

20 years on from the end of the Soviet Union: Prospects and opportunities for conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space

Conference report

The conference was held under the [Chatham House Rule](#) at the Locarno Suite of the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London on 4 July 2011.

At the opening session, speakers set the context for the day's proceedings. One speaker noted that all three of the UK's main political parties recognise the importance of promoting good governance in the post-Soviet space and that significant progress has been made in the region since 1991, with many former Soviet states now well-established partners of the UK, although some areas remain in which less progress had been made. Unresolved conflicts, lack of human rights and corruption are still acute problems that continue to blight the lives of many of its residents. The speaker also emphasised the crucial importance of the UK's relationship with Russia, particularly in relation to Iran and Afghanistan. There was broad consensus that, while many problems remain, the region was, regrettably, now of a lower priority to many Western policy-makers and academics due to events in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of China, the global financial crisis and the Arab Spring. Speakers also shared the view that many countries in the region have a number of things in common, most notably entrenched authoritarian regimes and transition processes that had in many ways come to a halt, indicating that much of the optimism of 1989/1991 now appears misplaced.

Another speaker recalled how nationalism and ethnic conflict were not on the minds of many observers at the end of the Cold War, but that they had since proved to be a powerful force in the region and are of continuing importance. He divided the post-Soviet era into two phases. In the first, from 1991 to 2001, he argued that against the backdrop of ethnic conflicts across the region and of tensions in Central and Eastern Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe had successfully established institutions and field missions, the European Union had developed the Copenhagen Criteria, NATO and the UN had deployed peace-keeping missions in several areas within the region, and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities was appointed. The speaker argued that this was the time when states were no longer willing to sit back and watch, but rather came to see instability in the region as important to their interests. While mediation had not always been successful, as the conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia showed, there was greater success in other cases such as Macedonia. By contrast, the decade from 2001 to 2011 has been a decade of failure. The reputation of the OSCE had started to decline, he argued, and war had broken out in Georgia despite the OSCE presence there. While the EU had become more active in conflict prevention, the UN's role had declined. The same speaker also argued that there was still need for conflict prevention and resolution activities in the region, noting a significant sense of *déjà vu*. While Russia has a role to play, it is not seen as an honest broker by all parties in the region; the EU is a potentially powerful actor but its power declines with distance from its borders. There is, therefore, still a significant role for the OSCE. He argued that there needs to be a greater sense of local ownership in the region, noting that Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE had contributed to this, improving engagement by local actors. The EU needs to make greater use of its economic clout, and rethink the cutbacks to the system of EU Special Representatives, while the OSCE should consider developing peace-keeping forces. At the same time, more attention needs to be paid to understanding the role of water and organised crime in driving conflicts in the region. More resources and regional co-operation are needed to address these issues. Overall, the speaker noted that little progress had been made in resolving the tension between the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of existing states and of the self-determination of peoples in the region since 1991, and that while the issues the region faces can be solved, the currently proposed solutions are not working, thus necessitating a rethink of current approaches.

Focusing on the South Caucasus, the next speaker argued that there is a new freeze in the South Caucasus in the sense that while conflicts continue, peace processes have ceased to make progress. Speaking about South Ossetia, the speaker noted that Russia is providing the overwhelming majority of funding to the South Ossetian and Abkhaz authorities. The danger of Georgia trying to regain control of the regions militarily was considered to be limited, as is the likelihood of their broader diplomatic recognition. At the same time, local actors who express disquiet about the reliance on Russia are marginalised in public discourse. Prospects for conflict resolution are not good. In relation to Nagorno-Karabakh, the speaker argued that a new form of stalemate had emerged. New momentum for a peace process has now subsided, and officials in Nagorno-Karabakh increasingly accept the view that recognition is not required in order for them to run the state. As the situation there remained highly volatile, the outbreak of a new war remains a major risk. Sustainable change across the region is likely to depend on further democratisation, an opening-up of peace processes to a wider set of actors, and an end to the isolation of de facto states which only increases their siege mentality and prevents meaningful engagement.

Focusing on the North Caucasus, the next speaker argued that while the anti-Russian insurgency there was nominally Islamist, factors such as poverty play a key role in driving it. Furthermore, the speaker emphasised that focusing narrowly on Chechnya alone ignores the significant regional nature and dynamics of conflicts in the North Caucasus. Nonetheless, the Chechen conflict had been a catalyst in creating militant Islamist factions within the anti-Russian resistance movement that continue to have recourse to terrorist tactics, including suicide attacks. An important distinction, however, has to be made between the Arab Mujahedeen fighters and branches of al-Qaeda who are in fact rival organisations in the North Caucasus, appealing variously to Islamist radicals and acting as criminal networks. Although the conflict in the region is now at a relatively low level, it continues to be fuelled by poverty and inequality, with Dagestan now representing a particular hot-spot in the region.

