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# Russia's Changing Partners: Sovereign Actors and Unrecognized States

**Victor Jeifets**

School of International Relations, St. Petersburg State University  
[jeifets@gmail.com](mailto:jeifets@gmail.com)

**Nikolay Dobronravin**

School of International Relations, St. Petersburg University, Russia  
[n.dobronravin@spbu.ru](mailto:n.dobronravin@spbu.ru)

## Abstract

For several centuries Russian foreign policy was stuck in the realm of sovereign states. When local administrators entered into contact with non-state actors across the border, such relations were often seen as an embarrassment for Moscow or St. Petersburg. Even in the tumultuous first decades of the Soviet era, global Communist activities were ostensibly led by the Comintern, while the state mostly dealt with other sovereign actors. After the break of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation had to cope with the crisis in Chechnya and did everything possible to prevent the international recognition of this breakaway region. Russia's policy was then totally consistent, as no wannabe political entities were officially recognized by Moscow. The situation started to change in 2008-2010, when the independence of Kosovo was proclaimed and widely recognized. Russia's policy has drifted towards a wider recognition of de facto states and aspiring political movements. The Russian Federation still tends to deal with sovereign states, but semi-official contacts with non-recognized actors are common whenever these fall into the sphere of Moscow's Realpolitik.

## Keywords

Russian Foreign Policy, Sovereign States, Comintern, Unrecognized States, Realpolitik

## Introduction

Among the traditions of Russian foreign policy there used to be a tendency to deal with great powers or other influential sovereign states which had achieved wide international recognition. Smaller and less influential states were often ignored or treated with contempt. This was even more true of self-proclaimed enti-

ties. While Russian public opinion supported the independence of the Balkan states in the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire preferred to see them as autonomies under Ottoman suzerainty for many years before they could be worth recognition. In the Soviet period, with the growth of sovereign states in Asia, Africa and Oceania, most of them were recognized by Moscow immediately after official decolonization. The contacts with the national liberation movements were officially made by 'public' organizations such as the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, rather than the Soviet state.

Local contacts with would-be states and non-state actors across the Russian/Soviet border were often seen as an embarrassment for the official foreign policy. One such example was Mongolia's struggle for independence from China in the first decades of the twentieth century. At the local level, Russian merchants and military supported the Mongols. When the Mongolian independence was proclaimed in 1911, a single platoon of Trans-Baikal Cossacks under the command of Grigory Semenov (apparently on his own initiative) disarmed the Chinese garrison and occupied the state bank. Such arbitrariness led the Russian consul to expel Semenov from Mongolia. Russia and China then recognized the autonomy of Outer Mongolia under Chinese suzerainty, but not the independence of all the Mongols as proclaimed. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese troops came back and abolished the autonomy of Outer Mongolia. Then White Russian and Mongolian forces under the command of Baron Ungern von Sternberg expelled the Chinese and restored the country's independence. Afterwards, the Baron tried to reconquer Siberia, but the Red Army and its Mongolian allies defeated the Whites. In 1921 Soviet Russia and Mongolia recognized each other, trying to break the international isolation of both countries. In 1924, in accordance with the Sino-Soviet Treaty, Mongolia was recognized as an integral part of China. The same year the Mongolian People's Republic was proclaimed, and the Soviet Union recognized the new state, although the treaty with China was not annulled. The Soviet diplomats were in favor of the autonomy of Outer Mongolia, while the Executive Committee of the Comintern saw Mongolia as an independent republic which would become a part of the Chinese federation after the eventual victory of the Communists in China (Perepiska 2008, pp. 111 & 119). To further complicate things, in 1941 the Soviet Union and Japan signed a neutrality pact and pledged to respect the territorial integrity and inviolability of the Mongolian People's Republic and Manchuria (Manchukuo, a Japan's client state proclaimed in 1932). During the Great Patriotic War, Mongolia republic declared war on Germany. In 1944, the Soviet Union and USA agreed on "the maintenance of the Republic of Outer Mongolia as an independent identity" (United States Department of State, Foreign relations of the United States, Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945, p. 378). After the World War II Manchukuo

disappeared, and China recognized the independence of the Mongolian People's Republic. This recognition was then adopted by the Chinese People's Republic, but annulled by Taiwan. The conundrum continued until 1961, when Moscow and the West reached a deal which permitted Mongolia to join the United Nations (in exchange for the admission of Mauritania, previously vetoed by the Soviet delegation). The Mongolian People's Republic remained a client state of the Soviet Union until the 1980s (for more details on Russian-Mongolian relations in the twentieth century see e.g. Murphy 1961, Luzyanin 2003).

