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# RUSSIA AND THE ISSUE OF TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY IN THE POST-SOVIET STATES: THE CASES OF GEORGIA, UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA

Motto: "There is a fact which dominates in an authoritarian manner our historical movement, which like a red thread runs through all our history, which contains within itself all its philosophy, which is manifested in all periods of our social life and determines its character, which is simultaneously an essential element of our political greatness and a fundamental cause of our mental helplessness. This fact is geography."<sup>1</sup>

P. Chaadaev

## Introduction

Ever since the end of "honeymoon" relations between Moscow and West in the mid-1990s, the revival of the neo-imperial ambitions in the Russian Federation has been much discussed.<sup>2</sup> The grounds for believing that a neo-imperial policy was emerging were all the more legitimate since according to a stereotype that has won widespread recognition in Russian political thinking, stung by an awareness of contemporary Russia's weakness and its loss of a decisive say in global processes, "unless the Russian Federation is leader in its own region of the world, still less can it expect to become a power of truly global stature."<sup>3</sup> Self-assertion in the "Near Abroad" has become something of a substitute for the superpower-status complex inherited from both the Soviet period and a remoter, pre-revolutionary era.

The invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the official recognition of separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian Federation showed explicitly the linkage between Russian policy in the "Near Abroad" and the commitment to rebuilding the country's great

power status. Russia under Vladimir Putin, and presently under Dmitri Medvedev, started a process of “regaining” control in the international arena and first of all over the “Near Abroad.” In order to achieve the objectives in both of these directions, “hard power” and other “traditional” means are employed: coercion (military intervention in Georgia, strategic military moves around the world); economic sanctions (“gas wars” with Ukraine and Moldova, “wine wars” with Georgia and Moldova, investment policy); diplomatic activities (multilateral diplomacy in international and regional organizations); aspersion and propaganda campaigns (accusations of human rights violations in the Baltic states, defending the interests of compatriots in the CIS and the Baltic states); shifting political environments in other sovereign countries (support to pro-Kremlin political parties in the CIS and Baltic states); using military presence in different regions and of the peacekeeping missions in “frozen conflicts” (Moldova, Georgia, Tajikistan);<sup>4</sup> and more recently the “Humanitarian Trend” in Russian foreign policy which contains traditional elements of Russia’s actions in the “Near Abroad” (human rights, compatriots, campaigns of aspersion and propaganda, political consolidation of Russian speaking minorities), the technical/practical means to enforce these actions (consular issues, informational superiority), and new approaches of soft power (culture, education, science, public diplomacy).<sup>5</sup>

The case of Georgia suddenly opened the issue of territorial integrity in the post-Soviet states as a tool for Russian foreign policy strategies, especially in the similar case of the Transnistrian separatist republic of Moldova and the probably similar case of the Ukrainian region of Crimea. Recent developments in the post-Soviet states, but specifically in Georgia, interestingly impose the necessity to analyze Russian Federation foreign policy and its involvement in the “Near Abroad,” specifically from the perspective of territorial integrity.

This study is focused on territorial disputes in three former Soviet republics – Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Ukraine (Crimea), and the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria) – and Russian Federation involvement in these issues. It aims to present the Moscow perspective on these territorial disputes, and their role in Russian Federation plans to “regain” influence in the “Near Abroad” and in the world. In other words, the article will try to explain what “great power” is, and what “imperial power” is (if there is any difference), in pursuing Russian interests in these conflicts.

The paper will also focus on how these states perceive Russian involvement in these conflicts particularly, and in their domestic affairs generally. All three states face at this moment strong pressure from Moscow since the Russian Federation's primary aims in the "Near Abroad" are to maintain its strategic position in the regions considered as part of "vital interests," in the interest of Russia's own stability, to establish stable and predictable relations with these states, and not to admit the growing influence there of any other power. But this perspective will be only collateral to the primary intention of the paper.

Which factors determined the primordality of territoriality in Russian history and politics? Why were the Russians as a nation accustomed (and why are they still) to a large sphere of action, and the absence of borders? What does the issue of territorial integrity represent in the post-Soviet sphere in Russian policies, and why does Russia consider such integrity something relative and susceptible to change? How does the Russian Federation use the problem of territorial integrity in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova in its politics? To answer all these questions is the main aim of the present paper.

Each of the selected cases is specific in the Russian perspective of territory. The Georgian case is important for security reasons, in terms of "steppe diplomacy" as Hosking has stressed.<sup>6</sup> The Ukrainian case is more complicated, since it involves not only the issue of Crimea, but also the integrity and existence of Ukraine as a whole and its importance in reconstructing Russian power. As Brzezinski stressed,

*"without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state, more likely to be drawn into debilitating conflicts with aroused Central Asians, who would then be supported by their fellow Islamic states to the south."*<sup>7</sup>

The case of Transnistria does not affect the security of the Russian Federation directly, and it is not as important as the case of Ukraine in terms of Russia's future greatness. The integrity of Moldova is rather a piece of the puzzle in the Russian great power game, and is more related to control and influence over Moldovan, regional and European policies.

In order to understand all these issues, a glance at the place of border and territory in Russian history would be very helpful. Our primary intention here is to answer what border and territory mean in Russian

history, and how this issue influenced Russian intellectual and political thinking in the post-Soviet period.

## **I. Border and Territory in Russian history**

“Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan are lost; Adzharia has fallen; Transnistria is under siege. Enemies have engaged in subversive activities in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and are approaching the gates of Belarus. Minsk is standing firm, but if it falls. The road to Moscow will be widely open.”<sup>8</sup> This statement by Dmitry Furman, a leading researcher at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences, reflects the basic perception of the Russian political and intellectual establishment, and of the majority of Russians, regarding the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Russian geopolitics has been always focused on the Russian “Near Abroad,” a place with historical and cultural meanings to Russians. For the West, this semicircle of countries surrounding Russia has been of strategic interest because of its potential to contain the country. For Russia, the Near Abroad is not simply a set of areas to control for strategic reasons, but also territories that are intimately related to Russia through ties of history, economy, and culture. Thus, the imposition of borders upon “Russian” space is seen as both unnatural and impermanent. After all, Russia’s international political history has always been dominated by action on her frontiers.<sup>9</sup>

When reflecting on Russian history we should bear in mind that there is no one single Russia in terms of territory, but rather six Russia bonded into one: Kievan Rus, Mongol Russia, Muscovite Russia, Imperial (Romanov) Russia, Soviet Russia and finally post-Soviet Russia (the Russian Federation). All of the previous five Russias left a particular legacy on the current Russian Federation in terms of identity, and probably no other nation has spent as much intellectual effort in search of its true identity as Russia.

The historical shaping of the Russian state and empire could be summarized in four major processes and trends. The first is related to the process of internal colonization in the sense of Solovyev’s and Klyuchevsky’s view of Russian history as a “history of a country in permanent colonization.”<sup>10</sup> The second process is the so-called “gathering of lands” initiated by Muscovite Russia starting from Ivan Kalita, which resulted in the creation of the Russian unitary state and of premises for



further extension. The third tendency which shaped the Russian sense of border and territory was Russia's constant territorial expansion in search of security, until they reached the "natural" land and sea limits. Finally, the last policy to shape Russian territory was the imperial one, mixed with messianic mission, driven by forms of the Russian "special way" either of the Tsarist triad – orthodoxy, autocracy, "narodnosti" – or the Stalinist – Communism, Party and Soviet Power. Berdeav profoundly caught this quality of the Russian character when he said that "the messianic idea runs through the whole of Russian history up to Communism."<sup>11</sup> The new and old territories were becoming a unique vital space, creating an organic unity, the Russian "core" or "oikumena", but not however a harmonious one.<sup>12</sup>

The "external cover" of dominance over foreign countries was needed in order to assure the invulnerability of the "core." It was intended to oppose, by all available means, the countries from West, South or East, not part of the sphere of Russian influence, so that these could not threaten the region with their material, political or ideological overtures. The maintenance of barriers and countermeasures to major external contacts, as well as the tendency to integrate into the "other" world, were *sine qua non* conditions for the survival of the "Russian idea" and its institutional basis. Here the "Russian idea" is the idea of Russian dominance over Slavic and non-Slavic ethnic groups within (more or less) the "natural borders" of the late Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, but also its political dominance over the vicinity, i.e. East-Central Europe, Central and South Asia, Mongolia and the Far East. Direct rule and geopolitical domination over this area during Russian history was not justified by some attractive model of economical development or by the Russian people's political freedom. They were explained by metaphysical qualities – Russian spiritual superiority and universality, which all nations which became parts of the Empire should accept *a priori* as a gift of God (or of "World revolution").<sup>13</sup>

Looking at the issue of territory as the main feature of any state, we have to stress that in Russian terms, the tragedy of 1991 was not that some administrative borders became state and national borders. The problem resulted from the idea that Russia, which during the twentieth century bore the name Soviet Union (and was earlier known as the Russian Empire), as a united body, united culture, and united civilization, was split into many parts.

