

**THE ROAD TO BECOMING A FROZEN CONFLICT: THE CASE OF
THE UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN WAR**

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ABSTRACT

The Road to Becoming a Frozen Conflict: The Case of the Ukrainian-Russian War

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The discourse on coercion often focuses on the aggressor state's (i.e., coercer's) intentions to change the status quo of world affairs prior to the use of force. In doing so, scholars examine the intentions of the aggressor state while occluding the agency of the target state. My thesis addresses this by studying the behavior of both the coercer and the target state after the war's conclusion but while tensions remain unresolved. Post-war tensions produce an unstable peace since the target state never conceded to the demands of the coercer state. In such instances, these conflicts become "frozen" and place the status quo in an indeterminate state. By tracing post-war relations, scholars can identify the factors that hinder the conflict resolution process and that prompt repeated armed conflicts, even after the coercer carries out their threat. This paper aims to discover how separatist blocs depend on international entities to survive in an anarchic world and inadvertently shape the conditions for a frozen conflict. How does the prolonged armed conflict shift the relationship between coercer and target state, and how does this influence the involvement of external actors?

My research will also consider the role of informal empires and the legacy of colonial-drawn borders. In a post-imperial world, an informal empire is often a reconstructed albeit cloaked version of its past iteration as a colonizer. This means that it is accustomed to, or perhaps even expects, the continued subordination of former colonies. I will use the war in Ukraine, including the proxy war in the Donbas, as a case study to demonstrate the imperial impact of the Soviet Union on the making of a frozen conflict in Ukraine.

DEDICATION

To my friends in Ukraine who showed me a different way of thinking and who exemplify the greatest strength I have ever known. When this project began, I did not know it would become such a personal endeavor for me. Now, it means the world to me.

Слава Україні.

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All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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NOMENCLATURE

DPR	Donetsk People's Republic
EU	European Union
LPR	Luhansk People's Republic
MIDs	Militarized Interstate Disputes
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Note on the use of “Russia” or “Russian Federation” - Throughout this text, the term “Russia” or “Russian Federation” will always refer to the Russian government and never to the Russian people. Minimizing Russia’s actions merely to Vladimir Putin overshadows the intricate power structure within the government. At times, “Kremlin” or “Moscow” may also be used for this same purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Although the term “frozen conflict” is referenced frequently in the media and policy world, often in reference to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, academic literature on frozen conflicts remains minimal. In fact, a common definition for the term has not yet taken hold.¹ There is, nonetheless, consensus that frozen conflicts emerge after large-scale wars between two actors and imply the existence of an unstable peace. Recent writing on frozen conflicts considers the contributions of non-state actors, including separatist blocs such as the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, in international conflicts.² This paper will adopt the definition of frozen conflict put forth by Smetana and Ludvik who define it generally as “a protracted, post-war conflict process, characterized by the absence of stable peace between opposing sides” while also considering the role of non-state actors.³

Four main criteria will be used to classify frozen conflicts: the conflict must be international, protracted post-war, contain core unresolved issues, and lack stable peace. That the conflict resolution process is frozen does not imply, however, that the situation on the ground today is unchanged or has the same context that gave rise to these conflicts. For example,

¹ “A frozen conflicts explodes,” *The Economist*, April 9, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2016/04/09/a-frozen-conflict-explodes>; Ann Simmons, “Russia Cements Ties with Crimea, Freezing Conflict with the West,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-cements-ties-with-crimea-freezing-conflict-with-west-11584523802?mod=article_inline. Jakub Lachert, “Post-Soviet Frozen Conflicts: A Challenge for European Security,” *Warsaw Institute*, March 14, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/post-soviet-frozen-conflicts-challenge-european-security/>; Barrack Obama, Press conference of President Obama and Prime Minister Renzi of the Republic of Italy, October 18, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/18/press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-renzi-republic-italy>.

² See: Magdalena Deminska and Aurelie Campana, “Frozen Conflicts and Internal Dynamics of De Facto States: Perspectives and Directions for Research,” *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2: (June 2017) <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/vix010>. Ivan Katchanovski, “The Separatist War in Donbas: A Violent Break-up of Ukraine?” *European Politics and Society*, 17, no.4: (2016) <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1154131>.

³ Michal Smetana and Jan Ludvik, “Between war and peace: a dynamic reconceptualization of ‘frozen conflicts’,” *Asia Europe Journal* 17 (2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-018-0521-x>.

identity politics were not the factors that initially provoked the war in the Donbas. If it were, it would imply that the overwhelming majority of Donbas inhabitants formed an exclusive political alliance outside of national Ukrainian politics to embrace Russian political integration. In fact, the economic isolation of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, and the security dilemma with NATO, remain primary causes of the conflict, demonstrating the increasing role of non-state actors in prolonging the conflict resolution process.

