

The Military as a Political Actor in Russia: the Cases of Moldova and Georgia

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Was the Russian military intervention in Moldova and Georgia in 1992-95 an attempt by Moscow to regain the geopolitical space lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union as some scholars claim? What were the role and the interests of the Russian military in these two conflicts? It is argued here that there was no geopolitical design underlying the two interventions, since Russian foreign policy was/is characterised by a plurality of actors with no single institution able to work out and implement a political strategy.

In a very illuminating publication on the situation in the former Soviet Union (FSU) today, Klaus Segbers poses the fundamental question whether there is any sense in focusing analysis of the great transformations under way in the former Soviet Union on "high politics", that is, on presidents and their declarations of intent, on parties, parliaments and administrations, on elections and constitutions, "when states are not functioning properly, when identities are unclear. . . [I]t seems to be a good idea to return to some basic questions: if the state is not the only relevant actor and category of analysis, what territories, actors, groups and behaviours do really matter?"¹

The foreign policy decision-making process reflects the "pluralistic chaos" of social, economic and political transformation in Russia. Russian foreign policy and even the Russian military is characterised by a multiplicity of actors and a proliferation of institutions, which has voided them of any meaning. There is a panoply of organs with almost identical functions and a variety of actors, with no mechanisms to coordinate or control them.²

Russian Foreign Policy

Two types of actors appeared on the foreign policy scene after 1992: actors that have some kind of foreign policy role under the Constitution, and actors that played a role - and a rather autonomous one at that - although this is not envisaged by the Constitution. The former group is made up of the

¹ "Systemic Transformation in Russia: A Critical Revision of Methods and a New Agenda" in K. Segbers and S. De Spiegeleire (ed.) *Post-Soviet Puzzles. Mapping the Political Economy of the Former Soviet Union*, Aktuelle Materialien zur Internationalen Politik, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1995) p. 11.

² J. Sapir, *Le chaos russe. Désordres économiques, conflits politiques, décomposition militaire* (Paris: Découverte, 1996). Dimitri Trenin, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Moscow, when asked during a personal interview on 11 November 1996, who the Russian foreign policy actors are, replied, „Good question! The answer is: many. We do not have democracy in this country, but we clearly have plurality.“

President, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister and parliament. But while parliament and the Prime Minister have only a marginal impact, the President and his administrative apparatus are central figures in Russian foreign policy.

The head of state pursues his policies by means of decrees issued by the presidential administration. The line is officially worked out by the Security Council, and the Defence Council, which are responsible for coordinating foreign and defence policy, respectively.³ The Security Council, often described as a new Politburo, is an influential and powerful autonomous actor that follows its own rules; indeed, its plenary sessions are reported in the national press, its opening minutes are generally broadcast on television. But the role and the influence that the Security Council and the Defence Council really have depend on President Yeltsin. Both councils, which duplicate each other in many ways, are no more than consultative bodies which prepare documents and decrees but have no real power to see them implemented. In addition, these two organs, already rivals in many respects, both compete with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), also in charge of coordinating foreign policy.

In addition to these constitutional actors is another group of actors with considerable direct or indirect influence on foreign policy. While some, like the regional administrations, are constitutionally attributed a limited autonomy in foreign economic policy, others have no constitutional role whatsoever in this field. Among the latter are the actors who have a monopoly on violence, that is, the numerous "security organs", the Ministry of Defence (MO) and the armed forces, as well as economic actors such as the military-industrial complex, the energy sector and the financial world. Even the "Confederation of Caucasian Peoples" and the Cossacks have been known to play an autonomous role in foreign policy.⁴

It might be objected that a multiplicity of actors and interests exists in other countries as well. But unlike the countries of the European Union, there are no institutional mechanisms or authorities in the Russian Federation to coordinate foreign policy effectively. Lacking are the very prerequisites for harmonising the various interests groups and imposing feasible compromises on them. Given this deficit, there is a tangle of apparatuses and bureaucracies representing a multitude of specific interests in which no one is in a position to decide or act with responsibility. The proliferation of institutions, the rivalry and overlapping among them considerably strengthens the power of the president, who remains the final arbiter. Under these conditions, it is impossible to formulate and implement a coherent foreign policy line.

