

**“The resolution of protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space:  
implications for Russia-US cooperation.”**

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Many crises that appeared with the fall of the Soviet Union on its periphery transformed into violent conflicts in the beginning of 1990s. Although open confrontation was stopped, most of such conflicts were not properly resolved, remaining in a so-called “frozen” condition for years. This can be characterized as the “no peace no war” condition, which at first sight may seem relatively stable, but in fact could lead to a sudden escalation of the situation. Eloquent proof are conflicts in Georgia in 2008 or in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016, demonstrated they are far from the frozen condition.

Nowadays it is more evident that such conflicts are more protracted than frozen, and their existence has become one of the characteristics of the crisis state of the European security system. The relatively new Ukrainian crisis yet continuing for three years is also often considered as a new “frozen” or protracted conflict. Protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space can be viewed also as a part of rising geopolitical competition between Russia and the West over contested neighborhood.

The settlement of such “protracted” (or “frozen”) conflicts is one of the most complex and controversial issues of modern international security, both from a practical and from a research point of view. In modern Europe, conflicts in the post-Soviet space remain the most complex and acute. They are a source of constant tension for more than two decades. We can say that the existence of “protracted conflicts” became one of the characteristic feature of the sphere of security in the region, which is characterized by increased tension and instability.

The question of how to resolve the contradictions have remained a real puzzle for politicians and diplomats, as well as for researchers. During the existence of protracted conflicts dozens of reports and hundreds pages of recommendations about their causes and the measures to resolve them have been written. However, none of these “pain points” have not been resolved in a peaceful way to satisfy all the warring parties. The attempt to solve militarily the stalemate in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts led to a new confrontation. After the military intervention of Russia decided to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Georgia, in turn, has not accepted this option and continued to insist that these regions are its integral part.

Two other major “protracted” conflicts in the region – Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh – remain unresolved to this day. Progress in the negotiation process in both cases shows contradictory dynamics: temporary periods of improvements are replaced by complications, and in the case of Nagorno Karabakh – even periodic renewal of armed conflict.

The difficulty lies not only in the prolonged absence of a decision of this kind of conflict, but also in the difference of their perception. On the one hand, there is a reason to consider them as a secondary problem that may eventually disappear by itself, or even non-existent, at least “frozen”. For Russia, for example, the internal confrontation between Abkhazia / South Ossetia and Georgia no longer exists. However, from the standpoint of Western countries, the internal Georgian conflict continues. On the other hand, periods of tension between the warring parties, for example, in Nagorno-Karabakh, or contradictions between the mediators on the situation in Transnistria, called to life the discussion that the problem of “protracted” conflicts poses a serious threat to the entire system of European security.

To date, tensions between key European security actors further complicates the process of negotiations on “protracted” crises. Such a confrontational environment contributes to the emergence of new potential points of tension. The current confrontation in the East of Ukraine, which now in the center on the agenda for the settlement of disputes in Europe, may also well become the new focus of the protracted struggle<sup>1</sup>. It attracts more attention to the problem of “protracted” conflicts existing for a long time, especially in the post-Soviet region. In today's crisis conditions, when the security system in Europe runs a serious test of strength, it is necessary to rethink the reasons on which we can not find a way out.

It is necessary to distinguish a few key features of this kind of crises that important to understand why it is so difficult to resolve such conflicts.

First, the very definition of such intractable conflicts as “frozen” is misleading. Considering the unresolved conflicts as “frozen”, we provoke the emergence of a number of concepts, connected with the idea of something conservative, unchanging and imposed from the outside.

The term “frozen” conflicts began to be used in the 1990s mainly in relation to the description of the conflicts in the former Soviet Union that emerged with the end of the Cold War. Thus, these conflicts can be seen as vestiges of former times the bipolar confrontation. “Frozen” conflicts in the post-Soviet space has been considered in the context of so-called “imperial policy” of Moscow toward the former Soviet republics<sup>2</sup>. They were viewed as not so much due to the confrontation at the domestic level, but more as the result of Russian policy that in order to maintain its geopolitical influence in the former Soviet Union, was interested to “freeze” the conflicts and manipulate with the status quo<sup>3</sup>.

