



"A QUARREL IN A FAR-AWAY COUNTRY": THE RISE OF A BUDZHAK PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC?

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Frustrating former Soviet republics' ambitions of European Union and NATO accession underlies Russia's instrumental use of territorial disputes—both historic and contrived ones—in the borderlands of its near abroad. As one recent commentary observed, as the war in Ukraine erupted last spring, observers largely unfamiliar with the former Soviet republics of Eastern Europe scrambled to understand the importance of the sub-national regions that suddenly waged great influence in the conflict between Russia and the West.¹

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the loss of its eastern and central European buffer between the Russian homeland and the NATO states of western Europe left Russia with a single European bridgehead—the Kaliningrad enclave—at a distance 1000 kilometers from Moscow. What was once a matter of Russia's internal policy overnight became one of foreign policy. Russia suddenly found itself at a distance of some 1300 kilometers from its Moldovan and western Ukrainian borderlands with the Eastern Balkans, with one-half of the intermediate territory no longer Russian. In 1992, Russia acquired a second, equally distant European bridgehead in eastern Moldova with the declaration of a Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic in separatist Transdnistria. Since then, PMR-Transdnistria has acted as a stop on Moldova plans for EU and NATO accession, and the hopes of some Moldovans for unification with neighboring Romania.

Short of overt military intervention, Russia has limited instruments at its disposal for the protection of its geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the eastern Balkans and the northern Black Sea littoral. These limits notwithstanding, Russia exerts indisputable regional hegemony in its near abroad. Fomented territorial disputes within former borderlands have been an effective if crude instrument of Russian policy now for three decades. It has used that instrument willingly, if discriminately, in its near abroad while holding in reserve a failsafe to unfreeze "frozen" conflicts. The Transdnistrian bridgehead (seconded by another separatist Moldovan region, the vocally pro-Russia Gagauzia) undergirds Russian hegemony in Moldova, and radiates outward into the eastern Balkans and importantly, into southwestern Ukraine's pivotal Odessa region.

There is regular speculation about Russian intentions to establish a so-called land bridge from Crimea and the Donbas westward along the Black Sea littoral to Odessa. Short of willfully disregarding the complications associated with seizing and holding a broad swath of contended territory in the face of determined resistance by (in all likelihood, Western armed) Ukrainian armed forces and paramilitaries, that scenario is unlikely under the present circumstances. Russia's demonstrated

The first line of the title is from Neville Chamberlain's statement during the 1938 Czechoslovakia crisis, which reads in full: "How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing."

¹ Eric Jones (2015). "Gagauzia: Strategic Pressure Point." <http://foreign-intrigue.com/2015/03/gagauzia-strategic-point-of-pressure/>. Last accessed 4 April 2015.

preference for disruptive proxy forces and other hybrid instruments is at odds with a suggested large-scale (and in all likelihood, long-term) military operation requiring it to deploy conventional armed forces en masse.

An alternate scenario postulates the projection of Russian hegemony southward from its Transnistrian bridgehead to Budzhak, a southern Bessarabia borderland in Ukraine's Odessa region. This might take the form of political destabilization scaled to disrupt Ukraine's control of the region without triggering a strategic impact, blending, as Frank Hoffman offered, “the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular warfare.”²



The Republic of Moldova, Moldovan Transnistrian & Ukraine's Budzhak Region³

Thus the recent suggestion by Romanian Foreign Affairs Minister Bogdan Aurescu that Russia might seek “new separatist areas, like the so-called Bugeac People's Republic,”⁴ using Budzhak's Romanian name.

Ukraine's Strategic Budzhak

Budzhak⁵ is an historical region of southern Bessarabia. It is located between the lower Danube and Dniester rivers on the coast of the Black Sea. Comprising the southwestern anchor of modern-day Ukraine's Odessa Oblast,⁶ Budzhak is bordered on the north and the west by Moldova's autonomous Gagauzia and separatist Transnistria regions; to the south, by Romania; and to the east by the Black Sea.



Ukraine's Budzhak Region⁷

² Frank G. Hoffman (2007). *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. (Arlington, VA: The Potomac Institute for Policy Studies), p. 28. LTC Frank Hoffman, USMC (ret.) is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Defense University.

³ <http://www.conde.ro/eliminarea-ucrainei-de-la-marea-neagra-poate-deveni-realitate/>. Last accessed 1 April 2015.

⁴ Embassy of Romania (2015). "ForMin Aurescu: the security interests of Bucharest it is "crucial" that Ukraine is stable." *Romanian Headlines*. http://londra.mae.ro/sites/londra.mae.ro/files/romanian_headlines_-_15-28_februarie_2015.pdf. Last accessed 1 April 2015.

⁵ Budzhak [Russian: *Буджак*] is called *Bugeac* in Romanian, the region's other principle language. The region's Ukrainian and Bulgarian speakers use *Budzhak*.

⁶ An *oblast'* [Russian & Ukrainian: *область*] is an administrative unit that is equivalent to a region and comprised of multiple districts, known by the Russian transliteration *rayon* or the Ukrainian transliteration *raion* [Russian & Ukrainian: *район*].

⁷ Source: http://russia-insider.com/ru/politics_ukraine_opinion/2014/12/08/03-06-18pm/budjak.

“Budzhak” derives from the Turkic word *bucak* meaning “corner,” in the sense of a distant frontier or borderland, which the region most certainly was for most of its history. It remains today geographically isolated from the rest of Ukraine, attached only by a single, thin land connection. A figurative Ukrainian island, Budzhak is more integral geographically to neighboring Moldova and Romania than to the rest of the Odessa region. One might perhaps be forgiven for suggesting Budzhak is less important for what it is than for what it sits amidst:

- Ukraine's Odessa region, the northern Black Sea's geopolitical epicenter.
- Moldova's autonomous Gagauzia and separatist Transdnistria regions.
- Romania's Black Sea hydrocarbon and Bugeac shale gas fields.



Budzhak & Northern Black Sea Littoral⁸

Building on Mackinder's concept of the pivot area, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote that the importance of *geopolitical pivots*:

“[I]s derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behavior of geostrategic players. Most often, geopolitical pivots are determined by their geography, which in some cases gives them a special role in either defining access to important areas or in denying resources to a significant player.”⁹

Brzezinski continued, “The identification of the post-Cold War key Eurasian geopolitical pivots, and protecting them, is thus also a crucial aspect of America's global geostrategy.”¹⁰ So, as the western anchor of an Odessa region that stretches from the Danube delta to the Tylihul estuary—and the geographic center of a larger littoral arc sweeping north from Bulgarian Northern Dobruja and Romanian Bugeac through Ukraine's Odessa region—Budzhak is indisputably a, perhaps *the*, key geopolitical pivot in the northern Black Sea.