Consequently, the statement by Aleksandr Lebed, secretary of the Security Council from June to October 1996 comes as no surprise: "During the four months in which I was President of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, I tried to understand whether we had a foreign policy strategy or at least a plan, who formulated it and who coordinated its implementation. I found no answer."⁵

The Military Actor

For decades, the Soviet military institution⁶ was highly privileged and had accumulated a

³ R. Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 1996)

⁴ See O. Vasileva, "Der Kaukasus als Spiegel einer zweiten russischen Revolution", *Russlands Räume und Regionen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1994), pp. 211-28.

⁵ Interview by Egon Bahr, on Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), 13 May 1997.

⁶ The term "military" refers to the troops and the civilian and military personnel employed by the Ministry of Defence, as distinguished from other paramilitary formations of the Russian Federation, which sometimes have their own ministries and are, in any case, better financed than the armed forces of the MO.

disproportionate amount of national wealth: "The Soviet Union did not have a military machine, it was a military machine."⁷ The military formed "a state within the state", and it is paradoxical that this state survived the Soviet Union by five months, until May 1992 when the Russian Ministry of Defence was established, sanctioning the painful division of the Red Army among the Soviet Union's successor states. The division not only had a strong impact on the quantity and quality of weapons and spare parts, but also caused a drastic reduction in the military budget.

Thereafter, the budget no longer allowed for the upkeep of operative armed forces, let alone the implementation of conversion programmes. Budget restrictions have been aggravated by the fact that even the resources already earmarked in the budget and approved by the Duma are sometimes not paid out by the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Defence. Not all branches of the armed forces have been hit to the same extent. The Ministry of Defence allocates first to strategic forces, that is, nuclear weapons and the security of materials, and second to the air force. The army and the navy come after that and are, therefore, chronically underfinanced. At times, there has not been enough money to pay for heating and even food. Thus soldiers have been forced to fend for themselves by working in the fields or renting out their trucks.

It is not surprising that the main concern of the officers at the time of the events being examined was to provide for themselves and their families. A survey carried out among soldiers at the end of 1992 showed that over 80 percent had another job on the side, even though this was prohibited.⁸ In order to boost their salaries above the poverty threshold, soldiers and officers also turned to sale or trade of weapons, munitions, military equipment and even military plans. According to an enquiry carried out by military authorities, over 4000 cases of arms theft were reported in 1992.⁹

In October 1995, the president of the parliamentary defence committee, Lev Rokhlin, stated before parliament that senior officers were selling substantial parts of vital military equipment and that the "large munitions deposits in the Transcaucasus were simply empty".¹⁰

This economic situation and sense of abandon contributed strongly to lowering the morale of the armed forces and negatively influencing discipline. As a result, crime and corruption increased, as did the number of cases of illtreatment and suicide.¹¹

This situation of the armed forces led to an enormous loss of prestige, of which one of the consequences was that young Russians no longer wanted to do their military service. As there was no alternative, even though the right to conscientious objection is guaranteed by Article 59.3 of the Constitution, they faced two options: desertion once enrolled or dodging the draft beforehand. These phenomena, not at all rare, have led to a less rational use of the military personnel available. Senior officers do the work of junior officers and, vice versa, many soldiers are forced to do work for which

⁷ C. Donnelly "Evolutionary Problems in the Former Soviet Union Armed Forces", *Survival*, vol. 36, no. 3, Autumn 1992, pp. 28-42.

⁸ H.-H. Schröder, "Eine Armee in der Krise. Die russischen Streitkräfte 1992-1993. Risikofaktor oder Garant der politischen Stabilität?", *Berichte der BIOst*, no. 45, 1993.

⁹ N. Burbyga, "Kradeny avtomat mozjno kupit' za 100 tysyach", *Izvestia*, 3 June 1992; B. Van Voorst and Y. Zarakhovich, "Unease in the Barracks", *Time*, 5 April 1993.

¹⁰ *Time*, vol. 148, no. 17, 1995.

