



ROBERT W. KURZ

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Author Background

Robert Kurz has been a Central and East European analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office since 2005, following eight years of analytical and multinational engagement activities at the Joint Analysis Center in the United Kingdom. He is also a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Army Reserve, where he provided over twenty years of research and international engagement support to the US European Command headquarters and its operations and analysis components. Robert holds an M.A. from the University of Kansas Center for Global and International Studies, and is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College Common Core Course and the Executive Program in Advanced Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Germany.

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Ukraine and Moldova: A Qualitative Comparison of Perspectives on Russian Influence

Robert W. Kurz

Abstract: Ukraine's 2014 Maidan Revolution, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the onset of the separatist conflict in the Donbass have prompted defense personnel from around the world to examine the evolving military and security developments in the region. Yet my dialogue with personnel from the area revealed to me an intangible but powerful dynamic often overlooked in the analyses of the battlefield: Influence. This paper explores Russian influence by comparing the perspectives shared by a group each of Ukrainians and Moldovans whose work plays a notable if not direct role in their government's ability to maneuver through the effects of Russia's leverage in their country. Their views underscore Russia's employment of indirect methods to build loyalty and support that impact nearly every sector of society. This comparison proves valuable since Ukraine and Moldova have much in common: they have significant Russian speaking populations, they have belonged to the Russian empire and Soviet Union, they have strong identities largely divided between Russia and one or more Western states, they are predominantly Orthodox in religion, and they have active, largely pro-Russian separatist regions on the east side of their territories. While Russian influence is not new to conflict or war, this study suggests that its digital context is far-reaching, and that Russia has the initiative. Similarities and differences – and the reasons for them -- between Ukraine and Moldovan perceptions of Russian influence are important to understanding the operational environment in a region where local and international entities are attempting to bring long-term stability.

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Map of Ukraine and region, 30 August 2016. Map courtesy of the Foreign Military Studies Office.

Introduction

In May of 2016, I had the opportunity to travel to Kiev, Ukraine, intending to engage with the people, understand their perspectives and, along with my colleagues, learn as much as possible in a very short time. My hope was that this brief trip would be the first of several journeys to the country and its neighbors, where I could observe the impact of the conflict in eastern Ukraine on the region.

Roughly two years earlier in neighboring Romania, I watched with amazement as local and international news showed Maidan unfolding into long, massive protests in Kiev's Independence Square.¹ By February 22, 2014, Ukrainian President Yanukovich fled the country and Ukraine's parliament began to select a new cabinet. One broadly shared perspective, among many, is that Russia's President Putin quickly used these developments as a pretext for Russia to exert its own interests. In less than a month, it annexed Crimea, and by April, pro-Russian separatists had begun taking over government buildings in eastern Ukraine's Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk regions.²

Today Kiev is, by most appearances, more stable than in 2014, but fraught with serious challenges. To say the least, it faces political turbulence over corruption, Russia's occupation of Crimea, and a volatile eastern Ukraine, where approximately 13,000³ people have died in the conflict with little or no resolution from the Minsk Agreements.⁴ These topics – corruption, Crimea, and the military conflict – are so palpable in Ukraine that they often dominate the international media as well as thousands of analyses of what will happen next. Yet my visit revealed to me a hidden battlefield in Ukraine, one on which victory is measured by the effects

of a quiet and penetrating influence, and one that can deliberately alter perspectives and the outcome of most other battles. This battlefield is about a fight for persuasion and identity through the employment of indirect methods. While it is not new to conflict or war, its digital context is far-reaching, and Russia has the initiative.

President Putin's bold actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine raised tensions -- among other places -- next door in Moldova, where some residents and government officials anticipated similar Russian-led movements including recognition of independence for Moldova's pro-Russian, breakaway Transnistria region. In March 2014, following Russia's Crimea annexation, then-NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Philip Breedlove expressed concern that Russian forces could sweep across eastern and southern Ukraine to link up with Transnistria.⁵ While Moscow has not taken these actions, its efforts to extend influence and hegemony over Moldova have become more pronounced since 2014, according to some Moldovans.⁶ These efforts are exacerbating an already fervent division in Moldova between those who prefer a future strongly tied to Russia, or one that is increasingly integrated with Western institutions. The pull in each direction is strong and entails more than just geographic proximity; it involves a Russian-Moldovan shared history, culture, religion, economic ties, and domestic political circumstances that together create a challenging tangle in Moldova.⁷

This paper compares perceptions and perspectives on Russian influence in Ukraine with that in Moldova, and is intended to help Western defense, civil, political, or security communities improve their contextual understanding of both states on this topic. Primary sources include Ukrainian and Moldovan professionals in government, defense, media and academe who shared their perspectives with me in the 2016 through 2018 timeframe, and augmented by books, articles, surveys and polls that reflect recent Moldovan, Ukrainian and regional perspectives on Russian influence. The viewpoints in this paper reflect the perceptions of the Ukrainians and Moldovans involved in the study, and not necessarily my own.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is unconventional in that it began with data I initially obtained as part of a separate, unrelated research project in Ukraine. Interestingly, the perspectives I learned from the Ukrainians provided a unique opportunity to observe an operational environment through the lens of individuals who have lived directly in it, and sufficient enough to facilitate a comparative examination useful to researchers and practitioners tracking Russia's influence activities in the broader region. The specific comparison of Ukraine and Moldova is logical because of notable similarities between these two countries -- which I address later in the paper -- and also because of high Western political and security concerns regarding Russia's intentions in both. The intent of this study is not to rely on the analysis of extensive polls or surveys, though I include recent ones where they relate closely to the topic. Instead, its strength lay in first-hand perspectives from a small number of foreign professionals with a national and strategic focus. Their shared viewpoints, while sometimes anecdotal, offer significant insight into a community of people whose work and decisions play a substantive if not direct role in their governments' ability to maneuver through competing influences.

PART I – UKRAINIAN PERSPECTIVES

Background

While the international media often presents Ukraine's current crises as relatively new, the country's disunity – and Russia's role in it -- actually stem from a complex, ongoing historical struggle for influence, control, and independence. Slavic tribes occupied central and eastern Ukraine in the sixth century A.D., when Kiev began to prosper as the center of Kievan Rus – the latter of which became the first eastern Slavic federation between the 9th and 13th centuries, and geographically Europe's largest state by the 11th century. Mongol raiders razed Kiev in the 13th century and by the 14th century, most of the territory of today's Ukraine was annexed by Poland and Lithuania. However, by this period many Ukrainians began to identify as a distinct people. In the mid-17th century, what is now Ukraine was partitioned between Polish and Russian entities, with the latter gaining control of most of the territory by 1793. In the 19th century, Ukraine fell mostly under the Russian empire except for a small, western enclave under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Imperial Russia imposed strict limits on attempts to elevate Ukrainian culture and banned the use of the Ukrainian language.⁸

Ukraine experienced both opportunity and suffering through both World Wars, only to continue its statehood under the yoke of Russian control in the end. World War I and the Russian revolution led Ukraine to proclaim autonomy in 1917, independence in 1918, and unification with western Ukraine in 1919. However, this newfound liberation was short lived, as Polish expansionists from the west, and Russia's Red Army from the east, defeated the Ukrainian armies. Soon after, Ukraine was officially incorporated into the Soviet Union and "Russification" – including the barring of the Ukrainian language from the state's official and educational sectors – ensued under the theory that the overarching Soviet population would more strongly unify under compulsory Russian language and culture.⁹ In World War II, Ukraine suffered significant wartime devastation under the Nazis until the Soviets retook Ukraine in 1944, yet underwent continued post-war political oppression as Moscow kept tight reins on all aspects of Ukrainian society. Since World War II, Ukraine has faced a cultural and linguistic divide, whereby eastern Ukraine generally identifies with Russia and predominantly speaks the Russian language, and the remainder of the country is more Western oriented and speaks predominantly Ukrainian.¹⁰

Ukraine's 1991 declaration of independence, after the Soviet Union's fall, marked the beginning of a new era for the country, though one still fraught with the same divisions as before. Ukraine's populace largely coalesced around a Ukraine national sovereignty, but the competing "grand narratives" of its past – largely pre-communist or Soviet – left its political leadership with challenging constitutional choices when it came to defining the conception of statehood in institutional, territorial and national terms.¹¹ These challenges are reflected in what many perceive as ambiguities in Ukraine's 1996 constitution and amendments and, likewise, in Ukrainians' development of a national identity. The Ukrainian populace has grown increasingly divided between those who support the

continuation of the state's political, economic and security ties with Russia, and those who favor integrating with NATO, the EU and the West in general.¹² This rift initially culminated in Ukraine's November 2004 Orange Revolution when opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko effectively launched mass protests over rigged elections that gave Viktor Yanukovich – known for political leanings toward Russia -- the presidential victory. Yushchenko won an election re-run with the intent to place Ukraine on a path of Western integration; however, his coalition soon collapsed and his administration struggled until 2010, when Yanukovich won the presidency.¹³

No one expected that Yanukovich's 2010 presidential election victory would steer Ukraine toward another revolution more powerful and internationally polarizing than the Orange Revolution just five years earlier. Yanukovich took many steps to subdue the country's momentum toward Western integration, including his late 2013 decision not to proceed with signing an EU Association Agreement. This triggered a three month protest of thousands of Ukrainians in Kiev's Independence Square -- "Maidan" -- accusing Yanukovich of corruption and bowing to Russian pressure. Throughout this "Euromaidan" revolution, Ukrainian government security personnel responded to the protesters with increasing lethality. In February 2014, they conducted their most violent response by killing at least 77 protesters in Kiev. The explosive political and security upheaval from this, both internally and internationally, prompted Yanukovich to flee to Russia.¹⁴ Kiev's immediate establishment of a new, Western-focused interim government prompted Russia to annex Crimea in March, and to engage in a pro-Russian, separatist movement in eastern Ukraine's Donbass region in April.¹⁵ In May, Ukraine elected leading businessman Petro Poroshenko as president. Poroshenko ran on a pro-Western platform during his campaign and, in July, signed the delayed EU Association Agreement.¹⁶

Fighting in eastern Ukraine, between government forces and Russian-backed separatists, has continued to date with approximately 13,000 deaths,¹⁷ despite internationally brokered ceasefire agreements in September 2014 ("Minsk I") and again in February 2015 ("Minsk II").¹⁸ Multiple efforts have ensued with the intent to stabilize the region, including recurrent talks via the Trilateral Contact Group comprised by Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Normandy Contact Group comprised by Germany, Russia, France and Ukraine representatives.¹⁹ Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, coupled with the involvement of its armed forces in support of separatists in east Ukraine -- and worsening U.S.-Russia relations over Syria -- sparked significant political, economic and security tensions between Russia and the West that have now escalated to levels comparable to the Cold War time frame.