### **Dualism in the early Soviet policy**

Even in the first decades of the Soviet era, during the period of global Communist activities, these were officially led by the Communist International, while the Soviet state tried to deal with other sovereign state actors. Throughout this period, Moscow's foreign policy might be seen as a dual one, and this dualism was aimed at the need to support the world revolution and to secure the USSR's national interests. Early Soviet dualism resulted in a number of diplomatic conflicts. The objectives of Moscow in establishing relations with the bourgeois countries were quite contradictory, as the Kremlin wanted peaceful coexistence with governments rather than capitalist states (Zagladin 1990, pp. 40-45). One basic principle was that that the interests of the governments and the populations in the West could never be the same, while the capitalism existed. The Soviet diplomacy was inspired by this principle, even when the idea of immediate world proletarian revolution was about to vanish. One should also note that Moscow saw the anti-imperialist movement as one of the obstacles to an eventual intervention against the USSR. Consequently, the official contacts with foreign states were just a way to maintain balance in international relations, rather than the principal aim of the revolutionary foreign policy. The People's Commissar for Foreign Relations Georgi V. Chicherin told it clearly at the XIV Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) in 1925:

*We need urgently the close contact with the Communist parties of other countries. [...] I wish much closer contact between Narkomindel [The People's Commissariat for Foreign Relations] and the Executive Committee of the Comintern. [...] The previous situation of some mis-coordination between the Soviet diplomacy and local Communist parties, is, fortunately, over. We have managed to establish close and permanent (though un-official, absolutely secret) contacts with the local Communist parties of different countries" (Blinov, Nadtocheev & Orehova 1991, p. 122).*

The same approach was recognized by one of the Soviet revolutionaries and diplomats Georgi Skalov ("Sinani"), the assistant to the Soviet Russia envoy in Bukhara and, later on, the chairman of the Latin American Secretariat of the

Comintern:

*The main task of our Legation was not like the work of the common diplomats – it was the political preparation for the sovietization of Buhara and the organization of the Buharan Communist Party (Skalov, G. The autobiography, p.37).*

A classic example of dualism in foreign policy was the activity of Stanislav Pestkovsky, the Soviet envoy to Mexico in the mid-1920s. We completely agree with William Richardson's conclusion that, while the Soviet diplomacy was trying to settle the possible conflicts with the Mexican government, the Comintern agents were provoking new conflicts (Richardson 1988, P. 102). As a matter of fact, the situation was more complicated; Pestkovsky was not only a diplomat, but also a Comintern emissary (under the alias "Andrei") (Jeifets&Jeifets, 2002). This dualism was not extraordinary, as the Soviet diplomats were ex-revolutionaries or were returning to the Comintern after completing their diplomatic missions. This symbiosis reached the organizational level as well. The top administrators of the Soviet People's Commissariat (Ministry) for Foreign Affairs were also members of the Executive Committee of the Comintern. The case of Mexico, however, was still different from that of the European countries. The USSR saw the Mexican revolution as a similar one, and, consequently, there seemed to be no contradiction between the diplomatic work and the revolutionary activities. Pestkovsky was designated as the Envoy in Mexico City, being the person "able to fulfill the Comintern's American tasks" (Chicherin 1924, P.76). Stanislav Pestkovsky was trying sincerely to broaden the Mexican-Soviet relations, but simultaneously he was making pressure at the local Communist Party in order to change its leadership. The result of this pressure was the rise of the ultra-leftist feelings inside the party and the danger of the rupture between the left-wing militants and the authorities.

