STUDIA UBB. EUROPAEA, LXII, 1, 2017, 105-125

COMPLEXITIES AND CHALLENGES WITHIN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: ETHNO-POLITICAL SECESSIONISM, FROZEN CONFLICTS, AND *DE FACTO* STATES IN SOUTH CAUCASUS

Laura M. Herța*

DOI:10.24193/subbeuropaea.2017.1.06
Published Online: 2017-03-15
Published Print: 2017-03-30

Abstract:
This article presents and analyzes several key concepts associated with the South Caucasus region, such as secessionism, frozen conflicts, and de facto states. The main goal is to emphasize complexities of this region in terms of ethno-political turmoil and main challenges with respect to the Eastern Partnership. The article is organized in two main parts. The first two sections will briefly overview EU's relations with countries within the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) and the theoretical approaches on ethnic conflicts. The methodological approach employed in this paper will focus on constructivist claims relating to ethno-political conflicts. The second part of the paper will analyze three case-studies (Abkhazia, South-Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh) by focusing on ethno-political secessionism, frozen conflicts, and de facto statehood.
Keywords: Eastern Partnership, South Caucasus, frozen conflicts, *de facto* states, secessionism

The Eastern Partnership and South Caucasus

In 2004 the European Neighbourhood Policy was initiated. In 2003 the EU appointed a special representative for the South Caucasus in order to support processes of democratization and conflict resolution. The Eastern

* Laura M. Herța holds a PhD in History and is currently Associate Professor of International Relations within the Department of International Relations and German Studies, Faculty of European Studies, Babeș-Bolyai University.
Contact: laura.herta@ubbcluj.ro

Partnership Initiative (EaP) was launched in 2009, at the Prague Summit, for Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Throughout the 1990s the EU had not played a decisive role in the South Caucasus, but in 1999, the loose Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) came into effect. On the one hand, the EU assumed an active role in promoting human rights and designed the Eastern Partnership, *inter alia*, as platform on democracy, good governance and stability. On the other hand, the European Union is often analyzed in terms of "normative power Europe."[1] The latter role entails the EU capacity to set norms and then export them through the European Neighbourhood Policy (perceived as process of norms diffusion in the European 'near abroad') and especially through the Eastern Partnership. The EU established bilateral relations with countries within the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and one chief objective herein is human rights and stability promotion.

Both Georgia and the secessionist regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) were beneficiaries of EU assistance.[2] In 2006, the European Union and Georgia signed the Action Plan on cooperation. In June 2014, Georgia (together with Moldova and Ukraine) signed the Association Agreement with the European Union. Ever since the Maastricht Treaty, the European Union has set the goal of "preserving peace, preventing conflict and strengthening international security" (Art III-193 of draft Constitutional Treaty) and this objective was embedded in the EU-Georgia Action Plan, as Priority area 6 (*Promote peaceful resolution of internal conflicts*), in order to "contribute to the conflict settlement in Abkhazia, Georgia and Tskinvali Region/South Ossetia, Georgia, based on respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders; [...]."[3]

As far as Armenia and Azerbaijan are concerned, they seemed to have embarked on a different path, by joining the Eurasian Economic Union (with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), and neither of them signed the Association Agreement with the European Union. EU's relations

[1] Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 40, 2, 2002.
[2] Nathalie Tocci, *The EU and Conflict Resolution. Promoting peace in the backyard*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
3 EU-Georgia Action Plan, available at
[http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/action_plans/georgia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf], accessed March 2017.

with Armenia are framed within the EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which had been signed in 1999 and "which provides for wide-ranging cooperation in the areas of political dialogue, trade, investment, economy, law-making and culture."[4] Just like Georgia, Armenia benefits from EU assistance through the European Neighbourhood Instrument. EU relations with Azerbaijan are also developing under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. However, starting with 2016 the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy received a mandate to negotiate a comprehensive agreement with the Republic of Azerbaijan. Since Azerbaijan is an energy partner for the EU, cooperation in the energy field is important. Such cooperation is based on the Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the European Union in the Field of Energy which had been signed in 2006. In areas such as human rights promotion, democratization and stability, EU-Azerbaijan relations have been strained, as "the EU continues to stress the importance of issues relating to defence of human rights, space for civil society and freedom of media, expression and assembly."[5] However, "engagement with civil society is a prominent feature of EU cooperation in Azerbaijan, reflected by the fact that the EU is the largest foreign donor to civil society in Azerbaijan."[6] The unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh represents a major hurdle in regional stability.

In what follows, this article will explore certain ethnic features of the South Caucasus region and will show how secessionism and *de facto* states affect EU-Georgia, EU-Armenia, and EU-Azerbaijan relations and complicate the Eastern Partnership objectives. The following part will focus on different theoretical approaches on ethnic conflicts and separatist movements. The last section of this article will tackle ethno-political conflicts in South Caucasus and will show how ethno-political turmoil led to breakaway regions and later to the emergence of *de facto* states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

---

[4] Armenia and the EU, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/896/armenia-and-eu_en], accessed March 2017.

[5] EU-Azerbaijan relations, European Union External Action, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/4013/EU-Azerbaijan%20relations], accessed March 2017.