Today, several years into the conflict between Kiev and the separatists in the country's eastern region, Ukrainians are more polarized regarding their relations with Russia than they were when the fighting began in 2014. According to a 2018 Gallup survey, the largest percentage of Ukrainians (43 percent) believe Ukraine needs to have a "very strong position regarding Russia." At least one in five, however, say that Ukraine needs to have a good relationship by all means (25 percent) or that Ukraine needs to terminate its

relationship with Russia (20 percent).²⁰ This polarization of Ukrainians, in part, is reflected by the country's April 2019 election of Volodymyr Zelensky as president over the incumbent, President Petro Poroshenko. A former TV comedian, Zelensky's wherewithal as a politician was largely unknown; however, his campaign captured substantive interest from all camps: end the country's separatist movement in the east, and end the uncertain state of relations with Russia, widely perceived as the instigator and sustainer of that movement.²¹

Propaganda

In my first on-the-ground opportunity to hear Ukrainians' perspectives, their concern over Russian propaganda became considerably evident. Ukraine's long, divisive history -- overlaid with local, national and international strains from its Crimean and ongoing separatist conflicts -- placed Russia at the center of the topics shared by Ukrainian officials. In one discussion, a senior military official spent considerable effort explaining how Ukraine's current conflict is technically an "artillery war." Yet, to my surprise, he ended his long explanation with a brief, succinct divergence from his artillery discourse. He said that in this conflict "Russian propaganda is the main instrument of power," that this propaganda is "at its highest," and that it "splits Ukraine in half."²² The official's final statements were my entree into understanding the quieter -- yet more pervasive and powerful -- battle that Ukraine faces today.

A separate group of Ukrainians, on the subject of current security challenges, also prioritized Russian propaganda as a top issue for their country. Their research, based on Ukraine's experience and perspectives, organized Russian propaganda into four major methods: "Cultural Invasion", "Historical Distortion", "Centralized Media", and "Information and Psychological Operations."²³ The group described "**Cultural Invasion**" as a type of influence whereby Russia uses its diaspora, language, entertainment, books, social networks, and the Russian Orthodox Church to grow and leverage its influence in target areas. Dr. Mahir Ibrahimov, a cultural and language expert on this trip who lived, served and worked in the region for over 30 years, provided insight on this topic. He noted that for Ukraine, this might be one of the most difficult forms of Russian propaganda to distinguish, given the two countries' interwoven histories and cultures.²⁴ There is an undeclared Ukrainian-Russian cultural war that is far less widely known than the countries' longstanding controversies over Crimean separatism, energy and gas disputes, the prospect of Ukraine's NATO membership, and similar highly publicized differences. Nevertheless, it is as bitter as any other aspect of the poor state of bilateral relations between Ukraine and Russia. Well before the current Ukraine-Russia conflict over Crimea and Ukraine's separatist Donbass region began, this culture war had significant ramifications in both countries' domestic politics, national identities and geopolitical orientations, and it continues today. For example, the language spoken by Ukrainians (Ukrainian or Russian) and their attitudes toward Russia -- shaped by their stance on culture and history -- often contribute to voting patterns marked by either pro-Western or pro-Russian orientations. These orientations then impact support for Ukraine's integration into the CIS, NATO or the EU.²⁵

The group explained that Russia's second most prevalent method of propaganda, **"Historical Distortion"**, uses Russia's vast array of connections in Ukrainian society to teach and reflect on key historical developments along misleading, anti-Western and pro-Russian themes.²⁶ Though falsification of history, in various forms and methods, has likely existed in nearly every society, Russia in particular has exercised it increasingly through its Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Many analysts assess that in today's Russia, history is not an objective record of events but an instrument to strengthen the regime. Since the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia's manipulation and distortion of history has served three main purposes: legitimizing the regime, denigrating its rivals, and mobilizing the masses. In contemporary Russia, historical narratives appear to justify the policies of the administration of President Vladimir Putin – especially those focused on defending the country against a multitude of foreign enemies. False depictions of history are intended to disguise reality and appeal to the Russian populace.²⁷

Russia also uses historical distortion to undermine the identity and cohesion of neighbors who fall within the regime's immediate concerns or interests. One key stratagem is to manufacture a fraudulent self-identity, in which the history of neighbors is erroneously disseminated via texts, news, education and similar venues. Over time, perceptions of their distinctiveness are diminished. Ukraine is an example of this; e.g., many Russians disparagingly dismiss it as a "younger brother." Russia's rulers claim much of Ukrainian history as their own, including Kievan Rus, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and the Cossack tradition. By denying Ukraine a distinct and independent historical narrative, Russia makes questionable the very idea of a separate Ukrainian nation. In turn, if Ukraine has no distinct identity then it cannot possess a truly independent state. Nor can it freely choose its government or determine its international alliances. Today, Russia has many more tools at its disposal than during Soviet times, including cable news networks and social media. With a seemingly ever-growing range of emerging and far-reaching information technologies, more distortions of both the past and the present are likely.²⁸

The Ukrainians described the third method of Russian propaganda, **"Centralized Media,"** as Moscow's progressive effort to promote its views by monopolizing or manipulating television, radio, and printed products inside Ukraine and elsewhere, and in multiple languages.²⁹ Following Putin's 2012 return to Russia's presidency, Moscow significantly tightened its control over external messaging in order to more closely align it with the country's national policy objectives. Since the Ukraine conflict, Russia has intensified its use of media as a key lever of broader influence campaigns. Today, Putin and his key advisors use media to disseminate key messages aimed at discrediting the West, reducing social cohesion, and promoting Russia's role in the international system. This process is not only integrated from the tactical to strategic levels and across multiple governments, but includes an emphasis on Russian-speaking populations, which Moscow considers an extension of the Russian nation.³⁰

Russia's media centralization starts within its own populace and its influence extends to its neighbors and other select areas where it has media leverage, including Ukraine. A recent study by CNA Analysis and Solutions indicates that Russia's media has three primary functions in contributing to foreign policy: building domestic political support for its foreign and security

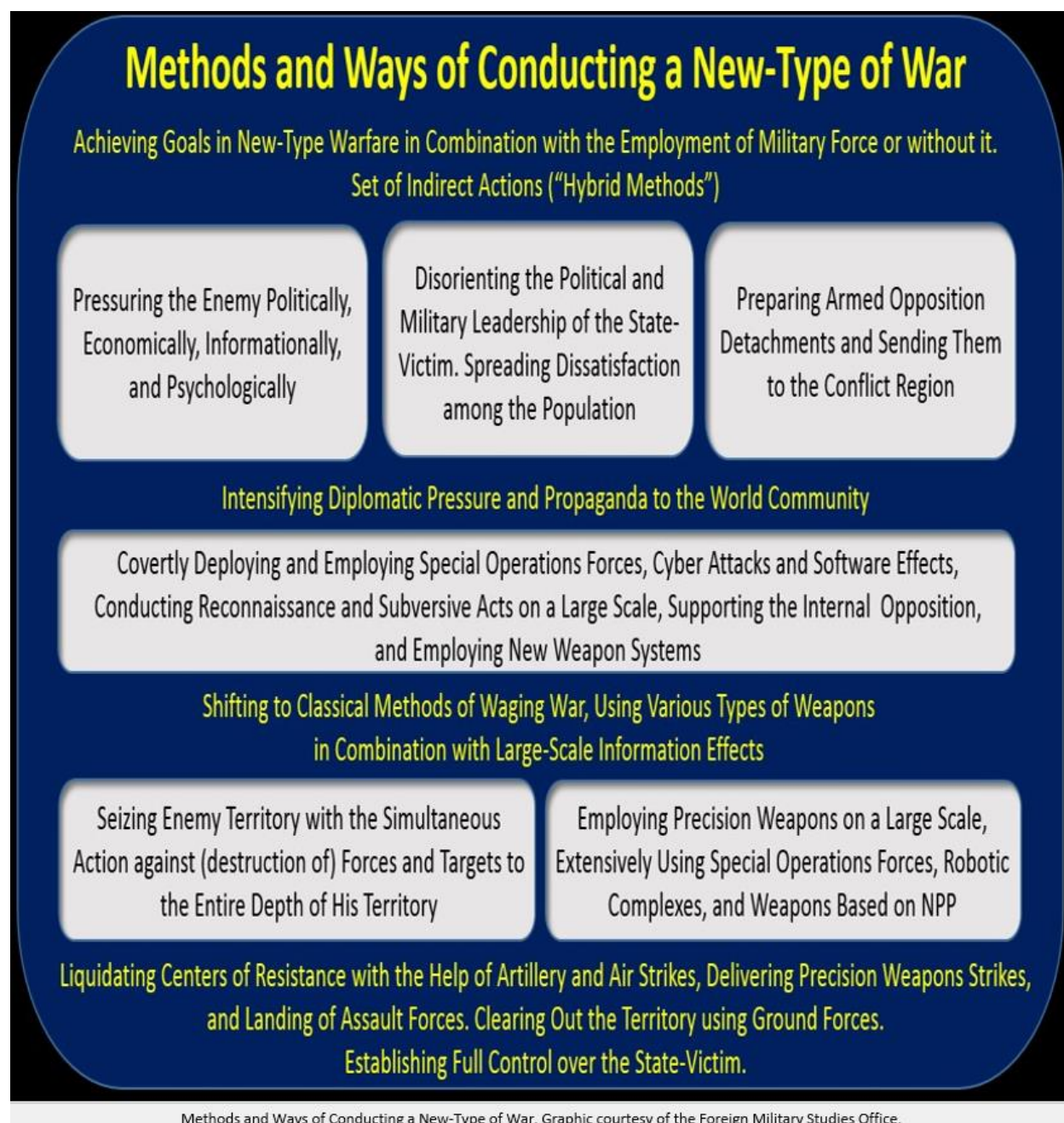
policies; presenting official perspectives and policies to foreign audiences, and influencing foreign audiences through disinformation and propaganda.³¹ Therefore Moscow's control and use of the media within Russia is a reasonable indicator of its effort to influence media externally. Ukraine -- with a strong Russian-speaking population; a substantively overlapping social, political and economic history with Russia; a Western-leaning government; and a pro-Russian separatist conflict -- has more than enough reasons to be a critical target of a calculated Russian messaging campaign.

The Ukrainians stated that their fourth category for defining Russia propaganda is **"Information and Psychological Operations."** The group cited the east Ukraine conflict as an example, where separatists or their Russian counterparts use cell phone text messages, embedded journalists, social networks, and even Russian patriotic symbology (e.g., the Cross of St. George, the Russian Federation colors, the Great Patriotic War cult, etc.) to influence the Ukrainian armed forces, populace, or its leadership.³² While Russian concepts of information warfare became a subject of increased interest in the West since the start of the crisis over Ukraine, this type of warfare is by no means new to Russia or the West. They reflect enduring principles related to competition between states.³³ Today, Russian military literature discusses the current evolution and future of warfare with largely the same concepts. Russian Colonel S. G. Chekinov and Lieutenant General (retired) S. A. Bogdanov, currently recognized for their focus on strategy and future war, claim that Russia's strategic goals will not be achieved without information superiority and psychological operations, including timely, unexpected, and clandestine misinformation and influence measures designed to create division and tensions within the adversary country.³⁴ According to a NATO handbook on Russian information warfare, these measures fall within a wide range of activities seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort or destroy information through computers, smartphones, real or invented news media, statements by leaders or celebrities, online troll campaigns, text messages, vox pops by concerned citizens, YouTube videos, or direct approaches to individual human targets.³⁵ For Russia, Information and Psychological Operations comprise a definitive and pivotal aspect of conflict and war. With the world's increasingly informatized environment, these types of operations will almost certainly be given an ever higher level of attention. In 2017, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu publicly announced that Moscow had established a troop program specifically designed to conduct "information operations" that will facilitate "smart, competent, and effective" propaganda.³⁶

New-Type War

In my view, the Ukrainian group's description of these four propaganda methods was markedly consistent with a Russian explanation of modern war in an issue of Russia's *Bulletin of the Academy of Military Science*. In an early 2015 article, Russian General-Lieutenant A. V. Kartapalov examined changes in the "nature of armed struggle" and what is described as "new-type" war.³⁷ Kartapalov explained that conflicts now have a more protracted character and use indirect actions that achieve results through demoralizing the enemy and inflicting damage on him without the use of force. The general included a chart outlining a Russian view of this "new-type" war, wherein the initial stages are "Pressuring the Enemy Politically, Economically, Informationally and Psychologically;" "Disorienting the Political and Military Leadership of the