Budzhak was a Ukrainian administrative region in its own right known as the Izmail Oblast before it was absorbed into the Odessa region in February 1954.¹¹ Its multi-ethnic population includes Ukrainians (40 percent), Bulgarians (21 percent), Russians (20 percent), Moldovans (13 percent), and Gagauz (4 percent). Unsurprisingly, Budzhak is replete with ethnic enclaves. There are Russian ones throughout, and others across its west and southwest: Bulgarians and Gagauz in Bolgrad and Tatarbunary; Russians, Moldovans, Bulgarians and Gagauz in Chilia; Bulgarians in Artsyz; Bulgarians and Moldovans in Izmail and Saratsky; and Moldovans, Gagauz and Bulgarians in Reni.¹²

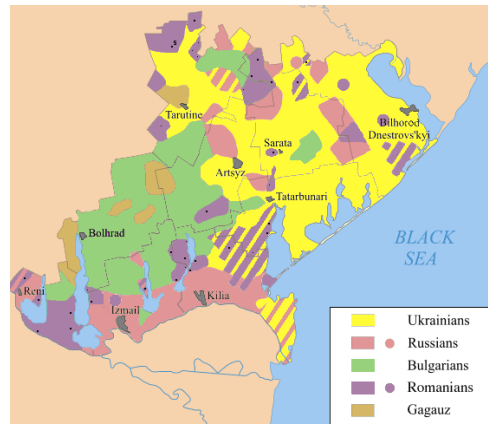
⁸ Source: <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21637415-little-known-place-interests-both-ukraine-and-russia-towards-unknown-region>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997). *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. (New York: Basic Books), p. 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ukrainian: *Ізмаїльська область*. Ukrainian transl.: ‘*s’ka oblast*’. Prior to December 1940 the province was known as the Akkerman Oblast [Ukrainian: *Акерманська область*. Ukrainian transl.: *Akermans’ka oblast*] for the city on the Dniester estuary formerly known as Akkerman, now Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy [Ukrainian: *Білгород-Дністровський*. Ukrainian transl.: *Bilhorod-Dnistrovsk’kyi*]. The area was occupied by Romania after World War I, and then reoccupied by the Soviet Union in 1939-1940 pursuant to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

¹² DaVinci Analytic Group (2014). “Об угрозе создания Бессарабской народной республики” (“The Threat of a People's Republic of Bessarabia”). *DaVinci AG Breaking Report* [published online in Russian 24 November 2014]. <http://ru.davinci.org.ua/docs/Bessarabia241114.pdf>. Last accessed



Ethnic Composition of Ukraine's Budzhak Region¹³

Here as elsewhere, ethno-nationalism is, in Janusz Bugajski's phrase, a combustible substance, especially given the larger region's stuttering progress toward the European Union and NATO. It is standard Russian practice to seek out and exploit these soft spots—witness its actions in the western Balkans.¹⁴

Despite being a largely neglected borderland, Budzhak has disproportionate strategic value as a figurative geographic wedge between Ukraine and Bulgaria along the critical Black Sea littoral. This importance would increase greatly were the region to ally with its neighbors Gagauzia and Transdnistria to the north and west. A strategic locus and combustible ethnic patchwork make Budzhak a near perfect fit for the Russia hybrid warfare playbook:

“[P]ulling political, economic, and military levers—all of which fall short of traditional invasion—to exploit ethnic conflicts in countries that used to be in its orbit. And the goal is to leverage these tensions, which are often relics of the Soviet Union's messy consolidation and collapse, to gain influence in former Soviet states, while preventing these countries from moving closer to the West.”¹⁵

“War Without War, Occupation Without Occupation”

Is Russia the proverbial “black knight in the Eastern neighborhood”?¹⁶ A November 2014 report by the Ukraine-based DaVinci Analytic Group speculates how Russia might exploit the region's ethnic patchwork:

“We expect Russia to activate separatism in the Bolgrad, Izmail, Reni, Artsyz, Kiliya and Tarutinsky districts with additional attempts in the Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi and the Sarata and Tatarbunarskiy districts. Shortly before, Russia will purposely destabilize Gagauzia and Taraclia in parallel with Transdnistria [see footnote]. The initial gambit may focus on an independent Gagauzia, which can make territorial claims in Moldova and Ukraine. [...] The spring of 2015 is a critical period for the Kremlin, which sees it as the most favorable time to initiate a new round of aggression against Ukraine.”¹⁷

29 March 2015.

¹³ Source: http://russia-insider.com/ru/politics_ukraine_opinion/2014/12/08/03-06-18pm/budjak.

¹⁴ Janusz Bugajski (2014). "Moscow Exploits Balkan Soft Spots. *Central European Digest* [published online in English 10 July 2014]. <http://cepa.org/content/moscow-exploits-balkan-soft-spots>. Last accessed 31 March 2015.

¹⁵ Uri Friedman (2014). "Putin's Playbook: The Strategy Behind Russia's Takeover of Crimea. *The Atlantic* [published online in English 2 March 2014]. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/putins-playbook-the-strategy-behind-russias-takeover-of-crimea/284154/>. Last accessed 31 March 2015.

¹⁶ Nicola Del Medico (2014). *A Black Knight in the Eastern Neighborhood? Russia and EU Democracy Promotion in Armenia and Moldova*. EU Diplomacy Papers 7/2014. (Bruges: College of Europe Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies). The term "black knight" means a countervailing power that provides an alternate source of economic, military, and/or diplomatic support, thereby mitigating the impact of pressure by, in this case, the United States and/or the European Union. See: Gary C. Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott & Kimberly A. Elliott (1998). *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered: History and current policy*. (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute), p. 12. As DeMedico point out [p. 29], just because Russia is a "black knight" does not necessarily mean either the United States and/or the European Union is a "white knight" from the region's perspective, especially when these powers are perceived to put their security interests ahead of local ones.