[6] *Ibidem*.

Theoretical approaches on ethnic conflicts

It has become a truism to say that ethnic rivalry, separatism and identity conflicts are salient issues and pose real threats to any integrative processes. Ethno-political conflicts are protracted and, sometimes, violent forms of rivalry in which group leaders use ethnic symbols and rely on ethnic group mobilization in order to achieve political goals.

The literature on this topic abounds and several schools of thought centred on ethnicity provide different arguments relating to group identity and ethno-political mobilization. The Primordial School holds that "ethnicity is so deeply ingrained in human history and experience that it cannot be denied that it exists, objectively and subjectively, and that it should therefore be considered a fact of life in the relations between individuals and groups who all have an ethnic identity."[7] As such, ethnic identity is a "subjectively held sense of shared identity based on objective cultural criteria"[8] or a "biological given" or a "natural" phenomenon.[9] Anthony D. Smith referred to six "foundations" of ethnic identity: existence of group name, belief in common ancestry, historical memories (which are transmitted or diffused over generations), shared objective cultural attributes (law, customs and institutions, religion, language, crafts and architecture), attachment to a specific territory (group homeland), and feelings of common solidarity with other group members.[10] In contrast to this understanding, the Instrumentalist School argues that "ethnicity is by no means an indisputable historical fact."[11] Rather, "ethnicity is […] a resource in the hands of leaders to mobilize and organize followers in the pursuit of other interests, such as physical security, economic gain, or political power."[12] Therefore, ethnic identity is exacerbated and gains political significance when "ethnic entrepreneurs invoke and manipulate selected ethnic symbols to create political movements in

---

[7] Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict. A Global Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 33.

[8] Timothy M. Frye, "Ethnicity, Sovereignty, and Transitions from Non-democratic Rule", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 45, no. 2, 1992, p. 602.

[9] Raymond C. Taras; Rajat Ganguly, *Understanding Ethnic Conflict. The International Dimension*, New York: Longman, 2008, p. 11.

[10] Anthony Smith, The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism", in Michael E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 50-51.

[11] Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[12] *Ibidem.*

which collective ends are pursued."[13] Group mobilization is thus triggered, and politicized ethnicity is created, because of "elites who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the group they wish to represent in order to protect their existence or to gain political or economic advantage for their group as well as for themselves."[14]

The Constructivist School rejects both previously presented views and claims that ethnic identity is neither pre-given and natural, nor is it merely a tool which is "invoked and manipulated by ethnic entrepreneurs for individual or collective political ends."[15] In other words, ethnic identity is socially constructed and is internalized by individuals (but the degree of internalization varies). In this article we will undertake the constructivist claims (based on the belief that they are the most convincing ones) and we will present South Caucasus ethno-political issues in the constructivist framework.

One main assumption pertaining to constructivist theorizing is that the social-construction of phenomena which comprise international politics plays a major role in understanding how threats, enemies and crises are construed, perceived and dealt with. Social-constructivist literature emphasizes the role of ideas (which are treated as complementary to material factors or to elements that belong to the so-called "hard politics") and argues that meanings assigned to facts or associated with decisions represent key elements in decision-making processes. Social-constructivist scholars (such as Nicholas Onuf, Martha Finnemore, John Ruggie, Friedrich Kratochwil, Alexander Wendt and others) focus on ideational or social phenomena, on the issue of need (dis)satisfaction and the resulting emotions, and on the mechanisms and conditions under which norms play an influential role in world politics. For instance, Alexander Wendt emphasized the social construction of fear and anxiety and explained how people experience the emotion of satisfaction when needs are met, and how they experience anxiety, fear or frustration when such needs are not met.[16]

---

[13] Ted Robert Gurr, *People versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century*, Washington, United States' Institute for Peace Press, 2000, *apud.*Taras; Ganguly, op. cit., p. 12.

[14] Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, Sage, 1991, p. 8.

[15] Taras; Ganguly, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[16] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 132. Furthermore, Wendt listed five major "material needs", *physical security, ontological security, sociation, self-esteem, and transcendence*, and he explains ontological security in terms of "human beings need [to have] relatively stable expectations about the natural and especially social world around them." (pp. 131-132).

When problematizing ethnic conflict, constructivists reject the idea that ethnic identity is a pre-given or natural phenomenon and contend that "ethnic identities are enduring social constructions" and they are "products of human actions and choices" rather than biologically given.[17] According to Cristoph Zürcher, "ethnicity *per se* is never an explanation for conflict; rather, the way ethnicity is institutionalized and how this institutionalization becomes contested in periods of rapid social change explains conflict."[18]

Valery Tishkov argued against oversimplified typologies and claimed that "the basic methodological weakness of such theories of conflict analysis lies in their vision of groups as collective bodies with needs and universal motivation – not as situations, feelings, or acts of speech."[19] If we adopt such an approach, we then focus on single-factor understandings of the nature and dynamic of conflict. But, when we reject this reductionist typology (which is in fact quantitative), we focus on ethnic boundaries or ethnic divisions whose content, linguistic utterance and narrative are not immutable, but rather altered, interpreted and embedded in (political) speech acts. The convincing and coherent argument developed by Zürcher is that "ethnic boundaries, while not a *cause* of conflict *per se*, become reinforced or even reinvented *during* conflict. The salience of ethnicity can therefore be the result of the 'ethnicization' of conflict. Cultural difference becomes important in the course of conflicts, for it is the material from which the barriers between groups are built."[20]

