

## Border Security in Eastern Europe: Lessons for NATO and Partners

*By Hannah Thoburn*

**In Brief:** The relatively young borders in Eastern Europe have been the stage of protracted conflicts. In countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, insufficient border control continues to cause an influx in corruption, human and substances trafficking, and mistrust toward established democratic institutions. Conflicts within each of these nations have a significant Russian component. Building the strength of these states is key — and there are crucial areas in which these nations can bolster their border security and move towards solving their internal conflicts.

### Introduction

The geopolitical dynamics in Europe are changing. Countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova have undergone significant transformation processes since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, history's aftermath continues to influence these states. The relatively young borders in Eastern Europe have been the stage of protracted conflicts. An often insufficient border control causes an influx in corruption, human and substances trafficking, as well as mistrust toward established democratic institutions.

The three conflicts covered in this paper are all in different stages. Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria has been in a decidedly frozen state for some time, and internal de-facto border controls are well delineated. In Georgia, the Russian-supported separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia continue to agitate and Russian troops continue to slowly push the border in towards Tbilisi, gobbling up even more Georgian land.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in Ukraine, Russia has annexed the Crimean Peninsula and now controls the seas around it, and the Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine continue to fight the Ukrainian government.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these conflicts has a significant Russian component to them. Each of the breakaway regions has Russian troops openly or discreetly stationed there, and each has a population that has been heavily influenced by pro-Russian propaganda. Most importantly, each of the regions is nearly wholly dependent on the Russian state for its financial

<sup>1</sup> Paul Salopek, "Vladimir Putin's Mysterious Moving Border," POLITICO Magazine, April 3, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/georgia-border-russia-vladimir-putin-213787>

<sup>2</sup> "Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, based on information received as of 19:30, 14 November 2016," Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, November 15, 2016, <http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/281761>



support, the payment of pensions, and maintenance of infrastructure. It is also important to note that prior to the outbreak of conflict, border control capabilities in these nations were very weak. They continue to be so.

It is crucial to make realistic assessments of these conflicts as well exchanging and further developing practical strategies that may serve to both defend the interests and remaining territory of the states in question, as well as to help bring them to an eventual end.

This paper lays out several of the major questions and will conclude with recommendations to interested parties as to how they might begin to move toward a satisfactory resolution of these conflicts and prevent the emergence of similar issues in the future. These conflicts persist for several reasons, the most significant of which is that Russia wants them to be prolonged and uses a wide variety of tools — financing, propaganda, the threat of violence, and political infiltration — to achieve that goal. In turn, the Western friends of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine must continue to support these nations strengthen their governments and societies, and provide them with the kind of training and assistance for their border and police services that can help forestall future military incidents, border incursions, or conflict.

Russia uses borders in ways other than conflicts. It has sent Syrian refugees across the Finnish and Norwegian borders and kidnapped Estonian agent Eston Kohver from

within the borders of Estonia. These kinds of actions help destabilize the citizens' faith in their governments and NATO's ability to protect them. The lessons learned by our Eastern Partnership friends can be instructive not only in Europe's borderlands but in its core as well.