¹⁷ DaVinci Analytic Group (2014), *op cit*. In a separate report published in Romanian on 26 March 2015, DaVinci speculated that Russia would pursue one of two strategies in Transdnistria. The first is a "Trojan horse" strategy to re-integrate Transdnistria politically into Moldova in order

DaVinci's speculation is congruent with the observation elsewhere that Russia acts through small-scale gestures aimed at destabilization rather than full-blown military actions. These gestures, suggested the Bulgarian Defense Ministry, include "disinformation, propaganda campaigns, media manipulation, exploiting social networks for disinformation, and using sympathetic local leaders to manipulate voting blocs and cause confusion."¹⁸

One analysis described Russia's strategy as "a form of political synecdoche":

"[W]here a war inside a breakaway province stands for a potential war inside the de jure state, and where the occupation of the separatist region creates the constant threat that the country as a whole will be occupied. This *war without war and occupation without occupation* is nearly as effective, more flexible, and decidedly cheaper than a real occupation."¹⁹ [emphasis added]

It continued, "The key element of Putin's strategy is to use...breakaway regions as perches from which to threaten the larger states that once governed them,"²⁰ here, meaning Ukraine and NATO member Romania. It is in a manner of speaking, a scenario for controlling the Odessa region without occupying it.

Is Gagauzia "a 'Donbass' Inside Moldova"? ²¹

Many see ATU-Gagauzia as a likely "perch" from which to spread destabilization into southern Moldova and Budzhak, then north across the rest of the Odessa region and possibly south into Romania's hydrocarbon-rich Bugeac region. Some, like Ukrainian political scientist Oleg Pasternak, believe Gagauzian separatism will spill into Budzhak, especially were Gagauzia to secede from Moldova.²²

Moldova, it can be said, faces the problem of long-term liminality and geopolitical ambiguity.²³ In an underpublicized but in many respects highly significant episode of modern European history, Moldova declared parts of its ethnically distinctive southeastern region a "national-territorial autonomous unit" in 1995.²⁴ The region, known as *Gagauz Yeri*²⁵ in the official

to derail Moldova's EU integration strategy. It estimates that post re-integration, pro-Russia Transdnistrian voters would comprise a definitive 13 percent voting bloc in Moldova. The result would be what Lucan Way called "pluralism by default," or the virtual impossibility of concentrating power in a single pole. [Lucan A. Way (2003). "Weak States and Pluralism: the Case of Moldova." *East European Politics and Societies*. 17:3, p. 455. <http://homes.ieu.edu.tr/~ibagdadi/INT435/Readings/Western%20NIS/Way%20-%20Weak%20States%20and%20Pluralism%20The%20Case%20of%20Moldova.pdf>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.]

The second hypothesized strategy is to destabilize the situation in Transdnistria and to cause the currently frozen conflict to revert an active one. Were this to occur, DaVinci speculates, Ukraine would quickly become embroiled in the conflict, creating a pretense for a large-scale Russian intervention in the region. See: DaVinci AG (2015). "Scenariile Rusiei pentru Transnistria" ("Russian scenarios for Transdnistria"). *DaVinci AG Report* [published online in Romanian 26 March 2015].

<http://www.davinci.org.ua/news.php?new=792&num>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

Russia's military force stationed in Transdnistria consists of an estimated 1500 troops of the Operational Group of Russian Forces [Russian: *Оперативная группа российских войск (ОГРВ)*. Russian transl.: *Operativnaya grupa rossiyskikh voysk (OGRV)*], a specially designated unit directly subordinated to the Russian Defense Ministry; and 400 "peacekeepers". See: "Главы МИД России и Молдавии обсудили ситуацию на Украине и блокаду Приднестровья" ("Russian & Moldovan foreign ministers discuss the situation in Ukraine and the blockade of Transdnistria"). *Regnum* [published online in Russian 7 April 2014]. <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1787931.html>. Last accessed 30 March 2015. According to published reports, these forces flew surveillance drones into Ukrainian airspace in the vicinity of a former military airfield near Bolgrad, Budzhak. See: "Россия продолжает шпионить и стягивать войска на границу" ("Russia continues to spy and deploy troops on the border"). *Pravda-Ukraine* [published online in Russian 5 August 2014]. <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/08/5/7033967/>. Last accessed 30 March 2015.

¹⁸ Republic of Bulgaria Defense Ministry (2015). "Доклад за състоянието на отбраната и въоръжените сили за 2014" ("Report on the state of the armed forces in 2014"), p. 6. [published in Bulgarian 26 March 2015].

http://www.md.government.bg/bg/doc/drugi/20150325_Doklad_MO_2014.pdf. Last accessed 30 March 2015. The Defense Ministry's commentary added, "Dynamics in the development of 'hybrid warfare' are challenging the national security system. [...] The crisis in Ukraine is an example of the growing vulnerability of countries to the instruments of 'hybrid warfare' when they are used effectively to achieve political goals.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Cullen Dunn & Michael S. Bobick (2014). *American Ethnologist*. 41:3, p. 409.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

²¹ From a section header in "Что стоит за слухами о юго-западном фронте Украины?" (2014) ["What is behind the rumors in the southwest corner of Ukraine?"]. *Vesti* [published online in Russian 5 August 2014]. <http://vesti-ukr.com/odessa/64096-cto-stoit-za-sluhami-o-yugo-zapadnom-fronte-ukrainy>. Last accessed 30 March 2015. See also the author's [July 2014 essay](#).

²² "Политолог объяснил, как гагаузские села Украины могут стать сепаратистскими" ("Political scientist explains how Ukraine's Gagauz villages can become separatist."). *Point.md* [published online in Russian 3 December 2014]. <http://point.md/ru/novosti/politika/politolog-objyasnil-kak-gagauzskie-sela-ukraini-mogut-statj-separatistskimi>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

²³ Dunn & Bobick (2014), *op cit.*, p. 410.

²⁴ The Moldovan parliament adopted an act "Providing for the Special Status of Gagauzia/Gagauz-Yeri" (No. 344-XIII) on 23 December 1994.

language, Gagauzca,²⁶ incorporated all Gagauz-majority districts and others that elected to opt-in via local referenda. The result was a Bantustan-like geography of four non-contiguous districts, all but the smallest lying along Moldova's southern border with Ukrainian Budzhak.

