Special Issue Introduction:

International Linkages and the Dynamics of Conflict:

Revisiting the Post-Soviet Conflicts

The violent post-Soviet conflicts that erupted during and immediately after the collapse of the USSR, have experienced very different conflict dynamics. Some, such Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, are often described as being 'frozen' in a stalemate of "no war, no peace" (Lynch 2002). Others, such as Chechnya and Tajikistan seem to have been resolved. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 has moved the so-called 'frozen' or 'managed' conflict areas of the post-Soviet space centre stage again, calling into question some of the earlier assumptions about their underlying causes, dynamics and inherent stability or instability. The concept of the 'frozen' conflict does not sufficiently take into account the actors and structures continuously shaping the conflict dynamics that can precipitate the return to war, lock in cycles of increasing or decreasing tension, or transform a conflict altogether. The Russia-Georgia war in 2008, the clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Osh (Kyrgyzstan) in 2010, and the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation in 2014 are recent examples of how conflicts previously considered to be 'frozen' or resolved can suddenly be reactivated. The fact that events unfold quickly at these crisis moments points to the fact that unresolved dynamics make the (re-)occurrence of violent conflict possible once a political opportunity presents itself. The re-emergence of the Crimean issue provides the extreme case in this respect: a conflict that was prevented during one period of the post-Soviet transition process in the 1990s can leave unresolved elements that can become salient under a new set of political leaders and conditions and with very different consequences. Only by reflecting on underlying conflict dynamics, including the coherence and commitment of ruling elites, can we explain why Russia under Yeltsin accepted Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea in the 1990s, but rushed to annex it under Putin in March

2014 in the aftermath of mass protests in Kyiv and the ouster of Ukrainian president Yanukovych. The image of the 'frozen' conflict also cannot capture the stop-and-go rhythm characterizing conflict-management in Moldova where the incentive of closer links with the EU sporadically ~~seems to~~ provides an incentive to resolve the Transnistria issue. And even in the case of Nagorny Karabakh, where no new conflict has broken out, a constant ebb and flow in the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan and speculation about a potential escalation aer not captured adequately by the image of a 'frozen conflict'. These kinds of conflict dynamics that have not yet been explored systematically are analyzed in this special issue.

Early discussions of the conflicts arising from the collapse of the USSR had focused culpability on 'institutionalized multinationality' and the 'subversive institutions' of Soviet federalism, in particular autonomy arrangements (Brubaker 1996, Bunce 1999, Cornell 2002), or stressed the corrosive role of democratization in new states as a cause of violence (Snyder 2000, Mann, 2004, Mansfield and Snyder 2007). An alternative interpretation for the occurrence vs. the absence of violent conflicts valued territorial autonomy as stabilizing in divided societies, and highlighted the way in which Soviet-era autonomies were managed by post-communist regimes. Whether a successor state regime de-institutionalized or re-institutionalized autonomy for regions or ethnic minorities within their new nation statebuilding processes had a determining impact on conflict potential (Hughes and Sasse 2002). The question of why conflict occurred in some places across the Former Soviet Union (FSU) but not in others with similar conditions drew attention to different combinations of structural legacies and the role of agency in mobilizing or defusing conflict potential (Hughes 2007, Sasse 2007, Zürcher 2007).

New empirical analysis and a better understanding of conflict dynamics over time are needed. This special issue aims to contribute to this new generation of research into the

protracted post-Soviet conflicts. It will focus, in particular, on the links between different external and domestic actors in shaping conflict processes by borrowing the concepts of 'linkage' and 'leverage', which were developed in the context of regime change and democratization. The innovative conceptual focus should also prove useful in understanding other protracted conflicts beyond the FSU.

