

## Contours of Conflict and Prognosis in the Eastern Neighbourhood

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*Conflict around Russia's borders is pervasive. And the inadequacies of all states involved means resolution is improbable*

The numerous conflicts in formerly Soviet parts of Eastern Europe are not completely intractable; but almost 30 years on from the first of them, and with no resolution in sight in any of them, they are certainly protracted. Nor are several of the conflicts 'frozen'. That is an expedient, Western-imposed definition. Half of them are decidedly active – as anyone on the frontlines in Nagorny Karabakh or Donbas, or on Ukrainian ships in the Sea of Azov, will attest. Whether the conflicts in the region mark the death throes of the USSR or the birth pangs of new formations is academic. They are a stain on the West's ability to manage them and on the reputations of the afflicted parties, as well as a reflection of Russia's long-drawn-out imperial mindset. There is plenty of blame to be shared around – though not necessarily equally.

Europe's approach to the eastern neighbourhood suffers from a combination of inattention, overstretch and timidity. Wracked by internal problems largely of its own making, it has neither the capacity nor the inclination to worry about what many policy makers dismiss as distant conflicts involving only 'minimal' loss of life. This is despite the conflicts taking place either inside Europe's borders or on its doorstep (depending on one's mental map of extent of the continent). And it is despite over 10,500 conflict-related deaths in Ukraine since 2014<sup>1</sup> and approximately 30,000 deaths along the line of contact between Armenia and Azerbaijan since 1991.<sup>2</sup> Only the conflicts involving Georgia and Moldova respectively can credibly be characterized as frozen. There has been no significant fighting in either of those countries since the wars there in 2008 and 1992 respectively – although this is not to forget the approximately 800 deaths<sup>3</sup> during the five-day war between Russia and Georgia, which led to Abkhazia and South Ossetia being declared independent by Russia (or occupied by Russia, in the Georgian and majority western view); and the 600–1,500 casualties from the fighting in the Transnistrian war.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2017), *Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 16 May to 15 August 2017*,

[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/UAReport19th\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/UAReport19th_EN.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> de Waal, T. (2003), *Black garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war*, New York and London: New York University Press, <https://raufay.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/0814719449.pdf>. Approximately 2,000 people have been killed along the line of contact (LoC) since the 1994 ceasefire. In recent years, the LoC has become increasingly tense, with some 30-40 people killed every year.

<sup>3</sup> Estimate of Georgian combatant casualties: 180. Georgian Ministry of foreign affairs factsheet:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20140802211733/http://mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=597](https://web.archive.org/web/20140802211733/http://mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=597)

Estimate of Russian military casualties: 65. *The Tanks of August*, pg 130:

[http://www.cast.ru/files/The\\_Tanks\\_of\\_August\\_sm\\_eng.pdf](http://www.cast.ru/files/The_Tanks_of_August_sm_eng.pdf)

Estimate of South Ossetian combatant casualties: 150

Moscow Defense Brief: <https://www.webcitation.org/5fm4fGQ5j?url=http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/3-2008/item3/article1/>

Estimate of civilian casualties: 365:

Public Commission for investigating war crimes in South Ossetia, Human rights watch report, pg 75:

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=GueUCYGFrc8C&pg=PA75&dpq=PA75&dq=The+Public+Commission+for+Investigating+War+Crimes+in+South+Ossetia+maintains+a+list+of+people+killed+in+the+conflict+that,+as+of+November+8,+contained+the+names+of+365+individuals.%5B206%5D&source=bl&ots=PyPCfnIr5F&sig=VI8smZeXOGsoZisOcFViQjGfWJU&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiEo8fv2fTeAhWP6qQKHWNFB3oQ6AEwAHoECAgQAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false>

<sup>4</sup> M. Geistlinger, *The EU-Neighbourhood Policy and the Case of Transnistria*, pg 23, footnote 4:

