When Frozen Conflicts Melt Down

By Jim Headle
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Can Russian passports become the weapon of choice in disputed regions of the former Soviet Union?

The label "frozen conflict" as applied to the wars that accompanied the breakup of the Soviet Union implies that, some day, they may well "unfreeze." This is what happened in Georgia.

Current events in the Caucasus could be blamed on renewed Russian assertiveness, provocation by the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili seeking Georgia's entry into NATO, and support from the West in the stand-off with the powerful neighbor - even on the geopolitics of pipelines.

But the fundamental issue and the immediate spark of what became a wider war was the unresolved status of the breakaway province of South Ossetia. In this sense, the broader context is the delineation of the borders of the republics of the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, issues which in some cases remain no different to what they were 17 years ago. So what are the implications of the "unfreezing" of the conflicts in Georgia for other such conflicts?

The fate of Abkhazia will most likely be the same as that of South Ossetia. Beyond Georgia, the most direct implications may be for the comparable frozen conflicts of Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) and Transdniester (Moldova). These are breakaway regions which asserted their independence leading to war in the early 1990s. They have attempted to create the institutions of statehood, but remain unrecognized. This limbo status has also contributed to isolation, economic decline, poverty, and organized crime. Recurrent attempts to negotiate solutions run aground on the rock of the irreconcilability of the two sides' demands: on the one hand, the separatists declare the sovereignty of their "state" and recognition of independence as the precondition for any agreement, while the larger state insists that its territorial integrity be preserved and demands that the province be under its sovereignty (albeit with autonomy). Meanwhile, the status quo is preserved by the balance of forces on the ground: in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, supported by Armenia, and in the case of Transdniester, by Commonwealth of Independent States peacekeepers (effectively, Russia).

None of these breakaway regions has been recognized as independent by outside states because so far all governments have operated in line with the principle that the republic borders of the Soviet Union became the international borders when that state dissolved. Georgia can therefore claim to be asserting its legal right to sovereignty over its territory, by attempting to bring South Ossetia under the control of Tbilisi and to affirm the Georgian state's monopoly on the use of force within its borders. On the other hand, Russia accuses the Georgian authorities of reneging on the original cease-fire agreement and resorting to force, with resulting civilian casualties, after having ostensibly agreed to hold negotiations.

THE BALKANS EXAMPLE

There are echoes here of August 1995, when Croatia forcibly reclaimed control of the breakaway Republic of Serb Krajina despite talks being planned for its future. This was supposedly a UN protected area, but UN forces failed to protect it from the Croatian offensive. Western governments urged caution but implicitly condoned the action, noting that the region was part of Croatia, while Russia called on the United Nations to uphold the cease-fire agreements, and suggested that NATO should consider using force to protect the region. As the guarantor of the cease-fire agreement in South Ossetia, Russia is effectively claiming now to do what it said the UN should have done in Krajina in 1995.

Yet, in 1995, Russia's argument was weakened by the fact that, not long before, it had resorted to force itself to reassert sovereignty over its breakaway republic of Chechnya. That time it failed, but in 1999 it was more successful when it again overrode an interim peace agreement with Chechnya, justifying it in terms of regaining control of Russian territory and restoring order in a lawless region whose actions threatened the security of the rest of the country. It is therefore difficult to discern any consistency of principles on the part of Russia with respect to observing cease-fires or interim peace agreements and not resorting to force in frozen conflicts. In fact, in relation to South Ossetia, Russia is acting more in line with NATO's response to Serbia's attempts to crush separatism in Kosovo, as shown by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's use of the term "genocide" to describe the initial Georgian offensive.

Until now, there has been more consistency over the status of breakaway regions. Russia may have provided economic support and security guarantees to places such as South Ossetia, but it has not recognized them as independent (unlike Turkey in relation to Northern Cyprus, for example). Russian policy-makers have, until now, argued that the principle of territorial integrity should be sacrosanct, thus justifying their action in Chechnya and condemning countries which have recognized Kosovo as independent. However, Russian policy-makers have long made it clear that if Kosovo did effectively become an independent state there would be implications for comparable breakaway provinces in the former Soviet Union. It is quite possible that this change is now occurring, and that Russia will recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent or incorporate them into the Russian Federation.

Russian policy-makers always accused their Western counterparts of double standards in their application of principles of territorial integrity and self-determination in the Balkans, and attributed the differing outcomes in different political entities of the former Yugoslavia to NATO's selective use of force. But we may now see the outcomes of secessionist conflicts in the former Soviet Union also being determined by the selective use of force: on the part of Russia, crushing separatism in the Russian Federation itself, but supporting it in neighboring Georgia. And, if these conflicts are beginning to unfreeze, other cases may be settled by relative power if not actual use of force. Where the state is strong, autonomy may be the outcome; where it is weak, or where the separatists are supported by a strong neighbor, independence may result.

President Ilham Aliev of Azerbaijan, for example, has also threatened to re-take Nagorno-Karabakh by force, and may be more successful than his Georgian counterpart as Russia has no direct interest, Armenia is weak and isolated, and Azerbaijan has a larger, well-equipped and -trained army and, like Russia, huge revenues from energy exports.

Russia always accused Western countries of acting inconsistently and partially in relation to the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, by condoning the use of force by Croatian and Bosnian authorities to reassert control of their territories, yet condemning it in the case of Serbia in Kosovo, and indeed intervening in support of the separatists in the name of humanitarian values. But this present conflict directly contradicts the principles used to justify its previous war (in Chechnya). Rather than look for consistency of abstract principles, it is probably more realistic to understand events in terms of Russia asserting its right to use force in its immediate neighborhood and striving to demonstrate that its influence still counts; indeed, pursuing the Kosovo parallel, Russian credibility is at stake in Georgia in the same way that NATO's was in former Yugoslavia.

PASSPORT DIPLOMACY

Most alarming is the deliberate ploy of extending Russian citizenship to the inhabitants of breakaway regions of other states - as was done in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This has always seemed to be a step toward legitimizing a potential intervention. Will the model now be applied elsewhere? What, for example, if Ukraine continues to seek NATO membership, and ethnic Russians in Crimea are granted citizenship?

If events in Georgia are an indication of a wider shift in Russian thinking toward reconsidering the borders of the former Soviet republics, then it could have alarming implications. However, there are no clear ethical reasons why the borders should not be changed if a significant majority of the population of a province wish it. After all, the borders were often designed on the principle of divide-and-rule by Soviet authorities or, in the case of Crimea, transferred to Ukraine on the whim of Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. Of course, such moves threaten stability in the former Soviet space; but the existence of frozen conflicts shows that that stability is sometimes only ice-thin.

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