

Realism, Russia, and Conflict Resolution

PONARS Policy Memo 348

Cory Welt

Center for Strategic and International Studies

November 2004

In 2004, distinct shifts in Georgian and Moldovan conflict resolution efforts sharply underlined the functions of Russian support to the breakaway regions of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transdniestria. Russian patronage permits regional leaders to adopt more radical positions than they would otherwise adopt. It also allows Moscow to continue its efforts to limit the geopolitical choices of Georgia and Moldova, two wobbly outposts of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

For the United States and the European Union to counter Russia's support requires a sufficient stake in resolution and the ability to undermine or transform Russian interests in Georgia and Moldova. Concerns of trafficking via unregulated regions at NATO and EU borders, coupled with the possibility of obtaining a few democratic "success stories" in Eurasia, provide the stake. The question of leverage needs to be more thoroughly discussed. But if the U.S. and the EU are unable to push Russia toward more rapid political settlements, policymakers can at least adopt a strategy for normalizing conflicts that will promote continued Georgian and Moldovan central reforms, prevent the absence of political settlements from hijacking those reforms, and improve governance within the breakaway regions themselves.

Before 2004: Counterproductive Georgia, Overeager Moldova

Before 2004, the actions of the Georgian and Moldovan governments obscured Russia's role in obstructing conflict resolution. Under President Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia was not a credible negotiating partner regardless of Russian involvement. Shevardnadze refused to take on Georgian interests benefiting from trade in black market fuel, cigarettes, and other items (including arms and narcotics). The Georgian elite's reluctance to recognize South Ossetia's political autonomy, let alone the name "South Ossetia," further diluted the effect of Russian interference in that conflict. Georgian recognition of Abkhazia's autonomy was overshadowed by an unnatural increase in the official rolls of Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs), the entrenchment of a belligerent and corrupt IDP leadership, and the occasional incursions of two Georgian guerilla groups, one of which cynically moonlighted as the Abkhazians' illegal trading partners.

By comparison, Moldova was too eager a partner. In 2002 Chisinau gave its principled consent to a Russian-supported peace plan brokered by the Organization for

Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). While the OSCE was to join Russia (and Ukraine) as a co-guarantor of a new federal state, Russia maintained the power to veto all its decisions. The agreement allowed for the continued presence of Russian troops in Transdniestria, as the dominant component of an OSCE-supervised peacekeeping force, during a “transition period” of unspecified length. In November 2003, President Voronin went further, supporting a revised agreement that locked Moldova even more directly into a process of decentralized, Russian-dominated state development. By eliminating mention of external guarantors altogether (the OSCE included), the document did away with the fiction that anyone but Russia and Transdniestria alone were to guarantee the federation’s functioning. For a ten-year transition period, Transdniestrian representatives in the legislature and judiciary were to possess the right to block passage of all-union legislation. The Russian Defense Minister and Transdniestria’s leader specified that Russian military forces would remain in Transdniestria for a transition period of 20 to 30 years in anticipation of Moldova’s ultimate demilitarization.

Changing Policies

In 2004, the conflict resolution efforts of Georgia and Moldova underwent considerable change. Georgia increased its credibility as a negotiating partner in several ways. In an unprecedented public shift, President Mikheil Saakashvili declared the abolition of South Ossetian autonomy in 1990 a mistake, promised to grant the former autonomous district greater status as a “republic,” and restored the name “South Ossetia” to official usage. The government made promises to return Ossetian refugees that had fled from other parts of Georgia and appointed an Ossetian living in Russia as deputy state minister and subsequently state minister of civil integration. The government also pledged to grant South Ossetians (and Abkhazians) dual Georgian-Russian citizenship.

Additional efforts were directed towards resolving the Abkhazian conflict. The government disbanded guerilla groups, reorganized and restaffed the IDP leadership, launched a process to grant permanent homes to numerous IDPs, and ordered a new census to realistically cap official IDP growth. The Georgian government also agreed to receive the recommendations of a group of political and intellectual elites for a federal solution to the conflict that made no clear demands regarding the timing and extent of IDP repatriation. At the end of 2004, the government began to prepare concrete peace plans that would provide a basis for negotiations with both Abkhazians and Ossetians.