The territory of a nation has a meaning beyond the political power accruing from its control of the land. The history of a nation, its struggles,

conflicts, defining moments, and tragedies all happen in particular places that not only shape the character of those places, but also the character of the nation. Consequently, territory is a vital component of national identity as an emotive source of imagining the nation. Scholars working on territory perceive a fundamental problem relating to the location of national boundaries when territory is thought of as “space to which identity is attached by a distinct group who hold or covet that territory and who desire to fully control it for the group’s benefit.”<sup>14</sup> Such a conception of territory tends to encourage the social construction of national boundaries that do not necessarily match state borders. In this sense, Russian territorial consciousness extends beyond the country’s present borders, and “Russia” and “Russian identity” are not confined within the space of the present Russian Federation. Thus, the breakup of the Soviet Union was not simply the collapse of a communist regime, but also the dissolution of the Russian Empire.

### ***1.1. A glance at the post-Soviet period***

The collapse of the Soviet Union generated new mental maps for Russians, maps that do not always match the contemporary political map of state borders. Such imaginings of Russia are frequently connected to beliefs about what sort of country Russia is and should be, how Russia is viewed by the rest of the world, and how it is shaped by Russian foreign policy objectives.<sup>15</sup>

Post-Soviet intellectual and political debates and orientations regarding the Russian state/imperial power and territory were differently grouped by scholars who variously assess their impact on the politics of post-Soviet Russia. For instance, Alexei Arbatov has defined four broad foreign policy positions within Russia, which vary in terms of influence but span all the major institutions engaged in policy formulation: a pro-Western group; moderate liberals (pragmatists); moderate conservatives; the radical left and right.<sup>16</sup> Malinova considers that the theme of “imperial” and “post-imperial” projects is very present in current Russian political discourse in at least two forms: among “imperial nationalists” and in “liberal discourse.”<sup>17</sup> The former treat the borders of “new empire” in different ways, but usually think in terms of the restoration of the Soviet Union. Prokhanov speaks about the “Fifth Empire” and considers that “CIS countries will rot outside the imperial body”;<sup>18</sup> Zhirinovskiy pledges “reunification of the territories carved from Russia” (especially for Slavic

peoples), but views Russian expansion in terms of a “last assault to South”, i.e. to the Indian Ocean.<sup>19</sup> The liberal vision of empire is not so much imbued with the “gathering of territories” rhetoric, but with Russia’s “natural” leadership in the CIS, considered “vital” for its greatness<sup>20</sup>.

According to Sidorov, there are also post-imperial “Third Rome” projects in post-Soviet Russia, resurrecting a Russian Orthodox geopolitical metaphor.<sup>21</sup> He considers its reincarnations in various contemporary Russian geopolitical ideologies, such as “Orthodox Nationalism/Fundamentalism,” “Geo-apocalypitics of the Postmodern,” “Neo-Panslavism,” “Statism/Eurounionism,” “Neo-Eurasianism,” “New Chronology,” and “Neo-Orthodox Communism.” For Nazarov, one proponent of this trend, the only legitimate basis for establishing limits to the Third Rome must be the boundary of the Russian Empire as of 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1917, when the last legitimate authority was interrupted. For the three Baltic republics, Russia should recognize their peoples’ choice for independence, but not their boundaries; the Transnistrian republic of Moldova is a Russian territory, etc.<sup>22</sup>

O’Loughlin and Talbot have also proposed a systematization for Russian intellectual and political visions of territory and empire, considering them as “Westernizing Nationalism,” “Moderate Eurasianism,” and “Extreme Eurasianism.”<sup>23</sup> According to the authors. Westernizing Nationalism has no territorial aspirations, since any expansion of Russia would conflict with the clearly expressed wish to assert Russia’s place in Europe and the Western world. Moderate Eurasianists do not have a single territorial vision but want, at a minimum, a return of the Slavic states of Belarus and Ukraine to Russia. Other moderates favor a complete reunification of the Soviet Union. A distinguishing attitude toward territory, however, is that moderate Eurasianists reject the notion of a forced reconstitution of the Soviet Union and hope for a voluntary reunification. Extreme Eurasianists view all of the former Soviet Union as part of Russia.<sup>24</sup>

How do all these reflections and debates influence and shape Russian politics in terms of power and influence, and how they alter the territorial *status quo* established after 1991?

In the first three years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia’s official policy toward its neighbors evolved from isolation to active engagement and reintegration, at the same time as Russia discovered a new language of self-determination for its compatriot communities in the “Near Abroad.” In this sense, Russian state-building and Russian empire-building overlap, remaining ambiguous, opaque, elusive, difficult to define<sup>25</sup>.

Events in Russia and the republics during 1992 necessitated some serious adjustments in the understanding of Russia's role and place in the post-Soviet sphere; in particular events in the Transnistrian region of Moldova in 1992, when for the first time ethnic Russians were drawn into military action, pushed Russians out of their inward-looking policy and drove them to involvement in the territories of the "Near Abroad".

It is generally accepted that the Russian Federation's post-Soviet "honeymoon" in relations with the West, especially the United States, came to an end in the mid-1990s. One supporting argument is that as a result of marginalization in the West, Russia increasingly turned its attention to the former Soviet republics – the "Near Abroad."<sup>26</sup> A wide range of factors were mentioned to explain this shift: the necessity to strength economic ties with the Commonwealth of Independent States; a strong interest in the fate of ethnic Russians, 25 million of whom found themselves outside the Russian Federation and imploring protection; border issues such as Crimea and to a lesser extent north Kazakhstan; and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless there is evidence that a shift toward the former Soviet republics occurred early. Of all the arguments outlined above, the most important in our case is how the interests of Russia in defending ethnic Russians overlapped with the pursuit of Russian state/empire building in the "Near Abroad."

Discussions of the emergence of the "Near Abroad" policy usually cite Andranik Migranian, Yeltsin's adviser for security, who early in 1992 said that

*"as a result of miscalculations in assessing the role and place of Russia and the deep-seated nature of relations between Russia and the countries of the near abroad, officials of the Russian Foreign Ministry and other political leaders in the country drew the strategically erroneous conclusion that Russia should turn inward, within the borders of the Russian federation, get out of all the former USSR republics, and not interfere in interethnic and regional conflicts in the former Union, thereby openly and publicly renouncing any special rights and interests in the post-Soviet sphere outside the Russian Federation."*

According to him, events that occurred in Russia and in the republics during 1992 necessitated serious adjustments in the understanding of Russia's role and place in the post-Soviet sphere, and a significant portion

of the political establishment started to realize more and more clearly that Russia had a special role in the post-Soviet sphere.<sup>28</sup>

In particular events in the Transnistrian region of Moldova in 1992, when for the first time ethnic Russians were drawn into military action, pushed Russians out of their inward-looking policy.<sup>29</sup> Other problems were Baltic citizenship restrictions, the conflict with Ukraine over the Crimea, over the former Soviet Fleet and the policy of "Ukrainization," massive out-migration of Russians from Central Asia and Transcaucasia, and the widespread perception of Russia's artificial borders; all these stimulated the shift from an inward-looking policy in the Russian Federation toward the "Near Abroad."<sup>30</sup> So-called neo-authoritarian representatives of Russian foreign policy stressed that the problems cited above, as well as security guarantees, imposed on Russia the necessity to become the center for reintegration of the former Soviet republics.<sup>31</sup>

The 1992 Foreign Policy Concept explicitly points out that in the emerging new system of international relations, the Russian Federation remains a great power in terms of its potential, its influence and its responsibility to create a new system of positive relations among the states that used to make up the Soviet Union, and that it is the guarantor of stability for these relations.<sup>32</sup>

Even though the basic contours of Russia's policy towards the "Near Abroad" were already in place well before the December 1993 elections, the strong showing of nationalists and neo-communists during the elections explicitly stressed Russian geopolitical interests throughout the region. Both V. Zhirinovskiy and E. Zyuganov, leaders of the Russian Liberal Democrats and Communists respectively, took a very active role in shaping intellectual and political discourse regarding the "vital interests" of Russia in its geographic proximity.

