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

**Testimony before  
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the  
Environment**

**Committee on Foreign Relations**

**United States House of Representatives**

**March 11, 2020**

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Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The conflicts imposed upon Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova by Vladimir Putin have created military, political and policy challenges in all these countries. In addition to providing factual and political analysis in all the countries, we hope to provide the subcommittee with policy recommendations as to how the U.S. might engage in all these situations.

**Ukraine – Crimea and Donbas**

Since assuming office, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has dramatically enhanced his government’s efforts to resolve the crisis posed by the Russian-occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea. In a few short months, the Ukrainian government has increased its level of engagement with Ukrainian citizens still residing in these territories, improved the quality of critical public services to address needs created by the conflict, and re-invigorated diplomatic efforts to increase international pressure on the Kremlin to allow for the reintegration of these territories. It is crucial that the United States does all it can to support the Ukrainian government in achieving these aims.

***Challenges***

The conflict has created a humanitarian crisis in Donbas as vital public infrastructure, such as airports, bridges, highways, apartment buildings, and power and water lines have been destroyed or severely damaged. Life has become extremely difficult for the nearly six million people who continue to reside in the conflict zone, many of whom are elderly and lack the ability to flee. For some 200,000 who continue to live along the frontline, it is especially dangerous. The area is being emptied of young people as they leave the region for economic opportunities and security in central and western Ukraine, the European Union (EU) or even Russia.

These dire needs are unmet by the local authorities in the occupied territories. Just last month, on February 4, the head of the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR)” admitted to his own information ministry that his government lacked the funds to pay wages and pensions. In these circumstances, Ukrainian citizens in these territories look to the government in Kyiv to meet their needs. Every day, Ukrainian citizens in Donbas and Crimea wait up to six hours to cross at one of the only eight checkpoints allowing entry into government-controlled areas. They collect passports that allow visa-free travel to the European Union, pension checks for their parents and grandparents, register the births of their children and obtain life-saving medical care. This constitutes a significant segment of the population of these territories. Our sources estimate that up to a quarter of the population of the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) and DPR are registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine in order to receive these critical services.

Despite the need to travel to Ukraine to access public services, mobility between the occupied territories and the rest of Ukraine is made difficult by a paucity of checkpoints and lack of modern infrastructure to receive checkpoint crossers. Though the Ukrainian government plans to open new

checkpoints, there are currently only three checkpoints with Crimea, four with Donetsk and just one with Luhansk to service the estimated one million people who cross checkpoints each month. Most of these checkpoints consist of tents and lack heating, water and sanitation facilities. Moreover, these checkpoints are located hours away from administrative service centers, where citizens can collect these pensions, passports and other legal documents. In contrast, Russian facilities along the line of control in Crimea are modern and feature transport links, restaurants and gas stations.

Increasingly, a separate information space is being created in the occupied territories. The Kremlin uses disinformation to sow distrust in the Government of Ukraine and discourage the use of Ukrainian public services. Moreover, the Kremlin routinely blocks transmission of Ukrainian radio and television signals into the occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea. In response, Zelensky's administration has improved efforts to break into this information vacuum through the creation of a new Russian-language channel targeting residents of these territories and expanding the amount of information on available government services.

### ***History***

In November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovich's sudden shift away from an Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU in favor of closer ties with Russia precipitated mass protests across the country. The protests, which brought together hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians over the course of several months, were later referred to as the Revolution of Dignity or the *Euromaidan* movement. As a result of the Revolution of Dignity, then-President Yanukovich fled the country to Russia in February 2014.

In March 2014, the Kremlin invaded Crimea, and organized a forced referendum at gunpoint. Ninety-seven percent of voters allegedly supported joining Russia. However, International Republican Institute (IRI) polling in May 2013 showed that 65 percent of the population of Crimea believed that the peninsula should remain a part of Ukraine with autonomy while only 23 percent of Crimeans polled supported Crimea joining Russia. Subsequently, Kremlin-supported actors incited a conflict in Ukraine's eastern region of Donbas in April 2014, resulting in the establishment of the DPR and LPR which currently control the region with Kremlin support.

The war in Ukraine has resulted in more than 13,000 deaths and displaced more than 1.5 million persons. Although the heaviest fighting occurred in the Donbas region from 2014 to 2015 an active conflict continues with casualties reported almost daily. Civil society, including minority religious organizations, in the occupied territories and in Crimea are systematically repressed with intimidation techniques like imprisonment and extrajudicial renditions. The Crimean Tatar community (indigenous to the peninsula) has been particularly subject to pressure from Kremlin authorities on the peninsula.