Frozen conflicts follow a relatively consistent pattern: they can result in (1) a re-escalation of armed force ("violent thawing"), (2) an effort to resolve the conflict through diplomatic negotiations ("peaceful thawing"), or (3) an inadvertent transformation into a stable peace.⁴ There may be multiple attempts at resolving the conflict, which may result in periodic "thawing,"; however, the core features of a frozen conflict are the unresolved nature of the dispute and the potential for re-escalation. Frozen conflicts can be thought of as the inactive phase of war, with the latest invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 being an escalation into an active phase, or "violent thawing".

Throughout the "frozen" period, coercive behavior can intensify, especially when the conflict turns into a stalemate, which leads to frequent militarized interstate disputes (MIDs). MIDs are "...united historical cases of conflict in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state".⁵ Temporal specificity is relevant to examine the frequency of MIDs, which can inform policymakers at which stage a conflict becomes frozen. Diehl and Goertz specify six MIDs and Klosek et al. specify four MIDs

⁴ Michal Smetana and Jan Ludvik, "Between war and peace", 8.

⁵ "Militarized Interstate Disputes (v5.0)," The Correlates of War Project, accessed March 20, 2022, correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/MIDs.

to classify a conflict as frozen during a 20-year timespan, in which a display or threat of force indicates the potential for conflict re-escalation.⁶ I will follow a similar approach to identify at which point a frozen conflict begins and at which it begins to thaw or transform, but instead re-freezes.

It is my intention to trace the developments of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and ask how frozen conflicts become “frozen” in the first place. I intend to examine the imperial behavior of the Russian Federation as a remnant of the Soviet Union in order to shed light on contemporary Russian foreign policy. The Russo-Ukrainian case offers a unique perspective on frozen conflicts due to the historical imbalance of power between former empire and former subject. The involvement of non-state actors further complicates the study. For all of these reasons, a new framework must be used to deconstruct the complexities of the current war. I hypothesize that the lack of or retracted support from the international community for the target state, in this case Ukraine, contributes to the inconclusive state of this frozen conflict. The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual understanding of the conflicts in eastern Ukraine as frozen conflicts so policymakers can strive to reduce the frequency and fluctuations of violent outbreaks. From this perspective, we can begin to identify the peak of the thawing process and determine whether the conflict will re-freeze or wither.

The remainder of this paper will proceed as follows. I will first explain how frozen conflicts fit into the discourse of coercion due to the many similarities the two concepts possess. In doing so, I will outline the sequence of behaviors of the coercer and target state, including the occurrences of MIDs. I will then provide background on Crimea and the war in the Donbas,

⁶ Paul F. Diehl and Gary Goertz, *War and Peace in International Rivalry* (University of Michigan Press, 2000). Kamil C. Klosek, Vojtech Bahensky, Michal Smetana, and Jan Ludvik, “Frozen conflicts in world politics: A new dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research* 58, no. 4 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320929726>.

including the role that separatists factions play throughout the conflict. Next, I will consider the parallel behavior of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation to expound the post-imperial strategy crafted by an informal empire. To conclude, I will discuss future directions of the concept of frozen conflicts and some remaining gaps.

1. COERCION AND FROZEN CONFLICTS

1.1 Theory of Coercion

Frozen conflicts tend to develop after conflicts produced by (or involving) the coercive actions of a state against a less powerful, target state. In this context, coercion typically takes two forms: deterrence and compellence. Deterrence relies on the threat of retaliation to prevent a target from changing its behavior, while compellence aims to change the target's behavior in favor of the coercer's demands.⁷ The coercer may do so through the threat of force, demonstrative use of force, or limited use of force. The threat of force is simply stating the intentions of an attack. The demonstrative use of force resembles the flexing of one's muscles, such as deploying military troops to display their strength and capabilities. The limited use of force is a more direct and provisional attack on its target.⁸ Each of these three methods graduate in intensity with the latter being a segue leading to war.

Coercers often initiate violent armed conflicts by compelling smaller, less powerful states to fit the coercer's foreign policy objectives. Compellence may occur when rising powers become emboldened by their increasing capabilities, such as the case of China with Taiwan, or when powerful states are impatient and/or unwilling to conduct negotiations, such as the case of Russia with Ukraine. As explained in Thucydides's Melian Dialogue: "The strong do what they can, and the weak endure what they must." In other words, it is the "power of power' to bend others to one's will".⁹ In cases of war, identifying the coercer and how it threatens the use of

⁷ For a more thorough reading of coercive diplomacy, See: Robert J. Art and Kelly M. Greenhill, "The Power and Limits of Compellence: A Research Note," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 1 (2018), DOI: 10.1002/polq.12738.

⁸ Art and Greenhill, "The Power and Limits of Compellence," 81.

⁹ Art and Greenhill, "The Power and Limits of Compellence," 78.

force is an important first step in assessing the power disparities that characterize conflict; knowing the consequences of coercion failure is subsequently imperative for crafting a sustainable resolution and preventing further escalations.