The dualism in foreign policy was not absolute. Moscow put the limits to the revolutionary activities of Soviet diplomats and Comintern envoys. Thus, the Foreign Affairs Ministry and the Executive Committee of the Comintern were ready to promote the Communist activities in Mexico (without taking into account the possible worsening of official relations with the government), but they proved to be unwilling to support the idea of an armed expedition to Venezuela (proposed by Gustavo Machado, a Venezuelan revolutionary, and supported by Pestkovsky) with the purpose to overthrow the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gomez. The USSR considered that Gomez was not only dictator, but also an unconditional ally of the US imperialism. However, the Soviet leadership did not see any perspectives of triumph for the revolution in Venezuela and didn't want to waste time and money for such plans. The same destiny awaited the plans of an armed expedition to Cuba (developed by the Cuban revolutionary Julio Antonio Mella) and a Communist revolt in Colombia and Ecuador (with the support of the Rockefeller oil corporation). Moscow preferred to avoid direct participation in

the projects of doubtful promise (Jeifets & Jeifets 2015). The USSR was unwilling to grant support to the non-state actors, if there was no chance for them to win and transform themselves into States.

### **The Soviet Union and the Unrecognized States in the Context of Decolonization**

The early Soviet dualism disappeared, but there were other challenges to Moscow's foreign policy. In the process of decolonization, quite a few states were proclaimed, but not recognized by the international community. Most of these states did not last, but some of them were able to survive for several years and even decades. This group of quasi-sovereign international actors has remained relatively stable in numbers, and all of them tried to behave like 'normal' states. There have been many attempts at describing these political entities. Various definitions have included 'unrecognized states', 'de facto states', 'self-proclaimed states', 'state-like entities', 'virtual states', 'quasi-states', 'states-within-states', 'statelets' and even 'nonstate states'. The phenomenon has attracted many scholars, from historians to political anthropologists and geographers (see e.g. Berg & Toomla 2009, Caspersen & Stansfield 2011, Dobronravina 2013). Understandably, the analysis of such entities is often far from academic. In the writings supportive to the countries that fell victim to 'illegitimate state-building', the very existence of unrecognized states is negated through the consistent use of terminology delegitimizing them, e.g. 'secessionist regions/entities', 'separatist territories/regimes', 'breakaway territories', 'self-proclaimed republics' or 'illegal entities' (but never 'states').

Many, but not all, unrecognized states are fairly weak and depend on foreign assistance from a third state ("tutor state", "patron state", "external patron/sponsor", "kin-state"). In the 20th century, the political discourse included references to "puppet states", a rather clumsy term, as it covered both unrecognized and sovereign recipients of external assistance. Nowadays, such relations may be better understood as 'outsourcing' (Popescu 2006). The outsourced functions of a patronized state usually include defense and foreign affairs. Nevertheless, no such entity has ever declared that it would not try to enter the arena of international relations. Full-scale recognition, including the membership in international organizations, dominates the political agenda of unrecognized states. All of them have formulated their own foreign policies, even if they are too weak to implement them without an external patron. Seaboard unrecognized states have developed their own maritime policies, following the lines of 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III), even though they could not join the Convention. A number of legitimate or self-proclaimed subnational entities also emulate sovereign states, e.g. in their approach to the seas, maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones (EEZ). Before 1991, the former Soviet Union

used to avoid open official contacts with unrecognized states. There were very few exceptions (Algeria in 1960-1962, Guinea Bissau in 1973-1974, Communist-controlled Republic of South Vietnam in 1969-1975). In the other cases, no recognition was granted.

A good case was that of Western Sahara. The former Spanish Sahara was claimed by Morocco and Mauritania, while the adjacent Algeria supported those Sahrawis who opted for independence. In 1976, when the intervention of Moroccan forces had already begun, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (POLISARIO) proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) without the consent from the former metropolitan state. The majority of the population moved to the refugee camps in Algeria together with the leadership of the new republic. By 1991, the parties to the conflict have exhausted all possibilities for a military solution to the problem of Western Sahara, and a cease-fire was brokered by the United Nations. Algeria has supported POLISARIO and acted as a patron state for the SADR. Nowadays, the former Spanish Sahara is claimed by the effectively exiled de facto Sahrawi state and the Kingdom of Morocco. The POLISARIO front and the government of the self-proclaimed SADR now control about 20 per cent of the territory of the former Spanish Sahara, called "free zones", or "liberated territories". From the perspective of the Moroccan authorities, it is a "buffer zone" ("zone tampon") between Morocco and the neighboring states of Algeria and Mauritania. The SADR has established diplomatic relations with some countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. The republic also joined the African Union. The United Nations see Western Sahara as a territory to be decolonized, although there is no effective colonizing power. All the agreements reached under the auspices of the UN have been signed by the representatives of POLISARIO, and not by the SADR. From the Moroccan perspective, there are three Saharan provinces that make up the future autonomous region in the south.

