Jan Zofka

Territorial Conflict and Secessionism in the Post-Soviet Black Sea Region

1 Introduction

Charles King has stated that "the end of Soviet communism was a relatively peaceful affair"[1]—given the disputed boundaries and social grievances across the decaying Union. Compared to the end of Yugoslavia and other historical cases of empire and state decay, and if the wars in Ukraine since 2014 are counted as belonging to another epoch, one might say so. The Black Sea region, however, was riddled with conflict in the 1990s. Furthermore, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the war in Eastern Ukraine since 2014, Russia's takeover of Crimea, Azerbaijan's recent offensive against Armenian-held territories, and Russia's attack on Ukraine have brought a second wave of violence lasting to this day. However, one can also look at what happened in the Black Sea region from the opposite perspective. In the areas bordering the Sea one can find various examples of conflictive situations where peaceful settlement was found, as in Ajaria, Gagauzia, and, for the period up to 2014, even Crimea. Additionally, violence in the Black Sea region was not exceptional, as one might name the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997 with 60,000 to 100,000 victims, the pogroms in Osh, or the "Batken events" in 1999 in southern Kyrgyzstan.[2]

Furthermore, most of the political projects of conflict actors in the region were not connected to the Black Sea. Above all, the pro-Russian actors were, at first sight, oriented towards Moscow and not towards the Black Sea. And indeed, to be sure, the conflicts initially took place in the context of the Soviet Union's state decay and were coined by the legacies of Soviet structures and borders. But, on a concrete level, the Black Sea and its shores were influential for and entangled in conflict development and the formation of the acting coalitions—as a conflict site, through sea-related infrastructures, and as an imaginary space.

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1 Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics* 53, no. 4 (July 2001): 529.
2 İdil Tunçer Kılavuz, "Understanding Civil War: A Comparison of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (March 2011): 263–90; İdil Tunçer Kılavuz, "The Role of Networks in Tajikistan's Civil War: Network Activation and Violence Specialists," *Nationalities Papers* 37, no. 5 (2009): 693–717; Iraj Bashiri, *The History of the Civil War in Tajikistan* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020); Tim Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016); Valery Tishkov, "'Don't Kill Me, I'm a Kyrgyz!': An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Ethnic Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 32, no. 2 (1995): 133–49.

What conflicts are to be considered here? Firstly, this chapter examines "intra-state" conflicts. To be sure, all civil, internal, or intra-state wars include action and support by outside governments. What is required here for an intra-state conflict is that non-state collective actors of violence or secessionist mobilization make up crucial parts of the conflict scene. The second problem is the geographic question as to whether to treat conflicts in the broader region or to concentrate on direct connections to the sea. In order to do both, the chapter is divided in two parts. The first will provide an overview of the post-Soviet "intra-state" conflicts in the broader Black Sea region and summarize what research has achieved on its way towards a sociology of post-Soviet internal war. The second part looks for concrete entanglements of these conflicts and the protagonists with the Black Sea.

2 Overview: The Sociology of Post-Soviet Intra-State Conflicts

The most visible post-Soviet intra-state territorial conflicts for outside observers are the ones that have left non-recognized states until today, or even led to new wars in recent years. Others are much less well-known, as they remained on a level of low-intensity warfare and did not result in relevant territorial changes, and some conflictual situations were resolved before getting to a stage of protracted violence by autonomy solutions.

The conflict over the region Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh, formerly an autonomous oblast in Soviet Azerbaijan with an Armenian majority, was continued in 2020. In the first war from 1991 to 1994, tens of thousands of civilians died at the hands of government soldiers and nationalist paramilitaries and hundreds of thousands had to flee their homes. Between 1988 and 1991, around 1,000 had already been killed in low-intensity warfare and nationalist pogroms. Interwoven with the Karabakh-conflict, different factions of the Azerbaijani forces fought a short civil war among themselves for power in Baku in 1992/93. The pogroms in the Azerbaijani capital Baku in 1990 and in the nearby industrial town of Sumgait (Azeri: Sumqayıt) in 1988 against Armenian inhabitants, and the massacre of the Azerbaijani population of Khojaly (Azeri: Xocalı, Armenian: Khojalu) in 1992 belong to the most violent events of the Soviet decay. The territorial result of the war was that the autonomous oblast of Nagornyi Karabakh in Azerbaijan became the non-recognized republic of Artsakh and that a corridor between Armenia and the exclave was controlled by the Armenian forces. In 2020, Azerbaijan was able to win back a large part of this corridor, the region of Ağdam (Armenian: Akna), and the strategically important town of Shusha (Azeri: Şuşa, Armenian: Shushi) inside the former autonomous oblast.[3]

3 Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 152–85.