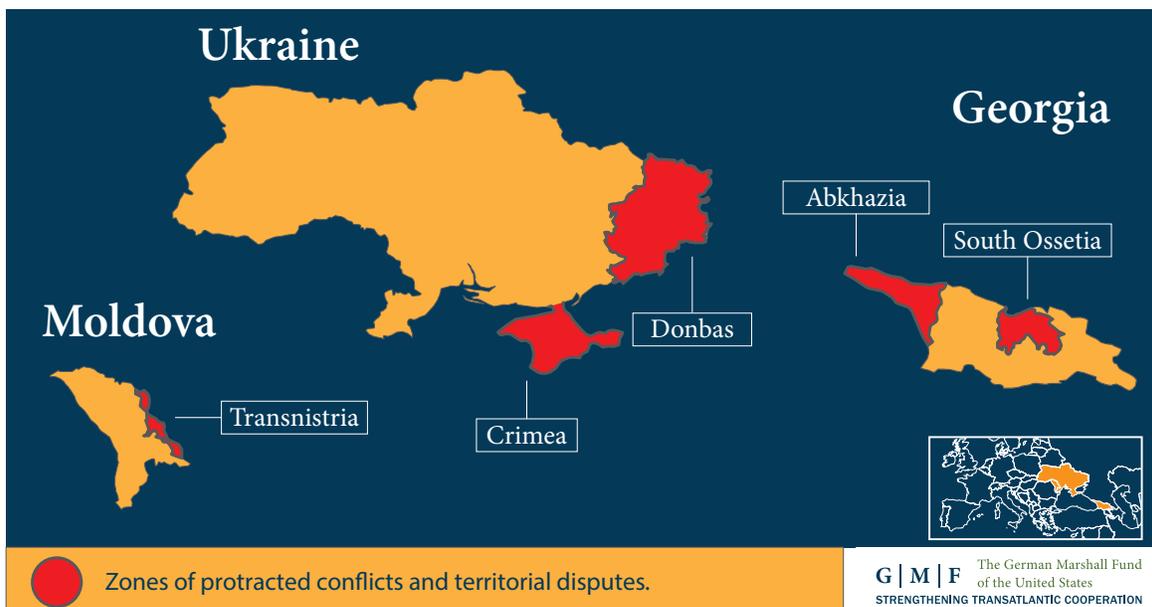
## Issues and Challenges

### *Why do these breakaway regions persist?*

The simplest answer to why these conflicts persist is inertia. For the countries in question, any change in the status of the conflict with their recalcitrant region may lead to even more difficulties than are already present. Each of these nations is in a reactionary position, a very weak position from which to bargain. In short, things could get worse if they try to solve the problem.

**“ Some regions have become accustomed to living off of Moscow's money.”**

The Russian-proposed solution to the issues of Transnistria in Moldova and Donbas in Ukraine is to create a kind of federalized state that would allow these areas greater say over decisions that are made by Chisinau and Kyiv.



This solution would effectively create a pro-Russian Trojan horse within those countries and work to turn them away from the West.

For Russia, which supports each of the regions, it is relatively easy and cheap to maintain their presence and assistance; their gains are much more than their outlays.

## **Tools of Persistence**

The rightful owners of each of the regions are Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine — countries that the Kremlin believes should remain within its orbit and not move toward a Western orientation. The frozen conflicts within the borders of each are a useful tool to keep these nations from being attractive prospects for membership in the European Union. While such a situation has not kept Cyprus from becoming a full member of the EU, the EU is far more fearful of poking the Russian bear in Eastern Europe than any unpleasanties with Turkey.

One consistent theme that the three conflicts share is the difficulty that each of the subject countries has in being an attractive prospect with which a breakaway or disaffected region would want to reunify. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine each have extreme problems with both petty and grand corruption and have thus struggled to build working health care, transportation, infrastructure, and pension systems as well as strong democracies. In such a situation there is no initiative for the regions to reunify with such dysfunction.

Moscow has continuously worked to keep these nations corrupt and off balance, and to undermine the success of governments, their institutions, and politics. That may also mean sponsoring or otherwise supporting political parties that can act as spoilers or might be willing to implement the Kremlin's wishes.<sup>3</sup>

3 The Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Valeriy Gerasimov, was explicit about this in an article he wrote for the *Voenno-Promyshlenniy Kur'yer* (Military-Industrial Courier) in 2013, saying that "The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. ... Among such actions are the use of special-operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state, as well as informational actions, devices, and means that are constantly being perfected." See Gen. Valeriy V. Gerasimov, "Tsennostiy Nauki v Predvideniy" ["The Values of Science in Foresight"], *Voenno-Promyshlenniy Kur'yer* [Military-Industrial Courier], February 27, 2013, [http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK\\_08\\_476.pdf](http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf).

Some regions have also become accustomed to living off of Moscow's money. In Transnistria, the longest existing of the statelets mentioned here, the roads are noticeably better maintained than in Moldova proper; the money that flowed in during times of Russian economic prosperity has very visibly been put to good effect over the years. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia has likewise poured in the cash, helping tie the regions economically to Russia.<sup>4</sup> In others, it is the promise of Russian funds that keep spirits high. In Crimea, where the economic situation has worsened since it was annexed, locals eagerly await the new bridge that will connect Crimea to mainland Russia; they are convinced it will be the key to their prosperity.

Russia also spends large sums on propaganda, putting each of the breakaway regions in question in thrall to the Kremlin controlled media machine. As has been well chronicled, propaganda has been weaponized by the Putin regime in a new and more aggressive format. Not content to spread the occasional fake story in newspapers or push a unified party line on television, the new propaganda now produces so many products that it has become impossible for media consumers to determine what is true and what is false.<sup>5</sup> And in these separatist regions, control over the media space is nearly total, consistently tying their futures together with Russia's, while working to demonize the other side.<sup>6</sup>

“ The strength of the states is key.

