Article

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Closer together or further apart? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the conflicts in the EU's eastern neighbourhood

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Abstract

The article discusses the impact of COVID-19 on the conflict zones in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, and the EU's and Russia's approaches to addressing the pandemic. It illustrates that the pandemic has led to the further escalation of tensions in the region, while exposing the vulnerabilities of the secessionist territories and the limits to their reliance on external support. Addressing the crisis in its neighbourhood, the EU has largely focused on tackling the long-term consequences of the pandemic, while Russia has resorted to disinformation tactics to exercise influence among its neighbours. In this regard, the failure to push forward any negotiations on the global crisis within the existing mediation formats signals the political impotence of these formats to convey even a symbolic message of cooperation to the populations.

Keywords

Frozen conflicts, Eastern neighbourhood, COVID-19, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, Russia, EU

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges worldwide and created unique threats for the breakaway regions in the EU's eastern vicinity. These regions' limited contacts with the international community have not prevented the spread of the virus. However, the lack of international cooperation and the often-strained relations

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with the regions' parent states have led to a dilemma regarding how to approach the global crisis. Weak health systems and outdated Soviet infrastructure have made the breakaway regions of Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the self-proclaimed republics in Donbas particularly vulnerable (*Crisis Group* 2020). On the one hand, in some cases this situation has created a unique opportunity to bring the secessionist regions in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus closer to their parent states in order to jointly tackle the pandemic. On the other hand, the willingness for and likelihood of such cooperation can be questioned.

This article seeks to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the dynamics of the conflicts in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. It argues that the common challenge has not brought the conflicting parties closer together but has further escalated tensions. At the same time, the global health crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities of the secessionist territories and the limits to their reliance on external support.

The article is structured as follows. The first section examines the situation with the pandemic and the responses of the breakaway regions. The following section considers the strategies of the parent states. Finally, the article looks at the approaches of Russia and the EU towards the conflict-ridden areas in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus in this time of health crisis.

Breakaway regions' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

Despite poor health infrastructure and a lack of medical personnel, the breakaway regions of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have largely resorted to a strategy of further isolation as a means of tackling the pandemic. As early as 16 March, Tiraspol decided to close the border with the Republic of Moldova (Balakhnova 2020). As the global pandemic entered its second wave, more checkpoints were introduced by the de facto Transnistrian authorities, restricting the freedom of movement across the Nistru river (OSCE 2020). The Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia adopted somewhat different approaches after the closure of the borders by their kin state, Russia. Remarkably, Abkhazia opened up limited channels of communication and accepted medical supplies and aid from Russia and international organisations (in particular the World Health Organization) (Emerson et al. 2020). In contrast, with a very limited international presence on the ground and internal unrest, South Ossetia faced a very dire situation (Chankvetadze and Murusidze 2020; *JamNews* 2020).

Amidst the global pandemic, the breakaway regions have not only become further isolated but have also witnessed the continuation or even escalation of violence. Notwithstanding the call by UN Secretary General António Guterres for a ceasefire in March 2020, bombing and shooting in Eastern Ukraine continued. The ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh broke down in July and escalated into a war in September 2020, which left this disputed region on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. Before the start of the war, the Armenian website quoted statistics on coronavirus from the 'ministry' of healthcare of Nagorno-Karabakh, putting the overall number of cases at 421 (*Hetq*

2020). This information has not been updated since but the situation with COVID-19 has dramatically worsened. Media sources have reported that the population has been hit particularly hard (*AP News* 2020; *Global Voices* 2020). Unsurprisingly, with the start of the war in September 2020, the issues related to the pandemic became of secondary importance. As Stepanakert-based journalist Lika Zakaryan noted in a conversation with *Global Voices* (2020), 'Nobody cares about COVID-19 right now'. Significantly, the existing multilateral formats for negotiations to address these ongoing conflicts—the Normandy Format for Ukraine and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh—have been neither visible nor effective in fostering dialogue to cease hostilities and tackle the ongoing pandemic.

With this further alienation of the breakaway regions from their parent states, the COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed difficulties for the secessionist entities in providing security for their people and has demonstrated the limits to their external support. Thousands of pensioners in Transnistria and Eastern Ukraine, whose pensions are paid by Russia, faced difficulties in receiving their payments after the decision of the de facto authorities to close the borders with Moldova and Ukraine respectively (Uskenskaya 2020; *Hromadske International* 2020). Struggling with the pandemic within its own borders, Russia, as the patron state of the separatist territories (with the exception of Nagorno-Karabakh), has barely managed to address the health crisis outside it, resulting in criticism from the populations of the breakaway regions. As a human rights activist in Ukraine put it, the de facto leaders of the Luhansk People's Republic 'turned against Ukraine and risked their own health and freedom—and in return, Russia cannot even deliver masks' (*Crisis Group* 2020). However, although the parent states have expressed more willingness to assist their uncontrolled territories, their approaches have so far also been unsuccessful.

