

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

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At the end of 2011, it will be twenty years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Peaceful as break-up of a multi-national empire, the consequences for a number of its successor states were deeply destabilising—socially, politically, and economically. One of the lasting, and still unresolved legacies of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its aftermath is the stubborn persistence of so-called ‘frozen conflicts’ in Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and to a lesser extent in the Russian North Caucasus and in Central Asia. Why, despite significant international efforts, has no settlement been achieved for these conflicts over the past two decades?

The first issue that one has to consider is of course the question of where we really are in relation to the conflicts in Moldova (Transnistria) and the South Caucasus (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia). The sad truth is that things have not moved much, certainly not towards a sustainable solution, over the past twenty years. In many ways, we are in the same place as ten or twenty years ago, but at a different level: locally, in the conflict zones, the balance of forces between those genuinely interested in a solution and those equally genuinely interested in a continuation of the status quo (i.e., non-resolution of the conflicts) has decisively shifted towards the latter, while internationally there is frustration and disillusionment with the lack of progress, emphasis has shifted to security challenges elsewhere (now primarily to the ‘Arab spring’), and resources (and the enthusiasm to spend them) are increasingly limited. At the same time, the stakes are potentially much higher: spending on ‘defence’ has increased year on year across the region, conflict narratives have consolidated antagonistic identities, and future European security arrangements, such as possible permanent EU-Russia cooperation structures on security matters, have become intrinsically tied up in what remain protracted and volatile conflict situations.

The reasons for this state of affairs are too many to recount them in any level of detail or comprehensiveness here. They include entrenched local and regional interests, incomplete transitions to democracy, high levels of corruption, persistent transnational organised crime, on/off international engagement, missed opportunities, wrong approaches, lack of resources and/or strategies to deploy them in meaningful way, etc., and above all a widespread culture of mutual recrimination that finds faults with everybody but oneself. Moreover, the endless search for causes of conflict and causes for their non-resolution remains a fruitless exercise in the absence of even a consensus on what a given conflict is actually about: identities, rights, territory or some or all of the above and quite possibly other issues.

Leaving aside for a moment the search for their causes, the question is what to do in relation to the conflicts themselves: continue to strive for a solution (the politically correct shorthand for some form of reintegration of the four break-away territories or unrecognised states) or an acceptance, and improvement on, the existing status quo? Yet, these questions cannot really be answered unless there is an answer to a more fundamental second set of questions, namely about the underlying objective of any action vis-à-vis the four conflicts in Moldova and the South Caucasus. Is it about peace, security, and stability? And for whom—the EU, the metropolitan states, the break-away territories, the people living in either? Or is it about democracy, and where and for whom? Or is it about upholding some principles of international law—sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-determination—but in what order of priority?

Obviously, there are no clear and easy answers to either of these two sets of questions, let alone any answer(s) that could equally provide a solution to all four conflicts. Too much depends on the specific local, regional and international dynamics of each case.

One could leave it at that and give up on the idea that twenty years on from the end of the Soviet Union, there is much that unites these four conflicts or any possible solutions to them. And while the idea of a post-Soviet era and area may have come to an end of its conceptual usefulness two decades after the actual break-up, three themes permeate discussions of the so far unsuccessful efforts to resolve any of these conflicts.

First there is a lack of skilled, determined, and visionary local leadership for peace. Political elites remain self-serving, civil society organisations, if they exist at all, are excluded from the settlement process or are as entrenched in maximalist demands as elites.

Second, there is an absence of a sustained, strategically directed, and well-resourced international engagement aimed at achieving a negotiated settlement. Too often international efforts are ad hoc and focused on a particular crisis, uncoordinated and competitive between the major players, and driven by the national interests of the states involved rather than by local needs.

Third, where discussions on the institutional design of an eventual settlement do take place, they are overly obsessed with what labels can or cannot be used to describe the outcome of a negotiation process. More time is spent on debating why autonomy, federation, independence, etc., are desirable or not than on focusing on specific issues that need to be resolved.

Where concrete proposals exist, international mediators have failed to move local conflict parties to a compromise. The incredibly small windows of opportunity that occasionally exist to do so have not been grasped so far because of the short supply of political will—locally and internationally—to take calculated risks that enable a process of conflict settlement to move forward.

To overcome this culture of extreme risk averseness will not be easy and not without costs, but it is possible as the EU's policy of engagement without recognition vis-à-vis the breakaway territories in the South Caucasus demonstrates. The German-Russian Meseberg initiative and the discussion of permanent EU-Russia security cooperation point in a similar direction, as does the recent attempt by the co-chairmen of the Minsk Group—US, Russia, and France—to breathe new life into the settlement process for Nagorno-Karabakh. Even taken together, all of these are but incremental steps and still far away from an actual solution for any of these conflicts, but they may well enhance prospects and opportunities for conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space if they shape the design of multi-pronged and more transparent settlement processes, fill them with real substance, and initiate a public debate on the necessary compromises and concessions for sustainable results.