In the discussion about the international dimension of transition and regime change (rather than conflict), Levitsky and Way condensed previous attempts at categorizing the international factors into two concepts – *linkage* and l*everage* (Levitsky and Way 2005, 2010 2012). Their paradigm is a development of earlier scholarly efforts to conceptualize the interactions between domestic and international politics. The usefulness of these concepts lies in the fact that they span the spectrum of paradigms for understanding the relationships between these two levels of politics, from hegemony aspiring realpolitik at one end, to forms of international society and cooperation around common interests and norms at the other. Historically, the international order has alternated along this spectrum, undergoing shifting temporal waves and experiencing uneven geographical experiences of power-based and rule-based order. The global unevenness of the spectrum means that some states and regions are more rule-oriented with each other and not other states, while others operate more completely within the frame of power politics. Studies of the international pressures for domestic change have tended to use a political or economic conditionality lens since the early 1990s, whether examining aid and development (Stokke 1995), the conditionality of international financial institutions such as the IMF (Stone 2002), or Western policies of conditionality for spreading democracy (Whitehead ed. 2001), or the expansion of the European Union (Hughes et al. 2004, Grabbe 2005, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier ed. 2005, Vachudova 2005, Jacoby 2006).

Levitsky and Way have contrasted two mechanisms that, in their view, raise the cost of authoritarianism: Western *leverage*, defined as a government's vulnerability to external pressure, and *linkage* to the West, defined as the density of a country's ties to the US, the EU and Western-led multilateral institutions. They differentiate between six types of Western linkages: economic (credit, assistance and investment), intergovernmental (bilateral and multilateral), social (tourism, migration etc.), technocratic (foreign educated elites), communication (cross-border telecommunications, internet connections, Western media penetration) and transnational civil society linkages (Levitsky and Way 2012). Levitsky and Way conceded a category of 'black knights' as a counterpoint to Western actors exerting leverage, but non-Western linkage and leverage remain by and large outside their analysis. In this special section Western and non-Western actors will be given equal weight in the analysis.

For the purposes of this special issue, the concepts of linkage and leverage will be applied to the analysis of post-Soviet conflict dynamics. While issues of regime type and regime change are tied up with the conflicts, our main interest is in the effect of linkages – between external and domestic actors as well as among external or domestic actors – on the conflict dynamics in the FSU. Linkage and leverage function on different analytical levels: while a country's set of linkages can be mapped more or less comprehensively for a certain moment in time, leverage requires an ex post assessment of particular outcomes. Linkages can, but do not have to, turn into leverage, and we need to know more about the conditions under which they do. Leverage denotes a clear direction of causality, whereas linkage points to sets of relationships without prejudging the mechanism, significance and direction of causality. It therefore provides a more comprehensive entry point for the analysis and will be frontloaded in the empirical case studies. The key concern are the conditions under which certain linkages become politically salient – whether as leverage, as a facilitating or

constraining factor, or as a framing device. Linkages may exert a direct and discernible effect on an aspect of a conflict or the conflict outcome, but they may also be part of a broader set of factors that jointly shape one or more stages of a conflict cycle. The latter does not diminish their overall significance, but requires detailed process tracing to reveal the causal dynamics at play. Thus, the special issuesection aims to make a conceptual and an empirical contribution to the discussions about post-Soviet conflicts (and conflicts generally) and the idea of linkages and leverage.

We ask whether certain types of linkages are more conflict-prone than others. Both the density and diversity of linkages will be probed. Linkages have to be forged and maintained by actors against the backdrop of structural conditions. Thus, the emphasis in our discussion is on the role of agency in conflict dynamics. By comparison, Levitsky's and Way's discussion was primarily structuralist in focus, and the causal mechanisms behind linkage in particular were underexplored in their work. They posited that linkages increase the costs of authoritarianism by making international responses to repression more likely, building domestic constituencies for reform, and changing the domestic power balance of interests.

One causal mechanism is centred on how international linkages are (de-)activated by domestic politics (Sasse 2013). In the context of regime change it has been shown that diverse linkages reinforce domestic political competition and can thereby contribute to the creation of democratic openings. Conversely, in the absence of domestic political competition, international linkages can insulate a regime from internal pressures for reform, in particular if the linkages are deep and undiversified. Unresolved conflict and stateness issues are one potent filter for international linkages (ibid.). While the focus here was on conflict issues as an intervening variable linked to the dynamics of regime change, this special section explores a related logic with regard to the role that international linkages play

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in the dynamics of conflict: how do the density and diversity of linkages become politically activated to influence (or renew) conflict or conflict-management? The internationalization of conflict through external linkages can either act as a constraint on actors and therefore support accommodation rather than violent conflict or stoke conflict by creating inroads for external actors. This central question frames the case analysis collected in this ~~s~~Special issue~~Section~~.