Discussions on the implementation of the Minsk agreements remain at an impasse. The Kremlin's goal remains the federalization of Ukraine, so that Russia will be able to influence regional governments to interfere with Ukraine's democratic development and delay the country's broader Euro-integration. Ukraine rightly demands Russian military withdrawal, a lasting ceasefire and restoration of its control over the border with Russia as a precondition to its implementation of the Minsk agreements.

### ***Current Situation***

According to polls conducted by IRI in May 2017, June 2018 and December 2019, 80 percent or more of Ukrainians nationwide believe that the Donbas region should be reintegrated into Ukraine. IRI polling in the government-controlled areas of the Donbas region of Ukraine in 2018 showed that 73 percent of polling respondents believed that non-government-controlled areas of the Donbas should be returned to Ukrainian control. As of December 2019, only seven percent nationwide believe that these areas should not be reunited with Ukraine. In the same survey, respondents identified the conflict in Donbas as one of the top issues facing Ukraine.

Improving the quality of life of citizens will yield greater stability for the region in the long term. IRI's work focuses on building the capacity of local government in Ukraine to respond to citizen priorities. Our polling shows that the quality of local governance is improving, especially as Ukraine continues to implement much needed decentralization reforms. IRI's fifth annual nationwide municipal poll showed that in 22 out of the 24 cities surveyed, there was an increase in the proportion of respondents who thought that the situation was improving at the local level. Respondents also reported high levels of optimism about Ukraine's national economic outlook. More needs to be done.

There are signs of real progress across Ukraine. In surveys of cities in the country's western region, there is a high level of optimism regarding both the future of Ukraine and the future of Ukrainian cities. In Ukraine's east, there are also positive signs. For instance, in the city of Mariupol, which is located along the line of control, 63 percent of citizens express a belief that things are going in the right direction in their city. Mariupol, despite facing a blockade by the Russian Navy, is becoming a cultural and economic center for the region.

To reintegrate the occupied territories into Ukraine, more needs to be done to support the development of transparent, inclusive and participatory governance in Ukraine's eastern cities. IRI polling has shown that only 25 percent of respondents in Sievierodonetsk in Luhansk *oblast* and 15 percent of respondents in Kherson in Kherson *oblast* believe that things in their city are headed in the right direction. Both cities are regional centers where residents of occupied Crimea and the occupied territories travel to continue to receive services from the Ukrainian government.

Ukrainians' commitment to the EU and NATO has remained consistently strong since the Revolution of Dignity. IRI's most recent December 2019 survey showed that 56 percent of Ukrainians believed that Ukraine should enter the EU, while only 17 percent supported joining the Eurasian Customs Union. The same survey showed that 52 percent of Ukrainians would vote for joining NATO if a referendum was held.

### ***Recommendations***

Ukrainians remain resolute in their desire to restore their country's territorial integrity. Until the Kremlin removes its troops from the occupied territories of Ukraine and ensures that Ukraine can control its internationally recognized border with Russia, peace in these territories is impossible. While the conflict continues, the United States can take concrete steps to support the Ukrainian government's goal to reintegrate residents of the occupied territories into Ukrainian society and improve the lives of the conflict-affected population.