State-Victim;” and “Spreading Dissatisfaction among the Population.”³⁸ These initial stages are distinctly “indirect” methods of achieving goals in a “state-victim,” and can be used with or without the employment of force. While Kartapalov claims that past U.S. actions provide examples of this “new-type” war, his explanation of the concept actually appears to coincide with the aforementioned Ukrainian observations. Moreover, his explanation of modern war is a well-written blueprint for Russia’s involvement in Ukraine and similar locations to date (please see the graphic below, which reflects Kartapalov’s “new-type” war).³⁹



I briefly shared with the Ukrainian group my understanding of General-Lieutenant Kartapalov's "new-type" war, wherein a state initially uses the indirect methods of "pressuring," "disorienting," and "spreading dissatisfaction" – without force – to achieve its goals in a target population.⁴⁰ The group acknowledged the similarities between their own research and Kartapalov's journal article, with the exception that the latter implies Russia is only now recognizing these indirect methods as a new phenomenon in conflict. The Ukrainians saw them instead as actions that Russia has used historically. The group then outlined a more recent, historical pattern of Russian propaganda in Ukraine that clearly employed some or all of these methods. They explained that Russian propaganda in Ukraine distinctly rose and then dropped in 2004 relative to the Orange Revolution, and spiked again in 2007 relative to the Russia-Ukraine gas disputes. In the summer of 2013, Russian propaganda ramped up again, paralleling then-Ukrainian President Yanukovich's efforts to squelch dissent by taking control of the press.⁴¹ Based on subsequent discussions in Kiev, Russian propaganda in Ukraine has only intensified since that time, including indirect methods related to the aftermath of Maidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing separatist conflict . . . and have become a battlefield all their own.

Russian Influence in Critical Sectors of Ukraine Society

A second, prominent theme emerged from discussions with Ukrainians in Kiev: Russia's pervasive, often arcane "presence" in critical sectors of Ukraine society. By "presence", Ukrainians were referring to individuals working within certain Ukrainian sectors, with loyalty or sentiment toward Russia, and who enable Moscow to orchestrate political, social, economic, or security outcomes in Ukraine favorable to Russian interests.⁴² Russia uses most if not all sectors of civil society and public life to develop influence operations aimed at winning hearts and minds across Europe and elsewhere.⁴³ Given Ukraine's and Russia's substantially intertwined history, it is no surprise that the latter has unique, longstanding connections and leverage throughout Ukraine. Empowering this capability is the fact that seventeen percent of Ukraine's population identifies as ethnic Russians, and thirty percent claim Russian as their mother tongue.⁴⁴ Coupled with strong, historic business and cultural ties, the environment is optimal for the more powerful of the two countries to leverage heavy influence on the other.

Media

One of Ukraine's sectors most manipulated by Russia is its media sphere. This is distinct from the aforementioned topic of media; here we are addressing not a form of propaganda via messaging, but rather a level of Russian control within an important Ukrainian industry. To better understand Russia's manipulation of Ukraine's media sector, it may be helpful to note the Kremlin's increasing control over its own media sector. During the second period of Boris Yeltsin's presidency, there were already signs of "the trend towards concentration of national networks . . . into the hands of a small group of powerful economic and political interests" and this trend has continued under Putin.⁴⁵ The only difference has been that these interests are closer to the Russian government than was the case under Yeltsin. Former Russian President Medvedev's administration facilitated a limited liberalization of media policy – though many would say this move was largely rhetoric -- but after Putin returned as president, control was tightened again.⁴⁶ Legislation allowing the Ministry of Justice to label certain media outlets as

“foreign agents”, and to monitor or block designated internet activity, reflects Moscow’s increasing intent and capability to harness most or all of its media to its political advantage.⁴⁷

In neighboring Ukraine, recent legislative changes require television and radio broadcasting companies to make their ownership structure public, and statistics indicate that Ukrainian oligarchs, not Russian entities, own most media outlets.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the Kremlin exerts influence via such outlets directly and indirectly, whether it be through these oligarchs and their vast business connections, or other types of entities.⁴⁹ In a discussion with a seasoned Ukrainian media expert, I learned how Russia is increasingly manipulating its connections to Ukraine’s news syndicates to intensify anti-government sentiment in Kiev. In one example, the media spokesman explained that Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate (*Glavnoye razvedyvatel’noye upravleniye-GRU*) actually contacts Russian-backed journalists in Ukraine and tells them when to arrive at a designated location . . . so that the journalist is already on site just before an unexpected, controversial incident occurs there. These journalists are therefore the first to report – on local, national and international media – a pro-Russian view of the development, or that the Kiev government is to blame. He explained another media tactic whereby a longstanding, independent, pro-Ukrainian radio station, for example, would seamlessly transition to a pro-Russian agenda. The station’s loyal listeners are gradually fed news which increasingly reflects Moscow’s perspectives, with the intent to reduce listener support for the Kiev government. The expert also explained that most of Ukraine’s cyber-attacks can be traced back to Russia, including measures to sway Ukrainians or, as in Ukraine’s post-Maidan elections, to actually shut down government systems.⁵⁰ Coupled with its manipulation of Ukraine’s broadcast media, Russia can form an integrated and credible narrative detrimental to Ukraine’s interests and political legitimacy. Russia’s influence is clearly prevalent within Ukraine’s media sector if it can provide both the catalyst for and coverage of powerful, politicized events. Yet with all of its proven capability to cause change in Ukraine, this Russian method is indirect and often hidden from the media’s audience.

Orthodox Church

Ukrainians described another sector of their society in which Russia has had an increasingly polarizing influence: the Orthodox Church.⁵¹ Russia is the largest Orthodox-majority country, with 80 million members. Since the end of the Cold War the Church’s growing, official linkage to the Kremlin has had significant consequences for Russia’s immediate sphere of influence, including Ukraine. Two developments, internal to Russia and involving the Orthodox Church, play a key role in this trend. First, the Kremlin has increasingly supported a type of “clericalization” of Russian politics, allowing the Church access to draft legislation prepared for the Duma -- suggesting that the Russian Orthodox Church is developing into a de facto established (state) church. Second, as part of this trend, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has built and maintained a high level of collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Church, using the latter as an instrument to unify support for Russia and the Kremlin among the country’s diaspora.⁵² For example, the Kremlin spends considerable resources using the Russian Orthodox Church to promote Moscow’s concept of a global “Russian world” – one comprised not only by ethnic Russians, but also Russian speakers, their families, and others whose cultural, familial, or business connections to Russia make them Russia’s

sootechestvenniki or “compatriots.”⁵³ Therefore, in the broadest terms, Russia adroitly uses the Orthodox Church to institutionalize and sustain a vast Russian identity, and it attempts to socially, politically, economically and even legally amalgamate Russians and compatriots – in Russia, across Europe, and abroad -- by advancing the concept of a greater ethno-cultural Russian state.⁵⁴ The Ukrainians’ concern over this type of growing Russian influence is consistent with national-level surveys, which indicate that less than 40 percent of Ukrainians favor government support for -- or financing of -- the dominant church in their country; less than 40 percent believe that Russia has the obligation to protect Orthodox Christians beyond its own borders; and less than 20 percent recognize the Patriarch of Moscow as their Church’s highest authority.⁵⁵

Ukraine is the second largest Orthodox-majority country, with about 65 percent of its population, or 27.8 million people, identifying as members of the Orthodox Church.⁵⁶ The structure and relationship of Orthodox Church components in Ukraine has been complex. Until recently, the majority of the country’s Orthodox communities fell under the Moscow Patriarchate, the Kiev

Patriarchate (which split from the former in 1992), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.⁵⁷ Those Ukrainian Orthodox churches under the Moscow Patriarchate formed the largest Orthodox community and were the most highly integrated with the Russian Orthodox Church. A Ukrainian military officer told me that Ukraine’s Orthodox Church communities had peacefully co-existed in his country until 2014, when Ukrainian Orthodox churches under the

Survey: UKRAINE vs MOLDOVA PERSPECTIVES

Governments Supporting Religion

Less than half – only 36% of both Moldovans and Ukrainians -- say governments should support the spread of religious values and beliefs in their country.

Government Funding of the Dominant Church

Only 38% of Ukrainians say the dominant church in their country should receive financial support from the government. Moldovans feel differently on this topic: 68% believe the dominant church should receive government financial support.

Russia as Protector of Orthodox Community

Only 38% of Ukrainians believe Russia has an obligation to protect Orthodox Christians outside its borders, whereas 63% of Moldovans feel that Russia has that responsibility.

Moscow Patriarch as Highest Authority

Only 17% of Ukrainian adults say they recognize the Patriarch of Moscow as the highest authority of the Orthodox Church, whereas 51% of Moldovans look to him as the Church’s overarching leader.

Support for Russian vs US/West Influence

A majority (62%) of Ukrainians believe it is in their country’s interest to work closely with the U.S., and only 22% believe a strong Russia is necessary to balance the West’s influence. Moldova is closer to center regarding these positions: 54% believe it is important to work with the U.S. and Western powers, and a slightly higher percentage – 61% -- believe that a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West.

Russia as a Major Threat / Russia to Blame for Eastern Ukraine Violence

47% of Ukrainians see Russia as a major threat, whereas only 14% of Moldovans do. Similarly, 45% of Ukrainians blame Russia for the violence in eastern Ukraine, whereas only 16% of Moldovans do.

Pew Research Center, “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” Survey, *Pew Research Center*, May 10, 2017, www.pewresearch.org (accessed August 23, 2019). Note: Survey conducted June 2015 to July 2016 in 18 countries.