The territory and the EEZ of Western Sahara have attracted foreign business including a number of Russian companies. Fish resources of Western Sahara's EEZ are as vast as about 11 per cent of world reserves. Since the Spanish rule, these waters have been subjected to predatory fishing. The SADR and various European NGOs struggle against the "illegal use" of fish resources in the EEZ claimed by the republic. Russian policy towards Western Sahara has been influenced by practical interests of the fishermen who used to deal with Moroccan authorities. Neither the Sahrawi independence nor the annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco have been recognized by the former Soviet Union.

### **The Russian Federation and the Post-Soviet de Facto States**

Since 1991, the Russian Federation initially followed the same approach to the

unrecognized states. In the early 1990s, previous administrative borders were taken as a foundation for new boundaries between the former Soviet republics. Estonia and Latvia tended to disagree with this approach, but had to follow the general principle of Post-Soviet *uti possidetis*. On the other hand, hardly any new state seemed satisfied with its piece of the Soviet cake. Among the reasons for discontent, there were ethnic or historical conflicts, as in the autonomous region of Nagorno Karabakh, in Northern Kazakhstan or in the Fergana Valley, where the borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were reminiscent of medieval German princedoms. One more reason was often ignored by the media and many politicians alike. The Soviet administrative boundaries could be good, bad and at times utterly ugly, but at least they could be discussed and somehow improved in somebody's favor. However, there remained many tiny and large sections of land where there was no administrative border at all, just some general idea of it on the map. The situation was even worse along any boundary watercourse and particularly confusing on numerous lakes and seas (Caspian, Aral, etc.). One might also remember that many places were not even mentioned or intentionally misrepresented on maps and in the media for defense purposes. The limits of an industrial site or a forest could be traced with more accuracy, but even there a lot of inconsistencies were to be discovered when post-Soviet privatization started. As concerns the reservoirs of oil and natural gas both onshore and offshore, as well as various other mineral and water deposits, it became clear fairly soon that new legislation was needed. As a result, a joint declaration on trans-boundary deposits was adopted by most post-Soviet states as early as 1992. In accordance with this declaration, the deposits found in the immediate borderland of the neighbor state members of the Commonwealth of Independent States should be reserved for common use of the adjacent states. The 1992 declaration had, however, little practical outcome, as most conflicts were to be resolved through bilateral talks.

On the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some entities started to break away from their republics, e.g. Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan, Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, Transnistria from Moldova, Chechnya from the Russian Federation, etc. When the new sovereign states were born (or recreated) and recognized by the international community, the de facto entities were eager to emulate them. E.g., the independence of the Azerbaijan Republic was restored on 30 August 1991, and on 2 September the Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) Republic declared its independence from Azerbaijan. The former autonomous region was supported by Armenia as a kin-state. From the perspective of Azerbaijan, there has been a direct Armenian intervention and occupation. The war continued till 1994, when the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh agreed on a ceasefire. Until now, no sovereign state including Armenia has recognized the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Kaldor 2007, Dobronravin 2010, pp.163-166).

All the above-mentioned breakaway territories, with the exception of Chechnya, were then transformed into relatively stable unrecognized states. Until 2008, there was a consensus that no such entities should be granted official recognition. In the case of Chechnya, Russia was able to cope with the crisis only after two wars and the reconciliation with some of former secessionists. The government of the Russian Federation used all possible measures to prevent the international recognition of the breakaway region in the Caucasus. Russia's policy was then totally consistent, as neither Chechnya nor any other self-proclaimed states (Abkhazia, etc.) were officially recognized by Moscow.

