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Corruption Thrives on Russia's Frozen Conflicts

By Karen Dawisha

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From its very first days, the Soviets were as adamant about sovereignty in "their" zone as the West was in theirs. In practice, this meant that from 1960s the international system was populated by states whose own independence was vastly curtailed by one or the other superpower, under the covers of the Brezhnev and Monroe doctrines.

Now there are at least two wars in which the protagonists are non-state actors: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in Ukraine. Both seek to destroy the state on whose territory they operate, and both have external backers. Whether desiring to be part of an Islamic caliphate or the "Russian World," these movements seek to destroy states fully recognized by the international community and to redraw recognized boundaries.

What makes the DPR an interesting proposition is that it is Russia's fourth deliberate creation of a "frozen conflict," in addition to Transdnestr, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The later two were declared independent when Russia invaded Georgia and are recognized only by Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and a few other countries you have never heard of (like Nauru, until

recently one of the money-laundering capitals of the world). And now we have the DPR about to "be born" by the midwifery of Russian special forces.

Of course, the comparison between Abkhazia and Ukraine is not perfect. Unlike Georgia's days-long war, the conflict in Ukraine has lasted much longer and is propelled by issues that are perhaps closer to both Kiev's and Moscow's hearts.

First, there is no doubt that there are populations in eastern Ukraine who view Kiev as completely controlled by ultranationalist thugs. And certainly all of Russian television frames Ukraine in this way, despite the fact that Kiev's European tilt is anything but fascist. These "fascists," though, promote something quite dangerous for the Kremlin's autocratic nature, namely the rule of law and the rule of popular democracy.

Meanwhile, there's no doubt that western Ukraine considers itself to have been put forcibly under the yoke of Soviet domination since the end of the Second World War, and it now seeks historical redress. Part of Europe prior to World War II, it now seeks return.

Russia, remembering that some western Ukrainians were so vehemently anti-Soviet that they were willing to ally with the Nazis to prevent forcible incorporation, now seeks to do whatever is necessary to prevent a western-Ukraine-dominated central government from bringing Europe closer to its borders.

Still, eastern Ukraine is shaping up to be another frozen conflict, rather than be annexed like Crimea. And, as the experience of other Russian-sponsored statelets shows, it can expect a corrupt future.

Despite these territories' interest in becoming part of Russia, particularly on the part of Transdnestr, Russia has so far kept them at arm's length. Instead, Moscow has chosen to create siloviki-led statelets, in Transdnestr, Ossetia, Abkhazia and presumably Donetsk. In return for being allowed to manage these territories, former FSB, GRU and other special-forces elites appear to be given sinecures to run these areas as homes for organized banditry.

As but one example, Russian-born Vladimir Antyufeyev was a commander of the Latvian OMON forces who in 1990 refused to recognize Latvian sovereignty. After fleeing Latvia for Moscow, he then joined Transdnestr's fight against Moldova in 1991.

Antyufeyev eventually became the head of Transdnestr's State Security Ministry, but in 2012 was dismissed and charged with abuse of power and misappropriation of public funds. After fleeing to Moscow yet again, this July he became deputy prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic.

Antyufeyev's presence in Donetsk suggests a Russian version of the colonial office, in which predatory elites can be circulated around to whatever happens to be the next profitable conflict zone. These legally gray zones are no doubt attractive to the Kremlin-backed siloviki who operate in the territory because all this occurs away from the prying eye of the international community — there are no embassies or international observers in these rogue territories.

Organized crime, and the collusion with authorities that allows it to flourish, has turned these

unrecognized territories into centers for human trafficking, drug smuggling and currency counterfeiting. In 2011, a resident of Transdnestr was even apprehended in Moldova after attempting to sell nuclear materials.

At the same time, Georgia and Ukraine, which were both seeking international support for joining Western institutions, are stymied in these objectives because their borders are now contested and their internal political cohesion sorely challenged. Equally, Russian opposition activists who are wondering how far the Kremlin will go to dismantle the last structures of democratic rule need only look at the ruined buildings of Luhansk.

Game, set and match to Vladimir Putin? His ultimate success in the long game will depend on his ability to control escalation, increase the cost of Western involvement, use gas diplomacy to weaken European resolve, and manipulate Ukrainian oligarchs and security elites to weaken Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's grip.

But come what may, starting with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu who brought "peace" to Abkhazia and up to Antyufeyev, Putin has a loyal reserve of special forces who see the establishment of frozen conflicts as a legitimate, and even profitable form of foreign policy.

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