

Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States

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Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States

Dov Lynch



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Foreword

For more than ten years, a group of self-proclaimed states in the southwestern corner of what used to be the Soviet Union have maintained a precarious existence. Unrecognized by the international community, prey to organized crime, mired in economic misery, scoured by ethnic cleansing, and seared by recent memories of war, these hard-pressed territories have clung to their independence, ever fearful that the states from which they seceded will reabsorb them. The fear is not entirely unfounded, for although the metropolitan states (Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) are currently too weak militarily to retake the breakaway states (Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia), they have not abandoned hopes of one day emulating Russia, which recaptured—or at least has reoccupied—its own secessionist territory, Chechnya. How, despite their many weaknesses, these so-called *de facto* states have endured is one of two central questions posed by *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States*, a slim but highly illuminating study of the dynamics that sustain both unrecognized states and secessionist conflicts.

The other central question, which comes in two parts, is not only analytically interesting but also distinctly pragmatic in its implications: Should the international community be concerned about these conflicts between post-Soviet metropolitan and *de*

facto states? And if so, what can the international community do to stabilize the region? The first part of this question may seem cavalier or callous, but the answer is by no means self-evident. With so many other hotspots vying for the attention of the international community, why should these conflicts merit consideration? After all, the de facto states are small, with populations no larger than those of typical small and medium-sized U.S. cities. The conflicts between the separatists and the metropolitan authorities are not hot; for the most part, cease-fires have held for years. Moreover, if the parties to the conflicts are themselves apparently content to see the present state of affairs continue indefinitely, why should outsiders bestir themselves to intervene?

I will leave it to the reader to discover how Dov Lynch, who has traveled widely in this beautiful but volatile corner of the world, answers the first of these questions—about how the de facto states manage to survive. But I trust the author and reader will forgive me if I eliminate any suspense surrounding the second question by noting here that Lynch does indeed think the international community should concern itself with what happens in this impoverished, underpopulated part of Eurasia. As the author makes clear, there are in fact several reasons why the international community should care, ranging from the area's strategic importance as a gateway to Europe and a transit point for resources from the Caspian Basin region and Central Asia, to the billions of dollars of foreign investment in the local oil and gas industries, to the fact that the de facto states are breeding grounds and transit zones for international criminal activities. Moreover, Lynch not only contends that there are excellent reasons for international concern but also proposes how the international community might act. He argues strongly for a coordinated approach that combines "some form of acceptance of the current existence of the de facto states," "a package of measures—economic, security, confidence-building, and societal—that support a settlement process," and "political will . . . to shape the various measures taken by various organizations and states into a more coordinated whole."

My reason for emphasizing this aspect of *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States* is not only to commend the book's relevance for policymakers as well as scholars but also to illustrate a wider point. Conflicts that seem to be too remote geographically and too quiescent militarily to pose a threat to the wider international community are often more dangerous than they appear. Some conflicts may pose no threats to their neighbors, either near or far, but such conflicts are uncommon. The contemporary world is differentiated from previous decades and centuries not least by its interdependence. Transnational flows of people, information, and business—and of arms, crime, and terrorism—are the norm, not the exception. In such an environment, the temptation to concern ourselves only with the most visible and pressing of crises abroad is understandable, but it is also counterproductive to building national as well as international security.

This is a point made not just in this volume—the research for which was supported by an Institute grant—but in several other publications from the United States Institute of Peace. The Institute has, for instance, just published *Taming Intractable Conflicts*, an eloquent and compelling argument by Chester Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall for the importance of well-crafted third-party mediation in bringing deep-rooted and protracted conflicts to a peaceful close. A similar plea for the international community to involve itself—when circumstances and resources permit—in ostensibly localized conflicts and to craft creative, context-responsive strategies to contain or end the violence is made in books as diverse as Michael Lund's *Preventing Violent Conflict: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy*; John Paul Lederach's *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*; and *A Strategy for Stable Peace: Toward a Euroatlantic Security Community*, by James Goodby, Petrus Buwalda, and Dmitri Trenin.

The published works of the Institute overlap with the concerns of *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States* in at least three other ways, too. First, the question of how to satisfy the demands of independence-minded minorities short of secession lies at the

heart of Ruth Lapidoth's much-praised volume, *Autonomy: Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts*, and Tim Sisk's much-cited study, *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts*. Second, just as Dov Lynch focuses on struggles in which ethnic identity plays a central causal role, so too do a host of other Institute authors. Some portray the problems of a specific country, as Rotimi Suberu does in the book *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria*; others paint a much broader canvas, among them Ted Robert Gurr, whose book *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century* reports on no fewer than 275 politically active ethnic and other communal groups. And third, Lynch is by no means the first Institute author to examine the problems besetting the successor states of the former Soviet Union. To name just a few examples: Martha Brill Olcott has profiled Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in *Central Asia's New States*, Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski have dissected the corruption of Russian politics under Yeltsin in *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*, and Anatol Leiven has explored "a fraternal rivalry" in *Ukraine and Russia*.

