

# PROTRACTED ARMED CONFLICTS IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE AND THEIR IMPACT ON BLACK SEA SECURITY

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## I. Introduction

The events of 2014 in Ukraine—the takeover of Crimea by Russia and the start of the internationalized civil war in the east of the country—have refocused attention on the problem of protracted conflicts in the territory of the former Soviet Union (the ‘post-Soviet space’) and their impact on Black Sea security.<sup>1</sup> These conflicts have often been overlooked as most were on the periphery of international interests and were more or less frozen. However, the war in Ukraine and the escalation of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016 have demonstrated that the disintegration processes in the post-Soviet space have not ended. The active fighting close to the borders of the European Union (EU), the intensity of the violence and the effect on other conflicts in the region now require re-examination of the conflicts’ dynamics.

These conflicts affect the security in the Black Sea region in a number of ways. They all represent a significant security challenge to the states involved by violating their territorial integrity and diverting significant resources into military security. They have resulted in the militarization of the region and have prevented the states from developing their mutual cooperation and engaging in economic, political and military integration processes with their neighbours.

This paper provides background information on the protracted armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space, their current status and an analysis of how the conflicts influence the security dynamics around the Black Sea.<sup>2</sup> It

<sup>1</sup> Russia gained control over Crimea in Mar. 2014 after a referendum in Crimea favoured secession from Ukraine to join Russia. Russia and a few other countries claim this to be a legal accession. However, Ukraine and most other countries call the referendum and accession to Russia an illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. This paper uses the term ‘takeover’ to mark only the factual change of control of Crimea.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is part of the Black Sea Regional Security Initiative, a project launched by SIPRI in 2017 to provide independent data and analysis on security developments in the region and to promote transparency around military issues. As well as this paper, the project will publish Background Papers mapping the developments in each of the 6 Black Sea littoral states, and a paper on the challenges in the region: Melvin, N. J., *Rebuilding Collective Security in the Black Sea Region*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 50 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Dec. 2018). The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs provided funding for the project.

## SUMMARY

● The events of 2014 in Ukraine—the takeover of Crimea by Russia and the start of the internationalized civil war in the east of the country—have refocused attention on the problem of protracted conflicts in the territory of the former Soviet Union (the ‘post-Soviet space’). This paper provides background information on these conflicts, their current status and an analysis of how they influence the security dynamics around the Black Sea.

The protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space have had a clear and profound impact on the Black Sea region’s security dynamics. First, they have led to an increase in military activities in the region. Second, the overlapping conflict-affected areas have generated a wide zone of instability stretching from Trans-Dniester, through eastern Ukraine and the Caucasus and into Turkey and the Middle East. Third, the conflicts are a significant obstacle to economic development in the breakaway regions themselves and their respective states.



starts (in sections II–V) with an examination of the conflicts in Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Georgia (Ossetia and Abkhazia), Moldova (Trans-Dniester) and Ukraine (Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk). It then analyses the main overarching conflict trends and concludes with an overview of their implications for security in the Black Sea region (section VI).

## II. Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabakh

### Background<sup>3</sup>

While the origins of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict date back several centuries, the contemporary history of the conflict starts in the 1980s, the last years of the Soviet Union. Although the population of Nagorno-Karabakh is predominantly Armenian, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). On 20 February 1988 an extraordinary session of the NKAO Regional Council of People's Deputies petitioned for the transfer of the NKAO from the Azerbaijan SSR to the Armenian SSR.<sup>4</sup> The refusal of this petition provoked demonstrations by Armenians not only in Nagorno-Karabakh but also in the Armenian capital, Yerevan. The tensions spurred a wave of violence and ethnic cleansing in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In a referendum held in Nagorno-Karabakh on 10 December 1991, a few weeks before the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, an overwhelming majority—99.89 per cent—voted for complete independence from Azerbaijan as the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.<sup>5</sup> The Azerbaijani Government declared this act to be illegal and abolished the autonomy of Nagorno-Karabakh. During the subsequent armed conflict, Azerbaijan tried to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh while Armenian troops defended the independence of the province with the support of the Armenian Government and the Armenian diaspora. An internal separatist conflict had gradually internationalized. The losses on both sides are estimated to have reached up to 25 000 people.<sup>6</sup> Armenia gained control over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent seven regions of Azerbaijan (approximately 15 per cent of its current territory).

The fighting stopped on 12 May 1994 after the signing of a ceasefire negotiated by Russia.<sup>7</sup> However, a political solution to the conflict has not yet been agreed, despite the efforts of the parties to the conflicts and numerous international mediators. As a consequence, Armenia and Azerbaijan remain in an ambiguous state, with no war but no peace. They have no diplomatic relations, their common border has been transformed into a 'line of contact',

<sup>3</sup> This background section draws on a number of sources including de Waal, T., *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York University Press: New York, 2003); and International Crisis Group (ICG), *Nagorno-Karabakh: A Plan for Peace*, Europe Report no. 167 (ICG: Brussels, 11 Oct. 2005).

<sup>4</sup> NKAO Council of People's Deputies, 'On a petition to the Supreme Councils of Azerbaijani SSR and Armenian SSR on the NKAO's secession from Soviet Azerbaijan and its transfer to Soviet Armenia', Decision of the Special Session, 20 Feb. 1988.

<sup>5</sup> In 2017 the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh adopted the additional name of Republic of Artsakh. It continues to be widely referred to as Nagorno-Karabakh.

<sup>6</sup> RIA Novosti, [Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh], 4 Mar. 2006 (in Russian).

<sup>7</sup> Bishkek Protocol, 5 May 1994.

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and transport and other communications between them and to third countries have been blocked.

Unlike the other conflicts in the post-Soviet space, no peacekeepers are deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh: neither of the sides would welcome a Russian-led peace operation and there continues to be no agreement on the possible format or composition of such an operation. Another distinction of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been the limited influence of external powers on the dynamics of the conflict. Despite the fact that Russia had strong ties with Armenia, it ultimately had little ability to influence developments on the ground in Nagorno-Karabakh, in Yerevan or in Baku.

Peace negotiations have continued through the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, which was created in 1992 with France, Russia and the United States as co-chairs. A number of additional diplomatic efforts have been made to resolve the conflict, including a US-led negotiation attempt in 2001 at Key West, Florida, the 2007 Prague Process and subsequent Madrid Principles, and Russian-led negotiations in 2011. However, none of these efforts succeeded in achieving a peace agreement.

### Recent developments

Although exchanges of fire along the ceasefire line have been a recurring feature of the conflict since the 1994 ceasefire (see figure 1), starting in 2014 there was a significant upsurge in violence and tension between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh supported by Armenia. According to different sources, up to 54 people were killed in 2014, which at the time was the highest number of casualties in any year since the ceasefire.<sup>8</sup> Most casualties were due to border shootouts on the line of contact, but in November Azerbaijani forces shot down an Armenian Mi-24 helicopter, the first such incident in more than two decades.

Fighting restarted in early 2015 and escalated during the year. In September, for the first time since 1994, artillery was used by both sides.<sup>9</sup> On 8–9 December, according to the Ministry of Defence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the ceasefire regime was violated over 180 times along the line of contact. Weapons of different calibre were used, including mortars and grenade launchers.<sup>10</sup>

On 2–5 April 2016 the situation significantly deteriorated. Each of the parties to the conflict accused the other of starting the violence: Azerbaijan reported shelling from the Armenian side, while Armenia accused Azerbaijan of ‘offensive actions’ in the conflict area.<sup>11</sup> The use of aviation, tanks and heavy artillery weapons was reported, including unmanned aerial

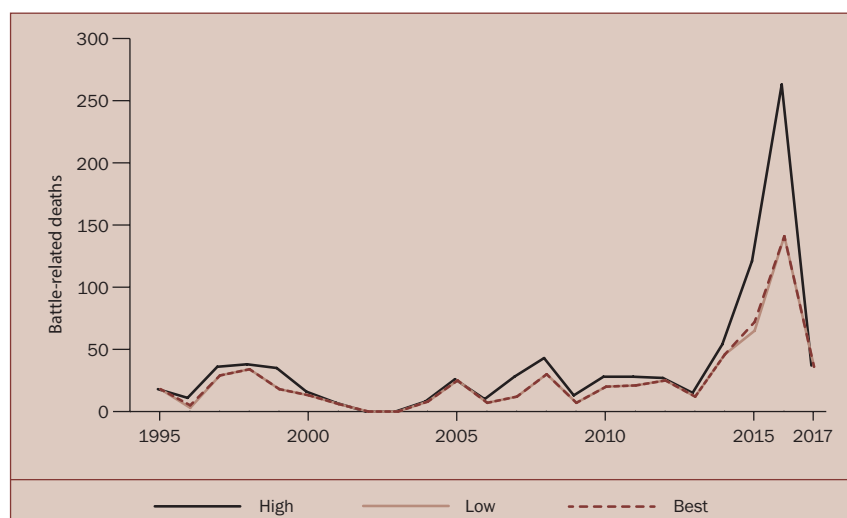
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<sup>8</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia.

<sup>9</sup> Nersisyan, L., [The end of the truce], Lenta.ru, 28 Sep. 2017 (in Russian).

<sup>10</sup> Armenpress, ‘US Department of State: use of heavy artillery in conflict zone of Nagorno Karabakh is unacceptable’, 10 Dec. 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Al Jazeera, ‘Dozens killed in Nagorno-Karabakh clashes’, 3 Apr. 2016.



**Figure 1.** Battle-related deaths in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, 1995–2017

Note: The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) gives low, high and best estimates of the battle-related deaths.