Ethno-political conflict and secessionism in South Caucasus

In the case of post-Soviet wars, the argument supported here is that the collapse of the Soviet system increased the incentives and opportunities for nationalist elites. The Soviet map was based on the "territorialization of ethnicity".[21] This means that administrative units with a defined titular nation were created and were embedded into the hierarchy of Soviet ethno-

---

[17] Taras; Ganguly, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[18] Cristoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2007, p. 54.

[19] Valery Tishkov, "Ethnic Conflict in the Former USSR: The Use and Misuse of Typologies and Data", *Journal of Peace Research*, 36(5), 1999, p. 572.

[20] Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

[21] *Ibidem*, pp. 23.

federalism. The Soviet hierarchy was based on three tiers: 1) the Union Republics (Soviet Socialist Republics/SSRs); 2) the Autonomous Republics (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics/ASSRs), and 3) the Autonomous Regions/Oblasts (Autonomous Oblasts/AOs).[22] As far as our case studies are concerned, Georgia received the status of SSR and the Georgians comprised around 77% out of the total population (followed by the other non-titular groups, namely Armenians, Russians, Azerbaijani, Ossets). Abkhazia was given the status of ASSR and its ethnic demographic composition included a majority of Georgians (approximately 45%) while the Abkhaz represented only 18% of the total population living in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. The Autonomous Oblast South Ossetia displayed a majority of Ossets (66%) and a minority of Georgians (29%).[23] The term *micronationalism* was coined by Ted Gurr in order to describe the independence movements of numerically small groups like the 96,000 Muslim Abkhaz in the north-western corner of Georgia and the 164,000 Ossets in northern Georgia who wanted to be united with the 402,000 Ossets living in the homonym autonomous region in southern Russia.[24] Armenia and Azerbaijan were both Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) while Nagorno-Karabakh was an Autonomous Region/Oblast. The territory of Nagorno-Karabakh comprises 4.400 km^2 and 77% of its population (totalling around 189,000 at the end of the 1980s) are Armenians while 22% are Azerbaijanis.[25] When the Bolsheviks conquered South Caucasus, back in 1920, the formerly independent republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan became SSRs and Nagorno-Karabakh was incorporated

[22] Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers. A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005, pp. 136-138; Zürcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-32; Georgiy I. Mirsky, *On Ruins of Empire. Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Former Soviet Union*, Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 1-10. On Soviet ethno-federalism, see also Jack Snyder, "Introduction. Reconstructing politics amidst the wreckage of empire" and Steven Solnick, "Will Russia Survive? Center and periphery in the Russian Federation", in Barnett R. Rubin; Jack Snyder (eds.), *Post-Soviet Political Order. Conflict and State Building*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

[23] See Zürcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-31 and Pascal Marchand, « Conflits dans l'espace post-soviétique : une géographie de la décomposition impériale », dans Franck Tétart (sous la direction de), *Géographie des conflits*, Paris : Editions Sedes/Cned, 2011, p. 323.

[24] Ted Robert Gurr; Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, second edition, Boulder: Westview Press, 2004, p. 24.

[25] Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

into Azerbaijan, despite the overwhelmingly Armenian population of the region.[26]

Soviet ethno-federalism was meant to guarantee the control of the centre and foster counteraction strategies against aspirations of the various ethnic groups. But, it also proved to be a corrosive factor. Just like Zürcher showed, "the equipping of the union republics with the prerequisites of statehood and the anchoring of their status as sovereign states in the Soviet constitution paved the way for the process of 'sovereignization' that began in 1988."[27] Alongside with this attribute, other specificities of Soviet nationalism, especially the "unusual alliance between Russian nationalism and other nationalisms of other peoples of the USSR"[28] or the phenomenon coined by Ian Bremmer as "matryoshka-nationalism"[29] (the existence of nations inside a larger nation) led to the following cumulative effect: the resurgence of Russian nationalism triggered the revitalization of other national movements and hence provided impetus for conflict. Referring to the Caucasus and to the analogy of the Russian painted doll *matryoshka*, René Does showed that "at the time the Soviet Union collapsed, the striving for greater sovereignty and even total independence was virulent in the autonomous formations lower in the federal hierarchy of the Soviet state as well."[30] The ensuing situation was marked by a downward spiral of mistrust and rivalry. Christoph Zürcher explained this dynamic as follows:

> "The autonomous republics and autonomous oblasts within the union republics viewed the latter's sovereignization and nationalization with concern, since they feared that

[26] Vincenc Kopecek; Tomas Hoch; Vladimir Baar, "Conflict Transformation and Civil Society: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh", Europe-Asia Studies, 68:3, 2016, p. 442; Michael Kambeck; Sargis Ghazaryan (eds.), *Europe's Next Avoidable War Nagorno-Karabakh*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

[27] Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

[28] Taras; Ganguly (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 119.