Moscow Patriarchate began overtly supporting Russia's separatist actions in both Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The officer explained that the public had expected all Ukrainian Orthodox Churches, regardless of their patriarch, to come to the aid of Ukrainian casualties and their families. Instead, the Ukrainian Orthodox leadership under the Moscow Patriarchate distanced itself from these people for political reasons; this angered many Ukrainians enough to leave that church. Meanwhile, the Kiev Patriarchate made a concentrated effort to help in the crisis, supporting first the protesters during the Maidan revolution – when it opened the doors of its Mikhailovsky Monastery as a safe haven and later as a hospital – and subsequently the Ukrainian soldiers fighting against Russian-backed separatists.⁵⁸ In a related press article, then-Kiev Patriarchate Archbishop Yevstratiy Zoria stated that “Moscow is using its influence over Ukraine in the Church as an instrument of hybrid warfare against Ukraine.”⁵⁹ The article described how tensions between the two churches became so bad in 2015 that in one incident, a priest from the Moscow Patriarchate church stabbed a priest from the Kiev Patriarchate, allegedly shouting “For Russ! For the Orthodox faith!”⁶⁰

Russia's ability to capitalize on divisions among Ukraine's Orthodox community has hit deeply within the country's society and exemplifies “new-type” war's indirect methods of “pressuring,” “disorienting,” and “spreading dissatisfaction,” without force.⁶¹ However, recent developments in Ukraine's Orthodox community suggest that this type and level of Russian pressure reached a threshold whereby it backlashed against Moscow's intentions. In October 2018, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in Istanbul -- the ancient cradle of Christendom that the Orthodox still call Constantinople -- revoked a 17th century ruling placing Ukraine's Orthodox Church under the Moscow patriarch. This move followed years of appeals by Ukraine to the Ecumenical Patriarch, who has global sway over most of the world's Orthodox churches, to facilitate a break from the powerful Moscow Patriarchate. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and backing of pro-Russian Ukrainian separatists intensified this effort.⁶² Given the Ecumenical Patriarch's approval and enablement of this break in October 2018, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko announced the following December the creation of new, national Orthodox Church for his country. This church unified those parishes under the Kiev Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church into one entity, liberated from the Moscow Patriarchate. In January 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I officially approved this consolidated church, formally recognizing it as the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine. This marked an historic split from Russia and was seen by many as the final stage of Ukrainian independence.⁶³

These developments led to a powerful set-back of Russian influence in Ukraine through the Orthodox Church and has had significant implications for the Orthodox Church internationally. Russia has now unilaterally severed full communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, prompting a substantive schism in the global Orthodox Church. As a result, many other Orthodox Church entities have been forced to align themselves with either the Moscow Patriarchate, which oversees the world's largest community of Orthodox Christians (approximately 150 million faithful -- half of the number of Orthodox Christians worldwide), or the Constantinople Patriarchate, which is Orthodoxy's historic center of gravity and influence.⁶⁴ Not only does the loss of Ukraine's Orthodox membership potentially reduce the number of

parishes under Moscow's control by a third, ensuing controversies over Orthodox Church property in Ukraine has ripened the environment for legal and physical confrontations, worsening the divisiveness already present in the country.⁶⁵ While the decision by some national Orthodox churches to align with the Constantinople patriarchate may produce limited political challenges for Russia, Moscow will almost certainly use the disarray over Orthodox Church loyalties in Ukraine to further discredit the legitimacy of the Kiev government.⁶⁶ In any case, what began as a longstanding, indirect method of influence in Ukraine manifested tangible consequences both geopolitically and locally.

Defense and Security

While Russia's influence within Ukraine's media and religious sectors has been powerful, its penetration of the country's front lines has had a demoralizing and disruptive effect on Ukrainian soldiers and officers. The military's challenges on the conventional battlefield have been deeply exacerbated by what multiple Ukrainian officers describe as Russian or separatist threats *internal* to Ukrainian units. These officers stated that, on the front lines of eastern Ukraine, there has been a trend of Ukrainian soldiers receiving threatening texts on their mobile phones. Such texts are from unknown sources who address the soldiers by name, inform them that they are being watched exactly where they sit or stand, and warn them to stop fighting and to leave their unit. I learned that, in some cases, the texts included photos taken of the soldier's family within the past 24-48 hours. These threats have caused absences and defections on the front lines, and have sharply reduced Ukrainian commanders' ability to retain their units' loyalty, morale and personnel strength.⁶⁷

Ukrainian military commanders' internal challenges have also included their own staffs. On more than one occasion, military officers shared that, due to a concern over Russian influence, there is often only a fragile, cautious trust among officers up and down their chain of command. One official explained that some commanders on the front line learned to limit information shared with their own planning staffs, withhold critical data to the last minute, or even provide their staffs with false locations initially – in order to reduce the risk of the commander's operational plans being shared with separatists before the mission began.⁶⁸ This level of Russian intelligence and influence within Ukraine's defense community has a tangible and debilitating effect on its military, yet it is accomplished by indirect methods of war including social media and insider threats.

The issue of trust vis-à-vis military actions in Ukraine extends to the international level as well. The officers shared that many Ukrainians have had little trust in two key organizations intended to monitor adherence to the Minsk Agreements and ceasefires associated with the separatist region: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Joint Center on Control and Coordination (JCCC). Ukrainians have felt uneasy about the OSCE -- mandated to observe and report on Ukraine's security situation including alleged Agreement violations -- as it does not have a "no neighbors" policy. This means that Russia has been able to participate substantially in the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine.⁶⁹ Russia has maintained the fourth largest staff out of 44 countries participating in the SMM, following the United States, United Kingdom, and Bosnia Herzegovina.⁷⁰ From a Ukrainian

perspective, it makes little sense to populate a monitoring mission with the main adversary in the crisis.

Russia had also been a primary member of the Joint Center on Control and Coordination (JCCC), which was established in September 2014 to monitor the implementation of the Minsk Agreements and to clarify and resolve on-the-ground disputes within east Ukraine's conflict zone. The Center included representatives from Ukraine, Russia, and the so called Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic (DPR and LPR, respectively). Russia's function was to serve as a liaison between Ukraine and the latter two.⁷¹ While the JCCC provided a unique communication channel between Ukrainian and Russian military in the conflict zone – indeed the only mechanism for non-combat contact between the two – Russia's 75-member JCCC contingent was perceived by Ukrainians as too large. Ukrainians referred to it as the "Second Russian Invasion".⁷² Three years after its inception, the Russians withdrew from the JCCC, citing a "disrespectful attitude on the part of the Ukrainians" and a "tense psychological atmosphere." With Russia's JCCC representation then shifting to the opposite extreme – i.e., complete disengagement -- Ukrainians feared Russia was preparing to facilitate increased combat operations in the separatist region.⁷³ Their fears may have been warranted; immediately after Russia's withdrawal from the JCCC, some of the worst fighting since February 2017 took place in the Donbass.⁷⁴ Many Ukrainians would have preferred to keep the Russian channel open via the JCCC, but with a much smaller, more balanced contingent. From Ukraine's perspective, Russia's presence and engagement in both the OSCE and the JCCC have only helped it employ very influential, indirect methods to multiply Russia's intelligence, manipulation and destabilization of the crisis region in favor of Moscow's own objectives.⁷⁵

One of Kiev's primary concerns about eastern Ukraine is that it will evolve into another longstanding, frozen conflict which, somewhat like Moldova's breakaway Transnistria region, weakens the state's territorial sovereignty and provides another area for increased Russian geopolitical leverage.⁷⁶ This concern has fueled a slow momentum of support for building a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force in eastern Ukraine to work in concert with the OSCE's SMM. At present, some in the West and Ukraine support a UN peacekeeping force with broad authorities and access throughout the conflict zone to include the Russia-Ukraine border. President Putin has leaned toward a smaller UN force with access mostly limited to the line of contact dividing the separatists from the rest of Ukraine. In the spring of 2018, all parties agreed that one of the primary goals of the peacekeeping force would be to facilitate peaceful, local elections in eastern Ukraine, a key part of the 2015 Minsk Agreements.⁷⁷ In any case, the specific missions and jurisdiction of such a force will confirm or assuage Kiev's fears about a frozen conflict, the disputed Crimean peninsula notwithstanding.

The anti-Russian perspectives shared by the Ukrainians in this study were not surprising given their own positions or connections within the Kiev government and defense community, concurrent with ongoing developments – in the Crimea and the Donbas – wherein Russia has been the adversary. Yet their insights also reflect an overarching shift in the Ukrainian populace as a whole. The extent of anti-Russia rhetoric in Ukraine today, including that which was verbalized by candidates in Ukraine's recent elections, would have been surprising a

decade ago. According to a Gallup survey, Ukrainians at that time were much more likely to approve than disapprove of the Kremlin. The Ukrainians in this study are sharing their perspectives against a much different backdrop. In 2018, only seven percent of Ukrainians said they approve of Russia's leadership.⁷⁸

PART II – MOLDOVAN PERSPECTIVES

Why Moldova?

The perceptions of the Ukrainians with whom I spoke, and their revelation of Russia's powerful, divisive influence in their country, prompted me to explore this topic beyond Ukraine's borders. How effective is Russian influence among Ukraine's neighbors? Rather than embarking upon a region-wide study, I decided to approach the topic similarly to the way I discovered it: seek the perspectives of nationals in one country. Such a methodology would facilitate a comparative study -- of perspectives on this topic -- with Ukraine. I selected Moldova for this comparison, for three reasons: 1) the geopolitical similarities and relations between Ukraine and Moldova, 2) Moldova's impact on Russia relations with the U.S. and EU, and 3) Moldova's historical, socio-cultural, political and economic ties to Romania.

Background

Geopolitics

From a geopolitical perspective, Ukraine and Moldova have similar characteristics. They both have significant Russian speaking populations, they have belonged to the Russian empire and Soviet Union, they have strong identities or influences largely divided between Russia and one or more Western states, they are predominantly Orthodox in religion, and they have active, largely pro-Russian separatist regions on the east side of their territories. Given increased tensions between the West and Russia over the latter's destabilizing actions in Ukraine, it is this last similarity – the pro-Russian separatist regions – that draws the most attention and concern today.⁷⁹

The onset and development of Ukraine's separatist conflict in the Donbass has prompted a feeling of déjà vu among Moldovans, as it recalls painful memories of Moldova's Transnistrian War (November 1990 -July 1992). At least initially, it aroused fears in Moldova about a possible re-ignition of the Transnistrian 'frozen conflict.'⁸⁰ Russia was not identified as the initiator of the Transnistrian War; however, the Kremlin is perceived by many Moldovans to have tipped the balance toward the breakaway republic. Since the war's end, Russia has actively supported the Tiraspol regime; i.e., the pro-Russian regime in charge of Moldova's separatist Transnistria region.⁸¹

A brief review of Moldova, Transnistria and the 1990-1992 war provides a broader, logical reason for the region's pro-Russia leanings. In 1924, the USSR created the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic on the east bank of the Dniester River, with the desire to eventually lay claim to the Romanian territory on the west side, called "Bessarabia". In 1940, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the threat of Soviet invasion, Romania ceded most

of Bessarabia to the USSR. The Kremlin then unified Bessarabia with the western part the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic – referred to here as “Transnistria” -- to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). Over the years, the USSR advanced the industrialization of Transnistria more than the rest of the MSSR to the west, maintained the majority of its 14th Guards Army there, and favored the Transnistria political elite in the socialist republic’s governance. However, in the 1980’s, a new generation of politicians in the Bessarabia portion of the MSSR built momentum for a return to the Romanian language and culture and, by spring 1990, were elected to lead the republic. Their promotion of Romanian as the official language, and their consideration of a re-unification with Romania, prompted separatist movements in two key regions with sizable minorities: Transnistria and Gagauzia. While Gagauzia’s movement involved minimal violence and was eventually defused with Moldova’s creation of a semi-autonomous Gagauzia administrative district, the Transnistria movement had escalated by November into clashes between Moldovan police forces and local, separatist, irregular troops.⁸²

Moldova’s August 1991 declaration of independence from the USSR intensified the Transnistrian separatist movement. The USSR’s subsequent December 1991 dissolution, the Russian Federation’s struggle to retain control and influence in former Soviet areas (in its so-called “near-abroad”), and the arrival of volunteer fighters from former USSR locations culminated in a new peak of the armed struggle between Moldova proper and the Transnistrian separatists. In the spring of 1992, the battle for the city of Bender, on the Dniester River’s west bank, became the decisive moment. The separatists won the battle with the support of Russia’s local 14th Guards Army units which, due to their longstanding presence in Transnistria, were comprised in part by Transnistrian locals or personnel loyal to its independence movement. In July 1992, Russia negotiated a ceasefire to a war that had ended with 1,000 casualties, 51,000 internally displaced persons, and 80,000 refugees in Ukraine. Since then, despite a lack of international recognition, Transnistria has acted as a de facto separate state.⁸³

The ceasefire enabled the deployment of an international peacekeeping mission to Moldova. In July 1994, then-Moldovan President Snegur and Russian President Yeltsin signed an agreement, in accordance with the ceasefire, that laid the foundation for peacekeeping operations along the Dniester River, separating Moldova proper from the breakaway Transnistria territory. Today that mission is comprised by a buffer zone maintained by 402 Russian troops, 492 Transdnistriean soldiers, 355 Moldovan ones and ten Ukrainian military observers at fifteen checkpoints. It is overseen by a Joint Control Commission (JCC) including delegations from Russia, Moldova, Transnistria, and the Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Besides the peacekeepers, Russia maintains up to 1,200 additional soldiers in Transnistria despite its pledge in the OSCE’s 1999 Istanbul Summit to withdraw them. These Russian soldiers comprise an “Operative Group of Russian Troops” tasked with maintaining munition warehouses.⁸⁴ Over the years, multiple efforts to find a final, unified solution to the conflict have failed, and there is a Moldovan and international perception that Moscow has



Russian Peace Keepers at border crossing between Transnistria and Moldova.