In 2004, Moldova also engaged in a distinct policy shift, as President Voronin rejected Moldova’s return to a Russian sphere of influence via a federal peace plan. Confronted by street protests and the opposition of the United States and the EU, Voronin backed out of the fateful agreement and returned to negotiations based on the earlier OSCE-brokered drafts. As March 2005 parliamentary elections near, Voronin has denounced Russian “occupation” and Moscow’s efforts to become the predominant broker of the new, federated state.

Isolating Russia’s Role

Reacting to a more active Georgian policy, and a more cautious Moldovan policy, Russia in 2004 embraced a more overt form of intervention. Moscow openly resisted Georgian

efforts to resolve the South Ossetian conflict on its own terms, i.e. by undermining the South Ossetian leadership via an anti-smuggling operation. While the Georgian operation had its faults, the Russian response was an exercise in needless escalation. The government issued a remarkable number of communiqués denouncing Georgian activities in the conflict zone and threatening interference. It permitted weapons and armed volunteers to cross the border into South Ossetia. It also blocked efforts to increase the OSCE presence in South Ossetia and rejected suggestions to post OSCE monitors at the Roki tunnel connecting South Ossetia to Russia.

With regards to Abkhazia, Russia resisted a domestic political shift that threatened to dilute its role as patron. When Russia's preferred candidate, Abkhazia's incumbent prime minister, lost a presidential race in October, Moscow refused to accept the results. Weeks later, Russia imposed a blockade on Abkhazia and forced a deal whereby Abkhazia's presumptive leader Sergei Bagapsh would run together with his defeated opponent in a new election on a joint ticket. Control over Abkhazia's internal politics was conceded to Bagapsh, while his vice-president would possess authority over security and foreign affairs, assuring Moscow's continued oversight of Abkhazia's development. In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia accelerated the process of granting citizenship to local residents, using this fact to justify further involvement in regional affairs.

In Moldova, Russia similarly responded to Voronin's about-face. The Russian ambassador to Moldova hinted that Moscow would involve itself in Moldova's upcoming parliamentary elections, presumably with the intention of encouraging the removal of Voronin from power. An official communiqué later stated that Moldova's new position on conflict resolution was "absurd" and "irresponsible" and asserted that Russian troops—which Moscow had long ago promised to recall—would for now stay put in Transdnistria.

What Russian behavior in 2004 suggested is not that Moscow wishes to block conflict resolution to preserve slices of the former Soviet Union for itself, but to prevent Georgia and Moldova as a whole from permanently leaving Russia's geopolitical sphere—a possibility that first arose after Georgia's Rose Revolution and, now, Ukraine's Orange Revolution. Without serving as the guarantor of a reunified Moldovan state, Russia will not be able to secure control over Moldova's foreign policy trajectory. This is true in the case of a potentially federated Georgia as well—if Russia is not the arbiter of reunification, Georgia will be free to maneuver itself, united, towards NATO membership. For Russia, de facto independence for the breakaway regions is better than nothing. Its preference, however, is for Georgia and Moldova to return as wholes to its sphere of influence.

What if Russia were to withdraw its support?

It will take an impressive change of heart for Russia to embrace more neutral models of conflict resolution that rely on European norms and which could ease the way towards Euroatlantic integration for Georgia and Moldova. Before pinning blame exclusively on Russia for obstructing the implementation of such models, however, it is instructive to imagine what would happen if Russia were to become a more productive player in conflict resolution.

First, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria will not just leap into the welcoming arms of Georgia and Moldova. Officially, Georgia insists on a political settlement that provides for the return to Abkhazia of at least 80 percent of the 225,000-strong Georgian IDP community. Getting Abkhazians to agree to a solution that re-unites Abkhazia to Georgia and accommodates the return of so many Georgians is a formidable task. Abkhazia's leadership has already proven receptive to Russian pressure—the Abkhazian economy depends on Russian markets and investments—but if Russia were to push Abkhazia in the other direction, towards integration with Georgia, would that mean a negotiated settlement was in sight? When confronted with the return of some 180,000 Georgians to Abkhazia, Abkhazians may choose to fight, even if the odds of victory are slim, rather than again become a minority in what they consider to be their land (ethnic Abkhazians numbered 93,000 in the last official census of 1989).

While the repatriation of refugees is not a major issue in South Ossetia and Transdniestria, regional populations will still entertain serious doubts regarding the extent of the self-rule Georgia and Moldova will tolerate if the regions do not have Russia to support their position.

Still, it should take less time to achieve agreements on South Ossetia and Transdniestria if Russia were to withdraw support. South Ossetia's link to Russia via the Roki tunnel is vital for its economic well-being, and Georgia will be well positioned to secure the region militarily if necessary. In addition, benefits from trade, transport, and tourism will be considerable for this region of 70,000, a major transit route between Russia and Georgia. Devoid of Russian patronage, South Ossetia's leadership can be expected to change their tune.

Transdniestria will also probably fold. True, Transdniestria would still win any armed confrontation it has with Moldova. Besides Russian military support, however, the region relies tremendously on heavily subsidized Russian gas as well as on neighboring Ukraine's willingness to maintain free trade relations. If Russia were to withdraw support and Ukraine adopted a joint customs regime with Moldova (a serious possibility after the Orange Revolution), the Transdniestrian leadership will be under increased pressure to strike a deal. Additionally, Transdniestria's population is approximately one-third ethnic Moldovan and another quarter ethnic Ukrainian (less than 30 percent ethnic Russian). While nearly all are Russian-speaking, and many of the Ukrainians and even Moldovans may support federal status for Transdniestria, Moldova can hold out a carrot of successful integration to all Transdniestrians. The Russian language is used freely in Moldova's capital Chisinau; President Voronin himself hails from Transdniestria.

The main point of Russian involvement is that as long as Russia continues to support the breakaway regions' *de facto* independence, local leaderships do not have a need to enter negotiations that will result in a settlement other than one institutionalizing their status as Russian protectorates—if not as parts of Russia directly, then as dependencies or as parts of re-unified states that are as a whole dominated by Russia. Even in Abkhazia, where Russia crudely exhibited the price of this protection, a rebellious leadership chose to resubmit to Russian influence rather than risk facing Georgia on its own.

Should the U.S. or Europe do more?

It is one thing to identify Russia's role in shaping the conflict resolution process. It is another thing to do something about it. Contemporary Russia is not likely to be persuaded by a simple appeal to its interests or goodwill to pursue a different policy in Georgia or Moldova.

There are a number of realpolitik perspectives that support doing little to counter Russia's approach to conflict resolution. The first perspective would consider continued Russian control over the process an exchange for other geostrategic considerations. NATO and the European Union have already expanded to Russia's borders in the north and across the Black Sea. The United States wants Russia to remain a useful partner in the war on terrorism and nonproliferation. Europe seeks to maintain good relations with Russia as a major supplier of gas and oil. From this perspective, if Georgians and Moldovans want their countries put back together, they ought to find ways to accommodate Russia's terms for reintegration.

A second realpolitik perspective would argue that Western states anyhow do not possess appropriate leverage, whether by sticks or by carrots, to persuade Russia to change its position on the "side issue" of conflict resolution. Russia must be encouraged to rethink its entire goal of maintaining geopolitical supremacy over its CIS neighbors, or at least its strategies for doing so. Unless Western states are able to expediently transform Russia's grand strategy, they can do little to alter Russia's approach on Moldova and Georgia in particular.