[29] Ian Bremmer, "Reasserting Soviet Nationalities Theory", in Ian Bremmer; Ray Taras (ed.), *Nations, Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 22.

[30] René Does, "The Ethnic-Political Arrangement of the Peoples of the Caucasus", in Françoise Companjen; László Marácz; Lia Versteegh (eds.), *Exploring the Caucasus in the 21st Century. Essays on Culture, History and Politics in a Dynamic Context*, Amsterdam: Pallas Publication, 2010, p. 54.

> the positive discrimination, which Soviet authorities had guaranteed the titular nations of the ASSRs, could be jeopardized.
> Vice versa, the union republics viewed with mistrust the tendency of 'their' ASSRs to dispute subordination to them or even to make moves toward secession from the SSR. Thus, the weakening of the centre led to a competition between union republics (SSRs) and autonomous republics and regions (ASSRs and AOs), which in Nagorny-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia ended in organized violence."[31]

It was against this background that the Georgian state was challenged by the secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The argument supported here is that there was no strict, cause-effect relation between national mobilization and organized violence. For a while, as Zürcher emphasized, national mobilization was present in "mass rallies [...], exaggerated public use of national symbols, in public discourse, and in the rewriting of national histories."[32] In fact, the inter-ethnic tension between Georgians-Ossets, Georgians-Abkhaz respectively, did not "naturally", inherently, or "automatically" turned into violent armed conflict. Any attempt to de-politicize ethnic conflicts and any reductionist emphasis on their "ethnic nature" lead to an oversimplification that loses its content pertaining to the escalatory dynamic of such ethno-political rivalry. In an extended analysis on the Caucasus, Svante Cornell has argued that the conflicts in South Caucasus cannot simply be described as "ethnic" or "religious" in nature, because "the conflicts are primarily political conflicts over territory and ownership" of such territories.[33] Symbolic politics, discourses that construct the "us *versus* them" dynamic, and the politicizing of territorial, identity, ethnic disputes pertain to the accurate description of conflicts in South Caucasus. Inter-ethnic rivalry and later ethnic violence were the result of (nationalist) political mobilization, not the inescapable triggering factors.

Social-psychological approaches on conflicts share certain assumptions with social-constructivism and delve into (mis)perception, fears and needs.

---

[31] Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 39.
[33] Cornell, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

For instance, one major claim formulated by Herbert Kelman is that "conflict is a process driven by collective needs and fears."[34] Ethnic conflict, then, is triggered by non-fulfilment or the perceived threats to the non-fulfilment of basic needs. One chief common denominator in constructivist and social-psychological theorizing is the role of ideational factors which, instead of competing with, actually completes the role played by material factors. When discussing basic needs, Kelman accurately indicates that "needs include not only obvious material one, such as food, shelter, physical safety [...], but also, and very centrally, psychological ones, such as identity, security, recognition, autonomy, self-esteem, and a sense of justice."[35] Based on the previous constructivist and social-psychological assumptions, we could see that the secessionist wars in Georgia did not follow a line of inherent inter-ethnic belligerence and a form of self-perpetuating endemic rivalry between Georgians-Ossets and Georgians-Abkhaz.

According to Christoph Zürcher, "it would be simplistic to claim that nations and nationalism caused the Caucasian turmoil at the end of the Soviet Union. Rather, it was the institutional legacy of the Soviet Union that shaped the ways in which the concepts of 'nation' and 'state' became contested."[36] We contend that the perception of fears regarding not only material needs of Georgians, Ossets and Abkhaz, but also psychological and ideational ones such as identity, recognition and autonomy, coupled with the corrosive aggregated elements of the Soviet ethno-federal organization, unleashed ethnic mobilization. A gradual, yet precipitating, process of threat inducement and triggering of need dissatisfaction occurred concomitantly with the Soviet Union's demise. Zürcher pinpointed to the fact that "Georgians, Abkhaz, and Ossets mobilized in reaction to the national project of the other groups, which was perceived as a threat to their own national project. Each of these three groups came to see the ethno-national claims of the other group as mutually exclusive, and they mobilized in reaction to the other group's mobilization."[37] A radicalization of the political agenda of Abkhaz

[34] Herbert Kelman, "Social-Psychological Dimensions of International Conflict ", în William Zartman; J. Lewis Rasmussen (eds.), *Peacemaking in International Conflict. Methods& Conflicts*, Washington, D.C., 1997, pp. 191-223.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 195.

[36] Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 144.

and Ossets was also produced, turning them into what Ted Gurr coined as *ethnonationalists*.[38] When certain groups perceive the loss of power-sharing opportunity, autonomy as option tends to dissipate and other radicalized strategies are envisioned. Henceforth, autonomy is replaced by aspirations towards independence and secessionism is set into motion. Throughout this process, discursive practices and construction of *otherness* played a pivotal role in shaping group identity, menaces, and strategies.