Approaches of the parent states

The parent states have adopted different approaches to dealing with the pandemic in the territories outside of their control. Georgia and Moldova in particular made attempts to extend aid to the uncontrolled territories, with Georgian Prime Minister Gakharia stating that '[we] will do everything to protect the health of our citizens on both sides of the occupation line' (Fenwick 2020). In a similar way, Moldovan President Dodon stressed that no restriction on the freedom of movement would be imposed as 'Transnistrian region residents are our citizens' (*InfoTag* 2020).

The responses to the pandemic in Nagorno-Karabakh and Donbas were more constrained because of the continuing hostilities. Despite the highlighted opportunities to stop the war in Eastern Ukraine (Taylor et al. 2020), Oleksiy Reznikov, the Ukrainian Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine stated that 'the "border" between the occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions has been locked', with ongoing fighting and no information on the coronavirus situation (*EU Today* 2020). In a similar vein, the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but partly controlled by Armenia, faced a lack of necessary

aid because of its particular status. This was combined with repeated outbreaks of violence from March, which escalated into a war in September. With the start of the global pandemic, Armenia closed its borders, thereby restricting access to and from the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Consequently, Nagorno-Karabakh could only receive medical assistance with the authorisation of the Azeri authorities. With Azerbaijan having no direct control over this region, such arrangements could hardly be made. All attempts to raise this issue within the Minsk format or to organise the delivery of assistance via Armenia with the agreement of Azerbaijan have been unsuccessful. As a result, even before the start of outright war, the inter-state competition between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the region meant that the conflicting parties were unable to address the pandemic in the disputed territory.

However, notwithstanding the situations in Nagorno-Karabakh and Donbas, a more cooperative approach by the parent states to bring the breakaway regions closer to them has not borne fruit either. The concerning situation with the virus has only exacerbated tensions among the populations of the countries. In one example, a news report appeared on Georgian television about the hospitalisation of an Abkhazian woman in a Georgian hospital. The truth of the story was, however, quickly denied by the de facto authorities of Abkhazia, causing an escalation of tensions between the conflicting parties (Rozanskij 2020). A similar pattern could be observed in Transnistria: after the closure of the borders with Moldova, Tiraspol restricted the movement of medical personnel (including those with Moldovan passports) on its territory. This restriction generated further tensions because of a general lack of medical personnel in the region (Gamova 2020). Against this backdrop of a lack of cooperation between the secessionist regions and their parent states, external policies, in particular those of Russia and the EU, need to be considered.

Russian policies towards the frozen conflicts during the pandemic

Even before the pandemic, Russia had developed a wide toolbox of strategies to instrumentalise the presence of the breakaway regions with a view to increasing its influence over the countries in its neighbourhood. With the start of the global pandemic, Russia continued to rely on disinformation campaigns and oligarchic structures in some countries to generate mistrust of democratic processes and the way democratic societies were handling the pandemic.

In particular, the elections in Georgia and Moldova in autumn 2020 witnessed disinformation campaigns on social media as well as more direct interference in the electoral process. Investigations conducted by the Dossier Center, a London-based investigative project financed by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a critic of Russian President Putin, found evidence of financial support for and direct handling of the campaign of the Patriots' Alliance, the pro-Russian party in Georgia (Kiparoidze and Patin 2020). Polarisation in Moldova similarly increased on the eve of the presidential election. During the campaign President Igor Dodon accused his main rival, Maia Sandu, of receiving direct support from foreign governments. A similar observation was made by Russian Minister of

Foreign Affairs Lavrov (*RFERL* 2020). In reality, in early October 2020 the non-governmental organisations the Dossier Centre and RISE Moldova published an investigative report alleging Moscow's manipulation of and provision of direct aid to President Dodon (*RFERL* 2020). It was thus amidst this climate of rising polarisation and deeply undermined trust in state institutions and campaigns that the two countries entered their electoral periods.

In the hot zones of Eastern Ukraine, fighting continued, supported by Russia, despite the pandemic. A lack of communication and knowledge about the situation in the East has dominated the months of the health crisis. At the same time, the patchy information available on social media evinced a particularly worrying situation in the Donbas region, where infected people were placed outdoors in the absence of the necessary facilities and equipment. Additionally, various conspiracy theories seemed to dominate the discourse about the pandemic. For instance, the Telegram (social media app) channels of the 'ministry' of information of the Donetsk People's Republic blamed the US for creating coronavirus with the aim of thwarting the 9 May military parade (*Glavcom* 2020).

Nagorno-Karabakh is the only breakaway region where Russia does not act as the patron state. However, since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia has managed to increase its influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan, in particular via the deployment of its peacekeepers as part of the 10 November agreement that formally ended the war (Russia, The Kremlin 2020). Arguably, the early months of the pandemic, characterised by a lack of diplomatic engagement between the Minsk Group mediators and the conflicting parties, contributed to the outbreak of the war and further marginalisation of the Western role in the peace negotiations over the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

As a result, the global pandemic did not generally change Russia's approach to the conflict-ridden neighbourhood. Its activities continued to sow doubt about democratic processes and attempted to increase its influence. At the same time, the Russian authorities aimed to compensate for their inability to assist Russian-controlled territories (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and parts of Eastern Ukraine) in handling the crisis by operating disinformation campaigns and disseminating various conspiracy theories about the origins of the crisis.