This breadth of endeavor reflects the Institute's dedication to its congressionally mandated mission—to promote research, education, and training on the peaceful management and resolution of international conflicts—and its determination not to restrict its interest to those conflicts that are currently highest on the media's or the government's agenda. As Dov Lynch reminds us in this stimulating study, in today's world even conflicts far from our shores have a way of endangering our interests and our security.

Richard H. Solomon, President
United States Institute of Peace

Preface

FIFTEEN NEW STATES AROSE from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recognized by the world and admitted into the club of states, they acquired the protective shield of a body of law developed expressly to protect states, with sovereignty as the foundational norm. International recognition resembles a process of reification; the fifteen post-Soviet states shed their former shapes as union republics of the USSR to become states—the single most important form of political organization in world affairs. If, in past centuries, there existed myriad forms of political organizations—from states to empires, city-states to dependencies—there are few shapes left at the start of the twenty-first century. There are states, and there is little else.

This book provides a new look at the Soviet collapse and the process of state building that erupted across one-sixth of the world's landmass. In addition to the fifteen recognized states, five other "states" declared themselves also independent: Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria. The first of these, Chechnya, has since seen its self-proclaimed independence crushed, but the other four have endured, despite being unrecognized and isolated, their very existence deemed illegitimate and unlawful. If considered at all, they are called

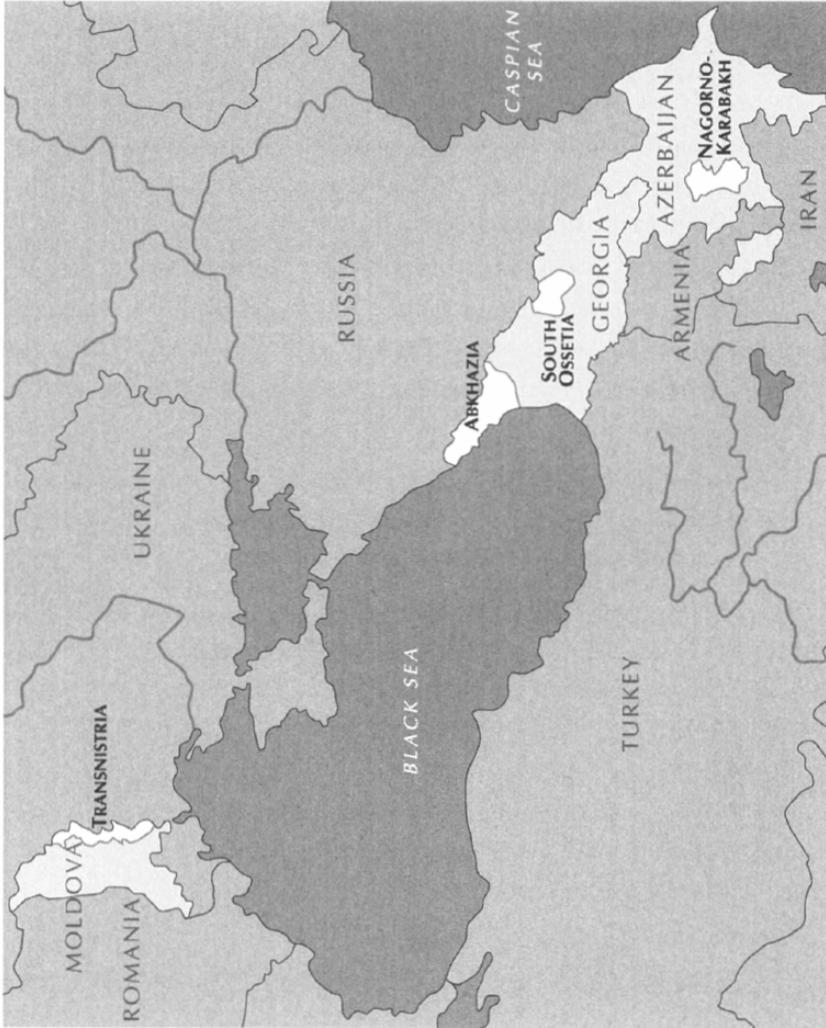
“badlands” and “criminal dens.” The truth is, nobody knows much about them.

This book poses a simple question: How do they survive? How have these entities endured since the Soviet collapse—without international recognition, existing under constant threat, all the while building the institutions of statehood? The question occurred to me when I first visited Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh in 1998, and it led me through a research project, funded by the United States Institute of Peace, that ran from 2000 to 2002. This book seeks to answer this question and raises another one: What should the international community do with the unrecognized states? More particularly: How might the principles of self-determination and sovereignty be reconciled? And what approaches could be considered to move toward conflict settlement?

Parts of the research for this book were conducted while I was a visiting research fellow at the WEU Institute for Security Studies in July 2001. The work was completed as a research fellow at the European Union Institute for Security Studies in 2002 and 2003. The initial project was funded by the United States Institute of Peace in the framework of a two-year project titled “De Facto States and Eurasian Security,” which I directed at the Department of War Studies, King’s College London.

