At the end of the Cold War, secessionist conflicts broke out in the former Soviet republics of Moldova and Georgia, while Armenia and Azerbaijan were drawn into a war over Nagorno-Karabakh, a region within Azerbaijan with an ethnically Armenian majority that unilaterally declared independence in 1991. None of these wars ended decisively, resulting in a series of internationally-monitored frozen conflicts. While Russian peacekeepers deployed to disputed areas of Georgia and Moldova, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sent political missions to both countries and the UN dispatched military observers to Abkhazia, the largest secessionist region in Georgia. Since 1992, the OSCE has orchestrated efforts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. These efforts are led jointly by France, Russia and the US through the “Minsk Process.”

While the European Union (EU) has also engaged in conflict resolution efforts in both Moldova and the Caucasus, political progress has been limited in all cases. Tensions between Russia and Georgia over Abkhazia and the separate secessionist region of South Ossetia culminated in war in 2008. On winning a decisive victory, Russia recognized both secessionist regions as independent states. After a brief period of uncertainty over the international presences in the two regions, the OSCE and UN missions in Georgia both closed at Moscow’s insistence. The UN, OSCE and EU have remained involved in efforts to resolve the Georgian conflict or at least prevent their escalation (see box).

The OSCE continues to operate in Armenia and Azerbaijan, including Nagorno-Karabakh, and Moldova. The direct political leverage of its missions is limited, but the organization remains central to broader diplomatic efforts to end the frozen conflicts. Russia has indicated a desire to see the Moldovan situation resolved and President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia has also invested personal political capital in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh
Since the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, the EU, OSCE and UN have all been active in efforts to maintain stability and find political solutions to the disputes over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is in spite of the fact that the OSCE and UN missions in Georgia both closed down in 2009 due to differences between Russia and Western powers over the status of the two secessionist regions. The EU maintains a monitoring mission (EUMM) at the invitation of the Georgian government, but this is not able to operate in Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

Two EU Special Representatives (EUSRs) have also been involved in post-war politics. The former EUSR to the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby, had been in office before the war, supported by a small team of police and civilian experts in Georgia. He was replaced in August 2011 by Philippe Lefort, who also doubles as the EUSR for the Crisis in Georgia, replacing Pierre Morel.

Morel and co-chairs from the UN and OSCE oversee efforts to mediate the Georgian conflict in the context of the Geneva Discussions, launched in the wake of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. The talks bring together representatives of Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (before the war, the Abkhaz and Ossetian questions had been treated separately). The 16th round of the Geneva Discussions was held on 6-7 June 2011. The discussions have made only limited progress in addressing both political issues and humanitarian concerns.

An earlier round of the Geneva Discussions resulted in a 2009 agreement to set up two Joint Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRM), meant to reduce tensions on the frontlines within Georgia. The two mechanisms fall under different auspices: the Gali Mechanism for Abkhazia is supervised by the UN chairmanship in the regional UNHCR office, while the Ergneti Mechanism for South Ossetia is facilitated by the EU and the OSCE.

Some progress has been made in the context of these mechanisms. The Gali IPRM recently agreed regulations for patrol behavior on the Abkhazia-Georgia line of separation. Apart from the established mechanisms for discussion, the OSCE continues to promote confidence-building measures between parties, such as carrying out water supply related projects on Georgian and South Ossetian-held territory. Nonetheless, the fundamental political differences between the parties to the conflict are very unlikely to dissipate soon.
The three co-chairs of the Minsk Process – France, Russia and the United States – responded to these signs of deterioration by increasing their diplomatic efforts with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. On 5 March, President Medvedev hosted his Armenian and Azeri counterparts in Sochi to discuss the issue.

On 26 May, Presidents Medvedev, Obama and Sarkozy released a statement at the G8 Summit in Deauville, France, encouraging Armenia and Azerbaijan to move towards peace on the basis of their discussions in Sochi. President Medvedev had invited the two countries’ leaders to another meeting in Kazan on 24 June, and there was a brief burst of speculation that a breakthrough might be in the offing. The goal was not a final deal but an agreement on the basic framework for an agreement based on a set of principles originally laid out by the co-chairs in November 2007. Raising expectations, President Obama spoke with the leaders by telephone in advance of the event.