The Gagauz descended from ethnic Turks who fled the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century for the protection of Imperial Russia and converted to Orthodox Christianity. While they account for only about 4 percent of Moldovans, Gagauz comprise more than 80 percent of the population of Gagauz Yeri.²⁷ There also are small Gagauz enclaves in southern Moldova's adjoining Basarabesca and Taraclia districts. Unsurprisingly, Turkey has been actively engaged in Gagauzia for two decades, and in 2000 the Comrat government opened a representative office in Ankara.

Gagauz Yeri—the territory is more commonly called the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia ("ATU-Gagauzia")—has a 35-member parliament, the *Gagauziya Halk Topluşu* or "Gagauzian People's Assembly," and a territorial governor known as the *Başkan*. While the Moldovan law granting internal self-governance to ATU-Gagauzia left intact Moldova's national territorial integrity, it did open the door to secession in the event Moldova's status as an independent nation changed.



The Republic of Moldova²⁸

In late March, voters in ATU-Gagauzia elected a pro-Russian *Başkan*, Irina Vlah, to lead the regional government in Comrat. She defeated nine candidates to win an outright majority (51.01 percent) in the first round and avoid a runoff, far outpacing her nearest rival (at 19.05 percent). While Vlah ran as an independent, she served in the Moldovan parliament for the Party of Communists until January, when she resigned citing the Communists' collaboration with Moldova's pro-European parties to form a governing coalition in Chişinău, the national capital. Her victory in March had much to do with the support she received from another ex-Communist, Igor Dodon, who in November led Moldova's Party of Socialists to a 26-seat plurality in the 101-seat national parliament. Dodon managed to draw a large share of Moldova's traditionally Communist Russophile electorate to the Socialists, who in all previous elections had failed to win a single seat.²⁹ For Russia, Vlah's election may be important to stem Gagauzia's perceived slow drift toward Turkey.

What is the significance of a former Communist parliamentarian's election as governor of a small autonomous region in southeastern Moldova? By one assessment, the election was won not by Ms. Vlah but by Russia, with the support of which “a Barbie doll would have won in the first round.”³⁰ In a more serious vein, Dmitri Trenin tweeted³¹ that it shows the

²⁵ Gagauz Yeri's more common name, Gagauzia, is derived from the Romanian [*Găgăuzia*] and Russian [*Гагаузия*. Russian transl.: *Gagauziya*] transliterations.

²⁶ The official language, Gagauzca is a Turkic language with two dialects, Bulgar, Maritime Gagauzi, respectively. Gagauzca is the principle language of nearly 90 percent of Gagauz living in ATU-Gagauzia, and also is spoken in Bulgaria and Romania as well as Budzhak's Izmil district [Ukrainian: *Ізмаїльський район*. Ukrainian transl.: *Izmail's'kyi rayon*. Russian: *Измаильский район*. Russian transl.: *Izmail'skii raion*] on the north bank of lower Danube facing Romania. Part of the Oghuz branch of Turkic languages, Gagauzca is similar to Balkan Turkish dialects spoken in Greece, Bulgaria, and parts of Macedonia.

²⁷ While Gagauz hold notably pro-Russia sentiments as a whole, political analogies between then and Transdnistria's ethnic Russians are flawed: Gagauz account for fully 80 percent of ATU-Gagauzia's population whereas ethnic Russians (and Ukrainians) comprise less than a third of Transdnistrians.

²⁸ Source: <http://reconsideringrussia.org/tag/transnistria-2/>.

²⁹ This is even more remarkable considering Moldova precludes residents of pro-Russia Transdnistria from participating in national elections.

³⁰ "Депутат: При такой поддержке Кремля в Гагаузии победила бы и кукла Барби" ("With the Kremlin's support, a Barbie doll would have won in Gagauzia."). *Regnum* [published online in Russian 27 March 2015]. <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1909380.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2015. The person quoted is Ivan Burgudji, an ATU-Gagauzia parliamentarian.

competition for Moldova between Russia and the European Union, far from being over, is getting more intense. “The fact that Gagauzia is pro-Russian is no secret,” Vlah told *Deutsche Welle* in a post-election interview.³² While that truism is unremarkable in and of itself, what may turn out to be remarkable, however, is that Vlah's election may mark the start of something remarkable.

Pro-Romanian Moldova Heads West, Everyone Else Goes East

"[T]he rather small territory of the Republic of Moldova hosts at least three geopolitical conflicts: Transdnistria, the South Bessarabian conflict, and the problem of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. [...] The respective conflicts intersect and influence each other. [T]he South Bessarabian conflict is in close connection with the Transdnistria one, as well as with the conflict related to the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. [...] Geographically, [the South Bessarabian] conflict results from the borderline drawn in the summer of 1940 and politically, in the movement of Bessarabian Romanians and the proclamation of the Republic of Moldova's independence."³³

Autonomist Gagauzia and separatist Transdnistria—to which, it can fairly be added, the Bulgarian ethnic enclaves in southern Moldova centered on Taraclia—share an abhorrence of Moldova's ambitions of unifying with neighboring Romania,³⁴ and oppose Moldova's hoped-for accession to the European Union.

In November 2013 the Moldovan government signed a European Union Association Agreement establishing the framework for bilateral negotiations over Moldova's hoped-for membership. That agreement was swiftly and forcefully rejected by ATU-Gagauzia. A February 2014 consultative referendum—condemned as illegal by the Chişinău government,³⁵ which froze financial accounts in an attempt to deny it the use of government funds—asked whether Moldova should seek closer ties with the European Union, or alternately, the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union; and a separate question whether ATU-Gagauzia had the right to secede if Moldovan sovereignty was lost. Voters were given three separate ballots printed on different colored paper.

As one Russian commentary colorfully put it, Chişinău's efforts to block the referendum “pulled the chair out from under the skinny legs of ‘Moldovan statehood’ by aggravating the country's political situation.”³⁶ With 70 percent of eligible voters participating, 97.2 percent rejected closer ties with the European Union and 98.4 percent supported closer ties with the Eurasian Customs Union.³⁷ An even higher 98.9 percent endorsed Gagauzia's right to secede under the sovereignty question,

³¹ <https://twitter.com/DmitriTrenin/status/580397593890582529>. Last accessed 28 March 2015.

³² "Irina Vlah: „Cel mai mult îmi doresc să fie pace și relații bune cu Chişinău”." ("Irina Vlah: 'Most of all I want peace and good relations with Chisinau'.") *Deutsche Welle* [published online in Romanian 23 March 2015]. <http://www.dw.de/irina-vlah-cel-mai-mult-imi-doresc-sa-fie-pace-si-relatii-bune-cu-chisinau/a-18333780>. Last accessed 28 March 2015.

