THE UKRAINE WAR AND THE NATURE OF RUSSIAN POWER

How Russia's 'de facto state playbook' keeps 'frozen' conflicts warm

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Sophie Gueudet

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Author: Sophie Gueudet

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, The University of Edinburgh
Old College, South Bridge
Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566
Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005
E-mail: peacerep@ed.ac.uk

PeaceRep.org
Twitter: @Peace_Rep_
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/PeaceRepResearch
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/peace_rep_/

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About the Author

Sophie Gueudet works as PeaceRep Ukraine's post-doctoral researcher. A historian of war and conflict, she specialises on separatism and secession, contested states and unresolved territorial conflicts, and civil-military relations in intra-state wars in Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Her current research agenda deals with the effects of the war against Ukraine on Russia's constellation of client de facto states.

Introduction

Among the scenarios elaborated by Ukraine's Western partners to bring the full-scale war to an end, a long-term "freeze" has been proposed[1] as one of the possible options. Experts and diplomats that support this proposal highlight both Kyiv and Moscow's reluctance to compromise and find a sustainable negotiated solution to satisfy each other war goals.

Instead, an armistice agreement may be struck in which Ukraine gives up the goal of re-taking all its territory in the immediate term but maintains a commitment to this as a longer-term goal and does not recognize the legitimacy of Russia's annexation of Crimea and other Ukrainian territory. This would see frontlines becoming informal borders and the full-scale warfare diffusing into a latent but permanent state of crisis. Given the current attritional state of the war, this is a prospect that should be taken very seriously. At the time of writing, it can be reasonably considered a plausible trajectory. The proposal is attractive to some of Ukraine's partners and has been privately discussed by diplomats and officials as a possible for some time. It would decrease the economic and political costs of backing Ukraine and deal with the "war fatigue" in public opinion. This outcome may also satisfy Russia, which has been unable to demonstrate its military superiority on the battlefield. This relative failure means it could go for an exit strategy short of a definite settlement, to be thawed at the regime's convenience and which grants Moscow a form of semi-perpetual leverage in Ukrainian domestic politics and a route back to influence and a semi-normalisation of relations at the regional and global levels.

Given the plausibility of this potential scenario, a consideration of Russia's patron-client relations in other so-called frozen conflict can provide a useful evidence base to reflect upon how Russia might operate in such a context. The post-Cold war history of Eastern and South-East Europe and the Caucasus broadly has two streams of unresolved territorial conflicts. The first are those deemed as 'frozen' territorial conflicts, between Transnistria and Moldova, South-Ossetia and Georgia, Abkhazia and Georgia. The second are those that, despite having been formally settled through peace agreements that reintegrated the breakaway entity into its parent-state, remain unstable, indeed sometimes highly volatile, like Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The first category, the formally "frozen" conflicts, short of perennial and viable mechanisms of conflict resolution, remained stalled on a precarious but long-lasting status quo. Each of the parties had an incentive to maintain this precariousness rather than attempting to decisively change the balance of forces in their favour. The basic dynamic which can be observed in these conflicts has the following features: the breakaway authorities' governance system was never recognised internationally as legitimate; the 'parent-state' did not have the military capacity and/or legitimacy to win back those territories by force or negotiation; European states and the US devolved to the OSCE the responsibility for keeping the conflict under control, i.e., preserving the status quo; and finally, the Russian Federation, though structurally weakened at the time, was recognised as a third party in all peace negotiation formats.

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[1] For example, a number of RAND Corporation figures have put this forward. See Charap, S., and Priebe, M., 2023. Avoiding a Long War U.S. Policy and the Trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict. RAND Corporation.

Yet, the concerns voiced in the aftermath of February 2022 regarding the risks the war in Ukraine spilling over to those territories illustrate how volatile the various status quo settlements remain and how the entities born of those conflicts, despite their surprising endurance and demonstrated agencies and capacities in building relatively functioning systems of governance, remain incredibly permeable to the interference of external forces. This structural vulnerability arises from the mechanisms of the 'de facto state playbook' that Russia, as an external but omnipresent actor, initiated and strengthened throughout the last three decades. This term, coined by scholars Tetyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff when unpacking Russia's approach to the occupied areas of Donbas since 2014 and to the other Ukrainian territories seized since the beginning of its war on Ukraine, refers to a pivotal strategy for the achievement of the Kremlin's strategic objectives in the Black Sea region and beyond[2]. What makes this 'playbook' successful is the combination of Russia's status of third party to several peace agreements and a tight system of patron-client relations, which instrumentalises the irresolution of these conflicts to retain influence over the republics that were born from the dissolution of the USSR.

As a result, lingering territorial conflicts and de facto statehood have become a major component of Russian power projection and one of its quickest inroads in Eastern and most recently South-East Europe. However, the strategic issues they raise for regional and European security are often overlooked. It is within this context that proposals to try to bring about an armistice that would result in a 'freezing' of the conflict should be assessed. This report identifies some of the potential risks of this path for European and global security in light of the experience of the Russian 'de facto states playbook'. It argues that unresolved conflicts easily become fertile ground for attempts from state or non-state actors to implement their own (geo)political agenda.

