



Department of  
Politics and  
International  
Relations

European Studies Centre

Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre

## Linkage and Leverage: External Actors and Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space

### Workshop Report

On 11 May 2012, the European Studies Centre, based at St Antony's College (University of Oxford) hosted a one-day conference entitled "Linkage and Leverage: External Actors and Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space", organised by **John Beyer** and **Dr Gwendolyn Sasse**, and sponsored by the ESRC Knowledge Exchange Scheme (through a grant held in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford).

Two panel sessions looked at Russia's and the EU's involvement in conflicts and conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space from Moldova to Central Asia, three focussed on specific areas - Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Moldova. The discussion was framed by extending the concepts of "linkage and leverage", developed by the political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way in the context of regime change (2005, 2010), to the role of external actors in conflict settings.

This report provides a brief summary of the talks and discussions at the workshop.

### Introduction

Levitsky and Way posited two mechanisms which raise the cost of authoritarianism: Western *leverage*, defined as a country's vulnerability to external pressure, and *linkage* to the West, defined as density of the country's ties to the US and EU. Levitsky and Way had concentrated on democratisation, and had not applied the framework to conflicts. Non-western influence remained by and large outside their analysis, although they did concede a category of *black knights*. In addition to taking non-western influences more seriously, it seems necessary to probe the causal mechanisms behind "linkage" and "leverage", to analyse the links between the two concepts, and to focus on the role of agency.

### Russia

Levitsky and Way's main *black knight* could better be described in tones of grey. While the West was often characterised as a democracy promoter, this was not always the case, for example in the EU's approach to Azerbaijan, which moderates democracy promotion in view of Azerbaijan's energy resources. Similarly, Russia is not only an "autocracy-promoter" in

the region (the mirror image of Western democracy promotion). Instead, it may be best described as “a status quo power”.

With regard to the post-Soviet conflicts, Russia’s influence can be overestimated, thus obscuring the deep local roots of some of the conflicts. Nevertheless, the fact that the resulting *de facto* states have survived for so long (about 20 years) is largely due to Russian involvement. Russia has obstructed conflict-resolution when resolution would lower its influence in the region and vis-à-vis the West. Levitsky and Way do not analyse the military dimension, an important factor given Russian troops stationed in or near conflict areas across the region.

From Moscow’s point of view, the authority of the EU and US have declined since Levitsky and Way began their analysis, and they now have less interest in the area. And Russians clearly do not see Russia as an *external actor* in the post-Soviet space. Russia is present not just in order to pursue political or economic interests, but because it shares a “co-habitat” with the other states in the post-Soviet space. Russia has powerful economic tools (restrictions on imports, increases of gas prices, restrictions on migrant labour). This leverage is complemented by more cultural sources of influence: a shared language, history, culture, and kinship. Russia is unable to solve the ongoing conflicts alone – but neither can they be solved without Russian participation.

Often conflict resolution (like “regime change”) has been seen as a function of hard power. The conflicts across the former Soviet Union cast Vladimir Putin’s controversial characterisation of the fall of the USSR as the “greatest tragedy” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a new light: in that we cannot yet appreciate its full cost (in human lives, etc). Russia was able to “freeze” these conflicts based on a stalemate of equal forces, at a time when conflicts were yet to be divided into “good” and “bad” sides.

It could be argued that democratisation may actually hinder conflict-prevention or -resolution. Politicians not facing the uncertainty of genuine elections have more freedom to make potentially unpopular decisions, in particular when popular opinion will not tolerate any concessions to the opposing side. For example, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict might be more feasible if Haidar Aliev – with his unshakeable charismatic authority – were still alive.