My thanks first go to the United States Institute of Peace for its support to this project since 2000. Nigel Quinney was a constant source of ideas and assistance during the editing process, for which I am very grateful. I also thank the five anonymous reviewers for their comments and queries. I am grateful also to the European Union Institute for Security Studies, and to its director, Nicole Gnesotto, for her advice and support. The Department of War Studies, King’s College London, remains an intellectual home for me, and I thank Professor Brian Holden Reid for his help. A number of colleagues have provided rich suggestions on this work at its various stages of development: Roy Allison, Bruno Coppieters, James Gow, Craig Oliphant, Jonathan Cohen, Rachel

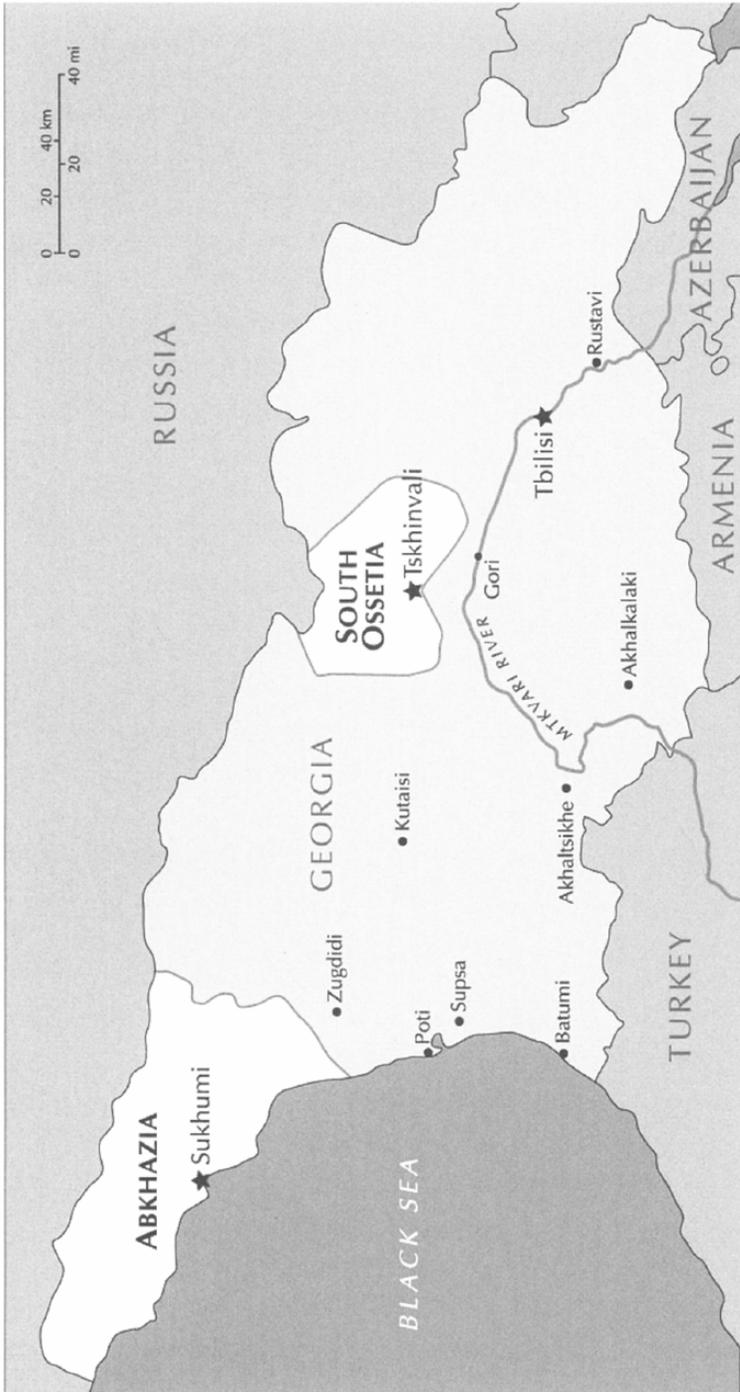
Clogg, and Tom de Waal. The numerous trips made to the separatist states would never have been possible without the help of many. In Moldova and Transnistria, I would like to thank Sergei, Igor, Slava, and Dima. In Georgia and Abkhazia, I am grateful to Max and all of the team at the ministry for their welcome and help. In Nagorno-Karabakh, I wish to thank Artemis especially for her kindness and support. There are many others who will remain unnamed, but I am no less grateful for their allowing me to question them about their dreams. Finally, I wish to thank Eric Baudelaire, *mon compagnon* on many of these travels. This book is dedicated to Francesca Maria Devalier for everything that is, and to Caspar the magnificent.



Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Neighboring States



Moldova and the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (Transnistria)



Georgia, the Republic of South Ossetia, and the Republic of Abkhazia



Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic

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