- We believe that economic sanctions imposed on Russia are having the desired effect. They are placing economic pressure on the appropriate sectors, which has reverberated within the Kremlin. An example of this are the sanctions imposed in September 2016 on the individuals and companies responsible for the construction of the Kerch Strait Bridge. The United States should not only continue to impose strategic and targeted sanctions on the Russian Federation but should expand them until Ukraine's territorial integrity is restored. The United States should also encourage our European allies to continue and expand sanctions.
- With a monthly average of approximately 1,000,000 checkpoint crossings in the Donbas region alone, there is a high level of civilian traffic and, therefore, a need for infrastructure development and access to information about available services. Temporary administrative checkpoints are often unable to provide adequate public transportation and rest areas protected from harsh weather. The United States should support the Ukrainian government in modernizing infrastructure at checkpoints and increasing access to information about the services available to those crossing the line of control. These efforts will help to demonstrate to Ukrainian citizens residing in the occupied territories and Crimea that Ukraine is investing in them by being responsive to citizen needs.
- The United States should increase its efforts to support the Ukrainian government's goal of filling the information vacuum in Donbas and Crimea by providing residents of these territories with information on reforms being undertaken in Ukraine. Greater access to information about government-controlled Ukraine will allow residents in the occupied territories in the Donbas and occupied Crimea to feel more included in Ukrainian society and political processes, thereby reminding them that they are an integral part of Ukraine. By fostering this sentiment, the United States can promote unity among Ukrainians and ease the eventual post-war reconciliation process.
- The United States should continue to provide technical assistance to Ukraine to support the further institutionalization of democratic processes in the country. Residents of the occupied territories must be made to feel that they can expect to enjoy a more stable and prosperous future as part of Ukraine.
- To counter Kremlin efforts to sow disunity and polarization, the United States should continue to support initiatives that build unity and foster pluralism within the country. The United States should support the free and open exchanges of persons and ideas across Ukraine through educational and cultural exchanges, conferences, seminars, etc. to provide opportunities for Ukrainians, particularly youth, to engage with their counterparts from different regions of the country.

### ***IRI in Ukraine***

Since 1994, IRI has been partnering with local governments, political parties and citizens to support the development of more effective, citizen-centered governance in Ukraine. IRI has trained tens of thousands of local government officials, political party members and civic activists, and supported the participation of underrepresented groups such as women and youth in the political process. IRI has been recognized for its international survey research through its regular public opinion surveys, which includes dozens of national, municipal and *oblast*-level surveys of the political and public policy landscape in Ukraine.

### **Georgia – Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

Twenty percent of sovereign Georgian territory has been under Russian occupation since August of 2008. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have declared “independence” from Georgia, supported by the Russian Federation. This status is not recognized by the international community, which by and large recognizes Russia as an occupying force. Meanwhile, Russian forces (and Russian-backed local authorities) have actively engaged in ethnic cleansing, most recently in South Ossetia where they have forced Georgian enclaves to flee and hardened the border with checkpoints and barbed wire. After the August 2008 War, only about 50,000 ethnic Georgians remain in the Gali district of Abkhazia.

### ***Challenges***

Abkhazia is arguably the more autonomous of the two occupied territories, enjoying a hard border with government-controlled Georgia since the 1992 Abkhaz War. This relative isolation from Georgian institutions, combined with Abkhazia’s status as a de-facto monoethnic state, has allowed its institutions to develop independently for more than 25 years. Despite this relative stability, Abkhazia is currently in the midst of an ongoing political crisis precipitated when de-facto President Raul Khajimba’s re-election on September 8, 2019 was declared illegitimate by the region’s Supreme Court on January 10, 2020. Following two days of protests, Khajimba resigned from his post and snap elections were set for March 22, 2020. This apparent exercise of judicial independence should not be misunderstood; while Khajimba was supported by Moscow when he came to power, the new president will certainly be Moscow’s newest favorite. Regardless of who wins election, the regime will be bolstered by the presence of Russia’s 7<sup>th</sup> Military Base in Gudauta, home to the 3,500-strong 131<sup>st</sup> Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade.

Challenges in South Ossetia are the starkest. The overall population of the region has been nearly halved from almost 100,000 before the 2008 August War. About a third of ethnic Ossetians have left for Russia, and ethnic Georgians, once nearly 30 percent of the region’s population, are now fewer than 4,000 (7 percent) according to the 2015 census. Most ethnic Georgians remaining in the region are old or infirm, or otherwise unable to relocate to Georgia proper. With little industrial infrastructure (nor the population to operate it) the economy is in shambles, with most of the remaining population dependent on subsistence farming for food and income. Regional authorities are almost entirely dependent on the Russian Federation for even the most basic economic and infrastructural supports. Similar to Abkhazia, South Ossetia is now home to a Russian brigade from the 58<sup>th</sup> Army, permanently housed at the 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Military Base outside Tskhinvali.

### ***History***

The August War in 2008, precipitated by the Russian invasion of South Ossetia, was far from the first conflict over these regions. The roots of the conflict in both regions go back to the Russian Revolution and are directly traceable to Soviet preferences for organizing and categorizing territories under their control. Abkhazia was granted some degree of autonomy within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921 as the ethnically based Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. South Ossetia received the lesser status of an autonomous oblast (district) the same year. In both cases, this relative autonomy was granted as a reward for siding with the Bolsheviks in the Red Army’s conquest of the former Georgian Democratic Republic (1917-1921).