The post-Soviet *de facto* states could not be ignored even when there was no war. Russia became the patron state of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, meaning that all these entities received financial assistance and military protection from forcible re-integration into their "mother states". There were practical reasons for the patronage besides traditional ethnic and political ties. In the case of Transnistria, a local company inherited a section of the Soviet gas transit system. The stability in the *de facto* state was needed to guarantee gas transit to Moldova, the Balkan states and Turkey. In the case of Abkhazia, Russian business was interested in the sea resources within the limits of the EEZ claimed by Abkhazia, as well as tourism. No such activities could be possible in war time. In this context, it is worth mention that most sea boundaries in the Black Sea region remain undefined. The adjacent states, with the exception of Turkey, have not even finalized all their claims in the area. The agreement of 1978 on continental shelf boundary (extended to the EEZ limits in 1987) between Turkey and the former Soviet Union has remained in force after the collapse of the USSR. That document, however, could not help to resolve the issue of the post-1991 sea boundaries of Russia, Ukraine and Georgia. The geographical position of Abkhazia means that a future discussion on the sea boundaries and EEZ limits of the Russian Federation will have to take this actor into consideration and need its consent.

The post-Soviet consensus on non-recognition of breakaway entities remained in force for more than a decade under the Eltsin and Putin administrations. During that period, fourteen sovereign states were eager to escape from Moscow's control in political, economic and cultural sense. At the same time, Russia also aspired to the West, but the political logic of "escaping from Russia" predominated in post-Soviet Eurasia. Inside Russia, several big corporations, both private and state-controlled, as well as a number of subnational regions and republics became interested in global politics. Some of these regions and corporations did influence Russian foreign policy in the way which would have been unconceivable before 1991. Among the new players one could mention Tatarstan, with its oil company "Tatneft", Gasprom, Rosneft, Rusal, Alrosa and other non-state actors. Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially cooperated with some of them in the coun-

tries and regions where they had business interests.

The case of Tatarstan was of particular interest. The 1990s saw the transformation of this formerly autonomous republic into a vibrant quasi-state without any military conflict with the Russian Federation. Already in 1990, the “Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic” was adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the republic, proclaiming “Tatar state sovereignty” and establishing the “Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic - The Republic of Tatarstan”. After the end of the USSR, according to some scholars, Tatarstan joined the list of post-Soviet quasi-states, “including passports, embassies and full control of its substantial oil industry” (Said 2007, p. 136). This is an exaggeration, but it is true that the republic positioned itself as an ‘associated state’ in its relationship with the Russian Federation, including its own citizenship. In 1994, Russia and Tatarstan signed a treaty, “On Delimitation of Jurisdictional Subjects and Mutual Delegation of Powers between Bodies of Public Authority of the Russian Federation and Bodies of Public Authority of the Republic of Tatarstan” and a few special agreements on oil industry. “Tatneft”, a joint stock company with the government of Tatarstan as its major shareholder, established joint ventures with Kalmykia (one more former republic within the Russian Federation) and South Korea, started oil exploration and other businesses beyond the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. The federal government was never happy with the post-Soviet status of Tatarstan. In the 2000s, the legislation of the republic, including the constitution, was amended under the pressure from Moscow. A new “Treaty on Delimitation of Jurisdictional Subjects and Powers between Bodies of Public Authority of the Russian Federation and Bodies of Public Authority of the Republic of Tatarstan”, valid for 10 years, was concluded in 2007. The ability of Tatarstan to pursue its own political agenda, including foreign and energy policy, was then reduced to a tolerable minimum.

### **Russian Foreign Policy Since 2007: A New Trend**

Russian foreign policy started to change by the end of the second Putin’s presidency and continued during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. Many observers in the West saw February 2007, marked by Vladimir Putin’s speech in Munich and his visit to the Middle East, as a watershed in Russian foreign policy. Ariel Cohen (2007) from the Heritage Foundation was one of those who described this shift as a rebirth of both Soviet and Russian imperial past.