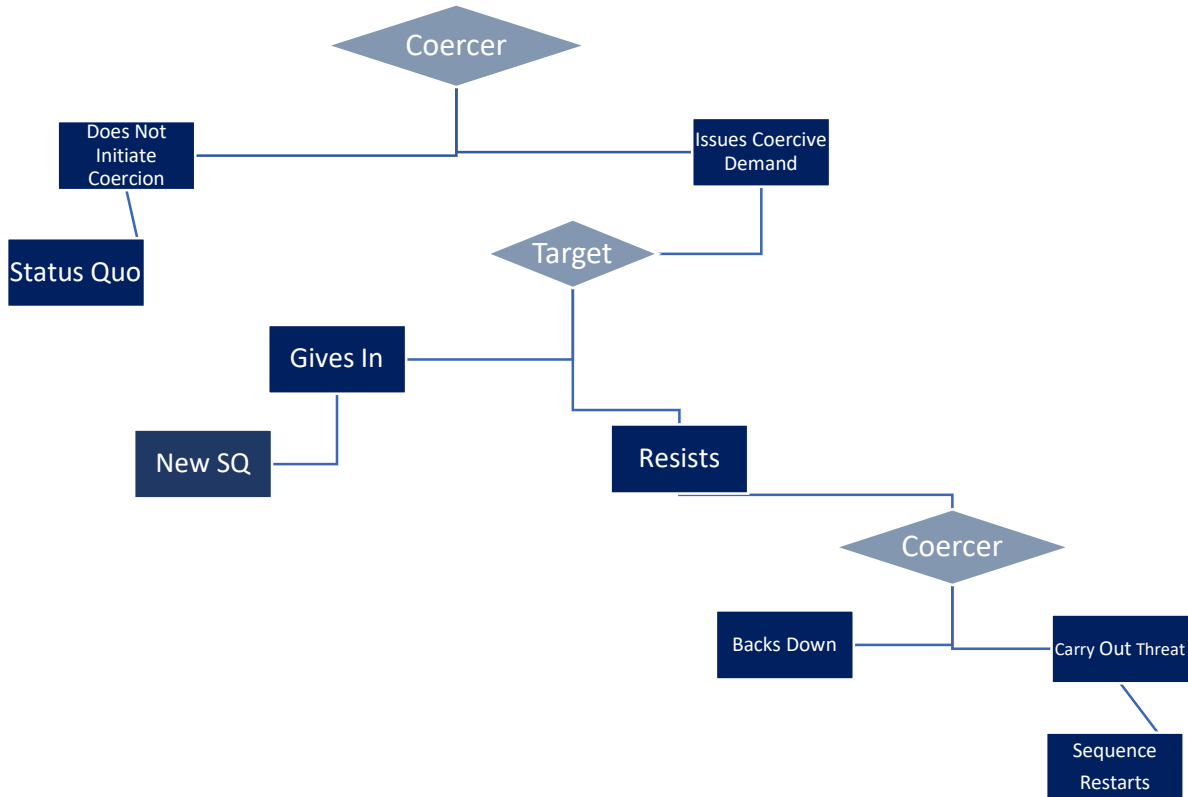


Figure 1.1: Sequence of Coercion

The sequence of coercion depends on the actions of the coercer and the target (see Figure 1.1). Such actions change the condition of the status quo (SQ), which determines whether the coercion was a success. To begin, a coercer initiates a demand and expects the target to concede. A target then has two options: accept the demand or resist the coercion. If the target concedes to the demands, a new status quo is established, and the coercion is considered a success. However, if the target resists, the coercer must decide whether to forfeit or carry out its initial threat with the limited use of force. In either case, the primary coercion has failed, but carrying out the threat

(i.e., war) raises more questions about the coercion sequence. What follows warfare in this sequence, especially if violent conflict is reduced to low-level clashes despite the issue being unresolved? How does this shift the relationship between coercer and target and how does this influence the involvement of external actors? Within the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the annexation of Crimea prompted warfare in 2014, and the subsequent years witnessed reduced military clashes. During this time, Ukraine sought closer integration with Europe while Russia continued to view Ukraine as a dependent subject.

At this point, what I label as a ‘secondary’ coercion begins, given that the target (i.e., Ukraine) displays continued resistance, and the coercer is attempting to consolidate a new SQ. The coercer may have acquired limited gains, such as the acquisition of disputed territory; however, the coercer must also remain on high alert since its behavior is not widely accepted by the international community. The rejection of such behavior shifts the boundaries of coercion by increasing the involvement and significance of external actors. A new status quo cannot yet be claimed, and the status of the previous status quo remains undetermined. This indeterminate state, generated among coercer, target state and the international community, is the precise arena for frozen conflicts to flourish. The term “frozen” does not imply that there are no further political, economic, military, or social developments. In fact, the negotiation process may be stalled, but the situation surrounding the dispute is hardly stable. The coercer and the target remain the central actors in the conflict, in which the former attempts to change the behavior of the latter through compellence. Although the main coercive tool (i.e., the threat of force) escalated to the implemented use of force, the underlying interests of both the coercer and the target remain unresolved. In other words, the *initial* coercion failed, but the process restarted.

