Can Ukraine Learn Anything from Georgia?

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As the Soviet Union began to disintegrate, confrontations emerged on the political and administrative status of the autonomous republics of the region. The geopolitical shifts that followed the fall of Communism created tremendous opportunities and risks for local leaders to redesign their authority. In particular, conflicts were largely contingent on disagreements over the institutional status of the different ethnic groups after the collapse of the *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (USSR). As the Communist rule was losing credibility, groups began a series of internal battles over the control of territories. Conflicts in the South Caucasus mainly emerge around issues of recognition and secession. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia gained recognition as sovereign republics and started to rebuild their institutions. However, minorities that were already settled in the region found it difficult to comply with the hardening of international borders and the rise of nationalist politics. This was the case of the autonomous region of South Ossetia. Tracing back the events that led to the current "frozen" situation is important to understand the stakes of the Ukrainian crisis. Analyzing the development of these protracted conflicts into a "frozen" state highlights the implications for regional as well as international politics. The term "frozen" should not imply that there were no changing dynamics but rather that the negotiations have not succeeded in moving beyond the temporary end of violence.

Timeline of the conflict

During the Soviet regime, Georgia was a multi-ethnic state in which three regions enjoyed partial autonomy over their territorial and cultural policies. South Ossetia, notably, had a strong ethnic territorial concentration – 66.2% Ossetian – for which it had secured a right to use its indigenous language and preserve some cultural symbols (Zurcher, 2008). While Georgia continued to maintain its authority over South Ossetia throughout Soviet rule, the overwhelming control of the Communist party preserved the stability of the region and helped to integrate it into Georgia. However, the disintegration of such transcending authority, inversely, had an immediate impact on Georgia. As Georgian nationalist movements increasingly pushed towards the reunification of the whole Georgian territory, South Ossetians feared the consequences of a potential secession of Georgia from the USSR. Indeed, in August 1989, the Georgian Supreme Soviet passed a law making Georgian the official language, which created tensions in South Ossetia as few people spoke it. The South Ossetian Regional Soviet tried to counter it by appealing to the Supreme Soviet of Soviet Union (SSSU) to raise the status of South Ossetia from autonomous *oblast* to autonomous republic in November 1989. This was perceived by Georgia as a step towards secession and a threat to its territorial integrity (Zurcher, 2008). Consequently, the nationalist party reinforced its blockade of any separate decisions made by the South Ossetian Regional Soviet. When, in September 1990, South Ossetia declared itself to be an independent republic within the USSR, the Georgian government rejected the decision and announced its intention to send troops into South Ossetia to "march on Tskinvali." As a result, clashes broke out between Georgian forces and paramilitary groups and issues have since remained unresolved. Only Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia are recognised as sovereign states by the international community. South Ossetia and the other autonomous regions have been limited to the status of de facto states: they possess all the formal attributes of states, such as clear borders, an established government and army but are not perceived as such by the international community.

Factors preventing a resolution

The soviet legacy

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The Soviet Union was already divided into a hierarchical system of administrative units and sub-units that were supposed to represent the "homeland" of specific nationalities (Wheatley, 2009: 120). When Soviet control began collapsing, these units sought to protect their status and preserve their autonomy. In that sense, the ideology of the Georgian nationalist movement was highly influenced by the tradition of Soviet ethno-federalism (ibid.). The nation was perceived as a definable entity of which language was the primary determinant of membership, regardless of how its members perceived it. Moreover, a nation also had the rights to determine its own history and territory. Under Soviet rule, individual rights were subordinate to the arbitrary power of the party. Therein, the breakup of the Soviet Union opened up a breach for renewing confrontation between elites of different national groups over ownership of territory according to historical records. Nonetheless, Georgian nationalists kept the borders of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic as a way to justify the inclusion of the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within Georgia (Wheatley, 2009: 121).