Another continuation of violent state decay in the post-Soviet Black Sea region took place in Ukraine when the Russian Federation incorporated the Black Sea peninsula Crimea in 2014 via military action, practically without resistance, while the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk were dragged into protracted violence and faced *de facto* control of large parts of their territory by two "People's Republics," before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. More than 10,000 people died in the standoff between the Ukrainian Army and volunteer paramilitaries on the one side and separatist forces supported by Russian military structures on the other between 2014 and 2022.[4]

A third "resumption" of violence occurred with the 2008 war in Georgia, where Russian troops excessively responded to the Georgian army's inroad into South Ossetia after shelling from the separatists' side. In the early 1990s, Abkhazian and South Ossetian regional elites and paramilitaries had resorted to violence in the face of Tbilisi's attempts to deprive them of autonomous status. The Abkhazian war cost tens of thousands of lives, and saw massive nationalist violence by the Georgian nationalistic paramilitary and an expulsion of more than 200,000 Georgians from Abkhazia. The Abkhazians were supported by Russian military and the—rather anti-Russian—paramilitary Confederation of the Mountain Peoples from various Caucasus districts and republics. The smaller former autonomous oblast of South Ossetia in the Caucasus Mountains also made itself independent in a war from 1990 to 1992 that cost 700–1,000 peoples' lives.[5] Additionally, the Georgian forces fought among themselves for power in Tbilisi. A coalition of the former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze as state council chairman with the leaders of the dominant paramilitary racket groups, supported by Moscow, defeated the incumbent nationalist president Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his "Zviadist" forces.[6] Also, the quasi-independence of the Ajar Autonomous Republic around the Black Sea coast resort of Batumi became rather forgotten after the conflict lifted when the Saakashvili government forced the regional strongman Aslan Abashidze to step down in 2004.[7]

In contrast, the conflict in Moldova over the region stretching along the Eastern shore of the river Dniester was met with comparatively great attention on an interna-

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4 Tetyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, *The Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States: Eastern Ukraine in the Post-Soviet Space* (London: Routledge, 2019); Ivan Katchanovski, "The Separatist War in Donbas: A Violent Break-up of Ukraine?," *European Politics and Society* 17, no. 4 (2016): 473–89; Anna Matveeva, "No Moscow Stooges: Identity Polarization and Guerrilla Movements in Donbass," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16, no. 1 (2016): 25–50; Alexandr Voronovici, "Internationalist Separatism and the Political Use of 'Historical Statehood' in the Unrecognized Republics of Transnistria and Donbass," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 3 (2020): 288–302.
5 Pavel K. Baev, "Civil Wars in Georgia: Corruption Breeds Violence," in *Potentials of Disorder: Explaining Conflict and Stability in the Caucasus and in the Former Yugoslavia*, ed. Jan Koehler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 134–37; Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 124–25.
6 Baev, "Civil Wars in Georgia," 131–33.
7 Georgi M. Derluguian, "The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria Before and After the Soviet Collapse," in *The Myth of 'Ethnic Conflict': Politics, Economics, and 'Cultural' Violence*, ed. Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D. Lipschutz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 261–92.

tional level. The small-scale war with around a thousand dead was fought by an embryonic Moldovan army and nationalist volunteers against a coalition of separatist paramilitaries supported by Soviet/Russian military. It led to the foundation of the Moldovan Dniester Republic (Transnistria), which in spite of international non-recognition has existed for thirty years and has seen its second government change by elections in 2019.[8]

The Chechen wars of course are also some of the most well-known post-Soviet intra-state conflicts, mostly due to the massive destruction of the republic and atrocities against civilians by the Russian army in the two wars of 1994–96 and 1999–2001. They are also famous for the image of the enemy as evil "Islamist" terrorists that was created by Russian (and Western) publics to legitimize these military campaigns. In fact, the early Chechen movement was led by the former Soviet army general Dzhokhar Dudaev and propagated a secular "Third World" nationalism. Only after the first brutal crackdown by the Russian army did the adoption of a supra-national political version of Wahhabi philosophy make sense to a part of the younger generation of field commanders, who used it as a "smokescreen"[9] for promoting their business interests and for entering into an internal power struggle against the older generation. It was mainly after the second Russian armed intervention that these people embarked on a destructive guerrilla strategy across various North Caucasian republics, as political options for independence had vanished.[10] Much less known are conflicts like the small-scale one-month war in the Prigorodnyi Raion of Vladikavkaz, between Ingushetia and North Ossetia in October/November 1992. The Ingush side claimed the suburb of the North Ossetian capital on the grounds of a history of expulsion under Stalin. Around 850 people died; the district remained under Ossetian control.[11]