As the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia contemplated its independence, Abkhazia and South Ossetia declared their own independence from Georgia, touching off a series of civil conflicts that ran from 1988-1993 and included heavy fighting in both regions and a two-year long coup against

the first president of Georgia. When the fighting finally ended, both regions were de-facto independent. In Abkhazia, ethnic Georgians which had comprised half the population were either killed or forced out of the territory, creating nearly a quarter-million internally displaced persons. Some 50,000 have since returned to the Gali district, enabled by various agreements between Tbilisi and de-facto government. In South Ossetia, territorial lines were far more indistinct, resulting in the existence of Georgian enclaves throughout the region. According to Georgian government estimates, there are currently 250,000 IDPs from the conflicts in the early 1990s, and an additional 26,000 from the 2008 war.

In 2002, the Russian Federation adopted a new citizenship law that granted citizenship to Abkhaz and South Ossetians without requiring them to travel to Russia. Under this provision, more than 150,000 Russian passports were distributed to persons living within the internationally recognized boundaries of Georgia. The Abkhaz took this effort a step further after the August War, proposing a measure in 2009 that would have pushed Georgian citizens in the Gali District to exchange their Georgian citizenship for Abkhaz. While this particular measure was defeated, it is indicative of how ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia are held in clear second-class status. Since 2016, Georgia has been able to counter these efforts by offering visa-free travel to the European Union to any resident of Abkhazia who holds a Georgian passport.

The August War ossified the status quo which had existed for the previous 15 years, and formalized Russian state backing of the separatist authorities. Invading through the Roki Tunnel on the pretense of protecting Russian “citizens” in South Ossetia, the Russian army pushed to within a few miles of Tbilisi before pulling back almost to the original administrative border line (ABL). They have been entrenched there for the last dozen years, having never evacuated several Georgian towns that were never within the ABL. Akhagori, a Georgian town of nearly 8,000 persons which was never part of South Ossetia, remains occupied by Russian forces and has a current population of barely 1,000 residents. All the ethnic Georgians are gone.

Every few months since early 2011, Russian forces are slowly pushing the barbed wire further and further into Tbilisi-controlled territory, executing a policy of “creeping borderization.” On more than 150 occasions since that time families have gone to sleep and woken up in different territories, farms have been halved and rendered useless, and crucial pipeline infrastructure (built to bypass Russian territory) has come under Russian control. In nine years of flagrantly violating international norms there have been no repercussions.

### ***Current Situation***

The frozen conflicts continue to impact Georgian domestic politics in profound ways, particularly regarding security and economic policy. Most notably the very existence of Russian-backed separatist authorities has been cited as the primary barrier to Georgian accession to NATO. Many European members of the alliance are publicly concerned that Russian military activity in the regions would be used as a cause to invoke Article 5 of the NATO Charter. To this point, the tension centers on whether Georgia would recognize the regions as autonomous, foregoing any sovereign claim and preventing the return of IDPs. Alternatively, Georgia could continue its current path, maintaining that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are sovereign Georgian territory and locking itself out of NATO forever. Neither option is palatable to the Georgian government and people for obvious reasons, and this catch-22 precisely illustrates Russia’s intentions in the region.

The continued presence of Russian bases in Abkhazia, the increasing presence of Russian military forces in South Ossetia, and the employment of Russian-based “thieves in law” all point to a coordinated Kremlin plan to keep Georgia in limbo between Russia and the West. But Georgian citizens are decisive in their support for the West.

According to IRI’s National Public Opinion Survey conducted in September 2019, a significant majority of the Georgian population (83 percent) perceive Russia to be the primary political and economic threat. Since 2010, public support for direct dialogue with Russia has significantly declined from 93 percent to 74 percent. Since the formal ceasefire that ended the August War, a significant majority of the Georgian public (between 77 and 84 percent) continue to believe that Russian aggression towards Georgia is ongoing. Meanwhile public support for NATO and EU membership within Georgia has consistently been high. Since 2013, support for EU integration has hovered around 85 percent, while support for NATO membership remained at nearly 80 percent. Surveys show that this consistent high level of support is motivated by the security and economic benefits associated with NATO and EU membership. Historic polling data also shows that an overwhelming majority of the Georgian public (more than 90 percent on average) believes that negotiations and peaceful means are the only alternative for resolution with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Despite this strong support for NATO and Western institutions, the only functioning, internationally supported conflict resolution forum is the Geneva International Discussion (GID), launched in 2008. The GID is co-chaired by representatives of the OSCE, European Union and United Nations, and involves participants from Georgia, Russia and the United States. The exiled Georgian administrations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the Russian backed de-facto authorities are also represented in their personal capacities. In 2009, all sides in Geneva agreed to establish the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) for both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Over the years, the IPRM format has proven to be an efficient instrument for managing the situation on the ground and promoting stability along the breakaway borders and the mechanism has successfully brought all parties to a common table. Despite the relative success of these mutual measures, the IPRM is the only mechanism available to the Georgian government to hold Russia accountable, and has done little to prevent Russia from implementing its creeping borderization.

