



## Russia's Shadow Empire

(Published in the *Washington Post*, March 11, 2006)

Ana Palacio and Daniel Twining

Colaboraciones n° 849

March 16, 2006

Since 2003, democratic revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia have dealt strategic blows to the ambition of Russia's leaders to reconstitute the former Soviet empire by retaining political and military suzerainty over their weaker neighbors. But Russia's imperial pretensions along its periphery linger.

Calls from the elected presidents of Georgia and Ukraine for a united Europe stretching "from the Atlantic to the Caspian" should embolden Europe and the United States to help people aspiring to freedom in other post-Soviet states end Russia's continuing dominion over them by rolling back the corrupting influence of Russian power in regions beyond its borders. This task is especially urgent in countries where Russian troops and political support sustain secessionist conflicts that threaten aspiring

new democracies and the security of the West.

Since the Cold War ended, Russian leaders have built a shadow empire on the territories of Russia's sovereign neighbors, extending Russian power where it is unwarranted and unwelcome by sponsoring "frozen conflicts" in southeastern Europe and the South Caucasus. This behavior, designed to maintain political and economic influence beyond Russia's borders, impedes democratic development in states that aspire to join the West. It exports instability, criminality and insecurity into Europe. It threatens regional military conflict that could draw in the United States and other powers. It also bolsters anti-democratic forces within Russia who believe Russia's traditional approach of subverting its neighbors' inde-

pendence is a surer path to security than the democratic peace enjoyed by the nations of Europe.

The frozen conflicts in the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and in the Moldovan territory of Transdniestria, share many characteristics. Russian troops fought on the side of local armies when these regions broke away from their mother countries as the Cold War ended. Russian officers continue to help train and command the breakaway territories' Russian-armed militias. The secessionist leaders are all Russian citizens, some sent directly from Moscow, who are maintained in power by the continuing presence of members of the Russian military and security services. Secessionist political leaders also enjoy the sponsorship of powerful criminal elites in Russia, which profit from the unregulated smuggling trade -- in consumer goods, drugs, weapons and women -- in the conflict zones.

Moscow has granted the people of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transdniestria Russian citizenship, including Russian passports and the right to vote in Russian elections. This effective annexation of sovereign peoples is expressly designed to undermine the authority of pro-Western governments in Georgia and Moldova.

Russian political and military influence also looms in the shadows of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Opposing armies that fought a bloody war over the disputed enclave in the 1990s now shoot at each other from trenches across a "no-man's land" more reminiscent of Flanders in 1916 than the

European neighborhood in 2005. This barely frozen conflict threatens a hot war that would devastate the region.

It is also the place where a breakthrough is perhaps most likely. Western governments could support a settlement there in which Armenia returned to Azerbaijan the occupied provinces surrounding the disputed territory and allowed Azerbaijani refugees to resettle there. Nagorno-Karabakh could enjoy full autonomy until its ultimate status was decided by democratic referendum at some future date. In return for Azerbaijan's cooperation in ending a conflict that threatens its growing prosperity, the West should welcome closer partnership with that country as it moves forward with reform, end residual sanctions against Azerbaijan dating from the 1991-94 war, require closure of the Russian bases on Armenian territory that threaten Azerbaijan, offer a mini-Marshall Plan for the entire South Caucasus and put these countries on a path to Europe.

In South Ossetia, Europe and the United States should support Georgian calls to internationalize the Russian-dominated "peacekeeping" force, which now functions chiefly to obstruct changes to the secessionist status quo. The United States and the European Union should join Georgia, Russia and South Ossetia in a new negotiating framework designed to achieve a lasting political settlement consistent with international law.

In Abkhazia, the Atlantic democracies should push to transform the U.N. observer mission into an armed peacekeeping force, hold Russia to its 1999 promise on troop withdrawal and pledge assistance to rehabilitate

Abkhazia's war-torn economy as part of a federation agreement with Georgia. With the West, Ukraine can help bring change to neighboring Transdnistria by continuing its recent crackdown on cross-border smuggling, reinforcing Moldovan demands for a Russian military withdrawal and supporting a political settlement upholding Moldova's sovereignty and the democratic rights of all its people.

Russia holds the key to any resolution of the frozen conflicts, and the West-

ern democracies are surely not powerless to foster a change of Russian behavior in Europe's backyard. President Vladimir Putin must understand that his country cannot enjoy partnership with the West -- including membership in the G-8 club of Western democracies and the chance to host their summits -- as long as his policies in the European neighborhood, and at home, look less like those of a modern European statesman than of a czar.

*Ana Palacio is the former foreign minister of Spain. Daniel Twining is an Oxford-based consultant to the German Marshall Fund of the United States. These are their personal views.*