It is also the case that the restarted negotiation process leaves open questions about the condition of the status quo, which is important for determining the success of coercion. In this stage of the coercion process, war did not resolve the dispute, and a new status quo cannot yet be firmly claimed. Within the context of frozen conflicts, failed coercion prolongs the conflict and leaves the status quo in an indeterminate state of limbo.

Even taking into account the above explanations, my imposition of frozen conflicts into the process of coercion has conceptual difficulties. If, for instance, the seeds of a conflict are planted decades prior to a violent outbreak, at which point can we begin tracing the coercive process? The histories of separatist factions are even more difficult to pinpoint since dysfunctional states or would-be states have little legitimacy due to their inability or reluctance to include all component of a society. The decades-long tension leading up to the violent outbreak often involves the same core issue as when the conflict first froze. A uniform time frame, therefore, is difficult to apply to a research study. Moreover, coercion is not always explicit and often occurs behind closed doors. If there are secret meetings between governments, there may be instances where we cannot adequately categorize or date a coercive demand from the coercer.

Lastly, it is important to distinguish between frozen conflicts and full-blown war. Frozen conflicts may experience periods of warfare, but not all wars result in an inconclusive state of frozenness. Whereas wartime implies the use of coercive warfare¹⁰, frozen conflicts oscillate between the limited (and swift) use of force and diplomatic negotiations. Both actors during the “frozen” period do not necessarily want to mobilize their militaries for an armed confrontation

¹⁰ Coercive warfare draws on more punitive instruments of war and relies on the diplomacy of violence to inflict widespread pain and damage. The sole purpose is to cause pain and destruction to defeat rather than compel the opponent.

due to the costs associated with combat operations and in fear of a backlash from the international community; this fact indicates a level of peace not awarded to states during wartime.¹¹ The state of being “frozen” does not imply that the conflict is at a standstill. Instead, it emphasizes that the conflict has not witnessed any meaningful progress towards a peaceful solution and has not transformed into a different state of relations. A thin line separates a frozen conflict and a full-out war; the latter maintains large-scale offensives whereas the former is limited by the number of deaths and armed confrontations of a frozen conflict.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation offers an example of a large-scale offensive devolving into a state of a frozen conflict with large-scale yearly total deaths. There has been an estimated total of 14,000 deaths in Ukraine between the years 2014-2021 (UCDP “Ukraine: Number of Deaths”). The UCDP recorded a total of 4,423 deaths within a single year in 2014, which exceeds the 500-death threshold for the start of a frozen conflict. Because the 2022 invasion is a large-scale offensive of similar size, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has devolved into a violent thawing of renewed armed conflict. In a span of 5 days, the Health Ministry of Ukraine estimated 352 combined civilians and military personnel have died.¹² To date, approximately 7,000-15,000 Russian Armed Forces members, 2,000-4,000 Ukrainian Armed Forces members, and 1,104 civilians have died in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹³ Given the continued casualties since the initial war, the conflict displays the potential

¹¹ For a more in depth reading of the wartime costs, see: Branislav Slanchev, *Military Threats: The Costs of Coercion and the Price of Peace* (Cambridge University Press: 2011).

¹² Katharina Krebs, “Ukraine’s Ministry of Interior says 352 civilians killed,” *CNN*, 27 February 2022, https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-news-02-27-22/h_006edf6a680923940d845b2d4ef1f4e0.

¹³ Daniel Michaels, "NATO: Up to 40,000 Russian Troops Killed, Wounded, Taken Prisoner or Missing in Ukraine", *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-03-23/card/russia-lost-up-to-40-000-troops-in-ukraine-nato-estimates-xyZjWxinMDHzdeRZvAeD>. David Martin, "Up to 6,000 Russians may have been killed in Ukraine so far, U.S. official estimates", *CBS News*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-russia-death-toll-invasion/>.

of becoming a frozen conflict. With these numbers in mind, it is important to understand the socio-historical context that led to such violent clashes.

2. THE WAR IN THE DONBAS

Decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation continues to display irredentist behavior¹⁴ by encroaching on the territorial integrity of post-Soviet states to regain its geopolitical power. The Russian Federation often carries out its geopolitical aims discretely by supporting separatist blocs to generate instability and create distractions. The separatist blocs may or may not be aware of the role they play in creating an unstable peace because of their own nascent political, economic, and military aspirations. For example, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics are secessionist factions in Ukraine, which adds an additional layer of tension to the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions have displayed the most pro-Russian sentiment among Ukrainians as measured by vote for political parties and presidential candidates, foreign policy orientations, and support for Russian as the second state language in Ukraine. While some have expressed their desire to become reabsorbed into the Russian Federation, many others have wanted only to maintain a close political and economic relationship with Russia. Nevertheless, Putin has capitalized on the Russian language sentiment to justify his aspirations for his "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir) policy which posits, among its other features, the "protective" role of the Russian Federation toward Russian-speaking minorities in its Near-Abroad, especially within post-Soviet states.¹⁵

¹⁴ According to a trailer shown on state-run Rossiya-1 television, Putin is recorded saying in a meeting that, "[they] must start working on returning Crimea to Russia." *Guardian*, 9 March 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/09/vladimir-putin-describes-secret-meeting-when-russia-decided-to-seize-crimea>.

