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**THE ROLE OF FROZEN CONFLICTS IN RUSSIA'S POLICY
TOWARD THE ‘NEAR ABROAD’ REGION**

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Abstract: *The dissolution of the USSR did not bring clarity over Russia and newly independent states relations. Despite an apparent peaceful process, the dissolution brought in light many conflicts that Russia used to mediate as central peacekeeper actor of the region and claim its ‘near abroad’ as a strategic area of vital interest. Its aspiration to regain international recognition as a great power and maintain control over the former soviet states made conflict resolution an endless and unclear process that anchor countries further development. Used by Russia to maintain its military posture on the contentious front with western countries, it denies the statehood of host countries and threatens populations’ security.*

Keywords: Russia; frozen conflict; EU; security; Transnistria

1. Introduction

The dissolution of USSR changed the security environment and the geopolitical map entirely. In this situation, Western powers perceived Russia as a liberal state that followed a democratic way and gradually accepted independence of the former soviet states. However, the new Russia was unwilling to accept their independence considering as part of a historical pattern. In Russian understanding, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus regions remain as its exclusive sphere of influence and significant interest [9]. The new geopolitical context maintained the Black Sea region in the Russian Federation area of interest that resulted in a policy oriented to preserve its *cordon sanitaire* well beyond its borders and reaching most of its neighbours. Simultaneously, because of many changes in the state's internal structure that affected its economy and, consequently, every state's establishment. This new reality weakened its ability to coerce former ‘brother’ entities.

2. After the Cold War

Despite the tendency to characterise it as a ‘peaceful process’ [26], the end of the Cold War was marked by considerable violence in some newly independent states on the USSR's outskirts. Russia has begun to act politically and militarily in the former Soviet republics, which constitutes the border between Russia and the West. Built as an empire, Russia needs to have buffer states to separate them from the outside world, as Shevtsova stated [3]. This fact might come from their historical background being periodically invaded, and the only vast territory gave the possibility to buy time for recovering. Russian strategy ‘divide and influence’ based on conflict instigation confused the EU and NATO. Three main arguments emphasise the role of the conflicts in Russian hybrid strategy: control over neighbours and resources, hinder EU/NATO access in its ‘near abroad’ by mediating disputes, and reassuring its supremacy. The chapter will address the first one.

Economically weak and in reformation, Russia found the best way to maintain its control over neighbouring countries through forging military conflicts on the various basis and eventually becoming the mediator of the de jure conflicting parties. Planned during the soviet time as ‘mines of



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delayed action’ [8], Russia used enclaves to ignite local discontent that sparked military conflicts. Perceived as non-Western geopolitically [12], Eastern European countries, less Baltic States, gave Russia a fertile soil for its hybrid tactics. Having a protracted period of more than two centuries of uncontested influence in the region, Russia still considers the only significant player with the rights on security and economic issues. Russian intervention in conflicts and its resolution was biased. In Transnistria, the 14th army intervened on the separatists' side. Russia delivered military, political and economic assistance to the separatist regime, thus enabling conflict [14].

Nevertheless, this was far from being the only Russian support to the regime [5]; other volunteers came from Russia to fight on the separatists' side [2]. Assistance continued after the 1992 ceasefire, thus enabling regime survival and securing a certain amount of autonomy vis-à-vis Moldova [17]. The new Russian's military began recruiting Transnistria residents, thus violating other international law [26]. Since that, Russia tried to make its de facto military base status in Transnistria de jure, but Moldova was able to resist [10]. The Russian financial support is vital for the region's economy that would be sustainable for two to three months without Russian economic aid [4]. For Russia, Transnistria is an instrument that allows Moscow to exert influence over the domestic and, more importantly, foreign policy of Moldova. Therefore, the conflicts were double beneficial for Russia: control over neighbour territory and position as ‘leader of stability and military security over the former USSR, by contrast ‘having quite special interests in the region [14].’ It is therefore of strategic importance for the Russian military, as former 14th army commandant Lebed emphasised the geopolitical significance of the region as ‘the key to the Balkans’, stating, ‘If Russia withdraws from this little piece of land, it will lose that key and its influence in the region’ [27].

Some scholars see the ongoing territorial disputes in the post-Soviet space forged by Moscow to reverse the fall of the Soviet Union [16]. However, Putin denied such intent in an interview claiming that ‘no one wants to believe that we do not have a goal of recreating the Soviet Union [20].’ This statement might be correct; Russia's intent is not the annexation of the territory but control through destruction from within. However, Crimea emphasises an exceptional case due to its military importance for Russian control over the Black Sea. It gives Russia military superiority in the Black Sea and the possibility to establish an Anti-Access Area Denial bubble, which effectively threatens the entire region [11].