Using the examples of South-East and Eastern European unresolved territorial conflicts, this paper aims to demonstrate why freezing is not a strategy, in the sense that it will never bring a fair peace or durable security to Ukraine, its neighbours and the rest of Europe, and will only keep it exposed to future Russian interferences and aggressions. Policy-makers should therefore distinguish between what may become a short term messy reality on the ground from a long-term strategy. It is therefore important that, in the event of some form of armistice agreement, policy makers are alert to and develop strategies to address Russia's de facto state playbook over the longer-term. Freezing the conflict is not a desired endpoint as such, but a possible outcome from a military stalemate. For example, if Ukraine is unable to mount an effective counteroffensive to liberate its territories the Government and its allies may be unable to prevent the consolidation of de facto statehood engineered and assisted by Russia. If that is the case, then it would become even more necessary to analyse the Russian 'de facto states playbook' in order to develop alternatives methods of engagement with de facto states, which counter the influence of and do not legitimise sectarian and kleptocratic agents in order not to let the Russian Federation hijack mechanisms of conflict resolutions to extend its power base in the region and globally.

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[2] Malyarenko, T., & Wolff, S. (2022), The Changing "De-facto State Playbook": From Opportunism to Strategic Calculation, Ponars Eurasia, 27 May 2022, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-changing-de-facto-state-playbook-from-opportunism-to-strategic-calculation/

The multifaceted "de facto state playbook(s)": how Russia engages with "frozen" conflicts

The "de facto state playbook" is also to be defined as an evolving, variable tool that adapts to the political realities of the target territories.[3] The playbook - or rather the *playbooks'* - diversity is illustrated by the strategic shift operated by Russia between achieving political leverage over the de facto states' parent states (Moldova, Georgia, and later on Ukraine) to securing effective land capture and control in pursuit of geostrategic and geo-economic interests through the establishment of subordinated system of de facto governance that eventually led, for Eastern Ukraine, to annexation. Therefore, the "de facto state playbook" is to be defined according to fluctuant dynamics that have in common to install and secure degrees of leverage and control over Russia's galaxy of client de facto states born out of the dissolution of the USSR for geopolitical and geostrategic purposes. It seeks to achieve this through the perpetuation of "formalised political unsettlements" that keep territorial conflicts unresolved and sustain the de facto statehood status quo[4]; the vital assistance in security, economic and political resources necessary to de facto statecraft[5]; and strong intergovernmental linkages[6]. Indeed, Eurasian de facto states have demonstrated a "strange endurance" given the burdens of non-recognition and truncated sovereignty that weigh on their political systems and their institutions.[7] Transnistria, Abkhazia, and to a lesser extent South-Ossetia have carried out relatively successful enterprises of state and nation-building, and effectively exercise sovereignty over their citizens and control over the territories their authorities claim.

Scholarship on de facto statehood has correctly underlined that those de facto states have an agency of their own and can demonstrate relative degrees of statehood. Nonetheless, their endurance must also be heavily attributed to the omnipresent role of Russia in the domestic politics, economies and security of these entities. This 'omnipresence' stems from two interconnected factors: the endorsement of Russia as third party in the conflict resolution mechanisms and agreements that sustain the status quo on which de facto statehood is built; and the patron-client systems Moscow developed and strengthened, offering direct inroads in the lives of those entities and by repercussion, into those of the states they broke away from.

Russia, from the early 1990s, has been a prolific actor in peace negotiations, with a track record of being a third party to 132 peace agreements.[8] Those concerning territorial conflicts that broke out in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR represent a distinct strand, whose most striking characteristics is their unresolved status and

[3] Malyarenko, T., & Kormych, B. (2023). New Wild Fields: How the Russian War Leads to the Demodernization of Ukraine's Occupied Territories. *Nationalities Papers*, 1–19.

[4] Bell, C., and Pospisil, J., 2017. Navigating Inclusion in Transitions from Conflict: The Formalised Political Unsettlement. Journal of International Development, 29, pp. 576–593.

[5] Blakkisrud, H. (2023). Surviving Without Recognition: De Facto States. In *The Routledge Handbook of Self-Determination and Secession* (pp. 343-358). Routledge.

[6]Gerrits, A. W., & Bader, M. (2016). Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution. *East European Politics*, *32*(3), 297-313.