¹¹ The Russian armed forces hold the sad world record for the greatest number of deaths during peace time. The Moscow committee, the "Mothers of Soldiers", founded in 1989, fights for the right to conscientious objection and the respect of human rights within the armed forces. Every year, it reports the deaths of soldiers during peace time as a result of torture and systematic illtreatment and undernourishment; it estimates that every year between 5000 and 10,000 soldiers die in the barracks, of which one third by suicide, and almost 100,000 are wounded or mutilated, sometimes so seriously as to lead to death. Some publications of the Committee of the Mothers of Soldiers can be consulted at <http://www.openweb.ru/windows/smo/smo.htm>. See also V. Makarnenko, "L'esercito russo è in crisi", *Internazionale*, no. 73, 1995, p. 17 ff. Investigative units of the Ministry of Defence have confirmed that 487 men died of suicide and 1103 of criminal accidents in 1997, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 January 1998.

they have not been trained and are not qualified.¹²

The new military doctrine approved at the end of 1993, setting out security and defence policy, seemed neither to excite nor reflect the interests of the military. There was one point above all to which the military were opposed; their deployment to maintain order within the Russian Federation. The policing role that the armed forces were called to play in Tbilisi and Baku in 1989 and in the Baltic Countries in 1990, as well as the role they played in the attempted coup in 1991 only accentuated their aversion to „in house“ combat.¹³ The majority did not accept the new doctrine,¹⁴ and although they wished to regain their former prestige – not only abroad, but above all within Russia – they felt that this required an improvement in the economic situation, which did not allow for a dignified life, let alone for combat readiness. This general situation of abandon helps to explain the role the military played in Russian foreign policy in Moldova and Georgia.

The Cases of Moldova and Georgia

In 1992-93, there were separatist conflicts in Moldova and Georgia. In both conflicts, the Russian military intervened in favour of the separatists, while official policy declared absolute neutrality. In the case of Transdniestria, a tiny region lying to the east of the Dniestr River which sought independence from Moldova and began to fight against it in autumn 1991, the accusations of partiality mainly concerned a battle led by Gen. Lebed which was a decisive victory for the separatists.¹⁵ In the case of Abkhazia, a stretch of land extending from the Black Sea to the Caucasus Mountains on Georgia's western flank, the controversy arose in the early stages of separatist action in spring 1991 and concerned the handing over of Russian arms to the separatists.¹⁶

Observed from afar, this behaviour could seem a part of an imperialist plan, conceived by Russia in a sophisticated manner to destabilise its neighbours and regain lost geopolitical space. Some scholars claim that Moscow, by declaring itself neutral but acting behind the scenes in exactly the opposite way, was fuelling these separatist conflicts to create an opportunity to re-establish control over the republics of the "near abroad". But closer analysis of the actors involved gives quite a different picture.

Moldova

¹² A. Arbatov, "Military Reform in Russia", *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1998, pp. 83-134.

¹³ S. Foye, „Confrontation in Moscow: the army backs Yeltsin, for now“, *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 2, no. 42, 22 October 1993.

¹⁴ According to two surveys carried out in 1993 and 1996, only 6% of the 100 foreign policy experts and officials interviewed stated in 1993 that Russia had a foreign policy strategy; 48% stated that it had none; 43% stated that it was under preparation. The results were exactly the same three years later. SINUS, *Russische Aussenpolitik 1993 im Urteil von aussenpolitischen Experten*. Eine soziologische Umfrage bei leitenden Mitarbeitern in Regierungsstäben, Mandatsträgern, Parteiführern and Wissenschaftlern und Redakteuren in den Massenmedien. Im Auftrag der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Büro Moskau; *Russische Aussenpolitik 1996 im Urteil von aussenpolitischen Experten*. Eine soziologische Umfrage bei leitenden Mitarbeitern in Regierungsstäben, Mandatsträgern, Parteiführern and Wissenschaftlern. Im Auftrag der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Büro Moskau.

¹⁵ For the conflict in Moldova and the role of Russia, see, among others, M. Gribincea, "Rejecting a New Role for the former 14th Russian Army", *Transition*, vol. 2, no. 6, 1996 and D. Ionescu, "Russia's Long Arm and the Dniestr Impasse", *Transition*, vol. 1, no. 49, 1995.

