
Are Eurasian Conflicts Really All That Eurasian?

LESSONS FOR SCHOLARS AND POLICYMAKERS

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Civil and territorial conflicts in Eurasia are often treated as distinct from their counterparts in other parts of the world. The Tajik civil war in the 1990s, the separatist conflict in Moldova, and the battles over Ukraine’s sovereignty are seen as products of the collapse of Communism and the resurgence of Russia. “What Is Happening in Russia’s Backyard?” [asks](#) the very title to one such article? This angle limits us. While a Eurasian lens can allow scholars and policymakers to analyze a conflict deeply and understand its regional context, it gets in the way of broader comparisons and lessons about how civil wars play out and end globally.

Scholars and policymakers have much to learn from Eurasia. This memo explains that seemingly imperfect outcomes—like the so-called frozen conflict in Transnistria or the undemocratic end to the Tajik civil war—are more realistic and durable than the solutions that scholars propose and the international community tries to impose on conflicts in other regions. It concludes with a set of recommendations on how to study Eurasia more comparatively and how to transplant some of the region’s lessons on ending conflict to other parts of the world. Among my primary commendations is to take seriously the practical, if controversial, solutions that have ended conflicts in Eurasia or at least definitively curtailed violence.

Seeing Through Eurasian-Colored Glasses

There is an undeniable chasm between experts who study civil war globally and those familiar with Eurasian conflicts. The civil war literature treats conflicts like Tajikistan and Transnistria as oddities or outliers and folds them into datasets with little or no analysis. This is understandable. There is a high bar for research in the former Soviet Union—visas can be hard to come by and the language barrier is formidable. Civil war

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experts prefer to do their research in French, Spanish, and English and study cases in West Africa, Latin America, and those where there is a rich record left behind by the international community.

Yet, when scholars do deep dives into Eurasian conflicts, the results include rewarding and highly instructive publications like John Heathershaw's *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (Routledge 2011), Nina Caspersen's *Unrecognized States* (Polity 2011), and Charles King's *Extreme Politics: Nationalism, Violence, and the End of Eastern Europe* (Oxford University Press 2010).

Moreover, Eurasian conflicts are intuitively easier to compare to one another, to study the unfinished legacy of Soviet state and nation-building or to understand the role of a resurgent Russia. Yulia Nikitina, professor at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), [argues](#) that Russia has a powerful effect on how conflicts across Eurasia play out. Russia's approach to crisis management in its region is one where it uses foreign policy to exert its preferred state- and nation-building models to neighbors in conflict via elite-level dealing and by minimizing interference from western powers. Columbia University professor Alexander Cooley [explains](#) that Russian officials justify their actions by invoking particular "scripts of sovereignty" and overtly rejecting the encroachment of international norms within Eurasia. He goes on to make a dire prediction in the case of the conflict in Donbas: "It is likely that whatever political model is applied to eastern Ukraine, either as part of a negotiated settlement or a de facto state of affairs, will become regionally influential and possibly foisted upon the other territories."

But the Russian angle can be taken too far. For example Kyiv Mohyla University professor Olexiy Haran and Petro Burkovsky from the National Institute for Strategic Studies [see](#) Russia as overwhelmingly responsible for the civil war in Donbas. Yet even if Russia deserves the lion's share of the blame for triggering the conflict, it would be too easy to see Russia as the solution to it as well. Sergiy Kudelia, professor at Baylor University, [makes](#) important distinctions to this point, arguing that peace in Ukraine will take far more than Russian withdrawal from the conflict and new elections. The tough road ahead will depend on whether Ukraine and the parties to the conflict can draft a new institutional framework and one that guarantees political rights and safety to civilians and insurgents on the separatist side.

In short, looking at Eurasian conflicts as an exclusive regional set makes for easy comparisons and debates on Russia's destructive tendencies. It does not, however, get us very far in understanding how similar they are to other cases of conflict around the world. The next section takes off the Eurasian lenses and looks at how three civil conflicts—in Tajikistan, Moldova/Transnistria, and Ukraine—compare to those in other geographies.