[7] de Wall, Thomas, Uncertain ground: Engaging with Europe's de facto states and breakaway entities, Carnegie Europe, December 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/deWaal_UncertainGround_final.pdf

[8] Badanjak, S. (2023). Third Parties in Peace Agreements: First Look at New Data and Key Trends (Global Transitions Report). PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh

weak prospects in coming to a permanent settlement and bringing about a viable and sustainable peace. The 1992 ceasefire agreement in Transnistria, the 1994 ceasefire agreement in Abkhazia and the 2020 ceasefire agreement in Nagorno-Karabakh all entailed the deployment of Russian peacekeeping contingents. It also gave Russia, as a third party to all of the agreements, the opportunity to shape its own variation of peace-building founded on an illiberal approach to conflict management, in clear opposition with globally promoted norms and practices.[9] In Transnistria, in addition to a negotiated tripartite Joint Control Commission (JCC) with Romania and Moldova, Russia stationed the remains of its 14th Army, whose some soldiers "defected" to fight alongside Transnistrian armed forces in 1992, even though the presence of this Operational Group (OGRF for Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria) is not part of the ceasefire plan.[10] Until today, the deployment of the OGRF is highly criticised by Moldovan authorities for operating without a mandate, illegally monitoring a massive depot that houses approximately 20,000 tons of munition in Cobasna and running unauthorised training exercises in the security zone defined by the ceasefire. Without a doubt, such a blatant distortion of the peace agreement represents a disincentive for Moldova not to reintegrate militarily the breakaway entity, and therefore ensure the viability of the status quo on the ground.

The cases of the Russian peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia and South-Ossetia also demonstrated how conflict management mechanisms are designed to foster a "controlled instability" that gives Moscow leverage in its relations with Georgia and over regional politics. While the 3000 Russian troops deployed in Abkhazia following the Moscow Agreement of 1994 did put an end to armed hostilities, they did not fulfil any other mission required for a comprehensive settlement of the conflict, including the return of IDPs, and proved seminal military assets in the 2008 invasion of Georgia.[11] Finally, the disastrous outcome of the most recent instance of Russian engagement into peacekeeping activities, Nagorno-Karabakh, has shown that the role of peacekeepers was mostly to serve as an instrument of its power play with Turkey and did not contribute towards finding sustainable mechanisms for conflict resolution. As is well known, its prime position in the Minsk process enabled Russia to fully back armed separatism in Eastern Ukraine, and repeatedly drove the attempts of conflict resolution set up by the Trilateral Contact Group to a stalemate. By adopting the status of a third party mediator to the Minsk II agreement, rather than an aggressor-party, Russia made extensive use of plausible deniability in its direct involvement along DNR and LNR authorities and armed groups,[12] As Cindy Wittke argues, the Minsk agreements cannot be read as meaningless, empty ""scraps of paper", but rather as a set of arrangements aimed at "shap(ing) politics and future processes of dialogue and negotiation over the effective, legitimate exercise of political power in the eastern regions of Ukraine".[13] The full-scale invasion proved that they were not meant at negotiating and bringing an end to the conflict, but rather, for Russia, at putting together the conditions for a "formalised political unsettlement"

[9] Owen, C., Juraev, S., Lewis, D., Megoran, N., & Heathershaw, J. (Eds.). (2018). Interrogating illiberal peace in Eurasia: Critical perspectives on peace and conflict. Rowman & Littlefield.

[10] Potter, B. (2022). Unrecognized Republic, Recognizable Consequences: Russian Troops in" Frozen" Transnistria. *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, *13*(1), 168-188.

[11] RUSSIA DISCARDS ITS "PEACEKEEPING" OPERATION IN ABKHAZIA, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 5 Issue: 196

[12] «Путин признал наличие в Донбассе' решающих военные вопросы 'россиян», RBC, 17 December 2015.

[13] Wittke, C. (2019). The Minsk Agreements–more than "scraps of paper"?. *East European Politics*, *35*(3), 264-290.

that laid the basis for implementing a "de facto state playbook". This set the stage for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 by installing separatist structures of governance with extremely strong linkages to Russia that later turned into launchpads for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In short, Russian involvement in the peace processes in post-Soviet territorial conflicts allows the obstruction of internationalised negotiations and enables the status quo on which to build its "de facto state playbook" strategy that offers both political levers and strategic advantages to the Kremlin in the region. What Moscow had in mind when negotiating was to reach to, in the case of Eurasian de facto states, more or less "formalised political unsettlement", by perpetuation unresolved conflict into "a set of agreed political and legal structures that lead to perpetual 'transition' characterised by no war-no peace experiences (…)"[14] from where to build and expand a constellation of client entities that relied on Moscow primarily as a guarantee against forced reintegration within the parent state, but also as main security provider. The database on De Facto states produced by the De Facto research unit in Tartu clearly show how pivotal external military support from the patron is for ensuring de facto states' survival. 100% of the de facto states that made it through time could count on the supply of troops and weapons by external actors, which, in the case of Eurasian de facto states, means Russia[15]. Police forces of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, as well as the South Ossetian armed forces have as a matter of fact been directly integrated in the structures of the Russian army.[16] The enterprise of borderisation, which translated into the materialisation of the unrecognised border along the administrative boundary lines that separate South-Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia, results from a direct involvement of Russian troops stationed along those lines.[17] In 2023, when the Transnistrian government asked Moscow to increase the contingent of peacekeepers in the entity, its representative to Moscow stressed that "(they) are the main security factor on the (banks of the) Dniester. As long as Russia's peacekeeping mission continues, Moldova is shackled in any military plans and preparations against Transnistria".[18]

While security is the cornerstone of Russia's patron-client systems that link the future of de facto states to its political and strategic interests, it has induced relations of dependence in other fields, mostly economical. Russia is the main economic partner of Abkhazia, way beyond Turkey, and "virtually the only one for South-Ossetia".[19] Most of de facto states' budgets heavily, though with discrepancies, depend on Russian assistance, which has nevertheless been steadily decreasing over the years (for South-Ossetia, Russian assistance accounted for 82,1% of its total budget in

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[14] Bell, C., & Pospisil, J. (2017). Navigating inclusion in transitions from conflict: The formalised political unsettlement. *Journal of International Development*, *29*(5), 576-593.