Ongoing Russian aggression, particularly along the ABL, has fed an increasingly polarized political environment. The current government has continued to advocate for increased engagement with Russia, while the opposition (and former government) is adamant about maintaining a posture of continued resistance. Both points of view have their merits. Engagement opens Georgia to Russian economic markets which are still important to Georgian economic growth, particularly in the tourism and wine production sectors. However, this also heightens economic dependence on an aggressive and increasingly unpredictable neighbor with a reputation for closing borders on a whim, like the June 2019 flight cancellations between Georgia and Russia over anti-Russian street protests in Tbilisi. The latter approach serves to solidify Georgia’s desired role as a Western ally but limits the country’s economic potential in a way that can only be made up by significant and intentional economic support from the United States and the European Union.



In 2018, the Georgian government introduced the “Step to a Better Future” policy for the breakaway regions. Under this approach, Georgia’s free universal health insurance program will also apply to residents of the separatist regions. Since initiation, the number of residents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia who rely on these services is growing. In 2014, 450 Abkhazians came to Georgia for medical assistance, increasing to more than 500 in the first five months of 2016. Between 2014-2017, 2,650 Ossetians underwent medical treatment in Georgia. For South Ossetia, the numbers are proportionately larger.

For the government in Tbilisi, humanitarian aid and provision of public services is one of the last remaining tools to win hearts and minds in the breakaway regions. To that end, the Georgian Ministry of Justice built a \$6.4 million Community Center in the village of Rukhi, two kilometers from the border crossing with Abkhazia, offering a range of legal services to local residents as well as a new trade center. Also, the Georgian government has spent almost \$16.5 million, on a state-of-the-art hospital in Rukhi, to be opened in April 2020. In order to prevent these exchanges, the Abkhaz regime has long restricted citizens from going to Georgia for healthcare and other services. In July 2013, Tskhinvali passed a decree aiming to restrict its citizens’ use of Georgian medical services to “exceptional cases” only. Russia concluded a similar agreement with Abkhazia on August 8, 2019. Their efforts to restrict movement remain largely ignored in practice.

Although Georgia has regularly and actively engaged its partners in the United States and Europe for a more direct role in NATO, these efforts have not yet yielded any tangible benefit despite Georgia’s extensive contributions to the NATO mission in Afghanistan and to joint exercises in the region. It is clear that a path to Georgian membership will come through the efforts of the United States. The U.S. Government needs to be intentional and direct in its engagement with helping Georgia chart a proper course toward Western institutions, and with NATO allies on Georgia’s behalf. Recent international fora have finally introduced potential “third ways” to the discussion regarding Article 5 limitations, and these alternatives should be thoroughly explored. U.S. involvement in these discussions can help break the deadlock internationally, and the impasse within Georgian politics. Georgian resolve to join Western institutions remains strong, it should not be allowed to flag through inaction.

Continued economic development in Georgia is perhaps the strongest antidote to Russian intervention. Georgia is currently resigned to choosing between an aggressive neighbor that it must engage with in order to survive, and a European future that it desperately wants but cannot yet attain. The European Union has already taken significant steps with the signing of an Association Agreement, implementation of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, and introduction of visa-free travel for holders of Georgian passports. The U.S. Government should strongly consider similar steps, particularly regarding expansion of existing economic agreements into a full-blown Free Trade Agreement. Strengthening of economic, democratic, and security supports will help Georgia significantly increase its economic resilience. This would dramatically improve Georgia’s ability to meet its pre-existing obligations under its Association Agreement, thereby bringing Georgia another step closer to full participation in western political and security structures.