The soviet tradition also facilitated the mobilization and support of the population in the autonomous regions (Zurcher, 2008: 133). One of the main instruments used by nationalist powers to promote a certain ethnic identity has been the education system: hence, they used the separate systems of native language education of the Soviet Union to reinforce communitarianism (Cornell, 2002: 254). Furthermore, Russian assistance was a crucial component in the early stages of state building. Not only did it supply weaponry to separatist groups but also its citizenship and visa policy encouraged the autonomous regions to see themselves as effectively independent. Azerbaijan, Moldova and Georgia were all wary of allowing dual citizenship because they feared it would undermine their national unity. Russia, however, did not impose visa restrictions on South Ossetia and Abkhazia to maintain its connection with the autonomous regions. Consequently, South Ossetia repeatedly turned to Moscow for help, but Moscow also encouraged separatist inspirations (Zurcher, 2008: 136). Notably, as Soviet rule was breaking away, intellectuals started to take sides, and members of the Soviet party found themselves making nationalist claims on behalf of minorities. However, the state power never became institutionalized, and decisions remained very arbitrary, which made it impossible for the new states to function effectively and to provide a sense of "national community" (Wheatley, 2009: 132).

Finally, Russia also has its own geopolitical and economic reasons for remaining involved in the region. The official Russian position was that the Georgian territorial integrity should be maintained but that it will not stand by and do nothing if South Ossetians, who were closely related to Russian, were killed (Ozhiganov, in: Arbatov, 1997: 366). However, Russia's foreign policy towards these conflicts has always been very ambiguous: On the one hand, Russia wants to secure control over the region by keeping military presence on Georgian grounds; on the other, the Russian government has also allowed for various forms of cooperation with de-facto states to maintain its monopoly over the local economy.

Internal grievances

As the Soviet markers of identity began to erode, the local intellectual elites attempted to reshape history. In South Ossetia, for instance, the Information Ministry tried to redefine the origins and statehood of the nation by glorifying the war against Georgia as a struggle against external aggression (King, 2001: 543). Moreover, a lot of members of the new political elite were former members of the Communist party who were very nostalgic of the soviet period; they attached a lot of importance to the preservation of certain values and traditions. However, as the soviet ideology collapsed, competing nationalisms began to mobilize against one another, and leaders built on ancient history to prove that they had more right over a territory by linking ethnicity with ownership. Consequently, some kind of security dilemma arose as leaders perceived the crisis as a chance to assert their own control over certain areas. As they sensed an opportunity to gain power over a territory, leaders began to weigh the costs and benefits of taking on an offensive stance on the situation. In such context, autonomy becomes the only way to compromise between the conflicting interests of the different groups and to adapt to specific grievances. Nevertheless, there is no official framework for the relations between the autonomous region and the central government (Cornell, 2002). It is a very fragile system that relies on the institutionalization and promotion of separate identities (ibid.). Moreover, it cannot guarantee interethnic peace without the agreement of the elite.

The new policies, therefore, left minorities less well off than during the conflict. A large body of the literature on

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secessionist conflicts has argued that war produces positive externalities for its perpetrators: nationalist elites benefit from using violence as a tool to extract and redistribute resources (King, 2001: 528). In this view, the spoils of war are more likely to encourage conflict rather than encourage settlement. Even in the event of a partial or complete victory, separatist leaders know that they are needed in the negotiation process. Hence, they often managed to secure high roles in government, which eventually reproduces wartime networks in the new state-like institutions (ibid.). In the case of South Ossetia, King argues that security forces benefited from the illegal trade in the region. According to him, it is the geographical location of South Ossetia that allowed groups to benefit from the crisis: the local police have had a privileged position to monitor trade along the highway to the Russian Republic of North Ossetia (2001: 537).

Despite the coherence of his reasoning, King's argument lacks empirical support. Given the international involvement in the region, security agencies would have made the information public if they had found any criminal activities preventing resolution. For instance, most of the heroin comes from Afghanistan, so it has to travel a long way before coming to South Ossetia, yet King only talks about what is happening at the border with Russia (ibid.). Nonetheless, the "criminal elite thesis" is a very effective way for the West to politicize the issue to its advantage. Henceforth, when measuring the impact of corruption in blocking decisions, one must think about the level of dysfunctionality that needs to be applied. Indeed, corruption does not seem to be a major factor of the deadlock. These states actually fit into the *Tillyian* framework of state building: The modern nation state is a by-product of rulers' attempts to access the means of wars. Once standing armies are created, the centralization of rules follows, making states stronger. Hence a national consciousness is developed, and the state belongs to the people who must fight to preserve it (Tilly, 1992).

