

RUSSIA'S GREY ZONES: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL AMBIGUITY ON RUSSIAN
INFLUENCE IN GEORGIA, UKRAINE, AND MOLDOVA

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the people who believed in me, even when I did not.

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ABSTRACT

RUSSIA'S GREY ZONES: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL AMBIGUITY ON RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN GEORGIA, UKRAINE, AND MOLDOVA

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This thesis explores the ways in which the politically ambiguous status of the former Soviet grey zones allows Russia to exert influence over Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Literature review and case studies indicate that there are a few key strategies which allow this influence to take hold: passportization, economic coercion, presence of troops, and the strategic manipulation of official peace talks. The cases of Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics illustrate the use of these strategies on the ground in different contexts. These strategies are made possible in part by the ambiguous political status that the grey zones hold and contribute to both keeping the zones in their liminal state and influencing the parent state for Russia's political and military interests.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, regional conflicts over autonomy within Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have increasingly become ‘frozen conflicts’ leading to several quasi-autonomous grey zones throughout the region. In some cases, these grey zones have endured for decades, impacting the political, economic, and security landscapes of the countries from whom they seceded. These grey zones have much in common, including their reliance upon Russian military support to achieve and sustain their autonomy, as well as the influence of Russia on their internal politics. These grey zones present a challenge, as their international political status is ambiguous—they are neither part of the nation that claims sovereignty over them, nor are they independently functioning agents in the international arena. These republics have been termed ‘Grey Zones’.

The European Council on Foreign Relations published a series titled *Russia in the Grey Zones*, which identifies seven entities that fall into the category in the former Soviet context: Crimea, Luhansk People’s Republic, Donetsk People’s Republic, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh¹. These grey zones are each

¹ European Council on Foreign Relations, Pugsley and Wesslau, 2016.

characterized by heavy Russian political influence and military presence, ethno-linguistic differences from the countries from whom they broke away, and at some point, violent conflict that was either perpetrated or regulated by Russian military forces². The oldest of these republics, Transnistria, has endured for almost 30 years, while the youngest, Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, were established in 2014. The majority of UN member states reject these republics' bids for independence, maintaining a hardline position in favor of 'territorial integrity' on behalf of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Attempts at negotiations at international peace talks in Minsk, Geneva, and others have failed to reach political settlement beyond a ceasefire (and, in the case of the Donbas, have failed even in that regard). Meanwhile, Russia maintains a tight hold over these regions, often to the direct detriment of the countries from whom they attempted to break away.

These grey zones present a problem to the international community, as well as to the parent states from whom they have sought autonomy. Russian influence in these zones is a threat to the territorial integrity of the parent states, as well as to the general stability of the geopolitical situation in the region, posing unique challenges to the field of conflict resolution. They also present unique humanitarian difficulties, as the people who reside in these zones face oppression from many different forces. This research will seek to address the following question: In what ways does the ambiguity of the international political status of grey zones allow Russia to exert influence over the

² Russian military involvement has been disputed by the Russian government, but the international community is in agreement of their involvement.

countries that claim sovereignty over these grey zones? It is possible that the protracted nature of these conflicts is in part due to their ambiguous political status. Political science and military scholars widely agree that the circumstances of these grey zones present an intentional strategic pattern of intervention on the part of Russia³. This research will seek to explore the ways in which Russia may take advantage of the confusion and uncertainty regarding the political status of these grey zones on the international stage to achieve its own interests within Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

It is important to note that the citizens of these grey zones face a difficult set of circumstances. While the situation in each of the grey zones is different, their citizens face economic hardships, as well as oppression from Russian forces, the forces of the parent state, and/or from the government of the grey zones themselves. Opportunities for these people are limited; international travel is nearly impossible, university degrees are not accredited, and job opportunities are scarce. While this research will focus on Russia's political and military strategy in the grey zones, it is important to note that the people living under these hardships are the victims of circumstances often well beyond their own control.

This research will begin by addressing the research design of the thesis. Then, literature on cases will be discussed, illustrating the pattern, context, and analytical framework for the three cases. Next, theoretical literature surrounding grey zones, de facto states, and the role of patron states will be explored. The cases will be discussed in depth, and conclusions will be drawn about the role of political ambiguity in Russia's

³ Grossman 2018

influence over Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Implications for the field of conflict resolution will also be discussed, and questions for further research will be considered.

Research Design

This research uses literature review and case study methods to analyze the ways in which the politically ambiguous status of the grey zones allows Russia to exert their influence over Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Literature in a variety of fields including defense and national security, political science, and conflict resolution set the theoretical framework for understanding the grey zones. Analysis of de facto states, not only in the former Soviet context but also in other areas of the world, provide a theoretical framework through which to understand the behavior and role of such entities. Reports and publications from organizations like the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), as well as professional reports provide analysis and application of the theoretical concepts in the former Soviet cases. Evidence from literature and case studies is augmented by material from course lectures, as well as in-person interviews conducted in IRB-approved research in Ukraine in 2018. Interviewees included academics, government ministers, journalists, and influential members of civil society in Kiev, Ukraine. Contemporaneous news publications as well as timelines of events published by BBC and others provide an overview of the events leading up to hostilities in each of the zones.

Case study and literature review methods are appropriate for this research because the concept of political ambiguity cannot be strictly measured or turned into a dataset. The creation of a framework or metric of ambiguity based on certain factors was

considered but proved to be both difficult to construct and limiting in the scope of analysis that it would allow. In order to determine if the hypothesis regarding the role of political ambiguity as a method of influence is valid, the research must assume that this manipulation is the strategic goal. There are many unique and varied dynamics at play in each of these grey zones besides Russian influence. Often there is a presence of organized crime, and the people residing in the zones are marginalized by both the parent state and Russia⁴. The focus of this research will be on the ways in which Russia may take advantage of the politically ambiguous status of the grey zones with the goal of influencing the parent states, with the acknowledgement that there are other nuanced dynamics at play. Based on this focus on political ambiguity as a tool of Russian influence, the development of a metric for measuring such ambiguity would have been biased and narrow. Through the use of case study and literature review methods of evidence collection, the result is left open to the data and evidence that exists, which leads to more fruitful and honest analysis than if a certain metric or framework dictates what kinds of evidence should be considered. The weaknesses of this method are that the literature and cases cannot be explored in their entirety in a project of this scope—numerous publications have been written on each of the cases over a period of decades. Additionally, the broader literature skews heavily in favor of the parent states and does little to address the attitudes or agency of the citizens of the grey zones, or the perspective of Russia. However, this analysis uses the existing evidence and data to specifically explore the role that political ambiguity may play in allowing Russia to manipulate these

⁴ European Council on Foreign Relations, Pugsley and Wesslau, 2016.

countries, rather than on analyzing the ways in which these quasi-states interact with Russia, each other, or the world.

In this analysis, the term grey zones will refer to Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics in the Donbas, Ukraine. These cases have substantial enough similarities for a pattern to be observed, and for comparisons to be drawn between them. The key similarity that ties these cases together is that they are all ongoing conflicts over sovereignty, during which Russian troops intervened on behalf of the grey zones in armed conflict, and these troops remain in the zones to varying degrees. Each of these zones illustrate different challenges faced by the parent states in the face of Russian influence, which will be discussed individually in Chapter 4. The cases also feature differences in their relationships with Russia—for example, Russia has recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states but has not extended the same courtesy to other grey zones. Potential reasons for this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. The cases of grey zones in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova all provide insight into different dynamics of political ambiguity and illustrate the role that it may play in continued Russian influence in the region, while still providing a pattern which can be compared easily.

For the purposes of this research, Nagorno Karabakh and Crimea will be excluded from analysis. In the case of Crimea, despite the objections of Ukraine and the international community, the peninsula has been annexed into the Russian Federation and is now fully incorporated into that system. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian troops were instrumental in the height of the conflict, but there is no ongoing Russian

troop presence in the region. Today, that conflict is primarily one between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with different dynamics than are at play in the other grey zones. These cases were selected with the acknowledgement that the cases of Nagorno-Karabakh and Crimea require further investigation into their differences from the others, and the reasons for these differences. Such investigation, however, is beyond the scope of this project. Chapter 2 will discuss literature related to the cases and explore the patterns of Russian involvement in these zones, as well as discuss the strategic advantages to Russia that these zones provide. Chapter 3 then illustrates the theoretical foundation for the project, defining key concepts such as grey zones, de facto states, and political ambiguity in the context of the grey zones under Russian influence.

CHAPTER 2: RUSSIA IN THE GREY ZONES

A Note on Terminology

In the context of these grey zone conflicts, the use of language and names is a deeply political issue. The use of certain names or spellings of places in Georgia and South Ossetia, for example, can prefer one language over another, and thus appear to side with one side or another of the conflict. The city Tskhinvali is an excellent example of this issue: in Georgia, the city is called Tskhinvali, while South Ossetians call the city Tskhinval. This thesis will use the common English translations for the names of places, people, and events in each of the zones respectively, and attaches no political meaning or preference to the names that are selected for such people or places. In order to fairly investigate the different political contexts of each grey zone, using English translations for all names and places across all cases is a stylistic decision only, useful for analysis. Likewise, the term ‘parent state’ will be used to refer to Ukraine, Georgia, and/or Moldova, as the state from whom the grey zone has declared their independence. This is in no way meant to be a value judgment, but rather a stylistic one.

A Pattern of Intervention

This research will draw upon the literatures of conflict and peace studies, political science, national security, and others to analyze the phenomenon of grey zones. It is important to understand not only the conflict dynamics of these zones, but also the

broader geopolitical space in which these zones exist in order to examine how Russia may use them to exert its influence.

The political turmoil that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the creation of 15 post-soviet republics, each responsible for building a functioning state in the absence of the funding and control of Moscow. Russia remained the largest and strongest of these post-Soviet states, inheriting much of the land, military, and remaining financial resources of the USSR. National security scholars have written extensively on the topic of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet era, and of Russia's trademark concept of the 'near abroad'. Russia coined the term in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, as a way of referring to the former Soviet states that it borders. "Russia's overall goal in the former Soviet area is to strengthen its hegemonic position based on extensive political, economic and security ties, which link the neighbouring countries to Russia, without denying their formal sovereignty."⁵ Through economic, political, and sometimes coercive means, Russia works to ensure that it maintains influence over all of its neighbors—especially those which show promise in developing democracy, and who seek agreements with NATO or the EU.

In an opinion piece for Foreign Policy, Orttung and Walker issue a scathing review of Russia's strategy of intervention in the near abroad. The subtitle of the article reads, "Each of Russia's Reform-Minded Neighbors is Plagued by Separatism: It's no Coincidence"⁶. They highlight the growing number of regions in Eastern Europe and the

⁵ Gerrits and Bader 2016

⁶ Walker and Orttung 2015

Caucasus under Russian influence, and the pattern from which these quasi-states emerged in reforming former Soviet countries. The authors joined a growing chorus in the spring of 2015 speaking up against the situation in Eastern Ukraine, in which Russian soldiers intervened on behalf of pro-Russian rebels in the Donbas following Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea. In addition to international law banning such annexations and invasions, those who had studied Russia and their foreign policy connected the dots. They recognized that this annexation was unfolding in a larger geopolitical context—one in which Russia had already invaded on behalf of separatists in at least 4 other former Soviet regions.