In January 1994, in his opening speech to the new Federation Council, Boris Yeltsin stressed Russia's destiny as "a great power" and as "first among equals" among the former Soviet republics.<sup>33</sup> At the same time Russian officials drew a distinction between a "great power" and an "imperial power": the first was about the legitimate pursuit of state interests towards its neighbors within the norms and expectations of the state system, the second was a policy of domination standing outside those norms. Within the post-Soviet context, however, the distinction between the legitimate pursuit of state interests and empire-building is entirely nebulous and is likely to remain so for a long time. Very suggestive in this sense was the statement of Alexander Rutskoy, Vice-President of the Russia Federation,

when he said in 1994 that “the peoples of the former Soviet Union are destined by the Lord God himself to live as one family, one nation, one state – a great power.”<sup>34</sup>

Although “post-imperial” territorial ambitions are usually ably “hidden” in the discourses and actions of the Russia political classes, and not invoked to legitimize the political course, many of the Kremlin’s arguments can be attributed to the diversity of intellectual opinions and trends mentioned above.

The main purpose of Putin’s political reform was announced as the creation of a strong state. Analysis of Putin’s speeches reveals that his perception of a “strong state” explicitly contains the imperial archetypes. In his 2003 Address to the Federal Assembly, the Russian President stressed that the historical heroism of Russia and its citizens lay in “maintaining the state on the grand stage, in keeping with the unique community of nation with strong positions in the world.”<sup>35</sup> In his May 2004 Address, Putin announced the integration of the post-Soviet sphere as a priority direction for Russian foreign policy. “Our priority is to work on deepening integration in the CIS, including the Common Economic Space and the Eurasian Economic Community.”

Earlier, on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2004, he declared that

“The breakup of the Soviet Union is a national tragedy on an enormous scale, from which only the elites and nationalists of the republics gained. . . . I think that ordinary citizens of the former Soviet Union and the post-Soviet sphere gained nothing from this.”<sup>36</sup>

Respecting the independence of the new post-Soviet states, Putin has always spoken of the importance of integration processes in this area, stressing his concern for the status of Russian-speaking minorities in these states. In 2005, for instance, he declared the necessity to continue “the Russian nation’s mission of civilization on the Eurasian continent.”<sup>37</sup>

As we stressed at the beginning of the paper, Russia’s self-assertion in the “Near Abroad” has become something of a substitute for the superpower-status complex inherited from both the Soviet period and a remoter, pre-revolutionary, era and Russia’s ability to control the territory of the “Near Abroad” is considered to be one of the main arguments that grant Russia the status of regional or even world power (and probably will continue to grant this in the near future). But this is not the only explanation of Russian influence in the “Near Abroad.” Russia experiences a dichotomy

in relations with the former Soviet republics, which determines the main dilemma of Moscow policy in the “Near Abroad”: how to find a balance between addressing these as absolute sovereign states, and maintaining “special relationships” with them. Post-imperial historical realities have shown that there are two options when a large country is surrounded by small, weak countries: either the great power conquers and dominates them, or these states become strong enough to resist, unifying their own resources and external support, and thereby containing and exhausting the great power potential. Fear of domination pushes small countries to create containment barriers and seek support from other powers, while fear of hostile encirclement, of isolation and of external involvement pushes the great power to extend its own influence over neighbor states.

The dynamic interrelation between these two models over five centuries has been the paradigm of Russian/Soviet empire evolution, its colonized territories and surroundings<sup>38</sup> Russia considers the former Soviet republics as internally deeply unstable, open to outside influence, and riven by confrontation between themselves, with their own separatist regions or with Russia itself. In this sense, Russia’s great dilemma is how to prevent post-Soviet states from creating a hostile surrounding (or any kind of *cordon sanitaire*), and how to impede their transformation into a sphere of economical and political influence, and potentially of military presence, for other great regional and global powers and alliances.

Case studies of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are relevant in explaining these paradigms.

## **II. Caucasian conundrum: why recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia?**

In spite of the historical, cultural, and economic ties between Georgia and the Russian Federation, tensions between the two states amount to a long-standing political problem that has various sources. The new Georgia starts with the period of perestroika and glasnost, a fateful attempt to liberalize the Soviet political regime undertaken by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985 on. Georgians used the opportunities provided by the new liberties to launch a national independence movement, which mobilized the public around the slogan of independence from the Soviet Union. The inevitable tensions with the Communist authorities came tragically to a head in the early morning of

9<sup>th</sup> April, 1989, when the Soviet army dispersed a huge pro-independence rally, leaving twenty people, mostly young women, dead. This tragic event represented the moral death of the Communist regime in Georgia: its legitimacy was fatally injured and never recovered.

The emergence of Georgian nationalism was paralleled by the development of a counter-nationalist agenda in the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Abkhazians and Ossetians formed their own nationalist movements and demanded secession from Georgia. As in many other multi-ethnic countries, an attempt at democratic transition created challenges to the unity of the country. The Soviet authorities, concerned with a rising nationalist movement for an independent Georgia, had a vested interest in encouraging and supporting anti-Tbilisi movements with a weakening effect within Georgia.

For years, Russia has attempted to present the conflicts within Georgian territory (as well as in Moldova) as inter-national confrontation and “ethnic conflicts.” Very successful at the beginning of 1990s, this approach soon lost its relevance.

For decades, the main issue in Russian-Georgian relations has been connected to two problems – first, Russia’s interest in preserving its control in CIS countries; and second, its interests in two separatist regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Ossetia. In the last official census of South Ossetia, conducted in 1989, before the outbreak of hostilities, the South Ossetian Autonomous District had a population of just under 100,000 people, with 66% ethnic Ossetians and 29% Georgians.<sup>39</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1990, the newly elected Ossetian Supreme Council proclaimed the South Ossetian Republic, which could well be interpreted as secession from Georgia, or at least a step in that direction. In July 1992, the Russia-brokered peace deal ended hostilities in South Ossetia, creating the first zone of “frozen conflict” in Georgia: most of South Ossetia remained under control of the separatist Government, and the ceasefire was monitored by the tripartite Georgian-Russian-Ossetian peacekeeping forces.<sup>40</sup>

According to the 1989 Soviet census, the Abkhaz population was approximately 525,100 and consisted of the following ethnic groups: 45.7% Georgians, 17.8% Abkhazians, 14.6% Armenians, 14.2% Russians. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz separatists sought to secede from Georgia by force, which in terms of ethnic composition would be impossible without Russian external assistance. The Abkhaz Supreme Soviet declared its sovereignty on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1992



and had procured the support of Russian forces stationed in military bases located in Georgian territory.<sup>41</sup>

Having sustained heavy losses and the forcible expulsion of approximately 300,000 of its citizens from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the years after the dissolution of the USSR, Georgia was left with no practical option but to accept Russian demands and to join the CIS in order to end the conflict. On 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1992, Georgia and the South Ossetian insurgents signed the Sochi Agreement. On 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1993, Georgia and the Abkhaz insurgents signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Geneva, and on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1993, Georgia became an official member of the CIS. On May 14, 1994, the Abkhaz separatists and the Georgian government signed the Moscow Agreement on Ceasefire and Separation of Forces. The agreement was endorsed by a decision of CIS heads of state on 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 1994, which prescribed that Russian CIS peacekeepers would be stationed in the region alongside UN forces.<sup>42</sup>

Since then, Russia has increased its influence in separatist regions by providing citizenship and various forms of support. The international recognition of Kosovo in February 2008, combined with Georgia's expression of its intention to seek NATO membership at the Bucharest Summit in April of 2008, intensified efforts by the Russian Federation to establish South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent, ethnically homogenous territories. In this sense, the Georgian case is the first successful one for Russia in using territorial integrity in a combined strategy of security, neo-imperial ambitions and great power stance looking for international affirmation as a regional and world power.