Limited international management

The South Caucasus is an area where several international actors hold important geographical, economic and political stakes. All of these actors try to maintain influence in the region. They have also played a role in blocking the negotiation process. Notably, negotiations often took place out of local contexts, where everything was set for leaders to rebuild trust and take decisions. However, they then had to go back to their constituency and try to sell the compromises to both the people and elite on the ground. Hence, in 1992, under the Sochi agreement, Russia brokered a ceasefire between Georgia and South Ossetia. The agreement defined a zone of conflict around the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali and established a security corridor along the border of the unrecognized South Ossetian territories. In addition, Russia also set a Joint Control Commission and peacekeeping intervention. The forces were put under Russian control and were composed of peacekeepers from Georgia, Russia and North Ossetia. However, there has been no actual effort to rebuild trust with the South Ossetian government.

Within Georgia "proper" too, the population was growing disillusioned by the politics of the Shevardnadze government which failed to provide basic state functions. He was eventually overthrown by peaceful protest, in 2003, and one of the leaders of the "Rose revolution," Saakashvili, was elected president. In order to remedy the situation, he attempted to increase the power of the state and make it more visible throughout the country (Wheatley, 2009: 127). Therein, the members of the government have had to cater their own constituency while trying to force Abkhazia and South Ossetia to come back within Georgian territory. The implicit idea was "to eradicate enclaves – geopolitical, economical and cultural – that had hitherto appeared beyond the reach of the state." (ibid.) After he successfully re-imposed his authority over the Adjara Republic, Saakashvili focused its attention on South Ossetia: He supplied free fertilizers to the rural population and promised full state pensions to Osssetian citizens to mobilize them against the separatist government. However, he also closed the Ergneti Market, the principal source of revenue for most South Ossetians. Hence, tensions increased and Saakashvili's strategy backfired (Wheatley, 2009: 128). While he successfully restored some of the country's infrastructure, he also demonstrated the limits of the state-building project: by forcing its decisions upon the local population, he failed to take into account the reality of ethnic divisions. Therein, the decision-making process remained very undemocratic as it ignored the benefits of establishing some kind of civil society (Wheatley, 2009: 130). In 2008, relations worsened between Russia and Georgia who continued to disagree on how to handle the minority issue. Sarkozy negotiated a ceasefire agreement, but Russia quickly broke it when it recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia's reassertion of its influence over the region represents a bigger issue for the international community than just the creation of new states itself. European countries affirmed their intentions to uphold the ceasefire and helped to create a broader political framework for a

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lasting conflict resolution. Nevertheless, the Georgian leaders maintain that the OSCE requirements do no oblige them to grant South Ossetia anything beyond cultural autonomy. South Ossetian officials, on the contrary, point out the principles of ethnic and national self-determination and argue that basic individual rights and freedom should over-weigh the principle of territorial integrity. As groups refuse to acknowledge the position of the other, it is difficult for the OSCE to move the peace process forward (Ozhiganov, in: Arbatov, 1997: 370).

Owing to the diversity of agents involved in the region, the prospects for a resolution are unlikely, especially if the U.S and Europe hold on to their interests in the process. Indeed, despite the desire of Georgia to secure its alliance with the West, Russia is the only international actor whose stakes in the region are big enough to put pressure on the local leadership. The US and Europe, on the contrary, are focusing their political resources on other parts of the world. Finally, Georgia is not likely to have much impact on the process, unless the Georgian government manages to restore the economy of the country. In parallel, the international intervention can be deemed useful for the separatist leaders for whom the participation in the negotiation process provides some kind of legitimacy. However, as Ukraine is taking a similar path to Georgia, it is going to increase pressure on the already weak institutions of much of the states in the region. In particular, as members of Saakashvili's government as well as Saakashvili himself have been appointed as advisers to Ukraine, Georgia fears what the break up of Ukraine would mean for its own sovereignty.

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