The summit was, however, a failure, as no framework agreement was signed. An analysis of the event by Thomas De Waal, the leading Western expert on the conflict, suggests that this was largely due to Azerbaijan's concerns, which included territorial interests and an underlying suspicion of Russian motives. While this was seen as a significant setback for Russian diplomacy, Azerbaijan was bolstered by a visit by the Prime Minister of Turkey – its closest regional friend – the following month.

In spite the efforts of the Minsk co-chairs and the OSCE, the pressure for a final deal has yet to reach a decisive level.

**MOLDOVA**

In late 2010, there were some promising signs for progress in resolving the long-standing frozen conflict in Moldova. Since clashes in 1992, Transdniestria – a narrow strip of land along the country’s eastern border with Ukraine – has maintained de facto independence from Moldova. The EU, however, has made efforts to strengthen the Moldovan state and economy, and deployed a border monitoring mission in 2005 to monitor trade between Ukraine and Moldova through Transdniestrian-held territory.
In 2010, Russia indicated that it saw resolving the Moldovan situation as a “pilot project” for better relations with the EU. This had the potential to weaken the role of the OSCE, which has maintained a mission in Moldova since 1993 and played a central role in earlier talks. However, the Russian initiative has not yet gained momentum, not least because some EU members are skeptical.

Since 2005, talks on the frozen conflict have taken place in the so-called “5+2” format, involving Moldova, Transdniestria, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE plus the EU and US as observers (the EU and US were absent from previous rounds of talks). Since 2006, 5+2 consultations have only taken place on an informal basis, however. Perhaps concerned that Russia’s efforts to discuss the issue bilaterally might upset the parties to the conflict or the US and Ukraine, the EU’s Special Representative to Moldova urged the parties to revitalize the 5+2 format. In February 2011, Lithuania announced that it would use its chairmanship to lobby for the resumption of formal 5+2 negotiations. On 21 June, the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for Protracted Conflicts, Giedrius Čekuolis, chaired a further informal meeting of the parties to discuss the possibility of full-fledged negotiations. This broke up inconclusively, however.

Meanwhile the OSCE’s mission in Moldova continued to undertake a range of activities aimed at strengthening the legal system, human rights and civil society. It continues to support working-level and political dialogues between Moldovan and Transdniestrian officials. But diplomacy with Moldova has been complicated by a constitutional impasse in the parliament that has made it impossible to elect a president, with the parliament’s speaker holding the post in the interim.

**BALANCING THE EU AND THE OSCE**

The diplomatic initiatives over both Nagorno-Karabakh and Moldova in 2011 took place through processes with the OSCE in a central role: the Minsk Process and the 5+2 format. While these formats ensure that Russia and the US have a continued role in addressing the frozen conflicts, some analysts believe that the EU’s financial and political clout give it special leverage in the region. The EU offered to liberalize its visa regime with Moldova...
in January 2011. In July, Bronislaw Komorowski the President of Poland – then holder of the rotating EU presidency – made a visit to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The EU’s representation has been affected by the reorganization of the Union’s foreign policy mechanisms in light of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. The EU’s Special Representatives to both Moldova and the South Caucasus had their positions terminated in February 2011 (the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova continues). Further to criticisms that the lack of a regional representative limited its diplomatic options in the South Caucasus, the EU appointed a new EUSR for the region in late August 2011. The post is now held by Philippe Lefort of France, who also doubles as the EUSR for the Crisis in Georgia, replacing Pierre Morel.

CONCLUSION

Although the diplomatic efforts devoted to both Moldova and Nagorno-Karabakh had not produced significant breakthroughs by mid-2011, they may prove to have been a prelude to greater progress later. Although there has been a focus on high-level diplomacy over the two frozen conflicts, the OSCE missions in the region continue to provide significant on-the-ground assistance. It is hard to envisage a solution to either conflict that does not involve a sustained international presence, and political missions will probably have a role in the former Soviet space for some time.

NOTES