Christoph Zürcher argued that wars in breakaway South Ossetia and Abkhazia were not "the direct result of mutually exclusive national projects", but rather the inability of the new Georgian nationalist leadership to accommodate claims and to consolidate state power. The author showed that "neither the Abkhaz nor the Ossets had national independence high up on their agenda in 1988 or even 1990. Both entities actually opted to remain a part of the Soviet Union, with the status of a sovereign republic. [...] the national project of the Ossets and Abkhaz was not so much defined by what they wanted to become but, rather, by what they did not want to be: a minority group within a rapidly nationalizing Georgia" that did not intend to maintain the *status quo* enjoyed by the Ossets and Abkhaz within the Soviet Union.[39]

Both Karabakh Armenians and Armenia considered the assigning of Nagorno-Karabakh to the SSR of Azerbaijan an injustice and, after the death of Stalin, demands for a revisiting of the issue were expressed. Violent clashes occurred in Stepanakert (the capital city of Nagorno-Karabakh) in 1963, leading to the death of 18 Armenians; this development marked both the first publicly expressed discontent by a national group within the USSR and the repression of Armenian claims by the Soviet regime.[40] The Armenian discontent resurged during the reforms of Gorbachev and "the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh quickly ignited nationalist sentiments among the Armenian population" leading to "rising tensions [that] resulted in armed clashes between the two national communities during the last years of the Soviet Union—not only in Nagorno-Karabakh itself, but also in the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijan SSR, which were home to substantial

[38] Gurr, Harff, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-30.

[39] Zürcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-145.

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 154.

Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities respectively."[41] According to Zürcher, "the conflict over Karabakh was the first large-scale ethnopolitical conflict that openly emerged in the Soviet Union, and the decaying Soviet Union failed to manage it on a grand scale."[42]

The main argument supported here is that narratives and counter-narratives, symbolic politics, reiterations or reinterpretations of historic events conveyed through discourse, and nationalist political mobilization were elements that torpedoed post-Soviet developments in South Caucasus. Furthermore, we argue that ethno-political conflicts should be explained without reducing their cause to the mere ethnic nature of inter-group rivalry, thus de-politicising disputes, and that a social-constructivist account provides a coherent understanding of secessionist movements.

Frozen conflicts and *de facto* states

Usually, the phrase "frozen conflicts", when applied in the post-Soviet space, is meant to illustrate the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, even though recent literature tends to include the case of Crimea as well (because since 2014 it "has been under the *de facto* control and jurisdiction of Russia"[43]). Since the focus of this study revolves around South Caucasus, we will only present the three breakaway regions mentioned above. The term "frozen conflict" refers to a post-conflict situation where there is no longer violence, but, at the same time, there is also no settlement to it. Basically, areas of violence, usually spurred by secessionist movements, are marked by an end of hostilities, but the parties to the conflict have not managed to find a mutually agreeable solution. Hence the conflict is "frozen", even though a local dynamic would rather indicate a dormant dispute which could re-escalate at a future time.

---

[41] Vincenc Kopecek; Tomas Hoch; Vladimir Baar, *op. cit.*, p. 442.
[42] Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
[43] Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department, *The frozen conflicts of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and their impact on the respect of human rights*, European Parliament, 2016, p. 5, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578001/EXPO_STU(2016)578001_EN.pdf], accessed in March 2017.

According to Sebastian Relitz,

> "the 'frozen conflicts' are in no way static – they are dynamic. Although large-scale hostilities of the past were 'frozen', they can always break out again as in Georgia 2008 and Nagorno-Karabakh 2016 since mutual solutions for ending the conflicts have not been brokered yet. This is due to internal and external dynamics. Therefore, 'frozen' does not refer to the developments in the respective conflict zones or to conflict dynamics, but rather to the process of conflict resolution and the positions of the parties involved in the conflict. The conflict remains unresolved and is usually continued on a level of low escalation and with political means without realistic perspective for settlement. The concept of 'frozen conflicts' is therefore misleading and reflects a limited understanding of conflict dynamics and a narrow focus in academic analysis and political debate regarding those regions. It makes more sense to refer to general secessionist conflicts than frozen conflicts."[44]

Other approaches also stress the fact that terminologically, the term is both misleading and erroneous. For example, Filon Morar claims that "entities with ambiguous legal, regional and international status describe rather a protracted conflict with a high likelihood to be abruptly 'de-frozen' without effectively transcending the 'grey zone' condition."[45]

Since 1991, when Georgia achieved its independence, Abkhazian and South Ossetian secessionists have referred to international law and to their right to self-determination, while their Georgian counterparts have highlighted international law provisions in order to stress their right to territorial integrity. As indicated, the Soviet form of federalism was curtailed by

---

[44] Sebastian Relitz "De Facto States in the European Neighbourhood: between Russian Domination and European (Dis)Engagement. The Case of Abkhazia", EURINT Proceedings 2016, p. 97, [http://cse.uaic.ro/eurint/proceedings/index_htm_files/EURINT2016EURINT2016_REL.pdf], accessed in March 2017.