## **The EU**

When conflicts broke out around 1991, both the EU’s foreign policy remit and the EU itself were very different from their present state. Since then, changes in the EU itself have shaped its evolving engagement in the former Soviet Union. Important landmarks were the EU’s two eastern enlargements (2004, 2007), which brought new borders, new interests, and new linkages to the region – as well as first-hand experience in implementing post-communist reforms. Recently, the EU has developed new tools (the bilateral European

Neighbourhood Policy and the multilateral Eastern Partnership) to engage in the region, and improved its internal coordination. The EU hopes to supplement traditional state-to-state linkages by developing people-to-people contacts, and by demonstrating its relevance not just economically (as an increasingly important trading partner and investor) but also by bringing “knowhow”. While the EU wants a stable and prosperous eastern neighbourhood, it would also like this to be based on EU standards.

However, the EU seems to have never perceived these conflicts as an immediate threat to its security – which explains its overall low commitments in this area. There is a tension between the EU’s relations with the states themselves (for example, within the Eastern Partnership framework) and its engagement in their internal conflicts. For example, EU interests in Moldova proper must be distinguished from its (far lesser) interest (or ability to engage) in Transnistria. Moreover, there can be a conflict between the two: Moldovan “reunification”, incorporating the Russophone Transnistria, could shift the country’s orientation away from Europe. Rather than empowering break-away regions, the EU should strive to make the mainland country (Moldova as a whole, or Georgia) attractive to the populations of the separatist region. The EU can capitalise on its strengths in technical assistance – a “de-securitisation” of EU foreign policy that is visible in its recent Eastern Partnership initiative.

### **Central Asia**

Subregional organisations are an example of non-Western linkages and leverage. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), for example, brings together the Central Asian states and Russia. This is essentially a political project aimed at consolidating cooperation between “like-minded states” – hence it also has a normative dimension. Across the post-Soviet space (and Central Asia in particular) Russia presents itself as the “indispensable regional conflict manager” but is nonetheless wary of making open-ended commitments in such conflicts, as seen in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. In terms of security, Uzbekistan is the key Central Asian state, and in some ways Russia’s main competitor. In a context of revived nervousness resulting from the Arab Spring and the potential outbreak of new conflicts, it is unclear under what conditions and mandate CSTO troops would become involved.

Today Iran plays a marginal role both in Central Asia as a whole, and in the regional conflicts. At the critical juncture of 1991 (the fall of the USSR), it looked like Iran could play a powerful or even destabilising role in Central Asia. However, it was hampered by its recent war with Iraq and a desire to normalise its relations with the West. Now Iran is a fairly weak regional player (militarily and with an economy dependent on oil), and has been unsuccessful making its culture and version of Islam attractive in Central Asia. Iran has other foreign policy priorities and prefers not to challenge Russian hegemony in Central Asia – which it views positively, as a counterweight to the United States’ global dominance.

Kyrgyzstan is a good “test case” of linkage and leverage in Central Asia, as it set up links with the West after independence and was commonly (but inaccurately) viewed as an “island of democracy” in the region. Western external linkages with Kyrgyzstan have empowered a variety of domestic actors who have been trying to exploit these links, leading to a “pluralisation” of the political landscape. There was also a trend towards “normative regression” as Western democracy promotion declined (see Alexander Cooley’s forthcoming book *Great Games, Local Rules*, OUP). Increasingly, the US has been prioritising security over democratisation. In fact, Western linkages have not always had a positive effect; they have also fuelled corruption and criminality, notably empowering the Bakiev family, and ignited anti-US and anti-Western feeling. With regard to China, there is a “rift” between the elites’ distrustful discourse and China’s growing appeal for ordinary people. The lesson from Kyrgyzstan is that we need to look beyond the (extremely weak) state to other actors involved in linkages, such as migrant workers going to Russia or refugees escaping to neighbouring countries.

### **The South Caucasus**

The three South Caucasian states are now more independent and less interconnected than ever before, as demonstrated by their diverging trajectories since 1991. Objectively, the region’s volatile situation makes it an “unattractive” place for external engagement – yet it still has a surprising number of suitors. The West has changed its attitude since the Russo-Georgian war, once again relegating its relations with the region to a “subset” of its relations with Russia. Meanwhile, the key question about Russian linkages in the South Caucasus is how to differentiate the legitimate ones from those that merely serve to increase Russian power. Despite the presence of numerous external actors Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia hold the key to their own futures, including conflict-resolution.

