

1

Introduction



A MAP OF THE WORLD provides the onlooker with a sense of completion: the globe has been divided up into legally equal sovereign states, and all territories and peoples fall under one or another of these units' jurisdiction. The world is a complete matrix of colors and lines that leaves nothing to chance. The blank spots have been filled in. The map of the former Soviet Union conjures a similar satisfaction. Fifteen new states emerged from the Soviet collapse. All of the territory has been divided up and formal jurisdiction claimed across all of the post-Soviet space.

This satisfaction is misplaced. In late November 2000, the city of Tiraspol, formally under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova, held an unusual summit.¹ It brought together the foreign ministers of four separatist regions that have declared independent statehood in the former Soviet Union: the Pridnestrovyan Moldovan Republic (PMR or Transnistria) inside Moldovan borders, the Republic of South Ossetia and the Republic of Abkhazia, both within Georgian borders, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic inside Azerbaijan.² The foreign ministers agreed to create a permanent forum called the Conference of Foreign Ministers to coordinate the activities of their separatist governments. They also discussed a blueprint for the settlement of the conflicts that they face. The blueprint called for the recognition of

"sovereign equality" between the separatist regions and the authorities in Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan (hereafter referred to as the metropolitan states) as the only path leading to conflict resolution. There had been similar meetings of the separatist governments in the early 1990s, none of which had much impact on the conflicts. This summit, too, was unlikely to have dramatic effect.

The summit did, however, perform a service in highlighting an enduring but often forgotten reality of security in the post-Soviet space. In addition to the fifteen successor states that emerged in 1992, four other "states" exist that are unrecognized.³ (A fifth unrecognized state, Chechnya, is, as of this writing, virtually nonexistent and thus is not examined in this volume.) These separatist states are not found on any map of the former Soviet Union. They are isolated in international relations, and they all face deep internal problems and existential external threats. If ever discussed, the separatist areas are typically dismissed as criminal strips of no-man's-land or as the puppets of external states. There has been much analysis devoted to individual cases of conflict in the former Soviet Union; however, there has been no full comparative study of the separatist states.⁴

Two works—one by Edward Walker, the other by Charles King—have come near to such a study. Edward Walker's long, path-breaking article published in February 1998 focused on three "secessionist conflicts" in the Caucasus: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Chechnya.⁵ His argument was heavily descriptive and considered the conflicts one after the other. His basic point was that a situation of "no peace, no war" had developed in each of the conflicts that was founded on the military success of the secessionist movements, the imposition of cease-fire regimes favorable to them, and the lack of progress in talks, driven by a reluctance on any side to reach compromise. The article had a wealth of detail on each conflict and painted a clear picture of the status quo. However, the work was not fully comparative, and little attention was devoted to drawing out the social, political, and economic forces sustaining the status quo. Nor did Walker analyze

the foundations of the state-building projects initiated by each of the secessionist parties. In concluding, Walker posited that comprehensive settlements were far off in these conflicts: "The best that can reasonably be hoped for are staged agreements in which both sides agree to disagree on status while building trust through limited agreements on specific issues." This important conclusion was not developed further.

Charles King addressed all four extant separatist states in a July 2001 article in *World Politics*.⁶ King placed his analysis of the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh in the context of wider research on how to end civil war, arguing persuasively that an "equilibrium" had been reached in each of these conflicts and concentrating on the role of the state-building projects as a critical factor behind the status quo. The equilibrium is driven by a number of factors, namely, the construction of states in the secessionist regions, the weakness of the central government and its collusion with the status quo, and the role of external actors, including Russia, diasporas, and even international organizations. In the end, King argued, "just as the political economy of war can perpetuate violence, so too the institutions of Eurasia's unrecognized states have ensured that the benefits born of conflict continue to accrue to belligerents on both sides, the erstwhile losers as well as the winners." King's analysis was illuminating in many ways, but it was not complete in its discussion of the forces driving the separatist states to insist on sovereignty. The thrust of King's analysis was analytical and not prescriptive. Still, he noted in conclusion that recognizing the existence of the separatist states may be the only obvious solution to these conflicts, provided the separatist entities remain within the formal structures of the recognized states. The article finished on a qualified note, however, with King stating that this might prove too difficult for "new, fragile and allegedly democratizing states."

The current study draws on the work I have undertaken since 2000 on the post-Soviet "de facto states."⁷ In articles published in 2001 and 2002, I concentrated mainly on analyzing the

factors behind the inertia that had developed in all of these conflicts due to the existence of the separatist states. This study presents a more complete analysis of the social, political, economic, and military forces sustaining the stalemates in the post-Soviet conflicts and, on this basis, discusses ways out of the impasses.

