, including the engagement of private military contractors in a train, advise, and assist capacity that reduces exposure. Weapon deliveries to Ukraine should increase so state forces have a qualitative edge over the opposition. Russia's response to this support would likely result in increased support for the separatist forces, but operating on a level of deniability limits the types and quantity of assets—such as drones, conventional air strikes, and standoff weapons—that can be engaged.

By intervening at the behest of the sovereign Ukrainian government, the West has the advantage of bringing those forces to bear. Should such an action occur, Russia will be forced either to remain at a lower level of engagement than the West or to confront Western assets directly. Russia would likely be unwilling to risk a direct confrontation with NATO and

opt to remain at a lower level of engagement to maintain deniability. As long as the West remains more engaged than Russia, Ukraine should emerge with an advantageous position in settlement negotiations.

Russia's history with frozen conflicts reveals preventative measures post-Soviet states may take to reduce or to degrade Russia's ability to foment separatism and conflict. Russia strives to widen the identity rift between native and Russian populations by funding cultural centers, summer camps, and language academies. Vulnerable states such as Estonia and Latvia attempted to counter these efforts by implementing language laws akin to those found in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. Understanding how these laws encourage separatism, vulnerable states should repeal these mandates. Collaborations with regional partners should invest in native cultural programs that encourage Russian populations to assume a shared identity. The United States similarly promotes shared identities among its ethnic populations by celebrating holidays such as Cinco de Mayo and the Chinese New Year despite neither being official government holidays.

According to political anthropologists, Baltic states can successfully assimilate Russian populations not by forcing them to become Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian but by acknowledging Russian ethnicity as a legitimate subdivision of the native culture.³⁹ In Estonia and Latvia, ethnic Russians make up approximately 26 and 30 percent of the total population, respectively. Marginalizing Russia as a primary language, removing Soviet monuments, maligning Russian media (which may be the only understandable outlet), and diminishing ethnic holidays only gives just cause to claims of Russophobia. Denying the Russians minority of legitimacy as stakeholders in the native society creates a schism that is more susceptible to overtures of Russian ultranationalism. Thus by investing in a stronger national identity and state character among the population of ethnic Russians, the Baltic will be less vulnerable to Russian influence.

Media plays an important role in deterring Russian aggression against post-Soviet states. The relative ignorance of the international community made previous Russian efforts more effective. Russia had frozen Moldova, humbled Georgia, and annexed Crimea before NATO states even knew there was a conflict. Increased media and international attention has helped stifle Russia's efforts in the Donbas by keeping the conflict relevant to Western voters and their representatives. Thus, post-Soviet states should keep diplomatic, political, and military confrontations with Russia as public as possible. This is not to say an alarm should sound every time Russia violates Lithuania's airspace, but it does mean a narrative of Russian aggression should be propagated to deprive Russia control over the narrative if a separatist conflict breaks out. Such a deterrent would reduce Russia's political capital and make its direct support of separatism less likely.

The Baltic states should be commended for integrating with NATO and the European Union. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania successfully petitioned for an increased NATO troop presence, and Estonia expanded NATO infrastructure that included the Cooperative Cyber Defence

39 Durukan Kuzu, "Comparative Analysis of Political Systems and Ethnic Mobilization: Assimilation versus Exclusion," *Comparative European Politics* 15, no. 4 (June 2017): 567–68.

Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. More can be done to strengthen the effectiveness of this deterrent force, however. Baltic states should advocate for a legal framework within NATO regarding allied troops responding to separatist forces supported by adversarial nations without triggering Article 5 since Russia is far less likely to employ “little green men” and GRU operatives directly against NATO forces, which would degrade the sustainability of a separatist force.

Not all separatist movements are the result of nefarious directives emanating from the Kremlin, however. Vulnerable states should therefore adopt a doctrine of maximum response to any armed movement. Such a strategy raises the commitment necessary for supplying and sustaining separatist militias. If the Kremlin does not believe it will achieve a quick, legitimate, or effective political victory at a reasonable cost, it will be far less likely to support such movements. Although the tactic failed in Ukraine, the strategy to crush the assumed center of resistance in Stryzhivsk was correct. Where Ukraine erred was in the execution, which provided time for Donetsk and Luhansk to fortify their positions. Post-Soviet states should create contingency plans for seizing vulnerable towns, government buildings, and infrastructure that might lend a separatist movement legitimacy. These plans should involve the greatest qualitative and quantitative assets available. Should an armed separatist movement break out, Russia should be faced with a quagmire rather than an opportunity.

Conclusion

South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transdniestria, Crimea, and Donbas represent an evolution of Moscow’s understanding of frozen conflicts. What started as an accidental development eventually matured into an opportunity to be exploited and culminated into strategy. Frozen conflicts have thus far allowed Russia to achieve its revisionist goals while staying free of Western military response. Russia dominated the frozen space for so long because it was the only superpower willing to operate within it. Post-Crimea, however, the West has started to challenge Russia on this front. Still, the West can do more to degrade Russia’s advantage in the frozen conflict space further and to formulate preemptive measures. Such efforts will become increasingly important as Russia takes aim at other vulnerable states who have the necessary preconditions for separatism present in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.