



HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Paul Globe

Editor - Window on Eurasia

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this hearing and for giving me the opportunity to speak. The topicality of its focus is obvious: All of us in preparing our remarks have had to consider the very real risk that developments on the ground are moving at such a rapid rate that anything we had been planning to say even a few hours ago may have been overtaken by events in the interim. And its importance cannot be overstated: what Moscow is up to in Moldova could easily prove more fateful to Europe and the West than did Russia's invasion of Georgia six years ago and its ongoing aggression in Ukraine now.

The three reasons that is the case can be quickly stated: First of all, the outcome of Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine and thus of his entire imperial project will depend on what Moscow does in Moldova's Transdnistria. Second, in his efforts to derail Moldova's efforts to join Europe, Putin has put in play the Gagauz, a Turkic community in the country's southeast that would likely secede violently if Transdnistria exits with Russian help. And third, the demise of the Moldovan state which these two things would happen could trigger changes not only in the borders of southeastern Europe but also force the federalization of a greater Romanian state, reverse the post-World War I settlement there, and contribute to a radical destabilization of the continent. Each of these possibilities requires additional comment, and that will be the focus of my remarks. But because these dangers are so great and because there are ways that we can counter them, I would like to conclude by suggesting five steps the United States should take now to recognize Moldova's importance and to prevent Putin from achieving his destabilizing goals there and elsewhere. We have enormous reserves of soft power, indeed, an overwhelming amount of it compared to Russia; and if we act expeditiously, we can prevent a situation from emerging in which we might be forced to use hard power, something that in this theater we are at a relative disadvantage.

For two decades, Moscow has supported both actively and covertly the breakaway Transdnistria region, a place where many have observed that the August 1991 coup against Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded and one which has one of the largest Soviet arms caches which the regime has sold off to terrorists and others to support itself. The Putin regime has declared Transdnistria "a frozen conflict," and many in the West have accepted the idea that there must be a negotiated settlement in which Moscow will have the whip hand. That acceptance, of course, has meant that no settlement is possible because the Russian government prefers managed instability to a stable, thriving and pro-Western Moldova.

In recent weeks, Moscow propagandists have changed their thematics on Transdnistria. They

have proclaimed it “a second Crimea,” arguing that like Crimea, its population which Moscow untruthfully claims consists of a Russian majority, Transdnistria wants to become part of the Russian Federation and that Moscow should agree. (For an example of this line of argument, see odnako.org/blogs/pridnestrove-vtoroy-krim-kak-eto-budet-i-kto-nachnyot-voynu-chtobi-etogo-ne-sluchilos/).

But more disturbingly, Russian writers and officials have begun talking about Transdnistria as an ally of Russia’s in Putin’s project of creating “Novorossiya,” a new Moscow client state stretching from Crimea in the east to Transdnistria in the West and reducing Ukraine to a landlocked country or even eliminating it altogether via partition. There have already been credible reports that armed individuals and groups from Transdnistria have entered southwestern Ukraine and Odessa in support of secessionist groups there. If Moscow does launch an overt invasion of Ukraine, in support of its current covert subversion of that country, it seems clear that Transdnistria will play a major supporting role, at a minimum forcing Kyiv to divide its forces and at a maximum catching Ukraine in a two-front war.

The second Russian action in Moldova, one that has attracted far less attention but that may ultimately play an equally large geopolitical role, is Moscow’s promotion of Gagauz separatism. The Gagauz, a 200,000-strong nation living in a dispersed area about 80 km southeast of Chisinau, have long wanted greater linguistic and political autonomy. In the early 1990s, their activism forced the Moldovan government to cede more power to them and to agree, should Moldova’s external borders be changed by the exit of Transdnistria, to the right of the Gagauz to move toward independence.

The Gagauz have neither the numbers, nor the arms supply, nor the international contacts that the regime in Transdnistria does, but they do have one important political resource in addition to the support they are getting from Moscow: they are Christian Turks and thus enjoy the attention and potential support of both the Moscow Patriarchate and the Republic of Turkey. In the event of a crisis, either or both could come to their aid, something the Russian government undoubtedly would use as a cover to promote a new wave of secessionism. If both Transdnistria and a Gagauzia defined in the broadest terms were to secede, Moldova would be left a rump state where a large percentage of the population would likely press for union with Romania.

And that is the third action that Russia has an interest in. Indeed, some in Moscow appear to be more interested in destabilizing a broader region and undermining Europe than even in seizing control of particular territories for the social and economic well-being Moscow would have to bear enormous costs. (That risk has already been noted by Russian politicians and commentators in the case of Crimea, and they have suggested that what Moscow should seek is effective influence rather than total control and thus total responsibility.)

What would happen if a Moscow-provoked disintegration of Moldova led to its union with Romania? Almost certainly, given the differences in historical experience arising from Soviet control, that new state would be federalized. Federalization in turn would spark demands for a Hungarian autonomy in the north, and such demands, given the Hungarian government in

place, would likely enjoy the support of Budapest. That could lead to the kind of controversy that the post-1918 settlements were designed to prevent and thus to destabilization in an even larger part of the European continent.

None of these things, as much as Vladimir Putin may desire them, are inevitable. Indeed, they can be countered effectively if we take steps now. I would like to propose five:

- First, we need to recognize Moldova's centrality to our security concerns and to build up expertise. For too long, the US has treated Moldova as, in the words of some officials, "an orphan country," because few Americans have developed expertise on this region and because many Moldovans in the West act so closely with the Romanians that people do not see the difference.
- Second, we need to expand Western broadcasts to Moldova and especially Russian-language broadcasts. Too many people in Transnistria and Gagauzia turn to Moscow television for news and information. What they get of course is Russian propaganda. It is time for us to create a Russian-language channel for Russian speakers who are citizens of Russia's neighbors and not potential citizens of some mythical Russian Empire.
- Third, we need to promote change within Moldova not by holding it up to standards that will allow us to say no to aid but by means of educational and professional exchanges that will send Americans to Moldova and bring Moldovans to the US. Such exchanges were the heart and soul of the Marshall Plan and played a key role in creating the Europe we see today.
- Fourth, we need to recognize that our approach to Transnistria has been wrong. Cooperating with Russia when Moscow is really prepared to cooperate on the basis of common interests is one thing. Cooperating with Russia when Moscow is totally uninterested in cooperation and does not recognize any common interests is something else. The Transnistria problem should be solved by direct talks between its leaders and Chisinau on the basis of the same principles we have proclaimed elsewhere: the inviolability of state borders and the protection of the rights of ethnic minorities as the most effective way of allowing for national self-determination.
- And fifth, we need to offer a united Moldova immediate membership in NATO and together with our European allies put it on a fast track to European Union membership as well. Despite the vocabulary of many in Washington over the last two decades, one does not "qualify" for a defense alliance: countries are included because they are threatened and because their membership will help the alliance do its job. Moldova qualifies on both grounds. In considering these ideas, we need to remember the implications of Winston Churchill's 1944 observation about the United States. The British prime minister said at the time that "the Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing – after they've tried everything else." We no longer have the luxury of getting things wrong a bunch of times before finally getting them right. We need to get things right early on – and Moldova is a good place to start.