“Unrecognized States” in Russia’s Domestic and Foreign Policy

PONARS Eurasia Memo No. 10

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May 2008

Predictably, the recognition of Kosovo’s independence by the United States and most members of the European Union was followed by pronounced appeals for recognition from three of the four “unrecognized states” of the former Soviet Union—Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria. All three (unlike the fourth, Nagorno Karabakh) host Russian peacekeepers and look primarily to Russia to support their independence.

To date, Russia’s official position on Kosovo and the unrecognized states has been based mainly on fundamental principles of international relations: sovereignty of existing states, the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, and deference to the norms of international law. Outgoing Russian President Vladimir Putin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stated repeatedly that Russia’s approach to the unrecognized states, and to Georgia and Moldova more generally, is based upon these principles.

At the same time, most politicians and specialists within Russia—as well as many in the West—regard Kosovo as a precedent that has changed the context for resolving the problem of unrecognized states in the post-Soviet space and elsewhere. Many political elites in Russia believe that now is an appropriate time to recognize the independence of these entities.

A combination of factors has elevated the problem of the unrecognized states to the forefront of contemporary Russian foreign and domestic policy. These include Russia’s tense relations with Ukraine and Georgia and the potential for difficulties with other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); recent attempts to redefine Russia’s relations with the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU); and, finally, the lapse of time between Russia’s presidential election and the May 7 inauguration. Russia’s new administration faces

two choices: accommodate the prevailing opinion of political elites in the country by recognizing the independence of the unrecognized states, or maintain its present posture—defined by the Russian daily *Vedomosti* as "defending without recognizing"–while using the circumstances to try and strengthen its position in the world and to reap multiple long-term dividends.

Policy "à la carte"

In March, two public hearings of the Russian parliament, or Duma, on the problem of the unrecognized states revealed the full spectrum of debate on the issue. The purpose of these hearings was to discuss the appeals that each of the three unrecognized states submitted to the Russian Federation. The hearings were held after Russia announced it was lifting the economic embargo on Abkhazia formally imposed in 1996 as part of a CIS-wide agreement.

The hearings offered a wide array of options to the Russian government. Aleksei Ostrovsky, chairman of the Duma Committee for CIS Affairs, announced after the first hearings that the Duma would likely pass a series of recommendations in support of a kind of "delayed status" for the unrecognized states. These would include measures to open diplomatic missions and to facilitate trade, investment, and transit. The final resolution passed went so far as to advise the government to "consider the possibility of accelerating" the process of recognition if Georgia were to attack Abkhazia or South Ossetia or if steps were taken for the "accelerated accession of Georgia into NATO." It also urged the strengthening of Russian peacekeeping contingents.

Despite considerable hype surrounding these hearings, their political effect was minimal. The final resolution refrained from committing explicitly to the independence of the unrecognized states in the event of Georgia's membership into NATO (one of several amendments proposed by the Communist Party and rejected by the United Russia majority). Numerous experts criticized the hearings as mere show and propaganda, aimed at leaving enough room for the Kremlin to maneuver while simultaneously demonstrating to the West that Russia could take more decisive steps if it so chose.

Nonetheless, the Duma debate foreshadowed the policy that the Kremlin ultimately unveiled in April. A set of presidential instructions ordered the establishment of consular offices across the border from Abkhazia and South Ossetia; cooperation with various governmental bodies; and recognition of official documents for individuals and legal entities. These steps corresponded to the "low end" of the Duma recommendations and are understood to suit Russia's economic and financial interests while both defending the rights of Russian passport holders in these territories and remaining within the limits of international law. Complementing these measures, Russia decided to increase its peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia to discourage Tbilisi from considering military action in the territory. In general, Russia appears ready to mimic U.S. policy towards Taiwan, including the extension of military guarantees to the republic in order to "defend Russian citizens."

The Duma hearings and presidential instructions reflect the attitude of the Russian political elite and society toward the unrecognized states. However, both have remained largely passive in this affair. Elites and the Russian public are in a state of policy fatigue and remain indifferent to anything that does not concern their pocket and

the immediate future. The Russian media as well appears to have exhausted its pathos in the aftermath of Kosovo's independence. Even the right-wing "national patriots" failed to exploit such an opportune theme in their struggle against "liberals" and "Westerners." Ultimately, the Kremlin's decision on the unrecognized states was taken without regard for the opinion and stance of either the Duma or Russian society and elites more generally.

What the government has taken into account are material factors, consistent with the Kremlin's emphasis on the pragmatic and non-ideological nature of Russian foreign policy. The Duma, naturally, did not mention these factors, but they were widely discussed in the media and among specialists. Abkhazia can help solve Russia's pressing shortage of cheap and easily transportable construction materials for the 2014 Olympic Games in nearby Sochi. Moreover, Russian investments in Abkhazia are already significant and may yield large dividends in the near future. On the other hand, the fact that Russian investment into Transdniestria was a politically senseless waste of money, providing unreliable local politicians with non-transparent dividends, has also not been a topic for open discussion.

A case for statehood?