Moreover, the home base for its Black Sea fleet stationed in Sevastopol perceived as being threatened by the NATO takeover [17]. Furthermore, Russia seeks international recognition claiming that ‘responsible international organisations should grant Russia special powers as a guarantor of peace and stability in the region of the former Union’ [28]. The same discourse had president Medvedev after the 2008 Georgian ceasefire stating that ‘there are regions where Russia has privileged interest’ [23]. Russia used a hybrid strategy based on protracted conflicts to ‘divide and influence’ society and compel new governments to accept military troops presence on their territory [24].

Moscow's hybrid strategy in Moldova and elsewhere secured several Russian geostrategic objectives as emphasised by Hill in a report on the Ethnic Conflict Project [6]. The main goal was to ensure the buffer zone between the West and Fatherland by maintaining a military presence in the region, subsequent transforming military peacekeeping forces [1]. Russia represents vital defensive protection for the regime in Tiraspol, protecting its statehood politically and diplomatically. As a critical member of the ‘5+2’ negotiating format, Russia ensures that Tiraspol's interests are well represented within the conflict resolution meetings. It becomes very aggressive when Moldova or Ukraine decide to undermine ‘Transnistrian statehood’, often blocking Joint Control Commission counsel for conflict resolution meetings. An example of such behaviour is Russia's blockade of Moldovan wine, agriculture products and increase of gas price, an act politically motivated as



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punishment for Moldova's reorientation towards the West [19]. Conflict prevents Moldova from moving closer to the West and less attractive for the EU [21]. Such entities became sources of illegal and criminal issues, negatively influencing the country's development by economic and political means. They created the ground for corruption and organised crime that destabilises region [25]'. Russian end-goal is Moldova part of the Eurasian Union that will return it under full Russian authority. Moreover, any country under Russia's tutelage provides additional vote for Russia or abstentions in international organisations.

The same patterns perceive in the Georgian case as a region with strategic importance, the vital point on the transit area to Turkey, Iran, and further beyond in the Middle East [1]. Like in Moldova, Russia used its stationary units to support anti-government separatists from the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. In the early '90s, Russia orchestrated its activities as a neutral party and chosen to act just when Georgia had compelled to the Russian imposed condition: join the CIS treaty and allow the further presence of Russian troops on its territory. Having a considerable contingent of troops in Georgia, Russia could have separated the poor equipped and trained forces of Abkhazia and Georgia and acquire the July 28 ceasefire [6].

Even in particular having differences, both cases highlight that Russia used frozen conflicts to secure its objectives in the region perceived as 'near abroad'. The support, and consequently, the separatists' control, was the main obstacle to achieving constructive coordination during the process [13]. The limited law enforcement and international intervention prevented the peaceful conflict's settlement where Russia is the central mediator.

The 2014 conflict in eastern Ukraine gave more insight into the Russian hybrid tactics and its goal in waging conflicts. Russia's most critical outcome is to anchor the targeted country with a burden that will keep it underdeveloped and allow control over it. Furthermore, under the guise of peacekeeping forces, the military footprint is a complementary outcome of the established conflicts. Even though Russia had a substantial military presence in conflict areas, they preferred to compel the targeted government through force to accept a Russian military intervention as a third mediator party while maintaining such enclaves that will allow control to the resolution process. However, such a scenario did not work in eastern Ukraine that rejected Russian peacekeepers for a leading international force.

Moreover, the international community provided substantial support in the political field. However, this does not mean that Russia sustained a defeat. The main goal of the conflict was not the conquest of the territory but interior dissolution. It is worth saying that Russia used conflicts in the targeted countries as a part of a hybrid strategy to maintain control over the region perceived as 'near abroad'. Although Russia is the only central mediator in all the peace processes, it is a party to the conflict due to its perpetual military and political involvement. Since the conflict's settlement in the early 1990s, Moscow has used them as a lever to influence domestic and external developments in 'near abroad'. Russia has managed an individual approach policy to each case's specifics [7], never allowing further Western integration and blocking the hopes that Western pressure on Russia will bring the conflicts to resolution [22].

3. Conclusions

Concluding one can say that Russia will continue to use its hard power as the primary tool in its external policy, as we might perceive from the last decades conducting strategic exercises to strengthen its military. Fuelling frozen conflicts will maintain its influence in the neighbouring countries and reject EU/NATO interference in the area. It will continue using uncontrolled sites to corrupt political leaders and create destabilisation in the region, thus disrupting the targeted countries' economic and political integration in the Euro-Atlantic area. Moreover, the Euro-Atlantic



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integration of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus will not be possible soon due to the Russian military presence in the area.

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