Source: UCDP, UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia.

vehicles (UAVs).<sup>12</sup> Estimates of casualties vary from dozens to hundreds on each side.<sup>13</sup>

A number of factors led to the escalation of violence in 2014–16. The arms race between Armenia and Azerbaijan made the area around Nagorno-Karabakh the ‘most militarized area of Europe’.<sup>14</sup> Azerbaijan’s revenue from oil exports allowed it to significantly increase its military spending.<sup>15</sup> While Azerbaijan still imports most of its weapons from Russia, it has also forged closer ties with Israel, buying advanced Israeli weapons including UAVs and missile systems, and it has signed an agreement on military cooperation with Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Armenia’s partnership with Russia and membership of the Collective Security Treaty

Organization (CSTO) military alliance gave it access to Russian weapons at significantly lower prices and through loans.<sup>17</sup>

Along with the rising violence, there has been an increase in the use of military and militarized rhetoric regarding the conflict. Azerbaijan’s political and military leadership have made more references to, for example, strengthening the Azerbaijani Army, the coming ‘military victory’ over Armenia and the liberation of the occupied territories.<sup>18</sup> The Armenian side has also used aggressive language referring to its willingness and readiness to offer a harsh military response to any Azerbaijani provocations.<sup>19</sup> The war has become a significant source for each state’s propaganda machine: keeping the status quo is an important goal for Armenia, while for Azerbaijan the shame of its losses in 1994 and an officially fostered narrative of

<sup>12</sup> Al Jazeera, ‘Nagorno-Karabakh crisis escalates amid threat of war’, 4 Apr. 2016; Baranec, T. and Juraj, B., ‘Nagorno-Karabakh and the military balance’, *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, 10 May 2016; and Garibov, A., ‘Karabakh: a new theater for drone warfare?’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 11 May 2016.

<sup>13</sup> NTV, [Ministry of Defence of Nagorno-Karabakh: 200 Azeri militants killed in battle], 2 Apr. 2016 (in Russian).

<sup>14</sup> de Waal, T., ‘Karabakh’s guns of August: war and peace in the Caucasus’, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 5 Aug. 2014.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Perlo-Freeman, S. et al., ‘Global developments in military expenditure’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016: Armaments Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2016), pp. 501–502; and Wezeman, S. T. et al., ‘Developments in arms transfers, 2015’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016: Armaments Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2016), p. 585.

<sup>16</sup> Stevenson, J. and Tiffin, G., *Russian Clients and Global Foreign Policy Strategy: Evidence from Foreign Military Sales*, Report for the US Department of Defense Strategic Multilayer Assessment (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism: College Park, MD, Aug. 2015); and Agayev, Z., ‘Israel’s top oil supplier endures Gaza as Azeri ties grow’, *Bloomberg*, 29 Sep. 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Melvin (note 2).

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Rajabova, S., ‘Azerbaijani Army to free occupied lands soon’, *Azernews*, 30 Oct. 2015; and BBC News, ‘Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Azeris dream of return’, 8 Jan. 2015.

<sup>19</sup> President of the Republic of Armenia, ‘Congratulatory Address by President of the Republic of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan on the occasion of the NKR Independence Day’, 2 Sep. 2012.



victimization are a significant part of politics.<sup>20</sup> Changing Azerbaijan's image as the conquered party and recovering control of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories are clear goals of the government of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev.<sup>21</sup> In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, which have had significant economic problems, the focus on the war is often driven by a need to distract the population from domestic political issues, economic problems and human rights.

The pace of the peace process has slowed down markedly since the proposed Madrid Principles of 2007. In 2011–12 Russia organized a number of high-level meetings, but none resulted in any progress. Overall, the other members of the Minsk Group have been relatively unengaged in the process. However, as a response to the increasing violence in 2014, three high-level meetings were organized separately by Russia in Sochi, by the USA in Newport, Wales, and by France in Paris. The three co-chairs also organized several meetings at the foreign minister level in an attempt to further reduce tension. However, the process proved to be ineffective: none of the meetings during the year ended in any signed agreement.

The escalation of violence in April 2016 yet again demonstrated the danger that the conflicts in the post-Soviet space, in particular the Caucasus, could 'unfreeze'. As a result of the fighting, the line of contact shifted for the first time since 1994 as Azerbaijani forces regained control of a small amount of territory. The territorial gains served to boost morale but had more symbolic than tactical or strategic value for Azerbaijan. The Armenian authorities and population attributed the loss of territory mostly to Azerbaijan's possession of Russian-produced weapons, which led them to question Russia's allegiance.<sup>22</sup> However, with no alternative partners or supporters in the war, Armenia continued to strengthen its military cooperation with Russia: in November 2016 the two countries signed an agreement on a joint military force.<sup>23</sup>

The escalation of fighting has also demonstrated how ineffective the peace process has been at securing a long-term and durable peace. The Minsk Group co-chairs held an emergency meeting in Vienna on 16 May 2016. Russian President Vladimir Putin also convened a trilateral summit in Saint Petersburg on 22 June. However, even the members of the Minsk Group admitted that there was little chance of the conflict being resolved under the conditions at the time, as 'the leaders were not ready for it'.<sup>24</sup> Talks were suspended later in 2016 and were only resumed with a meeting of the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers in Munich on 17 February 2017. The presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan finally met in Geneva on

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<sup>20</sup> Grono, M., 'What's behind the flare-up in Nagorno-Karabakh?', International Crisis Group, 3 Apr. 2016; and Altstadt, A. L. and Menon, R., 'Unfrozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: why violence persists', *Foreign Affairs*, 12 Apr. 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Simão, L., 'The Nagorno-Karabakh redux', Issue Alert no. 28, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 23 June 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Grigoryan, M., 'Angered at arms sales to Azerbaijan, Armenians push away from Russia's embrace', *Eurasianet*, 3 June 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Abrahamyan, E., 'Russia and Armenia establish joint ground forces', *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, 16 Dec. 2016. For details see Melvin (note 2).

<sup>24</sup> Armenpress, 'John Kerry doesn't see conditions for Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement', 30 Sep. 2016.



16 October. The moderators admitted that no breakthrough was expected from the meeting, but they hoped for a reduction in tensions.<sup>25</sup> In the following months, after discussions between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan mediated by the Minsk Group, there was progress in improving the monitoring of the ceasefire. The OSCE is increasing the number of monitors along the line of contact to prevent truce violations.<sup>26</sup>

The change of government in Armenia in May 2018 has raised concerns regarding the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, due not least to the unclear position of the new Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, on the conflict and the peace process.<sup>27</sup> A meeting on 11 July 2018 of the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan with the Minsk Group co-chairs brought no clarity or breakthrough in negotiations.<sup>28</sup>

### III. Georgia: Abkhazia and South Ossetia

#### **Background**<sup>29</sup>

Interethnic relations in Georgia soured in the late 1980s, when informal organizations and parties questioned the autonomy of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the Georgian SSR. The rise of the nationalistic movement in Georgia and the response from Abkhazia and South Ossetia spurred demonstrations and violent clashes throughout 1989–90. This led to Abkhazia and South Ossetia first seeking more autonomy within Georgia and the Soviet Union and then eventually declaring their independence from Georgia.

The tensions escalated to fully fledged armed conflict. The hostilities between the Georgian central government and South Ossetia lasted from 1991 to 1992. Under an agreement signed on 24 June 1992, a tripartite Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) comprised of battalions from Georgia, North and South Ossetia, and Russia (500 troops from each) was deployed.<sup>30</sup> A Joint Control Commission (JCC), consisting of the same actors, was to act as the main coordination mechanism for the various aspects of the settlement.

The armed clashes between Georgian and Abkhazian forces escalated in 1992–94. After several rounds of negotiations and failed ceasefire agreements involving the United Nations and the Conference on Security

<sup>25</sup> Panorama, 'Armenian–Azeri summit in Geneva aimed at reducing tensions', 18 Oct. 2017; and Azatutyun Radiokayan, 'Mediators "satisfied" with Armenian–Azeri summit in Geneva', 16 Oct. 2017.

<sup>26</sup> MassisPost, 'OSCE to deploy seven more ceasefire monitors in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone', 26 Jan. 2018.

<sup>27</sup> de Waal, T., 'Armenia's revolution and the Karabakh conflict', Carnegie Europe, 22 May 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Azatutyun Radiokayan, 'Armenian, Azeri FMs in first talks on Karabakh', 12 July 2018.

<sup>29</sup> This background section draws on a number of sources including International Crisis Group (ICG), *Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia*, Europe Report no. 159 (ICG: Brussels, 26 Nov. 2004); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly*, Europe Report no. 183 (ICG: Brussels, 7 June 2007); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Abkhazia: Ways Forward*, Europe Report no. 179 (ICG: Brussels, 18 Jan. 2007); Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG), *Report*, vols I–III (IIFFMCG: Sep. 2009); RIA Novosti, [Chronicle of the events of the Georgian–Ossetian conflict from 1988 to 1994], 11 Aug. 2008 (in Russian); and RIA Novosti, [Chronicle of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict 1989–2008. Reference], 12 Aug. 2008 (in Russian).

<sup>30</sup> Agreement of Principles of Settlement of the Georgian–Ossetian Conflict, Sochi, 24 June 1992. North Ossetia is an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation that borders South Ossetia.



and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, which became the OSCE in 1995), the Georgian and Abkhazian sides signed a ceasefire agreement in May 1994.<sup>31</sup> The parties agreed on further negotiations with UN support, deployment of international observers, drafting of proposals on Abkhazia's future status by the UN and the CSCE, the return of refugees, and the exchange of all prisoners. The agreement was monitored by a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peace operation of around 1700 Russian troops and the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG).

In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the introduction of a peace operation and international observers froze the conflict, and both remained unresolved. The conflicts were a low priority until the early 2000s, when a new Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, came to power after the so-called Rose Revolution in 2003. Saakashvili proclaimed restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity to be one of his main goals, and his government pushed for more integration with the breakaway regions. Special focus was placed on the relationship with South Ossetia, as it was perceived to be more willing than Abkhazia to search for compromise with the Georgian Government.<sup>32</sup> Some of these policies, however, resulted in a more negative reaction towards the Georgian Government. For instance, an anti-smuggling campaign in South Ossetia resulted in a partial unfreezing of the conflict and up to 73 deaths in 2004, when Georgian and South Ossetian villages in the area north of the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, came under fire.<sup>33</sup> In Abkhazia another attempt by Georgia to resolve the conflict by force in 2006 with a military campaign in Kodori also failed; it significantly undermined the peace processes in Abkhazia and the trust in Georgia's intentions to abide by the 1994 agreement.<sup>34</sup>

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To balance Russia's presence in the region, the new Georgian Government decided to enhance its relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU. The EU and Georgia agreed an action plan within the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy in 2006. The NATO states agreed at their summit in Bucharest in 2008 that Georgia would eventually become a NATO member. Against this background, with worsening Georgian–Russian relations after the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili's government began to attach special importance to the geopolitical nature of the conflict with the breakaway regions, calling it a 'Russian–Georgian problem' rather than internal Georgian–South Ossetian or Georgian–Abkhazian conflicts.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Russia had been actively supporting the breakaway regions politically, militarily and economically.<sup>36</sup> It had also distributed Russian passports to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which brought

<sup>31</sup> Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces, Moscow, 14 May 1994.