³³ The Institute for Public Policy (2002). *National Security and Defense of the Republic of Moldova*. (Chişinău: Editura Arc), pp. 17-18.

³⁴ Depending upon one's historical viewpoint, this is seen variably as Moldova's *re-unification* with neighboring Romania—the Romanian government's expressed view and the one held by pro-Romania Moldovans—or its *re-annexation* by Romania—the Russian government's expressed view, and the one held by anti-Romania and/or pro-Russia Moldovans (including Transdnistrians & Gagauzians). Irrespective of which term is applied, Romanian intentions are indisputable: In November 2013, President Traian Băsescu said that after joining the EU and NATO, Romania's third priority must be reunification with Moldova. See: "Traian Băsescu la TVR: Următorul proiect pentru România trebuie să fie 'Vrem să ne întregim țara!'" ("Traian Băsescu: Romania's next priority should be 'To unify the nation!'"). *Știrilor TVR* [published online in Romanian 27 November 2013]. http://stiri.tvr.ro/traian-basescu-la-tvr--urmatorul-proiect-pentru-romania-trebuie-sa-fie-vrem-sa-ne-intregim-tara-_37653.html. Last accessed 28 March 2015. Elsewhere, he called unification "the project of my soul." [<https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/127824>]. Last accessed 28 March 2015]

³⁵ While a Moldovan court declared the plebiscite illegal since neither Moldova nor ATU-Gagauzia laws explicitly authorize holding such a referendum, this position was rejected by the Gagauzia People's Assembly, which went ahead with the plebiscite. See: Dumitru Minzarari (2014). "The Gagauz Referendum in Moldova: A Russian Political Weapon?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11:23 [published online in English 5 February 2014]. http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41922&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=756&no_cache=1#.VRCFbrpN38s. Last accessed 28 March 2015.

³⁶ "Чем закончится новый «поход на Гагаузию»?" ("How will the new 'march on Gagauzia' end?"). *IA REX* [published online in Russian 11 January 2014]. <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/44432.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

³⁷ It is worth taking note of the needle-threading position of Moldova's former president and the leader of its Party of Communists, Vladimir Voronin, who said that for Moldova, "the only possible path to the EU goes through the Customs Union." Voronin added that he favored Moldova's "modernization to European standards" rather than its "European integration." ["Владимир Воронин: Наш путь в ЕС возможен только через Таможенный союз" ("Vladimir Voronin: Our path to the EU is possible only through the Customs Union"). *Allmoldova.com* [published online in Russian 26 November 2013]. <http://www.allmoldova.com/news/vladimir-voronin-nash-put-v-es-vozmozhen-tolko-cherez-tamozhennyj-soyuz/>. Last accessed 28 March 2015.]

which was understood to mean Moldova's unification with Romania.

After declaring Russia would start showing a “special interest” in ATU-Gagauzia (and Taraclia), Ambassador Farit Muhametshin publicly supported the referendum. When denied funding by the Chişinău government, a Russian businessman, Yuri Yakubov—who, claiming roots in Gagauzia, said he “could not help a rush of patriotism and a desire to help his fellow citizens”³⁸—gave the Comrat government an estimated €55,000-€75,000 to fund the plebiscite.³⁹

There also have been rumblings in southern Moldova's Bulgarian enclaves. Russia advocates a “United Gagauzia” to unify Moldova's Gagauz and Bulgarian enclaves into a single autonomous unit that would cover most of southern Moldova. The addition of the Bulgarian enclave, Taraclia, would, as one Russian commentary put it, “allow Gagauzia to ‘open a window’ to Ukraine,” especially to Ukrainian Gagauz.⁴⁰

In April 2013, the Taraclia district council—the political center of Moldova's 65,000 Russian-speaking Bulgarians (two-thirds of all Taraclians)—unanimously demanded ATU Gagauzia-like status for Taraclia as a national-territorial autonomous unit. Taraclia's demands—“justice for the Bulgarian community” and “preservation of Bulgarian ethnic identity”⁴¹—were modeled on similar ones by the Bălţi municipal council in 2012 (which later dropped the one for an autonomy referendum).⁴²

Rumors surfaced in Budzhak, during late 2014 of a separatist plot centered in Bolhrad, a two-thirds ethnic Bulgarian city in region's northwest (and the birthplace of Ukraine's president, Petro Poroshenko).⁴³ There were unconfirmed allegations of involvement by former Soviet officers, including a former brigade commander, Oleg Babich; and other allegations regarding purported separatist sympathies held by public figures like Anton Kisse, a Ukrainian parliamentarian and chairman of the Association of Bulgarians in Ukraine. What has greater potential to crystalize pro-separatist sentiment among Budzhak ethnic Bulgarians is Ukraine's controversial series of military mobilizations (four so far) to conscript manpower for the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Some news accounts go so far as to describe a “rebellion” among Budzhak Bulgarians.⁴⁴ For its part, the Bulgarian government has remained (publicly, at least) circumspect about Ukraine's mobilization of ethnic Bulgarians, to not inconsiderable domestic criticism.⁴⁵

The Uses & Limits of Hybrid Warfare in Transdnistria & Gagauzia

Anatol Tsaranu⁴⁶ wrote that Ukraine's government believes “the situation in eastern Ukraine developed according to ‘the Transdnistria scenario’,”⁴⁷ and that the unresolved situation in Transdnistria poses a continuing threat to Ukraine's Odessa region. The risk here is separatism spilling over from Transdnistria and/or Gagauzia into the Ukraine's Odessa region—or

³⁸ http://gagauz-pmr.ru/view_news_en.php?id=220. Last accessed 28 March 2015.

³⁹ Stanislav Secieru (2014). “How to Offset Russian Shadow Power? The Case of Moldova.” *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych (PISM) Bulletin*, 125:31 [published online in English 31 October 2014]. http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=18536. Last accessed 28 March 2015.

⁴⁰ “Присоединение болгарских сел позволит гагаузам ‘прорубить окно’ на Украину.” (“The addition of Bulgarian villages would allow Gagauzia to ‘open a window’ into Ukraine.”) *ИА REX* [published online in Russian 1 May 2010]. <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/4291.html>. Last accessed 30 March 2015.