Introduction of the term “frozen conflicts” in the political and research lexicon was accompanied by the creation of a discourse inherent to the previous system of international relations, which eventually began to disperse with the real state of things. Only the 2008 Caucasian crisis, when over a short period a relatively stable “frozen” state suddenly was changed to an open armed confrontation, allowed to start its revision; and continuing violence in Nagorno-Karabakh in the past few years has supported the further need for the revision of terminology.

Thus while the “frozen conflicts” definition has drawn growing criticism of the scientific community and has provoked the appearance of the stereotypes as something unchangeable, non-dangerous and without no need to actively resolve<sup>4</sup>, the term “protracted conflicts” has a number of advantages, such as neutrality, universality, scientific and theoretical basis<sup>5</sup> and the prevalence in international organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> В ООН предупреждают Донбассу “затяжной вялотекущий конфликт”. [The United Nations Predict “Protracted Low-Intensity Conflict” for Donbass (In Russ.)] Available at: <http://www.rosbalt.ru/ukraina/2014/10/24/1331122.html>; Чижова Л. Затяжной конфликт или скорый мир? Военные эксперты – о различных вариантах развития событий в зоне конфликта на Украине. Радио Свобода. 07.07.2014. [Chizhova L. Zatyazhnoi konflikt ili skoryi mir? Voennye eksperty – o razlichnykh variantakh razvitiya sobytii v zone konflikta na Ukraine. [Protracted Conflict or Imminent Peace? Military Experts – about the Different Versions of Developments in the Conflict Zone in Ukraine]. Radio Liberty. 07.07.2014]. Available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/25448398.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Weiss S. Frozen Conflicts – Kant reloaded // *Spotlight Europe*. 2008. Issue 10. Bertelsmann Stiftung. P. 2.

<sup>3</sup> King Ch. The benefits of ethnic war: Understanding Eurasia’s unrecognized states // *World Politics*. 2001. 53(4). Pp. 524-552.

<sup>4</sup> Morar F. The Myths of Frozen Conflicts: Transcending Illusive Dilemmas // *Per Concordian: Journal of European Security and Defence Issues*. Vol. 1. No. 2. 2010. P. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ramsbotham O. The Analysis of Protracted Social Conflict: a Tribute to Edward Azar. *Review of International Studies*, 2005, vol. 31, issue 01, pp. 109-126. DOI: 10.1017/S0260210505006327.

Second, it is a long unsettled character of protracted conflicts. The paradoxical condition, typical for such conflicts can be described as “neither war nor peace”. On the one hand, the warring camps do not conduct large-scale military action for a long time after the conclusion of the ceasefire agreements, and their discords do not pose an immediate threat. On the other hand, the situation in these regions continues to be tense. From time to time incidents of varying degrees of intensity may occur. This, in turn, could lead to a new escalation into large-scale armed conflicts, as in the case of South Ossetia in 2008 and the recent aggravation in Karabakh in April 2016.

Thus, the high level of tension accumulated over a long time, though it may be hidden to a certain point, is fraught with great danger. The protracted nature of the unsettled situation also shows that the simple and short recipes for solving such problems are likely to prove ineffective. The settlement of protracted conflicts needs long-term measures that should be systematic and consistent.

Third, the protracted conflicts manifest themselves at different levels – from the local (internal) up to the pan-European and global (external). Their influence extends far beyond the “hot spots”, as in the negotiation process external actors are included, that play an important role in resolving local disputes. Since such conflicts have remained unresolved for many years, over time they can become an important factor in the relationship not only between the warring parties, but also with the neighboring countries, mediators and big powers, such as the US and Russia.

Thus, the Transnistrian conflict affects not only the relations between the Republic of Moldova and the self-proclaimed Dnestr Moldavian Republic (“Pridnestrovye”), but also acts as an important point of relations with Romania and Ukraine as neighboring countries (the latter is a mediator in the negotiations), as well as with Russia, the EU and the US as members of the negotiation process. In addition, each of these external actors of pursuing its own interests in the settlement. This is a real example of how the “protracted” confrontation in Transnistria turns into a long-term factor of relations and contradictions at the regional (between Russia and Ukraine)<sup>6</sup> and the pan-European dimension (between Russia/European Union/United States)<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, one can hypothesize that the influence of external actors in the Transnistrian settlement process to date has increased so much that the conflict can not be solved without reaching consensus on an external level. Thus, without taking into account the role of mediators (external actors) today it is hard to fully assess neither the interconnection between local conflicts and international security, nor prospects of their final decision.

