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## Congressional Testimony

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### **Antagonizing the Neighborhood: Putin's Frozen Conflicts and the Conflict in Ukraine**

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of the committee, I want to thank you for holding this important hearing and for inviting me to testify today alongside such distinguished fellow panelists. When I was serving as U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE, Simon's reporting was a crucial source of information about what was happening on the front lines. I remember when he was captured by armed militants and held in a cellar for several days where he was beaten—a reminder of the risks that journalists like Simon take so that the rest of us can know what's happening in some of the most volatile and fraught situations. And I'm grateful to be here with Ms. Vartanyan and Mr. Nix, too. Crisis Group and IRI do great work around the world and they attract great people.

The combination of globalization and technological advances has made the world more complex. Sadly it has not made human brains bigger. And one of the unfortunate but inescapable features of the current moment is that it is difficult to keep all of the important issues that impact U.S. national security in focus at once. In recent years we have devoted more attention to understanding how the U.S. should manage and respond to China's increasing influence and assertiveness on the world stage. This is prudent. An authoritarian great power that uses financial and economic relationships to amass political and strategic advantage, that carries out a campaign of ethnic cleansing that entails imprisoning over a million of its own citizens in "re-education camps," and that seeks to re-negotiate and control international institutions is worthy of our concern and attention. However, we must not let our focus on China become a "get out of jail free" card for Vladimir Putin.

Nor can we afford to allow our own domestic political convulsions allow us to pervert U.S. foreign policy and the protection of our long term interests. Members of this committee took different votes on impeachment. They should not take different positions on the importance of confronting national security threats going forward. Russian aggression towards its neighbors, including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, remains a threat to the long term interests of the United States. And it remains a threat to people on the ground in all three countries.

The Secretary of State asked a reporter recently "Do you think Americans care about Ukraine?" In truth, the average American is likely more focused on paying the rent and affording health care; the average American entrusts their elected representatives to focus on things they can't. Which is why I

want to say a bit about why it makes sense that Congress, as representatives of the people, does care a great deal about Ukraine, and, by extension, about Georgia and Moldova too.

### **Strategic implications of Putin's aggression**

The United States has an enduring strategic interest in a Europe that is, as President George H.W. Bush put it, whole free and at peace. Vladimir Putin's efforts to undermine democratic progress in Europe and to coerce European countries—particularly those European countries that are former Soviet republics—is inimical to this strategic interest. We stand to benefit from the prevalence of rule-of-law, peace, and prosperity in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova; and of course their citizens do too.

The United States—working with partners and allies—has also been the principal architect of the laws and institutions that serve as a foundation for international politics. These include the international legal protections of sovereignty and the idea that borders must not be changed by force. Russia's purported annexation of Crimea and continued de-facto occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova represent a broader challenge to the international system that—imperfectly, but persistently—undergirds the security of all states.

We also should be concerned that Putin uses his “backyard” as a testing ground for tactics that he can deploy elsewhere, including against the United States and our allies. The invasion of Crimea was carried out by “little green men”—Russian forces that, contrary to the laws of war, did not wear identifying insignia. In Donetsk and Luhansk, Russian military forces have experimented with “hybrid war” and have used techniques more often associated with non-state actors to carry out their military objectives. Putin has weaponized energy security vulnerabilities in multiple countries, coercing governments by turning off or threatening to turn off natural gas.

Cyberattacks are another weapon in Putin's arsenal of aggression. Last week at the U.N. the U.S. joined with Estonia and the U.K. to reiterate the public assessment made with our U.K. allies in February that an October 2019 cyberattack that knocked out more than 2,000 media and government sites in Georgia was carried out by the Russian GRU and its affiliated hacker groups. This followed

other GRU attacks on Ukrainian power grid in 2015, on the DNC in the U.S. in 2016, and on the campaign of French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017.

Many Americans were aghast that Russia intervened so dramatically in our 2016 election. None of our friends in Georgia, Ukraine, or Moldova were surprised—they've been dealing with Russian active measures (and opportunistic politicians who take advantage of them) for years. Under Putin, Clausewitz's famous aphorism that "war is the continuation of politics by other means" has been inverted: for Putin, intervention in politics is the continuation of war by other means and a key part of his attack on the West and the values and institutions of liberal democracy.