Liberating Eurasian Conflicts from Eurasia

Soon after becoming independent in 1991, Tajikistan collapsed into a devastating civil war. Government forces, warlords and fragments of opposition—Islamist and otherwise—battled one another across its territory in a prolonged conflict that killed tens of thousands, displaced half a million, and stranded 80 percent of the population in grinding poverty. The conflict formally came to an end in 1997 when the government and opposition factions signed a peace accord in Moscow after years of intensive mediation by Iran, Russia, the United States, and the UN. The accord laid out minimal yet attainable goals to put the country back together; notably, it included a 30 percent quota for members of the opposition in government positions and brokered agreements with local strongmen to “disarm” in the provinces—not by giving up their weapons, but by nominally integrating themselves into security forces. In exchange, they maintained local dominance over politics, economics, and security.

The Tajik solution [holds](#) several lessons for ending war and rebuilding in places far afield. Among these are that informal ways to include the opposition and former combatants in a post-conflict government may work far better than elections. While Tajikistan’s first post-war elections were a farce that included a sole opponent who did not want to run, it was the behind-the-scenes arrangements that made all the difference. Quotas to include the opposition in government bodies and the distribution of regional posts to strongmen in exchange for their nominal allegiance to national security forces were the enduring solution to the conflict. If the quasi-formality of inclusion was a specific lesson, the broader lesson was to avoid trying to do too much. Whereas the international community worked to put Tajikistan back together in a good-enough way, policymakers aimed for a far more expensive and fuller makeover in Afghanistan, turning the latter into an international money pit where neither democracy and development nor peace have been achieved.

Around the same time that Tajikistan was collapsing into civil war, violence was also escalating in Moldova between government forces, the armed opposition, and separatists in Transnistria. The fighting resulted in over 700 deaths as Transnistrian rebels declared an independent republic. A ceasefire was signed in 1992 following intense mediation but a negotiated settlement remains elusive. As University of Tartu professor Eiki Berg [reminds](#) us, Transnistria may be an internationally unrecognized state, but it has parallel government structures and functions with agency that even some small UN member states lack.

Despite occasional bursts of mediation efforts by the EU and the UN, there is little prospect that the conflict will be formally ended by an accord. Yet, there is [little prospect](#) that violence will flare up again.

Partly, this is a function of the passage of time. In Moldova and Transnistria, the younger generation is far less wedded to unfreezing the conflict and resolving it than are older generations. But more important factors may be outmigration—both to EU countries as well as to Russia—and the availability of foreign passports. Hundreds of thousands of Moldovan and Transnistrian citizens hold multiple passports thanks to the generous (if politicized) policies of neighboring Romania and Russia. Given that a substantial portion of Moldova’s and Transnistria’s citizens hold several passports, restoring the territorial integrity of the country (or formalizing the independence of Transnistria) has lost its ideological and functional appeal.

Moldova’s limbo has valuable lessons for conflicts where an accord may be unattainable—in part because outside powers may have little interest in resolving the conflict—but where conditions may be right for more organic changes to reduce tensions and make the conflict moot. In Cyprus, intensive mediation has failed to decisively end the partition that resulted from the Turkish invasion in 1974 but which is ultimately rooted in the civil and ethnic bloodletting of previous decades. Since partition, EU membership of the south and Turkey’s liberal distribution of passports to Turkish Cypriots in the north have changed the calculus of its citizenry about the importance of reunifying the island. Their livelihoods and identities give them weak motives to change the status quo.

When it comes to Ukraine and the conflict in Donbas, it is helpful to look outside of the region to Lebanon. Lebanon is often maligned as a hopelessly diverse country that is perpetually on the brink of civil war. Yet, the 1990 Ta’if accord, which put an end to the 1975 civil war, has lasted in the face of huge challenges. The accord’s success is not in restoring electoral democracy or disarmament; rather, the accord succeeded because it failed to dismantle the complex communal politics that kept Lebanon at peace far more than they brought its people to clash.