*To a great degree, contemporary Russian rhetoric has come full circle and resembles the Soviet agenda before President Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) [...] Russia is following the Soviet model of opposing first the British and then the American presence in the Middle East by playing to anti-Western sentiment in the “street” and among the elites. This is*

*something that both Wilhelmine Germany and, later, Nazi Germany tried to do as well.*

*[...]The image of a new Cold War may be too simplistic to describe the emerging relationship with Russia. In fact, Russian foreign policy has a distinctive late 19th century czarist, post-Bismarckian tinge: muscular, arrogant, overestimating its own power, and underestimating the American adversary that it is busily trying to recreate. This policy is likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy with dangerous consequences and a high price in treasure and ultimately in blood.*

Cohen's description is worth attention primarily because his approach has become popular in the Western media. However, such views, mixing together two periods of Russian history as well as various allusions to the past of Germany, are contradictory and thus far from convincing. What remains, in Cohen's own words, is that "while it lacks the global reach of Soviet ideology and the Soviet Union's military muscle, Russian policy nonetheless limits Washington's freedom to maneuver".

By 2007, the relations between Russia and the West had been overshadowed by the events in former Yugoslavia and the Western liberation/occupation of Kosovo and its separation from Serbia. The importance of these events should not be exaggerated, but they did play a certain role in the transformation of Russian foreign policy. Cohen (2007) noticed that "Russia threatened to apply the precedent of Kosovo independence to recognize the independence of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia" and "supported secessionist statelets seeking to undermine the sovereignty of Moldova and Georgia". The paradox was that Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia grew up as anti-secessionist entities within the former Soviet Union. Cohen also referred to an interview of Vladimir Putin (2007) with Al-Jazeera. When asked about his decision to invite Hamas officials to Moscow, the Russian President remarked that "Hamas won the election" and stressed that "it is better to work with people who have influence among their country's people and try to transform their position through negotiations than to pretend that they do not exist". Putin also confirmed that Russia had "very friendly relations" with the government as well as Hezbollah and other political groups in Lebanon. This position was apparently different from the earlier official state-to-state approach, but understandable in the context of Lebanon, with a special role of Hezbollah, and particularly Palestine. In both cases it would be infeasible to keep contacts with only one local actor.

The change in Russian foreign policy became more pronounced in 2008, when the Republic of Kosovo proclaimed its independence from Serbia. The International Court of Justice (2010) concluded that "the declaration of independence of 17 February 2008 did not violate general international law", because "general

international law contains no applicable prohibition of declarations of independence.” Most Western states and several international organizations recognized Kosovo and established diplomatic relations with the new state. Russia saw this approach as rule-changing and a precedent for the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. After the “08/08/08” war with Georgia, President Dmitry Medvedev signed the decrees recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

*[...] Russia continually displayed calm and patience. We repeatedly called for returning to the negotiating table and did not deviate from this position of ours even after the unilateral proclamation of Kosovo's independence. However our persistent proposals to the Georgian side to conclude agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the non-use of force remained unanswered. Regrettably, they were ignored also by NATO and even at the United Nations.*

*[...] It is our understanding that after what has happened in Tskhinval and what has been planned for Abkhazia they have the right to decide their destiny by themselves.*

*The Presidents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, based on the results of the referendums conducted and on the decisions taken by the Parliaments of the two republics, appealed to Russia to recognize the state sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Federation Council and the State Duma voted in support of those appeals.*

*A decision needs to be taken based on the situation on the ground. Considering the freely expressed will of the Ossetian and Abkhaz peoples and being guided by the provisions of the UN Charter, the 1970 Declaration on the Principles of International Law Governing Friendly Relations Between States, the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and other fundamental international instruments, I signed Decrees on the recognition by the Russian Federation of South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence (Medvedev 2008).*

The recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not mean that Russia was ready to recognize other de facto entities. E.g., recognition was not extended to Transnistria. Russia has supported the territorial integrity of Moldova, even though Russian forces have been stationed in the de facto entity.

More recently, Russian policy drifted towards more intensive contacts with would-be states and aspiring political movements. After Abkhazia and South Ossetia, no de facto entities were recognized, with the well-known exception of Crimea, but the contacts with such states and movements became admissible at the official level, from Azawad to Donetsk.

At the first sight, the contacts between Russian and self-proclaimed Azawad (in Northern Mali) might look like an isolated incident. Since 1960 Moscow has developed friendly relations with Mali. The Tuareg movement in the North used to be treated as “feudal” and “separatist”. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to use the same discourse in the beginning of the new phase of the conflict in 2012.