A third perspective simply asks: why bother? Much has been made of Russia's double-standard towards the breakaway regions of Georgia and Moldova, given that Russia brooks no interference in dealings with its own breakaway region of Chechnya. That a large power like Russia would exhibit greater disregard for other states' territorial integrity is, however, hardly surprising. Western states openly serve as a protectorate of Serbia's breakaway region of Kosovo, not to mention as guarantors of the security and development of China's breakaway region of Taiwan. While the motives of the U.S. may be different than Russia's, and the size difference in populations involved stark, the general rule is the same—formal recognition of breakaway regions is rare, but large powers do sometimes perpetuate their de facto independence. If the U.S. does not wish to leave Kosovo and Taiwan to their fate, they might as well accept that Russia chooses not to leave its clients to theirs.

That said, there are at least two reasons why Western states should want to do more to help Georgia and Moldova achieve fairer negotiated settlements. First, these unresolved conflicts continue to stunt the development of Georgia and Moldova—two realistic candidates for democratization in the post-Soviet space. Like other multiethnic eastern European states, Moldova and Georgia can readily combine central political reforms with agreements that will fairly integrate breakaway regions and minority populations and allow them to retain valued links with states and societies abroad. If the West wants to produce and maintain success stories in multiethnic democracy promotion at relatively low cost, helping Georgia and Moldova resolve these conflicts should be a priority.

Second, breakaway regions remain potential threats to international security. On the new eastern border of the EU and NATO, these regions are not bound by international

treaties or law, and their peculiar relations with Russia encourage the unregulated possession and transit of weapons, drugs, and armed men. To link the existence of these “lawless” enclaves directly to major security threats such as terrorism or WMD proliferation is hasty. Still, Western states should at least consider how maintaining the status quo could exacerbate, not reduce, security concerns at Europe’s edge.

Can the U.S. or Europe do more?

If a more activist approach to conflict resolution in Georgia and Moldova were to endanger vital partnerships with Russia, the U.S. and Europe would sensibly wish to continue moving cautiously forward. To determine if this is so, however, two questions must be asked: Will these partnerships be needlessly and irreparably endangered by a stronger position in support of Georgia and Moldova and do Western states really not have sufficient tools to transform Russia’s position or safely undermine it?

In past years, asking such questions has not been that popular. Now, however, Russia is retreating from democracy and the rule-of-law in ways that are independently promoting a more nuanced assessment of U.S. and European partnerships. Meanwhile, three of the four “buffer” states between the expanded NATO and Russia (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine) are expressing a keen desire for increased Western integration. It is time to ask these questions directly.

Even if Western policymakers conclude that more activist approaches to conflict resolution are risky or unlikely to achieve results, they need not blandly accept Russian-inspired “federal” solutions. The U.S. and Europe can continue to co-opt and revise Russian-inspired “federal” models in ways that provide for the re-unification of Georgia and Moldova but that allow for the continued strengthening of these states and do not predetermine their ultimate geopolitical positions. This is how OSCE (and more recently EU) policy towards the Transdnistrian conflict has evolved over time. This road is a long one with many bumps and an uncertain result. But it does keep alive the possibility of settlements with Russia’s cooperation.

There is a second alternative, if also not easy to implement. This is to seek normalization of the conflicts. Western policymakers can urge Georgia and Moldova to move forward with administrative and economic reforms without worrying unduly about re-unification. They can help come up with ways to prevent the absence of a political settlement from hijacking central reforms (through, for instance, helping devise and support customs regimes that do not isolate breakaway regions but also do not allow them to distort states’ economies). In addition, they can think about how to improve transparency and the rule of law in the breakaway regions. Democratization and the subduing of illegal activity in breakaway regions will help reduce the negative effects of conflict, address potential international security concerns, and conceivably even promote a permanent political settlement in the future.

Engaging in a policy of normalization will take a considerable rethinking of Western commitments regarding NATO (and possibly even EU) membership to Georgia and Moldova, as well as the use of foreign assistance in breakaway regions. But if Western states’ relations with Russia are too precarious to push more actively for political resolutions, or their tools insufficient to overcome or transform Russian interests, such a

strategy is more appealing than leaving Georgia and Moldova disillusioned, fragmented, and dependent on present-day Russia to solve their problems for them.

© PONARS 2005