Many more conflictive situations and nationalist mobilizations in the post-Soviet Black Sea region did not result in war-level violence. Nationalist paramilitaries in the South Russian region of Krasnodar perpetrated crimes against members of regional minorities, and the regional Cossack movement failed in its attempts to found new republics in Karachaevo-Cherkessiia.[12] In the Izmail district in southwestern Ukraine, squeezed between Moldova, Romania's Danube Delta, the Dniester Liman, and the Black Sea, dominant minorities with a tendency towards Soviet nostalgia had to adapt to Ukrainian independence, the Orange and Maidan revolutions, without this

8 Gottfried Hanne, *Der Transnistrien-Konflikt: Ursachen, Entwicklungsbedingungen und Perspektiven einer Regulierung* (Cologne: BiOsT, 1998); Stefan Troebst, "Separatistischer Regionalismus als Besitzstandswahrungsstrategie (post-)sowjetischer Eliten: Transnistrien 1989–2002," in *Regionale Bewegungen und Regionalismen in europäischen Zwischenräumen seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Philipp Ther and Holm Sundhaussen (Marburg: Verlag Herder Institut, 2003), 185–214.
9 Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 88.
10 Zürcher, 70–114.
11 Dana Jirouš, *Erinnerung als Mobilisierungsressource im Vorfeld ethnisierter Gewaltkonflikte: Das Beispiel Nordossetien – Inguschetien 1989–1992* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017).
12 Dittmar Schorkowitz, *Postkommunismus und verordneter Nationalismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 189–204.

leading to war or secession.[13] A broadly non-violent settlement with autonomy solutions was achieved in Gagauzia (Southern Moldova; Gagauz: Gagauz Yeri, Romanian: Găgăuzia, Russian: Gagauziia), Ajaria, and in 1990s Crimea.

Throughout the Soviet Union, a "Parade of Sovereignties" had been started by the liberalizations of perestroika. As Benedict Anderson noted, these struggles for new territorial arrangements were fought not along ethnic but, first and foremost, along administrative lines.[14] Oblasts wanted to achieve autonomy, autonomous oblasts wanted to become autonomous republics, and autonomous and Union republics independent states. Only in a few exceptions did actors manage to build up institutions without a direct Soviet administrative-territorial predecessor: in Eastern Moldova the Moldovan Dniester Republic, in Southern Moldova Gagauzia, and the Chechen national congress split up the Checheno-Ingush autonomous republic and marginalized the republican parliament, so that the Ingush-dominated oblasts had to build up their own institutions as well.[15]

Most of the actors employed nationalist ideology, but social science and historiography have identified the conflicts as violent re-allocation of power and resources in the context of Soviet state decay. In the pursuit of a sociology of post-Soviet war, the acting coalitions and their interests, motives, socialization, and their political economies have to be discovered. The clearest picture in this respect exists for the conflict in Moldova's Dniester Valley. There, the mobilizations for autonomy started in the factories of the industrial cities and towns on the banks of the Dniester in the form of strikes and demonstrations against the new Moldovan language law in 1989. The directors of the all-Union heavy industry factories collaborated with the local and all-Union security structures to build up the resources for a violent confrontation with Chişinău, with support from the Soviet army, which turned Russian in April 1992.[16]

The Transnistrian directors were not the only factory directors who could capitalize on their enterprise chairmanship in the violent conflicts of the transformation period. The most famous further examples might be the Azerbaijani textile fabricant and warlord Surət Hüseynov, in the Yugoslav sphere, the Bosnian owner of Agrokomerc Fikret Abdić.[17] Many other warlords and separatist leaders had become entrepreneurs in the transformation phase and were able to produce synergetic effects between their

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13 Simon Schlegel, *Making Ethnicity in Southern Bessarabia: Tracing the Histories of an Ambiguous Concept in a Contested Land* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

14 Benedict Anderson, *Die Erfindung der Nation: Zur Karriere eines folgenreichen Konzepts* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 1996), 214.

15 Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 76–79; Jeff Chinn and Steven D. Roper, "Territorial Autonomy in Gagauzia," *Nationalities Papers* 26 (1998): 87–101; Stefan Troebst, "Von 'Gagauz Halky' zu 'Gagauz Yeri': Die Autonomiebewegung der Gagausen in Moldova von 1988 bis 1998," *Ethnos – Nation* 7, no. 1 (1999): 41–54.

16 Jan Zofka, "The Transformation of Soviet Industrial Relations and the Foundation of the Moldovan Dniester Republic," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 5 (2016): 826–46.