*With the growing concern, Moscow is watching development of the affairs in the North and North-East of the Republic of Mali, where warfare between the illegal armed groups of separatists from the National Movement for Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) and the governmental military forces continues since the mid of January this year.*

*Hostilities of MNLA fighters under separatist slogans jeopardize security and stability not only in Mali itself, but also in the vast Sahara-Sahel area in whole [...]*

*We vigorously condemn the violence and acts of atrocity of the fighters to the captured military men and civilians. We support the measures assumed by Mali government to keep the territorial integrity of the Malian state and to resist the international terrorism” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Press Release, 28 February 2012).*

In April 2012 the MNLA proclaimed the independence of Azawad. Within a few months, this movement was defeated and expelled from the cities by the jihadist forces, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa and Ansar Dine. To save Mali from the jihadist menace, France started a military intervention in January 2013, joined by other European and West African states as well as the mission of the United Nations (MINUSMA). When the MNLA and Ansar Dine opened the political dialog with the Malian government, Russia saw both movements as “rebel groupings” and supported the dialog based on the inviolability of Mali’s territory (see e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Press Release, 7 December 2012).

The situation suddenly changed in March 2014, when a delegation of the MNLA visited Moscow and met with Mikhail Bogdanov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East. The level of the talks apparently came as a shock to the Malian leadership. The MNLA delegation had earlier visited Morocco where it was received by King Mohamed VI. Both Morocco and Russia confirmed their respect to the territorial integrity of Mali. However, the MNLA saw the talks in Marrakesh and Moscow as a diplomatic success for the cause of Azawad. From the West African perspective, this visit was explained as an attempt by the MNLA to find a patron state, taking

into account Moscow's reputation of "never letting its friends down" (Middle East Media Research Institute, 14 April 2014).

Russia has continued to support the political dialog in Mali without any open overtures to the supporters of Azawad's independence. Nevertheless, the MNLA visit to Moscow heralded a new approach in Russia's foreign policy. Mikhail Bogdanov continued his work as Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa, and there have been several public meetings between Russian officials and various delegations from Syria and Libya. These delegations represented the armed opposition to the governments which were recognized by Russia and the United Nations. Even taking into account the complexity of the situation in the Middle East, open official contacts with such forces may be seen as a novelty in Russian foreign policy.

The role of Russia in the Ukrainian "revolution of dignity" and the proclamation of several people's republics (Kharkov, Donetsk, Lugansk, Odessa) in 2014 attracted much more international attention than Russian contacts with non-governmental forces in Africa and the Middle East. From the Western and post-revolutionary Ukrainian perspective, Russian policy towards Ukraine was identified with a hybrid war, sometimes in an exaggerated way: "The artificial nature of the separatism in Eastern Ukraine and instigation of conflict by Russia makes this type of conflict unprecedented in global practice" (Zarembo 2016, p. 4). The surviving people's republics in Donetsk and Lugansk were seen as a mere smokescreen for a direct Russian intervention. When the leadership of the Lugansk People's Republic invited United States Senator John McCain to visit and monitor local elections, Senator McCain (2015) reacted: "While I do not typically monitor the elections of imaginary countries, I am grateful for this unique invitation. If the so-called 'Luhansk People's Republic' is interested in democratic elections, I suggest its adherents put down their weapons and participate in the next round of elections in a free and united Ukraine." Interestingly, the Western field reports from Eastern Ukraine were often more balanced and took into account the local sources of the rebellion against the "revolution of dignity" (see e.g. Judah 2015). Russia recognized the short-lived independence of Crimea before the region joined the Russian Federation. On the contrary, regular contacts between Russian officials and the leadership of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics have not led to the recognition of these people's republics.

The case of Crimea has parallels with the early Soviet history, not to mention the short-lived republics of Central Lithuania or Hawai'i, even though it may be seen as unprecedented in the post-1991 history of Russia and Ukraine. The attitude towards Donetsk and Lugansk followed the post-2008 line of Russian foreign policy, in negation of the idea that the "guided independence" of Kosovo was unique and could not present a precedent for secession elsewhere in the world

(for the discussion on the subject see e.g. Summers 2011). Supporting the rebels, Russia did not break relations with Ukraine. This “hybrid” approach had been practiced by major Western powers such as the United Kingdom long before it entered Russian foreign policy.