During his address to the 42<sup>nd</sup> Munich Security Conference in February 2007, President Putin challenged the existing model of Russia's relations with the West, whereby Russia had been denied its opinion and interests since the end of the Cold War.<sup>43</sup> The address symbolically marked the opening of a new phase in Russian foreign policy, which may be referred to as revisionist, as it fundamentally challenged the current formula for relations with the West, both globally and regionally (especially with regard to the "Near Abroad").<sup>44</sup>

The 2008 war in Georgia was one step toward changing this status-quo. One of Russia's fundamental aims was to prevent any further political, economic and institutional rapprochement between Georgia and the West. The use of armed force was intended to demonstrate Russia's determination in the defense of its influence in the "Near Abroad," and to stress the weakness and helplessness of the West, and especially the

United States, which proved unable either to stop Russia or to provide any help to Georgia. The Russian Federation wanted to demonstrate that the post-Soviet sphere was in fact within its zone of influence, and that Russia would not tolerate any excessive growth of Western influence here.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, it was a classical imperial military action, resulting in the territorial disintegration of a neighboring country in order to create personal territorial benefits and regional and global influence.

The recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence on 26<sup>th</sup> August, 2008 was the next step in this direction. In September 2008 Russia signed a number of treaties with the newly recognized republics, providing for Russian assistance in the event of aggression, and preventing the extension of international observer missions. As a result of Russia's actions, the OSCE mission in Georgia expired in December 2008, and the UN mission in July 2009.

It was no accident that the Russians invaded Georgia on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2008, following a Georgian attack on South Ossetia. To understand Russian thinking, we need to look at two events. The first is the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. From the U.S. and European point of view, the Orange Revolution represented a triumph of democracy and Western influence. From the Russian point of view, as Moscow made clear, the Orange Revolution was a CIA-funded intrusion into Ukraine's internal affairs, designed to draw Ukraine into NATO and add to the encirclement of Russia. U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton had promised the Russians that NATO would not expand into the former Soviet Union empire.

The second and lesser event was the decision by Europe and the United States to back Kosovo's separation from Serbia. The Russians were friendly with Serbia, but the deeper issue for Russia was this: The principle of Europe since World War II was that, to prevent conflict, national borders would not be changed. If that principle were violated in Kosovo, other border shifts — including demands by various regions for independence from Russia — might follow. The Russians publicly and privately asked that Kosovo not be given formal independence, but instead continue its informal autonomy, which was the same thing in practical terms. Russia's requests were ignored. If Kosovo could be declared independent under Western sponsorship, then South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two breakaway regions of Georgia, could be declared independent under Russian sponsorship. Any objections from the United States and Europe would simply confirm their hypocrisy.

In the period after the war, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev stated Russian foreign policy in five succinct points, called the “Medvedev Doctrine.” In the last two points, Medvedev declared that

“protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be, is an unquestionable priority for our country. Our foreign policy decisions will be based on this need. We will also protect the interests of our business community abroad. It should be clear to all that we will respond to any aggressive acts committed against us.”

In the last point he made clear that like other countries, there are regions where Russia has privileged interests. “These regions are home to countries with which we share special historical relations and are bound together as friends and good neighbors. We will pay a particular attention to our work in these regions and will build friendly ties with these countries, our close neighbors,” the Russian president declared. According to George Friedman, the fourth point provides a doctrinal basis for intervention in other countries if Russia finds it necessary, and the fifth point is critical because it actually states that Russians have special interests in the former Soviet Union and in friendly relations with these states. “Intrusions by others that undermine pro-Russian regimes in these regions will be regarded as a threat to Russia’s ‘special interest.’”<sup>46</sup>

But in long-term strategy the official recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian Federation was a demonstration of the Russian political elite’s incapacity to transform the post-Soviet sphere according to modern principles of influence and power. The 26<sup>th</sup> August act attested to the old Russian imperial paradigm of action in the post-Soviet sphere adapted to new realities – the separation and annexation of new territories. Could similar scenarios be expected in the different cases of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova? The logic of Russian political action suggests that the Russian Federation has no other strategies at the moment than to erode the territorial integrity of the neighboring states in order to achieve its geopolitical goals.

### **III. Ukraine: national identity, territorial integrity and geopolitical interests**

The Russian Federation's attitude toward Ukraine's territorial integrity is shaped by several historical and political aspects. The first point is that Ukraine's independence as such is regarded in Russia as abnormal, a historical error and as such a temporary issue to be solved by the absorption of Ukraine into Russia. This vision is deeply influenced by the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and historical community of these Slavic nations, and partially by Russian perception of the Ukrainian nation as something artificial, and as a result inconsistent, in terms of history.<sup>47</sup>

At the beginning of the post-Soviet period, historic relations between Ukraine and Russia were too little understood, and the most common misperceptions lead to the formulation of all manner of mistaken policies and judgments. In a highly relevant article concerning the making of post-Soviet history of Ukraine, entitled very suggestively "Does Ukraine Have a History?", von Hagen considers that fluidity of borders, cultural permeability, and a historically multi-ethnic society could make Ukrainian history a very "modern" field of research.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as such the making of modern Ukraine should be viewed in an international context – the first Russian nation-builders wanted the Ukrainians to be Russian; Polish nation-builders wanted "their" Ukrainians to be Polish – and the national identity of modern Ukrainians was formulated by those who, in defining Ukraine, rejected both the Russian identity and the Polish identity.<sup>49</sup>

Since in this case we are only interested in the Russian perception, several crucial moments in history influence the Russian view of Ukrainian territory. The first such moment is that, historically speaking, the roots of Ukraine grow from Kievan Rus, a legacy claimed by Russians and Belarusians as well, a situation close to that of France and Germany, which contest the legacy of the Carolingian Empire. Russia views Kievan Rus as one and the same with Muscovite Russia, and in terms of unity between Russians and Ukrainians, while Ukrainian historical narratives treat it as the beginning of Ukrainian statehood (starting from the "father" of Ukrainian historiography Mykhailo Hrushevsky), but especially of the Halych-Volhyn kingdom, perceived by the modern Ukrainian historians as part of Ukrainian history.<sup>50</sup>

The second moment of the Russian-Ukrainian dispute is the treaty of 1654, when Bohdan Khmelnytsky signed an act of union with Russia. After the Polish-Russian war, in 1667 most territories of present Ukraine

were divided between Poland and Russia, and therefore a part of that vast territory - today's regions of Poltava and Chernihiv, with the city of Kiev – came under Muscovite rule.<sup>51</sup> Today each country regards the union of 1654 from opposite viewpoints – as a positive action in Russia, and as negative in Ukraine.

The Russian view of Ukrainian territory is also shaped by the fact of that Ukrainians have existed under Russian influence for three and a half centuries. Szporluk's reflections are very suggestive in dismantling this argumentation, suggesting that only a small part of Ukraine was historically indeed under such control.<sup>52</sup> Most historians focused on the history of Ukrainians during the Russian Empire stressed that the rejection of Ukrainian identity, considered to be part of the Russian people and treated as Little Russians ("Malorossy"), for a long time influenced the Russian perception of "historical unity" of these territories.<sup>53</sup>

As result of Stalinist imperial conquests in Eastern Europe during the Second World War, for the first time in their history Ukrainians were united into a single state and it was mainly Soviet rule which accomplished the endeavors of the Ukrainians nationalists of all persuasions to unify "all Ukrainian lands." From this point of view, it is very complicated to sum up the Soviet legacy in terms of positive or negatives, or in terms of relations with Russia. It has been suggested that, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, in Ukraine the "infection" of anti-Stalinism spread to a critique of the entire Soviet period, characteristically treated after independence as a regime of occupation, presenting the Russians as historical enemies. However, the current boundaries of Ukraine are one legacy of the Soviet, and even Stalinist, period, which played a crucial role in the unification of the Western and Eastern parts of Ukraine as well as of Crimea.<sup>54</sup>

Starting from this assertion, the Russian perception of Ukrainian territorial integrity is easily understandable. "Fraternal help" in fulfilling Ukrainian territorial aspirations during the Second World war represents a kind of legitimization for the Russian Federation to interfere in Ukrainian affairs, especially in those related to territories considered "Russian" (Odessa, Crimea et c.) and to the Russian-speaking minority. Not to speak of the historical "unity" of these two nations, and more recently of Ukraine's geopolitical importance for the Russian Federation. In other words, Russia unconditionally views Ukraine as part of the "core," profoundly unstable, exposed to external pressures and influences, and as such to be returned to the "Russian world."

However, Ukraine has emerged and exists as a state, and Russia must somehow deal with this reality. The most controversial and heated disputes between the two Slavic nations after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were related to the issue of Crimea, to the status of Sevastopol, to the problem of the Kerch strait and to the demarcation of borders on land and at sea.

