
SELECTED CONFLICTS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION: AN OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

There are a several conflict zones in and near the Black Sea basin, but this paper has to omit the Russian North Caucasus (with Chechnya) and Eastern Turkey with its predominantly Kurdish population; otherwise it would be too long and complex. Also, it is impossible to discuss the region's potential 'hot spots' as, for example, the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine, although this would be highly relevant for any assessment of the future stability in the Black Sea region. Therefore, this article focuses on Moldova and South Caucasus.

Map 1: The Black Sea Region in Post-Soviet Times



Source: Wikimedia Commons (a).

THE TRANSNISTRIA CONFLICT IN MOLDOVA

During the last years of the 1980s, the political landscape of the Soviet Union was changing due to Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of 'Perestroika' (restructuring) and 'Glasnost' (openness), which allowed more and more political pluralism at the level of the Soviet republics and other administrative units. In the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR), as in many other parts of the Soviet Union, national movements became the leading political force and/or imposed their agenda on the local Communist Parties. Thus, on 31 August 1989, the MSSR's Supreme Soviet enacted two laws. One of them made Moldovan the official language, in lieu of Russian, the *de facto* official language of the Soviet Union.¹ The second law stipulated the return to the Latin Romanian alphabet. 'Moldovan language' is the term used in the Soviet Union for a virtually identical Romanian language. These events, as well as the end of the Ceaușescu regime in neighbouring Romania in December 1989 and the partial opening of the Moldovan-Romanian border on 6 May 1990, led many ethnic Slavs in the MSSR to believe that a union of the republic with Romania was inevitable and that they would be excluded from many aspects of public life, especially from high-ranking posts in the republic's politics, economy, media and science. These assumptions caused fears especially among the population in Transnistria, the region on the left bank of the Dnestr (Romanian: Nistru) river, where, as Table 1 shows, the Russians and Ukrainians outnumber the Moldovans (which is not the case in Bessarabia, Moldova's region on the Dnestr's right bank).

Table 1: The ethnic composition of Moldova (census 2004)

	Ethnicity	Bessarabia census	% Bess.	Transnistrian census	% Trans.	Moldova total	% total
1.	Moldovans	2,564,849	75.8	177,156	31.9	2,742,005	69.6
2.	Ukrainians	282,406	8.3	159,940	28.8	442,346	11.2
3.	Russians	201,218	5.9	168,270	30.3	369,488	9.4
4.	Gagauz	147,500	4.4	11,107	2.0	158,607	4.0
5.	Romanians	73,276	2.2	NA	NA	73,276	1.9

¹ *De iure*, this was not the case because the Soviet Constitution did not contain any provisions about an All-Union state language.

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6.	Bulgarians	65,662	1.9	11,107	2.0	76,769	1.9
7.	Others	48,421	1.4	27,767	5.0	76,188	1.9
8.	TOTAL	3,383,332	100	555,347	100	3,938,679	100

From September 1989, there were strong scenes of protests in Transnistria against the Moldovan Government. On 2 September 1990, a 'Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic' (PMSSR) was proclaimed.² The first clash between the Moldovan Government and the separatists occurred on 3 November 1990 in Dubăsari (see Map 2). In the aftermath of a failure of the coup attempt in Moscow on 19-21 August 1991, the Moldovan Parliament adopted a Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova. At that time, Moldova did not have its own army, and the first attempts to create one took place in early 1992 in response to the escalating conflict. By 1992, the Moldovan Government had troops under the Ministry of the Interior. Only in March 1992, it started recruiting troops for the newly created Ministry of Defence. By July 1992, total Moldovan troop strength has been estimated at 25,000–35,000, including called-up police officers, reservists and volunteers, especially from the Moldavian localities near the conflict zone. In addition to some Soviet weaponry inherited upon independence, Moldova also obtained arms and military advisors from Romania.

The Russian 14th Army on Moldovan territory numbered about 14,000 professional soldiers. The separatist region, renamed to 'Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic' (Russian: Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika, or PMR), had 9,000 militiamen trained and armed by officers of the 14th Army. Forces of the 14th Army stationed in Transnistria fought with and on behalf of the PMR forces. PMR units were able to arm themselves with weapons taken from the stores of the 14th Army.

2 March 1992 is considered the official start date of the civil war in Moldova. In April Russian Vice-President Alexander Rutskoi, a nationalist hardliner, visited Transnistria and expressed Moscow's full support for the separatist cause. With the PMR's overwhelming military superiority, Moldova's Government had little chance of achieving victory. It has been estimated that in total nearly 1,000 people were killed in the conflict, with

² 'Pridnestrovie' being the name for Transnistria in Russian.

the number of wounded approaching 3,000. Unlike the South Caucasian ethno-territorial conflicts (see Chapter 2.2.), in the war for Transnistria IDP's did not reach large numbers, and there was no 'ethnic cleansing' (Kaufman 1996, King 2000, Lamont 1995).