[15] Kursani, S. (2020). *Contested states: the struggle for survival and recognition in the post-1945 international order* (Doctoral dissertation, European University Institute) and Kursani, S. (2021). Reconsidering the contested state in post-1945 international relations: an ontological approach. *International Studies Review*, *23*(3), 752-778.

[16] The New Alliance and Integration Treaty between Russia and South Ossetia: When does integration turn into annexation?, FIIA Comments 9/2015, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/189653/comment9.pdf

[17] K. Kakachia et al. 2017. Mitigating Russia's borderisation of Georgia: A strategy to contain and engage. Georgia: Georgian Institute of Politics

[18] Moldova's breakaway Transnistria asks Russia to increase number of peacekeepers in region, AA, 8 May 2023, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/moldova-s-breakaway-transnistria-asks-russia-to-increase-number-of-peacekeepers-in-region/2891801

[19]Gerrits, A. W., & Bader, M. (2016), *op.cit.*

2020[20], while Transnistrian officials admit openly that Russia contributed in the early 2010s about 80% of their budget[21]). Russia also uses energy politics as a lever for patron-client systems, through arrangement like the "gas subsidy" provided to Transnistria, which generates a fair share of the entity's outcomes through the sale of gas supplied "for free" by Gasprom on the domestic market, while the debt remains formally accumulated by Moldova, as Russia never granted recognition to its client.[22]

Diverse agreements on economic integration also foster the illusion that de facto states' economies can compare to those of fully-fledged states and that patron-client systems are nothing more than conventional forms of partnerships. The signature of treaties of Alliance and Strategic Partnership, and Alliance and Integration in 2014 and 2015 with Abkhazia and South Ossetia already set up a "coordinated foreign policy" and a "single space of defence and security", testifying that patron-client relations also come with a high degree of political linkages. One of the most recent, on a "Common Social and Economic Space" between Russia and Abkhazia signed in 2020, entailed substantial reforms in Abkhazia's vital economic, but also social and political sectors and that has been analysed by specialists as a "preparatory step towards a potential full integration of Abkhazia into the Russian Federation".[23]

This illustrated the Janus-faced nature of the patron-client systems weaved by Russia, which are clearly enablers of de facto statehood but in which strong linkages in vital realms, such as security, economy, domestic politics and institutions, and foreign policy can dramatically impact the future trajectories of the de facto states and reignite crisis and conflict. In this sense, the category of "frozen" itself may be questioned as conflict remains an ever-present dynamic of the organising logic of these entities, albeit one that mostly does not cross a threshold into violence.

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[20] Sebentsov, A. B., Karpenko, M. S., Gritsenko, A. A., & Turov, N. L. (2022). Economic Development as a Challenge for "De Facto States": Post-Conflict Dynamics and Perspectives in South Ossetia. *Regional Research of Russia*, *12*(3), 414-427.

[21]" Konferentsiya Prezidenta Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki Evgeniya Shevchuka", Pervyi Respublikanskii Telekanal, 31 August 2012, available at http:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWeMG-QnLRI.

[22] Comai, G. (2024), "Has Transnistria just entered its last year with Russia's gas subsidy?", Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, 18 January 2024, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Transnistria/Has-Transnistria-just-entered-its-last-year-with-Russia-s-gas-subsidy-229417

[23] Belkania, B. (2023). The "Common Social and Economic Space" Agreement Between Abkhazia and Russia: A Path to Russia?. *Caucasus Survey*, *11*(2-3), 293-311.

The liabilities of the "de facto state playbook" and the (geo)political vulnerabilities of "frozen conflicts"

For its client de facto states, Russia's 'playbook' comes with strings attached. While it might be imagined that a more powerful patron capable of maintaining territorial conflicts in a state of permanent irresolution is incredibly helpful for those entities, and in many respects is, at least for the elites within these entities. Indeed, the scholarship on de facto states are clearly demonstrated that the dynamics of linkage and leverage that bind the clients to their patron have considerably hampered the democratisation processes in the de facto states.[24] Despite attempts at developing democratic governance, driven mainly by the strategy of "democratisation-for-recognition", de facto states' can merely be seen as democratic polities.[25] Russia's "de facto state playbook "and its implementation has fostered kleptocratic, authoritarian regimes and preserved an electoral balance in favour of ethnonationalist parties opposed to negotiating political settlements with the parent states. As an indicator, Freedom House ranks South-Ossetia and Transnistria as "Not free", and Abkhazia as "Partly free". In the case of South-Ossetia, the report notes that "people whose views and interests fall outside the narrow spectrum permitted by Moscow, South Ossetian authorities, and allied private businesses cannot meaningfully participate in the political process" meaning that Russia retains "decisive influence over its politics and governance" and that "local media and civil society are largely controlled or monitored by the authorities, and the judiciary is subject to political influence and manipulation".[26] In the case of Transnistria's 2023 report, Freedom House mentions the incarceration of political opponent Victor Pleşcanov over his critical remarks about the local authorities, the Russian army, and the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, the impact of Russia's patronage over the de facto states' political systems is also visible in the kleptocratic management and capture of the entities' resources, like shown in the case of Transnistria with Sheriff Enterprises, a company owned by ex-KGB agent Viktor Gushan. Not only does the company and its affiliates control 60% of the entity's economy, it also grants Gushan with enormous leverage in domestic politics, notably backing up incumbent Vadim Krasnoselsky, a former Russian police general and former Sheriff executive, in the last two presidential campaigns.[27]