Third, in the protracted conflicts, the problem of identity has played special role. It should be noted that this kind of confrontation zones in the former Soviet Union space emerged with the formation of new states, and such split status of these countries has become part of everyday political life. Since its independence, they had no experience of coexistence with the separatist territories of countries other than the scenario of confrontation, especially at the political level. Therefore, the identity of a de jure single state in reality based de facto on the contrast of the opposing sides to each other and separation. At the same time the separatist regions emerged with the armed conflict are ready to build their own independence and national identity. As a result, in the Post-Soviet space de facto entities have emerged, possessing sovereignty and other formal features of the state, as well as a special kind of identity. The latter is based on the opposition of strict center control over the breakaway territory, which can suppress local autonomy, to the desire

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<sup>6</sup> Истомин И. Украинское обострение приднестровского конфликта. *РСМД*. 03.08.2015. [Istomin I. Ukrainское obostrenie pridnestrovskogo konflikta. [Ukrainian Escalation of the Transnistrian Conflict]. *RSMD* 03.08.2015.] Available at: [http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id\\_4=6418#top-content](http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=6418#top-content)

<sup>7</sup> Gabanyi A. U. Moldova – A Test Case in EU-Russian Relations? *The Balkan Prism: A retrospective by Policy-Makers and Analysts*. J. Deimel, W. v. Meurs, eds. Muenchen, Otter Sagner, 2007, pp. 499-511.

for full sovereignty at the local level, aimed at having to stop the pressure from above. This leads to a growing distancing of the conflict territory from the central government<sup>8</sup>.

While in Nagorno-Karabakh the ethnic principle is the main reason for separation, in the case where the national factor is not the driving force behind the conflict – as in Transnistria, the perception of identity is more complex having cross-border nature. Although the population of Transnistria is traditionally considered to be focused on Russia, self-determination of locals here is based not so much on a sense of belonging to Russia but more on a special internationalist supra-ethnic perception of their own community, which was formed during the last two decades<sup>9</sup>. Thus, questions of identity impose a direct imprint on the course of the settlement and affect relations with external actors.

Given the above problems, in order to effectively resolve protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space we need to take into consideration their features such as the very definition of such conflicts, their long unsettled character, different levels of security where they manifested and their interconnections (especially the role of external level) and identity issue.

In fact, if we do not take into account Ukraine (which is a special case), Russia and the US have cooperated in a quite positive way on other “classical” protracted conflicts (existing since the fall of the Soviet Union). In Transnistria, this interaction is insignificant: the United States has an observer status and plays a minor role, while Russia is the leading mediator and its relations with the EU on the issue are more important. In turn, in the negotiations on Nagorno Karabakh Russia and the United States along with France have equal status being the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group as the main mediators in the settlement. Despite all the difficulties in bilateral relations over the past two decades of the existence of this major negotiation format on Karabakh there have been no major differences between the US and Russia. On the contrary, the parties are trying to consolidate their positions. This gives a good reason to consider these protracted conflicts as a field for cooperation between two big powers.

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<sup>8</sup> Cojocaru N. Nationalism and Identity in Transnistria. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 2006, vol. 19, issue 3-4, pp. 261-272. DOI: 10.1080/13511610601029813; Troebst S. The Transnistrian Moldovan Republic: from Conflict Driven State Building to State Driven Nation Building. *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, 2004, vol. 2, pp. 5-30.

<sup>9</sup> Troebst S. We are Transnistrians! Post-Soviet Identity Management in the Dniestr Valley. *Ab Imperio*, 2003, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 437-466; Штански Н. Особенности урегулирования «конфликтов идентичности»: казус Приднестровья. *Международные процессы*, 2014, т. 12, № 1-2 (36-37), сс. 33-50. [Shtanski N. Osobennosti uregulirovaniya “konfliktov identichnosti”: kazus Pridnestrov'ya [Settlement of “Identity Conflicts”: the Case of Transnistria]. *International Trends*, 2014, vol. 12, no. 1-2 (36-37), pp. 33-50.]