Source: By Clay Gilliland [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>)], [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Peace_Keepers_at_border_crossing_between_Transnistria_and_Moldova._\(16348984171\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Peace_Keepers_at_border_crossing_between_Transnistria_and_Moldova._(16348984171).jpg).

transformed the conflict into a frozen one in order to leverage long-term influence and control over post-Soviet Moldova.⁸⁵

With little to no progress toward resolution of Moldova's separatist conflict, it has been nearly impossible to build consensus in the population about important elements of a Moldovan national identity. While some native Romanian speakers assume a Moldovan national identity based on the tradition of the medieval Moldavian principality, others consider themselves Romanian on linguistic grounds. Alternatively, some Russian speakers there self-identify with Russia simply because of their language, while others identify with a Russia-oriented Moldova based on the territory's interwoven history with the USSR. The Transnistrian War not only accentuated the rift between Romanian- and Russian-speaking citizens, it revealed the divide on key issues regarding the country's past and future to include the history of the Soviet period, political and economic reforms, or foreign policy.⁸⁶ Politics in the country *per se* have been replaced by – or at least have their roots in -- an ongoing societal dialogue about identity, the confusion over which has been at the core of Moldovan relations with neighboring Romania and Ukraine, and its capacity to deal with the Transnistrian problem.⁸⁷ This challenge to forming a cohesive national identity is another key, geopolitical similarity

between Ukraine and Moldova, underscoring the value in comparing perspectives from both states.

Moldova's Pivotal Impact on East-West Relations

Moldova's pivotal impact on Russian relations with the West – the second reason for comparing the two states in this paper -- is not well known, but nevertheless significant. Since gaining independence in 1991, Moldova has generally been too small, quiet, poor and obscure to substantively interest Western policymakers. However, Moldova and especially its breakaway Transnistrian region remain for Moscow an area of important Russian interest and a country where Russian influence should not be challenged. Between 1993 and 2003, Russia, the U.S., and major OSCE participating states worked together, usually in relative harmony, to negotiate a special status for Transnistria, the reunification of Moldova and for the withdrawal of Russian military personnel and assets that remained in the country from Soviet times. However, this cooperation disintegrated in late 2003. The U.S., EU, and OSCE Chair effectively blocked a settlement agreement that had been negotiated unilaterally by Putin's close advisor and friend Dmitri Kozak only hours before Putin was to arrive in Moldova to preside over its signing. While the agreement, called the *Memorandum on Basic Principles of State Structure of the Unified State* -- or referred to here as the Kozak Memorandum -- was given little attention in Western press and capitals, Moscow considered its failure as a major disaster and an insult. Russia perceived a double standard by the West: U.S. unilateral intervention -- even military action -- was permitted to NATO in the Balkans, but unilateral Russian initiatives -- even to settle a longstanding conflict in a country historically and substantively connected with Russia -- would be thwarted by the U.S. and its allies. What Western leaders in 2003 saw as a minor matter of blocking an unworkable political settlement in a small, remote post-Soviet divided state, Kremlin leaders saw as a direct geopolitical challenge and defeat on turf that had been theirs for centuries. This colored Moscow's interpretations of Western presence and actions in its near abroad thereafter, and it significantly contributed to the Kremlin's narrative of the West's quest to displace and weaken Russia. Moldova may have been one of the first places in the former USSR where Russia's relations with the U.S. and EU moved from an uneasy cooperation to a more adversarial posture.⁸⁸

Romania's Role

As stated above, the third reason for comparing Ukraine to Moldova is because of the latter's relationship to Romania. In other words, Moldova's value to the West is in part due to its role as a neighboring state to one of the most resolute U.S. allies in southeastern Europe. An explanation of Romania's significant ties to both the West and to Moldova is therefore critical to establishing the latter's value within this study. With key strategic interests in the Black Sea and a border marking the periphery of NATO and the EU, Romania is ideally positioned to initiate and lead stability and security measures in this part of Europe.⁸⁹ Moreover, Romania is becoming an increasingly critical regional partner with the U.S. in supporting defense, political and economic reform, and consistently welcoming U.S. efforts to build partnership capacity in many of the country's sectors.⁹⁰ Through NATO and bilateral relations, the U.S. investment in Romania includes substantive economic resources, over one thousand troops, and six joint-use defense facilities that are expected to increase in number.⁹¹ The deteriorating relations

between the U.S. and Russia -- stemming largely from Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, its efforts to dominate the Black Sea, its complicity in Ukraine's separatist conflict, and its role in perpetuating political-security instability in neighboring Moldova -- suggest Romania's regional and strategic importance to the U.S. will continue to grow.

Since its 1989 revolution, Romania's path of accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions has consolidated a liberal-democratic form of the country's political identity, and this has benefitted Romania's relations with adjacent states -- with the exception of Moldova. A unique historical identity, not liberal-democratic progress, forms the basis of Moldovan-Romanian relations.⁹² Moldova is the one neighbor with which Romania has the most affinity and, to a certain extent, the most complicated relations. At the core of their relationship is the issue of reunification of the two countries, which have similar languages, histories and cultures.⁹³

The history of Moldovan-Romanian relations is very complex and dates back many centuries. The territory of contemporary Moldova has been an integral part of the Romanian Moldovan Principality roughly from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. It was part of the Russian Empire for five decades in the nineteenth century, and then it became part of the Romanian independent state for the most part until 1944, when it was ceded to the Soviet Union.⁹⁴ Romania was the first country to recognize Moldova's 1991 independence and it soon started referring to it as a Romanian state. Such declarations were followed by many other symbolic gestures suggesting the possibility of reunification. However, reunification never materialized due to domestic (i.e. political and economic costs) and international reasons (i.e. Romania's Euro-Atlantic aspirations). Given its current perception that near-term reunification is not possible, Romania has expressed its support for an open door policy of EU enlargement and suggested that the two countries could 'reunite in the EU'.⁹⁵ Romania has facilitated a privileged relationship with Moldova that includes the promotion of Moldova's Euro-Atlantic integration efforts alongside its own. Romania's establishment of dual citizenship laws for qualifying Moldovans, as well as easy or free visa requirements, is part of this effort.⁹⁶

In short, Romania's geographic position on the NATO/EU periphery means that its Moldovan concerns are the West's concerns. Among Romania's neighbors, Moldova presents the most diametric set of challenges to Romania's regional stability interests and, less directly, to NATO and EU interests. On one hand, Romania's and Moldova's interwoven history, culture, language, identity and prospect of reunification -- even if remote -- naturally prompt the former to actively endorse the latter's territorial integrity, EU integration and democratic reform.⁹⁷ On the other hand, Moldova includes sizeable pro-Russian elements that exert strong Kremlin influence through diplomatic, informational, and economic (including energy) soft power in the country, and which exploit separatist sentiment in Transnistria and the Gagauzia district. These challenges only exacerbate and intensify Moldova's own struggle toward long-term economic prosperity, democratic development and Western integration, thereby presenting indirect threats to Romania allied stability interests in the region.⁹⁸

Moldova's Reaction to Ukraine's Crisis

Given Moldova's separatist component as well as its diverse historical, ethnic and political loyalties and identities, it is no surprise that the country's reaction to Ukraine's Crimea

and Donbass struggles, since 2014, has been multifaceted. From the outset, Moldova's then-pro-West coalition government and its main opposition parties each used Ukraine's crisis to advance their own agendas regarding Moldova's future. Moldova's then-president and prime minister condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine, refused to recognize the results of Crimea's referendum (it was perceived as a Kremlin effort to legitimize Russia's takeover), and compared the ordeal to the early 1990s Transnistria scenario as well as its state of affairs today. Moreover, in 2014, just after the Crimea and Donbass crises began, Moldova's prime minister paid two visits to Ukraine, laying the foundation for a joint partnership in integrating both countries into the EU, and in security cooperation focusing on the Transnistrian frozen conflict. This, in part, led to Ukraine's eventual blockade of Russia's military and economic lines of communication into and out of Transnistria.⁹⁹

Moldova's main opposition parties quoted Moscow's arguments whenever possible, dubbed Ukraine's Euromaidan protesters as terrorists, and accused the West of attempting to break Ukraine into pieces. Like Moldova's governing coalition, its opposition argued that the conflicts in Donbass and Transnistria resembled one another . . . but that both regions were justified in revolting against Kiev and Chisinau, respectively, as both governments pursued a foreign policy against the will of the people.¹⁰⁰ While it's unclear if the majority of Moldovans identify with the claim that the Maidan crisis was inspired by Western-backed terrorists, surveys from 2015 and 2016 indicate that only 16 percent of Moldovans directly blame Russia for east Ukraine's instability (whereas 45% of Ukrainians blame Russia for the violence in that region).¹⁰¹

The self-proclaimed Transnistria republic and the autonomous district of Gagauzia issued a plethora of pro-Russia statements on Ukraine's crisis, congratulated Russia for annexing Crimea, and welcomed the results of its local referendum. Even more, in April 2014, the Supreme Soviet of Transnistria requested from the Russian Duma the unification of their self-declared republic with the "motherland", much like the separatists initially had done in eastern Ukraine. Moscow did not accept this, however, as the Kremlin benefits from Transnistria's breakaway status by using it to leverage pressure against Moldova's pro-Romanian or pro-Western supporters.¹⁰² This, too, is quite similar to the position Moscow may be taking with respect to Ukraine's breakaway region in the Donbass.