¹⁵ "Russkiy Mir: "Russian World," *German Council on Foreign Relations*, 03 March 2016, <https://dgap.org/en/events/russkiy-mir-russian-world>.

In terms of foreign policy orientations, the people of the Donbas have expressed disagreement with Ukraine's objectives to become a member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Their orientation away from Europe (or resistance to integration with Europe) overlaps with Russia's foreign policy objectives. Despite Ukraine's desire to establish closer ties with Europe, it must also contend with fractured elements within its country.

Socio-economic inequalities and identity politics have the power to dismantle a young and fragile democracy like Ukraine. The grievances against Kyiv mainly concern(ed) economic inequalities, which were exacerbated by local Ukrainian elites who sought to protect their financial assets and income sources following the exile of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. In the Donetsk region, young oligarchs and criminal groups heavily relied on "...export-oriented metal production and chemicals, which critically depended on the price of Russian natural gas...".¹⁶ This dependency shows the subtlety integrative strategy of Russia as a former empire to create a puppet entity in the Donbas region.

Although the Kremlin has appealed to elites in the region, the general anti-Ukrainian/anti-Western sentiment did not directly translate into pro-Russian sentiment; although there are some who do ascribe to such pro-Russian propaganda. Early polls showed that a large majority did not want to be independent or be separated from Ukraine. Instead, what this meant was that Russia could capitalize on this opportunity "...by managing public protests in the way they best served her own interests".¹⁷ Deconstructing this identity is important for Russia to justify its imperial claims over the territory of inhabitants who no longer feel attached to their country. This behavior highlights a keen strategy by former empires to maintain power over a

¹⁶ Malyarenko and Wolff, *The Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States*, 33.

¹⁷ Malyarenko and Wolff, *The Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States*, 24.

region in which they no longer have legal jurisdiction. Despite Russia's realist notions of war, the case of Donbas highlights how Moscow recognizes the strength of identity to achieve military goals. Former Minister of Defense of the DPR similarly states that the "DPR and LPR are a trap through which Russia keeps Ukraine in its orbit...[with]...serious implementation of Malorossia and other similar projects mean[ing] full-fledged war against Ukraine".¹⁸

The coercion sequence in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be pinpointed to March 2014 when Russia mobilized its military along the Ukrainian border, signaling the threat of force; the rigged Crimean referendum in favor of joining the Russian Federation also indicates that Russia's intentions were to reassert control over the post-Soviet territory, ultimately forming the basis for a new status quo in which parts of Ukraine would be re-integrated into Russia's orbit of influence. The overthrow of ex-President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 may also indicate the prompt of the Kremlin's coercive behavior, given that most of the Ukrainian population desired further integration with the European Union and not with Russia. Discussions between Russia's Senior Commander and its NATO counterpart occurred similarly around the same time, but the details were not disclosed (New York Times 2014). The conversation could have proven more explicit verbal threats of coercion.

We can assume that Russia as a post-imperial coercer expected the continued subordination of the former subject. Given the widespread recognition of the target state's (i.e., Ukraine's) independence, there was a stiff resistance by the Ukrainian people to Russia's coercive demands. By giving in to coercive demands, Ukraine would be perceived as renouncing its sovereignty. Since the initial coercive demand, Ukraine did not concede to the coercive demand over Crimea and Russia did not back down. In fact, the 2022 invasion by the Russian

¹⁸ Tetyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, *The Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States: Eastern Ukraine in the Post-Soviet Space* (Routledge 2019: 37).

Federation marked the restart to the coercion sequence, given that the conflict devolved into a violent thawing. Because the invasion also witnessed a high death count, it can be counted as the second MID and thus starting to fit the criteria for frozen conflicts within a 20-year timespan. A key component of the conflict that did change was the increasing relevance and involvement of the Donbas separatist bloc.

2.1 The Role of Separatist Blocs

The varying scales of involvement by different types of actors in modern conflicts mark a new age of warfare that must consider the role of non-state actors. Specifically, the role of separatist blocs complicates the study of frozen conflicts because common definitions of frozen conflicts do not explicitly exclude de facto states or other non-state actors from the coercive process; these definitions imply that frozen conflicts are matters between two states. In fact, most literature overemphasize ‘formal’ bilateral, interstate negotiations while ignoring informal entities and strength of nationbuilding.¹⁹ Bilateral frameworks no longer adequately address the complexity and dynamics of this new age of warfare.