Map 2: Moldova (with the Separatist Transnistria Region)



Source: Wikimedia Commons (b).

A ceasefire agreement was signed on 21 July 1992 by the Presidents of Russia and Moldova, Boris Yeltsin and Mircea Snegur. The document provided for peacekeeping forces charged with ensuring observance of the ceasefire and security arrangements, composed of five Russian battalions, three Moldovan battalions and two PMR battalions under the orders of a joint military command structure, the Joint Control Commission (Lynch 2006).

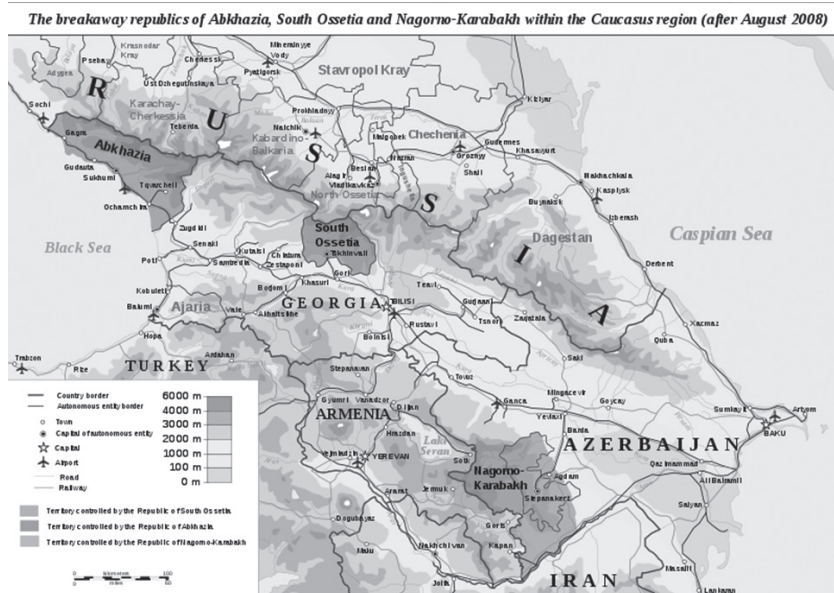
The ceasefire is effective since 1992. However, Transnistria is still out of the Moldovan Government's control: The PMR is a state entity, whose *de facto* independence is not internationally recognised (not even by Russia). Russian troops are still deployed in the region. The Moldovan Government has demanded their withdrawal on countless occasions, but Moscow clearly has no intention to remove them. So they remain in Transnistria and act *de facto* as 'guards' of the PMR's 'independence'.

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Security Policy: An Overview

From Central Europe, the South Caucasian capitals can be reached by aircraft within about four hours, but comparing patterns of thought one could guess that he came to another planet. Western categories of democracy, human rights, civil society, integration of ethnically diverse societies, political thinking and political culture (leaving out political correctness), conflict resolution attempts, dispositions to use force for the achievement of political goals, perceptions of friend and foe and so on hardly fit for the Caucasus. This background of the conflicts under consideration has always to be kept in mind.

Map 3.



Source: Wikimedia Commons (c).

The reasons for political violence are difficult to understand in most of the EU member states: There, nobody would fight for a piece of land because there are, allegedly or *de facto*, “the graves of our fathers” (“graves of our mothers” are never mentioned; so it is already obvious that feminism is very unpopular in the Caucasus). And if a neighbouring ethnic group found some “graves of our (= their) fathers” on the same land, this results in good preconditions for clashes, fighting or even war. This, however, again increases the number of these “graves of (whomsoever) fathers” — and creates conditions for the next war.

Map 4.

Ethnolinguistic Groups in the Caucasus Region



Source: Wikimedia Commons (d).

The “graves of our fathers” are closely connected with another aspect, which every observer of South Caucasian politics always should be aware of: the importance of *myths*. There are so many competing myths in this region that it is very difficult (or maybe impossible) to remove them in order to reach the historical facts. For example, even very educated people in Armenia, asked whether they really believe that Noah’s Ark stranded at Ararat Mountain, use to reply, “yes of course, why not”. The Armenians

still consider the Ararat as symbol of their nation, although it is located on Turkish territory (but it can be very well seen from the Armenian capital Yerevan). So, the coat of arms of Armenia shows the Ararat—with Noah's Ark on its peak:

Figure 1: The Coat of Arms of Armenia



Source: Wikimedia Commons (e).