Cease-fire agreements have been reached in all the separatist areas. Internationally led negotiations have been under way in all of them since the early 1990s. In the conflicts in Moldova and Georgia, Russian/Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping forces have been deployed to maintain a buffer zone between the conflicting parties. The United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have also become deeply involved in mediating in these conflicts, as well as in monitoring the activities of the CIS peacekeeping forces. However, since 1992 there has been little progress toward settlement. The *de facto* states are the main reason for the absence of progress.

From the perspective of the international community, does the continuing existence of the *de facto* states pose any significant problems? Do they threaten international security? Given that active combat has stopped in these conflicts, why should the international community care what happens to the *de facto* states?

At the most fundamental level, the fact that these conflicts have not been resolved does not pose an existential or direct threat to wider international security. However, the international community, and certainly Europe, no longer has the luxury of considering only existential threats. As the very notion of security has become deeper and wider, the existence of unresolved conflicts in the European and Caucasian regions of the former Soviet Union cannot be ignored. There are strategic interests in these areas. Moldova, squeezed between Romania and Ukraine, represents the outer rim of the Balkan area and an eastern gateway for Europe. Georgia is a strategically important transit country for the passage of goods and especially energy resources from the Caspian Basin region and Central Asia. Azerbaijan has become

the focus of billions of dollars of investment by European and U.S. oil companies seeking to exploit the vast potential of that country's reserves in oil and gas.

The separatist states have an impact on the security of the states from which they have seceded—the metropolitan states—and on wider regional developments. Close to two million people have been displaced by these wars, putting serious strain on the new states of Moldova, Georgia, and especially Armenia and Azerbaijan. The economies of these new states are all deeply affected by the existence of the unrecognized states. The self-declared states have presented external powers with opportunities to intervene in the region. Russia has used its peacekeeping operations in Moldova and Georgia as means to retain influence over those two states.⁸ Conditions within the *de facto* states have exacerbated problems of organized crime in the post-Soviet space. The legal limbo in which they exist has made them breeding grounds and transit zones for international criminal activities. Most importantly, the use of force has remained an option in all the post-Soviet secessionist conflicts, as the renewed fighting in Chechnya since August 1999 has shown.

If the existence of the *de facto* states does matter for international security, the next questions are these: What approach should be taken to move these conflicts toward some kind of settlement? More specifically, what sort of endgame is realistic in these conflicts?

The *de facto* states of PMR in Moldova, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan have existed for more than a decade. While limited in the grand sweep of history, ten years is not negligible. These conflicts are often called “frozen,” as little progress has occurred toward their resolution. Yet, while the cease-fire lines have not changed and remain frozen, in most other ways the word “frozen” is misleading. The concept of a dynamic logic is a more fitting way of understanding why there has been no conflict resolution, for much has happened in these areas over the past ten years. This logic has both

external and internal dimensions. Any movement toward settlement must take into account this logic, and any settlement will have to focus more on the structures that have developed over the past decade and less on the original sources of the conflicts.

The conclusions of this study are relevant to the wider discussion on the notion of “ripeness” as a prerequisite for conflict settlement.⁹ Ripeness corresponds with a moment in a conflict after escalation when the conflicting parties have reached a position of mutually hurting stalemate and seek to attenuate the pain of maintaining the status quo through negotiation. The argument made in this study qualifies this concept as it might be applied to civil wars between central governments and separatist regions. Painful stalemates have been reached in all the post-Soviet conflicts. The status quo carries costs for all the parties, in terms of social-economic difficulties and political burdens. However, in the past decade all the conflicting parties have developed internal structures and external sources of support that offset the pain of stalemate. For the separatist states, the status quo crowns their achievements on the battlefield and their *de facto* independence, both of which are salves to the difficulties that they face from being unrecognized by the international community and living under blockade. The metropolitan states have also developed mitigating strategies that offset the pain of the current stalemate. The status quo hurts, but it does not hurt everyone in the same way and it does not hurt enough to force a settlement.

The use of armed force is one solution for dealing with the *de facto* states. The use of force by the Russian Federation to quell its separatist region of Chechnya (the self-declared Republic of Ichkeria) in the North Caucasus is one example of this approach. Beyond the forceful solution, however, is a range of other options by which to move these conflicts toward settlement—all of which accept the continuing existence, in one form or another, of the *de facto* states. The international community has good reasons not to recognize these separatist states, but it also has the opportunity to support a solution that lies between the extremes

of recognition and elimination. The de facto states of PMR, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh and the metropolitan states of Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan could survive without conflict settlement, but none of them will prosper.

This study examines the internal and external dynamics driving the continuing existence of the separatist areas. Chapter 2 clarifies a number of important conceptual issues, defining the concept of a de facto state and describing the context that facilitated its emergence in the former Soviet Union. Chapter 2 also sketches brief histories of the four de facto states. Chapter 3 examines the forces that drive the de facto states, focusing on the political, military, and economic logic that underpins the separatist states at the internal and external levels. The fourth chapter discusses the security impact of the de facto states on the metropolitan states and regional developments.