17 Jan Zofka, "Politische Unternehmer: Fabrikdirektoren als Akteure postsozialistischer Bürgerkriege," in *Leipziger Zugänge zur rechtlichen, politischen und kulturellen Verflechtungsgeschichte Ostmitteleuropas*, ed. Adamantios Skordos and Dietmar Müller (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2015), 331.

business and their political or military career—such as Valerii Averkin in Crimea and Shamil Basaev in Chechnya, to name just two examples.[18]

Academics were a second social group from which leaders of conflict factions emanated. Nationalist intellectuals, not least historians, dominated many of the conflict parties in the Caucasus region. In some cases, the academic leaders were close to or partly congruent with the Soviet nomenklatura, as in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[19] In other cases, the leading academics had a dissident background or even had had another career as criminals which helped them become warlords. The Soviet nationality and education policies had broadened access to universities for people from these disadvantaged regions, but employment opportunities were limited, at least in the humanities.[20] In the Georgian civil wars, the historian Vladislav Ardzinba, an expert in Hittitology, led the Abkhaz Republic in its fight for independence. Georgia's president and military leaders were a philologist (Zviad Gamsakhurdia), a sculptor (Tengiz Kitovani, leader of the National Guard, who had a criminal past and had networked with dissidents in prison), and a playwright, Dzhaba Ioseliani, leader of the Mkhedrioni, who had a past as bank robber and long-term prisoner.[21] The "soixante-huitard" Musa Shanib, surrounded by a network of former philosophy, history, and philology students, led the abovementioned Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus movement, which fell short of creating its own state but formed a voluntary army that supported the Abkhaz and later Chechen wars of independence. After the Abkhaz war, Musa Shanib returned to his professorship at Nalchik University.[22] Historians and other academics also played a leading role in the conflict over the Prigorodnyi Raion, primarily on the Ingush side.[23] In Crimea too, the pro-Russian and autonomist movement was dominated not only by a Union of veterans of the Afghan wars and petty entrepreneurs but also by academics who had founded political informal groupings in the perestroika years. The cores of these groupings, after Ukraine's declaration of independence in August 1991, were merged in the Republican Movement of Crimea, which became the dominant pro-Russian organization at the time.[24]

The picture for a third important group is ambivalent: officials of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and other Soviet mass organizations. Former party secretaries who became local strongmen more often than not took a non-secessionist

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18 Jan Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus: Die pro-russländischen Bewegungen im moldauischen Dnjestr-Tal und auf der Krim 1989 – 1995* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015), 386 – 90; Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 84 – 85.

19 Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 134.

20 Jirouš, *Erinnerung als Mobilisierungsressource*, 116; Georgi Derlugian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World System Biography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

21 Klaus Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence: The Politics of Armed Groups* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 2009), 47– 48.

22 Derlugian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer*, 2 – 4; Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 62.

23 Jirouš, *Erinnerung als Mobilisierungsressource*, 142 – 43.

24 Gwendolyn Sasse, *The Crimea Question: Identity, Transition and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 140; Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus*, 295 – 96.

stance, but in some cases became leaders of conflict factions. An example of the latter was the North Ossetian Soviet chairman and later president Akhsarbek Galazov, who had been a member of the CPSU's Central Committee.[25] Robert Kocharian had been first secretary of the Komsomol in Nagornyi Karabakh during the 1980s before becoming leader of the informal Karabakh Committee in 1988, State Defense Committee chairman during the war, and first president of Artsakh. His peculiar career path then led him from Stepanakert (Azeri: Xankəndi) to Yerevan to become prime minister and president of Artsakh's patron state Armenia in 1997/98.[26] On the other side, in Transnistria, the local party secretaries in the separatist hotspots Tiraspol and Rîbniţa (Russian: Rybnitsa, Ukrainian: Rybnytsia) opposed the industrialists' aspirations to autonomy but remained unsuccessful in the power competition. Also, the long-year Crimean oblast party secretary Vladimir Bagrov took a moderate, non-secessionist stance, but lost the elections for the Crimean presidency to the Russian nationalist Iurii Meshkov in 1994. Nationalism was a ticket that could help beat incumbents in power competitions.[27]

A fourth group that joined secessionist or autonomist regional leaderships were representatives from the Soviet repressive state apparatuses: the military, police, and secret services. These could be representatives of regional offices of KGB or the Ministry of the Interior as well as all-Union officials who came to the respective region when the Soviet Union fell apart in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudaev had gathered his political capital as the highest-ranked Chechen Soviet Army officer.[28] The Transnistrian state security minister Antiufeev had been an officer of the special police unit OMON in Riga and came to Tiraspol under a false name through his relations with nationalist Duma deputies in Moscow. Although his true identity was revealed by Russian officers in public disputes between the 14th Army Command and the Transnistrian security forces in the early 1990s, he remained in office for twenty years before having to leave his post together with president Smirnov after the latter lost the presidential election in 2011. Together with a few other Transnistrian statesmen from the Smirnov generation he reappeared for a short moment when becoming an official of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in 2014.[29]

Beyond the leadership, collective violence was perpetrated by violence experts. Former criminal gangs, football hooligans, and trained nationalist far-right groups were among these experts, but most important were current and former members

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25 Jirouš, *Erinnerung als Mobilisierungsressource*, 145–47.

26 Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 172–73.