<sup>32</sup> German, T., *Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Collision of Georgian and Russian Interests*, Russie. Nei.Visions no. 11 (Institut Français des Relations Internationales: Paris, June 2006).

<sup>33</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict* (note 29).

<sup>34</sup> Avaliani, D., 'Paata Zakareishvili: under our government, the issue of Abkhazia's recognition will not emerge', *Tabula*, 5 Nov. 2012.

<sup>35</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia* (note 29).

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. German (note 32); International Crisis Group, *Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict* (note 29); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia*, Europe Report no. 193 (ICG: Brussels, 5 June 2008); and International Crisis Group, *Georgia* (note 29).



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an extremely negative reaction from Georgia and was regarded as ‘creeping annexation’ of Georgian territory.<sup>37</sup> The Georgian Government questioned the neutrality of the JPKF and claimed that Russia continued to support the regions militarily.<sup>38</sup>

The tensions escalated in August 2008, when Georgia attempted to regain control of South Ossetia. The Georgian armed forces launched an attack on Tskhinvali using heavy artillery on the night of 7–8 August 2008, and Georgia is recognized as having started the war.<sup>39</sup> However, this attack was the result of prolonged provocations in the conflict zone. In its subsequent armed intervention, Russia was also responsible for numerous violations of international law. In turn, Russia claimed that it intervened on humanitarian grounds to protect Russian citizens from the unlawful attack by the Georgian Government.<sup>40</sup>

The conflict led to numerous deaths. The Georgian side claimed that 170 of its servicemen, 14 policemen and 228 civilians were killed and 1747 people were wounded; the Russian side claimed that 67 of its servicemen were killed and 283 wounded; and the South Ossetian side claimed that 365 of its people were killed.<sup>41</sup> Altogether, about 850 people lost their lives, many were wounded or went missing, and more than 100 000 civilians were internally displaced or became refugees.<sup>42</sup>

The outcome of the conflict was the establishment of a new status quo in the South Caucasus. On 26 August 2008 Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia considered that the conflicts had been resolved.<sup>43</sup> As a result of the fighting, Georgia lost control of more of its territory, leaving Abkhazia and South Ossetia significantly dependent on Russia.

The violence along the borders of the breakaway regions has effectively stopped. A few shots were fired across the lines of contact in 2009, but violations significantly reduced in 2010 and 2011, returning the conflict to a more or less frozen state in military terms.

The fighting in 2008 ended the negotiations in the formats created in the 1990s. In October 2008 the Geneva International Discussions were launched under the joint auspices of the EU, the OSCE and the UN, with a focus on humanitarian issues rather than negotiations.<sup>44</sup> The EU Monitoring

<sup>37</sup> Reuters, ‘Russian military threatens to boost Georgia force’, 8 May 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Fischer, S., ‘The European Union and security in the Black Sea region after the Georgia crisis’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Sep. 2009), p. 335.

<sup>39</sup> In the aftermath of the conflict, the Council of the EU established an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. The mission’s report recognized Georgia as responsible for the conflict. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (note 29), vol. I.

<sup>40</sup> President of Russia, ‘Interview given by Dmitry Medvedev to television channels Channel One, Rossia, NTV’, 31 Aug. 2008; and President of Russia, ‘Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation’, 5 Nov. 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (note 29), vol. I, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (note 29), vol. I, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> RIA Novosti, [Medvedev signed decrees on recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia], 26 Aug. 2008 (in Russian).

<sup>44</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security, *Advancing Stability in the Black Sea Region*, Special Report 159 CDS 17 E rev. 1 fin (NATO Parliamentary





Mission (EUMM), which was deployed to the borders of Georgia with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in September 2008, continues its mandate of preventing the renewal of the armed conflict and monitoring the situation on the borders. However, it has been repeatedly denied access to the breakaway regions.

Some observers have argued that the fighting between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 revealed two weaknesses of the international community when it comes to protracted conflicts.<sup>45</sup> First, it showed the inability of the current international institutions to prevent the escalation of the conflict. Second, these institutions failed to generate a strong response to Russia's actions and returned to business as usual shortly after the conflict escalation. They instead divided the areas of control between Russia on the one hand and the EU and NATO on the other: NATO and the EU have strengthened their position in and deepened their relations with Georgia, while Russia has continued with its policies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Some argue that the fact that relations between Russia and the West normalized so quickly after the fighting created conditions for the events of 2014 in Ukraine.<sup>46</sup>

### Recent developments

Since the events of 2014 Russia has tightened its control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and has significantly expanded its military presence and political influence into the breakaway regions. Russia and Abkhazia concluded an Alliance and Strategic Partnership Treaty in November 2014 and Russia and South Ossetia concluded an Alliance and Integration Treaty in March 2015.

The titles of the treaties reflect the different dynamics in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in their relations with the Russian Government and the degree of integration with Russia. The first draft treaty proposed by Russia to Abkhazia provoked a wave of protests, with the Abkhazian general public and elites both protesting against Abkhazia losing its independence. Indeed, long-term disagreements between Abkhazia and Russia on the issues of sovereignty, property and control over development of offshore resources resurfaced when considering the new treaty. At the same time, although the draft treaty was significantly adjusted to take account of the Abkhazian position, Abkhazia had little choice but to make many concessions and sign the treaty.<sup>47</sup> In November 2015, in a further step, Russia and Abkhazia signed an agreement on the establishment of a joint military force, which was ratified in November 2016.<sup>48</sup>

***Since the events of 2014 Russia has tightened its control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia***

Assembly: Brussels, 7 Oct. 2017).

<sup>45</sup> E.g. Saakashvili, M., 'Let Georgia be a lesson for what will happen to Ukraine', *The Guardian*, 14 Mar. 2014; and Sharkov, D., 'Ukraine blames international response to Georgia crisis for Russian intervention', *Newsweek*, 9 Aug. 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Kakachia, K., 'Georgia and the Ukraine crisis', *Open Democracy*, 26 Sep. 2014.

<sup>47</sup> [Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership], 24 Nov. 2014 (in Russian).

<sup>48</sup> President of Russia, [Law on the ratification of the Agreement between Russia and Abkhazia on the United Group of Forces is signed], 22 Nov. 2016 (in Russian). On the agreement see Melvin (note 2).



By contrast, the treaty with South Ossetia has enjoyed much more support. It assumes a higher degree of integration with Russia and includes a number of areas not mentioned in the treaty with Abkhazia, including education and healthcare.<sup>49</sup> The South Ossetian Government has regularly expressed its willingness to join the Republic of North Ossetia–Alania in the Russian Federation and even considered holding a referendum on joining Russia.<sup>50</sup> In April 2017 South Ossetia held a referendum on renaming itself as the State of Alania, which is indicative of aspirations for unification with North Ossetia–Alania. According to the Central Election Commission of South Ossetia, the vast majority of voters (80 per cent) were in favour.<sup>51</sup>

***Georgia has now adopted policies to emphasize confidence-building measures and has toned down the anti-Russian rhetoric***

Among the concrete steps on the ground, Russia has continued the so-called creeping borderization: a slow advance of the occupation line further into Georgian territory.<sup>52</sup> For example, in July 2015 Russian troops in South Ossetia moved border markers, extending the administrative boundary of South Ossetia and brought a section of the Baku–Supsa oil pipeline into the South Ossetian administered area.<sup>53</sup> It moved even further into Georgian territory in July 2017.<sup>54</sup> Simultaneously, the movement of people into the breakaway regions has been limited. In December 2016 the Abkhazian authorities closed two border-crossing points with Georgia on the Enguri River.<sup>55</sup> In March 2017 they closed another two crossings: the Khurcha–Nabakevi (Bataiguara) and Orsantia–Otobaia (Bgoura) crossings.<sup>56</sup> Russia also conducts regular military exercises on the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>57</sup>

Having implemented policies for many years to isolate Abkhazia and South Ossetia, criminalize any dealings with them and internationalize the conflict, the Georgian Government policy changed in 2012 with the coming to power of the Georgian Dream coalition. Georgia has now adopted policies to emphasize confidence-building measures and has toned down the anti-Russian rhetoric.<sup>58</sup> Among other things, the new approach is intended to provide the Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations with access to the benefits of Georgia's better integration into the international community, including visa-free travel to the EU.<sup>59</sup> However, so far the de-isolation

<sup>49</sup> [Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on Alliance and Integration], 18 Mar. 2015 (in Russian).

<sup>50</sup> Kryuchkov, I. and Dergachev, V., [South Ossetia suffers from the 'Crimean scenario'], *Gazeta.ru*, 26 May 2016 (in Russian).

<sup>51</sup> Caucasian Knot, 'Idea to rename South Ossetia supported by 80% of voters', 13 Apr. 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Markedonov, S., 'Why Russia's "borderization" strategy makes Georgia so nervous', 29 July 2015, *Russia Direct*.

<sup>53</sup> BBC News, 'EU warning over Russia "land grab" in South Ossetia border row', 16 July 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Menabde, G., 'Russia again intensifies military pressure on Georgia', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10 July 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Democracy and Freedom Watch, 'Abkhazia shuts down two border crossings with Georgia proper', 30 Dec. 2016.

<sup>56</sup> OC Media, 'Abkhazia closes all but one Gali checkpoint', 7 Mar. 2017.

<sup>57</sup> On these military exercises see Melvin (note 2).