The selection of the empirical cases assembled covers variation on the nature of the conflict, the type and balance of international linkages, and the intensity and promise of multilateral attempts at conflict-resolution. It includes ~~both~~ extreme cases, such as the outbreak of a new international war (Russia-Georgia) and the largely peaceful though forced incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, but also the case of Nagorny Karabakh where the negotiation of linkages and leverage prevents both conflict escalation and resolution. . ~~Due to space constraints, the case of Nagorno-Karabakh is not covered separately. Several contributions make references to this case, but as it is probably the best documented one among the post-Soviet conflicts and the one where there has not (yet) been a political shift in whatever direction, it arguably contributes somewhat less to the discussion here~~.

The bulk of the comparative literature on nationalism and conflict focuses on the role of elites in instrumentalizing and mobilizing identities as part of their power struggles (Hale 2008). However, we still need to understand better what factors incentivize and constrain elite actors in their political choices. Here we focus on international linkages as one such factor that can be a constraint in some cases and an incentive in others. Our central concern throughout the case studies is with the conditions under which linkages turn into leverage at a critical juncture in a conflict. The literature on social mobilization provides a useful starting-point to frame the moment and process of activating existing linkages. It highlights, in

particular, the role of a political opportunity structure to bring about the rare event of mass protest against a backdrop of existing grievances (Tarrow 1989, McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Similarly, we suggest, that a political opportunity is needed to transform linkages into leverage. The case studies present a range of different scenarios to explore the political opportunities that activate linkages, make them gain in political salience, and transform them into leverage. Where the linkage structures are nested and uni-directional, this process is likely to accelerate and show a stronger effect. By contrast, multi-directional and potentially cross-cutting linkages can help to maintain a balance between the incentives and constraints of the pivotal actors. More specifically, linkages can disrupt or maintain the power balance between domestic elites, or between domestic and external elites, thereby underpinning either conflict or conflict-management. Finally, we reverse causality and account for the effects of conflict on linkages, thereby taking the idea of procedural conflict dynamics seriously and accounting for the shifting notions of 'cause' and 'effect'. Detailed process-tracing of individual conflicts has revealed the shifting nature of the conflicts at stake (Hughes 2007, Sasse 2007, Zürcher, 2007, Coppieters and Sakwa eds. 2010). Translated into the discussion about linkages, this logic suggests that conflict can disrupt some linkages while reinforcing others or creating new ones, thereby transforming or influencing the development of a new stage in the conflict.

This list of research questions or hypotheses is meant to provide a conceptual roadmap for the empirical analysis presented here and for future research. While all the case studies are concerned with explaining why certain linkages become causally important for conflict or conflict-management and how linkages turn into leverage, not every question outlined above will be followed up in each individual article. Rather, each contribution concentrates on the questions their cases speak to most clearly, thereby jointly providing a

richer picture. In the process, some of the initial questions are finetuned or reformulated as hypotheses for future research.

F~~our~~ive empirical articles will put these conceptual ideas to a test, focusing on the cases of Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), Ukraine (Crimea) and Russia (Chechnya), Moldova (Transnistria), ~~and~~ Kyrgyzstan (Osh), and Armenia/Azerbaijan (Nagorny Karabakh). These cases of internationalized conflicts have all seen ~~recent~~ changes in their dynamics, including their linkage structures and agents.

The first article by Bader and Gerrits analy~~s~~zes Abkhazia and South Ossetia as extreme cases of Russian linkage and leverage. The authors argue that the predominantly Russia-oriented economic and intergovernmental linkages that predated the 2008 Georgian-Russian war prepared the ground for Russian leverage in 2008 and beyond, while also limiting the scope for action of other international actors. The weakness of organizational power in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia and a new type of linkage highlighted by the authors – the diffusion of institutional templates and laws modelled on the Russian Federation and the delegation of Russian cadres – have deepened the regions' asymmetrical linkages and turned them into dependence on Russia.