During the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a breakaway republic developed along the Dniester river in Moldova, declaring its independence as the Republic of Transnistria. Fearing Moldovan integration with Romania, the mostly Russian-speaking minority of the region fought for their independence from Moldova. After a brief invasion by Moldovan forces, which managed to recapture some territory, Russian soldiers came to the assistance of the breakaway republic, pushing Moldovan forces back to what remains the de facto border to this day⁷.

In 2008, during the Russian and Georgian War, Russia intervened in Georgia on behalf of two breakaway regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Fighting went on for five days, before France negotiated a ceasefire agreement. Russia recognized both breakaway territories as independent countries and assumed responsibility for their protections.

⁷ BBC Timeline, Transnistria and Moldova, 2018

⁸ BBC Timeline, Georgia, 2018

In the winter of 2014, following the ousting of Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich, covert Russian troops invaded the peninsula of Crimea, which shortly thereafter was annexed into the Russian Federation. Following this annexation, the Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic declared their independence from Ukraine in the Donbas, supported by Russian troops⁹. The international community largely views this as an ongoing Russian invasion in Ukraine and has issued sanctions against Russia for their actions in the region. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Grossman points out that Russia has a series of strategic advantages to intervening in these states. He argues that the form that Russian intervention takes in these separatist regions is in the creation and curation of so-called 'frozen' conflicts. Grossman defines frozen conflicts as those which "have ended due to a cease-fire, either de facto or de jure", but have not been resolved with an official peace treaty¹⁰. This definition is broad in scope and could include any number of political conflicts across the world—however, in the context of Russia and its neighbors, it is most easily applied to Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and more recently the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics in Ukraine's Donbas region. Grossman alleges that Russia intentionally curates these frozen conflicts in these countries for a few strategic reasons: first, he claims that it allows Russia to maintain a 'buffer zone' around itself, which has been a central tenant of Soviet and Russian foreign policy alike¹¹. Some argue that Russia maintains this policy because of its long history of being conquered by marauding armies—with few if any

⁹ BBC Timeline, Ukraine, 2019

¹⁰ Grossman 2018

¹¹ Ibid.

natural barriers to stop advancing forces, Russia has sought to maintain a buffer zone in order to protect itself from future military confrontation¹². With the frequency and likelihood of land-based conventional warfare decreasing, this is perhaps less true than it once was. While Russia may no longer fear land invasion through the plains, it has demonstrated continuing unease with the expansion of NATO onto its borders with the induction of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the alliance¹³.

The pattern that emerges in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Donbas is a clear indication of Russia's strategy and playbook in the near abroad. The established pattern suggests that the 2008 war in Georgia may not have been unrelated to talks with NATO on how to further cooperate militarily, or with the EU on expanding trade¹⁴. Russia has demonstrated that when its neighbors demonstrate a western orientation, such as Ukraine's ousting of Victor Yanukovich in 2014 in favor of a pro-EU regime, Russia intervenes, which makes further development and economic partnership with Europe or the United States more difficult. Grossman argues that in addition to forming a geographic sphere of influence, the strategy of frozen conflicts also includes brief and swift military intervention, after which the fighting stops—thus ensuring that NATO and other western powers lack the impetus or justification to involve themselves militarily¹⁵. Finally, Grossman argues, the establishment of Russian peacekeeping forces in these zones allows them to keep large numbers of troops present

¹² Kaplan 2012

¹³ Radin 2017

¹⁴ Tolstrup 2013

¹⁵ Grossman 2018

inside the established territory of neighboring states. A European Council on Foreign Relations report in 2016 estimated that there are 1500 Russian troops in Transnistria, 4000 in Abkhazia, 3000 in South Ossetia, and as many as 8000 in the Donbas¹⁶. The figure for troops in the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics is difficult to gauge, as the border between Russia and these republics has open movements of troops and weapons across it, and the figures likely vary by the day. However, the strategic value of these troops inside of Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Georgian territory cannot be overstated¹⁷. The aftereffects of these interventions have led to a geopolitical limbo for the grey zones. Neither under the control of their parent state, nor completely under the control of Russia, these regions are forced to maintain the apparatus of a state, but remain unable to enter into international relations, trade, or direct engagement with other states.

On the other hand, it is important to note that these conflicts emerged due to very real identity, linguistic, and political grievances within the grey zones. The grey zones' populations' agency and the actions of the parent states are relevant conflict dynamics which contribute to the formation of these grey zones. In Transnistria in the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet state, in which the Transnistrian population had been members of a broader majority, left them a minority in a young and nationalizing Moldovan state¹⁸. With these very real concerns, and the geopolitical turmoil of the region in general, declaring their independence from Moldova and seeking the support of Russia seemed the logical course of action to preserve their status and economic prosperity, as well as to

¹⁶ Russia in the Grey Zones (ECFR Report)

¹⁷ In the case of Abkhazia, the number of Russian troops in the region is equal to nearly 2% of Abkhazia's total population.

¹⁸ Cojocaru 2006

avoid becoming a permanent ethnic and linguistic minority. However, if the leadership of the region had known that almost 30 years later their government and people would continue to live in limbo, with a heavy presence of Russian, Transnistrian, and Moldovan troops along their border, different decisions may have been made. In fact, Russia has never recognized them as an independent state, choosing instead to build bilateral partnerships with them in the murky areas of international law.

In Georgia, tensions with Abkhazia and South Ossetia have existed for decades. Disagreements over identity, language, and autonomy have been common long before the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. In the Soviet system, Georgia had been divided into different administrative entities, which had afforded Abkhazia and South Ossetia special administrative status and autonomy. In the post-Soviet Georgian state, nationalist politics and a hostile view toward these two regions led to armed conflict in the 1990s¹⁹. The people of these regions were fearful of the rising nationalism within Georgia and did not want to give up the degree of autonomy that they enjoyed. Eventually, Georgia joined Russia's Commonwealth of Independent States, and the conflicts with these regions were managed by ceasefire agreements. In August of 2008, however, a period of rising tensions led the breakout of more armed conflict in the region. Georgian troops began firing on the Tskhinvali area of South Ossetia, which prompted immediate response from Russian troops, as well as local South Ossetian militants. Similar fighting broke out in Abkhazia, and for five days armed conflict took place across Georgia²⁰. South Ossetia

¹⁹ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia 2009

²⁰ Ibid.

and Abkhazia took advantage of Russian interest in the region and declared their independence, which Russia recognized, guaranteeing their protection.

In November of 2013, Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich attended an EU summit in Vilnius, Lithuania where he was expected to sign onto a major EU trade deal, which would provide Ukraine closer relations with the EU and more opportunities to trade with the West. However, he refused to sign it, instead entering into a similar agreement with Russia. Angered at his choice, the Euromaidan revolution was born, which resulted in his ousting from the presidency, after which he fled to Russia for asylum²¹. After a new, pro-European government was established, Russia saw its military and financial interests in Ukraine in jeopardy. They had enjoyed a substantial amount of political control over the Yanukovich administration, which would not be offered by the incoming government. In addition to political interests, Russia had large military bases in Crimea, which it feared would be in jeopardy under the new Ukrainian government. After invading Crimea with insignia-less ‘little green men’, a referendum on annexation was held, in which 97% of people allegedly voted in favor of joining Russia, and the peninsula was annexed officially into the Russian Federation²². Shortly thereafter, fighting broke out in Luhansk and Donetsk, where pro-Russian rebels, again backed by Russian military forces, attempted to establish the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics. National Security and political science literature are nearly unanimous in their

²¹ BBC Timeline, Ukraine, 2019

²² Ibid.

assessment that this was a strategic move, in direct response to the new western-oriented Ukrainian administration.

This thesis will make the argument that these zones each were occupied and supported by Russia at key times of westernization or reform in their parent state. Scholars agree that Russia leverages these conflicts to impact the modernization and reform of their neighbors, and to trap them within Russia's own sphere of influence. The ambiguous status of these grey zones may be one component of how Russia leverages these zones for their military and political gain.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

In order to analyze the ways in which Russia may use the politically ambiguous status of the grey zones to influence the politics of their parent states, we must first understand the term grey zone by exploring the literature surrounding de facto states, and understand political ambiguity in the context of these republics.

The term ‘grey zones’ is widely used in literature to discuss matters of liminality, as a method of expressing that lack of clear conceptual or ideological boundaries. Found in the literatures of political science²³, labor research²⁴, and medicine²⁵ alike, the term requires defining in the context of the former Soviet quasi-autonomous client republics. In an Army War College report, grey zones are defined as “those areas of state competition where antagonistic actions take place” but which fall short of “red lines” which would be impetus for armed conflict between countries²⁶. This definition is used to encompass a wide array of activities by any state, from hacking and election meddling to more recent near-misses of US and Russian naval craft at sea²⁷. The term grey zone as it

²³ Knudsen and Brkovic 2015

²⁴ Bureau and Dieuaide 2018

²⁵ Ozge, Aydinlar, and Tasdelen 2015

²⁶ McCarthy, Moyer, and Venable 2019

²⁷ Russian and US Warships Almost Collide, BBC, 2020

relates to Russian control over these quasi-autonomous territories is commonly used by reports and publications in the security and defense sector.

In 2018, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) issued a report titled 'Competing in the Gray Zone', which defines the grey zone as comprised of three main tactics: information warfare, economic coercion, and use of ambiguous forces²⁸. These types of activities are those which can be deployed without fearing military provocation and can be performed by any country. Grey zone warfare are ways that smaller countries with more limited resources can engage in conflict without fearing the military retribution of larger countries or alliances, such as the US or NATO. CSIS indicates that Russia has long been a pioneer in the development of these strategic methods of engaging in conflict with the United States, but also with Russia's own 'near abroad'. In fact, Heather Conly, the Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic for CSIS goes so far as to describe Ukraine as a laboratory for Russia to test the use of what they call 'unconventional forces'²⁹. Despite Russia's denial of their involvement in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, international intelligence agencies have reached the consensus that Russia was directly responsible for arming and deploying the 'little green men' that were so instrumental in the occupation of Crimea, and providing weapons and soldiers for the rebels in the Donbas as well. Based on these definitions, these quasi-autonomous territories which Russia supports are examples of their use of grey zone military tactics, and as such are referred to as grey zones. They, too, exist in an

²⁸ Competing in the Gray Zone, CSIS, 2018

²⁹ Ibid.

ambiguous state of warfare: contested with armed conflict at one point (or presently, in the case of Eastern Ukraine), unresolved by official peace accords, and capable of flaring up at any point.

In order to understand more about how these grey zones function in this ambiguous space, literature on de facto states must be explored. There is a wide array of literature based on the concept of the 'de facto' or 'quasi' state. Perhaps the primary foundational text for this area of literature is *International Society and the De Facto State* by Scott Pegg. Published in 1998, Pegg writes about the phenomenon of de facto states as entities which have a population, a form of indigenous political leadership, effectively control territory for an extended period of time, and view themselves as capable of entering into relations with other states³⁰. Pegg then discusses at length the ways in which these de facto states engage with the international community, within themselves, and otherwise how and where they fit in (or do not fit in) to the current international system. Citing examples such as Eritrea, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and Somaliland, he applies his theories and discussion to real-world cases of de facto states. In terms of international relations theory, this work was vital in exploring how, within a carefully maintained nation-state-based system, these entities which do not fall in to the established system operate. Pegg concludes that the circumstances which lead to the creation of de facto states were not substantially altered by the end of the Cold War, and that there

³⁰ Pegg 1998

could be more de facto states in the future³¹. Since publication in 1998, four of the five cases considered in this thesis were formed.