[45] Filon Morar, "The Myth of 'Frozen Conflicts. Transcending Illusive Dilemmas'", *Per Concordiam. Journal of European Security and Defence Issues,* Volume 1, Number 2, June 2010, p. 11, [http://www.marshallcenter.org/MCPUBLICWEB/mcdocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/pC_V1N2_en.pdf], accessed in March 2017.

efforts of centralization conceived by the Communist Party. However, after 1991, when Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union, the historical legal autonomy of these entities fostered their capacity to engage in collective action and provided them with the reasons to ask for secession. The question raised in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia at the end of the 1980s, namely "if Georgia wants to be independent of Russia, why can't we be independent of Georgia?"[46], was seen as a legitimate response to Zviad Gamsakhurdia's discriminatory slogan "Georgia for (ethnic) Georgians."[47] However, as shown by Zürcher, "the national project of the Ossets and Abkhaz was not so much defined by what they wanted to become but, rather, by what they did not want to be: a minority group within a rapidly nationalizing Georgia that clearly did not intend to honor the status quo that the Soviet Union had guaranteed to Ossets and Abkhaz."[48] After all, the Ossets and the Abkhaz are neither the only, nor the largest minority groups, since "8 percent of Georgia's population was Armenian and 5.7 percent Azerbaijani", and yet the latter groups did not ethnically mobilize and manifested no tendencies to break away from Georgia.[49]

The Abkhaz-Georgian conflict escalated in 1992, when "both sides engaged in full-blown civil war, fought with great intensity and brutality" and when most of the Georgian population was forced to leave the region.[50] Russia assumed the role of mediator, and the conflict officially ended in 1994, when "the Abkhazian and Georgian authorities agreed to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia."[51]

---

46 Ghia Nodia, "Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia", in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders of the South Caucasus*, VUB University Press, 1996, available at [http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0201.htm], last accessed August 14, 2014.

47 Laura Herța; Alexandra Sabou, "Frozen Conflicts in South Caucasus and their Impact on the Eastern Partnership. The case of Georgia and its Break-away Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia", in Valentin Naumescu; Dan Dungaciu (eds.), *The European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood Today: Politics, Dynamics, Perspectives*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 127.

48 Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

49 *Ibidem*, p. 133.

50 Relitz, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

51 Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

However, there were other peaks of violence in 1997, 2001, 2006, but mostly after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, triggered by the Georgian offensive in South Ossetia in an attempt to reincorporate the region.

In 1991, South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia, lacking international recognition, however. The Sochi Agreement, brokered between South Ossetia and Georgia, ended the violence and entailed a "Joint Control Commission, with peacekeeping forces comprised of around 500 Russians, Georgians and South Ossetians" [while] "the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was tasked with monitoring the situation."[52] The conflict re-escalated in 2004, after the Saakashvili government tried to "restore Georgia's territorial integrity", which also led to the "exodus from South Ossetia, with ethnic Georgians leaving for Georgia, while Ossetians made their way to Russian territory – particularly North Ossetia."[53]

In 1991, Azerbaijan and Armenia initiated secession procedures, declaring their independence from USSR. Concomitantly, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast declared its independence from Azerbaijan, but, in legal terms, it remained subjected to the USSR.[54] A full-scale war broke out in 1992 along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and within Nagorno-Karabakh proper. During the first phase, Azerbaijani forces launched an artillery attack on Stepanakert trying to avert Nagorno-Karabakh's secessionism, while in 1993 a second phase ensued, with Armenian and Karabakh Armenian forces resorting to a counter-attack and regaining control of the territory. A frail ceasefire agreement was reached, but it was very soon violated by Azerbaijan. From 1992 to 1994, ethnic violence against civilians was rampant, with around 800,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis being forcefully displaced from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and some 230,000 ethnic Armenians leaving Azerbaijan.[55] Finally, in 1994, Russia brokered another ceasefire agreement, which formally ended the conflict. In fact, the conflict turned dormant or "frozen", because the roots of the conflict were never addressed and solved. In 2016, violence re-escalated in Nagorno-Karabakh and military clashes resulted in the

[52] John Baylis; James J. Wirtz; Colin S. Gray (eds.), *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, Fourth Edition, Oxford: Oxford University, December 2012, case study: The South Ossetian War.

[53] *Ibidem*.

[54] Kambeck; Ghazaryan, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[55] *Ibidem*, pp. 26-27; Zürcher, pp. 169-171; Relitz, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

death of around 60 people. The mediation was again undertaken by Russia, which seems to find it "difficult to determine which country to support in the conflict."[56]

Until 2008, the situation in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia was often referred to as "frozen conflicts" and as *de facto* states, even though both were internationally isolated. According to Relitz, the situation of these *de facto* states fundamentally changed after the Georgian-Russian war of 2008, because of the "increasing Russian influence and patronage".[57] According to this view, "although the recognition of only Russia and three other members of the international community (Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru) looks minor, it changed the Abkhaz situation considerably. Russian recognition demonstrated a strong commitment towards the entity of Abkhazia."[58] On the other hand, the secessionist region Nagorno-Karabakh has also developed "empirical statehood in the course of about 20 years of de facto independence from Azerbaijan."[59] As indicated by scholars, the main difference between the *de facto* states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the one hand, and Nagorno-Karabakh, on the other hand, is that the former were recognized by Russia as independent states, while the latter "remains without partial recognition—with even its closest ally and kin state, Armenia, failing to recognize it".[60] On a different regional level, the common denominator of these three case studies is constituted by Russian support and involvement. As emphasized by other views, "from the very beginning these were three-sided and not bilateral conflicts. Moscow has been a decisive actor that provided the secessionists with military, political, moral, economic, and financial support. It prevented greater international

[56] Alexey Timofeychev, "Post-Soviet frozen conflicts: What is happening in Russia's backyard?", *Russia beyond the Headlines*, April 13, 2016 [https://rbth.com/international/2016/04/13/post-soviet-frozen-conflicts-what-is-happening-in-russias-backyard_584475], accessed in March 2017.

