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Frozen Conflicts, Frozen or Soluble Solutions?

Introduction

There is a certain historical parallel for the in-between countries today and the *zwischen-raum laender* between Germany and Russia before the Second World. The difference, of course, is that today the security dilemma, or place of belonging, for the *zwischen-raum laender* has been resolved in the form of including them in the EU and NATO, while new states that emerged from the collapse of the Russian Soviet empire on the European end of the Russian Federation now take the place of the former in-between countries, or to use a better nuanced term that is more to the point – the “squeeze countries.”

The question to be answered today is where strategically does this belt of countries from Minsk to Tbilisi belong? Cannot they follow the former *zwischen-raum* countries to the EU and NATO or must they be reintegrated into the Russian sphere of influence? It is stated in our “Concept and Issues” paper that “our goals for them remain imprecise, their own goals apparently likewise”.

I submit that this is not quite true for most of these countries. It is clear where Moldova, true, only very recently, and Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan want to go and that this has created challenges for the EU and NATO, perhaps less so for the latter than for the former. But it is also clear that Russia knows precisely what it wants and is working to achieve what it wants. In other words, there is strong squeezing from Russia on this belt of countries but very gently squeezing from the EU and NATO in the opposite direction.

Accordingly there is no possibility that the frozen conflicts can be resolved other than according to the interests of Russia unless the unexpected happens as in Adjara this year in May, when the new Georgian government upset the status quo and simply took back the Georgian province. The confusing and unexpected results of elections on October 3 in Abkhazia indicates that Russia is not in full control there either as

previously thought and that now internal conflict inside the province, which, de facto, has become part of Russia, will replace the conflict between Abkhazia/Russia against Georgia.

I will focus on Moldova and Georgia, mainly on the three frozen conflicts of Trans-Dniester, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Since they are all very similar in nature, Moldova and Georgia can be said to share more in common than Georgia with the other South Caucasian states of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Nagorno-Karabakh frozen conflict is different by nature since it is basically a territorial dispute between two independent states. I must hasten to add, however, that though for Latvia this is not new territory, research conducted on these countries in Latvia is only at its infancy stage: LAI will finish its first project on this region in December. Hence, I have no claim whatsoever to be an expert on the area. My approach is strategic in as much as my country is increasingly being involved on the bilateral level with both countries and I have visited Georgia on a number of occasions as the Latvian board member of the International Security Advisory Board.

My strongest knowledge base are Baltic-EU/NATO and Russia relations and I see that the policy pattern conducted by Russia against the Baltic states since 1991 is similar to that carried out by Moscow in the in-between region's newly-independent states. What failed in the Baltic States has been more successful elsewhere, but the linkage between these states and the Baltics still exists today since Russia has not given up on the Baltics despite EU and NATO membership. Political and economic pressures continue to be applied which makes the capitals in the Baltics particularly sensitive to what is happening further east and south-east of their borders. In Moscow's eyes the only difference between the Baltic States and the in-between countries is that the former now belong to the second tier of Russian influence while those countries that have not escaped into the EU and NATO are not protected and hence fall into the first tier or sphere of influence.

My bottom line is that if one looks more closely at what is Western policy - if it can be called that - toward the frozen conflicts in both countries one cannot help but wonder if by default rather (than by design) we may be heading into a Yalta 2 situation. For Georgia less so, since Georgia minus the two provinces of Abkhazia and

South Ossetia is under the protection of the USA as manifested in the Training and Equip program being carried out by the Pentagon and the building of the major oil pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan. Germany, Turkey and Great Britain also do considerable work in strengthening the Georgian state. The Baltic states are also active, but their main contribution is their experience as successful transitional states. I note that today and tomorrow President Saakashvili is visiting Latvia to sign a bilateral cooperation agreement.

Nevertheless, if these two provinces will become permanently detached from Georgia, i.e. become parts of the Russian Federation, the end result may be that Georgia as a state becomes another frozen conflict. I will test my "Yalta 2" impression in the rest of my short intervention and, in the conclusion, offer suggestions of a policy relevant nature.

The Issue

The issue at hand is that the "empire" (I use this term for want of a better term) that has emerged in Europe in the form of the European Union is benign by nature with multi-layered centers of power and hence ill-suited to "squeeze" anything unless countries willingly submit to being squeezed. If this happens, then the EU has tremendous power on almost all levels of societal activity. But the EU is not ready to squeeze, for now it has no grand strategic vision for the in-between countries, and I am not sure what its strategic vision for Russia is either other than the understanding that it's a long-term difficult strategic partner. The EU has many centers of power and after Putin demonstrated his skill in playing Kyoto protocol card, and that the EU has a growing dependency on Russian natural gas I doubt if the EU will be ready to go beyond the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) and the new Action Plans (AP) now being drafted with the belt of countries in the in-between zone. The AP is the main instrument of the EU in its European Neighborhood Plan (ENP) and is a list of tasks and criteria to be fulfilled in political, economic and legislative areas, tailor-made for each individual country. Moldova is the first country to have adopted it and implementation will take three years. The Commission has agreed to it and now awaits the decision of the Council of Ministers. This time-span is shorter than the EU proposed because Moldova hopes that it will, at least, get an association agreement after its implementation, which is a necessary step toward membership.

However, the AP's, like the PCA's, have no reference to possible membership and no association agreements are foreseen by the EU. Some critical voices in Moldova doubt that the AP will offer much more than the existing PCA that it replaces.¹ Yet an association agreement with Moldova would dramatically change the situation in the break-away Trans-Dniester district. The EU would have to assume responsibility. In fact, the EU is already increasing pressure on Ukraine on border issues in anticipation that Romania will join in 2007. I will return to this shortly.