Pal Kolsto from the University of Oslo has also written a number of articles on de facto states, particularly in the former Soviet Union. Kolsto points out that current world politics exist within a system in which states have both internal and external sovereignty. Internal sovereignty means that states have recognition by their own people, are able to collect taxes and administer services and defense, and otherwise behave as a contemporary government. They also enjoy external sovereignty, recognized as the official representative of their people on the world stage, in relation to other states³². Literature on de facto states usually explores two kinds of de facto state—those with external recognition but lacking internal sovereignty (often called failed states), and states which have internal recognition and perform government functions but lack international recognition. The former Soviet grey zones fall into the latter category.

In his paper, *The Sustainability and Future of Unrecognized Quasi-States*, Kolsto sets forth three criteria commonly cited as a definition for quasi-states:

1. Its [the territory's] leadership must be in control of (most of) the territory it lays claim to.
2. It must have sought but not achieved international recognition.
3. It must exist in this state for at least 2 years³³.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kolstø 2006

³³ Ibid.

These criteria are derived from Pegg's analysis and are designed to be more specific in terms of which quasi-states may be included in this category. Kolsto argues that most de facto states share similar qualities in their creation and continuity. Among these are the support of a strong patron, the relative weakness of the state from whom they separated, and disproportionate spending on defense and military³⁴. Each of these traits is present in the former Soviet grey zones. At the time of Kolsto's paper in 2006, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh were the only former Soviet de facto client states—Abkhazia and Ossetia would formally declare their independence in 2008, although some would argue that they met this definition before the Russo-Georgian War, as they had territorial control but had not actively sought international recognition on the world stage. Ukraine's breakaway territories wouldn't come about until winter of 2014. However, at time of writing, Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Transnistria all easily fulfill these three criteria. In fact, the grey zones in Georgia and Moldova are cited as cases in a number of articles and books on the issue of quasi-states, including articles by Kolsto³⁵ and a book by Lynch³⁶. Whether Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics fulfill these definitions is up for debate. As there is still ongoing armed conflict, whether these two zones have held control over their territory continually is difficult to assess. However, in the time from 2014 to 2020, Ukraine has failed to reestablish control over these breakaway republics, and they continue to perform at least nominal services to their citizens³⁷. Whether these

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kolsto, Edemsky, and Kalashnikova 1993; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008

³⁶ Lynch 2004

³⁷ Sopova 2018

two republics genuinely made an attempt at international recognition is up for debate as well. Given that their claims for independence followed the very high-profile annexation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, one could argue that these two republics did not bother to seek international recognition, knowing from the outset that such a claim would be futile, and that international recognition was impossible. For the purposes of this thesis, however, these two republics will be included in the grey zones, as they illustrate an important ongoing process of Russia's use of grey zones to manipulate the political and security situation in the parent state. In some ways, the Donbas may be considered the pre-grey zone state of affairs from which Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia have already graduated.

De facto states face unique challenges as a result of their international isolation. They are unable to interact with other states and establish trade or other meaningful relationships, and they cannot endure as solo entities without assistance. In their article *Dynamics of de facto statehood: The South Caucasian de facto states between secession and sovereignty*, Kolsto and Blakkisrud argue that none of the grey zones in the Caucasus (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) would survive without the support of their patron state. In this case, the most fundamental service that Russia provides these two grey zones is military protection. Without the support of Russia, the standing armies of South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be no match for the military of Georgia. However, with the presence of Russian troops in both zones, Georgia does not possess the ability to recapture these zones and recapture its internationally recognized territory³⁸. This is also true of the other

³⁸ Blakkisrud and Kolsto 2012

former Soviet grey zones—the military of Moldova does not possess the capacity to overtake the Russian troops stationed in Transnistria, and as the conflict in Ukraine is ongoing, the Ukrainian forces have been unable to restore their territorial control over the Donbas.

In addition to security, Russia provides its grey zones with infrastructure assistance as well as financial support. Without the ability to enter trade agreements with either the parent state or other states in the international system, Russia must therefore be the primary trading partner of these grey zones. This is true not only of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also of Transnistria and the Donbas—each one of these grey zones would be unable to sustain itself without the assistance of Russia as the patron state. While this partnership and protection allow these grey zones to endure, the assistance is not without a price. Russia is intimately involved in the internal and external affairs of each of the grey zones, with a heavy presence in the political process. Leaders of these grey zones must be on good terms with Moscow if this assistance is to continue.

Not all de facto states are so dependent upon a patron state or locked in decades-long frozen conflicts. Pegg discusses examples of de facto states which have gone on to gain international recognition, namely Eritrea. Additionally, there are de facto states which have existed without the protection of a strong patron state to protect them—such as Somaliland. Somaliland exists because of the relative weakness of Somalia and the inability of that government to regain control over its territory³⁹. However, a larger number of de facto states without the protection of a strong patron do ultimately fail,

³⁹ Pegg 1998

either by military conflict or a lack of resources, to achieve their goal of becoming independent nations⁴⁰. The cases of former Soviet grey zones are much more comparable, Pegg might argue, to the situation of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Without the intervention and military support of Turkey, this breakaway republic would almost certainly have lost their war for independence and been integrated into Cyprus. Likewise, without the support of Russia, the grey zones would exist in very different geopolitical spaces today.

Scholars who study patron-client relations in this context have used Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a theoretical and practical case study to examine the ways in which Russia exerts its influence over the internal affairs of the grey zones. Gerrits and Bader theorize that there are five ‘linkages’, which constitute the nature and density of ties Russia shares with these zones: economic, intergovernmental, technocratic, social, and diffusion of institutions⁴¹. These five areas include linkages far beyond that of security assistance—Gerrits and Bader include education systems, cultural and linguistic ties, and even the ‘export’ of certain Russian institutions and governmental practices into the systems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This, in turn, allows Russia to maintain almost unilateral leverage over these regions. If Russia were to adjust their relationship with either of these zones, or threaten to stop trade or close the border, Russia would have little to lose. However, for the grey zones themselves, this could be catastrophic⁴².

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Gerrits and Bader 2016

⁴² Ibid.

Therefore, the policies, elections, and other aspects of life within these grey zones are subject to the tacit or outright approval of Russia.

While Gerrits and Bader exclusively used Abkhazia and South Ossetia for their conceptual model, it can easily be applied to the other grey zones. In the Donbas, if Russia were to stop supplying troops and military assistance, the Ukrainian military could potentially overtake the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Indeed, the Ukrainian government has a department dedicated to the eventual reintegration of these 'temporarily occupied territories'⁴³, indicating that this remains one of their top governing priorities. In the case of the Donbas, the governmental, social, and other linkages may be weaker than in the other grey zones—however, this is the only grey zone where there is active armed conflict at this time. The other grey zones have existed in this quasi-recognized state of political ambiguity for over a decade, allowing Russia more time to assist in the building of state structures and peddle its own influence.

In Transnistria, for example, Russian involvement has been a key aspect of Transnistrian life for almost 30 years. The majority-Russian speaking area has strong ethnic and linguistic ties to Russia and consumes primarily Russian language media. In addition to security assistance, Russian social linkages are perhaps the strongest in Transnistria of any grey zone. As a result of this closeness, Russia wields considerable influence over the political affairs of the grey zone. This is perhaps best exemplified by the 2016 Transnistrian presidential elections, in which a challenger successfully bested incumbent president Shevchuk. This campaign was interesting in that Russia did not

⁴³ Ukrainian Ministry of Occupied Territories.

openly endorse any candidate for the position (a break from precedent, as in 2011 they backed a candidate who ended up losing the election)⁴⁴. While Russia did not endorse either candidate, it remained a central part of the campaign. Each candidate sought to illustrate that they were closer to Russia than his opponent, had better ties with their leadership, etc. They ran a polarizing campaign, but Russia remained at the center of it, even as they expressed neutrality. When asked if Russia supported one candidate over another, the foreign ministry spokesperson stated that Russia does not take sides or assist particular candidates in the elections of other countries, as it views these actions as unlawful⁴⁵. While this had been clearly disproven long before the time of publication of Kolsto and Blakkisrud's article in 2017, and again since, in this instance there was very minimal engagement on the behalf of either candidate in the race. This illustrates that Russia's power over the grey zones is profound, and that even when it is not actively engaging with the political landscape in the zones, as it often does, it remains a central figure with great influence over the actions and messaging of politicians.

The literature demonstrates that Russia has a strategic and intentional pattern of intervening in neighboring countries in times of reform that it deems to be against its own national interests. In order to maintain a low enough profile to avoid international military intervention, Russia intervenes on behalf of separatist regions in the name of protection, and establishes a politically ambiguous grey zone. By freezing these conflicts in a grey zone, Russia can maintain a presence of troops inside of the parent state, exert

⁴⁴ Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2017

⁴⁵ Ibid.

its own influence in the affairs of the grey zone and impact its neighbors' ability to achieve their strategic or democratic reforms.

Another way in which Russia maintains influence over the grey zone process is through their participation in high-level format discussions and peace talks. In Geneva for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Normandy and Minsk for the Donbas, Russian involvement in these peace talks presents an interesting phenomenon. In these peace processes, Russia plays a dual role as both a neutral facilitator or observing party, and an aggressor with direct ties to the conflict that is taking place there. There has been little or no theoretical research on this phenomenon of a party acting both as an actor in conflict and as a neutral convener or observer in conflict resolution processes. There is literature which discusses the ambiguous roles that regional powers play in conflict resolution practices, such as the role of India in the civil war in Sri Lanka⁴⁶, but this does not quite address the specific dynamic of the aggressor in a conflict claiming neutrality and acting as the third-party facilitator. The United States has also played a dual role in conflicts, specifically in Latin America with the Contras in Nicaragua. The Contras were receiving direct military and financial aid from the United States, which became an internal political scandal. Members of the US government then sought to influence the parties toward a peace agreement, even as the funding for one side of the war continued⁴⁷. This dual role played by the US shows some parallels with Russia in the grey zones in terms of financial and military support. However, the US was not a direct peacekeeping force in

⁴⁶ Gunewardene 1991; Destradi 2010

⁴⁷ Robinson 1987

the region and appeared to search for a resolution to the conflict in good faith, even if motivated by their own political reasons. In the context of the grey zones and Russia, their role in conflict resolution processes will be further analyzed in context in Chapter 4.

The literature sets forth a clear pattern of Russian involvement in the near abroad which links these grey zones to one another as areas of Russian influence. The nature of de facto states, and former Soviet grey zones specifically, is their heavy dependence upon the weakness of the parent state and support from a strong patron. Both of these factors are present in the parent states of these zones. The most effective tool of influence in these zones is the politically ambiguous status that they hold. Neither part of Russia nor of the parent state, the international community is unsure how to treat these zones or Russia's actions therein—by trapping these conflicts in a frozen state of liminality, Russia has been able to take action through them to influence Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine for years, even decades. The next chapter will go over the separate cases in more detail and describe some of the ways in which this ambiguity allows Russia to influence the parent states.