The other conflict in the post-Soviet space traditionally considered a 'frozen conflict' is Transnistria in Moldova, which, as another speaker notes, is generally regarded as easier to resolve than the conflicts in the North and South Caucasus. However, the crucial conditions for such a resolution are missing at present. Some progress had been made following the election of a new Moldovan government in 2009, but considerably slowed down in 2011 because the chief negotiators on both sides were under pressure from hardliners and from groups on either side of the conflict that benefit significantly from the status quo. The speaker argued that there is a need for new impetus. While agreement could conceivably be reached relatively quickly after opening formal talks, the two sides remain very far apart and hence a final settlement might be difficult to achieve. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of willingness to compromise on either side and the lack of shared understanding of the main aspects of the settlement on the part of Russia and the EU as external actors. The EU in particular had to assume an increasing role in resolving the conflict in Transnistria, in order to help put in place the necessary conditions for resolving this conflict.

Another speaker, somewhat in contrast, argued that the frozen conflicts of the post-Soviet space look set to remain, because the proposed solutions to such conflicts – in the form of various types of autonomy arrangements – are likely to be as destabilising as the conflicts themselves. With the concomitant rise of nationalism and democracy, the internal causes of conflict, such as the deinstitutionalisation of arrangements that had previously accommodated minorities, prevent sustainable solutions along traditional lines of minority accommodation as advocated by the international community. Thus, the speaker argued, it is now necessary to reconceptualise frozen conflicts and to stop viewing the status quo as dysfunctional. We should accept that there are some positive aspects of the status quo and lower our expectations of what can be achieved in some cases. Conflict resolution might not always be possible and de facto states might be seen to represent a new hybrid form in the international system. The speaker concluded by emphasising the need for a focus on the on-the-ground issues in frozen conflicts, such as economic development and the need for rebuilding trust.

Another speaker strongly disagreed with this view, arguing instead that secession sets the precedent that homogeneity is the only response to conflict and argued that international society's obsession with sovereignty has made it impossible for minority groups to accept anything less than independence. This perpetuates the myth that sovereignty is the only mechanism which can guarantee the protection to minority groups. The speaker concluded by calling for a rethink of the principle of sovereignty, arguing that it is necessary to consider options such as condominiums and the representation of nations alongside states in international organisations.

Another speaker argued that there was a lack of co-operation between Russia and the EU over frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The EU has proven to be an ineffective conflict resolution actor. In particular, as the EU increases its engagement with the countries of the Eastern Partnership, Russia engages more with de facto states—leading to an ever deeper entrenchment of the status quo.

The view that peace processes remain a significant challenge in the post-Soviet space was shared by a number of speakers. Apart from a lack of international cooperation, another problem has been the trend towards the promotion of political settlements of conflicts, with elites being the key actors in negotiations, while civil society organisations and publics remain excluded and are further marginalised in the implementation of such settlements. This, in turn, enables governments to manipulate public opinion and prevent alternative discourses and conflict narratives from emerging as in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. Here too, a speaker noted, the EU's role is, despite its potential, rather limited and could include the deployment of peacekeepers as part of confidence-building measures, support for initiatives to address and combat conflict rhetoric, possibly through electronic media and support for press freedom, and settling issues relating to displaced persons, such as property rights.

Another speaker argued that the discussion so far had focused largely on the micro aspects of frozen conflicts, and that there was a need to consider the wider aspect of Russia's role, and perceptions of Russia, in the region. The speaker argued that Russia was an ever-present factor. While no-one in the Russian leadership wants to re-create the Soviet Union or to engage in changing borders, elites in Moscow feel the need for a security buffer and view its immediate neighbourhood as an area in which Russian-style politics—strong government with lip service paid to basic freedoms—was most effective in ensuring stability. Thus, managing Russia is the most important foreign policy goal of the CIS states and Georgia, which have either sought to ally with Russia or to balance against it by allying with the West. In this sense, the view that the conflicts are home-grown and resolvable as such is unrealistic and there is instead a need to address the role of Russia as a party with direct interests in the region. Consequently, the West needs to take a bold approach with a clear endgame by placing problems in a common framework, such as the establishment of a South Caucasus Cooperation Conference.

Another speaker argued that Eurasia's de facto states are sustained by powerful interests in favour of the status quo, because some of these states have proven more effective than the regimes that preceded them, and because of the failure of mediation efforts. The speaker noted that the international community had tended to support the principle of territorial integrity combined with backing for autonomy arrangements. While the outcast status of de facto states means that trade is difficult and creates the context for organised crime to thrive, there remains a lack of coherent policy towards these states on the part of the EU, which often sidesteps the tensions between the principles of territorial integrity and self-determination. The speaker also argued that autonomy is a problematic solution to conflicts in the region because it exists in the context of a poor general commitment to human rights. While the UK, Spain and Belgium were often held up as successful examples of the use of forms of autonomy in multi-national states, the commitment to respecting pluralism that is a necessary condition for such arrangements is lacking in Eurasia. Partition may thus be the only solution in this context, especially as there is empirical evidence that partitioned states are more likely to be democratic and peaceful than those that are held together. Consequently, there is a need for international election monitoring in de facto states, as a way of showing support for democratisation even if diplomatic recognition is absent.