¹⁶ For the conflict in Georgia and Russia's role in it, see, for example, A. Zverev, "Ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", in B. Coppieters (ed.) *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: VUB Press, 1996) pp. 1-76; D. Trofimov, "The conflict in Abkhazia: Roots and main driving forces", in H.-G. Ehrhart, A. Kreikemeyer, A. V. Zagorski (eds.) *Crisis Management in the CIS: Whiter Russia?* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1995) Veröffentlichung aus dem Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Hamburg, p. 75-92.

The first thing that stands out in the Moldova/Transdnistria conflict are the concrete economic interests of the Russian troops stationed there since Soviet times. When Moldova declared independence June, 23rd 1990, approximately 23,000 Soviet troops were on Moldovan territory, with the majority belonging to the 14th Army. The largest part of these were stationed on the left side of the Dniestr River with headquarters in Tiraspol. The soldiers of the 14th Army were strongly integrated into the social structures of Tiraspol, Rabnita and Dubasary. Most of the officers had married there and many reservists worked as specialised technicians in the defence industries and formed a privileged group with common interests and habits, supporting first the old Soviet Union and later the idea of a "Great Russia". Therefore, they had strong local ties and considered the region "their home".

Scholars tend to agree that, as denounced by the Moldovans, the 14th Army supported Transdnistria, in its struggle against the Moldovan state, extremist representatives of which initially wished for reunification with Romania. Russian troops were accused of two things: on the one hand, of being partial to and arming with light and heavy weapons the *Pridnestrovskaja Moldavskaja Respublika* (PMR), extremist factions of which sought to reunite with Russia and, on the other, and providing them with light and heavy weapons and, on the other, of participating directly in battles on the side of Transdnistria, above all, the large-scale battles of May and June 1992.¹⁷

The second thing that stands out is that the decision-making process was extremely chaotic, if not altogether absent. Orders were not executed, individual units broke away and soldiers, paid more by the separatists than by the Russian state, entered into their militia.¹⁸ As the conflict intensified, the question of the status of the troops in Moldova became more pressing. Nominally, they were under the command of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but effectively they accepted orders from the commanders of the 14th Army, which although officially neutral, collaborated with the PMR. On 1 April 1992, Yeltsin signed a decree withdrawing the 14th Army from CIS control and placing it under his personal jurisdiction. This move was an attempt to recover the armed forces and prevent them from becoming "accidentally" involved in the conflict. But Yeltsin's efforts to keep the army under control were undermined on 20 April, when a decree by the president of PMR, Igor Smirnov, invited the officers to join his national guard.¹⁹

The MO seemed to think that rapid withdrawal of Russian troops was impossible, due to the logistic difficulties involved in removing the huge amounts of stored ammunition, the lack of adequate lodgings for officers in the Russian Federation and the potential defection which it might cause, given the officers' local ties.²⁰ Since there was no alternative to their staying in place, the problem was to face the real threat of losing control over them and the risk of disintegration. In June 1992, the new Minister of Defence Pavel Grachov admitted that the 14th Army was no longer taking orders from Moscow and replaced the commander of the 14th, accused of corruption, with General Aleksandr Lebed, ordering him to regain control over the troops in Moldova. In order to do so, Grachov had to convince Yeltsin, initially against Lebed, that dividing the 14th Army into different regiments would have left a huge stock of arms in the hands of the separatists. And that if political decisions were delayed, the troops in the hot spots would start to follow regional commanders, turning them into local war lords. Under these

¹⁷ M. Shashenkov, "Russian Peacekeeping in the 'Near Abroad'", *Survival*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1994, pp. 46-9 and reports by V. Socor in *RFE/RL Research Reports* in 1992 and 1993.

¹⁸ P. Baev, *The Russian Army in a Time of Troubles*, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo: PRIO, 1996; *ITAR-TASS* 19.05.1992, *Izvestia*, 26.5.1992, 30.5.1992

¹⁹ Smirnov's decree was supposed to create an army of 12,000 soldiers, the same number as the 14th Army, which suggests that he expected a significant number of defections from the forces under the Russian president's control. V. Socor, "Russian Forces in Moldova", *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. I, no. 34, 1992; S. Crow, "Russian Moderates Walk a Tightrope on Moldova", *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. I, no. 25, 1992, pp. 9-12.