CHAPTER 4: CASES

Case Studies

Based on what the literature tells us of Russia's strategic objectives in these grey zones, this chapter will discuss the background and current situation in each of the parent states. After discussing relevant historical information, each case will outline specific strategies that Russia may use vis-à-vis the grey zone in order to influence each parent state respectively. Special emphasis will be placed on situations and case examples of Russia's use of these grey zones as a mechanism of influence over the parent state. Discussing the cases separately will allow for a more nuanced and contextual analysis, beginning with Moldova, followed by Georgia, and finally Ukraine.

Moldova

Background

When Moldova declared its independence during the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the region was in a state of political turmoil. Within the new borders of Moldova, a new government took over in Chisinau, overseeing a country comprised of a Moldovan/Romanian ethno-linguistic majority and a Russian-speaking ethnic minority concentrated on the Eastern bank of the Dniester river in Transnistria. In the process of state-building in Moldova, the concept of unification with Romania was considered in the public discourse. In response, the region of Transnistria declared its independence from

Moldova, and a war broke out. This led to the establishment of Russia's first involvement in a grey zone, Transnistria.

In the 1940s, when the USSR created the Moldovan SSR, two very distinct groups were placed into one republic: a majority Moldovan/Romanian ethno-linguistic group, and a minority ethnic Russian/Slavic group. During the 50 years that this republic was part of the Soviet Union, there was little conflict within the republic—while the Transnistrians, primarily ethnic Russians, knew that they were a minority in Moldova, they matched the majority in the USSR as a whole. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the declaration of independence of Moldova, the situation changed. Suddenly, the Transnistrians were a true minority in a country which they had no desire to be part of; and one with strong linguistic and ethnic ties to Romania. Sensing their change in position, the leaders of the Transnistrian separatist movement worked to achieve independence for their republic.

In the late summer of 1991, the mounting standoff between Moldovan authorities and Transnistrian separatists reached its peak. Various antagonistic actions such as the passing of an anti-Russian language law, the declaration of Transnistria's independence from Moldova, and several small skirmishes had already taken



Figure One: A Map of Transnistria and the Surrounding Region.

place. Each of these actions prompted response from the other side, culminating in a battle on the banks of the Dniester river which killed nearly 700 people⁴⁸. After this battle, Russia facilitated a dialogue process between Moldova, Transnistria, and Russia, and intervened to guarantee the protection of Transnistria from further action by Moldova. A demilitarized zone was established, under Russian command, and the de facto borders of the two republics have remained the same for almost 30 years. While peace talks have occurred on and off, Russia has ensured that these talks lead nowhere, and that the grey zone remains an ambiguous enclave in which Russia maintains influence.

Today, the situation in Transnistria and Moldova remains startlingly similar to the situation as it was in the 1990s. The European Council on Foreign Relations published a series of essays by journalists residing in the grey zones, which paint a vivid picture of what modern life is like in these areas. In Transnistria, Katrina Lungu describes a region in economic desolation, with no opportunities for young people and no opportunities for trade. With deeply unpopular leadership (and a leader who even has troubled relations with Moscow), the region has continued to slide into economic despair. With a critical number of people moving to Russia or the west to seek opportunities, Transnistria suffers from the brain drain phenomenon, and citizens have lost hope that things will get better⁴⁹. The citizens of Transnistria have little agency to change their situation, as the political interests of Moldova and Russia compete over their fate.

⁴⁸ Kolsto, Edemsky, and Kalashnikova 1993

⁴⁹ Lungu 2016

Despite the grim day to day life in the region, it remains an archetype of former Soviet grey zones, sporting clear signs of Gerrits and Bader's linkages to Russia. From the building of schools and donation of Russian state-approved textbooks, to Russian pension supplements paid to each pensioner in Transnistria, Russia retains their grasp on the region by ensuring that the existence of Transnistria is dependent upon Moscow for nearly every aspect of life. From military protection, to trade, to education and media, Russia permeates daily life in the region. Transnistria also shows signs of the political ambiguity of its fellow grey zones. Travel to and from Transnistria is the easiest of the grey zones for Westerners, although doing so is not advisable for those with connections to the US or Moldovan governments. Moldova has banned travel to the region for top Russian officials entering through Ukraine and has deported several such officials from Moldova⁵⁰. Transnistria has their own currency, the Transnistrian Ruble, which is not recognized anywhere else in the world. They must use Moldovan postage stamps, as their own are not recognized outside of the republic. The use of Moldovan postage stamps followed a joint agreement with Ukraine under the guise of 'anti-smuggling' law, which requires goods leaving Transnistria to Ukraine to have a Moldovan customs approval⁵¹. The same is true for Transnistrian passports; most citizens of the republic use Moldovan, Russian, or Ukrainian passports in order to travel, if they have the means to do so.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Tolstrup 2013

Russian Influence

Russia's presence in Transnistria has had a profound impact on the development and politics of Moldova. Since the Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement between Moldova and Transnistria in 1992, Russia has remained reluctant to remove itself from the region⁵². The initial agreement stated that Russian troops would remain in cooperation with Moldovan troops to uphold the ceasefire agreement, talks would go on, and upon a resolution of the conflict or the parties determining that it was stable, the Russian troops would withdraw. Negotiations between Moldova and Transnistria resumed in 1997, brokered by Russia as well as the OSCE. During this time, it was agreed that Russian troops would withdraw from the region—however, the deadline for this withdrawal was extended twice⁵³. Russia then stated that until an agreement was reached which guaranteed the rights of Transnistrian citizens, their troops would not withdraw, marking a unilateral decision to remain in the region which continues to this day.

The early 2000s brought increased tensions between Russia and Moldova over the status of Transnistria. With official peace talks going poorly, conflict between Russia and Moldova escalated. In 2003, Russia, Transnistria, and Moldova were set to sign a peace deal that would have provided Transnistria enough seats in the upper house of Moldovan parliament to effectively veto any legislation. Additionally, it would have allowed for the presence of Russian troops to remain as peacekeepers until the year 2020. At the last

⁵² Agreement on the principles for a peaceful settlement of the armed conflict in the Dniester region of the Republic of Moldova 1992

⁵³ BBC Timeline, Moldova, 2019

minute, due to pressures from the West and protests which broke out in Moldova over the proposed changes, the Moldovan president did not sign the deal⁵⁴.

After Moldova failed to agree to the peace deal, Russia's coercive tactics came to full force against Moldova. Due to Moldova's stance on Transnistria, food import bans from Moldova into Russia were introduced in 2005, including fruit and vegetables, and later wine. While this was allegedly for health reasons, the financial loss to Moldova likely equated to hundreds of millions of euros⁵⁵, and the timing correlated closely with Moldovan action against Transnistria. In January of 2006, Russian state-owned oil company Gazprom unilaterally doubled the price of gas for Moldova. When they did not pay the price, Russia cut supplies to the country completely, only returning them when they negotiated a gradual price hike (and Russian ownership of a significant portion of the Moldovagaz company)⁵⁶. These economic measures were also accompanied by rising tensions between Transnistria and Moldova. Moldova convinced Ukraine to only accept traded items with official Moldovan customs labels. This move was internationally supported, except by Transnistria and Russia, who called it an effective 'blockade'. In response, Transnistria held a referendum in which the Transnistrian government claimed that 97% of people who voted support working for independence with the eventual goal of annexation into the Russian Federation⁵⁷. This pattern repeated in 2014, when

⁵⁴ Rogstad 2018

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Tolstrup 2013

⁵⁷ Rogstad 2018

Moldova signed an association agreement with the EU, whereupon Russia stopped all imports of fruit and vegetables from Moldova again⁵⁸.

While it is impossible to demonstrate a true cause and effect relationship between Moldova's talks with the West and Russia's economic embargos, the literature and established pattern indicates that the timing of them cannot be purely a coincidence. In his book titled *Russia vs. the EU: The Competition for Influence in Post-Soviet States*, Jakob Tolstrup illustrates the clear correlation in Russia's use of gas as a weapon against Moldova. He points out that on at least five occasions, gas delivery to Moldova was interrupted with a clear link to requests for concessions or troop withdrawal, or in exchange for greater access to infrastructure to move gas through Moldova to Romania and beyond⁵⁹. At the same time, Russian supplies of gas to Transnistria remained uninterrupted, even despite longstanding failure to pay.

This kind of economic and political standoff is not unique to Moldova, or even to grey zone conflicts in general. However, the presence of the grey zone was the impetus and mechanism through which Russia was able to justify their political pressures. Russia has made no move to either recognize Transnistria as an independent country, as it has with other grey zones, nor to annex it as it did with Crimea. For their strategic purposes, Russia needs Transnistria to remain as it is—with no foreseeable solution. Without Russia's patron-client relationship with Transnistria, their actions against Moldova would have been viewed as much more antagonistic, and likely sparked greater international

⁵⁸ BBC Timeline, Moldova, 2019

⁵⁹ Tolstrup 2013

interest and attention. Rogstad argues in his 2018 article that Transnistria was never the goal for Russia, stating that control over the region has mainly been used as “A way of maintaining a bargaining chip vis-à-vis both Moldovan governments and Western actors”⁶⁰. By taking advantage of Western powers’ and Moldova’s interests in the stability of the post-conflict region, Russia has been able to use the ambiguous status of Transnistria to bargain, threaten, and otherwise manipulate the political and security landscape of the region. Indeed, Tolstrup argues that the main achievement of Russia during early 1990s was to use Transnistria and the threat of violence there to force Moldova’s participation in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). “The ruling elites in Chisinau reluctantly went along, fearing that any resistance to the expansion of intergovernmental and economic linkages would only result in again fanning the flames of the Transnistrian conflict.”⁶¹ The presence of Russian forces in Transnistria served as the leverage that Russia needed to ensure that their strategic objective of maintaining Moldova in their sphere of influence was achieved.

Russian coercion over Moldova is evident, and case studies clearly indicate the role that the politically ambiguous status of Transnistria played in making this possible. The presence of Russian troops inside of the grey zone was permissible only because of the ambiguous status of Transnistria—at the time, the agreement was that when the conflict was settled, Russian troops would no longer be present in the region. While this was later unilaterally walked back, Russia depended on the conflict remaining ‘unsolved’

⁶⁰ Rogstad 2018

⁶¹ Tolstrup 2013

for their influence to remain complete. In the 1990s and early 2000s, even the OSCE and outside observers recognized the role that Russian peacekeeping forces were playing in the region. However, in order for Russia to maintain its sphere of influence over Moldova vis-à-vis Transnistria, the conflict must remain unresolved. To this day, no agreement has been reached in terms of a political settlement, and Russia has also chosen not to recognize Transnistria as an independent state, as it did with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is one of Russia's main tactics in ensuring that these grey zones remain locked in frozen conflicts—ensuring that there is a permanent need for peacekeepers, which allows Russian troops to remain stationed inside of the parent state.

Georgia

Background

The Republic of Georgia has had the misfortune to be the parent state to two of the grey zones. Since even before Georgian independence from the USSR in 1991, South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been regions of contention within Georgia. During the time of the Georgian SSR, both regions enjoyed special administrative autonomous status, which granted them a level of freedom from Georgian rule, as well as limited internal conflict within



Figure 2: Map of Republic of Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia

the Soviet Republic. However, after the collapse of the USSR, these territories were integrated into post-Soviet Georgia, and their autonomous status and protections were lost. In 1992, just a year after Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union, South Ossetia held a referendum declaring their own independence as a republic. This referendum was unrecognized by Georgia and the international community at large, and military conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia ensued. Later that same year, in response to rising Georgian nationalism, rebels in Abkhazia began an affront that led Georgian soldiers to be largely expelled from the region⁶². In 1993, Georgia joined Russia's Commonwealth of Independent States, seeking their help in maintaining stability in their territory. Russian peacekeeping forces helped stop the violence that had occurred in Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁶³.