### **New Russian Pragmatism and the 2016 Concept of Russia’s Foreign Policy**

In 2016 a new Concept of Russia’s Foreign Policy was adopted, marking a new step in the development of Russian approach to various international issues. According to this Concept, Russian foreign policy is firmly based on the norms of international law (focusing on the UN Charter) and the equal relations among states. At the same time, it is recognized that “assisting the establishment of the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia as modern democratic States, strengthening their international positions, and ensuring reliable security and socioeconomic recovery remains a priority for Russia” (The Russian Federation, 2016, clause 57).. Russia will continue to seek wider international recognition and guaranteed security for these two entities (seen as “modern democratic states”), as well as their socio-economic recovery There are no signs that Russia could renege on the post-2008 agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the normalization of relations with Georgia will only be possible “with due consideration for the current political environment in the South Caucasus”.. (The Russian Federation, 2016, clauses 2 and 59). As for “the Transnistrian issue”, the Concept stresses the need to respect “the sovereignty, territorial integrity and neutral status of the Republic of Moldova” as well as a future “special status” for Transnistria (The Russian Federation, 2016, clause 58). There is no specific reference to the other post-Soviet wannabe states. These cases are only dealt with in the context of conflict regulation, be it “the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict” or “the internal conflict in Ukraine” (The Russian Federation, 2016, clauses 56 and 58). Outside the “post-Soviet space”, territorial integrity is mentioned several times in the Concept. In relation to the Middle East and North Africa, Russia “consistently promotes political and diplomatic settlement of conflicts in regional States while respecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right to self-determination without outside interference”; as for Syria, “Russia supports the unity, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a secular, democratic and pluralistic State with all ethnic and religious groups living in peace and security and enjoying equal rights and opportunities” (The Russian Federation, 2016, clauses 92 and 93). The reference to self-determination is thus not concretized in the Concept, but it becomes clear that the application of this right is not unconditional. The guiding principles of Russian foreign policy are defined as “independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency, predictability, a multidirectional approach and the commitment to pursue national priorities on a non-confrontational basis” (The Russian Federation, 2016, clause 3g).

Among these principles, the reference to pragmatism deserves a special attention. Taking into account current Moscow's policy towards internationally-recognized states as well as partly-recognized and other de facto political entities, we can conclude that Russia is still acting in the realm of states, but official and semi-official contacts with non-sovereign actors are also possible nowadays, especially when they fall into the sphere of Moscow's Realpolitik. New Russian pragmatism, which is not exactly new on the international stage, will give the Kremlin more space for business-like foreign policy.

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### **Bio**

#### ***Victor Jeifets***

Prof. Victor Jeifets (jeifets@gmail.com) is a Professor at the School of International Relations, St. Petersburg State University, Russia. He has worked in the fields of International Relations and Communist Studies. He has published extensively on Russian foreign policy issues, as also on Latin American history and politics. His publications include "América Latina en la Internacional Comunista, 1919-1943", Santiago, Ariadna Editores, 2015; "El Partido Comunista de Argentina y la III Internacional", Mexico, Nostromo, 2013, "Reflexiones sobre el centenario de la participación rusa en la Primera Guerra Mundial: entre el olvido histórico y los mitos modernos", *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de Cultura*, 2015. Vol. 42. Num. 2; "Rusia, Ucrania y los países del Oeste: en vísperas de la Paz Fría", *Patria. Análisis Político de la Defensa*, 2 (2014) 70-86.

#### ***Nikolay Dobronravin***

Prof. Nikolay A. Dobronravin (n.dobronravin@spbu.ru) is a Professor at the School of International Relations, St. Petersburg University, Russia. He has worked in the fields of world politics, African and Islamic studies. He has published extensively on West Africa, boundary studies and energy policy. His publications include chapters "Oil, Gas, and Modernization of Global South: African Lessons for Post-Soviet States", and "Oil, Gas, Transit and Boundaries: Problems of the Transport Curse" in *Resource Curse and Post-Soviet Eurasia: Oil, Gas, and Modernization*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2010.

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