SECURITIZATION AND IDENTITY

THE BLACK SEA REGION AS A "CONFLICT FORMATION"

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In the 1990s, many studies of regions at Europe's margins were grounded in a "New Regionalism" approach. This approach focused on a type of intra-regional relations, in which security ranked much lower than economics, environment, communication, or technology. In the Baltic, Nordic, and Barents regions, cooperation was strengthened through policies of conditionality, norms diffusion, and social learning. There were expectations that the most fruitful region-building experiences could be duplicated in other areas, including the Black Sea region (BSR). However, many factors have pushed the BSR in an opposite, much less peaceful, direction.

The BSR can most appropriately be viewed as a "security region." Regions of this type are based upon durable patterns of amity and enmity rooted within regional milieu. Members of security regions may jointly securitize an external power or a specific threat, or they may securitize each other as an indispensable element of their intersubjective (that is, linked to each other) identities. In the BSR, this seems to be the case, in the sense that the countries belonging to it may not be able to construct their particular identities without resorting to constant – even highly conflictual – references to neighboring countries' policies. For example, there is no way to describe Russian identity without pointing to such emblematic regions as Crimea, and Sevastopol in particular; in the same way, it is unthinkable for Georgia to speak about its identity without the narratives of Abkhazia or South Ossetia. One may claim that Ukraine raises identity issues for Russia, and vice versa; the same is true for Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is these rivalries that turn the BSR into what Ole Waever and Barry Buzan have dubbed a "conflict formation."

The elevation of security to the top of the BSR agenda comes as a projection of political logics, since the major developments in the region are driven by security

decisions that are deeply political. The acceptance or rejection of Turkey's European Union application, as well as of Ukraine's and Georgia's applications to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, are certainly political actions, as they imply answers to where the borders of Europe (and the Euro-Atlantic security space) lie and whether exceptional bargaining should be applicable to specific countries, including Russia.

Against this backdrop, two ways of conceptualizing the BSR from a security perspective may be singled out. First, the region might be viewed as one moving from a "conflict formation" to a set of bilateral security relations that have the potential to bind it together but have not yet achieved sufficient cross-linkage among units to do so. This interpretation is obviously optimistic; potentially it may come true only in the case of NATO expansion to Ukraine and Georgia, paralleled by Russia's closer contractual association with NATO within the "Partnership for Peace" program.

Alternatively – and far more realistically - the BSR may be seen as an area unable to become a security bridge between two competing spatial orders, Euro-Atlantic and Russian. The BSR represents a margin where the divisions between "EU-Europe" and the post-Soviet areas are neither final nor uncontested. It is an academic truism to speculate about the "fuzzy borders" of the EU, yet the contours of the Russian spatial order are also not that well fixed. The ambiguity stems from numerous nationalist voices in Russia questioning whether Crimea belongs to Ukraine, as well as from the existence of sizable communities of Russian citizens in Transdniestria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

The concept of "overlay" – a situation in which great power interests come to heavily dominate a region – may be helpful in this situation. Some Russian experts admit that most of the current problems in the BSR are regional projections of more fundamental differences in Russia's relations with its major Western partners. This explains why all activities of the EU and NATO in the BSR fuel geopolitical rivalries. The BSR is considered in Moscow as a place where a "counter-coalition to Russia" is being formed, which if successful, might lift Ukraine to the status of a regional power and, conversely, drag Russia down from the level of a great power to that of a regional power. Under this scenario, the idea advocated by some Russian intellectuals of a Moscow-led "second/non-Western Europe" (which would include Russia along with Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and even some Balkan countries) is doomed to failure.

How can Russia's policies be understood from the vantage point of the "security region" concept? First, Russia securitizes all attempts to treat it as an anomalous country. Russia's key security problem is the threat of marginalization stemming from a lack of due respect and recognition. Russia's place in "international society," Moscow feels, is questioned or contested by many governments in the West. Moreover, how the borders of this "international society" are drawn, and the roles within it distributed, is of primordial importance for Russia's positioning in adjacent regions. The Kremlin fears it will be excluded from the formation of an international security order on the basis of Russia's alleged failure to meet Western standards of democracy. This explains the reasons behind Russia's multiple attempts to draw the attention of Western leaders to the allegedly undemocratic nature of the Ukrainian and Georgian political regimes.

Second, NATO enlargement is perceived as one of the major threats to Russia's security. Within the BSR this type of securitization leads to serious problems in Russia's relations with Ukraine and Georgia. Russia uses NATO as one of the most important reference points in the mental construction of the "unfriendly West" and, therefore, puts it in a highly negative discursive framework. Securitization achieved momentum with Vladimir Putin's statement that Russian missiles might be re-targeted to Ukrainian territory should Ukraine join NATO. In fact, Putin's provocative statement was a reverberation of an existing anti-Ukrainian platform developed by one of the leading voices of Russian conservative nationalism, Yegor Kholmogorov. He has advocated the pursuit of a policy of "pragmatic irredentism" (meaning that Moscow should have an upper hand in supporting the political claims of Russian-speaking communities in neighboring states), the treatment of Ukraine as a country with "secondary" or artificial statehood, and a recognition of the "technical" (that is, temporary and conventional) nature of Russia's interstate borders with bordering countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This type of reaction could be explained to a significant extent by the feeling of traumatic defeat that Russia suffered during the "color revolutions" a few years ago.