In other words, the in-between countries, all European countries, are not being given the benefit of doubt that Turkey, which only has a small portion of its territory in Europe, was given in 1963. The issue of Turkey's membership, by the way, can have a decisive impact on further enlargement because Turkey could be the lynchpin that forces the EU to define the EU's identity, absorption capacity, and outer limits of its "empire."

I confine my remarks to the EU. NATO is a different "animal," certainly not an "empire." Integration in NATO is on a much lower level than with the EU, mainly on the military inter-state level. I will just point out that both the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq must be factored into the issue of NATO policies toward the in-between region. I venture to say that Iraq is not only draining American resources and hence attention away from the frozen conflicts, but may also strain NATO's resources.

With regard to Russia we now have accumulated 13 years of experience in relations with her and an extensive data base of her policy toward Russia has referred to as the "near abroad". We can go back even further in time, but let's remain with 1991. After the dissolution of the Soviet empire we see that several ideas were floated about the ways and means to restore Russian strength and the catchword became "partial restoration of the empire."

One of the most famous – or infamous- proponents of this vision was Sergei Karaganov, who outlined a three-pronged strategy for its implementation after ruling out a full restoration of the empire and unequivocal support for the former parts of the

¹ Igor Montenau, "Moldova and the EU Neighborhood Policy", draft research paper, research project Wider Europe – Direct Neighbors, Latvian Institute of International Affairs.

empire. This is a very interesting formulation, which, because it was implemented, has had – and will have even more - dire consequences both for Russia and for the former republics that thought and continue to think differently.

The three prongs are:

1. Ethnic Russians as instruments of foreign policy;
2. Large scale investments in order to create economic and political enclaves in the new states;
3. Russian language promotion, especially for the new officer class, who must be trained in Russia.²

I will refer to just two of the prongs, the economic and ethnic instruments. Judy Dempsey recently wrote in the IHT that Russia enjoys almost total control in the supply, sale and distribution of natural gas and oil in the countries that just joined the EU and NATO, from Estonia down to Bulgaria. For the EU as a whole, Russia already supplies 44% of natural gas and 18% of crude oil.³ In the in-between countries, one need not add, Russia enjoys total control.

My point is that the black economy completely controls the economy of the frozen conflicts in Trans-Dniester, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow must assume full responsibility for this state of affairs, since they are political enclaves of Russia in Moldova and Georgia.

When Georgia moved against the Ergneti market in South Ossetia this August, Georgia closed the biggest source of contraband in Georgia. The market got its contraband goods through the Roki tunnel from North Ossetia, i.e. Russia. If the market is not opened again, then that is the end of that frozen conflict since the “government” of South Ossetia, who want to join their statelet to Russia, is wholly dependent on the illegal trafficking of goods.

² Atis Lejins, “Latvia in a Post-Cold War Europe,” in Arne Olav Brundtland and Don M. Snider (eds.) *Nordic-Baltic Security: An International Perspective*, CSIS/NUPI, Washington, D.C., Oslo, 1994, pp. 31-55.

³ Judy Dempsey, *International Herald Tribune*, Oct. 1, 2004.

The same holds true for Abkhazia and even more so for Trans-Dniester. Huge amounts of sugar, for example, enter into Trans-Dniester from Ukraine and then return to Ukraine or elsewhere in another form. It is said that if the border between Trans-Dniester and Ukraine would be closed for just one month then this statelet would also collapse. Apparently very close cooperative ties exist between Ukraine and Russia that promote the black economy in this region.

With regard to the ethnic factor no further elaboration is needed to see that different nationalities and ethnic groups have been used in promoting the conflicts in Moldova and Georgia that led to the establishment of the break-away provinces as political enclaves of Russia. Basaev and his battalion of Chechens fought against Georgia in Abkhazia. It is hard to imagine that he could be done without the direction of Russian intelligence services. Several years later Basaev strolled into Dagestan with a powerful cohort of fighters from Chechnya, which served as the catalyst for the second Chechen war and which, in turn, propelled Putin to power. And now we have Beslan and the prospect of a Caucasian war based on ethnic lines.

Recommendations

This brings me to the conclusion, mainly, the political solution to the frozen conflicts. Moldova is putting together an Action Plan for the conflict strategy settlement based on the 3 D's. This is the demilitarization, decriminalization, and democratization of the secessionist region. Can anyone have objections to such a strategy? It fits in perfectly with the EU and NATO promotion of common values and, more to the point, is in the legitimate interests of both organizations. The problem will be finding a new format to carry out this strategy, since the old and present format is part of the problem, not its solution. This brings me back to the "Yalta 2" scenario. If the government of Moldova rejects the present pentagonal format of Moldova, Trans-Dniester, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, how can we insist on keeping this bankrupt arrangement?

The test will be in the format according to the formula 3 plus 1 plus 3 as advocated by Moldova, mainly, the OSCE, EU, USA – Moldova - Ukraine, Romania and Russia.

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Only then can the frozen conflict in Moldova be solved but it is a question of political will on the part of the EU and USA.

Georgia, as far as I know, has not elaborated a similar sophisticated plan for the settlement of its two frozen conflicts, but it is clear that the UN in Abkhazia and several OSCE observers in South Ossetia (even if they would be increased in number) is not the answer. Georgia could follow the Moldovian example.

Let me finish by saying that I would be most surprised if the seven new EU member countries will go along with the old members in upholding the status quo in the frozen conflicts. Upholding them means implementing Yalta 2. This is impossible. Poland has already signalled its support for the new Moldavian position and it will not be alone. The Baltics could easily have gone the way of Moldova as victims of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had it not been for the support of some friends and a strong political will to break out of the Russian re-integration process.