To update our understanding of frozen conflicts in our new age warfare, we should consider these conflicts as structures of opportunity for separatist blocs to secure and ultimately capitalize their positions. Afterall, the catalyst for the Ukrainian-Russian war remains the political and economic isolation of the Donbas region and the local elites’ heavy reliance on Russia for energy resources. These many integrated dynamics indicate how non-state actors can significantly shift the nature of the conflict. Understanding the consequences of external involvement, particularly in situations with post-imperial actors where separatist blocs emerge, can lead to better conflict mitigation strategies that foresee, and ideally avoid, the negative

¹⁹ Magdalena Dembinska and Aurelie Campana, “Frozen Conflicts and Internal Dynamics of De Facto States: Perspectives and Directions for Research,” *International Studies Review*, 19 (2017).

effects of geopolitical competition.²⁰ By classifying separatist blocs as complementary actors, a scholar can identify their consequential role in developing a frozen conflict throughout monumental phases, such as pre-war conditions, post-war statebuilding, and post-war nationbuilding to study the formation, transformation, and survival of separatist blocs in a domestic setting.

Within the framework of frozen conflicts, separatist blocs must be considered in relation to external actors, because one of the four criteria of a frozen conflict is that it must be international. Studying separatist blocs in isolation implies that the conflict occurs within one state's boundaries and is therefore a civil war rather than an interstate dispute. Although most separatist blocs remain largely dependent on the support of a patron state, the blocs operate as autonomous political entities that have acquired internal (although fragile) sovereignty despite various external and internal constraints. Despite Russia's sometimes covert support of the Donbas separatists, it would be difficult to apply the 'frozen' aspect of coercion to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine because of the heavy emphasis on the domestic environment.²¹ Nevertheless, by considering the role of the Russian Federation in fabricating anti-Kyiv resistance, the war in the Donbas may still apply.

Separatist blocs operate within an environment that connects both domestic and external (international) arenas. On the one hand, deep grievances against Ukraine ignited and perpetuate the underlying roots of the civil war component of the conflict. Identity and cultural autonomy

²⁰ Malyarenko and Wolff, *The Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States*

²¹ There are scholars who are beginning to analyze Russia's international involvement in the Donbas region as 'coercive diplomacy', which would help contribute to the literature on frozen conflicts. However, the research is too nascent to include in this study. See for example: Eray Alim, "Decentralize or Else: Russia's Use of Offensive Coercive Diplomacy against Ukraine," *World Affairs* (Summer 2020); Andrew S. Bowen, "Coercive Diplomacy and the Donbas: Explaining Russian strategy in Eastern Ukraine," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 3 (2019): 312-343.

were the primary wedge between Kyiv and eastern Ukraine which led to increasing political exclusion and the erosion of a relatively sustainable framework in which local, regional, and national identities managed to co-exist.²² The subsequent destruction of cultural identities, political autonomy, and economic sustainability for the marginalized was then associated with the imposition of dominant power relations and alienated the Donbas region through the denial of effective participation. Political exclusion and weak state structures lead to a security dilemma and increases the likelihood of conflict.

Self-proclaimed leaders of anti-Kyiv/anti-Maidan protests are described as the people's governors with no clear idea of a future model of the socio-economic development, administrative-territorial organizations and governance arrangements.²³ In effect, the people in the Donbas were so far removed from political processes that political reformation seemed nearly implausible due to the widespread corruption. Despite the negotiated terms which outlined a managed transition that would involve constitutional reform and fresh presidential elections before the end of 2014, Maidan protestors rejected the seemingly plausible plan. The most likely reason being that Yanukovich stood at the source of their grievance; it was not merely the broken structure itself. Instead, their demands for an immediate political overhaul struck discord among anti-Maidan protestors, particularly those in parts of the Donbas who believed the sudden dismantlement of the Yanukovich government was a manufactured coup d'état and therefore, an illegitimate transition" 24. This perspective coincided with Russia's perception of Ukrainian politics as Western fabrication.

The involvement by Russia further exacerbates the conflict because it imposes its own objectives, as an external actor, and effectively "internationalizes" the conflict. Russian Foreign

²² Malyarenko and Wolff, *The Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States*, 9.

²³ Malyarenko and Wolff, *Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States*, 25.

Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova referred to the training in Crimea as “Russian events on Russian territory”²⁴ and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev accused Ukraine and its Western allies of scheming to destabilize the political situation in Crimea.²⁵ At these instances, Russia regards any such interference as an affront to its “integration processes in the post-Soviet space” and uses Russian nationalists to justify the continued occupation of Ukrainian territory.

Prior to the Maidan revolution in February 2014, the Donbas region did not have intentions to become an independent state; in fact, “...the Donetsk identity project remained a predominantly Ukrainian project in the sense that its political and economic foundation and objectives were focused on the nature of the Ukrainian state and its relationship with its principal international partners and reference points—Russia and Europe—and not on the break-up of the country”.²⁶ Despite the loss of Soviet identity, native Russian-speaking Ukrainians embarked on an identity-searching campaign—one that became quite effective at mobilizing the public and that became based on the newly inequitable economic structures in place. This highlights the danger of isolating social groups. Although the meddling of an external actor plays a role in the conflict, domestic factors, such as widespread corruption and economic crimes (e.g., racketeering, extortion, smuggling, and kidnapping), must also be considered to understand the obstacles of restoring a failing democracy.

