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Complexities of Conflict Prevention and Resolution in the Post-Soviet Space: EU–US–Russian Security Dimensions

I. INTRODUCTION

The death of the Soviet giant left Russia with an illusionary perception of its former brother republics as being unconditional satellites. However, despite the official rhetoric regarding the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as the major focus of Russian politics, until recently Moscow has largely ignored the post-Soviet arena and freed the space for other players. The EU and the US, who originally also perceived the CIS as a realm of Russian influence, have changed their attitudes and stirred up their politics in the region. The ‘Wider Europe’ concept (and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)), together with NATO Partnership programmes, have been the major indicators of the new vision of the West towards Eurasia—a new vision with (possibly) new prospects. Given that Moscow had perceived EU–US–Russian politics in the post-Soviet space as a zero-sum game, the complicated cooperation of the former Soviet republics both with the West and with Russia became burdened with the new rivalry. Recent political transformations in the region have further widened the gap both between some of the republics and *vis-à-vis* the forces that are engaged in this arena. On the one hand, EU–US–Russian cooperation projects started to stumble and froze at the stage of vague phrases. On the other hand, two major groups (consisting of the former USSR republics) formed. The first group united around the Russian Federation and includes such countries as Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The second has leaned more towards western influences and is represented by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In other words, the countries have been choosing between ‘Wider Russia’ and ‘Wider Europe’, or being a ‘near abroad’ or ‘abroad’. The former group has been more active in Russian-initiated (re)integrationist projects and has tended to follow the line of Moscow’s policy; the latter has created fora with a Western orientation (GUAM—Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, and CDC—Community of Democratic Choice) and is less

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interested in integrationist perspectives with Russia. This new dividing line has deepened existing problems on several levels:

- between the EU, the US and Russia;
- between the two major groups of post-Soviet states; and
- within those states, as certain regions/republics of these new countries have favoured a direction that differs from that followed by their 'centre' (e.g., the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia has not only directed its policy towards Russia, as opposed to the Georgian agenda of a pro-US and EU orientation, but has even sought to join the Russian Federation as part of the North Ossetian Republic).

This article will focus on the study of the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, as they significantly contribute to these levels of separation. This will be done alongside a review of the security agendas of the three major actors—the EU, the US and the Russian Federation—in regard to the discussed events and areas by examining the interests of the parties and the problems that stand between them and those that separate them, as well as by addressing the potential for meaningful cooperation in conflict resolution and future conflict prevention.

II. THE CONFLICTS

As in all conflicts, there are no sides that do not have their stakes as well as their share of guilt; as in all conflicts—in reality—it is hard to imagine a mediator not becoming a part of the conflict one way or another; and, as in all conflicts, the full truth is relative, as well as often unacceptable and contested by all the protagonists of the story.

A. Moldova–Transdnistria

When, in the late 1980s, the USSR began to disintegrate, Moldova followed a similar trajectory to the other former Soviet republics: the road of confrontation with Moscow, demanding independence. However, there were certain specifics in the Moldovan case: a significant number of local politicians simultaneously aspired towards reintegration with Romania, of which Moldova had been a part prior to World War II. However, Transdnistria, the region situated on the left bank of the Dnestr river (See Map 1), represented a different story. To begin with, this region did not previously belong to the Romanian state (as was true in the case of the rest of the Moldavian SSR before World War II). It had been part of the Russian Empire before the revolution of 1917 and, later, part of the Ukrainian SSR (within the USSR, as the Moldavian Autonomous *oblast* (later a Soviet Socialist Republic)) and it had remained such until 1940 when, due to the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, the USSR incorporated the pre-revolutionary Russian imperial lands of Bessarabia (populated mostly by a Moldovan/Romanian population), after which this territory, as well as the former Moldavian Autonomous SSR of the Ukrainian SSR (Transdnistria) formed one of the 15 (post World War II) Soviet Republics: the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. As a result, the new republic united both the Moldovan territory *per se* and the territories of Gagauzia (now a Turkic-populated autonomous region of Moldova) and Transdnistria, the latter being populated equally by three ethnic groups: Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians. Therefore,