Russia's patronage can easily backfire and bring negative results. These entities can be impacted by the outcomes of Russia's domestic and foreign policies, or worse, be disregarded when they become disposable to Russia's interests. As an example, there have been significant adjustments noticeable in the budget assistance provided to Abkhazia, South-Ossetia and Transnistria, based on Moscow's own economic struggles. The allocation of funds to South-Ossetia has steadily declined between 2010 and 2020, reducing from 98% to the entity's total budget to 82%. In the contest

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[24] Kopeček V., Hoch, T. and Baar, V. (2016). De Facto States and Democracy: The Case of AbkhaziaBulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series, No. 32, Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University, pp. 85–104.

[25] Freedom House, "Report 2023: South-Ossetia", https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-ossetia/freedom-world/2023

[26] Freedom House, "Report 2023: Transnistria", https://freedomhouse.org/country/transnistria/freedom-world/2023

[27] "Moldava's Breakaway Transnistria Re-Elects Leader in Dubious Poll", Balkan Insight, 13 December 2021, https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/13/moldavas-breakaway-transnistria-re-elects-leader-in-dubious-poll/

of the war against Ukraine, Russian Deputy Economy Minister Dmitry Volvach announced that the cash flows towards Skukhumi and Tskhinvali will be running dry in the future: "For example, Russia's portion of co-financing salary hikes for public sector employees in the republics will progressively decline – from 85% in 2022 to 15% by 2025". However, he attributed this change in policy not to the dire economic situation of his country, but rather to a well-thought through and well-implemented strategy of regional development: "The first stage of support, when we could only provide money there and create infrastructure has already concluded. (…) We got everything we could obtain from this stage in terms of economic growth".[28]

The same goes for Transnistria, where in the midst of the 2015 collapse of the ruble, Moscow's budgetary cuts entailed important withholdings of payments to its client, notably the refusal to extend $100 millions in assistance and suspending monthly pension-supplements.[29] It resulted in a major structural crisis, amplified by the lack of other revenue streams and which led the Transnistria authorities to operate severe restrictions in public services and that gravely plundered the industrial sector. This exemplifies that even though Transnistria is often considered as the most accomplished de facto state, it remains highly porous to exogenous dynamics of crisis that might jeopardise the status quo on which its de facto statehood has been built. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine is likely to disrupt the gas subsidy, due to the very high probability that Ukraine will not renew the current deal established five years ago on the transit of Russian gas through its territory which is set to expire in December 2024. For Transnistria, it would translate into the loss of this financial windfall and would threaten the authorities capacities to provide fundamental resources to their population as well as the sustainability of the four big Transnistrian companies that heavily rely on Gasprom subsidies: the JSC Moldova Steel Works in Ribnita (MSW Ribnita), Tirotex, the Ribnita Cement Plant and the Moldavskaya GRES power plant. In the end, the whole socio-economic position of the entity could be disrupted[30]. This may well result in a significant political crisis. So far, there is no sign that Moscow has directly addressed this issue, another proof that the de facto state playbook is fully conditioned to Russian own interests and that the client de facto states are treated as disposable assets within this power constellation.

Cuts in economic assistance to client de facto states represents a hardship that these authorities have to face, but is nothing compared to the patron withholding the security guarantees that determine the very existence of the de facto state. To date, the case of Nagorno-Karabakh is the most striking example of how volatile the patron-client system can be. This rather specific case is distinctive from the other widely cited cases by the 'once removed' position of Russia as the traditional security guarantor of Armenia, which, in turn, acts as the patron towards Nagorno-Karabakh. It is also notable for the relatively recent character of the breakdown and crisis in patron-client relations, as well as the severity of the consequences for the client-state's population. Since the 1994 ceasefire Nagorno-Karabakh's historical patron, Armenia had

[28] "Moscow: "Abkhazia, South Ossetia will be less dependent on Russia"", Caucasus Watch, 21 March 2022, https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/moscow-abkhazia-south-ossetia-will-be-less-dependent-on-russia.html

[29] Can Russia Afford Transnistria?, https://eurasianet.org/can-russia-afford-transnistria