27 Sasse, *Crimea Question*, 156–60; Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus*, 219–29.

28 Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 76–81.

29 Malyarenko and Wolff interpret the appearance of former Transnistrian state officials in the Donbas as steered by Moscow. Malyarenko and Wolff, *Dynamics*, 48. For Antiufeev's career: Gennadii Kodrianu, *Dnestrovskii razlom: Pridnestrovskii krizis i rozhdenie PMR. Rol i mesto spetssluzhb* (Tiraspol: GIPP Tipar, 2002), 202; Natalya Prikhodko, "Rossiiskie ofitsery razoblachayut rukovoditelei Pridnestrovia," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, December 9, 1992, 1, 3; Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus*, 252–54.

of armed state apparatuses: policemen, veterans of the Afghan war, and secret service members.[30] Of course, many actors belonged to more than one of these spheres at the same time. None of this is specific to the Black Sea region or the Caucasus. The legacy of war, and the heavy weight of armed state apparatuses that belong to it, is now becoming obvious in Western democracies too with the German "Nordkreuz/Uniter" complex or the US "Oath Keepers."[31]

3 Black Sea Entanglements in Post-Soviet Territorial Conflict

While the fundaments of conflict were nothing specific for the Black Sea region, layers of conflict that are directly connected to the sea, its shores, and Sea-related infrastructures can be found nonetheless. At first sight, many of the secessionist projects in the Black Sea region do not refer to the Black Sea but are oriented away from it, for example towards Moscow and Russia. A second glance often shows that the mobilization did have regional anchors and characteristics. Important sites of conflict were directly located at the sea shore, institutions whose existence was directly connected to the sea (as navies, ports, or trade routes) played a crucial role in some of the conflicts, and many war protagonists referred to the Black Sea in their spatial imaginaries. This section provides four examples illustrating these direct entanglements and connections to the Black Sea.

3.1 Sevastopol and Crimea

One of the most obvious direct connections between post-Soviet conflict and the Black Sea is the Black Sea Fleet and the port city of Sevastopol in Crimea. In 2014, the Black Sea Fleet played a crucial role in the takeover of Crimea by the Russian Federation, as it was Moscow's military foothold in the peninsula. Back in the 1990s, the control over the former Soviet fleet had been a bone of contention between Russia and Ukraine. Until the agreement in 1997, the fleet had a dual command and was officially neutral, but on the ground political mobilizations did take place. Its chief commander at the time, Igor Kasatonov, openly advocated for a Russian and undivided Black Sea Fleet. The local pro-Russian forces supported him with demonstrations and campaigned to make him the political leader of Crimea. The ships themselves became sites of conflicts when pro-Russian soldiers raised the old Tsarist, and new Russian, marine flag with

30 Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus*, 14.
31 Hubert Wetzel, "Kapitolverbrechen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 8, 2021, 3.

the blue Saint Andrew's cross on many ships and swore oaths to the Russian command.[32]

The conflict over the fleet was entangled with the local political structures and developments in the city of Sevastopol. The port city had a specific political landscape due to its history: It was a marine base and the site of defense industries connected to the fleet, and had been one of the closed cities in the Soviet Union. On the Russian mental map, the "Hero City" of two defenses in the Crimean War and in World War II, was an outpost for the entire Black Sea region. These preconditions left an imprint on the local socio-political mentalities with many soldiers, veterans, and officials living in the city and many enterprises and organizations having been directly subordinated to Soviet central organs. The resulting political Soviet-conservative element largely translated into a pro-Russian stance during the 1990s.[33]

Furthermore, by law, the city did not (and still does not) belong to Crimea. In 1948 it had achieved special status as a city of direct republican subordination. The local pro-Russian nationalists claimed that this meant that Sevastopol had not been transferred to Ukraine in 1954. Based on this argumentation, the activists managed to convince their like-minded partners among the deputies to put this question on the agenda of the Russian Duma. In the summer of 1993, the Russian parliament, then dominated by a coalition of Soviet-conservative and nationalist forces, voted for a resolution claiming Sevastopol for Russia.[34]

The Ukrainian government, for its part, used the republican status of Sevastopol to implement direct control. From 1992 on, Sevastopol was ruled by a governor directly appointed by the president in Kyiv. The first Ukrainian president Kravchuk did not send newcomers from other regions of Ukraine but chose his governor from the local political elites. For example, the first governor, the Black Sea Fleet official and enterprise director Ivan Ermakov, combined his Soviet conservative and even implicitly Greater Russian ideas with a pragmatic view on current political adherences. It was precisely these Russian-Vector-leaning, Soviet conservative elites who were able to moderate the first steps of Sevastopol's transition from a closed Soviet "Hero City" to a normal city in Ukraine.[35] This transition has not been completed. In 2014, direct rule was overturned in favor of pro-Russian rule. The governor of Sevastopol, a Soviet-conservative Party of Regions official, promptly resigned when his direct superior, President Ianukovych, was overthrown in Kyiv. A demonstration against the regime change proclaimed Aleksei Chalyi as "People's governor" of Sevastopol. He became visible to the international public when he signed, as representative of the city, the treaty