<sup>58</sup> Cooley, A., *Scripts of Sovereignty: The Freezing of the Russia–Ukraine Crisis and Dilemmas of Governance in Eurasia* (Center on Global Interests: Washington, DC, 2015), p. 30; and Fischer, S. and Halbach, U., 'Change of government in Georgia: new emphases in domestic and foreign policy', SWP Comments no. 3, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Jan. 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Tsikhelashvili, K., 'Minister's vision', Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civil Equality, 7 Feb. 2017.



strategy, aimed at paving the way for economic, political and social contact with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has produced only limited results.<sup>60</sup>

Although Georgia has continued its course towards integration with the EU and NATO and cooperation with the USA, the new government has also made efforts to restore relations with Russia, including partial restoration of diplomatic contacts through a bilateral dialogue launched between the two countries in late 2012.<sup>61</sup> In response, Russia has eased the visa regulations for Georgian citizens visiting Russia and cancelled sanctions against Georgian wines and food. However, despite the resumption of dialogue, this rapprochement has had limited success so far.<sup>62</sup>

#### IV. Moldova: Trans-Dniester

##### Background<sup>63</sup>

Like the other conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the causes of the conflict in Moldova can be traced to the Soviet legacy, in particular the nationality policy, the uneven division of resources within the Moldavian SSR, and the consequences of the perestroika (reform), glasnost (openness) and liberalization policies of the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Throughout 1988–89 a reform-oriented movement in the Moldavian SSR demanded sociopolitical reforms and democracy, more important positions for ethnic Moldovans, and the recognition of Moldovan as a state language.<sup>64</sup> This and a number of other policies that aimed at ‘Romanization’ of public life, politics, culture and language in the early 1990s sparked a range of protests among ethnic minorities across the Moldavian SSR, including the Russian-speaking population in the area to the east of the Dniester river. This eventually led the latter to proclaim the independence (within the Soviet Union) of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (also known as Trans-Dniester) in September 1990.<sup>65</sup>

***The sporadic clashes between Moldovan Government forces and Trans-Dniestrian militia started in late 1990***

The sporadic clashes between Moldovan Government forces (mainly police) and Trans-Dniestrian militia started in late 1990. The tensions increased after Moldova declared its independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991. The hostilities culminated on 19–21 June 1992 with the battle in Bender between Moldovan forces and Trans-Dniestrian forces

<sup>60</sup> On Kavkaz, [Abkhazia, despite speculation about joining Russia, fears a close rapprochement with Moscow], 17 Sep. 2016 (in Russian); Sputnik, [RF Finance Ministry: financial aid to South Ossetia up to 2019 will be 7.6 billion roubles], 14 Sep. 2016 (in Russian); and Hikari Cecire, M., ‘Georgia to promote Abkhaz language, but Sukhumi unimpressed’, Eurasianet, 3 Nov. 2017.

<sup>61</sup> On Georgia’s cooperation with NATO see Kuimova, A. and Wezeman, S. T., ‘Georgia and Black Sea security’, SIPRI Background Paper, Dec. 2018 (note 2).

<sup>62</sup> Silaev, N. and Sushentsov, A., ‘Russia’s view of its relations with Georgia after the 2012 elections: implications for regional stability’, *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1 (winter 2014), pp. 65–86.

<sup>63</sup> This background section draws on a number of sources including International Crisis Group (ICG), *Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transdnistria*, Europe Report no. 157 (ICG: Brussels, 17 June 2004); and International Crisis Group (ICG), *Moldova: No Quick Fix*, Europe Report no. 147 (ICG: Brussels, 12 Aug. 2003).

<sup>64</sup> Vahl, M. and Emerson, M., ‘Moldova and the Transnistrian conflict’, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>65</sup> Pridnestrovia can be translated as Cis-Dniester (i.e. ‘this side of the Dniester river’), reflecting a different perspective from the term Trans-Dniester (i.e. ‘the other side of the Dniester’).



with the significant support of the Russian 14th Army, which was stationed in the area. By mid-July 1992, up to 1000 people had been killed and about 4500 wounded on both sides.<sup>66</sup>

On 21 July 1992, in the presence of the leader of Trans-Dniester, Moldova and Russia signed an agreement on the principles of the settlement of the Trans-Dniestrian conflict.<sup>67</sup> Military action was frozen and a Russian peace operation was positioned on the line of confrontation. Later, a JCC was established and the JCC Peacekeeping Force—consisting of Russian, Moldovan and Trans-Dniestrian contingents—was deployed in Trans-Dniester. The CSCE joined the peace process in 1993 and Ukraine joined two years later.<sup>68</sup> Talks are held in the ‘5+2’ format, which includes the two sides—Moldova and Trans-Dniester—along with the OSCE (as chair), Russia, Ukraine, the EU and the USA as mediators and observers.

Ever since the 1990s, Trans-Dniester’s de facto independence—in terms of politics, economics and security—has been significantly shaped by Russia.<sup>69</sup> The political system and institutions were formed with the support of Russia and it has significant influence over the internal political affairs in the breakaway region. Russia provides economic support to Trans-Dniester, including sponsoring social projects, supplementing the pensions of Trans-Dniestrian retirees and providing heavily subsidized natural gas that the Trans-Dniestrian authorities then resell on the domestic market.<sup>70</sup> The industrial output of Trans-Dniester’s four major enterprises remains competitive only due to this heavily subsidized natural gas.<sup>71</sup> Although their numbers are significantly lower than in the 1990s, the Russian peacekeepers in Trans-Dniester have continued to provide security guarantees for the breakaway region.<sup>72</sup>

***Moldova has gradually reoriented its policy towards closer relations with Western partners rather than Russia***

Moldova has gradually reoriented its policy towards closer relations with Western partners rather than Russia. A series of pro-European governing coalitions since 2009 strengthened Moldova’s policies on integration with the EU and closer cooperation with NATO, which had lagged while the Communist Party was in power in 2001–2009. Despite numerous internal political upheavals, economic difficulties and high levels of corruption, Moldova’s cooperation within the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy has been considered as a relative success.<sup>73</sup> The Moldovan Government (under both the Communist Party and the pro-Western coalitions) has also been

<sup>66</sup> Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘State Secretary and Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin’s interview with Kommersant newspaper, October 2, 2017’, 3 Oct. 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Agreement on the Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Dniester Region of the Republic of Moldova, Moscow, 21 July 1992.

<sup>68</sup> CSCE Mission to the Republic of Moldova, CSCE/19-CSO/Journal no. 3, Annex 3, 4 Feb. 1993; and International Crisis Group, *Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transdnistria* (note 63).

<sup>69</sup> Fylypenko, A., ‘The “first hybrid”: the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict’, *UA: Ukraine Analytica*, no. 3(9) (2017), pp. 7–13.

<sup>70</sup> Devyatkov, A., ‘The instability game: easing tensions between Russia and the West in Moldova’, Carnegie Moscow Center, 26 Oct. 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Frear, T., ‘New realities: the Ukrainian approach to Transnistria’, Commentary, European Leadership Network, 26 Mar. 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Russian Ministry of Defence, ‘Peacekeeping operation in Transnistria’, [n.d.].

<sup>73</sup> Cristescu, R. and Matveev, D., ‘Peacebuilding and conflict prevention in Moldova: the role of the EU’, Civil Society Dialogue Network, European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, 28 June 2011; and Boonstra, J., ‘Moldova: an EU success story?’, FRIDE Policy Brief no. 92 (Aug. 2011).



trying to balance its relations with Russia, including in the framework of the CIS. Moldova remains a CIS member and it joined the CIS Free Trade Area on its establishment in 2011. However, bans on the import of Moldovan wine to the Russian market are indicative of the tense relations between the two sides and Russian pressure on the Moldovan Government to reconsider its position on the settlement of the Trans-Dniestrian conflict and its policy on European integration.<sup>74</sup>

As with the other protracted conflicts, the negotiations around the Trans-Dniestrian conflict have not brought meaningful results. They have often been held hostage to the political disagreements not only between Moldova and Trans-Dniester, but also between the other participants in the 5+2 format. In 2003 the so-called Kozak memorandum, which presented a solution of the conflict through federalization of Moldova, was rejected by Moldova under significant pressure from its Western partners as it would have guaranteed the presence of Russian peacekeepers on Moldovan territory almost indefinitely.<sup>75</sup> In turn, Russia has suggested a guaranteed neutral status for Moldova as part of the settlement of the conflict.<sup>76</sup> Since the failure of the Kozak memorandum there has been no major breakthrough in negotiations. There were no 5+2 meetings in 2006–11 and since the 5+2 negotiations resumed in 2011 they have made no progress towards a resolution as they have mostly focused on humanitarian questions, freedom of movement and human rights.<sup>77</sup>

***For the past 20 years the Trans-Dniestrian conflict has remained perhaps the most frozen conflict in the post-Soviet space***

## Recent developments

For the past 20 years the Trans-Dniestrian conflict has remained perhaps the most frozen conflict in the post-Soviet space. However, the significant geopolitical shifts since the events of 2014 in Ukraine have considerably influenced the dynamics around Trans-Dniester. The Moldovan and Ukrainian governments have launched a number of policies on Trans-Dniester. As early as May 2015, Ukraine banned the import of excisable goods through the Kuchurgan and Platonovo checkpoints on its border with Trans-Dniester.<sup>78</sup> In January 2016 Moldova and Ukraine changed the procedures for the movement of goods imported into Trans-Dniester by rail and in July 2016 Ukraine restricted the import of excisable goods by rail through Slobodka station.<sup>79</sup> In February 2016 Ukraine announced its readiness to resume electricity exports to Moldova, which would compete

<sup>74</sup> A wine ban was introduced in 2006 as a reaction to the lack of progress on reaching a Trans-Dniestrian settlement. Delcour, L., *The EU and Russia in Their 'Contested Neighbourhood'* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2017), p. 68. In 2013 a further ban was introduced in reaction to Moldova's aspirations to sign an association agreement with the EU. Reuters, 'Russia, unhappy with Moldova's EU drive, bans its wine and spirits', 10 Sep. 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Beyer, J. and Wolff, S., 'Linkage and leverage effects on Moldova's Transnistria problem', *East European Politics*, vol. 32, no. 3 (2016), pp. 335–54.

<sup>76</sup> Rodkiewicz, W., 'The frozen conflict in Transnistria: a chance for agreement?', CES Commentary no. 2, Centre for Eastern Studies, 10 Mar. 2008.

<sup>77</sup> The press releases and statements of the meetings are available at the OSCE website.

<sup>78</sup> RIA Novosti, [PMR: Ukraine closed all checkpoints of excisable goods with Trans-Dniester], 30 Mar. 2015 (in Russian).

<sup>79</sup> Novosti Pridnestrovyia, Ukraine imposes unilateral restrictions for importation of excisable goods via Slobodka Export railway station, 12 July 2016.



***The Moldovan Parliament remains dominated by the pro-Western coalition and Moldova continues its course towards European integration***

directly with electricity supplied by Trans-Dniester. Losing the Moldovan electricity market threatened the Trans-Dniestrian authorities with the loss of 50–70 per cent of their budget revenues.<sup>80</sup> These measures have exacerbated the already difficult economic situation in Trans-Dniester.

