

EURASIA'S PROTRACTED CONFLICTS: LEARNING FROM POST-SOVIET TRANSITIONS

CONTRIBUTORS: NEIL MELVIN AND YEONJU JUNG (SIPRI), JOHANNA LARSSON (MA CANDIDATE, UPPSALA UNIVERSITY)

INTRODUCTION

In the 20 years following the cold war, the post-Soviet space did not experience the level of major armed conflict found in other regions that have undergone decolonization (e.g. Africa and Asia in the 1950s–80s). Instead, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the conflicts transformed into protracted, ‘frozen’ conflicts. This context persisted until the 2008 Georgia–Russia war. In 2014 the internationalized Russia–Ukraine civil war broke out, followed by the recent resumption of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

These conflicts appear to have followed a distinct trajectory in which the regional dimension has been central to the conflict dynamics, and the region is now facing an escalation of violence and conflict that threatens to spill over into neighbouring areas, such as the Middle East and South Asia. This brief examines conflict lessons of the post-Soviet space, assesses causes and catalysts of the escalating violence and considers the role of states as actors in Eurasian conflicts.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The conflicts in Eurasia are of increasing complexity: They have multiple drivers and involve complicated interests. State-to-state warfare is becoming more common, for example between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and often involves Russia. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in particular has reached a dangerous point: Azerbaijan has exhausted the peaceful means in its toolkit and lost faith in diplomacy.

Elsewhere in the region, Russia’s perceptions of its interests have different impacts on the conflict. On one hand, Eurasian power dynamics are now treacherously asymmetrical. On the other hand, the shortcomings of the international response to these regional conflicts, notably in Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh, have exacerbated the situation. The OSCE’s failure to deliver any lasting measure of peace in Ukraine has become regarded as a conflict driver. The European Union’s ostensible neutrality has made it party to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in a certain sense. It has not criticized either actor after the violation of terms and agreements, nor has it praised good behaviour. If the European Union (EU) applied a stronger conditionality-based approach to the post-Soviet conflicts, it might forestall the acceleration of violence.

Diplomatic relations have been increasingly important in the region, yet there is little trust in diplomacy, which makes effecting change from outside the region difficult. In order for diplomatic engagement to be perceived as legitimate, there must be a minimum consensus on the security ‘rules of the game’ within the region.

Eurasia’s conflicts have a tendency to become intractable in the sense of being non-reconcilable due to the existing political and social structures. In this regard, the complexity of the conflicts requires broader efforts to understand and address the current dynamics. It is especially important to emphasize the governance challenge that arose after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which must be taken into consideration, together with internal societal and socioeconomic dimensions of conflict, to understand the conflict dynamic in the region today.

The thawing of conflicts in Eurasia is taking place in conjunction with increased authoritarian politics and human rights abuses. Increased attention should be given to ongoing human rights abuses, such as torture and



restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, as necessary conditions for reducing conflicts. Women's rights are increasingly at risk. In the 1990s, women became increasingly active in the liberation movement and even participated in combat. Since the ceasefire, they have been relegated to more traditional, passive roles and have not had a substantial role in official conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. Greater regional analysis on transitional justice and gender-based violence during the 1990s and since could shed light on the regional gender dynamics of these conflicts.

The security–democracy nexus is an important issue across the region. Poor governance and a lack of genuine legitimacy are characteristics of many of the countries in the post-Soviet space. These conditions create an environment wherein politicians can use regional conflicts as tools to generate internal support. In large part, these conflicts are fuelled and sustained by nationalism, which surges each time violence recurs or a truce is broken. In this regard, the conflicts serve as convenient distractions that politicians can manipulate to avoid addressing difficult development questions. Without addressing governance and legitimacy problems, it is unlikely that these conflicts will be completely resolved as the political elite would rather stay in power than transform their own societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. External actors should set norms and stand by them.

- A lack of consistency in creating support for peacebuilding engagements has enabled the conflict to escalate very quickly.

2. The international community should reassess its expectations of existing peacebuilding structures.

- The structures established in the 1990s were designed to manage the conflict, not to generate or sustain transformative settlements between parties to the conflict.

3. Identify stakeholders that support constructive change and the establishment of transitional justice instruments.

- The international community and local civil society have the power to transform the situation from opposite directions.

4. Increase research and analysis of the local contexts in which these conflicts transpire.

- The new conflict paradigm of the post-Soviet space requires an in-depth analysis of what went wrong over the past two-and-a-half decades, and should take into account conflict drivers, the motivation of Russian behaviour, structural factors like declining education, negative demographic and health trends, a lack of social cohesion, corruption, inequality and poor governance.
- The relationship between various conflict catalysts, such as rising nationalism and the energy market, and their knock-on effects, such as human rights abuses and increased militarization, must be better understood.

5. Refrain from using the expression 'frozen conflict'.

- As long as there are casualties, the conflict should not be referred to as frozen but rather protracted, reflecting the continuing conditions for violence and the possibility of a new escalation to major violence.