[30] Comai, G. (2024)."Has Transnistria just entered its last year with Russia's gas subsidy?", Osservatorio Balcani I Caucaso, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Transnistria/Has-Transnistria-just-entered-its-last-year-with-Russia-s-gas-subsidy-229417

supported its client de facto statehood through military backups[31] and financial contributions, making up 60% of its revenues[32]. However, following the autumn 2020 resounding defeat, when Armenian forces crumbled in front of a better equipped Azeri army, the role of Armenia as a patron was forever undermined and a Russian-brokered ceasefire, which returned 2/3 of the entity's territory to Azerbaijan, narrowly prevented the entity's dissolution and its violent reintegration.[33] Yet, Russia's involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh has proven extremely contradictory. During a series of clashes between Armenian and Azeri forces in September 2022, Russia remained neutral, and the Russian peacekeepers failed to prevent the one-day war of September 2023 and the mass crimes perpetrated against Karabakh Armenians by the Azeri forces. Even though their mandate was vaguely defined by the 2020 ceasefire agreement, it became quite clear that Russian troops would not directly enter in confrontation with Azerbaijan, or divert any military resources necessary for fighting the war in Ukraine to provide Nagorno-Karabakh with security guarantees in front of the Azeri invasion.[34]

Abkhazia's authorities appear to be fully aware of the structural vulnerabilities induced by their patron-client relations. Opposition politicians and activists have repeatedly voiced concerns about the penetration of Russia in the entity's politics, which they consider potentially damaging to Abkhaz statehood and sovereignty. In 2020, the "Common Social and Economic Space", which has been analysed as an attempt by Moscow to "eliminate a crucial legal barrier against Moscow's further inroads into the de facto republic"[35], raised substantial questions within Abkhaz politics and society about the relationship to Russia. Traditionally, among the constellation of Russia's client de facto states, Abkhazia had stood out as the most determined "to defend its state interests against its protector is considerably larger in Abkhazia than what we can observe elsewhere".[36] This has been confirmed by the discontent manifested among public opinion and political elites after the signing of the 2020 agreement, which are not ready to trade off independent statehood for a deeper integration into Russia despite the greater economic and security guarantee it might provide. Likewise, discourses on the project of a "state union" between Russia and Belarus in which South-Ossetia and Abkhazia might be included, are met with strong scepticism. In August 2023, Medvedev evoked the possibility to incorporate South-Ossetia and Abkhazia to the Russian Federation "in the event of a good reason"[37]which Abkhaz authorities cautiously temporised. Foreign Minister published a statement in which he merely referred to 'the thousand-year statehood

[31] Smolnik, F (2016) Secessionist Rule: Protracted Conflict and Configurations of Non-state
Authority. Frankfurt: Campus.
[32] Ó Beacháin, D Comai, G & Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili, A (2016) The secret lives of unrecognised
states: Internal dynamics, external relations, and counter-recognition strategies. Small Wars & Insurgencies, 27(3),
440-466.
[33] "Defeated Armenia Looks to a New, Post-Russia Foreign Policy", Carnegie Politika, 27 November 2023,
https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91121
[34] Atasuntev, A. (2023), Long-Standing Ties Between Armenia and Russia Are Fraying Fast, Carnegie Politika,
https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90768
[35] Belkania, B. (2023). The "Common Social and Economic Space" Agreement Between Abkhazia and Russia: A
Path to Russia?. *Caucasus Survey*, *11*(2-3), 293-311.
[36] Kolstø, P. (2020). Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations. *Post-Soviet Affairs*,
36(2), 150.
[37] OC (2023), Outrage in Abkhazia after Medvedev suggests annexation to Russia, 25.08.2023, https://oc-media.
org/outrage-in-abkhazia-after-medvedev-suggests-annexation-to-russia/

of Abkhazia is not a subject for discussion 'and expressed gratefulness for the commitment of Russian officials to "the fundamental foundations of bilateral relations[38]". Despite the reaffirmation by President Bzhania, during his visit to Moscow, of the attachment to Abkhazia's statehood, several opposition figures in Abkhazia have blamed the government's permissive attitude toward Russia, which only gives more ground for the Russian authorities to take lightly Abkhaz sovereignty. However, whether local resistance to further integration within Russia, and even, down the line, annexation, would be strong enough to overcome Russian designs remain uncertain, especially given the entity's dire socioeconomic, political and security situation.

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[38] Caucasus Watch (2023). Separatist Leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia Discuss Future with Russia's Medvedev, 27.10.2023, https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/separatist-leaders-of-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-discuss-future-with-russias-medvedev.html

Why the de facto state playbook remains valid

As demonstrated above, Russia's "de facto playbook" is designed with inherent flaws that are likely to backfire for the de facto states, since the volatility of Russia as a peace mediator and as a patron-state has been increasingly exposed following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Yet, some of its clients remain loyal to that system or at least cannot defy its enforcement. In the former DNR and LNR, annexation and institutional integration within the Russian Federation of the former de facto states power structures have not been plain sailing. Despite the recent military setbacks of the Ukrainian forces that darken the prospects of a successful counter-offensive, civic resistance to the Russian occupation remains active and as such Russian rule over the population and the taming of civicness movements cannot be taken for granted[39]. Neither can military and political control of the territories, for a swift consolidation of Russian rule is made complicated by limited military territorial control of the "new regions" as well as pre-existing social, political and administrative divides.[40] Yet, formally, the process is moving ahead: so far, local militias and have been integrated within Russian's military apparatus[41] and foreign policy organs have been transformed into organs of regional representation.[42] The Kremlin also organised regional elections in September 2023 to foster the illusion of legitimate governance and, above all, to ensure the coming to office of politicians from United Russia loyal to the Kremlin and undermine centrifugal forces.[43]