The South Caucasian region is, unfortunately, of only very limited interest to the Western public. However, this does not mean that events there have no supra-regional relevance. On the one hand, the ethnically and religiously highly heterogeneous South Caucasus is itself the scene of a number of crises; on the other, it is close to other trouble spots such as the Russian Northern Caucasus, the Kurdish areas of eastern Turkey and North Iraq; civil-war torn Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict zone are not far away as well. The South Caucasus is a kind of ‘hinge’ between Europe and Asia, orient and occident. The zones of interest of several great powers also overlap here, not least of all due to the region's role as a transport corridor, in particular for oil and gas.

The most important challenges for the internal and external security of the South Caucasus are: Unresolved political and ethno-territorial conflicts, refugee movements, the continuing economic and social crisis, the weakness and ineffectiveness of state institutions (especially in Georgia), crime and corruption and the modest quality of democracy. These problem areas are so self-evidently linked that it hardly appears possible to tackle and solve them individually.

*Table 2: Basic data of the South Caucasian States and Austria
(for comparison)*

	Georgia	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Austria
capital	Tbilisi	Yerevan	Baku	Vienna
area (sq km)	69,700	29,743	86,600	83,871
population	4,497,600	3,031,200	9,235,100	8,489,482
major religion	Christianity	Christianity	Islam	Christianity
GDP (2011), nominal, in billion dollar, UN data	14.367	10.138	63.404	418.031
GDP (2005–2012), purchasing power parity, in billion dollar, World Bank data	26.63	19.7	99	367
GDP (2005–12), purchasing power parity per capita, in dollar, World Bank data	5,902	6,645	10,624	43,324
Human Development Index, 2013 (rank)	72	87	82	18
Corruption Perception Index by NGO Transparency International, 2012 (rank)	51	105	139	25
assessment of the level of freedom, by NGO Freedom House	partly free	partly free	not free	free
Press Freedom Index by NGO Reporters Without Borders, 2013 (rank)	100	74	156	12

The main players of security policy in the South Caucasus are:

- The independent and recognised states Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan;
- The states bordering the region, Russia, Turkey and Iran;
- The United States;
- International organisations such as the United Nations, the OSCE, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and NATO.

One could also include the unrecognised, but *de facto* existing state entities Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh among the players. However, Azerbaijan denies that Karabakh is an independent, i.e.

separate factor from Armenia, and it is a widely held belief in Georgia that Abkhazia and South Ossetia owe their position solely to Russian support.

Table 3: The Armed Forces of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2012

	manpower	battle tanks	armoured vehicles	artillery	combat aircraft	combat helicopters	warships (patrol and coastal)
Georgia	20,650	93	137	185	12	- (transport 29)	18
Armenia	48,850	110	240	239	15	8	—
Azerbaijan	66,950	339	595	458	44	38	8

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies 2013.

Ethno-territorial Conflicts in the South Caucasus

South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh declared their ‘independence’ from Georgia and Azerbaijan respectively at the beginning of the 1990s. The Governments in Tbilisi and Baku tried to stop the secession of these provinces, which resulted in violent clashes and, finally, in wars. In South Ossetia the fighting lasted from 1989 to 1992, in Abkhazia from 1992 to 1993 and in Karabakh from 1991 to 1994. Since then, the Armenians control 13,6 percent of the territory of the former Azerbaijani Soviet Republic (De Waal, 2003). Negotiations for solutions of the separatist conflicts have now been going on for many years since then, and nothing indicates that solutions are in sight. Abkhazia and South Ossetia insist upon their ‘independence’, Karabakh on its ‘independence’ or unification with Armenia.

Georgia has repeatedly accused Moscow of abusing its role as a ‘peacekeeper’ and of obstructing a political conflict solution in a bid to preserve its influence in the South Caucasus. Specifically, Georgian officials have blamed Russia for channelling financial and military aid to South Ossetia and Abkhazia and of abetting large-scale smuggling that helps to keep them afloat.

The refugee problem remains unsolved. In 1993 some 250,000 Georgians (i.e. almost half of the population of the autonomous republic) were expelled

from Abkhazia or had to flee, some 800,000 Azeris (from Armenia, Karabakh and other Armenian occupied territories of Azerbaijan) are refugees in Azerbaijan. Armenians from Azerbaijani territories outside of Karabakh had to flee. The rulers in all three separatist regions will probably never agree to a complete return of the refugees, because they consider the Georgians and the Azeris respectively as a threat to their claims to secede. From the point of view of Baku and Tbilisi, it seems to be unlikely to solve the refugee problem before Azerbaijani and Georgian jurisdiction has been established over Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia respectively. This, however, can be ruled out in the near future.