That propaganda machine also operates across the de facto borders and is quite capable of convincing significant portions of the population that their government is in the wrong and too feckless to reunite the country.

4 "No Clear Frontrunner as Abkhazia Goes to Poll," *The Moscow Times*, August 25, 2011, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/no-clear-frontrunner-as-abkhazia-goes-to-poll-9149>

5 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money," *Institute of Modern Russia and The Interpreter*, November 2014, [http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The\\_Menace\\_of\\_Unreality\\_Final.pdf](http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf). See also: Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>

6 An excellent example of this problem is Crimea, where the media space has been nearly completely closed since the peninsula was annexed by Russia in March 2014. See "Media freedom situation in Crimea, Ukraine, at all-time low, OSCE Representative says," *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Website*, March 5, 2015, <http://www.osce.org/fom/143861>

## Recommendations

There are several areas in which the nations investigated could both strengthen their border security and move towards solving their internal conflicts. Many of these ideas can also be a starting point for other European nations who are concerned about potential Russian incursions into their territories.

The strength of the states is key. A Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia that is strong, thriving, and has something to offer to its alienated citizenry will be an attractive prospect for reunification. However, should they remain weak, politically divided, and economically hobbled, there will be no reason for the regions to ever be tempted to return.

Here, pressure from western governments and institutions can make a difference. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has recently had some success in pushing the Ukrainian government to implement much needed reforms in exchange for the funds necessary to continue operating the government.

In Moldova, 29 percent of the population works in the agricultural sector,<sup>7</sup> while only 13.8 percent of its GDP comes from that sector.<sup>8</sup> Moving forward, the international funds given or loaned to Moldova should come attached with strings that force the government to modernize its economy and root out corruption.

In this vein, all involved must acknowledge that propaganda, the enervation, and infiltration of border security services are equally part of Russia's so-called 'hybrid warfare' — a kind of sustained effort to weaken some of the strands that hold nations together. The issue of Russia's state-supported propaganda has recently received much attention. Individual nations as well as NATO have begun to create structures to identify and counter the onslaught of false and misleading information. These efforts should continue and European nations with their own foreign language services should strive to assist.

Western nations with good experience in border security and anti-smuggling operations should step up their assistance of these nations. While advanced scanning equipment and other technologies are useful, these countries desperately need training in the best, most modern practices of the West. The occupied zones mentioned here are teeming with weapons and other contraband that some may seek to move into Europe proper. In June 2016, Ukrainian special services arrested a man at their border with Poland who was attempting to smuggle arms that he had gotten in eastern Ukraine into Europe in order to commit a terror attack in France.<sup>9</sup>

Training missions that focus on the human aspect — identifying forged documents, how to properly conduct full body searches, and how to identify stolen goods and vehicles — are the most urgent needs. Some advising experts from the EU Mission, Germany, Poland, and Lithuania have helped Ukraine, but more work is needed in all of the countries. In addition, more can be done to strengthen the cooperation between the Moldovan and Ukrainian border services. A special mission from European or North American Coast Guards should also be dispatched to instruct Ukrainian sea-based border services in the best means of interacting with Russian ships that may come into Ukrainian waters — an entirely new challenge since the annexation of Crimea.

These measures are unlikely to completely solve the three conflicts considered here, but they can help to stabilize the situations and begin to move societies — both in separatist regions and in the nations proper — towards reconciliation.

<sup>7</sup> See The World Bank Website, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=MD>

<sup>8</sup> See The World Bank Website, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.AGR.TOTL.ZS?locations=MD>

<sup>9</sup> "Ukraine 'prevents' 15 'terror attacks' planned for France," Euronews, June 5, 2016, <http://www.euronews.com/2016/06/06/ukrainian-secret-service-say-they-have-arrested-a-french-national-in-ukraine-suspected-of-planning-terror-attacks-during-euro-2016>

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## **About the Author**

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## **About the Project**

Throughout 2016, the German Marshall Fund of the United States' (GMF) Warsaw office has, together with the cooperation and assistance of NATO's Science for Peace and Security Programme and the government of Canada, convened a series of workshops on the various border security issues that face the Eastern Partnership nations. Held in Tbilisi, Georgia; Kyiv, Ukraine; and Chisinau, Moldova, the conferences brought together experts and officials from various backgrounds to exchange views on current regional threats, and how key players would be able to contribute to finding long-term solutions.

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