### **Humanitarian costs of Putin's aggression**

I know that my fellow panelists will also speak to the humanitarian costs of the conflicts in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. And humanitarian concerns should not be seen as distinct from strategic ones—humanitarian disasters have a destabilizing effect and represent lost economic opportunity, in addition to their direct and devastating human costs.

I have seen the Russian concertina wire in South Ossetia and talked with those who have seen their communities divided, their farm land cut off from their home. I have traveled with a bi-partisan delegation of Representatives and Senators to Chisanau, where we heard first-hand about the continued human costs, including organized crime and other scourges, that infect Transnistria and hold all of Moldova back. I have visited Donbas and seen buildings and bridges destroyed by Russian and Russian-backed separatist shelling. I have met with people displaced by the war in eastern Ukraine—which now number more than 2 million—and with friends and family of some of the more than 14,000 who have lost their lives. Even today, many Americans are unaware that the largest land battle in Europe since World War II took place in eastern Ukraine in the summer of 2014, and while the levels of fighting have subsided and some progress has been made in deescalating along parts of the line of contact, people are still displaced, people are still dying, the economy is still devastated, life is still far from normal. In the de-facto Russian occupied areas armed thugs rule. And of course in Russia-occupied Crimea, which remains part of Ukraine under international law and in the eyes of the

international community, Putin's authoritarian regime has tightened its grip with particularly devastating consequences for the Tatar community.

### **What the U.S. should do**

*Maintain our support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our partners*

The United States should continue to support the sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova within their internationally recognized borders. In the case of Ukraine and Georgia, this includes security assistance and cooperation. Ukraine will continue to need U.S. assistance to defend itself against Russian aggression in the ongoing conflict in the east. Our security assistance and cooperation with Georgia should also be maintained. (It should be noted that this cooperation is not a one way street—Georgia joined NATO allies in providing troops to the ISAF in Afghanistan and was the largest non-NATO troop contributor, with over 10,000 Georgian soldiers deployed over a decade of engagement in Afghanistan.)

Material assistance and training should be coupled with political support and public backing. President Zelenskyy is navigating a difficult path of trying to deescalate the conflict while reiterating his commitment to Ukrainian independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The United States can help give him a stronger negotiating hand by making our support clear and public, especially in the wake of the impeachment process here at home.

In Moldova, the U.S. should continue to support the OSCE-led 5+2 process and should press for progress on resolving concrete areas of contention between Chisinau and Tiraspol and moving toward restoration of full sovereignty for the government in Chisinau within Moldova's internationally recognized borders and with a special status for Transnistria.

In addition to our direct support for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, we should continue to invest in European security more broadly, including the European Deterrence Initiative or EDI, as well as the Three Seas Initiative which could enhance energy security in eastern and central Europe. Furthermore, we should work with NATO and our partners in the region—including Ukraine and

Georgia—to coordinate strategy in the Black Sea, which has implications not only for European security but also for the Middle East.

### *Support Domestic reforms*

Putin is doubly-motivated in his aggression and intervention in neighboring states. Not only does he seek to control them, he seeks to deny their inhabitants the possibility of living in prosperous democracies that enjoy the rule of law. Indeed, in my years serving overseas when I was deeply engaged in our policy with regard to Russia and Ukraine, I came to believe that it was less Putin's nostalgia for Russian empire and more his fear of the example of a thriving, democratic Ukraine—and the message that would send to Russians about the possibilities for something other than Putin's authoritarianism—that drove his efforts to sabotage Ukraine's democratic revolution and progress.

The United States should remain a resolute partner to Ukraine in its quest to build a more robust system of rule of law and to pursue the reforms that the Ukrainian people recognize as imperative to deliver a better future for their children. President Zelenskyy, a comedian and actor before he entered politics, ran on an outsider platform and a commitment to drive democratic and anti-corruption reforms and bring the war with Russia to an end. The honeymoon period after his election has ended, which is normal, and he must now work with his administration to stay the course on Ukraine's reform agenda. Ukraine's civil society and independent journalists hold the government to account, and we should take heed of their warnings when things are off track.