<http://www.prafak.ni.ac.rs/files/zbornik/sadržaj/zbornici/z70/02z70.pdf>

### *Western responsibility ... and limitations*

Realistically, what can the West do (short of a kind of Marshall Plan for reconstruction in the region, which it cannot afford)? It could certainly be more forthright about the deficiencies in the afflicted countries themselves. Theoretically, in a system of evidence-based policymaking, this should lead to a reordering of priorities and reallocation of resources on the part of the West. Such a newfound realism and honesty, if accompanied by financial carrots and sticks, could stem these countries' worst proclivities and encourage their better ones. A strengthening of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe's body politic – which would necessarily include the expulsion of Russia for sabotage, as well as fresh financial and human resources – would lend new impetus and respect to those tarnished organizations. Similarly, the EU's Eastern Partnership plan, now 10 years old, should be refreshed, also with expulsions of those countries which have no intention of accommodating liberal democratic values into their governance systems. This means Azerbaijan and Belarus, the latter of which is notable for being without border conflict at present but remains steadfastly uncooperative. This is not to say support for their civil societies should be withdrawn. And should there be indications of reform, recalcitrant countries can always be brought back in. For now, though, they take up time and stretched resources. The EU's methods changed following the failure of its 'incentive-based approach' ('more for more'). This, which only worked with three countries – Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The others were allowed to pursue a more 'tailored' relationship – a fudge which should never have been accepted by the EU. It was later acknowledged that 'it has not proven a sufficiently strong incentive to create a commitment to reform, where there is not the political will'.<sup>5</sup>

A fresh start will also require the US to reacquire an interest in the region's conflicts – not just harking back to a pre-Trump era but reflecting something more substantial than has been seen since the end of the Cold War (although the presidential visits of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and, to a lesser extent, Barack Obama, did send a signal, inspire, and pressure the region's governments into performing better).<sup>6</sup> Donald Trump has yet to make a visit to the region, and there is no indication that he has any inclination to do so. Trump is similar to Vladimir Putin in this respect above all: both believe in 'great powers' deciding the fates of smaller states.

So, the timing is poor. Europe and the West more broadly can hardly advocate for institutional change and the adoption of liberal democratic values when they are struggling with them themselves. The retreat of the international liberal order had better be a temporary one or else the game is surely up in the eastern neighbourhood.

The measures outlined above are radical. But they offer the promise of clarity, an altering of the stale dynamics, and the prospect of making some of the region's politicians think twice. Moreover, they pose relatively little risk, other than causing the profound irritation of those side-lined for bad behaviour and rule-breaking. Limited near-term progress is possible given more political will.

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2015), *Review of Neighbourhood Policy*, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52015JC0050>.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Clinton visited Latvia, Belarus and Ukraine three times. George W. Bush visited Lithuania, Latvia (twice), Estonia, Georgia and Ukraine (in 2008, Vladimir Putin famously told Bush that Ukraine was not a real country). Barack Obama visited Estonia. Once.

### *Burden-sharing*

But there should also be realism about the extent to which the EU and the West more broadly can effect change and solve others' conflicts. The primary burden of responsibility for conflict resolution must lie with the parties directly involved. This of course means Russia in many cases (see below) – but it also means the afflicted states and entities. The West, in its many institutional guises, can facilitate and advise. But it can scarcely enforce. For a resolution over Nagorny Karabakh to be feasible, for example, mere changes of leadership in Azerbaijan and Armenia (where a political revolution has already happened, with no sign of progress on its territorial disputes) will be insufficient. What is needed is a whole scale systemic and societal change, the likes of which seem barely conceivable. Conflict resolution and the restoration of territorial integrity in Ukraine (including Crimea and the Sea of Azov) seem just as unlikely without systemic change in Russia – presumably several generations away – and a less tumultuous domestic scene in Ukraine. In Georgia, meanwhile, despite Tbilisi's nobler efforts of late, it seems that the damage already done is irrevocable. Reunification with its breakaway entities, especially Abkhazia, seems further away for Georgia than it does for other states in the region with their own separatist elements.<sup>7</sup>

These states bear responsibility to resolve their conflicts, but they hardly seem able to face up to this fact, much less take action. In sum, the prospects for full conflict settlement anywhere in the region seem remote in the extreme – especially when the dynamics in each country are so different. Do these regions feel abandoned by Europe, or are they intrinsically more comfortable with Russian culture? Does Russian identity draw them in, or are the economic lifelines offered by Russia a more persuasive explanation? The answer is all of the above – not just in each conflict-riven state, but often to differentiated degrees in regions *within* each state. Complexity hinders resolution.