In the early 2000s, after the second Chechen War in Russia between Chechen insurgents and the Russian Federation, Russia accused Georgia of harboring insurgents who had fled the region and insisted that Georgia fight these rebels and remove them. In 2002, special forces from the US trained Georgian forces in counter-terrorism measures, and Georgian forces killed or extradited several Chechen rebel leaders to Russia. During this period Georgia also underwent several internal reforms, including the notable Rose Revolution, which forced the president to stand aside. The new government brought Mikhail Saakashvili into power, and with him a new approach to resolving Georgia's internal conflicts⁶⁴. This new approach aimed at reinstating Georgian control over the

⁶² BBC Timeline, Georgia, 2018

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

grey zones brought about heightened tensions. By 2004, Georgian operations within South Ossetia reignited hostilities, and were criticized by Russia. Tensions between Georgia and Russia heightened over the next several years, as well as tensions with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

By 2008, tensions rose such that Georgia and Abkhazia cut off all relations with one another, and Georgia attempted to re-take control of South Ossetia by force. Russia subsequently invaded on behalf of Ossetia and pushed Georgian troops out of both rebellious regions⁶⁵. Russia then recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and ensured them of their protection. Georgia has been plagued with corruption and difficult political transitions since gaining their independence, which enabled Abkhazia and South Ossetia to consolidate their autonomy. While both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have a number of similarities in terms of their dependence on Russia, as well as their rocky relationship with their parent state, modern life is quite different in each of the grey zones. While Abkhazia has a relatively resilient functioning government, and enjoys visits from Russian tourists, South Ossetia is not only geographically but also politically isolated and is the most closed and oppressive of the former Soviet grey zones (perhaps with the exception of the dismal human rights crisis inside of Crimea).

The region of Abkhazia is located in the northwestern region of Georgia and has been recognized as an independent state by Russia since the war in 2008. In an essay for the European Council on Foreign Relations, Astamur Achba discusses the unique position of Abkhazia among the grey zones. While Russian influence is undeniable and

⁶⁵ Ibid.

omnipresent, Achba argues, Russian attempts to influence the internal politics of Abkhazia have, at times, backfired badly⁶⁶. In the 2004 presidential elections in Abkhazia, Russia tried to exert influence by tacitly endorsing Raul Khajimba, showing photographs of him and Vladimir Putin in Sochi. When Khajimba lost to a man named Sergey Bagapsh, Russian media tried to paint Bagapsh as anti-Russian and Khajimba contested the result of the elections. Russia also created an embargo on Abkhazia, causing food prices to skyrocket. This turmoil almost caused a civil war within Abkhazia, which was resolved when Bagapsh traveled to Moscow to assure Russia that he would continue to deepen their close relationship and would allow Putin's preferred candidate to be his vice president⁶⁷. This arrangement was successful and avoided further internal conflict within Abkhazia. However, this crisis also suggests that direct influence from Russia is not popular among the Abkhaz people. Unlike Transnistria or South Ossetia, Abkhazia is also a tourist destination for almost a million Russians per year. With more restricted access to Ukraine and the West since 2014, tourism in Abkhazia has increased due to their weather and coastline on the Black Sea. This makes Abkhazia unique in terms of the grey zones, in that average Russian citizens can travel there for leisure. While Abkhazia may be dependent on Moscow for its budget and military protection, it has a far stronger state structure and independent politics than its grey zone neighbor, South Ossetia.

⁶⁶ Achba 2016

⁶⁷ Ibid.

In sharp contrast to Abkhazia, South Ossetia is the most closed, authoritarian former Soviet grey zone. Fatima Kochieva for the European Council on Foreign Relations discusses the region's precarious position, and its complete dependence on Moscow not only for military protection and trade, but also for internal sovereignty⁶⁸. Little is known of life inside of South Ossetia, as political dissidence is harshly quelled, media is state controlled, and the country itself is small enough to guarantee that if someone has been talking, the government will soon know about it. With a population of roughly 50,000, Russia's investment and troops in the region are disproportionate to the number of residents in the area. Almost everyone in South Ossetia has a Russian passport registered in North Ossetia, which allows them to collect Russian benefits and pensions, as well as to travel across the border with Russia freely⁶⁹. However, passports issued to residents of South Ossetia are not recognized internationally, and do not allow these citizens to travel outside of the Russian Federation.

South Ossetia has had a series of referendums since the 1990s, which have all passed with a trademark authoritarian 99% margin. In fact, two of these referendums are at direct odds with one another—one stated that 99% support independence, while another stated that 99% support integration with Russia. While there are internal disagreements about how to integrate with Russia, by all practical means, Russia has control over the economic, security, and social aspects of the region, and has effectively annexed it into the Russian Federation⁷⁰. Tourist visitors from Russia are not permitted

⁶⁸ Kochieva 2016

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Higgins 2016

into South Ossetia, and due to the tight security situation on the Russian-patrolled border, Westerners are unable to visit the region. In addition to political isolation, South Ossetia is physically isolated as well. The main viable method of entry and exit from the region is through the Roki Tunnel. This puts South Ossetians who wish to travel at the mercy of natural disasters and weather—if snow or fallen debris from the mountains make the tunnel inaccessible, South Ossetia is functionally cut off from the rest of the world.

Russian Influence

Violent conflict in these two grey zones began as early as the 1990s, when Georgia had just achieved its independence from the Soviet Union. In the face of increasing Georgian nationalism, Abkhazian rebels took to the streets and fought Georgian forces back, gaining control over a substantial portion of what had been their territory under their special autonomous status within the Soviet system. By 1993, Georgia had been coopted to join the Commonwealth of Independent States, thus soliciting Russia's help as a peacekeeping force in the region. Despite their membership in the CIS, however, Georgia had its eye set on a future joining NATO—this desire was made known in 1999, and the formal application followed in 2002⁷¹. Outside of internal conflict dynamics and the struggle for autonomy, Georgia's interest in joining NATO is possibly the main catalyst for Russian involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While these two zones had their own reasons for seeking autonomy, Russia's reason for involvement was likely aimed at doing everything in its power to halt Georgia's talks with the EU and NATO.

⁷¹ Niedermaier 2008

In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in contrast to Transnistria, Russian influence in the region with the goal of creating grey zones began long before the 2008 war. This allowed Russia to lay the groundwork for their eventual invasion in 2008 long before the fact, as well as to use their presence in the regions as a threat to Georgia should they make decisions against the political objectives of Moscow throughout each stage of development of the post-Soviet state. Preparations for the war with Georgia are well documented, and the speed and might with which Russia reacted and retaliated in 2008 call into question whether their actions were truly defensive, or if Georgia fell into a trap that Russia baited them into. Evidence for Russian preparation before the invasion is well documented by contemporaneous news publications for crucial events found in the edited work by Ana Niedermaier titled *Countdown to War in Georgia: Russia's Foreign Policy and Media Coverage of the Conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia*⁷².

This correlation is clearly exemplified by an article titled *State Duma Trumps Bid for Georgia to Join NATO*. Published in March of 2008, this article clearly suggests the cause and effect between Georgia's potential induction into NATO, and Russia's subsequent policy change towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia and their recognition as independent states. Prior to this point, Russia had not recognized either republic as an independent country, although it engaged with them as such. According to the article, the Duma provided the Russian president with a directive to reevaluate the Russian relationship with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in two weeks, if Georgia should receive a

⁷² This edited volume includes hundreds of translated and English-language publications from non-Western newspapers and publications from 1989 to 2008. The volume is edited to highlight news from times surrounding major events, such as conflicts, battles, or negotiations.

Membership Action Plan at the NATO summit to which they had been invited. The directive states that ‘if it does, the parliament might take an even harder line...’⁷³. This publication illustrates the clear strategic link between Russia’s goals of preventing NATO membership in its near abroad, and its use of the ambiguity of these two territories as a threat to Georgia. This directive was made public knowledge, intending to serve as a threat to Georgia that if they were to go through with NATO membership, Russia would recognize these two separatist entities within their territory as independent states. This would provide complications for Georgia—not least of which, the NATO requirement that member states be free of secessionist conflicts or border disputes and control their territorial integrity.

From this point on, the escalation timeline between Russia and Georgia culminating in armed conflict that same year can be clearly traced. By mid-April, a headline read: *A Creeping March—Russia semi-recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia*⁷⁴. This article illustrates the lengths to which Russia went to integrate themselves militarily, financially, and socially with the two grey zones, without supporting their international bid for recognition in the months leading up to the armed conflict. These actions were justified because of Russia’s use of another key tactic in the grey zones: passportization. Prior to their direct involvement in grey zone conflicts, Russia strategically relaxes requirements and constraints on citizens of the grey zone obtaining Russian passports⁷⁵. By artificially inflating the number of Russian passport holders in

⁷³ Niedermaier 2008

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Artman 2013

the grey zones, Russia creates an imperative to protect ‘its own’ citizens abroad. In 2004, Russian officials began to remove administrative barriers and extend Russian passports and citizenship to the citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in a much more accelerated manner. The strategic value of this practice is no mystery—Abkhaz Vice President Arshba stated that the Russian president is the protector of Russian citizens ‘No matter where they live...political protection implies military protection.’⁷⁶ By selectively administering large numbers of Russian passports in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, even before officially recognizing them as independent or intervening militarily on their behalf, Russia had created an ambiguous situation which they could exploit. Effectively, Russia created areas inside another country which were now disproportionately occupied by its own ‘citizens,’ which provided them with *carte blanche* to integrate these regions into their own system and to protect these citizens with their military. This practice has not been unique to Georgia, and most recently was seen in Crimea in Ukraine before the official annexation. Citizens of Transnistria are likewise able to access Russian passports, although many opt for the Romanian or Moldovan providing them with easier access to the West.

By summer of 2008, tensions were running high between Russia and Georgia, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia found themselves stuck in the middle. By the time the war broke out in August, escalation of the conflict over the grey zones had reached a peak. In efforts to deter Georgian action in South Ossetia, Russian warplanes had flown over the

⁷⁶ Ibid.

area repeatedly throughout the summer of 2008⁷⁷. By July 14, Russia had owned up to as much, saying that they had taken the action to ‘cool off hotheads in Tbilisi’. This made it abundantly clear to Georgia that if they were to attack South Ossetia or Abkhazia militarily, that they would be dealing with Russian military as well as local forces⁷⁸. What this demonstrated to Tbilisi at the time is a clear threat—if you mess with the status quo, you deal with the consequences. What it also tells us, with the benefit of hindsight over a decade later, was that Russian forces were already prepared to intervene in these areas before they had military provocation to do so. Georgia likewise stepped up their aggressive actions, increasing military spending from 1% of GDP to 8%, and establishing restoration of territorial integrity in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a priority⁷⁹. Despite Russian deterrence, Georgian troops carried on with their hostile actions and plans, leading to war.