Today Lebanon’s Shi’i, Sunni, Maronite, Druze, and other communities continue to self-administer many of their needs. These [communal divisions](#) are reinforced by personal status codes that are particular to each sect and are rooted in the cultural and religious autonomy the communities had as far back as the Ottoman Empire. These make electoral politics and Lebanon’s democracy highly unstable and untenable at times, but they also provide the communities with a sense of welcome isolation from one another. Since the accord, a growing number of services and goods are allocated on the basis of religious belonging and patronage—jobs, housing, education, garbage collection, and even hospital services.

In many ways, Lebanon’s chaotic system of quotas, autonomous communities and segregated public services may be highly suited to Ukraine and its pronounced ethnic and confessional divisions. Indeed, Ukraine’s ethnic and [religious cleavages](#) make it a much larger but only slightly less complex version of Lebanon. Unfortunately,

mediators in the Minsk Accords have taken a conventional approach to ending the conflict—one that is heavy on elections and disarmament but light on the lessons of places from Tajikistan to Lebanon.

Lessons for Academia and Policy

There are important lessons for scholars who wish to better understand civil wars and the policymakers who hope to end them. Oxford University professor Paul Collier [argues](#) that ending civil wars requires good peacekeeping with a healthy dose of economic development. The Eurasian cases indicate that there are ways to mimic the effects of economic development—such as out-migration by Moldova’s holders of multiple passports, or via revenue that pours into local warlord economies in Tajikistan’s far-flung provinces even if much of that revenue is from the opium and heroin trade.

As a first step, we can encourage more dialogue, debate, and collaboration between civil war experts and Eurasia specialists. There are a number of ways to do this, including organizing conferences to bring both sides to compare work and findings. Funding collaborative research is also important; indeed, a few demonstration projects can go a long way toward ending the irritating treatment of insightful conflicts like Tajikistan as oddities and outliers.

A second step involves taking seriously some of the practical, if controversial, solutions that have ended conflicts in Eurasia or dampened the fever pitch for violence. In Tajikistan, inclusive quotas in government appointments may have done far more to speed the country’s return to normality than standard-fare elections that the UN and Western policymakers unfailingly advocate in other places. Berkeley professor Aila Mattanock [finds](#) that elections are the best way to ensure that civil wars end and end durably, but without behind-the-scenes agreements, it is not clear that Tajikistan or Lebanon would have been able to stay relatively peaceful. Indeed, in Tajikistan’s case, the inclusionary agreements that voters had no say over may have done much to take the anger out of flawed and unsatisfying elections. Understanding how such back-door agreements can put warring factions back together into a sufficiently workable country might serve us well—particularly in an era of growing global populism where democratic elections can have unpleasant outcomes.

Conclusion

I presented these ideas at a PONARS Eurasia policy conference this past November in Yerevan, Armenia, alongside American University professor Keith Darden, who argued that one solution to ongoing and future civil, ethnic, and separatist conflicts would be for states to yield troublesome territories and focus their state-building and rule of law on more compact territories and borders. Whether readers agree or not with Darden’s

recommendations or those presented here, “It is time to jolt people’s imagination,” as said by George Washington University professor (and our panel’s discussant in Yerevan) Harris Mylonas. Further, as a former UN colleague told me in a personal communication:

“It’s not like the keepers of peace building and conflict prevention practice have a better track record....The default priority from the policy world to rebuild the state through elections and development—seen as universal goods—now comes with the admonishment that the UN should also ‘focus on the politics.’ The fact that this even needs saying is a sign of intellectual decay as well as leadership vacuum.”

Few scholars and policymakers like aiming for solutions that are outside their usual repertoire or that they consider less than perfect. However, the ideal is the worst enemy of the possible. As *The Economist* [wrote](#) in a feature on how to end civil wars: “better to condemn one’s children to a poorly run country than to endanger their lives.”

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