²⁰ Interview with Viktor A. Kremenyuk, Deputy Director of the Institute for USA and Canada Studies, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow, November 1996.

circumstances, ordering the troops to fight – even if in total contrast to the political line – was the only solution open to the military. And that is what Lebed did.²¹

Lebed arrived in Tiraspol when the armed clashes between the PMR and the Moldovan forces were very intense. He found what was left of the 14th Army in a state of advanced disarray. In a few days, he managed to disarm the paramilitary units that had formed inside the 14th Army and the Cossack formations that had come from Russia.²² The troops were brought under control and made ready to fight together, which they did beside the separatists against Moldovan government forces at the battle of Bendery 19.-21 June 1992. The price paid for restoring discipline was initial partiality towards the PMR.

The third point of note were the differences in the stance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MD) and the Ministry of Defence (MO). While the MO, responsible for the armed forces in loco, which risked disintegration, decided to react and replaced the aging commander with Lebed, the MD insisted upon neutrality, that is, a non-solution. The Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev broke his long silence on the Moldova question on 4 March 1992, deploring the "tragic events" in Moldova which, he said, could lead to "unpredictable consequences for the people of Moldova and for the entire CIS". He failed to mention, however, whether Moscow approved or disapproved of the idea of an independent PMR.²³ The first diplomatic contacts between the Russian Federation and Moldova were established 6 April 1992 during a trip by Kozyrev, when he proposed that Moldova's territorial integrity should be guaranteed by the four powers Russia, Moldova, Ukraine and Romania and that the PMR's right to self-determination should be recognised only in the event that Moldova united with Romania. Furthermore, Kozyrev proposed using the 14th Army as a peace-keeping force, an option refused by the other three states. In various interviews and speeches before the Russian Supreme Soviet, Kozyrev repeatedly declared that Russia could not act outside of the norms of international law.²⁴ Only after the battle of Bendery, did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs finally state that the degree of consignment of arms could lead to an uncontrolled escalation and lamented that the armed forces were "selling arms wholesale" in Moldova, supplying most of the arms used during combat without authorisation from any Russian political authority.²⁵

Thus, in contrast to the claims that Moscow, by declaring itself neutral but acting behind the scenes in exactly the opposite way, was fuelling separatist conflicts to create an opportunity to re-establish control over the republics of the "near abroad", at this level of analysis, the picture that emerges is quite different: it is one of a Russian state that has lost control of residual parts of the Soviet state instrument and that has not acquired control over new ones.²⁶

Georgia

Today, most experts agree that Russia's military intervention in Georgia favoured the Abkhazs. Interpretations differ, however. Some authors see a sophisticated strategy behind it all, which involved officially supporting the Georgian government and its territorial integrity, while backing the separatists

²¹ P. Baev, *The Russian Army in a Time of Trouble*.

²² Vasileva, "Der Kaukasus als Spiegel", pp. 211-38.

²³ *ITAR-TASS*, 4 March 1992.

²⁴ Crow, "Russian Moderates Walk a Tightrope", pp. 9-12.

²⁵ Interview with Kozyrev published in *Izvestija*, 30 June - 1 July 1992.

²⁶ S. Spiegeleire, "Levels and units in Post-Soviet Studies", in Segbers and Spiegeleire, *Post-Soviet Puzzles*.

to maintain a situation of instability in Georgia and accentuate its dependence on Moscow.²⁷ Actually, Georgia's decision to join the CIS in October 1991 almost seemed dictated by its weakness and need for Moscow's help, even though this was linked more to the civil war between the Zviadists and the national guards of the government in Tbilisi than to the Abkhazian conflict, which had just come to an end.> Others feel that, and this is the thesis argued here, there was no political design, but only the foreign policy void rapidly filled by the military and a series of other actors who, without any coordination, sought to fulfil their particular interests.²⁸

At least three levels of important actors must be distinguished: the political, that is, the MID (Kozyrev) and the Russian president (Yeltsin); the politico-military, represented by the MO (Grachov); and finally, the military, meaning the military in loco. While the MID was later forced to align its policy with that of the MO, the orders of the latter were frequently not followed by the military in loco.