Integration within the Russian Federation is a prospect that South-Ossetian authorities, still consider very much appealing. Former President Bibilov went as far as to sign a decree ordering a referendum on the annexation of South Ossetia by Russia on 17 July 2022. Gagloyev's election in May 2022 put the project on hold, but Medvedev's recent statements on Abkhazia and South-Ossetia joining the "Union State" with Belarus were not met with as much scepticism in South-Ossetia as they were in Abkhazia. According to new President Gagloyev, there is "no consensus on the issue in South Ossetia", but that, providing there was a 'a signal 'from Moscow, a new referendum might be hold. More recently, in October 2023, Vyacheslav Gobozov, Advisor to the President declared that joining the Union State is one of the unconditional foreign policy priorities of Tskhinvali. "Moreover - this is my opinion, and I have never hidden it - this step is much more realistic than direct entry into Russia. It seems to me that joining the Union State, in principle, solves the problems of political and military security of South Ossetia and provides an additional opportunity for the development of our statehood".[44] Such a move will surely reignite

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[39] "Inside occupied Ukraine's most effective resistance movements", The Kyiv Independent, March 11th 2024

[40] "Occupied Ukraine's Turncoat Elites Struggle to Make Their Mark in Russian Politics", Carnegie Politika, 8 August 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90342

[41] "Russia formally integrates proxy militias from eastern Ukraine into Russian military", 21 February 2023, https://kyivindependent.com/isw-russia-formally-integrates-proxy-militias-from-eastern-ukraine-into-russian-military/

[42] "DPR Embassy in Russia to be transformed to mission by next summer — envoy", 22 Novembre 2022, https://dan-news.ru/en/politics/dpr-embassy-in-russia-to-be-transformed-to-mission-by-next-summer--envoy/

[43] "Inside Russia's sham 'election 'in the occupied Ukrainian territories", Open Democracy, 6 September 2023, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-sham-election-ukraine-occupied-territories-donestsk-luhansk-kremlin/

[44] "De-Facto South Ossetian Official Speaks on Georgia's Political Landscape and Relations with Russia", Caucasus Watch, 19 October 2023, https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/de-facto-south-ossetian-official-speaks-on-georgias-political-landscape-and-relations-with-russia.html

a full-scale conflict with Georgia, which might explain Russia's cautiousness on the matter at a time when its eyes, and resources, are solely focusing on Ukraine. Likewise, in a recent interview with the author in February 2024, Abkhazia' Ambassador at large Kan Taniya openly discussed the prospects of leaning closer to Russia given the (geo)political stalemate in which the entity finds itself following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Stressing that the international sanctions imposed on Russia have had dramatic repercussions on the entity and its citizens, he noted that all prospects for engagement with Western diplomacies have been shut down after February 2022, leading to one single option for Abkhazia: embracing the alliance and partnership with Abkhazia's "only friend" and counting on it for new perspectives of international engagement, including with China and Iran. Kan Taniya touched upon an important dimension of the de facto state playbook here: the failure of the "engagement without recognition" strategy pursued by the EU members states, their allies and the international and multilateral organisations and the marginality and isolation of the de facto states.[45] Cautiously avoiding practices of engagement that might be assimilated to a de facto recognition of the secessionist entities, the diplomatic (or lack thereof) action of Western state and non-state actors, especially characterised by the absence of resolve in weighting in conflict resolution mechanisms, has in practice provided some leverage to Russia to expand its "de facto state playbook". While the roots of the "engagement without recognition" strategy remain sensible, especially in light of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine's pathways towards Euro-Atlantic integration, the consequences of not formulating a coherent and clear diplomatic and political alternative plan of action on the so-called "frozen conflicts" in the region clearly help empower Russia as a patron.

The enduring relevance of the "de facto state playbook" is also indicated by the appeals to some separatist groups or leaders outside the region traditionally deemed as 'post-Soviet', where the influence it has progressively secured since 2014 is linked to its willingness and capacities to stir the pot of lingering territorial and ethnic conflicts. The recent and constantly growing proximity between the Bosnian-Serb leaders and the Kremlin provides a clear example of this trend, as well as in Russia's support of Serbia and Kosovo Serb political parties in negotiations surrounding the status of the Northern municipalities. The plausible deniability Moscow attempted to maintain when backing the separatists in Eastern Ukraine clearly lacked credibility. But the effectiveness of their intervention resonated with their fellow separatists in the former Yugoslavia that saw in it an opportunity to secure the support of a more powerful and daring patron than Serbia, their historical one. Both in Kosovo and in BiH, those political forces share the objectives to overthrow the fragile settlements that have put a term to the armed conflict but not to the secessionist projects of Serb nationalist parties. The engagement of separatist leaders with Russia, approved tacitly by their historical patron-state Serbia, traduced their hopes that Moscow would be ready to back centrifugal forces challenging the territorial sovereignty of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Reciprocally, Moscow's revived interests for local separatisms have coincided with the ambition to expand the de facto playbook strategy to the Western Balkans since 2014 and even more clearly since February 2022.