Moldovan Group's Perspectives

To effectively compare Moldovan perspectives to those of Ukraine, on the topic of Russian influence within each country, I established a dialogue with Moldovan officials who had a similar level of understanding and access to their national administration as had the aforementioned Ukrainians to the Kiev government. These Moldovans primarily included mid- or higher-level military officers and Foreign Affairs Ministry officials. In broad terms, when asked about their general concerns regarding the state of their country, they focused specifically on military, economic and political topics. Their overarching perspectives included concern that Russian troops in Transnistria were a constant threat to Moldovan citizens, and that Russian influence in Moldovan politics had a local, destabilizing economic effect; e.g., when Russia embargoed Moldovan wines due to political tensions.¹⁰³

From a general, political point of view, the Moldovans stated that Transnistria's breakaway status is indeed a frozen conflict; however, at the local level people have cautiously adjusted to it. They explained that the Ukraine Crisis has had more impact at Moldova's national and strategic levels, as it has reinforced the actuality of foreign and regional actors in their country and in the region; e.g., Russia's presence in Transnistria and the European Union's engagement in Moldova. While Moldovans believed the Kremlin to be more geopolitically interested in Ukraine than Moldova itself, they perceived Russia's political influence in their country to be substantial. They stated that Russia focused largely on shaping domestic politics in Moldova by using media propaganda and Soviet nostalgia. They explained that Russia's influence caused much of their populace to be disappointed in their country's predominant political class, regardless of whether they were pro-European or pro-Russian.¹⁰⁴ This perspective is in line with a position shared by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace regarding Ukrainian and Moldovan differences in their use of the terms "pro-Russian" and "pro-European". In Ukraine, these terms have often been associated with anti- and pro-reform agendas, respectively. In Moldova, political leaders of *both* geopolitical persuasions are known to disappoint constituents regarding the quality of their governance and reform, in part due to corruption.¹⁰⁵

As with the Ukrainians in this study, the Moldovans shared mostly anti-Russian perspectives. This reflects, in part, a group of individuals that have been positioned or connected within the Chisinau government, which at the time of the dialogue was Western leaning. Nevertheless, their perceptions stand out against the backdrop of a Moldovan populace much more equally divided in its Russia versus Western allegiances – even without considering Moldova's pro-Russian Transnistrian break-away territory. According to a 2018 International Republican Institute (IRI) survey, slightly more Moldovans (excluding Transnistria) consider Russia to be the country's most important economic and political partner than the European Union. Yet more Moldovans (22 percent) consider Russia to be the highest threat to their country, compared to only 15 percent who believe that the United States is the highest threat, or five percent who believe that the EU or Romania is the highest threat.¹⁰⁶

Propaganda

Like the Ukrainians, the Moldovans emphasized the role that propaganda played in their country. Among all of the Moldovans with whom I corresponded, there was a clear consensus that Russia – and some used the term "Russia Mass Media" -- was the main source of propaganda in Moldova. In their view, Russia propaganda is spread throughout the country primarily via television, radio, the internet, and local political discourse. One Moldovan opinion was that the propaganda was perceived as more credible in the country's rural areas where only a limited number of television channels were available.¹⁰⁷ The Moldovans' perspectives were largely consistent with a 2018 USAID survey in their country which indicated that a majority – 68 percent -- of the population relied primarily on television as a news source and that, on the topic of propaganda, over 60 percent believed that Moldovan news reported *only* the achievements of a single party, its leader, and its point of view, and was aimed at changing the population's opinions, attitudes or behavior.¹⁰⁸

The Moldovans explained that several sectors of society are especially vulnerable to this type of Russian influence, including the security, media, economic, and political sectors. They underscored that Non-governmental organizations (NGO) in Moldova, the Orthodox Church, and political parties are primary institutions through which Russian propaganda is disseminated, and that the target groups – or main intended recipients of propaganda messaging – are Moldova’s youth, Soviet nostalgic people, and Russian compatriots. The Moldovans I interfaced with outlined seven interesting topics, from their perspective, upon which this Russian messaging is focused:

- Nostalgia after Soviet times
- The EU and the U.S. are aggressive states
- The “cult” of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s personality
- The West promotes homosexuality
- NATO is a threat to Eastern Europe
- Russia’s record of having never triggered a military conflict
- Russia’s role in the international arena.¹⁰⁹

At least one opinion among the Moldovans was that the country’s current political, economic and social instability makes its government and people particularly vulnerable to external and internal influence. They provided some recent examples: in February 2015 when, in the south of Moldova, the already autonomous Gagauz region conducted a referendum and “decided” it wanted to integrate into Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union (EEU); in May 2015, in the north of Moldova, when the ethnic Russian minority wanted to conduct a referendum regarding the local autonomy of the Balti municipality; and in September 2016, when the former president of the Transnistria separatist region, Yevgeny Shevchuk, called for secession from the Republic of Moldova and unification with the Russian Federation. The Moldovans stated that Russia considers Moldova its national interest, and that it uses propaganda to disrupt the country’s EU integration and NATO cooperation, to instigate anti-Western sentiments, and to popularize Russian official policy among the Moldovans. The Moldovans emphasized that the level of this propaganda has increased significantly since the beginning of Ukraine’s Euromaidan movement in 2013, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the separatist conflict in Ukraine’s Donbass region. Moreover, they stated that this propaganda especially spikes during the country’s electoral campaigns.¹¹⁰

The Moldovans also drew comparisons between their perceptions of Russian propaganda in Ukraine versus that in Moldova. They claimed the similarities are in the language and discourse utilized to promote Russian supremacy, Eurasian integration, a common Soviet past and values, and common “enemies” – the U.S. and EU. Differences are in the strength of the propaganda. They perceived the propaganda to be more intense in Ukraine than Moldova primarily because eastern Ukraine is a frozen conflict in the making, whereas the breakaway Transnistria region has become somewhat of a manageable norm – albeit in need of resolution. The Moldovans also believed that Ukraine’s comparably greater resources prompted Russia to concentrate its propaganda campaign there at higher levels.¹¹¹

Language, too, drives the perception that Russian propaganda in Ukraine is more intense than in Moldova. Russian is spoken or understood broadly across Ukraine, given its Slavic similarities to the Ukrainian language as well as its status as the mother tongue to approximately thirty percent of Ukraine's population.¹¹² In Moldova, only eleven percent of the population speaks Russian as a native language, though it is understood and spoken as a second or third language more broadly. Approximately seventy-six percent of Moldovans speak Romanian (also called "Moldovan") – the country's official language -- as their mother-tongue.¹¹³ With a much larger percentage of its population able to speak or understand Russian, Ukraine's vulnerability to Russian propaganda is higher than that of Moldova.

Russian Influence in Critical Sectors of Moldovan Society

Media

A discussion of propaganda in Moldova would be remiss without drilling down specifically to the country's media sector. Similar to Russia and parts of Ukraine, Moldova's overarching media climate is affected by insufficient protection of journalists, government-level interference, and concentration of ownership of media outlets by powerful figures who exploit their news resources to promote their own agendas.¹¹⁴ Perhaps more interesting – though quite logical given Moldova's history – is that the country's print, internet, and broadcast media are largely divided between the Romanian and Russian languages. News reporting on Ukraine events since Euromaidan has sharpened the tone of Russian and Romanian newspapers in Moldova and accentuated the polarization of Moldovans who view the events as similar to their country's Transnistrian conflict. Moldova's pro-West political forces used media to support Ukraine's pro-European government, while supporters of Russian and its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) did the same in favor of their separatist counterparts in Ukraine's Donbass. Using Ukrainian events to advance their own cause, Moldovans gradually generated a media war that inherently suggests a strong connection between Ukraine and the fate of their own country.¹¹⁵ This is particularly true as Moldova faces future elections and decisions regarding EU accession.

There is an effort in the Moldovan news industry to place political value on language-use; i.e., selecting Romanian over Russian – or vice versa – is an indicator of the loyalty or ethno-linguistically political agenda of the reporter or commentator. In other words, news about Ukraine offers not only information on the development itself, but the very choice of language promotes ethnocentric positions stemming from longstanding cultural and political differences. Both sides follow particular Ukrainian events and then attempt to connect them with their own political platform. Russian-language papers regularly address the Gagauz and Transnistria administrative governments in order to reduce doubt about a future, stable Moldova, and to imply there is a better life in Russian-controlled territories. Romanian language papers relate Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine to the Kremlin's manipulative influence in Moldova, in an attempt to underscore the Moscow's objective to sabotage Moldova's economic and political opportunities with the West. Moldovan media often portrays the country as torn between two equally powerful contestants. Ukraine, therefore, is subject to close examination related to the concept of an independent, sovereign, stable Moldova settled largely in support of one contestant or the other.¹¹⁶ I found this use of language, as an indicator of support for Russia or

the West, to be more pronounced in Moldova than in Ukraine. During my visit to Ukraine, the choice of using Ukrainian or Russian was not as often a clear, reliable indicator of support for the West or the Kremlin regarding that country's future.

Economy

With regard to their country's vulnerabilities, the Moldavans claimed that their economy is one of the sectors most susceptible to Russian manipulation. They explained that this is primarily due to Moldova's dependence on gas from Russia, for which they pay one of the highest prices among European and Asian countries.¹¹⁷ Moldova imports 98 percent of its energy, relying almost solely on Russian gas and electricity transferred to the country only through its Russian-backed, separatist Transnistria region. Russia's state-owned Gazprom company supplies nearly all of Moldova's gas demand and indirectly controls the Moldovan natural gas market in terms of supply, transmission, and distribution. Additionally, Russia purchases some of the gas from Transnistria and converts it to electricity for Moldova proper at double the cost, and it does not charge Transnistrian companies for their use of the same supplies.¹¹⁸ In the past, as Chisinau has taken steps toward EU integration, Russia has threatened to cut off energy supplies to Moldova proper, a prospect that could become more viable as Russia concentrates on building additional pipelines to Europe that do not transit Moldovan territory.¹¹⁹ According to the Moldovans with whom I interfaced, the vulnerability of their country's reliance on Russian gas and electricity, coupled with high prices, are used as strong arguments in convincing the population to join the Russian-led Eurasia Economic Union.¹²⁰

On the topic of economic vulnerabilities, the Moldovans also emphasized the havoc Russia caused by banning imports of Moldovan products. They underscored the local impact that Russia's most recent bans had on their economy, including a ban on Moldovan alcoholic beverages in September 2013 and Moldovan meats, fruits and vegetable preserves in July 2014.¹²¹ This has been a significant loss to the Moldovan economy, as agriculture comprises a large part of Moldova's GDP -- over 14 percent today -- and Russia itself has been Moldova's largest trading partner after Romania.¹²² Moldovan wine had comprised ten percent of all wine consumed in Russia.¹²³ Together, these trade restrictions (alcohol and foods) accounted for 25 percent of all exports to Russia, and 6-7 percent of Moldova's total exports.¹²⁴

Though Russia claimed that technical health standards prompted its ban on these Moldovan products, it is generally understood -- as expressed by these Moldovans -- that the restrictions were actually a political consequence of a growing number of Moldovan-EU economic exchanges leading to the initiation of an EU Association Agreement in November 2013, as well as its official signing in June 2014.¹²⁵ These were indeed worrisome and controversial steps for Chisinau to take as Moldavans observed the street protests unfold in nearby Kiev after President Yanukovych refused to sign the same EU Agreement for Ukraine.¹²⁶

Many pro-European Moldovans have hope that growing ties with the EU will mitigate the extent to which Russia can influence or threaten Moldova's economic progress. For example, the EU is gradually revolutionizing Moldova's energy sphere by broadening the range

of markets for Moldovan products in the West and significantly reducing its reliance on exports to Russia. In 2004, more than 50 percent of Moldovan exports went to Russia and CIS countries. In recent 6 years, Moldova's EU exports have become double the level of Moldovan-Russian exports in 2012.¹²⁷ In 2006 and 2007, Russia accounted for 60 percent of Moldova's wine exports. By 2013 – even before Russia's embargo on Moldovan wine – only 29 percent of Moldova's wine exports went to Russia.¹²⁸ Where energy is concerned, a Romanian-Moldovan gas interconnector should be completed by 2020 and is expected to eventually meet all of Moldova's gas needs. Ironically, much of Moldova's gradual growth in economic exchange with Europe stems from Russia's economic threats and embargos . . . having the opposite, long-term effect that Russia is likely seeking. Coupled with this, Romania views Moldova's Europeanization as a strategic interest of its own, and is a larger trading partner to Moldova than Russia and the biggest EU economies.¹²⁹ While all of this offers a re-orientation of Moldova's economy away from Russia, it is very long-term and -- as has been demonstrated -- its progress can be substantively delayed by Russia's geopolitical leverage in other sectors of Moldovan society. This is no doubt why the Moldovans with whom I communicated listed their economy as one of the top vulnerabilities to Russian influence.