Hughes and Sasse analyze one type of linkage that has not yet been conceptualized sufficiently, namely ideational linkages. They focus on what they call 'power ideas', the ideas of nationalism and Islamism with their inherent claims about how political power should be arranged. They trace the role of nationalism in two contrasting episodes involving Crimea (1990s and 2014) and the role of nationalism vs. Islamism in two conflict episodes in Chechnya (early 1990s and 1999 onwards) to show the conditions that either constrain, or mobilize an ideational linkage into leverage. The conflict outcomes range from conflict-prevention and a conflict based on a control regime (Crimea) to an extremely violent conflict

and its transformation through co-optation over time (Chechnya). Power ideas can be transformed into leverage by international political opportunities, but they can also be de-activated by political choices made by external elites prioritizing alternative linkages.

In Moldova competition over an increase in linkages as a basis for leverage forms part of the intensifying geopolitical competition between Russia and the West. As Beyer and Wolff show in the third contribution to this special issues, even as the balance in the linkage structures has tilted somewhat to the West, and the EU in particular, Russia retains enough blocking power through its nested linkages to prevent conflict-resolution or further democratization in Moldova. Thus, the wider international context determines the scope for linkages to turn into leverage. The analysis also highlights a paradox: state and institutional weakness enables leverage, but it can also limit its effects, at least in the case of the type of linkages Western actors are trying to build in Moldova. As the authors show, domestically weakly anchored external linkages such as the ones built through EU interactions with individual politicians in Moldova, can even have counterproductive effects in this international climate as they provoke countermeasures and competition over linkages and leverage.

Kyrgyzstan represents a case of repeated short-lived violent or non-violent conflict and a relatively quick return to stability (1990, 2005, 2010). In his analysis of the transnational dimension of conflict in Kyrgyzstan, in particular the intercommunal clashes in and around the city of Osh in 2010, Fumagalli highlights the dense, growing and increasingly diverse non-Western linkages. These potentially alternative sources of leverage can both foster and mitigate against conflict, and their effect has varied throughout the conflict cycle. Russia chose to activate its diverse and nested linkages with Russia to shape (but not cause) the conflict. Other external actors, most notably Uzbekistan and China, refrained from activating their economic or social linkages to Kyrgyzstan during 2010 events, or deliberately

de-activated them to maintain stability despite local actors calling for external intervention. The case highlights the choices actors have over activating linkages, especially in the presence of multi-directional linkages, but also the overarching influence of a deeper and nested set of linkages with one external actor – Russia.

The conflict over Nagorny-Karabakh is characterized by multi-directional and cross-cutting linkages between Western and non-Western actors that are not static but prevent both both the escalation of a new conflict and conflict resolution as well as domestic regime renewal. Broers' analysis of political dynamics underpinning conflict and regime stability highlights the role of domestic elites in preventing uni-vectoral international linkages and the significance of external actors choosing not to activate linkages into leverage. Western linkages exist in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, but they are not sufficiently relevant to the conflict goals. Russian linkages dominate in Armenia: they are effectively a veto on conflict-resolution but have been managed in order not to risk escalation.

Overall, the empirical cases highlight the causal force of international linkages in shaping conflict-prevention, the outbreak of conflict, conflict dynamics and conflict-management. In order to gain in salience and become causally significant during a conflict, linkages need to be activated by political opportunities and elites. In the post-Soviet space, the nested nature of the Russia-oriented linkages, comprising a mixture of economic, cultural and political links, is particularly amenable to this empowerment and dominates the conflict-cycles in all the cases discussed in this special issue. Moreover, the individual articles highlight novel dimensions that deserve further attention in scholarly analysis of conflicts beyond the FSU, namely the role of institutional and legal diffusion as a powerful linkage, the role of ideas as a linkage, the counterproductive effect of competing multi-directional linkages on conflict-resolution, and the external actors' choice when it comes to activating or de-activating their linkages in settings characterized by multi-directional linkages, and the

interaction of a predominant set of linkages preventing conflict resolution with diffuse, cross-cutting linkages mitigating against conflict escalation. This special issue hopes to add a new dimension to the study of post-Soviet conflicts and the broader comparative analysis of conflict.

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