32 Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus*, 127–32.
33 Andrei Malgin, *Krymskii uzel: Ocherki politicheskoi istorii Krymskogo poluostrova* (Simferopol: Novyi Krym, 2000), 34–37.
34 The vote did not have juridical consequences, RF President Yeltsin qualified it as "embarrassing" (Malgin, *Krymskii uzel*, 36), but it was a great success for the pro-Russian movement in Sevastopol.
35 Jan Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus*, 346–52.

on the accession of Crimea and Sevastopol in the Kremlin on March 18, 2014, posing for press photographs next to Putin and the Crimean representatives in a sweater.[36]

3.2 Transnistria and Odesa

Separatism in Eastern Moldova is often reduced to a (pro-)Russian project supported by Moscow and executed by an army under Russian command. Indeed, Transnistrian secessionism was oriented towards Russia, but it did have a strong regional element. While research correctly emphasizes that the leading protagonists had "all-Union biographies"[37] and came from factories that were directly subordinated to Soviet industrial ministries located in Moscow, the biographies of second-range protagonists were regional. They had spent their working lives and education in the southwest of the Soviet Union, and had studied at universities or technical schools in Chişinău or Odesa before becoming engineers or specialists in one of the industrial enterprises whose employees were mobilized for Transnistrian autonomy in the years between 1989 and 1992.[38]

In the first phase of the mobilizations, 1989/90, the movement also collaborated closely on a regional level with the Gagauz movement in southern Moldova, culminating in the "Gagauzian march" (Russian: *Gagauzskii pokhod*) in the autumn of 1990, when thousands of Transnistrian activists went to Comrat, assisting the Gagauz in resisting an attack by various branches of the Chişinău police and by nationalist paramilitaries. Even the 14th Soviet Army, which many observers mainly perceived through the generals sent from Moscow, most famously Aleksandr Lebed, was strongly anchored in the region, with a deployment stretching from Moldova to Ukraine, regional recruitment patterns, and veterans remaining in the region after their service. A regional aspect was also the fact that Ukrainian nationalists joined the Transnistrian forces in what they seem to have perceived as a fight of Eastern Slavs against Romanian aggression.[39]

Due to the movement's regional basis, the idea that the entire region consisted of historically Russian lands that belonged together as a "Novorossiia" played an impor-

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36 "Mer Sevastopolia poddal v otstavku," *Kommersant Online-News*, February 24, 2014, http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2415533?isSearch=Truev; "Aleksei Chalyi vozglavil upravlenie po obespecheniiu zhiznedeiatelnostiu Sevastopolia," *Kommersant Online-News*, February 24, 2014, http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2415882?isSearch=True.

37 Troebst, "Separatistischer Regionalismus," 185.

38 Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus*, 233–35.

39 Kimitaka Matsuzato, "Mezhpravoslavnye otnosheniia i transgranichnye narodnosti vokrug nepriznannykh gosudarstv: Sravnenie Pridnestrovia i Abkhazii," in *Pridnestrove: V makroregionalnom kontekste chernomorskogo poberezhia*, ed. Kimitaka Matsuzato (Sapporo: Slavic Eurasian Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2008), 209; Sergei Lipinskii, "Bratia-Gagauzy poprosili nas o pomoshchi," in *Slavy ne iskali: Sbornik vospominanii uchastnikov sozdaniia i stanovleniia PMR*, ed. L. Alfereva (Bendery: Poligrafist, 2000), 79–80; Anatolii Kholodiuk, *O generale Aleksandre Lebede i o zabytoi voine: Zapiski politemigranta* (Munich: Self-Edition, 2005), 56.

tant role as a background ideology. On the grounds of this spatial concept for the territories occupied by Tsarist Russia from the Ottoman Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, supporters of Transnistrian independence formed a paramilitary Black Sea Cossack Army. This group participated in the fighting of 1992 as one of the most significant special units.[40]

A crucial role in the geography of Transnistrian separatism was played by the Black Sea port city of Odesa. In the summer of 1990, the local soviet in Tiraspol, then the Transnistrian separatists' highest political organ, approved a proposition to accede to a supposed future free economic zone of Odesa.[41] The proposition may not have been taken seriously by the authorities of Odesa, but it shows that the separatists envisioned the Ukrainian port city as part of the Russian(-speaking) world. That more than three decades later, a pro-American former president of Georgia—one Mikheil Saakashvili—would become its mayor certainly would have seemed unlikely to these actors. Located sixty kilometers (32 miles) from Tiraspol, Odesa was the port goods from Transnistrian industries had to go through for export and via which raw materials came in. Hence the Moldovan Dniester Republic was hit very hard by new Ukrainian custom laws in 2006 under Iushchenko, which required export goods to bear stamps from Chişinău and led to the introduction of the EU assistance border mission EUBAM.[42]