Orthodox Church

In our dialogue, the Moldovans addressed perceptions of their country's primary church, the Moldovan Orthodox Church. Their predominant concern was that the Church is far too subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church, which they perceive as a tool for the Kremlin – in part – to facilitate foreign policy.¹³⁰ This is similar to the foreign policy-type role that the Russian Orthodox Church – specifically its Moscow Patriarchate – has played in Ukraine to build support for Russia and the Donbass separatists against Kiev. Many perceive the Russian Orthodox Church as filling an ideological gap stemming from Communism's collapse, whereby it seeks to invoke the unity of Orthodox states under religious-cultural auspices. This lends itself significantly to Moscow's foreign policy and foreign relations objectives which – as explained by Moscow since the fall of the Soviet Union – are largely underpinned with a philosophy of building and maintaining strong connections with Russian populations that in earlier times comprised the Soviet Union or the Russian empire.¹³¹

The Russian Orthodox Church effectively supports nearly all of Moscow's foreign policy projects by religiously elevating, symbolically representing, and historically substantiating these interests; this has been demonstrated in Moldova by the prevalence of official exchanges between a number of government personnel and Moscow Patriarch Kirill.¹³² For example, in 2009, the Moldovan president participated in celebrations for Kirill's installation and enthronement to the Moscow Patriarchate. This was an acknowledgement of his state's support for the primacy of the Moscow Patriarchate over the Orthodox Church of Moldova. In 2013, Kirill visited Transnistria and expressed his support to Moscow's foreign policy there.¹³³ Moreover, the Moldovans with whom I spoke noted that their current, pro-Russian president, Igor Dodon, has showed similar, direct support for the Russian Orthodox Church.¹³⁴

There is no state religion in Moldova; however, the Moldovan Orthodox Church is perceived by many Moldovans to receive special treatment from the government. For

example, the Metropolitan of the Church has a diplomatic passport, as do other high-ranking Moldovan Orthodox Church officials.¹³⁵ The Moldovans expressed that, in their country, there is too strong a connection between clergymen and politicians who are involved in providing financial support to the Church, thereby corrupting it much like other Moldovan institutions. They stated that the Orthodox Church is used as a political instrument of influence, having the power to sway certain political and social choices of Moldova's citizens. At least one opinion was that church representatives were actively involved in media campaigns aimed at discrediting the EU in the eyes of the populace. They stated, for example, that the Church is exploiting concern over the EU's comparably liberal policies on gender and sexual rights, and that this is part of a larger agenda to build pro-Russian support in Moldova.¹³⁶ The Moldovans' perspectives are largely consistent with a 2018 USAID survey in their country, which indicated that nearly 60 percent of the population believe the Church is involved in the promotion of parties and political ideas.¹³⁷

The history of the Moldovan Orthodox Church goes back to the medieval times of the Moldovan Principality, and was strengthened and further institutionalized following the 1812 annexation of Bessarabia by the Russian Empire. At that time, the Empire employed religion as a tool for centralization and Russification of newly acquired lands.¹³⁸ However, when Bessarabia joined Greater Romania after World War I, it established the Bessarabian Orthodox Church as a component of Romania's autocephalous Orthodox Church. Following World War II, under Soviet rule (which was hostile to the Church in general), the Bessarabian Orthodox Church was disbanded and even the traditional Moldovan Orthodox Church was downgraded to only a "Bishopric of Chișinău and Moldova" under the Russian Orthodox Church. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Orthodox Church elevated the "Bishopric of Chișinău and Moldova" to a "Metropolitan Church of Chișinău and all Moldova" -- which is today's "Moldovan Orthodox Church" -- and granted it autonomy. In roughly the same period, a number of priests broke away from the Moldovan Orthodox Church, re-established the Bessarabian Orthodox Church as the legal and canonical successor to the pre-World War II church under the same name, and positioned it under the Romanian Orthodox Church's Bucharest Patriarchate.¹³⁹ Meanwhile, the larger and stronger Moldovan Orthodox Church continues to fall under the Moscow Patriarchate.¹⁴⁰

Today, 97% of all Moldovans identify as Orthodox Christians; 87% identify with the Russian Orthodox Church, while 10% identify with the Romanian Orthodox Church.¹⁴¹ This makes Moldova somewhat comparable to Ukraine, whereby there are two prevalent Orthodox Church communities including one that is really an extension of the Russian Orthodox Church and another that is nationally focused. A notable difference, however, is that Ukraine's Orthodox Church schism is between a Moscow-affiliated church community and a Ukrainian national-oriented church community. Moldova's Orthodox Church division is the result of competition between two external autocephalous Orthodox Churches: the Moscow Patriarchate and the Romania Patriarchate and -- unlike Ukraine's new, national Ukrainian Orthodox Church -- Moldova's Bessarabian Orthodox Church has not attained autocephaly.¹⁴² Moldova's comparable absence of any substantive struggle for its own national autocephalous Orthodox Church, separate from Moscow, is consistent with surveys indicating that a majority

of Moldovans favor government support for their dominant church, believe that Russia has the obligation to protect Orthodox Christians beyond its own borders, and recognize the Patriarch of Moscow as their Church's highest authority.¹⁴³ The Moldovans who participated in this study were either part of a strong minority which disagreed with these notions, or were part of the majority but felt that the Russian Orthodox Church connections – while acceptable in principle – yielded too strong an influence in Moldova. In any case, this tense issue has political as well as religious implications, as it raises the question as to whether Moldova's Orthodox Churches should be united and oriented toward Moscow, or remain divided with a branch oriented toward Bucharest.¹⁴⁴

Defense and Security

The onset of eastern Ukraine's conflict indeed raised concern among Moldovans that – largely because of the similarities in the two countries' separatist situations -- existing tensions with Transnistria might re-ignite into some level of kinetic conflict.¹⁴⁵ As stated before, Moldova and Ukraine have in common a struggle against a Russian-backed, separatist region in the east of their territories: Transnistria in Moldova and much of the Donbass in Ukraine. They both host OSCE monitoring missions along their lines of conflict, and both have international entities engaged in politically resolving and stabilizing these problems: the Normandy Format for Ukraine and the 5+2 Format for Moldova. Moreover, proposals for new, multi-national, civil peacekeeping missions, with international mandates, have been suggested for each.¹⁴⁶

Present differences in their separatist conflicts, however, may account in part for Moldova's ability to weather this neighboring discord (i.e., real and potential impacts from the Ukraine crisis) with no substantive violence since it began. Based on my dialogue with the Moldovans, many feel that they already experienced -- from 1990 to 1992 when Russian military elements fought alongside Transnistrian separatists -- their country's equivalent to Ukraine's current conflict. For Moldovans, ongoing political and economic tensions stemming from a de facto, autonomous Transnistria perpetuate a fragile rather than reliable stability along the country's Dniester River, yet both sides have seemingly settled into a longstanding, temporary arrangement with the expectation of an internationally brokered and sanctioned solution around the corner.¹⁴⁷ The absence of military clashes in Moldova today, and the country's ability to move forward with nearly all domestic functions despite its continued separatist crisis, sets Moldova apart from Ukraine. In the latter, the daily demand for wartime resources and personnel continue to take a toll on both sides of the conflict, and throughout the country. One can argue that the separatist conflicts in Moldova and Ukraine are quite comparable except that the former started at an earlier time, is cautiously managing in the extended aftermath of military conflict, and that it possibly foreshadows eastern Ukraine's future.

In our dialogue, the Moldovans shared that their country is threatened by the stationing of Russian military troops in Transnistria, and that the National Army of Moldova should be much better prepared.¹⁴⁸ As stated previously, Russia maintains approximately 402 peacekeeping troops and up to 1,200 soldiers in Transnistria as part of an “Operative Group of Russian Troops” tasked with maintaining Munition Warehouses.¹⁴⁹ The current Moldovan government has elevated its concern over these troops to international levels over the years, and its recent efforts have prompted a slightly stronger response from the international



Moldovan President Igor Dodon (2016)

Source: By http://en.publika.md/igor-dodon-vows-to-cancel-association-agreement-with-eu-will-turn-moldova-to-federation_2629556.html [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

community. On June 22, 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted its first-ever, non-binding resolution for Russia to immediately remove its military personnel and armaments from Transnistria.¹⁵⁰ On July 11, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly passed a declaration reaffirming the need for Russia to withdraw its troops from Moldova.¹⁵¹ That same day, at its summit in Brussels, NATO called on Russia to withdraw its forces stationed in countries without their consent, including those in Moldova. Russia has responded to these calls by stating that Russia troops and their Transnistrian supporters stopped further bloodshed over the breakaway territory and are currently the guarantor of peace and stability there.¹⁵² Moldova’s pro-Russian president Dodon believes that the demands for Russian troop withdrawal are nothing more than political posturing,¹⁵³ and other pro-Russian Moldovans claim that such calls are simply distractors intended to divert attention away from the Moldovan government’s plan to sabotage Transnistria’s settlement process.¹⁵⁴ The current Moldovan government argues that Russia encouraged rather than prevented the fighting in the 1990-1992 conflict and that they threaten the country’s stability.¹⁵⁵ It emphasizes that the UN, OSCE, and NATO declarations are

valuable even if Russia does not withdraw its troops in the near-term, because they build a stronger, legal case that the Moldovan government can increasingly exploit.¹⁵⁶

Despite the Moldovans' perception of the threat posed by Russian troops remaining in their country, they noted that Russian influence did decrease somewhat in Transnistria following Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent separatist conflict in Ukraine's Donbass.¹⁵⁷ They believed this decrease was largely a consequence of the Ukraine and Moldova governments beginning a program of cooperation involving the emplacement of multiple, jointly manned checkpoints on the Ukrainian side of their shared border -- some of which are specifically opposite Transnistria. The program began on July 17, 2017, when Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko and Moldova Prime Minister Pavel Filip opened the first



Transnistria-Ukraine Checkpoint

Source: By Julian Nitzsche [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transnistria_Ukraine_Checkpoint.JPG.

joint border crossing point. Up to seven additional ones were planned and would eventually fall under the implementation of newer, stronger bilateral border control agreements negotiated in the fall of 2017.¹⁵⁸ Since the 1990-1992 separatist conflict that left Transnistria a de facto autonomous republic, Moldova was unable to control 454 kilometers of its border with Ukraine; i.e., that portion of its eastern border that runs alongside the breakaway republic. Russia had used that segment of Moldova's border to sustain Transnistria economically and to support its troops stationed there. Transnistria fears that the new Ukrainian-Moldovan border checkpoints will become an increasing threat to its economy and will restrict its "citizens"

freedom of movement. Both Transnistria and Russia perceive the checkpoints as a continuation of a greater “economic blockade” that actually began in 2015, when Ukraine cancelled an agreement allowing Russia to cross its territory to supply Russian troops in the breakaway republic.¹⁵⁹

Finally, some of the Moldovans in our dialogue stated that Russian influence in their country is unlike any other region in Eastern Europe where Russia is substantively engaged. This is because Moldova has a Russian troop presence on its territory and yet shares no border with Russia. Coupled with this, the Moldovans noted that by now Transnistria already includes a generation that grew up since the 1990-1992 conflict and do not see Transnistria’s re-integration with the rest of Moldova as an option.¹⁶⁰

SUMMARY and CONCLUSIONS

Based on the input of the individuals involved in this study, Ukrainian and Moldovan perspectives on Russian influence in their countries are very similar. They indicate that both countries battle an enduring undercurrent of this influence, powerful enough to shape the outcome of national and regional disputes or conflict. Their perspectives imply that – whether related to Ukraine’s separatist confrontation, Moldova’s separatist aftermath, or the East-West orientation of either country -- Russia often owns the initiative and can choose to escalate or de-escalate tensions using indirect, non-force methods. These methods range from the use of propaganda, in a variety of forms, to coercive measures targeting each country’s defense, security, media, economic and religious sectors.