Ukraine has also encouraged the withdrawal of the Russian peace operation from the region. Ukraine sees Trans-Dniester as ‘a pro-Russian enclave’ that could be used by Russia as a springboard to attack southern Ukraine.<sup>81</sup> Irina Friz, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and adviser to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, has stated that the presence of Russian troops in Trans-Dniester is unacceptable for Ukraine now that they have lost both their peacekeeping functions and the confidence of the other members of the 5+2 group.<sup>82</sup> Ukraine closed the resupply lines for the Russian military contingent in Trans-Dniester in 2015 and no longer allows Russian troops to access Trans-Dniester through its territory. Moldova itself began arresting and deporting Russian military personnel en route to Trans-Dniester.<sup>83</sup>

The Ukraine crisis has also affected the 5+2 negotiations. After negotiations in June 2014 in Vienna there was a two-year pause until a new round of negotiations was held in June 2016 in Berlin. These negotiations focus on a number of practical administrative, economic and social issues rather than negotiation of a settlement of the conflict.<sup>84</sup> It is difficult to predict whether the resumed negotiations will succeed, as the level of trust between the negotiating parties is low. In particular, Trans-Dniester has expressed its doubts about the neutrality of Ukraine as an observer due to its policies in 2014–16.<sup>85</sup>

The internal political changes in Moldova since 2016 have also affected the conflict. In December 2016 a pro-Russian candidate, Igor Dodon of the Socialist Party, won the first direct elections for the Moldovan presidency. On a number of occasions Dodon has expressed his dissatisfaction with the policies of the Western partners in Moldova and called for rapprochement with Russia. He has also expressed hopes for an early resolution of the Trans-Dniester conflict.

However, the Moldovan Parliament remains dominated by the pro-Western coalition and Moldova continues its course towards European integration. Although President Dodon has openly expressed his dissatisfaction with the EU agreements and claimed his intention for Moldova to join the Eurasian Economic Union (with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia), the EU trade agreement has not been halted and cooperation

<sup>80</sup> Regnum, [Currency crisis in Trans-Dniester: to meet the demand for currency is ‘impossible’], 10 Mar. 2016 (in Russian).

<sup>81</sup> Gushchin, A. V. and Markedonov, S. M., [Trans-Dniester: the dilemmas of a peaceful settlement], Policy Brief no. 1 (Russian International Affairs Council: Moscow, Jan. 2016) (in Russian).

<sup>82</sup> Sobytiya, [Ukraine has made an ultimatum to Trans-Dniester], 12 May 2017 (in Russian).

<sup>83</sup> Popșoi, M., ‘How vulnerable is Moldova to a Russian invasion through its only port?’, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 31 July 2017; de Waal, T., ‘An Eastern European frozen conflict the EU got right’, Politico, 16 Feb. 2016; and Sobytiya (note 82).

<sup>84</sup> Hill, W. H., ‘The Moldova–Transdnestrria dilemma: local politics and conflict resolution’, Carnegie Moscow Center, 24 Jan. 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Novosti Pridnestrovyia, [Moldova and Ukraine continue to put pressure on Transdnestrria], 29 May 2017.



continues to develop.<sup>86</sup> Dodon has expressed similar rhetoric regarding Moldova's cooperation with NATO and the USA. However, in December 2017 NATO opened a liaison office in the Moldovan capital, Chisinau, to support the modernization of the Moldovan armed forces in line with NATO standards.<sup>87</sup>

Relations between Moldova and Russia also remain tense. In July 2017 Moldova prevented a Russian deputy prime minister, Dmitry Rogozin, from travelling to Trans-Dniester to mark the 25th anniversary of the JCC Peacekeeping Force.<sup>88</sup> Moldova also insists on the withdrawal of Russian troops from its territory. In May 2017 Moldova's Constitutional Court ruled that these troops are an 'occupational force'.<sup>89</sup> In June 2018, after a debate requested by Moldova, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution urging Russia to withdraw its troops from Trans-Dniester.<sup>90</sup>

If the pro-Western coalition loses the Moldovan parliamentary elections in February 2019, the balance between Russia and the EU and NATO could change.<sup>91</sup> It is, however, unlikely to change the situation regarding the settlement of the Trans-Dniestrian conflict. Despite significant differences within the Moldovan political establishment on foreign policy and relations with Russia, there remains a relative consensus on the settlement of the conflict: maximum federalization within Moldova.<sup>92</sup>

Although some observers anticipated that Trans-Dniester would be Russia's next Crimea—that Russia would either take it over or recognize its independence<sup>93</sup>—Russia has not moved far in this direction. The relative strategic importance of Trans-Dniester for Russia decreased after the takeover of Crimea. Moreover, the de facto blockade of Trans-Dniester by Moldova and Ukraine makes the Russian presence there more complicated and expensive. Russia does not have direct territorial access to the region, which would also significantly complicate any attempt to take it over. Additionally, following the takeover of Crimea, Russia simply does not have the resources to takeover another region such as Trans-Dniester. Indeed, Russia benefits more from maintaining the status quo, with Trans-Dniester within Moldova, as this gives Russia leverage over Moldova and its pro-Western aspirations.<sup>94</sup>

***The relative strategic importance of Trans-Dniester for Russia decreased after the takeover of Crimea***

<sup>86</sup> Rettman, A., 'Moldova turns from EU to Russia', EU Observer, 18 Jan. 2018.

<sup>87</sup> EurAsia Daily, 'Dodon cannot prevent opening of NATO Liaison Office in Moldova', 5 Oct. 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 'Moldova declares Russian Deputy PM Rogozin persona non grata', 2 Aug. 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Zoria, Y., 'Russian troops unconstitutionally occupy Moldovan territory—Constitutional Court', Euromaidan Press, 4 May 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Tomuk, E. and Benea, R., 'Russia objects to Moldovan call for removing troops from Transdniester', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 Aug. 2017; and UN General Assembly Resolution 72/282, 'Complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova', 22 June 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Cenusă, D., 'Geopolitical games expected ahead of Moldova's 2018 elections', Moldova Monthly, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 10 Oct. 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Gushchin and Markedonov (note 81).

<sup>93</sup> Rogstad, A., 'The next Crimea? Getting Russia's Transnistria policy right', *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 65, no. 1 (2018), pp. 49–64.

<sup>94</sup> Markedonov, S., 'Russia faces another Transnistrian dilemma', Russia Direct, 16 Dec. 2016.



## V. Ukraine: Crimea and eastern Ukraine

### **Background**<sup>95</sup>

The catalyst for the emergence of armed conflict in Ukraine was the Euromaidan protests against the government of President Viktor Yanukovich, sparked by his decision in late 2013 to postpone the signing of an association agreement with the EU. These protests culminated in clashes between police and government forces after a number of questionable decisions by the Yanukovich government, including adoption of anti-protest laws and the use of force on protesters. Despite an agreement on a rebalancing of presidential powers and early presidential elections, signed by President Yanukovich and the opposition on 21 February 2014 in the presence of EU representatives, Yanukovich fled the country on the following day, allegedly due to fears for his safety. Power passed to the opposition, with the support of a number of West European countries and the USA.

Meanwhile, in Crimea, an autonomous republic of Ukraine with a largely Russian-speaking population, there was a series of protests, and government buildings were seized in late February 2014. Pro-Russian forces then took control of the Black Sea port city of Sevastopol and eventually the whole of Crimea with the support of Russian special forces. On 18 March 2014, after a disputed referendum, the region acceded to the Russian Federation.<sup>96</sup>

In eastern Ukraine, including Dnepropetrovsk, Donetsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts, mass rallies of opponents of Euromaidan began in March 2014. In April 2014 several administrative buildings in Donetsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts were seized by residents who disagreed with the policy of the new government in Kyiv. In response to these actions, the central government declared an ‘anti-terrorist operation’, which resulted in clashes in Donetsk and Luhansk with the National Guard gendarmerie. These two regions—together known as the Donbas—each declared their independence in May 2014 as the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic. Subsequently, the intensity of the conflict increased steadily, transforming into full-scale combat operations with the use of heavy armoured vehicles and aircraft.

Months of heavy fighting followed, with numerous deaths among the Ukraine military, the separatist forces and civilians. Then, at a meeting on 5 September 2014 in Minsk of the trilateral contact group on the settlement of the situation in Ukraine—which brings together the OSCE, Russia and Ukraine—a first ceasefire agreement was reached with the leaders of the two breakaway regions. However, fighting escalated again in January 2015. On 12 February 2015, at a further meeting in Minsk, the leaders of the Normandy

### ***On 18 March 2014, after a disputed referendum, Crimea acceded to the Russian Federation***

<sup>95</sup> This background section draws on a number of sources including Menon, R. and Rumer, E. B., *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2015); Sakwa, R., *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (IB Tauris: London, 2016); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter*, Europe Report no. 235 (ICG: Brussels, 18 Dec. 2014); and Center for Strategic and International Studies, ‘The Ukraine crisis timeline’, [n.d.].

<sup>96</sup> Masters, J., ‘Why the Crimean referendum is illegitimate’, Council of Foreign Relations, 16 Mar. 2014.





Four countries—France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine—developed a further ceasefire agreement, known as the Minsk II agreement.<sup>97</sup>

Observers have identified the internal causes of the conflict as the political and economic weakness of the Ukrainian state, the long-running struggle between oligarchs in the country's regions and the central government, and the high level of corruption that has taken root in Ukrainian politics and undermined the country's economic development.<sup>98</sup>

Additionally, long-term concerns over Ukraine's desire to join the EU and the negative economic consequences of this choice for the east of the country and the question of the redistribution of budget resources within Ukraine have alienated the eastern regions from the central government. These processes resulted in state fragmentation and particularly strong support for Yanukovich's Party of the Regions in eastern Ukraine, which later led to a growing protest movement against the Euromaidan movement and the post-Yanukovich regime. It also meant that the operation launched in April 2014 in eastern Ukraine had little coercive capacity since a significant proportion of the law enforcement bodies in these regions supported the separatist forces.<sup>99</sup>

***The main external factor behind the conflict was the rivalry between Russia on the one hand and NATO and the EU on the other for Ukraine's alignment***

The main external factor behind the conflict was the rivalry between Russia on the one hand and NATO and the EU on the other for Ukraine's alignment.<sup>100</sup> The incompatible economic integration projects promoted by the West and Russia led to a situation where each side saw Ukraine's alignment as a zero-sum game.<sup>101</sup> The Russian view is that it was pushed to respond militarily to deter processes such as the expansion of NATO and the EU, and the West's 'promotion of democracy' through the so-called colour revolutions and support for regimes that are openly hostile to Russia (with Ukraine being one example).<sup>102</sup>

The official position of the EU, NATO and the USA is that the conflict was caused by Russia's aggression, expansionist policy and intention to undermine Ukraine's choice for European integration.<sup>103</sup> From the official Russian perspective, Russia was forced to accept Crimea into the Russian Federation to protect its Russian-speaking population from the 'nationalistic', 'anti-Semitic', 'military regime' in Ukraine that came to power as a result of a coup

<sup>97</sup> Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements, Minsk, 12 Feb. 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Valdai Discussion Club, *The Crisis in Ukraine: Root Causes and Scenarios for the Future* (Valdai Discussion Club: Moscow, Sep. 2014).