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[45] Interview with Kan Taniya, Ambassador at Large of Abkhazia, February 2024

While Russian support to Kosovo Serb separatists remain at the moment mostly diplomatic[46], Republika Srpska, which has been operating as a de facto secession state since December 2022, is now deeply embedded within the patron-client system. Russia has, at the moment, operated a deep penetration into the sectors of political organisations, security, religion, culture and academia, and mass media.[47] More precisely, Russia's actions as a patron have helped consolidate Dodik's ethnocratic regime in the entity, by endorsing him with the status of Putin's favourite, which brings with it significant electoral clout in a territory where the general geopolitical culture leans toward Moscow.[48] It also provides material support for the Dodik regime's effort to make statehood a 'fact on the ground' over the last decade, bringing seminal support in arming and training a heavily militarised police that could very well serve as an army if the regime moves in the direction of violence. The financial windmill provided by Russia in RS remains limited, but still extremely welcome in an entity close to bankruptcy: as an example, in 2022, Dodik came back from the Saint-Petersburg International Economic Forum announcing that RS and Russia will jointly build two gas-fired power plants through investments worth a combined 1.5 billion euros.[49] Finally, and above all, Russia has, since 2021, steadily obstructed any institutions and mechanisms responsible for implementing and supervising the peace process and has demanded their closure and the end of international intervention in BiH.[50] The impact of Russian sabotage of the peace process in Bosnia-Herzegovina could be tragic in the hypothesis of the political conflict escalating into armed violence, since it will make all safeguards irrelevant and will burry any coordinated action to prevent full-scale conflict.

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[46] "What does Moscow think about the Kosovo-Serbia issue?", Euractiv, 21March 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/what-does-moscow-think-about-the-kosovo-serbia-issue/
[47] Metodieva A. (2019). "Russian narrative proxies in the Western Balkans" German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019.
[48] Gueudet S. (2023). The Usual Suspects – Russia's Patron Politics in Republika Srpska
[49] "Russia to back €1.5bn investment in two gas-fired power plants in Bosnia's Republika Srpska", https://www.intellinews.com/russia-to-back-1-5bn-investment-in-two-gas-fired-power-plants-in-bosnia-s-republika-srpska-248363/?source=bosnia-and-herzegovina
[50] Office ce of the High Representative (OHR) (2022). 61st Report of the High Representative for Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, 11 May 2022.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The consolidation and endurance facto states are the result of relatively formalised political unsettlement engineered by Russia as a third party and mediator in those conflicts born from the dissolution of the USSR. Despite their patron-client relationship to Russia that provides them with resources key to their survival, they cannot mask their vulnerabilities in front of troubled regional and global politics. They become geopolitical liabilities for European security.

Pretending a conflict is frozen, that is somewhere in between a state of resolution and a state of oblivion, and refusing to address the lingering risks it raises for the populations caught in the middle as a well as for the regional and European security architectures as a whole can backfire at any moment.

The changing role of the Russian Federation as a third party to agreements and mechanisms of conflict resolution and has a patron-state has testified of how fragile the status quo is and how easily can armed violence reignite. The implementation of the "de facto state playbook" in configuration of "formalised political unsettlements" is precisely made to keep active the potential drivers of conflict and violence, especially by ensuring ethnocratic regimes access to security and economic resources.

Through the "de facto state playbook" no matter how flawed, (geo)politically malicious and volatile it turns to be, Russia has designed a strategy to engage with unresolved territorial conflicts and de facto statehood. The strategy of "engagement without recognition" followed by the EU and Western countries to address the issues raised by those conflicts has failed to address Russia's leverage and room for action.

In order to not to repeat the past Western mistakes in dealing with territorial conflicts and contested statehood, the following framework steps should be considered:

1. In relation to the war in Ukraine, it is important to consider how steps taken now may have long-term path dependent impacts. Conditions for irresolution (formalised unsettlement) can generate a 'permanent' state of temporariness which is difficult to dislodge downstream. Parties should be mindful of the risk of legitimising Russia through any peace process. It may be that inclusive, representative and participatory goals are better served by relatively minimal agreements in relation to specific goals, for example on humanitarian needs. An armistice may similarly be desirable over a 'full' peace agreement in the absence of genuine democratic change in Russia.

2. Review and reassess the strategy of engagement without recognition in order to directly challenge Russia's prime position as a third party to those conflicts and as a patron for the de facto states.

3. Address the concrete questions raised by the residual materialities of statehood in Eastern Ukraine, in order to guarantee that no parallel structures of governance can develop and offer an inroad for Russia's imperial project in the region.

Cover Image: A protest in Oslo, Norway.

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