[57] Relitz, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

[58] *Ibidem.*

[59] Franziska Smolnik, "Lessons Learned? The EU and the South Caucasus De Facto States", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 35–36, 15 February 2012, p. 2, [http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-35-36-2-6.pdf], accessed in March 2017.

[60] *Ibidem.*

involvement and used its position in the negotiating mechanisms to protect the de facto states."[61]

Conceptually, *de facto* statehood refers to an empirical reality and to controversial recognition at the international level. As defined by some scholars, "de facto states are a result of a strong secessionist bid, on the one hand, and the unwillingness of the international system to condone secession on the other. They are regions which carry out the normal functions of the state on their territory, and which are generally supported by significant proportions of their population."[62] Referring to the legal status of *de facto* states within the South-Caucasus region, some notable distinctions are in place. Nagorno-Karabakh has not been recognized by any member state of the United Nations. The only entities that did recognize its independence are Abkhazia, South-Ossetia and Transnistria. In other words, as shown by analysts, "there is no recognized country that would question that […] Karabakh *de jure* belongs to Azerbaijan."[63] On the other hand, Abkhazia and South-Ossetia have been recognized by Russia and by some UN member states[64] and by some *de facto* states.[65]

Given all these developments, the European Union is confronted with a complex region. The EU's strategies of "non-recognition and engagement" with respect to South-Ossetia and Abkhazia and of "no recognition, no engagement"[66] with respect to Nagorno-Karabakh are not simplifying the matter, but merely indicate a seemingly ambivalent and undecided position.

---

[61] Theodor Tudoroiu, "The European Union, Russia, and the Future of the Transnistrian Frozen Conflict", *East European Politics and Societies*, 26: 135, 2012, p. 137. In this view, the frozen conflict in Transnistria is also analyzed.

[62] Tozun Bahcheli; Barry Bartmann; Henry Srebrnik, (eds.), *De facto States. The quest for sovereignty*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. x.

[63] Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department, *The frozen conflicts of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and their impact on the respect of human rights*, European Parliament, 2016, p. 8, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578001/EXPO_STU(2016)578001_EN.pdf], accessed in March 2017.

[64] *Ibidem*. As indicated by the authors of this study, "Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru still recognise these regions as independent, while two other countries, Tuvalu and Vanuatu have withdrawn their recognitions, both in favour of fostering diplomatic relations with Georgia".

[65] Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, the latter recognizing each other's independence.

[66] As formulated and analyzed by Franziska Smolnik, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

Bibliography:

1. Armenia and the EU, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/896/armenia-and-eu_en], accessed March 2017
2. Bahcheli, Tozun; Bartmann, Barry; Srebrnik, Henry (eds.) (2005), *De Facto States. The quest for sovereignty*, London and New York: Routledge
3. Barnett, Michael (2005), "Social Constructivism", in Baylis, John; Smith, Steve *The Globalization of World Politics. An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 251-270
4. Barnett, Michael; Finnemore, Martha (2004), *Rules for the World. International Organizations in Global Politics*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press
5. Baylis, John; Wirtz, James J.; Gray, Colin S. (eds.) (2012), *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, Fourth Edition, Oxford: Oxford University, December 2012, Case study: The South Ossetian War
6. Brass, Paul R. (1991), *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, SAGE
7. Bremmer, Ian; Taras, Ray (ed.) (1993), *Nations, Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
8. Checkel, Jeffrey T. (ed.) (2007), *International Institutions and Socialization in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
9. Companjen, Françoise; Marácz, László; Versteegh, Lia (eds.) (2010), *Exploring the Caucasus in the 21st Century. Essays on Culture, History and Politics in a Dynamic Context*, Amsterdam: Pallas Publication, 2010
10. Cornell, Svante E. (2005), *Small Nations and Great Powers. A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, London and New York: Routledge Curzon
11. Cornell, Svante E.; Frederick Starr (eds.) (2009), *The Guns of August 2008. Russia's War in Georgia*, Armonk, New York, London, England: M. E. Sharpe
12. EU-Azerbaijan relations, European Union External Action, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/4013/EU-Azerbaijan%20relations], accessed March 2017.