Notwithstanding strict orders issued at the beginning of the conflict in August 1992 by Russian Minister of Defence, Pavel Grachov, that military operations were not to be carried out in Abkhazia, and the affirmations of MO officers that the Russian forces stationed in the region would remain absolutely neutral, the Chiefs of General Staff, the *Genstab*, and the commanders *in loco*, sought to protecting the contingents stationed in Abkhazia from both external attacks and the risk that large parts of them could break away and join local forces. Intervening in the political debate, they asked Moscow for reinforcements, requesting to be allowed to use arms to protect themselves and to be able to retaliate against attacks on Russian military facilities. The officers *in loco* were the first to claim that if the conflict threatened the Russian population, the military would take action²⁹ and the Chiefs of General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces officially declared on 31 August 1992 that if the conflict threatened Russian citizens or the security and stability of the area, Russia would immediately put a stop to the activity causing the conflict.³⁰

In the same period, some articles published in the MO's daily *Krasnaya Zvezda*, challenged Yeltsin's neutral approach, maintaining that many members of the Russian armed forces actually sympathised with the Abkhaz cause and that the Russian troops would be able to defend the Russians in Abkhazia successfully if authorised to do so. These articles appeared one month before Yeltsin officially authorised Russian troops to protect themselves, other Russians and Russian property.³¹

For some time, the MID adopted a rigid policy of non interference. Later in March 1993, instead, still asserting its neutrality, it tried – together with Yeltsin – to actively promote peace, an effort also aimed at keeping other countries from moving in as mediators. Yet, while the Russian government continued to affirm its neutrality, denying that Russian troops were taking part in the fighting, and trying to legitimate and increase its mediating role, those Russian soldiers who were unsatisfied with the mediation of the MID and the President (which had led to another cease-fire on 27 July 1993 - the first one of 3 September 1992 was broken soon after it had been concluded) continued

²⁷ A. Lynch „Der Einfluß des Militärs auf die Außenpolitik Rußlands“, *Europa-Archiv*, Folge 15/1994, p. 437-446; A. Fahrner, „Die Streitkräfte als Faktor der russischen Politik“ *Internationale Politik* 11/1995: 31-38; R. de Nevers, „Russia's Strategic Renovation“, *Adelphi-Paper* 289/1994 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies).

²⁸ Trofimov, "The conflict in Abkhazia"; Baev, *The Russian Army in a Time of Trouble*; and interviews in Moscow with Viktor A. Kremenyuk, Deputy Director of the Institute for USA and Canada Studies, Russian Academy of Science, Nadia Arbatova, Institute for Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) and Dimitri Danilov, Head of the Section of Military-Political Studies at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences in November 1996.

²⁹ It must be remembered that since there were no official representatives, such as Russian embassies or consulates, the military on site became the "representatives" of the Russian Federation and the Russian inhabitants of Abkhazia turned to them for protection, asking – along with other populations – to be moved to Russia to avoid the fighting. D. Trenin in interview in Moscow, November 1996 and D. Trenin, "Russia's Use of Military Forces in Intra-State Conflicts in the CIS" *Berichte des BIOst*, no. 32, 1996.

³⁰ C. Dale, "Turmoil in Abkhazia: Russian Responses", *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 2, no. 24, August 1993.

³¹ *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 15 September, 7 and 21 October 1992.

to defy official orders. "More than a sufficient" number were fighting on the Abkhaz side. Units also included Cossacks and veterans from the war in Afghanistan. Relations between the Abkhaz formation and the Russian troops were "fraternal". Russian soldiers gave the Abkhazs moral support and provided professional advice, helping to work out battle plans.³² The individual officers and soldiers who openly sided with the Abkhazs, whether mercenaries or not, were also involved in the sale of arms and equipment, both heavy and light, and strategic plans. Many did it for purely economic reasons, while the more conservative elements were moved by a sense of deep resentment against Edvard Shevardnadze, considered responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union.³³

At the same time as some Russian military units unofficially supported the Abkhaz cause, Russia officially continued to supply the Georgian national guard with military equipment. On 25 March 1993, it was announced that Russia would supply Georgia with an entire and fully equipped division and plan to hand over 34 quarters by the end of the year, as foreseen by the CFE Treaty, on the condition that they would not be used in the conflict under way.³⁴