In Armenia and Russia, but also in various Western sources, fears are expressed that Azerbaijan could use its oil revenues to arm its military in order to at least threaten a violent solution of the Karabakh problem. However, this overlooks the fact that Armenia could use its ballistic missiles against Azerbaijani oil fields, pipelines and/or refineries, an action that would undoubtedly result in an inferno. Of course, in the event of war, Western corporations would immediately withdraw their investments from the Azerbaijani oil industry. Baku is well aware of this fact. For that reason, the current *de facto* independent status of Karabakh becomes safer with every dollar invested in the Azerbaijani oil industry by Western companies.

Russian Policy in the South Caucasus

Any examination of the ethno-territorial conflicts on the southern periphery of the USSR/CIS would be incomplete without taking into account the 'Russian factor'. Without military support from Moscow, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Karabakh relied mainly on Armenia, which is Moscow's main ally in the South Caucasus) could hardly have been able to tear free from their central governments: Moscow rendered political support and made massive deliveries of arms. The Russian army openly intervened in Abkhazia in 1992-93 (by the way, as strange as it sounds today, together with Chechen 'volunteers' under notorious warlord Shamil Basayev, who was one of Russia's most wanted terrorists between 1995 and his killing in 2006). Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that so-

called Russian ‘volunteers’ and Cossacks fought for the South Caucasian separatists, especially in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, at the beginning of the nineties.

Russia obviously uses double standards in handling separatist movements: On the one hand, it has, before August 2008, repeatedly warned Tbilisi against a new war against Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia. On the other hand, Moscow tried to solve its own problem with separatism in Chechnya in two wars (1994–1996 and from 1999 on) by solely military means, i.e. to “exterminate”, “erase” or “crush” – to use the most popular official terms—the rebels there (officially referred to only as “bandits” and “terrorists”).

Almost the entire adult population (and of course the political elite) of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has since long time held Russian citizenship. Consequently, Moscow in August 2008 intervened militarily against Georgia under the pretext of ‘protecting Russian citizens’ (Malek 2009, Asmus 2009). The currency in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is the Russia Rouble (Karabakh uses the Armenian Dram), Moscow pays pensions, Russian tourists are welcome visitors in Abkhazia and leave a lot of money in the pockets of the separatist authorities. Russian officials have occupied top positions in the power structures of the separatist entities. For example, from 1993 on, Russian General Anatoli Zinevich was Chief of Staff of Karabakh’s highly efficient and well-organized separatist army. And many officials in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, even in the Governments, armies and secret services, are sent from Russia.

The Russian ‘peacekeeping’ operations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were until their termination in August 2008 clearly not in line with the approved principles of United Nations peacekeeping missions. Thus, the ‘peacekeeping unit’ in South Ossetia had Russian, Georgian and Ossetian contingents, which ignored the traditional non-inclusion of soldiers from the (former) warring parties. This force was based solely on a bilateral agreement concluded in June 1992 between the Georgian head of state Eduard Shevardnadze and his Russian counterpart Boris Yeltsin in the Black Sea village of Dagomys. In the following years, not only Georgian officials and mass media frequently reported that the Russian

peacekeepers are supplying the separatists with weapons and ammunition in violation of demilitarizing agreements. Moreover, the Russians were accused of threatening the lives of Georgian citizens living in the conflict zone, carrying out sabotage raids against Georgian targets, and taking an active part in smuggling operations to and from South Ossetia.

There has never been an UN-mandated mission where a single country mustered all the personnel for a peacekeeping contingent. However, in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone on the Inguri river just this was the case: About 1,600 Russian servicemen have been stationed there in June 1994 under a CIS mandate. Tbilisi occasionally wished for a change of the mandate of the Russian 'peacekeeping troops' that would allow them to escort Georgian refugees back to Abkhazia. Russia, and of course Abkhazia, always categorically rejected this as well as the replacement of the Russian contingent by Turkish, Ukrainian or other peacekeepers. Russia evidently did not want to surrender control of the 'peace mission', arguing that without its troops the Georgian-Abkhaz war would flare up again. However, this concern for peace was hardly plausible given that the Kremlin conducted a war in its own breakaway region Chechnya. The real reason why Moscow was determined to remain present on the Inguri was clearly geopolitical: The Russian 'peacekeepers' acted as 'border troops' for separatist Abkhazia. In the UN-mandated force in the conflict zone, the United Nations Missions of Observers in Georgia (UNOMIG), after its creation in 1993 some 130 military observers from many countries remained a passive factor without any real influence on the Russian activities in Abkhazia. After its military intervention and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as 'independent states' in August 2008, Moscow terminated its 'peacekeeping missions' there. And UNOMIG ceased to exist in June 2009, because Moscow vetoed a prolongation of its mandate.