In 1991-1992 many Russian politicians publicly expressed doubts regarding the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and especially regarding the legitimacy of Ukrainian possession of Crimea, which Khrushchev transferred to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 in recognition of the “unshaken friendship” between the two peoples. Even Solzhenitsyn, reflecting on these issues, said that “In 1919, Lenin annexed to Ukraine some Russian territories which had never in history belonged to Ukraine: the south and eastern part of present-day Ukraine. In 1954 Khrushchev, on a tyrannical and abusively fad whim, made as a ‘gift’ to Ukraine of the Crimea.”<sup>55</sup>

The particular territorial status of Ukraine in the twentieth century made the issue of its integrity very sensitive and controversial after independence. At the beginning of the 1990s, movements emerged in many parts of Ukraine which directly or indirectly pushed the idea of creating autonomous or even independent political and territorial units.<sup>56</sup> Three of these movements were Russian-inspired or related to the principles of the “Russian world,” and were used by the Russian Federation as part of the “Near Abroad” territorial strategy. One of the principles which unified the movements in their demands was the “federalization” of Ukraine against the principle of a “unitary” state, promoted by Kiev.

The first case is that of the Donbas region, where in autumn of 1990, soon after Ukraine proclaimed its sovereignty, the “Interdvizhenie” movement emerged for the region’s separation from Ukraine and unification with the Soviet Union if Ukraine did not sign the new Union agreement (the situation in Moldova was similar, with the Transnistrian region). After the independence of Ukraine, the movement focused on “defending the rights of the Russian language” and called for territorial autonomy in the region. In March 1994 a referendum was organized to recognize Russian as a state language and transform Ukraine into a federative state, with 90% voting “yes.” The effects of this decision were soon mitigated when local politicians joined Ukrainian political jostling, but the region remained an important center of Russian influence, with various implications for Ukrainian political, economical and territorial integrity.

In 1990 separatist rhetoric also emerged among the Odessa intelligentsia, concentrated on the so-called “Novorossia” project to create a Southern Autonomous Region (including the Odessa, Mykolaev, Kherson, Zaporozhe and Dnepropetrovsk regions) in federative Ukraine, based on a distinct ethnicity in this region.<sup>57</sup>

The most serious testing for the new Ukrainian state was however the Crimean problem, the only case of separatism that threatened its territorial integrity.

The Crimean issue reflects several sensitive aspects of post-Soviet Russia and relations with Ukraine. The majority of the Crimean population are Russians; here was located the Soviet Black Sea fleet, considered strategically important for projecting Russian influence in the Black Sea Region; Crimea and Sevastopol are vital components of Russian national identity and an emotive source of imagining the glorious past of the Russian people and army. The very fact of this presence within a foreign country deeply affected Russian patriotic feelings, their perception of a unitary nation, of military power and national pride.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, Crimean separatism followed an internal agenda set by the overlapping interests of local Soviet *nomenklatura*, various criminal groups, the Tatar population who were returning “home,” and of the new central power from Kiev and local power-brokers.<sup>59</sup>

The situation was complicated by the relative ideological, political and economic weakness of the central government in Kiev, but especially by the direct involvement of Russian political forces and institutions. In other words, as in the case of Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, the Crimean problem was caused by the fragility of the Ukrainian state and the ambitions of the Russian Federation in the “Near Abroad.”

In 1990 a republican movement in emerged in Crimea led by Yuri Meshkov, which invoking the prospects of “Ukrainization” and formulated the idea of re-establishing “Crimean autonomy” (identical to the case of Transnistria, which had existed as a separate autonomic republic prior to merging with Bessarabia).<sup>60</sup> In January 1991, before the Soviet referendum regarding the preservation of the Union, a regional referendum was organized in Crimea, where 93.3% of population voted for the creation of a Crimean Republic within the Soviet Union. The process was similar to the cases of the Transnistrian and Gagauz Republics in 1990 in the Republic of Moldova (as well as of Abkhazia in Georgia) and was a signal from Moscow on the necessity of obedience and of tempering the rhythm of “sovereignty.”

On 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1991 the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine adopted a law re-establishing the Crimean ASSR within the Ukrainian SSR, which was considered inappropriate since “re-establishing” Crimean autonomy was possible only within the RSFSR.<sup>61</sup>

In 1992 a confrontation of priorities began between the central government and local authorities; on 29<sup>th</sup> April, the Supreme Rada adopted a law on the “Status of the Crimean Autonomous Republic” and a law regarding the office of president in the Autonomy, and in turn on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1992 the Supreme Soviet of Crimea adopted a law regarding the “Proclamation of state independence of the Crimean Republic.” The next day the constitution of the Crimean republic was adopted, under which the new state had the right to an independent foreign policy, its own juridical and political organs, and possession of all republican resources. The decisions of the Soviet Supreme were to be adopted by a republican referendum.

The conflict was highlighted by Russian Federation intervention. In January 1992 the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation raised the question of legitimacy when the Crimean region was handed over to Ukraine in 1954. In April, during his visit to Crimea, the vice-president of the Russian Federation, A. Rutskoy, called for secession of Crimea from Ukraine. After the Supreme Rada decided on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 1991 to consider the decisions of the Crimean authorities unconstitutional, the Russian Duma responded on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1992 by considering the 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1954 decision of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR regarding the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine as “having no juridical sense from the moment of adoption.” At the same time, the Soviet Supreme of the Russian Federation started discussions regarding the status of Sevastopol, and Commander-in-Chief Kasatonov of the Black Sea fleet announced that Sevastopol was a privileged location for Russian military forces.

Negotiations between Kiev and Simferopol ended with a moratorium on referendum and on 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1992 a new constitution of autonomy was adopted, where Crimea was ambiguously stressed as “a state being part of Ukraine”. However, the Crimean parliament adopted a law on state flags under which the Crimean flag was identical to the Russian one. Many other decisions generated supplementary tensions between center and local authority, such as the issue of special citizenship rights for the people of Crimea (Ukrainian laws allow only one citizenship), the declaration of Russian as the state language of autonomy, the adoption of presidency for Crimea in 1993. In April 1993, Russian deputy Agafonov



announced that Russia was ready to support a referendum on separating Crimea from Ukraine and integrating the republic into the CIS as an independent state. In July the Supreme Soviet confirmed the "Russian federal status of Sevastopol" and ordered the Russian government to elaborate a state program for "implementation of the special status of Sevastopol." Russian political tactics in Crimea only ended officially in February 1994, when Vladimir Chernomyrdin, prime-minister of the Russian Federation, announced that the Russian Federation no longer had claims against Ukraine.

The crisis continued however, confirming the existence of an internal dynamic to political life. Elections for the presidency on 4<sup>th</sup> February, 1994 were won by the leader of the political block "Rossiya," Yuri Meshkov, who promised independence for Crimea and integration into the Russian rouble zone. His block also won parliamentary elections in April 1994, and during the election a referendum was organized where 90% of population supported the idea of extended autonomy rights for Crimea. Meshkov issued laws which subordinated local military and police forces to his power, created a personal presidential guard, announced the intention to introduce the Russian rouble as Crimean currency and initiated negotiations on a separate treaty between Crimea and the Russian Federation. The stance against Kiev culminated when Meshkov appointed a Russian citizen as head of Crimean government and introduced Moscow time in Crimea (which is one hour ahead of Ukrainian). One of the factors which stimulated emergent separatist tendencies in Crimea was the massive return of Crimean Tatars. At the end of 1993, more than 250,000 Tatars returned to their motherland, where conflicts started regarding the restitution and division of land.<sup>62</sup>

The situation was very critical at this point and on 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1994, President Kravchuk declared in the Ukrainian Rada that "*de jure* Crimea belongs to Ukraine, but *de facto* we lost it."<sup>63</sup>

Russian politicians further supported manifestations of Crimean separatism, when in October 1994 the head of the Russian Duma Committee for CIS, Zatulin, again declared the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 illegal.

The new elected president in 1994, Leonid Kuchma, came to power mainly due to his promises to improve relations with the Russian Federation and defend the status of the Russian language. Due to this stance, he succeeded in putting an end to the Russian separatist movement in Crimea. In 1995, Kuchma took advantage of an internal political conflict

and dismissed Meshkov, and next year he abolished the presidency of Crimea entirely. In 1996 the Ukrainian constitution was adopted, which contained some articles relating to Crimean autonomy, and Crimean separatism was officially ended.