In addition to the three levels mentioned above, other Russian actors entered into the conflict on the Abkhaz side: the Cossacks of the Don, the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples, and some Russian members of parliament who, with their declarations, undermined the mediation efforts of the MID and Yeltsin. All failed to create an adequate and coherent Russian policy, as all were pursuing their own particular interest in "access to and the distribution of resources of all sorts, the proximity to centers of allocation of resources [. . .] and the rules according to which the power centers are established and reproduced". Basically, "The main operational mode for almost all FSU actors was *vyzhivanie* and *adaptatsiya* (surviving and adapting), not design and influence".³⁵

Conclusions

With the end of the cold war the Soviet Union collapsed, bringing down with it all those political, economical and military institutions which had for decades characterised it. The Russian Federation created new ones, at times based on Soviet institutions, but with completely different roles. The proliferation of institutions and the duplication of their functions, competences and powers led to a multiplicity of actors involved in foreign policy and a confused and often arbitrary decision-making process in which political authority was and is linked to the person rather than to the person's function.

The absence of any coordination among the various bodies involved in foreign policy and the incapacity of the MID to impose its policy to the MO and the latter to control its troops in the two cases examined brought to light the inability of the Russian government to formulate and implement a coherent foreign policy towards its "near abroad". The absence of a Russian foreign policy strategy made the decision-making process more vulnerable and open to influence by individual actors who pursued their own interests. The armed forces escaped not only political control, but also military control. In the cases examined, the military *in loco*, with real decision-making autonomy, sold arms to and fought beside the highest bidder, with no control by central military authorities.³⁶

³² Interview with former Lt. Col. S. Leonenko, *Moskovskie novosti*, 18 July 1993. In a British television interview, the head of the Transcaucasian military district also stated that he could not exclude that Russian soldiers were deserting their units and fighting on the Abkhaz side. E. Fuller, "Abkhazia: Russia's Proxy War?", *RFE/RL Research Institute*, 6 October 1993.

³³ R. Luyken, "Der gute Mensch von Tiflis", *Die Zeit*, no. 33, October 1993, p. 3.

³⁴ *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 25 March 1993. Real Georgian armed forces were only set up at the end of 1995 with the help of the Russians. For the difficulties in establishing the armed forces, see E. Fuller, "Paramilitary Forces Dominate Fighting in Transcaucasus", *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 2, no. 25, 18 June 1993.

³⁵ Segbers, "Systemic Transformation in Russia".

³⁶ J. Lepingwell, "A sudden fall from grace", *Transition*, 15 February 1995, p. 21-6; Sapir, *Le chaos russe*.

This autonomy was, however, linked to a specific situation and the conclusions should not be generalised. The two cases involved countries which Russia calls the "near abroad", and that implies that, among other things, that there were Russian troops stationed there, historical and cultural as well as family ties, and a political vacuum on the part of the Russian Foreign Ministry which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, found itself lacking in specialists on its former sister countries. Foreign Minister Kozyrev and President Yeltsin, concentrating their attention at the time on political integration with the West, were unable to define precise national interests, to structure policies and work out strategies for the "near abroad".

The political vacuum was soon filled by those who had direct interests in the conflict or could not allow themselves the luxury of not having a strategy: among them, the Russian troops in the Transdnestr and Abkhazia. And they were able to do so because Russian policy towards the conflict zones in the regions of the FSU was marked by contradiction, inconsistency and divergences.³⁷

Things have changed since the two conflicts were pacified. Kozyrev's successor, Yevgenij Primakov, with long experience in and excellent relations with Arab countries, immediately declared that he would give priority to policy in the former Soviet republics. Consequently, his first trip abroad was a series of visits to his colleagues in the CIS. Policy towards the former FSU is more coherent than in the past, even if one can still not speak of a strategic design.