The basis for future identity building in the Donbas can encompass the sense of abandonment and/or betrayal of the Kremlin to properly protect Russian national Ukrainian

²⁴ “Russia calls on France, Germany to stop propaganda over Russian military exercises,” TASS Russian News Agency, (15 April 2021) <https://tass.com/defense/1278605>.

²⁵ “Ukraine and its Western backers plotting to destabilize Crimea, says top security official,” TASS Russian News Agency (14 April 2021), <https://tass.com/politics/1277945>.

²⁶ Malyarenko and Wolff, *Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States*, 35.

citizens. This includes the Kremlin's use of the region as a pawn to provide itself with additional leverage over Kyiv, its discrimination of refugees from Donbas in Russia, and the socio-economic decline in Donetsk and Luhansk.²⁷ Perhaps cronyism must first be dismantled prior to political reform in order for the separatists to embrace Kyiv and disassociate with Russia, especially since Ukrainian elites possess an integrative dependence on Russia for energy resources. Given that one of Russia's main foreign policy objectives is to stall European integration, Ukraine's immediate integration with Europe may not be a prerequisite for stability. Instead, Ukraine can seek other external actors to address its energy needs, similar to the 3-Sea Initiative concept to fortify Central and Eastern Europe.

Contemporary intra-state conflicts are rarely limited within the borders of a single state Russia-driven aspect "internationalized" intra-state conflict. In fact, the crisis in Ukraine maintains local-, regional-, and global-level dynamics that "...requires us to analyze different actors' agendas and distinguish the optimal conditions for when they might carry out their agendas in the context of historically complex, social, political, economic, and cultural structures. The factors that determine the onset, duration, intensity, and termination of frozen conflicts are not to be found only within the target state's territory".²⁸

²⁷ Malyarenko and Wolff, *Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States*, 38.

²⁸ Malyarenko and Wolff, *Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States*, 11.

3. REMNANTS OF THE SOVIET UNION EMPIRE

A post-imperial lens is important for situating frozen conflicts within the larger context of great power competition and global security, specifically in the context of modern-day Russian intervention in its “Near Abroad” to solidify its status in the post-Cold War order. An informal empire (i.e., Russia) without a formal subject indiscriminately wields its power to obtain what it has lost. As the Russian example shows, an informal empire understands territory as the basis for geopolitical power and therefore will heavily rely on its military power, and even risk war, to achieve its foreign policy aspirations and exercise control over former territories. Therefore, to understand the case of the post-Soviet transition, we must first understand the classification and remnants of the USSR as an empire.

3.1 The Soviet Union Through an Imperial Lens

The Soviet polity possessed similar and sufficient imperial characteristics. For instance, empires must (1) be a great power, (2) play a major role in shaping not only the international relations but also the values and culture of a historical epoch, (3) possess widespread territories, (4) consist in the management of multi-ethnicity, and (5) imply an authoritarian polity.²⁹ However, the Soviet Union also existed during a period when polities increasingly rejected the classification of empire. By the mid-twentieth century, being an ‘empire’ no longer awarded the international prestige and status it once did prior to decolonization; to do so would risk losing legitimacy in a world that widely protected sovereignty. This aberration makes it difficult to recognize an empire unless it is accompanied by significant resistance of subjugated peoples. Still, empires need not be “empire-conscious” to be classified as such. Relying on an empire’s

²⁹ Levian, “Imperial Polities,” 608.

self-identification could invalidate the literature on modern empires, including those that propose neo-imperial theories.³⁰ Neo-imperial theories help contextualize informal empires in a more contemporary light, often with the Soviet Union as a model example.³¹

Informal empires are based on the lack of consent of dependent nations rather than effective control of a dominant polity. This contextualization switches the viewpoint away from the imperial center and toward the people that are subject to imperial domination. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-soviet states immediately became significant because of the 25 million Russians remaining in the ‘Near Abroad’. This population, because of its previously integrated history, has always been vulnerable to Moscow’s manipulation as “a potential arm of Russian power” despite only a fraction of the population wanting to become a formal part of the Russian Federation.³² Nevertheless, Moscow can still capitalize on this minority sentiment to apply its irredentist campaign and effectively deny Ukrainians of their agency. The perception of the Soviet Union as an empire will be useful here. “If the U.S.S.R. is defined as an empire, its demise can be seen as legitimate and inevitable, [and] efforts to re-constitute it in whatever form are immoral and doomed to failure.”³³ For comparative context, if Algeria were perceived as a legitimate part of the state, its independence would represent “a violation of the sacred soil of the nation” rather than the rightful decolonization awarded to an independent Algeria.³⁴

Classifying the Soviet Union as a new type of empire—one that openly denied any imperial ambitions and that effectively manipulated the characteristics of the modern nation-

³⁰ For example, Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York, 2019) and Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

³¹ Mark R. Beissinger, “Rethinking Empire in the Wake of Soviet Collapse,” in *Ethnic Politics and Post-Communism: Theories and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.)