This became crystal clear when, in early August, Georgian troops began firing on Tskhinvali, which led to Russian invasion. According to Asmus, as many as 20 thousand troops entered Georgia through Abkhazia, and the same number through South Ossetia, within hours of provocation⁸⁰. While this is likely an exaggeration of the speed with which Russian forces descended upon Georgia, there have been allegations leveled that Russian tanks had already crossed the border even before Georgian military attacked in South Ossetia⁸¹. While these claims are unsubstantiated, it is clear that Russian forces

⁷⁷ Niedermaier 2008

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia 2009

⁸⁰ Asmus 2010

⁸¹ Belton et al. 2008

were already amassed in great numbers just beyond the border, waiting for any reason to strike. Given weeks of warning from aggressive Georgian actions, it is no mystery why. Despite warnings of what could happen if they were to provoke an attack, Georgian troops opened fire on a city, which did incur civilian casualties⁸². The havoc that this war wreaked in Georgia was profound. While the war was very short, lasting only about five days, the impacts of this war over these territories are still very much felt today, most especially along the boundary line.

The boundary line between South Ossetia and Georgia has been an ongoing point of contention since 2008 and illustrates another way in which Russia exerts its influence through the grey zone. Russian border troops frequently and arbitrarily move the location of the border with Georgia, patrolling and arresting those who violate it. It is not uncommon, according to residents of the village of Jariasheni, to wake up and find that overnight barbed wire fencing and signs have been posted through orchards, farms, and even neighborhoods marking the ‘new’ border. One resident describes being out of the house for a few hours, only to return and find that the border had been moved and cut him off from his home. Rather than cross the border to retrieve his items and risk being arrested as other villagers have been, the man simply moved in with his brother, leaving his personal items behind⁸³. This not only has real impacts on the people who live on both sides of the boundary line, but also carries political implications. In some places, the border has been moved such that it comes within a few hundred yards of Georgia’s main

⁸² Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia 2009

⁸³ Higgins 2016

East-West highway. In one small area, a portion of an oil pipeline that runs through Georgia is now in territory under Russian control⁸⁴. The security concerns with this situation are twofold: first, the moving of the border is in violation of the tenuous ceasefire agreements that have been put in place and threatens chances of a political settlement. Second, the seemingly random and arbitrary establishment of manned border checkpoints and barbed wire fences force Georgia to dedicate more of their resources to monitoring the border, which hinders their ability to invest those resources into other ambitions such as infrastructure or education.

Georgia today lives with much of its internationally recognized sovereign territory outside of its control. The NATO cooperation deal which they had signed has all but dried up. The presence of the grey zones has also allowed organized crime to run rampant through the area. Tied up in talks in Geneva, the peace processes go nowhere because, as far as Russia is concerned, there is no situation in which Abkhazia or South Ossetia will be reintegrated into Georgia. And with thousands of Russian troops within their borders, Georgia is reluctant to provoke them. The tactics that Russia used in Georgia served as a groundwork for what they would later do again in Ukraine, in 2014.

Ukraine

Background

Ukraine has long been a close ally of Russia, and since its independence after the collapse of the USSR, remained in its close orbit. In the 2000s, few would have predicted that in just a few years, Ukraine would be home to three grey zones, one of which would

⁸⁴ Ibid.

be wholesale annexed into the Russian Federation. Ukraine has always had a multiethnic society, with different language groups cooperating under the same civic Ukrainian nationality. In the Eastern portion of the country, specifically in Crimea and the Donbas, a large majority of people speak Russian as their first language, had have had traditionally closer ties with Russia than the west. In western Ukraine, L'viv for example, Russian speakers are a minority, and Ukrainians with closer ties to Poland and the West are a majority⁸⁵. Ukraine also has a rich history of peaceful revolutions (and mistrust of the government) including the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Euromaidan revolution. The Orange Revolution followed an electoral victory by Viktor Yanukovich that international monitors as well as local leaders viewed as illegitimate, with issues of voter fraud and intimidation. Protests erupted and continued until the Supreme Court of Ukraine annulled the results, and a new election was held, with victory going to Viktor Yushchenko. However, many argue that it was the 2014 Euromaidan revolution which prompted Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine.

In the fall of 2013, Ukraine and the EU had worked out a comprehensive trade deal which would have provided Ukrainians with access to European markets and much closer ties with the EU. By all



Figure 3: Map of Ukraine and Occupied Territories

⁸⁵ In-person interview in Ukraine, August 2018

indications, president Yanukovich was going to sign the deal. When he did not, and instead signed a deal with Russia, people began to protest. These protests turned from display of disagreement to a call for revolution when the special riot police, or Berkut, opened fire on protestors and used brutal police tactics to attempt to break up the protests. After this disastrous attempt at putting down protests, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens demonstrated in Kiev every day, many occupying the Maidan square full time in a makeshift tent city⁸⁶. These protests went on for weeks, and eventually led to president Yanukovich fleeing to Russia.

At first, this was celebrated throughout most of Ukraine as a successful removal of a president who had acted as Russia's puppet for years. With the new government installed, Ukraine was free to sign the EU trade deal, and to seek ties with the west outside of Russia's orbit and political control. However, immediately following Yanukovich's departure, the parliament banned the use of Russian as a second state language, which sparked outrage in many areas of eastern Ukraine. Less than a week later, separatists had seized government buildings in the capital of Crimea, leading to a standoff⁸⁷. Shortly thereafter, 'little green men' began to invade the area, later proven to be Russian soldiers. After the peninsula was occupied by these insignia-less soldiers, a referendum was held in which 97% voted in favor of becoming part of the Russian Federation⁸⁸. This situation has been discussed at length in the media, and in academia,

⁸⁶ BBC Timeline, Ukraine, 2019

⁸⁷ BBC Timeline, Ukraine Crisis, 2014

⁸⁸ Ibid.

and has had lasting ramifications for the security sphere in Europe. By March, Crimea was a new state in the Russian Federation.

By April, Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics had also sought referendums on independence and began battling with Ukrainian forces. These rebels were again aided in both supplies and men by Russia, which has been substantially proven by intelligence authorities, but is still denied by Russia⁸⁹. These areas in which there were Russian-speaking majorities felt that they, too, may stand a chance of joining Russia if they were able to achieve their own independence. In the face of more western-oriented political movements in Kiev, and an increase in anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine, the predominantly Russian-speaking people of the Donbas wished to follow Crimea into the Russian Federation⁹⁰. These two grey zones, Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) are technically separate entities from one another, with their own constitutions and governments. However, for the purposes of analysis and their impact on Ukraine, they will be analyzed together, rather than as separate entities. This grey zone in Ukraine is unique because it is the only grey zone which currently has ongoing armed conflict. As of 2020, up to 10,000 people have been killed, and up to 1.5 million displaced by the conflict⁹¹. While most of these casualties have been military or armed combatants, a large number of civilians have been killed as well. Real figures regarding the involvement of troops are difficult to assess, because at any time there are an unknown number of Russian military forces aiding the rebels. These grey zones exist

⁸⁹ Competing in the Gray Zone, CSIS, 2018

⁹⁰ In-person interview in Ukraine, August 2018

⁹¹ UN Monitoring estimates.

in limbo—with armed conflict raging around them, they still attempt to make life seem ‘normal’ for the citizens of the zones.

Several years later, the scale of armed conflict has decreased drastically—however, ceasefire violations are constant by both sides⁹². TIME magazine published a special report on life in the wake of what they termed ‘Ukraine’s Forgotten War’. The article uses photos and narratives to illustrate the bizarre world in which these people live—attending church next to a minefield or rehearsing at the music conservatory with shelling in the background⁹³. In his report for ECFR, Vladidmir Peshkov discussed the lengths to which the local ‘governments’ were willing to go to keep their citizens engaged and activated. He describes life under curfew, with tight Russian control over the local government leaders, the media, and the economy. In particular, he illustrates that the agency and excitement that people felt in the DNR and LNR is gone, replaced instead by the acknowledgement that they will never join Russia, and that the ambitions with which they had voted for independence and Russian annexation have failed to come to fruition. They feel, as he most appropriately describes it, stuck in the grey zone⁹⁴.

Russian Influence

Russian influence in Ukraine vis-à-vis the Donbas takes a unique form in relation to the other grey zones, in that there is still active armed conflict in the region. The frequency of ceasefire violations is varying, and the responsibility for these violations is

⁹² OSCE Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.

⁹³ Sopova 2018

⁹⁴ Peshkov 2016

nearly equally distributed between the parties⁹⁵. Russia's strategy in Ukraine has been increasingly transparent in the wake of their interventions in Moldova and Georgia. As many scholars have pointed out, in the absence of a stable and coherent pro-Russian regime in Ukraine, Russia's strategic option became to prevent the consolidation of a pro-Western government there by halting their growth and development in any way that it could. As a second-best option, intervention in already existing social and political cleavages in Ukraine has allowed them to ensure that, when it became clear that their political influence was waning, Ukraine will face roadblocks and be held back from generating stronger institutions and connections with the West⁹⁶. By maintaining a hold on the conflict in the Donbas, even if it remains relatively stable in comparison to the situation at the onset of violence, Russia ensures that Ukraine must spend its resources, both financial and human, on fighting an endless war with an adversary they cannot possibly defeat, rather than on development and institution building. Essentially, Russia's interests in the Donbas are a form of punishment for Ukraine for ousting Russia's man in 2014, and they will ensure that the conflict remains active as long as that suits their political objectives. Unlike Crimea, in order to maintain influence over Ukraine by use of violent conflict, Russia cannot annex these zones—instead, it must keep them in their ambiguous state.

One of the main ways that Russia influences the happenings in Ukraine through the Donbas conflict is through their strategic weaponization of the negotiation process. It

⁹⁵ OSCE Monitoring Mission.

⁹⁶ Malyarenko and Wolff 2018

has long been a strategy of the USSR, and Russia thereafter, to use international format discussions and official peace talks to their advantage. In his book for USIP titled *Russian Negotiating Behavior*, Jerrold Schecter outlines a broad historical and conceptual analysis of Russian negotiating tactics. Based on years of experience as a diplomat and businessman working with Russians, Schecter discusses the common themes and tactics used by the Russian government specifically. One of these themes is based on what he argues is a fundamental difference in negotiating philosophy. Americans, he argues, attend a negotiation seeking pragmatic solutions, willing to adjust and create new ideas. Russians, on the other hand, come to a negotiation in order to discuss issues on their own agenda, with a steadfast refusal to make compromises that could harm their image and, most importantly, with the intent to continue doing whatever it was that they had planned simultaneously⁹⁷.

This strategy is visible throughout numerous examples of US-Russian bilateral negotiations but can also be observed in Russia's dealings with their grey zones. In Ukraine, Russia utilized the Minsk agreements to achieve its strategic aims. There is very limited literature on the role of Russia as a convener of conflict resolution processes in these contexts. While Russia has been involved in 'peacekeeping' forces through CIS agreements in most of these grey zones, there is not enough literature discussing the duality of Russia's role, especially in Ukraine. In fact, there is a void in theoretical literature surrounding the issue of aggressors in conflict acting as neutral conveners of conflict resolution processes in any context. These grey zones allow an opportunity to

⁹⁷ Schecter 1998

explore this dynamic more fully and explore Russia's role as both an aggressor and neutral observer in the same conflict, specifically through the Minsk and Normandy discussions on Eastern Ukraine.