To better compare Ukrainian and Moldovan perspectives on Russian influence, it is helpful to consolidate and briefly review their key similarities and differences regarding each of these sectors. In terms of defense and security, the Ukrainians with whom I spoke perceived that Russian influence and intelligence has an actionable presence at all levels of Ukraine’s military including those international-level entities tasked with monitoring the conflict. This has represented a significant threat to the Ukraine military’s internal planning and coordination. Like the Ukrainians, the Moldovans perceive a threat from the presence of Russian and Russian-backed troops in their separatist region -- including their presence at the international monitoring level -- but that threat is largely external and does not present the same challenges to the Moldovan military’s internal planning and coordination as it does to Ukraine’s.

Russia propaganda was a topic prevalent in discussions with Ukrainians and Moldovans alike, and their perspectives emphasized its ability to transcend all sectors of society. While the Ukrainians underscored Russian propaganda in terms of Cultural Invasion, Historical Distortion, Centralized Media, and Information/Psychological Operations, the Moldovans emphasized its key themes in terms of Soviet nostalgia, EU and U.S. aggression, the personality cult of Russian President Putin, poor U.S. values, the regional threat of NATO, and Russia’s noble role in the world. While none of these are exclusive to either country, the choice by the Ukrainians and Moldovans to emphasize two different sets – or categories -- of characteristics may reveal a deeper difference in their perspectives: the Ukrainians defined Russian propaganda largely in

historical terms, while the Moldovans defined it in more contemporary terms. Additionally, the Moldovans drew comparisons between their perceptions of Russian propaganda in Ukraine versus that in Moldova. They claimed that the language and discourse of Russia's propaganda campaign are similar in both countries. However, they perceived that the campaign's strength and intensity was higher in Ukraine because of its ongoing military fight with separatists and Russia's recognition of Ukraine's comparably greater resources.

Where the media is concerned, individuals from both countries perceived their press – in all its forms – to be heavily, politically influenced and exploited by pro-Russia supporters on one hand, and pro-Western or Romanian supporters on the other. In both countries, this influence is manifested in part by the language used by a media outlet: primarily the Russian or Ukrainian language in Ukraine, and the Russian or Romanian language in Moldova. However, based on the perspectives shared in this study, Moldova's media places a higher value on language as an indicator of political loyalty -- or an ethno-linguistic political agenda -- than does the media in Ukraine. In other words, a Moldovan media outlet's use of a particular language is more inherently an indicator of that outlet's political position. In Ukraine, a media outlet's use of the Russian or Ukrainian language is not always a full indicator of pro-Russian or anti-Russian political support.

Regarding the economy, the Moldovans emphasized their vulnerability to Russia's leverage far more than the Ukrainians did. The Moldovans fervently expressed concern over their reliance on Russian-controlled gas and electricity, as well as the impact that Chisinau-Moscow political maneuverings can have on their alcohol, meat, fruits and vegetable trade. The Ukrainians by comparison hardly mentioned their economy. Most of their perspectives on Russian influence were conveyed in terms of Crimea and the separatist conflict, and how that influence extended even to sectors not directly related to defense or security. While both the loss of Crimea and the ongoing separatist conflict have heavy economic implications for their country, the Ukrainians' choice to discuss these other areas of Russian influence -- rather than their economy -- reflects an understandable preoccupation with more immediate consequences of the crisis. Unlike Ukraine, Moldova is no longer experiencing a kinetic aspect of their separatist crisis, so it makes sense that Moldovans would accentuate economic and similar (softer) challenges stemming from this problem as it remains unresolved.

Among all the major topics discussed, the Ukrainians' and Moldovans' perspectives on the Orthodox Church were most similar. Both claimed that Russia significantly exploits the Church to accomplish Moscow's objectives, using a set of measures ranging from political, economic, social, and even legal actions, to advancing the concept of a greater ethno-cultural Russian identity and loyalty inside their countries. The similarities of their perspectives stem in part from the fact that both Ukraine and Moldova have hosted a longstanding branch of the Orthodox Church that officially falls under the auspices of the Moscow Patriarchate. Concurrently, both states have implemented a weaker, national Orthodox church that distinctly separated from this Patriarchate. All participants in this study reflected a perspective that their countries' Moscow Patriarchate-affiliated Orthodox Churches are far too influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church. Finally, participants from both countries perceived the Russian

Orthodox Church as a Kremlin tool to facilitate foreign policy, and expressed this is a threat to their country's sovereignty and stability.

Indeed, despite a freedom to discuss any aspect of Russian influence, each group of Ukrainians and Moldovans independently emphasized many of the same topics, and specifics of their explanations were quite comparable. This is due in part to similarities between the groups themselves: both seek governments more strongly affiliated with the U.S. and Western Europe and are attempting to distance their countries from Russia's leverage. While this has left little room in the study to directly explore pro-Russian perspectives, it nevertheless provides valuable comparisons within the limited parameters of two governments facing similar challenges. It also points to the possibility of a broader study comparing the perspectives of pro-European and pro-Russian elements on the same or similar topics.

What may be more interesting are the reasons for *differences* in each group's perspectives, which broadly relate to the intensity of their current experience with Russian influence. The Ukrainians reflected an ardent concern over a current and growing level of Russian influence that fuels internal distrust in their country. This stems from Russia's "new-type" approach to conflict and war, whereby it employs non-force measures – particularly in former Soviet states which are now courted by the West -- to weaken public unity, debilitate key institutions, create social division, and discredit the Western-oriented government. Moldovans, too, reflected concern about an imbalance of Russian influence in their country; however, their perspectives implied it was less intense and less volatile, and that their political, economic and social environment was reasonably manageable in spite of it.

These differences in perspectives regarding Russian influence are, at a basic level, underpinned by three facts that cannot be overlooked. Foremost, Moldova is not facing an active, Russia-backed separatist conflict on its territory at the moment; i.e., there is not a feeling of being "at war" with Russia such as there is in Ukraine. Though it seeks resolution of it, Moldova has grown accustomed to living with a Russia-backed, separatist, "frozen" conflict. It perceives Russian influence as troublesome but not as threatening as it is in Ukraine. Second, despite a longstanding Russia troop presence in Transnistria, Moldova does not share a border with Russia. Unlike Ukraine, Moldova does not face a build-up of Russian troops across its border. In fact, Moldova-Ukraine cooperation has reduced Russia's access to Transnistria and has rendered Russia's forces there to be largely static. Third, Moldova is not as central to Russia's history as Ukraine is and, as the Moldovans themselves stated, their country does not include the extent of historic resource and industrial connections.

These similarities and differences – and the reasons for them -- are valuable to understanding the operational environment. The similarities can prove useful to gaining context regarding the common challenges that Ukraine, Moldova and other former Soviet states face regionally. The differences remind us that, in all our efforts to bring stability and resolution to separatist movements, there is not a "one-size fits all" solution. Finally, understanding both the similarities and the differences between Ukraine and Moldovan perspectives on this topic will better inform defense and international community

representatives of their own vulnerabilities to regional influences as they engage with local and national entities in each country.

Abbreviations

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States (Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan).
ECU - Eurasian Customs Union
EEU – Eurasian Economic Union
EU – European Union
JCC – Joint Control Commission (Moldova)
JCCC - Joint Center on Control and Coordination (Ukraine)
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO – Non-governmental Organization
OSCE – Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)

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Notes

¹ "Maidan" is a term used in short for Kiev's "Maidan Nezalezhnosti" (Independence Square). Today it is also used as a term referring to Ukraine's 2014 "Revolution of Dignity" in that location, when a series of anti-government protests and the government's responses to them escalated into violence and fatalities leading to then-President Yanukovich's rapid departure. "Maidan" and "EuroMaidan" are often used synonymously to describe the overarching, pro-European movement behind the protests, revolution and post-revolution government.

² "Ukraine Crisis: Timeline of Major Events," *The Telegraph* (March 5, 2015), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11449122/Ukraine-crisis-timeline-of-major-events.html> (accessed August 22, 2016).

Note: this paper uses the terms "pro-European", "pro-Western," and "pro-Russian" to generally describe the political or geopolitical orientation of a government or group of people. Their use here is consistent with research sources supporting the study.

³ Christopher Miller, "Death Toll Up to 13,000 in Ukraine Conflict, Says UN Rights Office," *RFE/RL* (February 26, 2019). <https://www.rferl.org/a/death-toll-up-to-13-000-in-ukraine-conflict-says-un-rights-office/29791647.html>, (accessed May 22, 2019).

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⁵ Steven Woehrel, "Moldova: Background and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service* (April 23, 2014), www.crs.gov.

⁶ Moldovan Defense and Diplomatic Personnel, Consultation, Washington, D.C. and Moldova, February-March 2018.

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⁹ "A Brief History of Ukraine," *The Ukrainian Culture Center of Syracuse* (2006), <https://www.syruc.org/history.html> (accessed April 11, 2017).

¹⁰ For a brief chronology of Ukraine history including Euromaidan and post-Euromaidan events, see "Ukraine Profile – Timeline," *BBC* (August 3, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18010123>.

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- ¹¹ Kataryna Wolczuk, *The Moulding of Ukraine: The Constitutional Politics of State Formation* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), 29-58, <http://books.openedition.org/ceup/1739>.
- ¹² Gwendolyn Sasse, "Constitution Making in Ukraine: Refocusing the Debate," *Carnegie Europe* (April 12, 2016), <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/04/12/constitution-making-in-ukraine-refocusing-debate-pub-63304>.
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- ¹⁴ For a brief chronology of Ukraine history including Euromaidan and post-Euromaidan events, see "Ukraine Profile – Timeline," *BBC* (August 3, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18010123>.
- ¹⁵ Russian President Putin's reasons for annexing Crimea were, in part, concern that Ukraine's new government might join NATO, and second, that Kiev might evict Russia's strategic Black Sea Fleet from its long-standing naval base in Sevastopol. Under the 2010 Kharkiv Agreement between Russia and Ukraine, Russia was given rights to maintain its Black Sea Fleet on Crimea's Sevastopol base until at least 2042.
- Note: "Donbass" stems from the words describing a geographic feature and location in eastern Ukraine: "Donetsk Basin".
- ¹⁶ For a brief chronology of Ukraine history including Euromaidan and post-Euromaidan events, see "Ukraine Profile – Timeline," *BBC* (August 3, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18010123>.
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- ²³ Ukrainian Senior National Defense Personnel, Studies Group Consultation which included this author, conducted in Kiev, Ukraine in May 2016 and from within the U.S. in November 2017.
- ²⁴ Dr. Mahir J. Ibrahimov is the program manager of the Army's Culture, Regional Expertise/Language Management Office (CRELMO) and was a language and culture subject matter expert in the Studies Group.
- ²⁵ Taras Kuzio, "The Ukrainian-Russian Cultural Conflict," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, no. 87 (May 2009), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-ukrainian-russian-cultural-conflict/> (accessed January 27, 2018).
- ²⁶ Ukrainian Senior National Defense Personnel, Studies Group Consultation which included this author, conducted in Kiev, Ukraine in May 2016 and from within the U.S. in November 2017.
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- ³³ Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2016), 3.
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