³² Dominic Levian, “The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as Imperial Polities,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 30 (1995): 608.

³³ Levian, “Imperial Polities,” 608.

³⁴ Levian, “Imperial Polities,” 608.

state—leaves room for post-Soviet Russia to also be labeled as imperial. Contemporary Russia, therefore, fills the role as the successor imperial polity in the post-Soviet space. President Vladimir Putin justified the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the most recent invasion of Ukraine under this guise of the perceived obligation to protect Russian nationals beyond the state’s borders. In fact, the support of separatists in the Donbas region served as a pretext to the subsequent 2022 invasion on multiple occasions. For instance, the recognition on 23 February 2022 of the DPR’s and the LPR’s independence immediately prior to the large-scale invasion was an indicator of renewed armed force.

Empires go through different phases of expansion and domination, often transforming their political structure into more “modern” versions of multiethnic polities. Most scholars conclude that the Soviet Union both possessed imperial tendencies while also maintaining significant claims to nationalism.³⁵ Self-determination and sovereignty are central to the making of a nation, which imply that violations to such claims (e.g., the annexation of Crimea, destabilizing operations in the Donbas War, and the most recent invasion of Ukraine) are a common feature of empires in the contemporary world.

Identifying these violations can help identify empires seeking to cloak their imperial ambitions. For instance, “[Cloaked empires] often emerged in the wake of the collapse of empires, do not claim to be empires, and do not claim to be heirs of previous empires (though there often are some forces within these societies that view them in this fashion).”³⁶ Younger empires learn this behavior from the previous successes and failures of its predecessors on how

³⁵ See: Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993) According to Ronald Suny, the Soviet Union was an empire that simply fostered nations, which ultimately brought about its own demise; Suny explicitly indicates the simultaneous existence of an empire and nation; Adrienne Edgar, “Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet ‘Emancipation’ of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006). Edgar similarly describes the Soviet Union as neither an empire nor a nation-state but contained features of both.

³⁶ Beissinger, “Rethinking Empire,” 5.

to institutionalize control over multicultural populations.³⁷ These remnants "...[such as capital flows, communications systems, movements of people, and systems of governmental regulation] should not be surprising because 'empires were the templates of larger states.'"³⁸ By making this connection between former and contemporary empires, we can recognize the obscure behaviors and identify parallel patterns of behaviors, particularly as it concerns the coercion process.

Understanding the parallel behavior is another reason why frozen conflicts involving a former colonizer must be understood within the context of a post-imperial world. For a post-imperial country in conflict with a former subject, further imperial remnants must exist in other domains of security, such as great power competition. For example, the most recent invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has left world leaders with a lack of meaningful options. Sanctions are immediately ineffective against Russia who has been building formidable financial defenses over the past 7 years due to booming oil and gas revenues. Russia's intimately integrated energy domination in Europe has led the post-imperial power to be labeled as the "fortress" economy moniker. According to the Russian government who ascribes to a realist view of the world, the current international order rests on the primacy of military force, which is a residual effect of imperialism.

³⁷ Beissinger, "Rethinking Empire," 3.

³⁸ Beissinger, "Rethinking Empire," 2.

DISCUSSION

For further research, scholars should look more closely at the role of separatists in strengthening the coercer or exacerbating violent flare-ups between the dyad. In order to make solid claims, more detailed case studies should be analyzed in comparison to systematic regional and cross-regional processes.

By default, the Georgian-Russian war can be informative for the Ukrainian-Russian war given the commonality of being a post-Soviet state as well as the historical roots of the respective conflicts. By emphasizing these conflicts by region, the author does not intend to assume that frozen conflicts may only emerge in the post-Soviet space. In fact, a more thorough cross-analysis with other regional frozen conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, may also provide informative insights that we may otherwise miss in classifying the generalized concept of frozen conflicts. Nevertheless, the author decided to focus precisely on a post-Soviet state due to the parallel developments which are found in intraregional histories.

The post-soviet characteristic alone does not bear any insightful conclusions for the general conception of frozen conflicts. Frozen conflicts can occur between any two actors in the world, and they are not exclusive to Eastern Europe. It is more precise to investigate post-imperial states in general. Most frozen conflicts seem to emerge during or after the second wave of decolonization following World War II and often consist of a territorial dispute. The man-made borders drawn by former empires is only one step in contending how the remnants of colonialism develop frozen conflicts.

It is reasonable to conclude that most frozen conflicts emerge from the remnants of imperial relationships, such as those between former empires and former subjects. Contemporary

Russian foreign policy under the direction of Vladimir Putin continues an approach from the Soviet-era to reestablish an aggressive, imperialist stance towards post-Soviet states. Despite formal decolonization, scholars must contend with post-imperial implications of the Soviet Union's dissolution and how new actors, such as separatist factions, influence post-imperial relationships. It was my intention to provide a groundwork for putting Russian foreign policy in a comparative perspective of decolonization in the 20th and 21st century.

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