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A Borderline Issue

By Konstantin Sonin

This has been an eventful month. On March 3, Ukraine tightened customs regulations on cargo from the self-proclaimed Transdneestr republic, which is formally part of Moldova. On March 7, Ukraine's Central Elections Commission banned a referendum on the status of the Russian language in Crimea. The referendum had been scheduled for March 26. On March 20, President Vladimir Putin called his Belarussian counterpart, Alexander Lukashenko, to congratulate him on winning a third term. The Foreign Ministry hastily declared the election fair. And on March 22, South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity announced that he would petition the Russian Constitutional Court to recognize that his region, formally a part of Georgia, in fact belongs to Russia.

What do all these events have in common? They are all related to the question of Russia's borders, which may well prove one of the most urgent and complex issues facing this country in the years ahead. What areas in neighboring countries could be viewed as naturally belonging to Russia? What areas of this country could become countries in their own right or merge with one of our neighbors?

Just because borders are flawed doesn't necessarily mean they will be redrawn. Many borders in Western Europe and Latin America could have been drawn differently, yet they have remained unchanged for more than half a century. The main argument in favor of leaving borders as they are derives from the fear of regional civil wars and international conflicts. The best option for the former Soviet republics would be to leave the current national borders in place. The push to redraw the post-Soviet map seems irresistible, however. The question facing Russia is not whether or not to take part in this process, but how to go about it. And there will be no quick fixes.

The drive to redraw borders is fueled by a simple desire to live among people of your choosing, not the ones fate has thrown you in with. Russia's borders with South Ossetia, Abkhazia and eastern Ukraine are no less legitimate and no more natural than the border between East and West Germany after World War II. The Germans' desire to live together did not wane during 40 years of separation. It would be naive to expect similar feelings among groups in the former Soviet republics to cool over time.

The right of nations to self-determination didn't count for much in Kosovo, and there's no reason to assume the situation will be any different in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia, which is busily rethinking its place in the world, should do more than simply resort to the sort of policy adopted by the United States in Kosovo. We should come up with a constitutional, political process for annexing -- or declining to annex -- the territory of neighboring states.

Not long ago, I spoke with George Breslauer, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and a specialist on Russia and the Soviet Union. I asked his opinion about Russia's meddling in the Ukrainian presidential election in 2004. To my surprise, Breslauer noted the pragmatism demonstrated by Putin in not sending troops into Ukraine or calling on the Donetsk region to secede. At the time, Breslauer's take on the issue struck me as odd. Now it occurs to me that what appears normal to us could indeed look like pragmatism to someone who has spent so many years studying the Soviet Union. I also think that as we consider redrawing Russia's borders, such pragmatism is just what we need.

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