Chapter 5 explores ways out of the current volatile impasse. The analysis examines the approaches taken thus far by the international community toward these conflicts and proposes an alternative that may help to break the inertia of a decade of entrenched conflict. In seeking to balance the norm of territorial integrity with the right to self-determination, the alternative proposed here has relevance to other conflicts that present a similar dichotomy of separatist and metropolitan states, such as those in the former Republic of Yugoslavia. A proposal for a new approach to the conflict in Moldova is sketched out in some detail.

Most fundamentally, this study argues that settlement is possible only if it is premised on some form of acceptance of the current existence of the de facto states. International recognition need not be attributed to them; however, the existence of extensive independence in these areas must be recognized. This recognition must be combined with a package of measures—economic, security, confidence-building, and societal—that support a settlement process. Settlement of these conflicts requires a balance between de facto and de jure sovereignty and independence. The aim here is not to develop a comprehensive blueprint

that can be applied to each conflict. They are all sufficiently different that this would be a vain ambition. The central point is that of coordination: if the various strands of conflict settlement are not coordinated and interwoven, or if one or several are lacking, a settlement process is likely to unravel, as was witnessed in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2001. The costs for the international community in addressing these conflicts are not high in material terms, whether in the form of money or the deployment of military forces. The cost lies in the realm of political commitment: political will is required to coordinate the existing strands of policy already undertaken by the international community, to shape the various measures taken by various organizations and states into a more coherent whole. For now, current international approaches, lacking coordination and strategy, work against one another and thus sustain the status quo. The central objective must be to break the inertia by adopting a coordinated approach that takes account of the current conflict system and seeks to alter its key points.

The research for this study is based on several months of travel and interviews on the ground in the conflict zones in 2000, as well as shorter visits before and after 2000.¹⁰ The focus of the research is on the PMR in Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. In discussing Georgia, this study concentrates mainly on Abkhazia, rather than on South Ossetia, because the Abkhaz case has been far more volatile and entrenched, and the Abkhaz separatist state has proceeded further on the path of state building independently of Georgia. Nonetheless, the argument draws on the example of South Ossetia whenever appropriate.

This study does not consider in detail the case of the de facto state in Chechnya, the Republic of Ichkeria, now almost nonexistent and in an active state of war with the Russian federal government. After the first war between 1994 and 1996, the question of Chechnya's status was suspended by agreement of all parties at Khasavyurt for a period of five years. The Chechen

authorities sought to enshrine the independence of the region from Russia after this accord and aspired to be recognized by the international community as a full-fledged member. In some respects, therefore, the Republic of Ichkeria was a *de facto* state in the interim period between 1997 and 1999, sustained by a combination of internal and external forces similar to those examined in the following chapters. The movement of Russian troops into the republic in October 1999 put an end to the *de facto* status, plunging the region into an ongoing conflict. This study focuses on those states where empirical research on the ground has been feasible. The analysis concentrates also on those areas that have benefited from cease-fires since the early 1990s and on *de facto* states that have proceeded much further than Chechnya in developing the institutions of statehood. This does not mean that the example of Chechnya between 1997 and 1999 does not offer parallels to the separatist states under review here.¹¹ Simply put, the concentration falls on those areas that have successfully endured nonrecognition for over ten years.

The main objective is to draw out the main forces driving the separatist entities in the former Soviet Union by using the region's most prominent cases. The aim is not to present an exhaustive analysis of all cases of separatist states in international affairs, nor does this work seek to clarify debates about the origins of conflicts in the former Soviet Union. The argument does not present a blow-by-blow account of developments in these conflicts. Moreover, while presenting a general definition of *de facto* states and the place of these entities in international affairs, and while considering parallels with other examples of separatist states in Europe and beyond, the argument here does not have wider theoretical ambitions.

A final note concerns the potential for bias in the research and analysis. The lion's share of the fieldwork for this study was conducted within the separatist states, for the simple reason that the voices of the inhabitants of these areas have been largely ignored for the past decade in most discussions of the conflicts.

The fact that many interviews drawn upon in this study are with individuals in the de facto states reflects not a political bias in their favor but simply the desire to explain more clearly a point of view that is generally unheard. Moreover, calling these separatist areas “states” does not amount to an argument for their recognition but rather draws attention to the essential obstacle to conflict settlement, which is the state-building projects these areas have undertaken.¹² These post-Soviet conflicts have displaced close to two million people, and tens of thousands have been killed. While all suffer, a key point made in this study is that many profit also. The objective is not to distribute blame or recrimination, but to understand more clearly.