The Russian Federation officially recognized the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state in the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership (the so-called "Great Treaty"), signed on 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1997, which in turn permitted Russian military presence until 2017. The treaty was harshly criticized in Russia, especially the recognition of Crimea and Sevastopol as Ukrainian, and since then there have been many calls to renounce it.

Ukraine's historical and geopolitical importance to Russia has however demonstrated that the Russian Federation is far from accepting and recognizing the problem of its territorial integrity. The turning point of this issue was the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004, which among many other explanations, contained a profound separation of the country between Russian-speaking, industrial "South-East" Ukraine and more rural, Ukrainian-speaking "Central-West" Ukraine. This separation is determined by the "two" Ukraine's preferences in external orientation – the Eastern part preferring to be framed more in the post-Soviet sphere, while the Western part articulates a pro-European and Atlantic orientation.

Moscow spent the next six years working to reverse the outcome, operating both openly and covertly to split the coalition and create a pro-Russian government. In the 2010 elections, V. Yanukovich returned to power, and from the Russian point of view, the danger of losing Ukraine was averted. Russian behavior in the "Near Abroad" suggests that the Kremlin is content to allow Ukraine its internal sovereignty and to grant its territorial integrity, so long as Ukraine does not become a threat to Russia and does not pose challenges to its perception of Ukraine as part of the Russian "vital space."

#### **IV. Russia and the Issue of Territorial Integrity in the Republic of Moldova**

The Republic of Moldova was never an independent political entity before 1991. Its fate was inextricably linked to that of the Romanian Principalities, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, Romania and more recently the Soviet Union. Prior to 1812, the current territory of Moldova

was part of the Romanian Principality of Moldova, whose emergence dates to 1359. After the Russian-Ottoman war of 1806-1812, for most of the nineteenth century and up until 1917, Moldova, historically known as Bessarabia, was part of the Russian Empire.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the core of the Romanian Principality of Moldova joined Wallachia in 1859 and formed the modern Romanian state. After World War I, Bessarabia returned to Romania and for twenty-two years was part of the Romanian state. Bessarabia became part of the Soviet sphere of influence following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, when Soviet troops invaded and occupied in 1940; it returned to Romania in 1941, and was re-occupied by the USSR from 1944 to 1991.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1940, the Soviet Union created the Moldovan SSR, a result of joining Bessarabia and the Moldovan ASSR (created by the Soviets in 1924 within the Ukrainian SSR).

These territorial and political fluctuations, together with the peripheral position that it had in the states that took part, have strongly affected Moldova's evolution and stability in the twentieth century and especially after 1991. These changes in geographical and political landscape are often portrayed as a constant shift from West to East and back, but in fact the clash over this territory was a very specific confrontation between Romanian nationalism, which wanted to "bring home" its lost sons, and Russian/Soviet imperialism, which was driven by geopolitical strategies in controlling Moldova. The confrontation left a particular legacy on the current political and national physiognomy of the Republic of Moldova, and the issue of borders and identity is basically the main problem of its post-independence history.

Since Soviet-era boundaries are the main foundation on which newly independent Moldova must build its new political and national identity, an analysis of the effect of Soviet nationalities policy in the Moldovan SSR would be very helpful for understanding current realities in the Republic of Moldova.

#### ***IV.1. Historical Boundaries – Soviet Boundaries***

The Soviet understanding of nationhood was firmly based on the Stalinist linkage between a nationality, its territory and its indigenous political elite. Further, it is well known that under Stalin's own definition of nation, Soviet authorities promoted an idea of nation as fixed to territory. Major ethnic groups were assigned their officially recognized

territories and organized into an elaborate administrative hierarchy of ethnic stratification, in which the fifteen Soviet republics represented the highest rank of statehood accessible to a Soviet nationality.<sup>65</sup>

Even though scholars of Soviet nationalities assert that the Piedmont principle was not a major Soviet motivation in policies of nation-building, they admit that in a single exceptional case – that of the Moldovan Autonomous SSR – this principle was the main reason for the creation of a Soviet republic.<sup>66</sup>

Since the Soviet Union never recognised the annexation of Bessarabia to Romania, the Soviets created great pressure on the Romanian authorities by organizing, training, and financing subversive action in Bessarabia. This pressure included the creation of the Moldovan ASSR inside the Ukrainian SSR in 1924, in what Zatonsky called “our own Moldovan Piedmont.”<sup>67</sup> Despite its small size and dubious Moldovan ethnic character (the Moldovans represented 31.6% of the Moldovan ASSR, while Ukrainians were 49.6%<sup>68</sup>), the newly created republic of Moldova received the status of an autonomous republic because of its future political perspectives, i.e. the eventual annexation of Bessarabia. For the same reason, despite protest from Romanian Communists, a distinct Moldovan literary language was forged in the Moldovan ASSR, and a separate Moldovan national identity cultivated.<sup>69</sup>

The Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic was created by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1940, allegedly on the initiative of the majority of working people in the region.<sup>70</sup> Roughly speaking, the Moldovan SSR was created by joining together historical Bessarabia and the Moldovan ASSR, but not in their entirety - only six from the total of thirteen *rayons* of the Moldovan ASSR were annexed to the Moldovan SSR.

As usual the Soviets did not follow any ethnic, historic or cultural logic in creating the new republic, but only strategic considerations. As a result three counties of historical Bessarabia (Cetatea Alba, Ismail and Hotin), were annexed to the Ukrainian SSR in exchange for parts of the Moldovan ASSR.<sup>71</sup> Beside the idea of destroying Bessarabia’s compact historical integrity, Soviet official strategies pursued access to the Danube (through a reliable Slavic republic) and made the Moldovan SSR a landlocked entity. Undeniably, Ukrainian Communist officials brought pressure to bear on the formulation of this policy, both in the terms of the Soviet ultimatum concerning Bessarabia (the ultimatum of 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1940, claimed Bessarabia from Romania on the basis of the Ukrainian majority in the province<sup>72</sup>) and of the Piedmont Principle. Khrushchev proposed to the

Central Committee of the CPSU that the new Moldovan Soviet Republic should be created by the unification of the “Moldovan population only,” and not the territory of Bessarabia and the Moldovan ASSR.<sup>73</sup>

The fact remains that with the new borders, the disputed territory between the Dniester and the Prut, Bessarabia ceased to be a single unit precisely because it was expected that this would complicate any future attempt to have the area returned to Romania.

In the long term, the unification of these two distinct entities (known as Bessarabia and Transnistria, or the “left bank” and “right bank” of the Dniester river), which had never existed before in any sense as a common entity, was fateful for the further evolution of both the Moldovan SSR and the Republic of Moldova. Economically and demographically speaking, Soviet Moldova gradually developed as two republics in one: a largely rural, agricultural and indigenous Moldovan, and a more urban, Slavic, and generally immigrant population in Transnistria working in Soviet-style heavy industry<sup>74</sup>. Most of Moldovan industry worked as an appendage to the great Soviet enterprises, or was located outside Bessarabia in Transnistria, which produced 1/3 of Moldovan industrial output.

At the same time, the element of the party apparatus that promoted Soviet nationalities policy in the Moldovan SSR were mainly Moldovan elements from Transnistria, alongside Russian officials appointed from Moscow. As a whole, these elements enjoyed an almost caste-like dominance over public life in Moldova in the Soviet period, reinforced by the low level of education within the Moldovan population, the dominance of Russian and Russified cadres in most major institutions, and near-universal use of Russian as the language of official business in the republic.<sup>75</sup>

Besides the inherent distortion of the ethnic balance in the Moldovan SSR, that peculiar Soviet policy generated long-term premises for future Transnistrian separation. On 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1990, the region, supported by Moscow, proclaimed itself an independent entity, the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (PMR), and ceased to take orders from the central government of the Republic of Moldova.