Focusing on the EU, another speaker emphasised that the Union had gained a stronger image as a conflict resolution actor in the post-Soviet space in the past 10 years: as an observer and participant in negotiations, through the EUSRs, ESDP missions, post-conflict reconstruction activities and through the ENP and Eastern Partnership. However, even where the EU was most engaged in the region, in the two conflicts in Georgia, it has not been particularly successful, acting reactively rather than proactively. The EU continues to lack a clear-cut strategy for conflict resolution – a result of internal divisions and disagreements. The ENP and the Eastern Partnership do not have conflict resolution as their primary goals. Rather, the EU view is that economic development and good governance will eventually lead to conflict resolution. A more positive development, according to the same speaker, is the creation of a ‘non-recognition and engagement’ policy towards the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, consisting of the expansion of contacts with civil society, economic interaction, confidence building and engagement with internally displaced persons. The implementation and further development of this policy, however, has slowed because of internal problems within the EU, the reluctance to raise difficult issues with Russia and institutional transformations such as the loss of the EUSR to Georgia, who was its main proponent. This is particularly regrettable as the window of opportunity for conflict resolution is closing. Arguing that engagement is important but that the relevant instruments vary by conflict, the speaker argued that the big mistake of the international community has been to presume that the EU and Russia can solve these conflicts bilaterally.

Another speaker was sceptical of regional initiatives as having the potential to change the internal dynamics of the conflicts, arguing that Russia was not the sole problem in conflicts in the region, nor the sole factor in their resolution. Despite the significant funding that Russia provides to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moscow is not particularly influential in shaping the perceptions or nature of their regimes. At the same time, the Russian ability to mediate in regional deals is limited and no level of EU engagement can solve the conflicts when the issue at stake is seen locally as survival. On the ground, moreover, a new generation of people is growing up not knowing how to live side-by-side with ethnic others, and the prospects for international efforts at conflict resolution in this context are not good. In turn, this necessitates a fundamental rethink of the conflict resolution process, and in particular a need to change governance models to guarantee the rights of minorities, to open up public discussions about necessary compromises, and to target a new generation with initiatives to allow them to meet and study together, whether in the region or overseas. The speaker observed that we live in a new era of relations with Russia, which marks the beginning of the end of the post-Soviet era. While Russia no longer dominates the region and while some common ground seems to emerge between the EU and Russia, the speaker was not convinced that their shared perspective will last, but rather that with the EU’s interests drawn elsewhere, the present window of opportunity to address the frozen conflicts might be rapidly closing.

This view was in part shared by another speaker who also saw a conceptual space opening up for EU-Russia relations, even though a number of key questions remained, including about what fora to engage Russia in, what mechanisms for conflict resolution to employ, and what role to give Russia in joint decision-making. A more coherent approach is needed in Europe, including through NATO, where the precedent of NATO-Russia co-operation might prove a potentially useful model. However, the EU strategic partnership for Russia still lacks a clear strategy and Moscow remains wary of the Eastern Partnership. While it is important that the EU continues to use its economic and normative power to promote reform, it must tread a fine line to avoid provoking Russia to try to obstruct political and economic developments there in pursuit of its perceived interests. The speaker concluded that there was a need for the EU to align the Eastern Partnership and its Russia policy, and to broaden existing mechanisms and include a wider range of actors in conflict settlement.

In concluding the conference, a speaker noted that many issues shaping the prospects and opportunities for conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space have remained the same over the past two decades, with only small progress having been made. Many people in the region have an interest in the status quo, and the balance of power is now arguably in their favour. Internationally, there is frustration with the situation, caused and exacerbated by a lack of strategy and resources with which to resolve the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Meanwhile, local military capacities have increased, so the potential for war is real and there is much at stake in the region. Key questions that remain unanswered locally and internationally include: Do we still strive for negotiated settlements that involve reintegrating de facto states into their host states, or do we accept the status quo? What do we actually expect of conflict resolution—peace, stability, democracy, prosperity, security (and for whom)? Which principles of international law do we want to uphold—sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-determination? While we needed to consider the conflicts on a case-by-case basis, there are common problems that need to be addressed. These include leadership at the local level, with entrenched interests and a lack of new thinking. International diplomacy is not always sustained or resourced sufficiently and lacks strategy. Finally, questions of institutional design remain with too much focus on labels (such as autonomy and federalism and secession) and not enough attention being paid to the specific issues that need to be resolved. The speaker also noted that the question of timing is crucial. The problem in the region is not so much of fatigue but of risk averseness, and of not acting quickly enough when windows of opportunity open up. Conflicts in the post-Soviet region can be resolved as long as local leaders and the international community are prepared to take calculated risks to achieve sustainable peace.