⁴¹ “Болгары Молдавии требуют автономии” (“Moldovan Bulgarians demand autonomy”). *REGNUM* [published online in Russian 13 April 2013]. <http://regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/moldova/1648322.html>. Last accessed 28 March 2015. Further complicating matters, Bulgaria declared ethnic Bulgarians living in Moldova eligible for Bulgarian citizenship. See: “Minister: About 500,000 Bessarabian Bulgarians are eligible for citizenship.” *The Sofia Echo* [published online in English 22 September 2010]. http://sofiaecho.com/2010/09/22/964114_minister-about-500-000-bessarabian-bulgarians-are-eligible-for-citizenship. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

⁴² The northern Moldova city of Bălţi is the nation's third largest (after the national capital, Chişinău, and the Transdnistrian capital, Tiraspol). It has a majority Russophone population with large ethnic Russian (19.2% of all residents) and Ukrainian (23.7% of all residents) blocs.

⁴³ “Towards the unknown region: A little-known place that interests both Ukraine and Russia.” *The Economist* [published online in English 3 January 2015]. <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21637415-little-known-place-interests-both-ukraine-and-russia-towards-unknown-region>. Last accessed 30 March 2015.

⁴⁴ George Kolarov (2015). “Бунт бессарабских болгар против украинской мобилизации” (“Rebellion against Ukraine's mobilization of Bessarabian Bulgarians”). *Strategic Culture Foundation* [published online in Russian 2 January 2015]. <http://www.fondsk.ru/news/2015/02/01/bunt-bessarabskih-bolgar-protiv-ukrainskoj-mobilizacii-31568.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

⁴⁵ “Lack of reaction from Bulgaria over Bessarabian Bulgarians’ mobilisation is shocking: expert.” *FOCUS News Agency* [published online in English 2 February 2015]. <http://www.focus-fen.net/news/2015/02/02/362034/lack-of-reaction-from-bulgaria-over-bessarabian-bulgarians-mobilisation-is-shocking-expert.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

⁴⁶ Currently associated with the Moscow-based Russian Center for Strategic Research and Political Consulting, Tsaranu at the time was with the Centre for Strategic Research and Political Consultancy aka “POLITICON” in Chişinău.

⁴⁷ “Кишинев и Киев открывают второй фронт?” (“Have Chişinău and Kyev opened a second front?”). *Росбалт.RU* [published online in Russian 24 February 2015]. <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2015/02/24/1371387.html>. Last accessed 5 April 2015.

more likely, that it would be actively exported into Budzhak, where favorable conditions for ethnic unrest might already exist—bolstered by the menacing presence of Russian armed forces in the region.

Ethnically diverse and largely ignored by Kyev, Budzhak is fertile ground for political disruption. Among the several tools in its hybrid warfare toolbox, Russia has long operated in the region through front groups and cutout organizations. One technique used to great effect in Moldova was to organize Transdnistrian branches of established Russian media portals and place them under control of the internal security service. In early 2006, the Russian media outlet *Lenta* established *Lenta-PMR* [Лента ПМР], which in reality was controlled by Dmitry Soin, a senior intelligence officer in the PMR-Transdnistria State Security Ministry known by the acronym MGB.⁴⁸ In July 2009 a known Soin associate, Roman Konoplev, formed what purported to be a new Transdnistria-focused Russian media portal, *Dnestr* (Днестр), that in fact used a Russian domain name as a subterfuge. Soin himself occasionally wrote anti-Moldovan, anti-Romanian commentaries under his own name, usually ending with a call for Transdnistria's unification with Russia.⁴⁹

In 2005 Soin organized a front group known as *Proryv* or “Breakthrough,”⁵⁰ a self-described “Eurasianist International youth organization” that registered as political party in Transdnistria.⁵¹ At the time, he directed the Che Guevara High School of Political Leadership, and chaired the Transdnistrian branch of the Russian National Strategy Council (a putative think tank, it was in fact a Russian front organization). Soin eventually fell out with the PMR-Transdnistria political leadership, and decamped from Tiraspol in March 2013 for Odessa while remaining a member of the Transdnistrian parliament.⁵² He reemerged in public in April 2014 when he announced formation of the “Union of Transdnistrians in Ukraine,” a group purporting to represent Ukrainians in Transdnistria. According to Soin, “The situation on the [Transdnistria-Ukraine] border was on the verge of exploding” because of illegal restrictions on border crossings imposed unilaterally by Chişinău. He pledged the UTU would work to overturn prohibitions on dual Moldovan-Ukrainian citizenship, and support for opening a Ukrainian consulate in Transdnistria.⁵³ Soin's usefulness ended abruptly in August 2014 when Ukrainian authorities arrested him in Kyev on an Interpol warrant charging him with two murders while he was an MGB officer.

Classic hybrid warfare techniques executed through front groups and cutout organizations are inconsistent with an aggressor's objective to take and hold physical territory, even if they raise the specter of activating separatist forces. This alone substantially dilutes arguments that “Moldova is the next Ukraine,” notes Dan Dungaciu of the Romanian Academy Institute of Political Science and International Relations.⁵⁴ Russia sees Transdnistria and Gagauzia instrumentally, i.e., as means to an end, meaning a federal Moldova. Re-integrating Transdnistria and Gagauzia into a newly federalized political structure would likely foreclose Moldova's pathways to unification with Romania and to European Union and NATO accession, at least for the foreseeable future. It would also give Russia the option to escalate Budzhak separatism as a means of pressuring Ukraine, for which the presence of a non-EU, non-NATO Moldova “wedge” on its western flank would necessarily complicate its own accession ambitions as well as its defensive posture.

Concluding Thoughts

A Russian commentary—substituting the intentionally provocative *Bessarabian* for “Moldovan”—asked rhetorically:

⁴⁸ Russian: *Министерство государственной безопасности*; Russian transl.: *Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*. Ukrainian: *Міністерство державної безпеки*; Ukrainian transl.: *Ministerstvo derzhavnoyi bezpeky*. Romanian & Moldovan: *Ministerul Securităţii de Stat*.

⁴⁹ For example, “мы - за максимальную интеграцию с Россией” (“We are for full integration with Russia”). *Tupac* [published online in Russian in 2009]. <http://tiras.ru/v-mire/8019-d.soin-my-za-maksimalnuju-integraciju-s.html>. Last accessed 5 April 2015.