The EU and the (not so) frozen conflicts during the pandemic

Amidst the pandemic, the EU adopted a long-term strategy towards its eastern neighbourhood. At the end of March 2020, the European Commission came up with a generous financial support package to assist the countries of the Eastern Partnership in tackling the pandemic and building up their resilience (European Commission, DG NEAR 2020). As the pandemic has progressed and the socio-economic issues have started to become more salient, the importance of the support for dealing with the long-term consequences of the crisis and potentially shaping the image of the EU in its eastern vicinity have become particularly clear. In some cases (for example, Abkhazia), EU-sponsored aid has

reached the secessionist regions via international organisations such as the Red Cross (*Crisis Group* 2020). Overall, the EU has focused on economic aid and reiterated its support for democratic procedures on the eve of elections in some countries (such as Georgia and Moldova). However, the attempts of the EU and its member states to raise the issue of the pandemic within the existing mediation formats and bring the parent states closer to their uncontrolled regions have not been successful.

The situations in Nagorno-Karabakh and Eastern Ukraine witnessed a different approach. With repeated escalations of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh throughout the year, the EU primarily attempted to push forward a ceasefire and negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE, as well as providing humanitarian assistance. After the start of the war in September 2020, the EU allocated around €900,000 of humanitarian aid to help the affected civilian population (European Commission ECHO 2020b). The delivery of humanitarian aid to Eastern Ukraine, which has experienced continued fighting on its territory, also encountered challenges, although non-governmental organisations from EU member states (such as the Czech organisation People in Need) continued their work (European Commission ECHO 2020a). In these cases, the global pandemic became a somewhat secondary issue: it neither eased confrontation between the parties nor prevented its escalation.

Thus when approaching the conflict-ridden zones in its Eastern neighbourhood, the EU has focused on tackling the long-term socio-economic repercussions of the ongoing pandemic. Its toolbox includes the traditional approach of providing financial assistance and expressing support for democratic values. Overall, this approach has not had an impact on the relations between the secessionist regions and their parent states. Furthermore, the prospects for dialogue and negotiations between the conflicting parties remain very poor, if possible at all.

Conclusion

Tackling the global pandemic has brought unique challenges for the secessionist regions of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, which are experiencing international isolation and repeated escalations of tensions and violence. The health crisis has been tackled in various ways by the disputed regions, with most resorting to a strategy of further isolation from their parent states by closing the borders. This has not improved the situation but has exposed the vulnerabilities of the breakaway regions in maintaining peace and security for their citizens.

The global pandemic has further highlighted the contrasting approaches and confrontation between the EU and Russia in their shared neighbourhood. The Russian authorities continue to rely extensively on disinformation campaigns, support for oligarchic structures and the presence of pro-Russian groups in the conflict-ridden countries to undermine trust in democratic institutions. In contrast, the EU has followed a strategy of addressing the long-term consequences of the crisis by providing financial support to alleviate the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic. That being

said, the COVID-19 crisis has further destabilised the EU's eastern neighbourhood, in some cases rolling back the already slow process of enhancing people-to-people contacts. The lack of negotiations on this common challenge within the established mediation formats signals the political impotence of these formats to convey even a symbolic message of cooperation to the populations.

With this in mind, I offer the following recommendations for the EU to improve its response to the crisis in its immediate neighbourhood.

First, without undermining the policy of non-recognition, positive engagement with the breakaway regions needs to be developed. To this end, cooperation with international organisations could be one way to overcome the existing obstacles. A positive example of such cooperation can be found in Abkhazia. Amidst the pandemic, this breakaway region both opened up links with Georgia and received EU aid via the Red Cross, which was present on its territory.

Second, and related to the first, overcoming the persistent isolation of the breakaway regions could give more visibility in these regions to their parent states and the EU, which would make it easier to counteract conspiracy theories and disinformation on the ground. Such positive engagement, falling short of recognition, could ultimately foster communication between the conflicting parties and possibly end the unproductive isolation and stalemate into which most peace processes in the Eastern neighbourhood are locked.

Third, both the COVID-19 pandemic in the region and the efforts to deal with it have highlighted the need to revitalise the existing multilateral formats between the conflicting parties. In this regard, the failure of the Minsk Group to address the war and the pandemic in Nagorno-Karabakh is particularly salient as it rendered international mediators barely visible. The same is true of the other mediation formats—the '5+2' format for Transnistria, the Geneva International Discussions and the Normandy Format—which failed even to bring the common challenge of the pandemic to the negotiation table. In these circumstances, the pandemic has highlighted the deplorable state of diplomatic engagement and negotiations in the region, where diplomacy is becoming less of an option than ever before.

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