Odesa was also important because it had hosted the headquarters of the abovementioned Soviet 14th Army, which came to play a decisive role in the conflict over Transnistrian independence. This army had been established by the Soviet leadership in order to progress towards Southeast Europe in the event of a global war and was stationed in the Odesa military district, which comprised the southwestern Soviet Union. It did not simply become a Russian army after the break-up of the Union; on December 31, 1991, overnight it stretched over two countries and was divided into three parts: a Ukrainian one, a Moldovan one, and a third part in the disputed area in the Dniester Valley that remained a subject of contention for several months. The commander-in-chief, Gennadii Iakovlev, proposed swearing an oath to the newly founded Moldovan Dniester Republic, and some of the units declared allegiance to the secessionists. With the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) command consolidating control, Iakovlev was ousted and in April 1992 the army was officially declared under Russian jurisdiction—a process which could not have been executed in

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40 Besides these local actors identifying themselves as "Cossacks," several hundreds or even thousands of armed activists of the Cossack movement in Russia, from the Don, Kuban, Zabaikal, Orenburg, and Zaporozhe Cossack armies took part in the fighting. Zofka, *Postsowjetischer Separatismus*, 263–64.

41 Interview with Igor Smirnov, *Dnestrovskaia Pravda*, July 3, 1990, 1.

42 Jan Zofka, "Tödliche Wirtschaftsblockade oder transparente Zollregelung? Die neue Zollverordnung der Ukraine und der Transnistrienkonflikt," *Ukraine-Analysen*, no. 7 (May 2006): 2–5, https://doi.org/10.31205/UA.007.01.

the same manner without the pre-existence of the Transnistrian separatist struc-
tures.[43]

3.3 The Georgian Black Sea Coast: Abkhazia and Ajaria

The Georgian Black Sea coast is an example of diverging trajectories. In Soviet times,
two autonomous republics existed there: the Abkhazian and the Ajarian ASSR. Both
saw political mobilization in the early 1990s, but while the Abkhazian republic became
de facto independent after a war, the Ajarian republic after a phase of *de facto* inde-
pendence was re-integrated in 2004 in a more or less peaceful process. Both republics
host Black Sea resorts and were holiday destinations. The climate also made Abkhazia
an important supplier of citrus fruit and tea. Thanks to these immense income poten-
tials, the Georgian Black Sea coast had become the "Soviet Côte d'Azur."[44] These eco-
nomic branches, however, with their small-scale units, were prone to informal econo-
my, which in times of crisis and state decay could evolve into conflicting claims to
control. Violence, however, is bad for tourism. Thus, the warring parties destroyed
the prize in 1992–93, although tourists were still on the beach when tanks rolled
into Sukhumi. Furthermore, in Soviet times Abkhazia had already seen an ethnicized
separation of labor with the Abkhaz as the titular nationality being prioritized in state
and academic posts while Armenians and Greeks were more often involved in the tour-
ism business. In the late 1970s there had already been Abkhaz mass mobilizations
against Georgian pressure with an explicit pro-Soviet, pro-Moscow stance. The
Russia / Moscow-orientation was long-standing, although the violence during the Russi-
an conquest of the Caucasus in the nineteenth century is "the largest historical trauma
in Abkhazian collective memory."[45] For their part, Soviet / Russian military officials
who had their dachas in Abkhazia were particularly rigorous in supporting the Abkhaz
resistance against Georgian attacks and the attempt to dilute autonomy.[46]

   In contrast, in Ajaria no war took place in the 1990s. Ethnic discourse, culture, and
religion were not comprehensively used for political mobilization. The Ajar Autono-
mous Soviet Republic had been special, as it had had no titular nationality. Back in
1921, the new Soviet government had promised to the revolutionary Turkish govern-

43 Mikhail Bergman, *Na ringe epokhi: Neobychainye prikliucheniia polkovnika Rossiiskoi Armii, rasska-
zannye im samim* (Moscow: Self-edition, 2001); Mihai Grecu and Anatol Țăranu, *Trupele ruse în Repub-
lica Moldova: culegeri de documente şi materiale* (Chişinău: Ed. Litera, 2004), 7–8; Mihai Gribnicea, "Die
russische Militärpräsenz – ein historischer Abriss," in *Die Republik Moldau – Republica Moldova: Ein
Handbuch*, ed. Klaus Bochmann, Vasile Dumbrava, Dietmar Müller, and Victoria Reinhardt (Leipzig:
Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012), 422–29.
44 Derluguian, "The Tale of Two Resorts," 261–92.
45 Derluguian, 266.
46 Baev, "Civil Wars in Georgia," 137–40; Derluguian, "Tale of Two Resorts," 267–75; Zürcher, *Post-Soviet
Wars*, 118–32.