In Georgia, just last weekend the major parties agreed on a framework that, if implemented, lays the groundwork for constructive, democratic parliamentary elections later this year and should help mitigate some of the political polarization that has hampered Georgia in recent years. Ambassador Degnan and her team will, I'm sure continue to offer U.S. support for implementation. Georgia's future integration in European and transatlantic institutions depends upon continued progress in reforming institutions, protecting the independence of the judiciary, and a free press that is not subject to political control.

The people of Moldova have been robbed for too many years by corrupt actors from across the political spectrum. The U.S. should not let geopolitics distract us from the fact that in the long run the people of Moldova, their neighbors in Europe, and the United States have an interest in seeing Moldova break free of the chains of corruption. The Trump administration rightfully sanctioned the former chair of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), Vlad Plahotniuc. There have been recent reports that despite travel sanctions, Plahotniuc has been in the United States. This makes our commitment to enforcing consequences for corrupt actors look flimsy and raises questions about why Plahotniuc is being allowed to flout our sanctions. He and any family members that are also under sanctions should be removed immediately.

*Maintain our toolbox beyond the bilateral relationships*

The United States should continue to use its membership in multi-lateral organizations, alliances, and treaty bodies to help knit Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova more firmly into the community of democratic states and responsible state actors. The NATO-Ukraine Commission is a good example of this. The United States should also support strong relationships between Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and the EU. The EU has significant trading relationships with all three countries and there is strong support domestically in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova for closer ties in the years ahead.

Reportedly, the Trump administration is planning to make a decision this week about the future of U.S. participation in the Open Skies Treaty. The Trump administration has approached a number of international agreements with skepticism, and I fear, with an insufficient understanding of how the U.S. benefits either directly or indirectly from our participation in such arrangements. In the case of Open Skies, while our own capacity for gathering intelligence would likely not be materially impacted by our withdrawal, the U.S. benefits in other ways from our participation in the treaty. For example, one of the features of the treaty is that states can invite other Open Skies partners to join flights. This can be useful when we want to show allies and partners who don't have our intelligence capacity the same facts that we see and get everyone on the same page so that we can advance a smart strategy. It can also be a way of publicly reinforcing our partnership with a state like Georgia or Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression—one of the ways that we demonstrated support for Ukraine in the wake of Putin's invasion of Crimea was inviting Ukrainians and other partners to join an extraordinary

Open Skies flight. The Trump administration also invited Ukraine to join an extraordinary flight in the wake of Russian attacks on Ukrainian naval vessels in late 2018. Furthermore, withdrawal from the treaty would be a diplomatic “own goal” that would give the Russians a win: they like to make multilateral arrangements ineffective and to instrumentalize them for their own purposes. The Russians have been uncooperative in their participation in Open Skies, and have often acted in bad faith. We should hold them accountable, but by pulling out of the OST, we would hand Putin a victory.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I want to thank Mr. Keating, Mr. Kinzinger and members of the committee again for the opportunity to be with you today. By holding and participating in this hearing, the committee admirably demonstrates a bi-partisan concern for ensuring a smart, strategic, principled approach to U.S. policy with regard to Russia and its neighbors. In addition to seeking the input of experts, it is vitally important that the administration provide witnesses to Congress on this and other topics so that Congress may carry out its oversight duties. I testified a number of times as a government official from 2009-2017. Each time I got in the car to ride over here from the State Department I felt nervous. Each time I rode back to Foggy Bottom—no matter how harrowing the hearing had been—I felt proud to live in a democracy where elected representatives hold the administration accountable. I have written in the past about how the Trump administration has provided fewer government witnesses for hearings than many previous administrations of both parties have. I hope the Committee will continue to engage on this topic—and others—and will call government witnesses to explain and defend the administration’s approach to these difficult issues.

I am happy to endeavor to answer any questions.