⁵⁰ Russian: *Прорыв*. Russian transl.: *Proryv*.

⁵¹ When it was founded in October 2005, *Breakthrough* established additional branches in Crimea and in Georgia's two separatist regions, the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively. The Crimea branch was involved in Russian SBU-instigated agitation against Ukrainian authorities in Crimea in 2006. It first came to the attention of Ukrainian authorities in January 2006, when its Crimea branch dug a trench along the Yalta-Moscow highway at the neck of the Crimean peninsula and established a mock border post symbolically separating Crimea from Ukraine. The group invited inviting Russian but not Ukrainian media to cover the action. Western intelligence agencies believed that Russia used *Proryv* and like radical “youth groups” for propaganda actions but little else. After the January 2006 incident, the Ukraine SBU expelled *Proryv*'s Crimean director from the region.

⁵² The falling out concerned Soin's involvement in a Russian disinformation effort to discredit Moldovan president Vladimir Voronin. Moldovan security services responded by publicizing Soin's alleged involvement in the murder of two men while he was an MGB officer. Ultimately, Interpol issued a warrant for Soin's arrest, which occurred in Kyev in August 2014.

⁵³ “Украина открывает второй приднестровский фронт” (“Ukraine opens a second Transdnistrian front”). *Независимая газета* [published online in Russian 4 July 2013]. http://www.ng.ru/cis/2013-07-04/1_pridnestrovie.html. Last accessed 5 April 2015.

⁵⁴ Cristian Campeanu (2015). “Ochiul lui Putin fixează Moldova” (“Putin's eye is fixed on Moldova”). *RomaniaLibera.ro* [published online in Romanian 5 March 2015]. <http://www.romanalibera.ro/special/documentare/ochiul-lui-putin-fixeaza-moldova-369803>. Last accessed 4 April 2015.

“Are Bessarabian authorities seeking civil war [in Gagauzia] given the likelihood of escalating the conflict beyond the region—primarily in Transdnistria and the Ukrainian part of Budzhak, home to the second largest Gagauzia community outside Gagauz Yeri as well as twice the number of Bulgarians living in Moldova—and the inevitable involvement of external forces? The long-deferred formation of a Gagauz-Bulgarian Budzhak republic could gain quite tangible contours in the event of Bessarabia's absorption into Romania. [...] Unfreezing all of the 'frozen' conflicts inside the old borders of Soviet Moldova may sweep away not only Gagauzia and Transdnistria, but also Moldovan statehood along with Northern Bukovina and Ukrainian South Bessarabia.”⁵⁵

A 1913 map of an imagined *Novorossiya*⁵⁶ shows a unified Bessarabia—the demarcated region on the far left labeled *Бессарабская (Bessarabskaya)*—that incorporates both the modern-day Moldova and Odessa's Budzhak region.



Novorossiya Imagined c. 1913⁵⁷

A century later, visions of *Novorossiya redivivus* might, in Taavi Minnik's memorable phrase, might well be “a grotesque world reflected in a contorted mirror.”⁵⁸ However, its emotive strength lies in the term's historical roots.⁵⁹ So writes Ieva Bērziņa in an insightful paper published by the Latvian National Defense Academy. The symbol—*Novorossiya*—and its historical referent combine c.2014 as a claim for territorial change, especially among the *sootечественники*⁶⁰—literally, “compatriots”—persons who are linguistically and culturally Russian but who live within the boundaries of another state.



Historical *Novorossiya*⁶¹

⁵⁵ “Чем закончится новый «поход на Гагаузию»?” (“How will the new ‘march on Gagauzia’ end?”). *ИА REX* [published online in Russian 11 January 2014]. <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/44432.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

⁵⁶ *Novorossiya* is the Russian transliteration of *Новороссія*, the literal meaning of which is “New Russia”. The name is phonetically similar in Romanian (*Noua Rusie*) and Russian, the region's two principle languages.

⁵⁷ Source: <http://reconsideringrussia.org/2014/03/02/what-is-ukraine/novorossiya/>. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

⁵⁸ Taavi Minnik (2014). “Putini Novorossija projekti lõpp” (“The End of Putin’s Novorossiya Project”). *DELFI* [published online in Estonian 24 October 2014]. <http://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/arvamus/taavi-minnik-putini-novorossija-projekti-lopp?id=70016399>. Last accessed 31 March 2015.

⁵⁹ Ieva Bērziņa (2014). *Branding Novorossiya*. Strategic Review No. 10 (October 2014). National Defense Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research, p. 6. http://www.naa.mil.lv/~media/NAA/AZPC/Publikacijas/SA-10_NOVORUS.ashx. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

⁶⁰ Russian: *соотечественники*.

⁶¹ Bērziņa (2014), *op cit.*, p. 5.

As the historical map makes clear, Budzhak was never part of Novorossiia. While this makes the notion of a “People's Republic of Bessarabia” seem absurd from an historical perspective, it is an instrumental claim for territorial change, not an historical one.⁶² In a much-cited January 2015 commentary, Marcin Kosienkowski asked whether Budzhak is “next in line” for Russia. Next in line for what, is perhaps a fair reply. Russia will no doubt continue to interfere in the internal affairs of Moldova and Ukraine for the purpose of derailing their respective ambitions of European Union and NATO accession. It unlikely either will be targeted for full-blown military action, however. The lone foreseeable exception is if the Moldovan government moved formally to unify with Romania, in which event Russian armed forces in Transdnistria would likely support PMR-Transdnistria's and/or ATU-Gagauzia's secession.