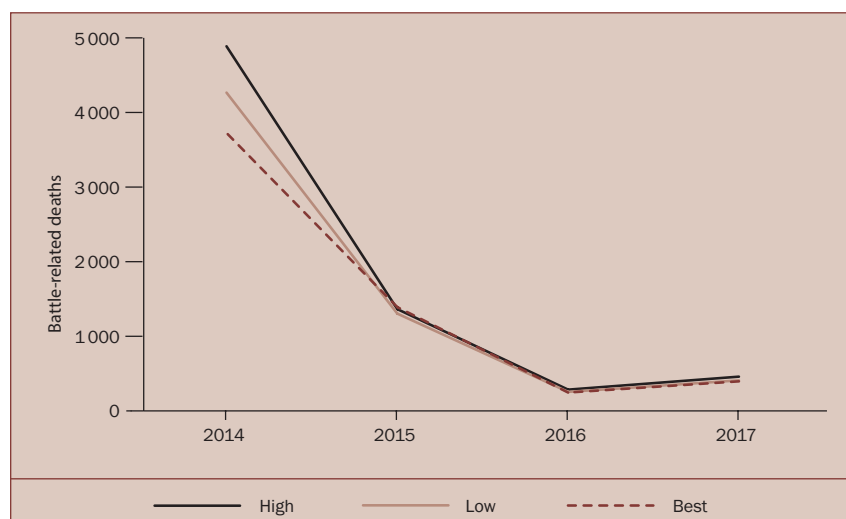
<sup>99</sup> Kudelia, S., 'Domestic sources of the Donbas insurgency', PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 351 (Sep. 2014).

<sup>100</sup> On Ukraine's cooperation with NATO see Wezeman, S. T. and Kuimova, A., 'Ukraine and Black Sea security', SIPRI Background Paper, Dec. 2018 (note 2).

<sup>101</sup> Trenin, D., *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry* (Carnegie Moscow Center: Moscow, July 2014).

<sup>102</sup> Peng, C., 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: a historical and philosophical perspective', *International Critical Thought*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2017), pp. 267–78; Mearsheimer, J. J., 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, Sep./Oct. 2014; and Krumm, R., Vasileva, A. and Weiss, S., *For a Balanced Peace: First Steps out of the Security Deadlock in (Eastern) Europe* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: Berlin, Aug. 2017).

<sup>103</sup> NATO, 'Secretary General sets out NATO's position on Russia–Ukraine crisis', 2 June 2014; European Parliament, Joint Motion for a Resolution on the Situation in Ukraine (2014/2965(RSP)), 14 Jan. 2015; and White House, 'Statement by the President on Ukraine', 17 Mar. 2014.



**Figure 2.** Battle-related deaths in eastern Ukraine, 2014–17

Note: The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) gives low, high and best estimates of the battle-related deaths.

Source: UCDP, UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia.

orchestrated by the West.<sup>104</sup> It also had to protect the military personnel of its Black Sea Fleet, which had been based in Sevastopol since the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>105</sup> President Putin has also appealed to the fact that Crimea has ‘always been Russian’ and Sevastopol is ‘the city of Russian military glory’. Hence the ‘unification’ with Crimea is rather a question of returning Crimea to Russia, as well as the right of the Crimean people for self-determination as expressed in the referendum.<sup>106</sup> Officially, the Russian Government has provided the same justification for its support of separatists in eastern Ukraine as in the case of Crimea: protection of the Russian-speaking population in the region of Ukraine known as Novorossiyya (New Russia).<sup>107</sup>

International observers underline that a key driving force behind Russia’s calculation in the takeover of Crimea (instead of choosing to support independence or a federalized status within Ukraine) was ensuring that its Black Sea Fleet could continue to be based in Sevastopol, as the post-Yanukovich regime may have questioned the lease agreement between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>108</sup> Ensuring the security of the Black Sea Fleet and denying access to NATO was, thus, at the core of the Russian intervention.

When it comes to the Russian support for the separatists of Donetsk and Luhansk, observers argue that after the takeover of Crimea it was difficult for Russia to back off from eastern Ukraine.<sup>109</sup> Overall, Russia’s intention is explained by its willingness to freeze the conflict in order to create a buffer zone on its border with Ukraine and to prevent further integration of Ukraine with the EU and NATO.<sup>110</sup>

Despite the Minsk agreements and a number of ceasefire declarations, the OSCE has recorded hundreds of ceasefire violations on a daily basis

<sup>104</sup> President of Russia, [Address of the President of the Russian Federation], 18 Mar. 2018 (in Russian).

<sup>105</sup> On the Russian Black Sea Fleet see Kuimova, A. and Wezeman, S. T., ‘Russia and Black Sea security’, SIPRI Background Paper, Dec. 2018 (note 2).

<sup>106</sup> President of Russia, [Vladimir Putin has submitted an appeal to the Federation Council], 1 Mar. 2014 (in Russian).

<sup>107</sup> President of Russia, [A direct line with Vladimir Putin], 17 Apr. 2014 (in Russian).

<sup>108</sup> See e.g. Biersack, J. and O’Lear, S., ‘The geopolitics of Russia’s annexation of Crimea: narratives, identity, silences, and energy’, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 55, no. 3 (2014), pp. 247–69; Blockmans, S., ‘Crimea and the quest for energy and military hegemony in the Black Sea region: governance gap in a contested geostrategic zone’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2015), pp. 179–89; and Allison, R., ‘Russian “deniable” intervention in Ukraine: how and why Russia broke the rules’, *International Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 6 (2014), pp. 1255–97.

<sup>109</sup> Wilson, A., *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2014).

<sup>110</sup> Wilson, A., ‘External intervention in the Ukraine conflict: towards a frozen conflict in the Donbas’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2016).



and deployment of weapons in violation of the withdrawal lines. The use of heavy weapons, including artillery and tanks has been recorded. Although each of the sides denies initiating the fighting, the OSCE has reported violations from both sides.<sup>111</sup> Between April 2014 and August 2017 the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded that 10 225 people—civilians, government forces and members of the separatist armed groups—had been killed and 24 541 injured.<sup>112</sup> By 15 May 2018 at least 2725 civilians had been killed and 7000–9000 injured.<sup>113</sup> According to one estimate, the total number of battle-related deaths may be as high as 6995 (see figure 2).<sup>114</sup>

## Recent developments

The situations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine have developed very differently. Although the international community condemned Russia's takeover of Crimea, for Russia the question of Crimea is 'closed forever'.<sup>115</sup> Russia considers the peninsula a part of its territory and has launched a number of economic, legal and political reforms as well as large infrastructure projects to fully integrate Crimea. Notably, the Minsk II process is confined to the conflict in eastern Ukraine and does not involve discussion of Crimea. For some in the West, the possibility of lifting sanctions on Russia is linked primarily to the resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine rather than the return of Crimea to Ukraine.<sup>116</sup>

By contrast, none of the parties to the conflict in eastern Ukraine considered that it is close to resolution. Progress in implementation of the Minsk agreements has been slow, and they have yet to be fully implemented (see table 1). A fundamental problem is that the conflicting parties interpret the 13 provisions of Minsk II differently and there is no common understanding regarding the sequencing of their implementation.<sup>117</sup>

Ukraine insists on implementing 'security issues' first: ensure a permanent ceasefire, withdraw foreign troops and equipment from the territory of Ukraine, and establish control over the border with Russia. Russia's priority is the implementation of 'political issues': the provision of special status to the 'uncontrolled territories', a change to the Ukrainian Constitution, and elections in Donetsk and Luhansk. Russia also insists that Ukraine's

*The situations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine have developed very differently*

<sup>111</sup> Daily and spot reports from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.

<sup>112</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report on the human right situation in Ukraine 16 May to 15 August 2017', 12 Sep. 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 February to 15 May 2018', 20 June 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia.

<sup>115</sup> RIA Novosti, [Putin: the issue of territorial Crimea is historically closed], 3 Sep. 2016 (in Russian).

<sup>116</sup> Reuters, 'We'll lift Russia sanctions when east Ukraine is peaceful: Merkel', 8 Sep. 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Hvenmark Nilsson, C., *Revisiting the Minsk II Agreement: The Art and Statecraft of Russian-brokered Cease-fires*, Report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Europe Program (CSIS: Washington, DC, Aug. 2016).

**Table 1.** Implementation of the Minsk II agreement as of March 2018

Provision	Status
1 Immediate and full ceasefire	Not implemented
2 Withdrawal of heavy weapons by both sides	Partially implemented
3 Effective monitoring of the ceasefire by the OSCE	Partially implemented <sup>a</sup>
4 From day one of the withdrawal, start a dialogue on the modalities for holding local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk	Partially implemented
5 Provide pardon and amnesty by banning any prosecution of those involved in the Donetsk and Luhansk conflict	Partially implemented <sup>b</sup>
6 Release of all hostages and other illegally detained people	Partially implemented <sup>c</sup>
7 Unimpeded and internationally supervised delivery of humanitarian aid to the needy	Not implemented <sup>d</sup>
8 Restoration of full social and economic links with affected areas	Not implemented
9 Full Ukrainian Government control restored over the state border, throughout the conflict zone	Not implemented
10 Withdrawal of all foreign armed groups, weapons and mercenaries from Ukrainian territory and disarmament of all illegal groups	Not implemented
11 Constitutional reform in Ukraine with decentralization as a key element; a new constitution by the end of 2015	Not implemented <sup>e</sup>
12 Local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk regions to be held according to OSCE standards	Not implemented
13 Intensification of the work of the trilateral contact group (the OSCE, Russia and Ukraine)	Partially implemented

OSCE = Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

<sup>a</sup> The OSCE reports difficulty in accessing areas controlled by separatist forces.