ment in the Treaty of Kars that it would grant its new Muslim citizens autonomy. An Ajarian nationality, however, was officially counted only in the 1925 census, but has never been since. Azeris, Meskhetian Turks, Georgian Muslims, and, by language, Gurian were different concepts for giving Muslims living in Ajaria a collective identity, but none of these were established as the autonomy's titular name, nor were they politicized in the autonomy movement after 1989/91. When Tbilisi threatened to curtail its autonomy, Ajaria fought back with demonstrations with red banners and a communist election victory in 1990, instead of recurring to ethnonationalist mobilization discourse. The local strongman Aslan Abashidze led the republic from 1991 to 2004 as a long-standing member of the regional nomenklatura. Ajaria's economic and political centre Batumi is not only a seaside resort but also has an important port, which in the early twentieth century had been of global importance as the endpoint of what was then the world's longest pipeline, bringing oil from Baku. For the economy of the "militarized autonomy" of the 1990s, the trade route to Turkey was more important, as Abashidze's militias controlled borders with Turkey and Georgia proper.[47]

3.4 Mariupol

The hybrid war in the Donbas between 2014 and 2022 directly reached the shores of the Black Sea too. In 2018, Russian navy ships blocked Ukrainian vessels in the Sea of Azov, after the bridge from Southern Russia to Crimea crossing the Kerch straits was inaugurated. To whom the sea belonged was clearly part of the conflict over eastern Ukraine. This is also reflected in the imaginaries of the protagonists fighting on land, as the name of the far-right ultra-nationalist Azov Battalion, later Regiment,[48] the most important officialized Ukrainian paramilitary unit, suggests. The struggle for the Black Sea port Mariupol in 2014 was emblematic. Controlled by militias belonging to the local oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov, the town remained neutral for several weeks, facing the bid of the DPR's leader at the time, Aleksandr Borodai, to incorporate it into the separatists' territory and the Ukrainian army's efforts to regain control. Eventually, the Ukrainian army took the city in the summer of 2014. Mariupol, known in Soviet times as Zhdanov, after the temporary second man in the CPSU under Stalin, was characterized not only by its multicultural sea port history and the strong Greek identification of many of its inhabitants but also by several immense steel and machine-building works. It is located at the peak of a triangle of almost direct vectors from the iron ore deposits of Kryvyi Rih and the coal deposits of the Donbas to the sea. These steelworks had been bought by the lord of many Donbas mines and factories, the richest Ukrainian oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov. Socialized in the Donbas and having been closely associ-

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47 Derluguian, "Tale of Two Resorts," 275–84; Zürcher, *Post-Soviet Wars*, 200–6.
48 Report Center for International Security and Cooperation: Mapping Militant Organizations, "Azov Movement," Stanford University, last modified August 2022, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmili tants/profiles/azov-battalion.

ated with the "Party of Regions" government, Akhmetov was certainly skeptical of the Maidan-driven overthrow of Ianukovych. At the same time, a takeover by separatists or even direct control by Moscow would have endangered Akhmetov's interests as well. For example, the separatists declared, in a cynical propaganda statement disguising their highly likely involvement in the re-allocation of the region's wealth, that the "ex-Donetsk oligarchs [were] clinging to their property. But they will not succeed. We are building a People's Republic. We will return everything that was stolen to the people."[49] In Donetsk, for instance, the insurgents burnt down Akhmetov's ice hockey stadium. In Mariupol, Akhmetov was able to mobilize his workers to patrol the streets and keep the separatists out, before coming to terms with the government in Kyiv.[50]

4 Conclusion

So how much Black Sea was there in post-Soviet secessionism and territorial conflict in the region? By no means can post-Soviet territorial conflict be ascribed to a meta-historical regional cultural proneness to violence. The regional developments during the break-up of the Soviet Union were in fact rather ambiguous and ranged from brutal war to non-violent conflict resolution. Regional connections become visible, however, when the focus is shifted away from the protagonists' own nationalist ethno-cultural reasoning and from a reduction to Russian interference. On a concrete level, the infrastructures and landscapes connected to the sea were significant for the formation of the collective actors. The protagonists did make allusions to the Black Sea. Even the pro-Russian movements were not only oriented towards Moscow but also devised a vision of the Black Sea region in which they acted. The sea, its shores and landscapes, and the infrastructures built around it became the site of conflict and could occasionally influence its course and its protagonists' imaginaries.

49 Malyarenko and Wolff, *Dynamics*, 26.
50 Malyarenko and Wolff, 45–46; Zofka, "Politische Unternehmer," 331.