Russian specialists overwhelmingly regard Kosovo as a precedent. They judge the numerous historical, ethnic, religious, political, and security circumstances of the unrecognized states no less valid than the arguments made in favor of Kosovo's independence. In a study on Taiwan, three well-known Russian experts (G. Kunadze, N. Kosolapov, A. Larin) proposed a set of prerequisites for unrecognized states to achieve sovereignty. These criteria constitute fundamental pillars upholding the stability of the international system and provide an expedient and pragmatic approach to the resolution of such cases. They include:

- Incompatibility with a parent state (historical, religious, ethnic)
- No potential security risks to the parent state
- Economic and sociopolitical viability
- Borders with third countries or an outlet to the sea (supporting the first and third points above)
- The consent of a dominant majority of the local population, permanently living on the territory

Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria refer to these principles in their appeals, stressing their viability, their established state institutional structures, and the will of their peoples. It should be noted, however, that the last argument does not fully correspond to the notion of a plebiscite, which could only be regarded as valid if it were held under international controls and with the participation of those inhabitants who were compelled to leave a given territory (such as in Abkhazia).

Still, the Kremlin will hardly cross the red line of recognizing the independence of the unrecognized states. This would contradict its position on Kosovo, which political circles in Moscow and even many observers in the West agree serves to strengthen Russia's international position.

Unrecognized States and Russian Foreign Policy

The foreign policy factor is significant; both specialists and politicians ultimately base their views on whether to recognize the independence of the unrecognized states on their general opinion of Russian relations with the West and the CIS. For example, a Communist deputy, Ambassador Yuli Kvitsinsky, insisted at the second Duma hearing that Russia needed to immediately recognize their independence to prevent the entry of Georgia (and Ukraine) into NATO. Mikhail Margelov, head of the Federation Council's International Affairs Committee, stated that the success of negotiations between Moldova and Transdniestria will prove to the international community that Russia supports the reunification of states while the United States and the EU support separatism. Duma member Vladimir Zhirinovsky declared that the Duma resolution was "temporary," only until NATO's April 2008 summit in Bucharest, when it would become clear if Georgia and Ukraine were to receive Membership Action Plans (MAPs). If that happened, Zhirinovsky promised, the West could be sure that Russia would respond with stronger measures.

In general, the unrecognized states became a priority item on the Russian agenda at a time of already intense negotiations with the West. German Chancellor Angela Merkel quickly departed for Moscow to meet president-elect Dmitry Medvedev. The 2+2 Russian-American meetings—discussing the most controversial aspects of the proposed anti-ballistic missile shield in Europe—were relocated from Washington to Moscow with the obvious intent of examining the workings of the Putin-Medvedev duumvirate. The EU summit in March and the meeting of the EU foreign ministers in late April left no illusions regarding the difficulties of establishing a Russia-EU strategic partnership. The problem of the unrecognized states has become one element of a larger package regarding key issues for European and international security and involving relations between Russia, the United States, the European Union (Lithuania's conditions for starting negotiations on the new Russia-EU treaty include the issue of the unrecognized states), and NATO. Relations with the latter are passing through a particularly difficult phase thanks to Tbilisi's determination to join the alliance despite Russian objections.

The CIS

The issue of the unrecognized states has also become the testing ground for the strengthening of Russia's position within the CIS. Recent developments demonstrate that Moscow still lacks a grand strategy for the post-Soviet space. On the one hand, the CIS remain a priority. In February, President Putin invited his CIS colleagues to an informal summit in Moscow to acquaint them with Medvedev even before the election. Medvedev, in turn, announced before the inauguration that he plans to make his first visit abroad to Kazakhstan (and the second one to China). At the same time, the Kremlin maintains a pragmatic line even in relations with its closest partners in the CIS, recently initiating, for example, anti-dumping procedures against metal producers in Kazakhstan.

Whether members of the CIS would support Moscow's decision to repeal trade and economic sanctions against Abkhazia promised to be a good indicator of the CIS's present and future situation. Moscow hardly expected that Kazakhstan, its strategic partner in the CIS, would fail to support the lifting of the embargo against Abkhazia. Within Georgia, a negative, if predictable, reaction to Moscow's decision has been the consolidation of different political forces on foreign policy, which has strengthened the

position of Mikheil Saakashvili on the eve of parliamentary elections. Still, tense relations with Georgia did not hamper the implementation of an agreement to restore air connections between Tbilisi and Moscow.

For now, in spite of the Kosovo precedent, the Russian position on the unrecognized states continues to be based on the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. In exchange for past and anticipated concessions, Russia will most likely support a settlement conferring wide autonomy on Transdniestria. These concessions will likely include a promise from Moldova to enshrine its status as a neutral state within its constitution; Moldova's withdrawal from GUAM, a bloc of states that seek to distance themselves from Russia and move closer to the EU and NATO; and increased preferences for Russian business.

Conclusion

In the end, the tensions in Russian-Western relations caused by Kosovo and extended to the problem of the unrecognized states have hampered the transition of power in Russia, which the Kremlin had planned as a smooth and pro-Western process. This transition began with the nomination of Medvedev as a successor, widely perceived as a liberal alternative. Some specialists also argued that Putin was trying to "reset" ("obnulit," or neutralize negative aspects of) the foreign policy sphere for his successor. Who will determine decisionmaking on the unrecognized states in the next Russian administration, and how, will have an important impact on Russian domestic and foreign policymaking in the next four years.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Program on Global Security and Sustainability of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, the Carnegie Corporation, or the MacArthur Foundation.