<sup>b</sup> The amnesty law was passed in Dec. 2016 but only entered into force in Sep. 2017. The effects of the law are yet to be seen.

<sup>c</sup> There are disagreements between Russia and Ukraine on the arrangements for the exchange, which have stalled the process. There are conflicting reports on exchanges of hostages. The largest exchange of prisoners took place in Dec. 2017. Bennetts, M., 'Ukraine and separatists begin largest prisoner exchange of conflict', *The Guardian*, 27 Dec 2017.

<sup>d</sup> Although Russia reports delivery of humanitarian aid to Donetsk and Luhansk, these deliveries are not internationally supervised since international organizations have difficulties accessing the areas controlled by rebels.

<sup>e</sup> The Ukrainian Parliament adopted amendments to the Ukrainian Constitution on decentralization in July 2017, but they still need to be approved by the Constitutional Court. The adopted amendments are considered inadequate by the leaders of the separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk.

Source: Compiled by the author based on various sources.

attempts to link progress in the political settlement to the security situation are unacceptable.<sup>118</sup>

The difference of positions has delayed the development of a 'road map' for implementation of Minsk II.<sup>119</sup> Reportedly, a road map should have been initiated by 2018, but the question of how to link the political and security questions remained unresolved.<sup>120</sup> In order to accelerate the start of political reforms, in October 2016 Ukraine requested deployment of an OSCE police mission, which, according to Ukrainian President Poroshenko, 'will provide security during both the electoral process and the transition period'.<sup>121</sup> According to Poroshenko, Russia supported establishment of the mission,

<sup>118</sup> Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Press release on Normandy Four deputy foreign ministers' meeting', 13 May 2017.

<sup>119</sup> Egorova, E., [Alone and without a breakthrough: tired Putin sums up the 'Normandy Four'], *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, 20 Oct. 2016 (in Russian).

<sup>120</sup> Interfax-Ukraine, 'Roadmap for implementing Minsk Agreements may be initialed by 2018', *Kyiv Post*, 17 Oct. 2017.

<sup>121</sup> President of Ukraine, [OSCE police mission to begin work in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions—Head of State], 12 Oct 2016 (in Ukrainian).



but statements by the Russian negotiators make it clear that they have a different interpretation of what the police mission might be.<sup>122</sup>

In September 2017 Russia suggested the deployment of a peace operation along the line dividing Ukrainian Government forces from separatist forces to support the OSCE observers in monitoring the conflict. The conditions for the deployment of this peace operation would be discussed directly between the separatist regions and the Ukraine Government.<sup>123</sup> Ukraine considers that it should be deployed across the territories of the breakaway regions as well as on the border between Russia and Ukraine and have a much wider mandate than protection of OSCE observers. It also refuses to discuss the matter directly with the breakaway regions. Although German and US officials have cautiously welcomed the idea of a peace operation in Donetsk and Luhansk, the possible format and composition, as well as the repercussions, of such a mission are still being discussed.<sup>124</sup> At the same time, the introduction of a peace operation might open new opportunities to revive the peace process and reduce the violence in eastern Ukraine.

In December 2017 Poroshenko revealed that the USA had confirmed that it will supply Ukraine with defensive lethal weapons as part of a US effort to increase Ukraine's defence capacity.<sup>125</sup> Russia denounced the US decision and expressed concerns about an increase in the bloodshed in eastern Ukraine.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, despite the fact that Ukraine requires significant support from its allies to withstand the separatists, similar action from other Western states might provoke retaliation from the separatists with support of the Russian armed forces.

In June 2018 the foreign ministers of the Normandy Four met to discuss the situation in Ukraine, the first such meeting since February 2017. They addressed a number of aspects of the conflict, including the exchange of prisoners, the possibility of a peace operation, the security situation and political reforms, but no major breakthrough was achieved.<sup>127</sup>

## VI. Conclusions: the evolution of the protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space and their impact on Black Sea security

### Main trends

Although the armed conflicts in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova are often said to be frozen, they have continued to evolve in a number of ways.

<sup>122</sup> Delfinov, A., ['Normandy Four' agreed on a 'road map' for Donbas], *Deutsche Welle*, 19 Oct. 2016 (in Russian); and RIA Novosti, ['Normandy Four' will try to agree on a road map for the Donbas], 29 Nov. 2016 (in Russian).

<sup>123</sup> *Korrespondent* [The UN and the Donbas: are the blue helmets in a hurry to help?], 5 Sep. 2017 (in Russian); and RIA Novosti, [The composition of the peacekeeping mission will be determined by Kiev and Donbas—Lavrov], 15 Jan. 2018 (in Russian).

<sup>124</sup> UNIAN, 'Germany calls for deploying UN peacekeepers to Donbas before Russian election: media', 4 Jan. 2018.

<sup>125</sup> Yakutenko, A., 'US supply of lethal weapons to Ukraine reportedly to include Javelins, RPGs', *Kyiv Post*, 24 Dec. 2017. See also Wezeman and Kuimova (note 100).

<sup>126</sup> Morello, C. and Filipov, D., 'Russia issues stern warning US is fueling new bloodshed in Ukraine', *Washington Post*, 23 Dec. 2017.

<sup>127</sup> Sputnik, 'Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov on Normandy Four talks: "meeting was useful"', 12 June 2018.



First, although ceasefire agreements have been reached or peacekeepers or international observers have been deployed, often effectively freezing the military action on the ground, the violence has not stopped completely and continues to erupt from time to time.<sup>128</sup> In some cases it has temporarily escalated into a fully fledged military campaign (e.g. in South Ossetia in 2008 and in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016).

The issues at the core of the conflicts have also evolved: while they were initially centred around ethnicity, language, territory and independence, they now relate to the foreign policy and economic integration choices of a country.<sup>129</sup> For instance, Georgia's conflicts with its breakaway regions have evolved from being about the ethnic minorities and their status within Georgia into a conflict between Georgia and Russia over Georgia's pro-NATO choice. The same shift also characterizes the conflict between Trans-Dniester and Moldova, as Russia often uses it as leverage to undermine Moldova's aspirations to join the EU and NATO. Even in Ukraine, where the conflict quickly became defined by Russian interference, the initial spark was an internal struggle. In all the cases, the primary underlying causes remain unresolved as the latter issues have come to the fore.

***All the conflicts have been internationalized and are no longer internal conflicts between the central government and a breakaway region***

Alongside the change in the issues being fought over, all the conflicts have been internationalized and are no longer internal conflicts between the central government and a breakaway region.<sup>130</sup> The Georgian conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have involved Russia. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has transformed into a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Even the conflict in Ukraine has been internationalized into a conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

The type of warfare has also changed, from sporadic separatist and guerrilla warfare to involve regular state armies and a significant militarization in the areas around the conflict.<sup>131</sup> The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is, perhaps, the most extreme case of militarization in the region, with Armenia and Azerbaijan investing significant resources in modernization of their warfare capabilities. The violence in eastern Ukraine rapidly escalated after the separatist fighters in Donetsk and Luhansk received support from the Russian Army.<sup>132</sup>

All of the separatist entities have significant economic, diplomatic and military support from their patron states.<sup>133</sup> Armenia supports the de facto administration of Nagorno-Karabakh, while Russia is a substantial (and often the only) source of finances, investments and military support to the de facto administrations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Donetsk and

<sup>128</sup> Melvin, N. and Prelz Oltramonti, G., 'Managing conflict and integration in the South Caucasus: a challenge for the European Union', SIPRI-CASCADE Policy Brief, Nov. 2015.

<sup>129</sup> Melvin, N. and Klimentko, E., *The Regionalisation of Armed Conflict in the Caucasus*, CASCADE Report (Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme: Paris, Dec. 2016).

<sup>130</sup> Melvin and Klimentko (note 129).

<sup>131</sup> Melvin and Klimentko (note 129).

<sup>132</sup> BBC News, 'Ukraine crisis: Nato images "show Russia troops"', 28 Aug. 2014; and Katchanovski, I., 'The separatist war in Donbas: a violent break-up of Ukraine?', *European Politics and Society*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2016), pp. 473–89.

<sup>133</sup> Morar, F., 'The myth of "frozen conflicts": transcending illusive dilemmas', *Per Concordiam*, vol. 1, no. 2 (June 2010), pp. 10–17.



Luhansk, and Trans-Dniester. In some cases this backing has evolved from covert assistance to open support. For example, in the 1990s Russia denied that it provided support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but in the 2000s it became more vocal about its support to the breakaway regions, especially regarding the extension of protection to the Russian citizens living in these territories.<sup>134</sup>

Russia has played an important role in all of the conflicts, either directly or indirectly.<sup>135</sup> But that role has changed. In the 1990s Russia considered conflicts in its neighbourhood as a significant security threat, and hence stabilizing the conflicts was a necessity. It often responded reactively to changes in the status quo in the conflict. However, stabilization of the internal situation in Russia—in particular in the North Caucasus—the strengthening of the Russian state and the changed international context, including the increasing role of NATO and the EU, incited more proactive and even aggressive responses from Russia to the changing status quo in the region. For example, in 2008 it recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>136</sup> In addition, Russia has been proactive in setting the scene for the conflicts in Ukraine.

### **Emerging militarization of the region<sup>137</sup>**

Since the fighting between Georgia and Russia in South Ossetia in August 2008 the protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space have had a profound impact on the Black Sea region's security dynamics. In particular, they have resulted in an increase in military activities—military capabilities, training activities and exercises—in the region. This tendency has been especially reinforced by the conflict in Ukraine.

The conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine have altered Russia's position in the Black Sea region. After August 2008 and following agreements with Abkhazia, Russia re-established control over the eastern part of the Black Sea.<sup>138</sup> Units of the Border Service of the Russian Federal Security Service (Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti, FSB) have carried out various combat-related tasks in the area since 2009. The ships and boats of the Black Sea–Azov Coast Guard Directorate of the FSB are stationed in Abkhazia. Although Russia's Black Sea Fleet does not plan to base its ships in the ports of Abkhazia, this opportunity remains should there be a need or desire.<sup>139</sup> An agreement with Armenia on common air defence means that Russia has deployed S-300 missile systems at its 102nd Military Base at Gyumri, Armenia. This has extended Russia's area-denial and control capabilities

***The conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine have altered Russia's position in the Black Sea region***

<sup>134</sup> Allison, R., 'The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia: international law, norms and political calculation', *European Security*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2009), pp. 173–200.