Ukraine's NATO application only strengthened the securitizing moves undertaken by Moscow. For example, first vice premier Sergei Ivanov predicted that in a few years Ukraine will introduce a visa regime between the two states, a perspective that runs against Russian expectations. In the meantime, Russia's representative to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, put Crimea, together with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in a group of territories that will not compromise on NATO accession and will pursue pro-Russian policies.

Third, the Georgia – Ukraine linkage is perceived by Russia in an ostensibly security-related context. In official media, Ukraine in August 2008 was portrayed as a country led by overt sympathizers of the Saakashvili regime who sell arms to Tbilisi and prevent the Russian fleet from operating in the Black Sea. The findings of a Ukrainian parliamentary commission which established that a number of Ukrainian nationals were involved in Georgia's attack on South Ossetia were met in Russia as proof of the close connections between Kyiv and Tbilisi.

Fourth, when dealing with BSR countries, Russia places a number of identity-related issues in a security context. The Kremlin has repeatedly claimed that the Russian language is discriminated against in Ukraine, and that its political elites are willing to rewrite the history of the Second World War. In particular, the attempt of the Ukrainian government to equate the *Holodomor* – the mass starvation of the 1930s – with genocide aimed specifically at the Ukrainian population has been harshly rebuffed by the Kremlin. Moscow presumes that criticism of Stalinism automatically translates into lambasting and challenging Russia today. Even more significantly, the proponents of the *Holodomor* concept have been said to represent a "new type of Nazism" in today's Europe (by Gleb Pavlovsky, one of the Kremlin spin doctors). The security implication of such logic is clear.

Fifth, the entire spectrum of border-related issues is tackled through a security prism. Examples include Russian claims that Georgia turned a blind eye to the infiltration of Chechen terrorists to the Pankisi Gorge and Russia's unexpected attempt to build a sea dike to the small island of Tuzla that provoked conflict with Ukraine. Arguably, Moscow plays a double game in this respect: on the one hand, it

shows readiness to fortify its own borders, while on the other hand, it interprets all European recommendations to impose stricter regulations on the border regime between Ukraine and Russia as unfriendly and provocative, precisely because of their divisive effects.

Sixth, alleged encroachments on Russia's economic interests are also seen from a security perspective. States like Georgia and Moldova have been portrayed as sources of low-quality products that are presumably below Russian food standards, while Ukraine is treated as a threat to Russian economic security because of its non-payments for Russian gas, on the one hand, and participation in constructing new energy transportation routes that bypass Russia (including the Odessa–Brody pipeline), on the other.

At the same time, it is precisely along these lines that Russia itself is securitized by some of the BSR countries. Russia's attempts to present itself as a "normal power" are frequently equated with resurgent Russian imperialism; Russia's resistance to NATO's eastward enlargement is interpreted as a challenge to the independence of Georgia and Ukraine; Russia's demands for market prices for oil and gas are portrayed as politically motivated and retaliatory measures aimed at punishing neighboring countries for their more independent policies. This situation could be called "symmetric securitization": Russia faces alienation and securitization from part of the BSR nations and itself launches similar mechanisms against them.

Yet securitization is never complete since Russia is trying to simultaneously articulate two different arguments: all attempts to interpret the foreign policies of Ukraine and Georgia as threatening to Russia's interests are paralleled by repeated endeavors to discursively debilitate both countries. The "post-Orange" Ukraine is predominantly covered in the Russian media as an unstable and weak country, dependent upon the United States and thus unable to make "serious decisions." This peculiar portrayal of Ukraine runs against the logic of securitization, in a way. By the same token, the dominant securitization of the Saakashvili government is culturally constrained by multiple narratives portraying Russia and Georgia as historically linked by good-neighborly relations and sharing much in their religious and cultural identities. The security-based conceptualizations of the BSR, thus, do not entirely neglect de-securitization perspectives.

This peculiar combination of securitization and de-securitization in the BSR only complicates the search for a new Russian identity in the aftermath of the August 2008 war. Instead of providing a background for a new and more coherent understanding of the Russian mission in the so called "near abroad," the military conflict with Georgia has blurred identification lines and raised many new questions. The primary source of Russia's inconsistency is its vacillation between two different types of foreign policy - normative and decisionist. The first option presupposes an adherence to clear rules of the game based upon international institutions and a unified interpretation of international law. In particular, the Russian representative to NATO has called for the establishment of an international tribunal (modeled after the one already existing in the Hague) to deal with ethnic cleansings in the South Caucasus. President Medvedev has not only called for "repairing" the existing European security architecture, ineffective in Russian eyes, but he has also criticized acceptance of the principle known as the "security dilemma" ("we are not supposed to build our security at the expense of others.")

Within this framework, Russia must keep integrating into the existing structures of international society, however unfair or imperfect they might be. The second option is grounded in individual / sovereign acts of power, including issues of recognition and non-recognition, punishment, and assistance. By reiterating that what Russia did was grounded in its own opinions and assessments ("*For us*, the present Georgian regime has collapsed. President Saakashvili no longer exists *in our eyes,*" Medvedev argues), or by claiming that Russia has "special relations" with states where its privileged interests lie, Medvedev adhered to a rather individualistic/unilateralist type of policymaking.

One may conclude that as a direct effect of the August 2008 war with Georgia, Russia has further complicated its identity-building endeavors. Postwar self-assertive Russia, under closer scrutiny, appears to be at a crossroads. The war against Georgia became a continuation of a highly mythologized method of identity making which requires both enemies and victors. Yet the reverse of this is a growing inconsistency in Russia's international identity.