#### ***IV.2. Transnistrian problem and interests of the Russian Federation***

The Transnistrian crisis was artificially created by Moscow in 1990, in the context of the Soviet systemic crisis and the ascendancy of national movements in the Soviet republics. Facing the probability of the Moldovan

SSR leaving the Soviet Union, Lukyanov, President of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, supported by Yazov and Pugo, respectively Soviet Ministers of Defense and Internal Affairs, decided to create two states on the territory of Moldova: on the left bank of the Dniester and in the region of Gagauzia.<sup>76</sup>

No wonder that the Transnistria region had sympathizers in official Moscow from the very start of its conflict with Chişinău. Until the summer of 1990, that sympathy was expressed primarily as a modest pro-Transnistrian bias in Gorbachev's efforts at conflict management in Moldova. But by fall of that year, the interests of the Soviet government, and later of its Russian successor, had shifted toward support for Tiraspol as a way of defending Moscow's own political influence and military bases in the region. As early as the fall of 1990, therefore, every major escalatory action the Transnistrians took was preceded by a clear show of support from Moscow. In many cases, aid from Moscow made Transnistrian strides toward independence possible.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, Soviet officials created a linkage between the problem of local separatism in Moldova and the Moldovan SSR's commitment to signing the new Soviet treaty, initiated by Gorbachev in order to save the Soviet Union.<sup>78</sup>

Moscow's first effective support for the Transnistrians came in September 1990, when Soviet Interior Ministry troops were dispatched to Tiraspol to protect the "Congress" of Russophone elites that declared the "Transnistrian Republic" independent of Moldova within the Soviet Union.<sup>79</sup> The troops' intervention was largely aimed at conflict management - in this case, deterring Chisinau from suppressing the gathering by force, as it had threatened to do. It also had a second goal, however: to pressure Moldova to abandon its bid for independence or else face dismemberment.

Now useful to the Kremlin as a tool, the Transnistrians soon began receiving more substantial help. As early as 1990, the Soviet civil defense organization and DOSAAF, the official Soviet paramilitary organization, started supplying the Transnistrian volunteers with weapons. Meanwhile, the Transnistrians had also secured the sympathy of the 14th Army by resisting Chişinău's anti-military legislation. The 14th Army troops, many of them natives of the Transnistria region, were further encouraged by the Defense Ministry's open tilt toward Tiraspol. Thus by the time the first Moldovan-Transnistrian armed confrontation took place outside Dubossary in November 1990, the Transnistrian Russophones had not

only their own armed volunteer formations, but also the expectation of support from Soviet troops.<sup>80</sup>

Unfortunately for all concerned, Gorbachev misplayed his hand at this point. After the Dubossary incident, both Snegur and the Moldovan parliament signaled a willingness to accept Gorbachev's terms: they would consider a Union Treaty if Gorbachev would help end the Transnistrian separatist bid. But unwilling to abandon the Transnistrians, Gorbachev refused. Snegur, in disgust, called for the December 1990 "National Assembly" at which between 500,000 and 800,000 Moldovans demanded independence from the Soviet Union and rejection of any union treaty. Thereafter, the Moldovan government was committed to that course.

After the December debacle, the Soviet government increased its aid to the Transnistrian republic. The Soviet Agro-Industrial Bank helped the Transnistrians to set up their own national bank, enabling Tiraspol to break the Moldovan budget by withholding payments due to Chișinău. Soviet KGB and interior ministry units were ordered to work with their (technically illegal) Transnistrian counterparts, and Moscow turned a blind eye as the extra-legal Cossack movement dispatched paramilitary volunteers to Tiraspol.

Conflict broke out between the new Moldovan authorities in Chișinău and the "Transnistrian Moldovan Republic" (with the Russian acronym "PMR") on the left bank of the Dniester in late spring and summer 1992, and resulted in several hundred casualties. The conflict was soon eclipsed by other world events and disappeared from the headlines. It remains, however, one of the most complicated conflicts on the post-Soviet scene, in terms of its pre-history, its political constellations and possible future developments. While an effective ceasefire was concluded on 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1992, no solution has yet been found to the underlying contentious issue, the legal-territorial status of the left bank of the Dniester in the Moldovan state.

Although the Russian mass media and officials have regularly referred to the war as an ethnic conflict,<sup>81</sup> it would be a gross oversimplification to present the conflict as a showdown between the ethnic Moldovan and the 'Russian-speaking' part of the Moldovan population. Indeed, the Transnistrian region's ethnic mix before the war was over 40% Moldovan, 28% Ukrainian, and only 25.5% Russian<sup>82</sup>. Moreover neither side involved in conflict agrees with this description, and both insist that it is essentially political in character.

At the same time, the ethnic dimension cannot be denied altogether: in the Transnistrian region, and only there, the dominant sector of the population included Russified Moldovans and Ukrainians as well as Russians. Conversely, until after the war the post-Communist Moldovan government in Chişinău was composed almost exclusively of ethnic Moldovans.

On the Moldovan side, the conflict began as a mass insurgency, but it became a case of popular chauvinism after Moldovan nationalists came to power in Moldova and pushed ahead the policy of hard Romanization and unification with Romania. Under the influence of nationalists among the Popular Front leaders, the legislature introduced a series of extremely divisive measures, which heightened the growing anxiety of the Russian-speaking minorities. The process of anti-Soviet mobilization that preceded the dissolution of the USSR thus reinforced the ethnic cleavage already present in Moldova.<sup>83</sup>

On the side of the Russian speaking secessionists in the Transnistrian region, in contrast, the violence was a case of elite conspiracy, with support from Moscow playing a crucial role. Incumbent Russophone leaders in the Transnistria region used ethnic outbidding to exacerbate mass hostility and the security dilemma, in order to preserve and increase their own power. The war in Moldova happened as it did because Moscow deterred mass-led violence on the Moldovan side, but later determined that its strategic interests were best served by supporting instead of preventing the Transnistrian elites' secessionism. Moscow therefore helped the Transnistrian elites to start the war, and then to win it.<sup>84</sup>

The outbreak of major military confrontations in the Transnistrian area put Boris Yeltsin in an unenviable position. It was extremely difficult to find the balance between support for the Moldovan alliance partner in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the need to stop the wave of allegations that he was betraying the interests of fellow Russians in the PMR. In addition to this, the position of Russia was complicated by a number of other concerns: a) the territorial integrity not only of Moldova, but also of Russia was at stake. If Russia should decide to recognize the "PMR" and the Gagauz republic, Moldova and Romania would most certainly retaliate by recognizing the breakaway Russian territories, Tatarstan and Chechnya. Other states could then be expected to follow suit; b) Yeltsin had not forgotten that Mircea Snegur was one of the few Soviet republican leaders who explicitly supported him in the struggle against the putschists in August 1991 - while the "PMR" leaders did not; c) If strong anti-Russian



sentiments should prevail in Moldovan politics, this state could possibly, together with Ukraine and the Baltic states, end up as a kind of anti-Russian *cordon sanitaire*. That would greatly complicate the attempts of the Yeltsin regime to integrate Russia into the Western world; d) The Yeltsin regime was very sensitive to allegations of Russian neo-imperialism. Despite the fact that it contributed to dismantling the Soviet Union, it was regularly accused of harboring imperialist schemes, and tried to avoid any action that could substantiate such accusations. The Yeltsin government's divided and indecisive attitude toward the Transnistrian conflict led to ambiguities in the official Russian policy regarding this issue.

In the end, the efforts of the patriotic opposition to bring about a more active Russian policy in the Transnistrian conflict met with sympathy and support among certain members of the Yeltsin entourage. Significantly, Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy was a leading champion of the Transnistrian cause in Russian politics. Rutskoy had on a number of occasions directly and indirectly attacked the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, who was generally considered a soft-liner on this and on most other issues.<sup>85</sup> In a situation almost unprecedented in democratic states, the vice president of the Russian Federation expressed the attitudes of the parliamentary opposition just as much as the attitudes of his government. The contrast between the two voices of the Russian executive was made abundantly clear in early April 1992 when both Rutskoy and Kozyrev visited Chișinău and Tiraspol within two days. Rutskoy proclaimed that the Transnistrian republic "has existed, exists and will continue to exist," while Kozyrev talked in Chișinău about Moldova's sovereignty and integrity.<sup>86</sup>

In a heated debate at the 6th Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation shortly afterwards, Rutskoy advocated official recognition of the "PMR." The cautious faction in the parliament prevailed, however. At the very same time, on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1992, diplomatic relations were established between Russia and Moldova. The escalation of the conflict after the Snegur ultimatum in March 1992 threatened to compromise the neutrality of the 14th Army in Moldova, which Russia took under its control by a presidential decree of 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1992.<sup>87</sup>

General Lebed, who replaced Yurii Netkachev as commander of the 14th Army in June 1992, on a number of occasions voiced strong support for the "PMR" regime. He declared the right bank city of Bendery an inalienable part of "PMR," and "PMR" itself "a small part of Russia," and the Transnistria region the "key to the Balkans."<sup>88</sup> When Bendery was

captured by Moldovan forces on 19th June, tanks from the 14th Army crossed the bridge over the Dniester. This event appears to have been the turning point of the battle.<sup>89</sup>

The June 1992 war created a new situation for Russian policy makers: the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's involvement in the war against the Republic of Moldova indicated a change in Russian policy towards the Transnistrian conflict, but also in that related to the Near Abroad.