At the Minsk agreements, Russia insisted that representatives of LNR and DNR be present as the representative of the party to the conflict. Russia was to be there as a neutral actor with influence in the region, but not as a main party of the conflict. It was clear at the time, and now even more so, that Russia was directly responsible for the military, weapons, and other provisions of the LNR and DNR, and that their role in these discussions as a neutral party is conceptually difficult to comprehend. However, this speaks to a common Russian strategy, and one that was executed with great success in Minsk. For the Minsk agreements, the priority was on creating a ceasefire that all sides of the conflict could agree to. While this was only moderately successful, the scope of these meetings was never intended to discuss the political settlement of these conflicts or even to address the underlying interests of the parties. Russia's objective in Minsk was twofold: First, create a ceasefire and conditions. While this may seem antithetical to the strategic escalation of the conflict unfolding at the time, they could rely on a standard western response to the agreement: compliance. The west could be trusted to help Ukraine comply with the terms of the agreement—something Russia and the DNR/LNR had no intention of doing. Secondly, being present at the talks allowed Russia to publicly deny their involvement, and have that denial accepted. While the western powers in Minsk did not truly accept Russia's denial of involvement, their presence at the talks was a precondition set by the DNR/LHR. Without Russia, there would be no talks, and with

the talks, Russia could claim non-involvement. This sticky duality is one that Russia has employed many times in its grey zones and was especially effective in Ukraine. By tying their adversaries up in agreements and talks, all the while continuing to pursue their own strategic objectives without pause, Russia was able to weaponize the discussions in Minsk against Ukraine, utilizing the ambiguous status of the DNR and LNR as a method through which to justify their neutral attendance at the talks⁹⁸. Since this time, the ceasefire has been recommitted to regularly, and regularly violated. While overall casualties have decreased, there has been no real headway towards a political resolution to these conflicts.

The discussions between the LNR/DNR and Ukraine were further complicated in March of 2020, as a new format for a contact group was proposed. In the most recent meeting of the Minsk contact group in March, a new format was introduced which would include ten representatives from Ukraine, ten representatives from the LNR/DNR, and one neutral observer each from the OSCE, Germany, France, and Russia⁹⁹. In her article for Atlantic Council, Lisa Yasko argues that this transformation of the peace process is dramatically in Russia's favor. By promoting themselves to a supervisory role and passing responsibility for the conflict to the LNR and DNR, Yasko and other Ukrainian officials who signed an open letter to the Zelensky government fear that the legitimacy that this new process confers on the breakaway regions is contrary to Ukrainian interests¹⁰⁰. This new development further complicates the negotiation process

⁹⁸ Report on Preliminary Examination Activities 2019

⁹⁹ Нові мінські протоколи Документ 2020

¹⁰⁰ Yasko 2020

surrounding the conflict in eastern Ukraine, especially in regard to the role of Russia and Russian forces in the area. At time of writing, it remains to be seen if this proposed format for the working group will be accepted.

Conclusion

These cases of former Soviet grey zones clearly suggest the presence of a strategic pattern of Russian influence through the zones. While the grey zones themselves initially sought their independence for a variety of reasons with the goal of more self-determination, their causes were in large part coopted by the involvement of Russia. The sustained efforts of influencing the parent states to Russian benefit through the use of the grey zones tend to follow a few key tactics. As the case of Transnistria and Moldova illustrated, economic coercion and political pressure to join the Commonwealth of Independent States are two early tactics that Russia uses to peddle its influence. By increasing the economic, social, and especially security linkages between Russia and the parent state, influence can be exercised through the threat of hostility in the grey zones, without having to directly threaten the parent state. A third tactic that has been deployed in Georgia and Ukraine is the strategic distribution of Russian passports, also called passportization. By issuing passports to citizens of the grey zones, Russia can create enclaves of ‘citizens’ inside the parent state, which it has the obligation to protect. Passportization was famously used in Crimea as justification for Russia to protect its own citizens abroad preceding the annexation¹⁰¹. This strategy was also used in the Donbas, where many citizens of the DNR/LNR possess Russian passports as well.

¹⁰¹ Herszenhorn 2014

Another strategy of manipulating the ambiguous status of these zones is through the manipulation of their mostly ambiguous borders. Across these cases, the current administrative and boundary border is at the location of ceasefire lines drawn in initial peace talks. From the perspective of the grey zone authorities and their Russian protectors, these administrative boundaries become official international borders. For the parent state, they remain official boundary lines, patrolled by monitoring missions, eventually to come down when the separatist regions are reintegrated. As the case of South Ossetia showed, the fairly arbitrary location of these borders allows them to be, for lack of a better word, grey. Each side can essentially unilaterally decide to move the border. In the case of South Ossetia and Georgia, Russian troops have moved the border to a strategic position close to the main highway in Georgia; while it cannot necessarily be proven that this is a threat, the message that it sends to Georgia and the international community is clear: Russia is still in control.

The final strategy that has been employed across the grey zones is the strategic use of international format discussions to solidify and continue the 'grey' status of the zones by ensuring that political settlements remain out of reach. This topic will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. The pattern and strategies of Russian influence in the grey zones is clear; while there are other complicated dynamics at play in the regions, the literature suggests that Russia can manipulate the politically ambiguous status of the zones in order to influence the parent states.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Across all three cases, the evidence indicates a clear Russian strategy of grey zone creation that generally unfolds in the same way. First, a separatist region forms along existing social cleavages within the parent state. Russia begins to distribute their passports and build influence within these zones, using media and propaganda as a tool to deepen existing social divides. Second, these regions declare some form of autonomy from their parent state. At this point, Russia has the obligation to step in and protect ‘its own’ citizens within the region, involving itself in a military conflict with the parent state. These conflicts generally de-escalate quickly, so as to avoid undue international intervention on behalf of the parent state. Then, a de facto border is established which Russia unilaterally decides to enforce in perpetuity. While there are different dynamics and nuances in each of the different zones, for example the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as countries while Transnistria and the Donbas are not, the pattern of these zones and their purpose cannot be ignored. As Rogstad argued in his article, Transnistria was merely a means to an end—securing political and military leverage over Moldova¹⁰². Likewise, Russia’s interest in the other grey zones is not exclusively in the lives and well-being of the people who reside there, but also in maintaining power over the countries in its near abroad.

¹⁰² Rogstad 2018

There are two key dynamics which must be discussed which allow Russia to exert its influence over the parent states. First, there are the methods and strategies through which Russia works to maintain the ambiguous status of these zones. Rather than allowing these conflicts to resolve, Russia uses specific strategies to maintain their ambiguous status, thus continuing their influence over the situation. Second, there are the dynamics of exploitation, the strategies through which Russia leverages the zones against the parent state. This chapter will explore both of these dynamics and the relations between them, illustrating the full range of strategies that Russia employs in their quest for regional hegemony.

Keeping the Zones Grey

In order for Russian influence over the parent state to endure, in some cases for decades, Russia must work to maintain the status quo. After achieving the quasi-independence of these zones and gaining influence over them, they cannot allow the zone to slip back into their parent state, or to become entirely a part of Russia. Their usefulness, essentially, is in the fact that the parent state still claims sovereignty over them and has an active interest in the situation. If they were to annex all of these territories, the parent states would be free to move on with reforms, join NATO and the EU, and otherwise progress as Russia intended them not to. The noteworthy exception to this strategy is Crimea, although Russia still maintains two zones in the Donbas which allow them to leverage Ukraine despite the total integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation. One of the main strategies for maintaining the status quo is the strategic

manipulation of peace talks and format meetings, such as the Geneva talks for Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the Minsk agreement and Normandy format for the Donbas.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Russia has expertly utilized the format, norms, and international standards of peace agreements and talks to their own advantage. While on the one hand these talks allow Russia to distract and preoccupy their opponents in order to gain ground in the conflict, Russia's involvement in these talks also allows them unique access to the policymaking and agreements that could otherwise see these conflicts resolved. In the Minsk agreements, Russia was present to ensure that a ceasefire was negotiated, and that the western mediators would pressure Ukraine into cooperating with such an agreement. Meanwhile, Russia continued to feed troops, ammunition, and weapons to the rebels in the Donbas, enforcing no such ceasefire. This is evidenced by the timeline set forth in the International Criminal Court report on preliminary findings in Ukraine, which pointed out that Russian involvement in military conflict in the Donbas was ongoing at the time of the Minsk agreements¹⁰³. This strategy is motivated by the fact that the goal was not to reach a political settlement, as ongoing armed conflict still tore through the region. Today, there are still ceasefire violations and armed conflict, but official talks have been held in what they are calling the Normandy Format—representatives are present from Ukraine, France, Germany, and Russia. To date, there have been no major breakthroughs, which works to Russia's advantage. This speaks to a dilemma for conflict resolution in that Russia is both a party to the negotiation as well as an aggressor. In attempts at conflict resolution, as all parties must be at the table;

¹⁰³ Report on Preliminary Examination Activities 2019

however, Russia is attending the format discussions not only with no intention of reaching a political settlement, but also of maintaining the status quo as much as possible. Barnett et. al., in their article titled *Compromised Peacebuilding*, discuss a trend in political conflict resolution efforts toward the preservation of the status quo, and away from liberal democracy. In their study of a wide range of peacebuilding efforts, they found that often the interests of third-party actors prevent meaningful progress toward a liberal democracy, and that the governments in negotiation are most worried about preserving the status quo¹⁰⁴. While this study focuses on the development of a liberal democracy as a primary outcome of conflict resolution processes, their study is an excellent illustration of what can happen when negotiations are tainted by outside or insidious interests. Additionally, as Yasko pointed out, Russia also works toward the goal of establishing the format of the meetings themselves to its own advantage. By transitioning the members of the group working on Ukraine to include Russia as an observer rather than as a participant, Russia can effectively deny all involvement, and suggest that the responsibility for ongoing armed conflict is entirely that of the LNR and DNR¹⁰⁵. Meanwhile, they can continue to supply arms and soldiers to the region.

Similar to Russia's involvement in the Normandy format meetings, the Geneva talks on Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Georgia have been marred by stagnation. The most recent release by the United States Mission to the OSCE, from the December 2019 meeting of the Geneva discussions illustrated that Russia has refused to implement

¹⁰⁴ Barnett, Fang, and Zürcher 2014

¹⁰⁵ Yasko 2020

aspects of the ceasefire agreement, and that upon the discussion of IDPs in Georgia, Russian and de facto authorities walked out of the meeting¹⁰⁶. In the same report, the US commended Georgia on successful completion of all of its commitments in the ceasefire agreement, and the chances of this deescalating the conflict. While this report leaves out the Russian and Abkhaz/Ossetian perspectives on the issue, the fact remains that Georgia has largely complied with the terms of the previous agreement, while Russian troops in the grey zones have not. This example indicates that Russia's strategic manipulation of these talks may have again worked in their favor. It would be consistent with the pattern if Russia committed to a comprehensive ceasefire plan that would have mutually benefitted both parties to the conflict, knowing in advance that the United States and others would pressure Georgia into fulfilling its side of the agreement. At the same time, Russia has continued to operate under the status quo, in no way impacted by the breakdown of the talks and international calls for their cooperation. In short, Russia has nothing to lose, as they have gotten exactly what they wanted from these peace talks. In addition to taking advantage of the cultural negotiation practices of their opponents¹⁰⁷, Russia remains committed to a presence at these talks long term. If Russia were not to attend these talks, they would lose the opportunity to craft policy and solutions beneficial to their own position and be unable to obstruct the talks should progress be made towards a political settlement.