SEPARATIST STATE FORMATIONS IN THE CIS

All the existing *de facto*-states of the CIS have their own 'symbols of statehoods': flags, coat of arms, presidents, parliaments, governments (with ministries for foreign affairs and defence), television channels, 'state

universities'; and Abkhazia even runs its own Academy of Sciences. It is difficult to assess the contribution of this authority to world science, but this is certainly not its main task: Together with all the other elements enumerated, it is one of the 'attributes of statehood'—meaning 'independent' statehood, of course independent from the metropolitan state Georgia (Lynch 2004).

*Table 4: Separatist State Formations in the CIS
(without Chechnya in the 1990s)*

	PMR	Abkhazia	South Ossetia	Nagorno-Karabakh
metropolitan state	Moldova	Georgia	Georgia	Azerbaijan
supporting states	Russia, Ukraine (passive)	Russia	Russia	Armenia, Russia (passive)
initial year of the crisis	1989	1989	1989	1988
war	spring 1992	1992-93	1989-92	1991-94
capital	Tiraspol	Sukhum(i)	Zkhinval(i)	Stepanakert (Xankendi)
currency	Dnestr Rouble	Russian Rouble	Russian Rouble	Armenian Dram
population	555.000 (official figure, disputed)	disputed; 140,000 – 200,000	disputed; 30.000 – 50,000	138.000 (census in 2005); 2011 official data 144.700 (maybe inflated)
proportion of the separatist state entity in the population of the metropolitan state in 1989 (in percent)	about 16	about 9.7	about 1.8	about 2.7
distribution of the citizenship of other states	Russia, Ukraine	Russia	Russia	Armenia

The PMR is the only separatist state entity in the CIS which an own significant armaments industry (which produces even rocket launchers). It delivered its goods to the other CIS separatist state entities, especially to

Abkhazia, but to ‘hot spots’ on the Western Balkans and even in Africa as well. The military of these separatist state entities has special relevance for our research interest.

Table 5: Separatist Armies in the CIS

	manpower	battle tanks	armoured vehicles	artillery
Transnistria	5,000 – 10,000	15-18	?	?
Abkhazia	5,000	50+	80+	80+
South Ossetia	2,000	5-10	30	25
Nagorno-Karabakh	18,000 (some 40,000 mob)	316	324	322

Sources: Malek 2003, Malek 2012.

These figures should be treated with great reserve: they are almost certainly outdated (but there is hardly other data available), and the existing data about the hardware of the separatist armies differs significantly. Thus, the information for Karabakh would mean that the bulk of Armenian military potential is stationed in and around Karabakh (see Table 3). It should, however, be pointed out that the figures in Table 5 for the Karabakh army come from Baku. They are firmly denied by the vast majority of Armenian and Karabakh politicians, media and other observers, but they have not provided their own official data on the Karabakh separatist military. Of course, no reference is made to the Karabakh military potential (like the forces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) in the quotas of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Karabakh has expressed its readiness to put its military under CFE control, but this, of course, implies the international recognition of its ‘independence’—which is very unlikely in the near future (Malek 2010a).

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The leaderships of Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan already at the beginning of the 1990s lost control over parts of their territories. There are still no solutions in sight for these separatist ‘frozen conflicts’, as Moscow tries to manipulate them in its own self-interest. It is widely assumed that Russia hopes to benefit from making Moldova and Georgia (but not

resource-rich Azerbaijan) look like unstable countries. Western powers show only a small (or no) degree of commitment to achieve enduring and just peace settlements (Malek 2008a, Malek 2008b).

The PMR, Abkhazia and South Ossetia equate 'self determination' solely with territorial separation. Not least because of that, the postulation of ethno-territorial conflict and separatism playing a central part concerning the decay of Moldova, Azerbaijan and Georgia is to be regarded legitimate. Thus they can be considered as 'failed states' also due to the fact that in the foreseeable future there is no apparent chance to restore their territorial integrity (Malek 2010b).

Russia will remain the dominant power in the entire CIS for the foreseeable future, thus setting clear limits for the current and future integration efforts in European and Euro-Atlantic organisations. Tbilisi's pursuit of NATO membership may be seen more as a delusion of grandeur than a realistic goal.

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