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From Crimea to Kosovo, Seeking Recognition

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The new geopolitical phenomenon of "unrecognized states" has appeared only in the last 40 years. This phenomenon did not exist 100 years ago when the world was divvied up between the colonial empires, nor did it exist after that, when most of those colonies declared their independence.

The situation changed in the mid-1970s, when a large part of the world was finally freed from its colonial shackles. In 1974 the Turkish army occupied northern Cyprus and, in 1983, proclaimed it the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. In 1975, Moroccan troops entered the territory of Western Sahara that had not yet fully established its independence. As a result, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was proclaimed in 1976, with support from Algeria.

Recent history has also witnessed several examples of the breakup and even collapse of Eurasian states composed of diverse ethnic groups — from Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union to Somalia and Iraq. In some cases, the disintegrative process continues even today. There is a long list of unrecognized and partially recognized territories and countries that have

appeared on the planet since 1989.

It includes the Republika Srpska and Kosovo on the territory of the former Yugoslavia; Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the Caucasus; Transdnestr and Gagauzia on the territory of Moldova; and the Islamic State (IS) on the territories of a number of Middle Eastern states.

Of course, the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, along with about a dozen other similar entities from West Africa to Southeast Asia also belong in this venerable company.

Why is it that, at one time, the fierce anti-colonial movement led to the appearance of states that rapidly assumed all of the features of formal sovereignty, whereas extremely complex conflicts arise now concerning far less fundamental instances of secession?

In my opinion, the reason is that from the 1950s to the 1970s, powerful states and their individual colonies were the parties to such conflicts — and often not even conflicts so much as processes of political disengagement, as was the case with the majority of Britain's overseas territories — whereas today, the emerging geopolitical squabbles involve a far greater number of participants.

By definition, the phenomenon of refusing formal recognition to a state involves more than just the transient conflict between that state or territory and the mother country. And while a number of recent large-scale secessions and breakups have proceeded smoothly — such as the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia — a conflict arises when more than one outside party becomes involved.

That outside party could be a country with direct ties to the secessionist entity. The classic example of this is Nagorno-Karabakh, which was created on the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan but which is populated by Armenians — and which therefore receives open support from Armenia. The outside player could be a neighboring state that has ethnic ties to the people of the unrecognized entity — as with Serbia and the Republika Srpska, as well as Russia and South Ossetia and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics.

The third party might also be a country pursuing its own geopolitical interests in the territories concerned, as with Russia and the self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic, Abkhazia, and, in some ways, the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics, and also the European Union and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

And finally, the outside parties can be global players that understand the threat that certain unrecognized states pose to regional security — as in the case of the United States and NATO against the IS — or the threat such entities pose to the modern world order — as in the case of the United States and the EU against the self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic and the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

As a result, a relatively local conflict has caused a sharp deterioration in relations between major geopolitical players. And that, in turn, has led to large-scale economic losses, heightened international tensions, failure of international initiatives and another round of increased military spending by many states.

The world community will undoubtedly have to find new solutions to these problems in the coming years, if only because the history of the last quarter-century shows that the previous approaches no longer work. The fate of self-proclaimed states has become a "bargaining chip" in relations between the major powers. In my opinion, there are two ways to overcome this practice.

On the one hand — though it seems a highly unlikely scenario — the international community could change the process by which new states gain entry into the United Nations. This is crucial because without such status, the UN cannot classify as aggression any attempts by the mother country to reassert control over secessionist entities.

Under the current arrangement, new states are admitted to the UN by a two-thirds vote of the General Assembly, followed by a vote of the UN Security Council where nine of its 15 members must give approval — without a single one of the five permanent Security Council members using its veto.

However, considering that the United States, Russia and the EU have a vested interest in practically every one of the conflicts, it is highly unlikely that it will prove possible to simplify the process by, for example, eliminating the need for Security Council approval.

On the other hand — and this seems a more promising option — the world community could revive inactive UN institutions. This primarily applies to the United National Trusteeship Council that ceased operations in 1994. That body functioned from 1945 until 1993 in accordance with Chapter XIII of the UN Charter.

In this way, an unrecognized territory over which no country exercises internationally recognized sovereignty could acquire the status of a mandated territory. As such, it would be managed by special administrations or agencies under the auspices of the UN on the basis of respect for human rights and freedoms and fundamental UN declarations and conventions.

I believe such a solution has three advantages and could turn current complex problems into opportunities for improving the global order. First, the new status would allow those territories to uphold civil rights, issue special passports to their citizens, host the consuls of foreign countries, appeal for redress to international courts and establish normal commercial relations with third-party countries.

Second, such a measure would serve as the basis for building constructive relationships between the major political players — relationships that would replace the current paradigm of confrontation, double standards and mutual accusations. A new world order would crystallize out of the current global chaos.

Third and finally, the UN — that many have written off as obsolete but which served as the fundamental tool for international stability for half a century — could regain its status.

Perhaps these arguments do not conclusively prove that this prescription for healing the world's ills will work. But why not try at least a small dose of a new medication if all of the old ones no longer help the patient?

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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