¹⁰⁶ US Mission to the OSCE, December 2019

¹⁰⁷ Schechter 1998

Russia also leveraged international discussions in Transnistria and Moldova to their advantage early on—when it intervened to stop the war, Russia was the convener of the peace talks between the two regions. There is a critical lack of theoretical research into the phenomenon of an aggressor and party to conflict acting as the convener of conflict resolution discussions. There are cases like this phenomenon in different regions of the world, but Russia’s grey zones illustrate several examples involving the same actor. Russia is somehow both a participant and combatant in the conflict (and, many might argue, the aggressor), as well as a ‘neutral’ party in peace processes, capable of convening talks aimed at resolving the conflict. This phenomenon is one which requires further study in the field of conflict resolution, not only in the context of Russia and the grey zones, but in conflicts all over the world. However, Russia’s role in Transnistria cannot be understated—Moldova would have won the war if it were not for Russian intervention¹⁰⁸. By arranging a particular peacebuilding agreement which allowed for Russian peacekeepers in the region, Russia was able to dictate the terms of the agreement and ensure that their presence there could be legitimized. By the time they had a policy change and unilaterally determined that their troops would stay in the region, the international community seemed to have lost interest. Without renewed fighting in the area, it seemed that the conflict would remain as it was—frozen and unsolvable.

The Power of Grey-ness

The evidence indicates that the ultimate strategic objective for intervening in these grey zones is to influence and manipulate Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. By

¹⁰⁸ Kolsto et. al. 1993

controlling these territories within their borders, Russia can have a direct line of influence over them for decades. There are a few ways through which the ambiguity of these grey zones allows Russia to exert influence. Perhaps the main way, however, is through the placement of Russian military and proxy forces within the borders of the parent state.

Due to their moral or legal imperative to protect Russian citizens abroad, and because of several bilateral agreements signed with each of the grey zones, Russia is responsible for ensuring the zones' protection and enforcing their borders. The role of these troops is twofold—first, they protect the borders from potential attempts by the parent state to take back territory. However, their main purpose is as a standing threat to the parent state that any decision they make could be met with hostility from the Russian troops already stationed there. The presence of these troops is the direct result of the ambiguous status of the zones. Since Russia owes their citizens protection, even if they are in another country, they are able to maintain these troops with relatively little pushback from the international community. While there are loud objections to these actions, Russia has felt minimal suffering under the sanctions placed by Europe and the US—certainly not enough to prompt a change in behavior. In fact, the international community has, at times, encouraged or supported presence of Russian troops in favor of greater stability in the conflict zone, such as the OSCE's support for Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria. However, while these troops are ostensibly there for the purposes of peacekeeping, their strategic location sends a continuous message to the parent state. There is no need for an outright threat of violence—any country with

thousands of foreign troops within their borders will factor that into decisions on their own.

One way in which the presence of troops intentionally handicaps the parent state is by forcing a disproportionate amount of resources, both human and financial, to be dedicated to military defense. While this is true across the grey zones, the clearest example of this is in Ukraine. When the Russian forces invaded Crimea and the Donbas, the Ukrainian military was a deeply corrupt institution that was completely unable to defend the borders. In fact, many soldiers had sold weapons and ammunition for personal profit, leaving themselves literally helpless in the face of Russian invasion. If it had not been for thousands of young and old volunteer soldiers and militias across the country, the territorial gains of the rebels may have been much larger¹⁰⁹. Since 2014, Ukraine has been forced to spend many millions more dollars on their defense budget and standing army in order to fight in an ongoing war than they would otherwise have done. This has resulted in a slow in infrastructure projects and other planned reforms, as the money is diverted to military spending and defense. In Georgia, there is a similar situation, as the NATO association agreement that Georgia signed in 2008 before the war with Russia came with guidelines for expanding the military. While this agreement cannot be fulfilled due to the security situation in Georgia, the military spending is far over what it would be if it were not for the presence of these troops. This is likely not a coincidence, but one of the strategic objectives of the Russian government in these zones. If the goal of Russia is to prevent these countries from reforming and developing closer ties with the west, then

¹⁰⁹ In-person interview in Ukraine, August 2018

tying their resources up with a tense security situation (while also using predatory trade policy, as we saw in the case of Moldova and Georgia) is an excellent mechanism through which to handicap these parent states. As the case of Ukraine showed, when Russia determined that it could not have a pro-Russian regime in Ukraine, its best hope was to prevent the consolidation of an anti-Russian or pro-EU government by tying up the country in a war. This strategy has been effective in Moldova and Georgia as well.

In Georgia and Moldova, the threat of violence at the onset of conflict was also used to coerce them into making certain foreign policy decisions. In the 1990s, when the war with Transnistria was still recently halted, Russia took advantage of the opportunity to coerce Moldova into joining the CIS, thus increasing Russia's economic and military influence over the country. Moldova depends heavily on exports of fruits, vegetables, and wine to Russia, which provided Russia with substantial leverage over the country. In Georgia, the Abkhaz rebels had successfully retaken most of their territory, and there was ongoing armed conflict. Russia offered to step in and assist in keeping the peace but forced Georgia to join the CIS as well. This increased Russia's sphere of influence not only over the economy of Georgia, but of their military cooperation as well, strengthening the linkages between the two states. However, Georgia did not keep their western NATO and EU ambitions secret from Russia, and actively pursued those interests despite their involvement in the CIS.

These grey zones also seem to operate as a form of punishment and example setting for other CIS nations. When the parent state does something that Russia does not like, they activate some part of the conflict as a way of punishing the parent state. In

Moldova, this was evident by Moldovan calls for troop withdrawal immediately followed with gas supplies cut to the entire country. In Georgia, as evidenced by contemporaneous media publications, the escalation of the conflict there was in part a design by the Russian government to discourage, and eventually punish, Georgia's association agreement with NATO. Shortly after the signing of that agreement, war descended and thus disqualified Georgia from membership. Since then, when there is a need to stir trouble in Georgia, they simply move the border of South Ossetia further into Georgia¹¹⁰. In Ukraine, non-grey zone measures were enough to entice Yanukovich to sign a CIS agreement rather than the highly anticipated EU association agreement—however, when the people ousted him, Russia had to move in to put a stop to the reforms and anti-Russian sentiment that would have pulled Ukraine from Russia's orbit. All of these strategic advantages to troop placement are the direct result of the ambiguous status of these grey zones. While the international community disavows all of these zones, and mostly alleges Russia to blame for the situations at hand, diplomatic symbolism does nothing to help the parent states that find themselves at the mercy of Russian control through these zones. These troops provide all of the leverage Russia needs to ensure that its neighbors make it a consideration in their policymaking. Taking a hard line in favor of territorial integrity of the parent states also leaves the citizens of the grey zones in limbo, making very real human suffering into a pawn for political disagreement.

The parent states have come up with different ways of addressing the grey zones from a policy point of view. In Ukraine, there is a Ministry for Occupied Territories,

¹¹⁰ Higgins 2016

which sets policy for the grey zones. It has outlawed traveling to Crimea from anywhere that is not the Ukraine-Crimea border. It is also responsible for tracking and assisting the estimated 1.5 million Internally Displaced Persons within Ukraine¹¹¹. In Georgia there is a Law of Occupied territories, which outlawed entry to Abkhazia or South Ossetia from the Russian side of the border without special permission. Such entries are a violation of territorial integrity¹¹². Despite these laws, however, Russians can fly directly into Crimea from Moscow now, and Russia completed construction of a bridge connecting the peninsula to mainland Russia. While this has mostly been used for military transportation, when the tight military crackdown in Crimea is eased, it is likely that Russian tourists will go to the beach there, as they have done for decades. In Abkhazia it is estimated that almost a million Russians per year go there to go to the beach in the Black Sea. Despite these laws, Russia still has the ultimate say over who enters and exits these grey zones. Most especially in South Ossetia, where the only ‘legal’ and viable entry and exit is through a single tunnel, leading into Russia.

Conclusions: Implications for Conflict Resolution

The cases and literature clearly indicate that the political ambiguity of the grey zones play a major role in Russia’s strategic influence over Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova through the presence of troops, halting and impeding economic and political development, selective distribution of passports, and by taking advantage of peace talks. Russia uses these strategies to consolidate power over the parent states and prevent them

¹¹¹ In-person interview in Ukraine, August 2018

¹¹² Law on Occupied Territories of Georgia, 2008

from achieving the reforms and goals that they had previously laid out for themselves. This situation presents a unique challenge for conflict resolution efforts. If one of the parties is only interested in showing up to peace talks and negotiations in order to exploit them for strategic gains, how does the ethical conflict resolution practitioner continue to work for resolution or de-escalation to these conflicts?

There is a critical need for scholarly research on the phenomenon of an aggressor serving as a conflict resolver. While cases of this phenomenon are present, both in the case of the grey zones and in other conflicts, not enough research has been conducted about these kinds of processes. Can a peace process convened by an aggressor be a valid peace process? What kind of results are seen in these processes and how do they differ from third-party facilitated conflict resolution processes? Future studies must be done in order to understand the role that these negotiations play in some of the major conflicts in the world at this time—including, for example, the recent US-Taliban peace deal in Afghanistan.

Future research should also broaden the scope of inquiry to analyze in more detail the Russian and grey zone points of view in these situations. The grey zones exist in a complicated geopolitical situation with identity, language, historical, and other cleavages. Their citizens face unique challenges related to everything from jobs to medical care, and their opportunities are very limited. Consideration of the Russian perspective of these grey zones and further understanding of their aims would strengthen the research and provide insightful analysis. This thesis focused on the strategic manipulation of these zones by Russia vis-à-vis their ambiguous political status, with the knowledge that this is

not the only dynamic impacting the conflicts in these areas, and that further study would be required.

Despite the categorical failures of the official peace processes to yield results in the grey zones, there are some hopeful examples of people-to-people cooperation in these contexts. The work of Susan Allen and her team facilitating dialogues between Georgians, South Ossetians, and Abkhazians can provide a framework for addressing some of the concerns around conflict resolution in these grey zones. While Russia makes it functionally impossible to find a lasting political settlement to these conflicts in Geneva, work can be done on taking practical steps toward cooperation on issues of mutual concern, especially along the ceasefire lines. By convening non-governmental figures of influence in Georgia and the grey zones to discuss practical issues, rather than political settlements, some progress has been made. For example, when the wolf population along the ceasefire line began to swell, the two sides were able to come to an agreement that allowed wolf populations to be brought back under control, during which time gunfire would not be retaliated against as a military attack for the duration of the agreement. In another instance, the sides were able to establish a process by which ambulances could cross the ceasefire line quickly and easily in order to provide medical attention to those living near the line¹¹³. These examples of practical, hands-on solutions could provide a roadmap to using people-to-people diplomacy to lessen the impact of Russian manipulation by building cooperation networks that could endure despite the ambiguous status of the zones. While these agreements bring the zones no closer to a

¹¹³ Lecture with Susan Allen.

senior-level lasting political settlement, they are an indication that conflict resolution processes are not without their benefit, even when a powerful force is working to maintain the status quo. The situation in the grey zones has remained intentionally stagnant in some cases for almost 30 years. While this is unlikely to change, there are ways in which the field of conflict resolution can work to de-escalate and through de-escalation and cooperation, neutralize the threat of Russian troops and improve opportunities for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to trade and prosper. Most importantly, such resolution attempts may have the capacity to alleviate human suffering both within the grey zone, and in the parent state.

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