Nor is the situation of the troops in Moldova and Georgia the same. In Georgia, the precarious economic situation of the troops improved when the United Nations started to finance peace-keeping operations in 1994, after the sending of an observation mission (that started in 1993 and still going on - UNOMIG). There have nevertheless still been examples of partial behaviour on the part of some units towards the parties involved in the conflict and a non-uniform interpretation of the peace-keeping mandate, both of which can be explained by the weakness of the central command of the units in the field and the local ties of the units that have been stationed in Georgia for years. Today, Russia is trying to improve the performance and accountability of its peace-keeping forces. The share of CIS troops specifically trained for PK operations has increased and local personnel were mostly replaced over time by units from other sectors of the Russian Federation.³⁸

The situation in Moldova is slightly different. After the 14th Army had – without any mandate – "imposed peace", Russian peace-keeping forces were deployed which, unlike those in Georgia, came from other parts of the country and were supervised by a Joint Control Commission (Russia, Moldova and Transdnestr) and monitored by the OSCE as of 1993. The position of the Russian peace-keeping troops is less controversial in Moldova than in Georgia. On 8 May 1997, Russia brokered an agreement between Moldovan President Lushinski and the leader of the break-away Transdnestr Region, Igor Smirnov, committing them to develop "their relations within the framework of a single state". Also signing the agreement as guarantors were Yeltsin, the Ukrainian President Kuchma and the OSCE.³⁹ The agreement does not commit Russia to withdraw any forces from the Transdnestr until the two sides come up with an agreement on their own. For financial reasons and as a result of the gradual détente, the peace-keeping forces were reduced from 2400 to 630 in 1994; a recent agreement signed by Lushinski and Yeltsin in March 1998 has further reduced them to 500.⁴⁰

Yet, the overall situation of the military in Russia is still disastrous. Perennial underfinancing continues and will not change until a military reform "based on the reduction in personnel, professionalisation of the military through an all-volunteer service; the merger of some branches of the armed services to bring them in line with available funding" is undertaken. These principle guidelines

³⁷ E. Pain and A. Popov, "Ethnic and Regional Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space", *Post-Soviet Puzzles*, p. 201-19.

³⁸ E. Greco, "Delegating Peace Operations: Improvisation and Innovation in Georgia and Albania" UNA-USA International Dialogue on the Enforcement of Security Resolutions, March 1998, New York

³⁹ P. Goble, "A Breakthrough on Moldova?", *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 1, no. 28, 15 May 1997.

⁴⁰ *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 2, no. 126, Part II, 2 June 1998.

of the reform movement were elaborated early in 1992, but have never been implemented.⁴¹

The main reason for the deadlock on military reform is, besides the indifference of the general public and Yeltsin's lack of interest, the absence of an adequate mechanism to implement it, given the redundancy of the institutions created in recent years to oversee the reform. In the summer of 1997, Yeltsin finally took some practical steps, that is, issued some decrees, to activate the much expected reform, but it remains to be seen whether the Russian leadership will go beyond these initial steps. "If implemented, [the reform] could have lasting and major significance for Russia and its multiple armed forces. However, these decrees also reflect the political struggles around the armed forces where each of the key players has different goals for them, a sure sign of impending failure."⁴²

Although the new Defence Minister Sergeyev recently claimed that the military is now under the control of state authorities,⁴³ civilian control of the Russian armed forces is still scarce⁴⁴ and a feeling of defeat and humiliation dominates. The main problem in today's difficult setting is the very survival of the institution and its men.

The longer the present situation persists, the more probable it becomes that some units will be regionalised in the medium term and that the Russian armed forces will disintegrate in the long term. The central government's scarcity of financial resources will make the armed forces increasingly dependent on local authorities, transforming them into regionalised units. Government could lose control altogether over some units that become self-sufficient and operate at the service of local political leaders, able to offer better remuneration than the central government. This could lead to the emergence of local war lords and therefore the dissolution of the very principle of the state's monopoly on armed violence in its territory.

⁴¹ A. Arbatov, "Military Reform in Russia", *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1998.

⁴² S. Blank, *Russia's Armed Forces on the Brink of Reform*, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, USA, 16 March 1998.

⁴³ "A new Russia, a new military instrument", *NATO's Sixteen Nations*, Special Issue, no. 2, 1998.

⁴⁴ For example, only eight of the 128 military budget items that have to be approved by the Duma are known to parliament. See Blank, *Russia's Armed Forces on the Brink*.