The Transnistrian conundrum lay heavily on the process of post-Communist transition in Moldova. As has been pointed out earlier, the conflict has generally portrayed as ethnic in origin. Nevertheless, efforts to deal with the ethnic concerns of the separatists remain ineffective so long as the more fundamental sources of the conflicts are not addressed. In fact, the crisis has been the result less of legitimate ethnic grievances and more of a long-term contest between two different political elites, one of which replaced the other in Moldova's transition from Soviet republic to independent state.<sup>90</sup> A complicating factor is that the Transnistrian republic established rudimentary state structures, that is, an elected president and parliament, military formations, a vast network of *rayon* and city councils left over from the Soviet period, and even introduced its own currency. As a result, since the Transnistrian leaders have profited from the lack of central Moldovan control over the region, they also unlikely to commit to political reforms which would diminish their position of leverage toward Chisinau.<sup>91</sup>

But the most complicating problem of the dispute is the Russian 14<sup>th</sup> army's and the Russian Federation's favorable stance toward Transnistria. According to a statement made some years ago by Moldovan Minister of National Security Tudor Botnaru, the key to the Transnistrian conflict is neither in Chisinau nor in Tiraspol, but in Moscow.<sup>92</sup> In October 1994, a Russian-Moldovan agreement was signed stipulating the withdrawal of Russian troops from the region, but the accord has never taken effect owing to the Russian State Duma's refusal to ratify it. In addition, on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1996, the State Duma adopted a resolution declaring the region a zone of "special strategic interest for Russia."<sup>93</sup> Under international pressure, at the 1999 Istanbul OSCE summit Russia committed to withdraw its army forces from Moldova by 2001, but has evaded this responsibility, invoking the technical difficulties of withdrawal.

During this period the Transnistrian conflict has also been invoked many times in the electoral prospectus and policies of the most important political party in Moldova. As such, we must recognise that beside many others explanations for Moldova's pro-Russian orientation,

Moldovan political elites hoped that Russia would support reunification of the country, with modest guarantees of autonomy to the Transnistria secessionist republic. The Russian Federation maintains its interest in the Republic of Moldova, invoking the historical past and the presence of the large Russian minority, but in fact its attitude is determined by great power geopolitical implications. In the context of post-Soviet politics, relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Moldova are marked by many contradictions. Russia officially supports the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, and officially is involved in "settlement" of the Transnistrian conflict. At the same time, Moscow is the main supporter of the separatist regime in Tiraspol and provides the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic with political, economic, financial and military aid.<sup>94</sup>

The interests of the Russian Federation in Transnistria are determined by the following considerations: a) to maintain strategic Russian Federation positions in South-Eastern Europe; b) to defend in Moldova the interests of the Russian population and other nationalities that consider Russia as their historical motherland; c) to maintain strategic links with the economic enterprises of Transnistria, many of them unique within the military-industrial complex; d) to solve the conflict in the interest of Russia's own stability, and consolidate Russia's relationships with the states from the "Near Abroad" with a Russian minority; e) to establish stable and predictable relations with Romania and not to permit its national influence on Moldova to increase.<sup>95</sup>

Russia initiated two plans to settle the issue of Moldovan territorial integrity, both proposing the federalization of the Republic of Moldova, with Chisinau and Tiraspol as equal partners; both plans thus give Russia the instruments to influence and pressure the Republic of Moldova, and the possibility to maintain its military bases in Transnistria. The first was the "Primakov Memorandum,"<sup>96</sup> signed in 1997, and the second was the so-called "Kozak Memorandum" which was supposed to be signed in 2003, but was rejected by the Communist government as result of massive protest and external pressure.<sup>97</sup> In both cases, but especially in the latter, Russia pushed for a treaty giving Transnistria near independence within a federal state, enough seats in the Moldovan Parliament to block constitutional change, and the long-term presence of Russian troops.

In this sense, the Russian Federation uses the issue of territorial integrity to influence policy-making in the Republic of Moldova, but at the same time the Transnistrian issue is a piece of the puzzle Russia's great power game in relations with the European Union and USA.

## Conclusions

Russian territorial consciousness extends beyond the country's present borders and "Russia" and "Russian identity" are not confined within the space of the present Russian Federation. Historically accustomed to a large territory and the "absence" of borders, Russia continues to look at the post-Soviet sphere as something relative and open to change, suitable for return to the Russian "core." From this point of view, the primordality of territoriality prevails in post-Soviet Russian history and politics.

The case of Georgia suddenly opened the issue of territorial integrity in the post-Soviet states as a tool of Russian foreign policy strategies, especially in the similar case of Transnistrian separatist republic of Moldova and in the probably similar case of the Ukrainian region of Crimea. The invasion of Georgia in 2008, and official Russian Federation recognition of the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, showed explicitly the linkage between Russian policy in the "Near Abroad" and the commitment to rebuilding the country's great power status.

The Georgian case is the first where Russia has successfully used territorial integrity in a combined strategy of security, neo-imperial ambitions and great power stance, looking for international affirmation as a regional and world power. But in long-term strategy the official recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian Federation was a demonstration of the Russian political elite's incapacity to transform the post-Soviet sphere according to modern principles of influence and power. The 26<sup>th</sup> August act attested to the old Russian imperial paradigm of action in the post-Soviet sphere adapted to new realities – the separation and annexation of new territories. Could similar scenarios be expected in the different cases of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova? The logic of Russian political action suggests that the Russian Federation has no other strategies at the moment than to erode the territorial integrity of the neighboring states in order to achieve its geopolitical goals.

Russian behavior in the "Near Abroad" suggests that the Kremlin is content to allow Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova their internal sovereignty and to grant their territorial integrity, so long as they do not become a threat to Russia and do not pose challenges to its perception of these states as part of the Russian "vital space."

## NOTES

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- 16 The *Pro-Western group* (headed by the Foreign Minister in 1991, A Kozyrev) was powerful at the beginning and pleaded for close relations with the West; *Moderate liberals* (pragmatists) were seeking to develop a distinctively

- Russian foreign policy based upon a realistic assessment of the country's interests; *Moderate conservatives*, representatives of important institutional forces within the military high command, industrial managers and the main segments of the federal bureaucracy, did not see the end of the Soviet Union as leading inexorably to the end of major power status. Russia, in their view, should develop its sphere of influence, particularly in the 'Near Abroad', and avoid excessive dependence on the West; *the Radical left and right* advocate rebuilding the superpower status of the country, by military means if necessary, but to date these groups are largely isolated from the policy process.
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- 30 M. Beissinger, "The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire", p. 166.
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- 32 Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping strategies in the CIS*, London, Antony Rowe Ltd, 2000, p. 52.
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- 34 M. Beissinger, "The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire", p. 168.
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- 36 O'Loughlin and P. F. Talbot, "Where in the World is Russia? Geopolitical Perceptions and Preferences of Ordinary Russians", p. 23.
- 37 O. Malinova, "Tema imperii v sovremennyh Rossiiskih politicesckih diskursah", p. 97.
- 38 A. Arbatov, "Natzional'naya idea i natzional'naya bezopasnosti", p. 246-247
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- revolutions of 1917; southern Ukraine, including the Crimea, conquered by the Russian Empire from the Ottoman Turks in the late eighteenth century, showed the continuing influence of centuries of Islamic rule; the region of Transcarpathia was uninterruptedly part of Hungary from the Middle Ages until 1919, when it was annexed to the new Czechoslovakia (it became Hungarian again from 1939 to 1944, and only after that date was ruled from Moscow, for the first time ever); the Chernivtsi region, the northern part of the former Austrian province of Bukovina, was Romanian from 1918 to 1940 and became Soviet only in 1940, being formally incorporated into the Soviet Union after 1944; the present regions of L'viv, Ternopil, and Ivano-Frankivsk, part of Poland from the mid-fourteenth century, were annexed by Austria in 1772, and remained as eastern "Galicia" ruled by Vienna until 1918, "Ukraine: From an Imperial Periphery to a Sovereign State", p. 88.
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