Levitsky and Way initially classified Georgia as “low linkage, high leverage” (with regard to the West), but it could equally be classified as the opposite – “high linkage, low leverage”. The question is therefore why, despite its many linkages to the West, Georgia has not democratised further. Nationalism is an important factor in Georgia (including in the separatist conflicts): it was the ideology of Georgia’s first rulers after independence in 1991, it was carefully avoided by Shevardnadze, and then revived by Saakashvili – gradually in a more civic form. Yet, while Georgia has experienced increasing contact with the West, this is largely absent in the two breakaway regions (South Ossetia, Abkhazia), where Russia’s influence prevails. Since the Rose Revolution in 2003 “technocratic” linkages and state consolidation have reduced tensions and internal strife, though there is no guarantee against resumed conflict.

The dynamic of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict gives the (dangerously misleading) impression that the relatively stable status quo of “neither peace nor war” will last forever, but sooner or later a collision will occur. Russia is the main external actor with the most linkages to the region. Its ambiguity in the conflict (formally backing Armenia and providing

it with cheap weapons, yet careful not to antagonise energy-rich Azerbaijan) is its main source of leverage. Yet there are limits to what Russia can do here, and it often falls prey to manipulation by both sides. Meanwhile, for the West the region remains peripheral and not worth sacrificing relations with Russia for. Iran, in turn, has publicised the failure of negotiations (the OSCE-led Minsk Process), using it as a reason to keep non-regional actors out and call for a greater Iranian role in the process.

## **Moldova**

As a small and relatively poor country, Moldova is especially prone to external influence. Over the last decade, Moldova has dramatically developed its links with the EU: in Levitsky and Way's framework, it is nearer "high linkage, high leverage" in terms of its relations with the West. This informs Moldova's strengthening of democracy in 2009. Nevertheless, while Moldova's front door faces the EU, with pro-Russian Transnistria Moldova also effectively faces Russia. In terms of conflict-resolution in Transnistria, Russia is an important player (it has troops stationed there) and would need to receive something in return for cooperation. Meanwhile, the EU should focus on amplifying its long-term leverage in both Moldova and Transnistria by building linkages through its staff present on the ground, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, and by coordinating its responses with Ukraine (lack of such coordination means that visa-bans on Transnistrian officials have proved largely ineffective). The EU should increase linkages with both Transnistria and the rest of Moldova.

A new linkage factor is the influence of the Moldovan diaspora. The votes of the Moldovan diaspora are becoming increasingly important in narrowly contested domestic elections (now an often-decisive 2%, equivalent to 2 seats in parliament). Aware of its mostly pro-European orientation, the diaspora has deliberately been courted by the post-2009 Alliance for European Integration. In Moldova, a "nationalist" is someone who is pro-Romanian, rather than specifically pro-Moldovan. Another important linkage is television, with new pro-European channels entering a market dominated by Russian television. Moldovan civil servants often start off with high expectations of the EU, but their day-to-day contacts bring disappointment, thereby highlighting that linkages alone do not translate into leverage.

## **Conclusions**

Already in the context of regime change Levitsky's and Way's framework of linkages and leverage had its shortcomings. The extension of these concepts into the realm of conflict-resolution is an even more complex undertaking, though it usefully highlights a number of underspecified empirical and conceptual factors. For example, a distinction needs to be made between leverage—over elites—and the effects on the population. There are neither purely "white knights" nor purely "black" ones; instead, there are many shades of grey among the external actors. It is important to recognise that the EU and the West in general

are not always benign actors. Similarly, a more nuanced view of Russia's involvement is called for, as it is difficult to speak of a single, unitary "Russian" actor. The conflicts cutting across the region and linkages across state borders combine old legacies with new, post-1991 developments. This overlay makes it hard to generalise which actors produce certain types of leverage. The causal dynamics behind "linkage and leverage" are clearly far more complex than envisaged by Levitsky and Way.

*Report by Annabelle Chapman, May 2012*