Nonetheless, the least the European powers could do collectively is formulate a long-term vision for the eastern neighbourhood region. This would eliminate obfuscation and help manage unrealistic expectations. How hard should that be?

### *The Russia question*

None of the pessimism above should be grounds for defeatism – or for the absolution of Russia. Russia is, of course, the common denominator in these conflicts. It either has directly caused them, feeds them or thrives off them (in some cases, all three descriptions apply). It is probably unfair to say that Russia could solve them all if it wanted to. But it does not want to; and it has a different conception of burden-sharing.

Russia can and does tinker at the edges of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict but has little incentive to resolve it when it sells weapons to both sides. It is more firmly embedded in Ukraine that at any point since 2014 with its November 2018 blockade of Kerch Straits and has long since jacked open barely bridgeable divides in each of the other conflict-afflicted states. That said, if you could take Russia out of the equation today, the conflicts (with the possible exception of the war in Ukraine) would remain tomorrow. Russia has much more influence in the region than the West does, especially over Armenia, but there is no guarantee that it can push even Yerevan to its own preferred solution.

It is not an original thesis but it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that Russia does not wish any of these independent states in the shared neighbourhood well. Indeed, it does not acknowledge their full independence. As former breakaway republics themselves (in 1991), were they to thrive autonomously

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<sup>7</sup> Up-to-date polling figures are hard to come by, but the research summarized here suggests that fewer than 2 per cent of Abkhazians wish to re-join with Georgia. Toal, G. and O'Loughlin, J. (2014), 'How people in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria feel about annexation by Russia', *Washington Post*, 20 March 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/how-people-in-south-ossetia-abkhazia-and-transnistria-feel-about-annexation-by-russia/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.f7300e7e5892](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/how-people-in-south-ossetia-abkhazia-and-transnistria-feel-about-annexation-by-russia/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f7300e7e5892).

– more so than their former overlord – what would that say about Russia’s own achievements and claims? Conflict keeps everyone weak and, in most cases, dependent. To quote one senior European commentator, ‘Russia feeds on the rotting flesh of others’.

Take that a step further – the thesis goes – and these states are a direct threat to the Kremlin’s credibility with its *own* people and therefore its viability. The Russian model, admired by few as it is, would be destroyed. Russia’s traditional security thinking drives it to dominate its neighbours. This goes back centuries and is not going to change any time soon.

### *Concluding thoughts*

The prospects for the eastern neighbourhood’s normalization and modernization thus look poor. The reality is one in which much of the region remains war-torn, or at least conflict-fatigued. Generational change offers some hope – and a whole new breed of talented, reasonably liberal, non-Soviet-born men and women are coming through. That’s the good news. Many, however, are nationalistic as well, and wedded to a belief in the innate ‘rightness’ of their own state (or de facto state) – and, by implication, the ‘wrongness’ of others. This suggests that normalcy and real peace are more than a generation away at best.

China may or may not decide to play a more pro-active and positive political role in the region in the future. But that is a distant hope at best and it certainly cedes to Russia’s security interests in the neighbourhood at present, even if it is pushing Russia out slowly with its economic clout.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, the West can and should help in developing that next generation. However, the region’s youth cannot differ in outlook from their parents unless exposed to new ideas. Many young people in conflict areas are deprived of this opportunity, which explains why they tend towards a nationalistic bent.

Ultimately, a sense of realism is needed. The conflict in Ireland – like some of those in the former Soviet Union – took 30 years to deal with. The West did do something about Bosnia belatedly, and then Kosovo, but neither are happy places today. The best the West can do in the meantime is to stop over promising and under-delivering (and ideally do the reverse<sup>9</sup>) and articulate a set of principles which insist upon good governance, the rule of law, democracy, shared values and liberalism; then it needs to back those principles up with resources...and stick to them.

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<sup>8</sup> Chatham House roundtable: *The Rising Presence of Third Powers in the Eastern Neighbourhood*, 27 November 2018. My thanks to Kataryna Wolczuk for this point

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

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