13. EU-Georgia Action Plan, available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/action_plans/georgia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf], accessed March 2017.
14. Finnemore, Martha; Sikkink, Kathryn (1998), "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change", *International Organization*, 52, 4, Autumn 1998, pp. 887-917
15. Frye, Timothy M. (1992), "Ethnicity, Sovereignty, and Transitions from Non-democratic Rule", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 45, no. 2
16. Gurr, Ted Robert (2000), *People versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century*, Washington, United States' Institute for Peace Press, 2000
17. Herța, Laura; Sabou, Alexandra (2015), "Frozen Conflicts in South Caucasus and their Impact on the Eastern Partnership. The case of Georgia and its Break-away Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia", in Valentin Naumescu; Dan Dungaciu (eds.), *The European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood Today: Politics, Dynamics, Perspectives*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 116-153.
18. Kambeck, Michael; Ghazaryan, Sargis (eds.) (2013), *Europe's Next Avoidable War Nagorno-Karabakh*, Palgrave Macmillan
19. Kelman, Herbert, (1997) "Social-Psychological Dimensions of International Conflict", în William Zartman; J. Lewis Rasmussen (eds.), *Peacemaking in International Conflict. Methods and Conflicts,* Washington, D.C.
20. Kopecek, Vincenc; Hoch, Tomas; Baar, Vladimir (2016), "Conflict Transformation and Civil Society: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:3
21. Kratochwil, Friedrich (1989), *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989
22. Laïdi, Zaki (ed.) (2008), *EU Foreign Policy in a Globalized World. Normative power and social preferences*, London and New York: Routledge
23. Manners, Ian (2002), "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 40, 2
24. Marchand, Pascal (2011), « Conflits dans l'espace post-soviétique : une géographie de la décomposition impériale », dans Franck Tétart (sous la direction de), *Géographie des conflits*, Paris : Editions Sedes/Cned

25. Mirsky, Georgiy I. (1997), *On Ruins of Empire. Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Former Soviet Union*, Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press
26. Morar, Filon (2010), "The Myth of 'Frozen Conflicts. Transcending Illusive Dilemmas'", *Per Concordiam. Journal of European Security and Defence Issues*, Volume 1, Number 2, June 2010, p. 11, [http://www.marshallcenter.org/MCPUBLICWEB/mcdocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/pC_V1N2_en.pdf], accessed in March 2017
27. Nodia, Ghia (2004), "Europeanization and (not) Resolving Secessionist Conflicts", *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, Vol. 1, [http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/1-2004Comment01.pdf], accessed in March 2017
28. Onuf, Nicholas (1989), *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press
29. Popescu, Nicu (2010), *The EU and Civil Society in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, MICROCON Policy Working Paper 15, Brighton: MICROCON
30. Relitz, Sebastian (2016), "De Facto States in the European Neighbourhood: between Russian Domination and European (Dis)Engagement. The Case of Abkhazia", EURINT Proceedings 2016, [http://cse.uaic.ro/eurint/proceedings/index_htm_files/EURINT2016 EURINT2016_REL.pdf], accessed in March 2017
31. Rubin, Barnett R.; Snyder, Jack (eds.) (2005), *Post-Soviet Political Order. Conflict and State Building*, London and New York: Routledge
32. Ruggie, John Gerard (1993), "Territoriality and Beyond: problematizing modernity in international relations", *International Organization* 47, 1, Winter 1993, pp. 139-174
33. Ruggie, John Gerard (1998), *Constructing the World Polity. Essays on International Institutionalization*, London: Routledge
34. Smith, Anthony D. (1993), "The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism", in Michael E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press
35. Smolnik, Franziska (2012), "Lessons Learned? The EU and the South Caucasus De Facto States", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 35–36, 15 February 2012, pp. 2-5,

http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-35-36-2-6.pdf, accessed in March 2017

36. Stepanova, Ekaterina (2008), "South Ossetia and Abkhazia: placing the conflict in context", in *SIPRI Policy Brief*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
37. Taras, C. Raymond; Ganguly, Rajat (eds.) (2008), *Understanding Ethnic Conflict. The International Dimension*, New York: Pearson Longman
38. Timofeychev, Alexey (2016), "Post-Soviet frozen conflicts: What is happening in Russia's backyard?", *Russia beyond the Headlines*, April 13, [https://rbth.com/international/2016/04/13/post-soviet-frozen-conflicts-what-is-happening-in-russias-backyard_584475], accessed in March 2017
39. Tishkov, Valery (1999), "Ethnic Conflict in the Former USSR: The Use and Misuse of Typologies and Data", *Journal of Peace Research*, 36(5), 1999, pp. 571–591
40. Tocci, Nathalie (2007), *The EU and Conflict Resolution. Promoting peace in the backyard*, London and New York: Routledge
41. Toft, Monica Duffy (2003), *The Geography of Ethnic Violence. Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press
42. Tudoroiu, Theodor (2012), "The European Union, Russia, and the Future of the Transnistrian Frozen Conflict", *East European Politics and Societies*, 26: 135, pp. 135-161.
43. Wendt, Alexander (1987), "The agent-structure problem in international relations theory", *International Organization* 41, 3, Summer 1987, pp. 335-354
44. Wendt, Alexander (1999), *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
45. Wolff, Stefan (2006), *Ethnic Conflict. A Global Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
46. Zürcher, Christoph (2007), *The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2007