That being said, nothing precludes the possibility of a small conflict morphing unintentionally into a larger and hotter one. In May 2014, the Romanian government barred Russian deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin from using Romanian airspace on a return flight from Transdnistria to Moscow. Rogozin tweeted in response,

“Upon a U.S. request, Romania has closed its air space for my plane. Ukraine doesn't allow me to pass through again. Next time I'll fly on board TU-160.”⁶³

Rogozin's reference of course is to Russia's largest strategic bomber. It must be added in fairness that Russia has no monopoly on the use of symbols incongruent with their historical referent. Consider the language used by the post-Trianon Romanian government to bind new provinces to the Old Kingdom:

“Bessarabia [...] torn by Russia more than hundreds of years ago from the body of the ancient Moldova [...] from now on and forever joins its mother, Romania.”⁶⁴

The position of Ukraine's ethnic Romanians today is an interesting one. A June 2014 forum held by a regional Romanian cultural association known as “Bessarabia” called for Ukraine to disintegrate Izmail from Odessa and reestablish its pre-1954 status as a standalone region.⁶⁵ The attendees balanced this demand by protesting “Kremlin plans to create a 'Budzhak Republic' behind the leadership of pro-Russia politicians in Gagauzia.”⁶⁶ The forum was conducted entirely in Romanian with no Ukrainian translation, and was attended by Romania's consul general in Odessa and the Romanian parliamentary deputy.⁶⁷ It is all the more interesting since Odessa's ethnic Romanian population is reliably estimated at around 700 persons, far fewer than the number of ethnic Romanians in Ukraine's Chernivtsi and Transcarpathian regions. The Romanian government, however, betrays its regional ambitions by counting all Budzhak Moldovans as “Romanians” which raises the count to 130,000 people. Russia for its part plays the Romanian question both ways, criticizing the Romanian government's alleged territorial ambitions in Moldova and Budzhak while at the same time analogizing the aggrieved state of Ukraine's ethnic Romanians and Transcarpathian Hungarians for the purpose of fomenting ethnic dissent inside the Odessa region.⁶⁸

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 7

⁶³ “Stuck in rogue airspace: Moldova seizes Transnistria petitions from Russian delegation jet.” *RT* [published online in English 11 May 2014]. <http://rt.com/news/158164-moldova-rogozin-airspace-romania/>

⁶⁴ Anamaria Dutceac Segesten (2009). *Myth, Identify and Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Romanian and Serbian Textbooks*. Dissertation submitted to the University of Maryland, College Park. http://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/1903/9168/1/DutceacSegesten_umd_0117E_10267.pdf. Last accessed 29 March 2015.

⁶⁵ “Одесская румынская община предлагает воссоздать Измаильскую область в единой Украине” (Odessa's Romanian community seeks reestablishment of Izmail Oblast.” *Black Sea News* [published online in Russian 21 June 2014]. <http://www.blackseanews.net/read/82285>. Last accessed 1 April 2015. Also В Измаиле прошел форум румын Бессарабии” (“A forum on Romanian Bessarabia held in Izmail). *Izmacity.com* [published online in Russian 17 June 2014]. <http://www.izmacity.com/novosti/sobytiya/7958-v-izmaile-proshel-forum-rumyn-bessarabii>. Last accessed 1 April 2015.

⁶⁶ “Одесские румыны выступили за воссоздание Измаильской области” (“Odessa Romanians favor re-creating Izmail Oblast”). *Думская.net* [published online in Russian 18 June 2014]. <http://dumskaya.net/news/odesskie-rumyny-vystupili-za-voosozdanie-izmails-036763/>. Last accessed 2 April 2015.

⁶⁷ “Представители румынской общины Одесского региона выступают за воссоздание Измаильской области” (“Representatives of Odessa's Romanian community in favor of the reestablishing the Izmail Oblast”). *Akerman 24* [published online in Russian 9 June 2014]. <http://akerman24.com/123gun/1099/predstaviteli-rumynskoy-obshchiny-odesskogo-regiona-vystupayut-za-voosozdanie-izmailskoy-oblasti.html>. Last accessed 3 April 2014.

⁶⁸ Vladislav Gulevich (2014) “The boori. О положении румын и венгров на Украине” (“The 'Boorish Country': On the condition of Romanians and Hungarians in Ukraine”). *Strategic Culture Foundation* [published online in Russian 10 August 2014]. <http://www.fondsk.ru/news/2014/10/08/hamskaja-strana-o-polozhenii-rumyn-i-vengrov-na-ukraine-29863.html>. Last accessed 3 April 2015. See also fn(11).

In an insightful March 2014 commentary published on *Polit.ru*, Aleksey Murav'yev wrote that Transdnistria and Gagauzia today dwell within a “mono-ethnic state”—a Romanized Moldova—and Budzhak within “a pseudo empire”—Ukraine. As a result, “these orphan lands...these no man's lands,” he wrote, cling “to a pseudo-Soviet identity which freezes them in the last century.” He concludes with this observation:

“[These lands] can only be preserved and their instability can only be quelled by a large empire in which the idea of 'the nation' is strongly grounded in the state and in the culture. Of course, an imperial structure is no panacea, but it can allow these 'no man's lands' to exist without having to define themselves by a single ethnic or a religious identity. The problem of modern Russia is that it has moved in the opposite direction—from a Soviet empire to a nation-state. The rise of nationalism, Orthodoxy, and other phenomena testify to just such a direction. Making these no man's lands part of Russia will not solve their problems, and pulls Russia backward instead of allowing it to move forward.

“Modern Russia, being neither the Soviet Union nor Imperial Russia, tries nevertheless to think of itself as both. In reality, however, Russia has nearly returned to its early borders—Central Russia, coupled to the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East. The continued existence of the old federal infrastructure only complicates the situation, along with persons who refuse to accept there no longer is—and never again will be—a Soviet Union.”⁶⁹

Will Budzhak join what is piquantly described as PMR-Transdnistria and ATU-Gagauzia's “theatrical and performative form of sovereignty”?⁷⁰ That remains to be seen. It is unfair to blame Russia alone for the territories' problems, for Bucharest and the pro-Romanian government in Chişinău undeniably contribute each in its own way to the general discordance. That being said, there is no moral equivalence between the status of a Russian legacy bridgehead located 1300 kilometers from Moscow (Russia's constant references to NATO actions in Kosovo notwithstanding) and Romania's interest in countering the threat to regional peace and stability posed by its contentious borderlands—and neither has moral equivalence to Ukrainian territorial sovereignty. Russian-fomented discord in Budzhak and neighboring PMR-Transdnistria and ATU-Gagauzia has one goal and only one goal:

“For those in the breakaway regions, occupation without formally occupying and annexation through carefully orchestrated, mass participatory endeavors like referenda open new domains where values, fears, and norms are reconstituted into a daily experience of threat and there is only one entity capable of restoring “order”: the Russian Federation...”⁷¹

⁶⁹ "Проклятье спорных земель" ("The curse of disputed lands"). *Полит.ру* [published online in Russian 13 March 2014]. <http://polit.ru/article/2014/03/13/spor/>. Last accessed 3 April 2015.

⁷⁰ From Dunn & Bobick (2014), *op cit.*, p. 409.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*