<sup>135</sup> Fischer, S. (ed.), *Not Frozen! The Unresolved Conflicts over Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Light of the Crisis over Ukraine*, SWP Research Paper no. 9 (German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP): Berlin, Sep. 2016).

<sup>136</sup> Ivanov, I. S., [Conflicts in the post-Soviet space: the prospects for a settlement and the role of Russia], Working Paper no. 36 (Russian International Affairs Council: Moscow, 2016) (in Russian).

<sup>137</sup> For a more detailed picture of the militarization in the region see Melvin (note 2).

<sup>138</sup> Bugajski, J. and Doran, P. B., *Black Sea Rising: Russia's Strategy in Southeast Europe*, Black Sea Strategic Report no. 1 (Center for European Policy Analysis: Washington, DC, 2017).

<sup>139</sup> RIA Novosti, [Kasatonov: Black Sea Fleet will not use Ochamchira port to base ships], 28 July 2016 (in Russian).



over the eastern Black Sea, Georgia and eastern Turkey.<sup>140</sup> By taking over Crimea, Russia secured several hundred kilometres more coastline along the Black Sea along with the most important Black Sea port, Sevastopol, and other Crimean ports. Russia is no longer constrained by the 1997 and 2010 agreements with Ukraine on the Black Sea Fleet that prevented it from freely upgrading or increasing its military presence in Crimea.<sup>141</sup> Russia has now significantly reinforced the Black Sea Fleet and its military in the Crimean peninsula.<sup>142</sup>

These reinforcements around the Black Sea allow Russia to project power not only into the Black Sea region and the Caucasus but also into the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean. The forces of the Black Sea Fleet have already participated in a number of operations in Syria.<sup>143</sup> The bases in Abkhazia, Armenia, Crimea and South Ossetia allow Russia to maintain combat capabilities in close proximity to these regions and to be able to support long-term military operations and constrain its adversaries with area-denial capabilities.<sup>144</sup>

The strengthening of Russian naval capabilities in the Black Sea has shifted the balance away from Turkey, which has now lost its clear naval primacy in the region.<sup>145</sup> Ukraine's own Black Sea Fleet has been practically eliminated.<sup>146</sup> Bulgaria and Romania are reconsidering their security threats and capabilities in the region in the face of the increased Russian presence.<sup>147</sup>

The growing Russian presence around the Black Sea and related strategic concerns of the nearby NATO member states has resulted in an increased NATO presence in the region. At the July 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, member states committed to enhancing their presence in the region. According to the summit communiqué, NATO will develop a 'tailored forward presence' in the Black Sea and continue to support the Black Sea littoral states (including Georgia and Ukraine) in their efforts to strengthen their security.<sup>148</sup> Since conflicts with Russia have effectively frozen the NATO aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine these countries have had to find new venues for cooperation with NATO. For example, a new NATO training

**Russia has now significantly reinforced the Black Sea Fleet and its military in the Crimean peninsula**

<sup>140</sup> Abrahamyan, E., 'Russia's newest A2/AD sphere: the South Caucasus?', 19 June 2016.

<sup>141</sup> Bugajski and Doran (note 138).

<sup>142</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, [Military grouping will be formed in Crimea], 12 Nov. 2014 (in Russian); RT, [The General Staff announces the creation of a self-sufficient group of troops in the Crimea], 7 Nov. 2017 (in Russian); and Kuimova and Wezeman (note 105).

<sup>143</sup> *Russkaya Vesna*, [The newest frigates of the Black Sea Fleet arrive off the coast of Syria], 24 May 2017 (in Russian).

<sup>144</sup> Blank, S., 'Russian intervention in Syria and the Caucasus', *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 27 Nov. 2016.

<sup>145</sup> Kucera, J., 'Russia claims "mastery" over Turkey in Black Sea', *Eurasianet*, 25 Sep. 2016; Trenin (note 101); and Wezeman, S. T. and Kuimova, A., 'Turkey and Black Sea security', SIPRI Background Paper, Dec. 2018 (note 2).

<sup>146</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'Russia and Eurasia', *The Military Balance 2016* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2016), pp. 163–210; and Wezeman and Kuimova (note 100).

<sup>147</sup> Bugajski, J. and Doran, P., *Black Sea Defended: NATO Responses to Russia's Black Sea Offensive*, Strategic Report no. 2 (Center for European Policy Analysis: Washington, DC, July 2016); Wezeman, S. T. and Kuimova, A., 'Bulgaria and Black Sea security', SIPRI Background Paper, Dec. 2018 (note 2); and Wezeman, S. T. and Kuimova, A., 'Romania and Black Sea security', SIPRI Background Paper, Dec. 2018 (note 2).

<sup>148</sup> NATO, 'Warsaw Summit communiqué', Press Release (2016) 100, 9 July 2016. For more on NATO in the Black Sea see Toucas, B., 'NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: a new confrontation?', *Commentary*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 Mar. 2017.





centre opened in Georgia in 2015. In addition, both countries regularly participate in NATO exercises or host them on their territory, and both have offered to allow NATO to station its Black Sea forces in their ports.<sup>149</sup>

### **Risks of spillover and conflict escalation**

After the events of 2014 in Ukraine it became more evident that the overlapping conflict-affected areas have generated a wide zone of instability stretching from Trans-Dniester, through eastern Ukraine and the Caucasus and into Turkey and the Middle East. The conflicts in these areas have also become incorporated into the broader confrontation between Russia and the West, which has exacerbated the risks of spillover and conflict escalation.

The conflicts are increasingly interrelated.<sup>150</sup> The consequences of the fighting between Georgia and Russia created the conditions for the conflict in Ukraine. In its turn, Russia's annexation of Crimea sparked further desire for accession to the Russian Federation in South Ossetia and Trans-Dniester. It heavily influenced the security dynamics around Trans-Dniester, which had remained stagnant for over a decade. The conflict in Ukraine has aggravated already tense relations between Russia and the West, and in an unlikely but still possible scenario a significant escalation of violence in eastern Ukraine and concentrated presence of military forces in the region might go further and result in direct military confrontation between Russia and the West.

*The consequences of the fighting between Georgia and Russia created the conditions for the conflict in Ukraine*

The violence in Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016 demonstrated how a conflict can pull in regional powers, thus internationalizing (or even 'regionalizing') it further.<sup>151</sup> The violence occurred at the height of a crisis between Russia and Turkey, which demonstrated the danger that these two states could come to conflict in the Caucasus. Although the tensions between Russia and Turkey were resolved after the coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016, the unpredictability and volatility of their relations mean that the threat of conflict remains.

### **Long term consequences: low economic growth and obstacles to regional cooperation**

The conflicts in the Black Sea region are a significant obstacle to economic development in both the breakaway regions themselves and their respective states. With the exception of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has maintained a relatively high level of economic growth over the past 15 years, largely through the assistance of the Armenian diaspora and cooperation with Armenia, the rest of the breakaway regions have been unable to achieve sustainable

<sup>149</sup> Capers, S., 'Exercise Noble Partner opens in Georgia', US Department of Defense, 31 July 2017; Antidze, M., 'Georgia begins US-led military exercise a day before Vice President Pence visit', Reuters, 30 July 2017; Kucera, J., 'Georgia offers NATO to build a Black Sea base at Poti', Eurasianet, 9 Mar 2017; Kuimova and Wezeman (note 61); and Wezeman and Kuimova (note 100).

<sup>150</sup> Melvin and Klimenko (note 129).

<sup>151</sup> Hedenskog, J. and Korkmaz, K., 'The interests of Russia and Turkey in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict', RUFBS Briefing no. 35, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), May 2016; and Melvin, N. J., 'Middle East conflict risks overspill into the Caucasus', SIPRI Commentary, 4 Mar. 2016.



economic growth and remain highly dependent on Russia's assistance.<sup>152</sup> The current crisis in Ukraine has further increased economic difficulties in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Trans-Dniester, while it is premature to talk about any independent economy in the cases of Donetsk and Luhansk. Since the violence in April 2016, the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities have diverted financial resources from economic and administrative reform to increase defence capabilities.<sup>153</sup>

In addition to the obvious loss of infrastructure, territory and economic resources during the military phase of the conflicts, the conflicts have significant economic consequences for their respective states as they continue to drain economic resources, slow down democratic development, and generate corruption and further instability. For instance, the continuing conflict in eastern Ukraine has undermined Ukraine's economic development, making it one of the poorest countries in Europe, ahead only of Moldova, which itself has a protracted conflict.<sup>154</sup> A weak economy and political instability mean that the Ukrainian Government is unable to both fight the war and implement the reforms necessary for economic recovery and to reduce corruption.<sup>155</sup>

The conflicts in the Black Sea region also prevent progress in regional cooperation, including development of regional transportation projects, an increase in trade relations and strengthening of economic integration. For example, due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and difficult relations with Turkey, Armenia has been excluded from a number of regional infrastructure projects, such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, which both take longer routes in order to bypass its territory.

Finally, although a number of organizations and initiatives are aimed at enhancing cooperation in the Black Sea region, progress in their development has stagnated. The conflicts in the region have exacerbated the tensions between states around the Black Sea and resulted in a significant lack of trust between them.

<sup>152</sup> Gushchin, A., [Unrecognized post-Soviet states: should I expect an explosion?], *Evrasiya Ekspert*, 18 July 2016 (in Russian).

<sup>153</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds*, Europe Report no. 244 (ICG: Brussels, 1 June 2017).

<sup>154</sup> Åslund, A., 'Which will be Europe's poorest country? Ukraine or Moldova', *UkraineAlert*, Atlantic Council, 2 Jan. 2018.

<sup>155</sup> Moshes, A., 'The war and reforms in Ukraine: can it cope with both?', Finnish Institute of International Affairs Briefing Paper no. 173 (Mar. 2015).



## Abbreviations

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSCE	Conference on Security and Co-operation
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU	European Union
EUMM	EU Monitoring Mission
FSB	Russian Federal Security Service (Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti)
JCC	Joint Control Commission
JPKF	Joint Peacekeeping Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NKAO	Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast
OHCHR	UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
UAV	Unmanned aerial vehicle
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UN	United Nations
UNOMIG	UN Observer Mission in Georgia

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SIPRI INSIGHTS ON PEACE AND SECURITY NO. 2018/8

# PROTRACTED ARMED CONFLICTS IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE AND THEIR IMPACT ON BLACK SEA SECURITY

EKATERINA KLIMENKO

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