### ***Recommendations***

- The United States should expand sanctions against Russia. Penalties for continued incursions and other violations of international law on the internationally recognized territory of Georgia should be at least as severe as those imposed in response to the annexation of Crimea and should apply independently of resolution to other territorial disputes in the region.
- The United States should further encourage and support Georgia in playing a larger role in NATO engagement and enlargement, and provide it with a clear accession roadmap with defined benchmarks and targets. The United States has been providing military training and materiel to Georgia since the Georgia Train and Equip Program in 2002. Since then, Georgia has been the largest non-NATO contributor to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, where Georgian soldiers have been praised for their professionalism and commitment. In recent years, military cooperation has expanded to include joint exercises, and the provision of Javelin missiles and other defensive weaponry. The United States Navy regularly visits the Black Sea ports of Batumi and Poti. These regular displays of military solidarity are crucial as a deterrent to Russian aggression and should be maintained and even increased.
- The United States should continue to support the Geneva International Discussions (GID) as an important format for addressing security, human rights, and humanitarian challenges stemming from the unresolved conflict. Furthermore, the United States should call for greater access to the occupied territories for diplomatic officials and human rights organizations and support a renewal of the OSCE presence in Georgia.
- The United States needs to continue its economic investment in Georgia, in the form of both government assistance and foreign direct investment. Particular consideration should be paid to developing a road map toward a full U.S. Free Trade Agreement with Georgia. These efforts should also include increased political engagement and networking with European and American legislators and leaders to continue developing and solidifying those political and economic ties to the West.
- The United States should enhance its support to Georgia's stable, democratic development. Ultimately, if Abkhazia and South Ossetia are to be reintegrated into the Georgian state, Tbilisi must be a preferable alternative to Moscow. This means a viable regional economy, robust social supports, and a stable pluralistic political system. The Georgian government has understood this well, particularly related to the economy and social support, and has generally structured its policy initiatives accordingly. United States assistance in implementing these policies could prove instrumental.

### ***IRI in Georgia***

Since 1998, IRI has supported the development of a multi-party political system in Georgia. With an office in Tbilisi, IRI maintains strong relations with all major political parties, and supports them as they develop their regional party structures and internal democracy. IRI also works with youth, women and other marginalized groups to help them develop policy awareness and to strengthen their positions in party structures. IRI is one of the first sources of reputable, methodologically sound, issue-based public opinion polling in the country, conducting regular national public opinion polls since May 2003. IRI also conducts international election observation missions, most recently deploying assessment missions for both rounds of the 2017 local elections and the 2018 presidential election, and international long- and short-term observation missions for both rounds of the 2016 parliamentary election. IRI is committed to providing impartial and responsible international observation to ensure that local elections comply with international standards for fairness and democratic principles.

In recent years, IRI has refocused its programming on encouraging parties to actively synergize their policy creation efforts with regional citizen engagement and grassroots party communications. IRI is also closely working with parties to increase their ability to work with and support members of underrepresented constituencies. IRI's Youth Debate Series is broadcast live on national TV in prime time and permits audience members to call and text their votes for the best team. Debate alumni have held positions at all levels of government and civil society, and include Members of Parliament, the Adjara Supreme Council, various government ministries, and leaders of think tanks and NGOs.

### **Moldova – Transnistria**

Transnistria differs from the occupied territories of Ukraine and Georgia in that the conflict is generally peaceful, there is frequent people-to-people contact across the border, and both territories have been steadily increasing their de-facto economic integration. While a political settlement remains elusive, there is space for U.S. engagement to support Moldova in its efforts to resolve the outstanding Transnistrian dispute.

#### ***Current Challenges***

Transnistria shares many of the challenges that the rest of Moldova faces: A struggling economy, serious population loss through emigration, and entrenched corruption that undermines reform efforts and economic development. Despite these shared challenges, Transnistria's problems are generally more serious and are compounded by the lack of desire for reform.

Transnistria's economy is functioning poorly and has suffered a decline in recent years. With a per-capita GDP of under \$3,000, the region's official economy is heavily reliant on remittances (Transnistrian sources report 65 percent originating in Russia and 14 percent in the EU), exports from its aging heavy industry, Russian direct investments (approximately \$150 million annually), and subsidized energy and pension stipends from Russia (a value of approximately \$400 million annually). While these funding sources have kept the Transnistrian economy afloat, currency manipulation, continued population loss and decay of industrial equipment threatens to further weaken the economy and make life more difficult for everyday Transnistrian residents.

In addition to the official economic activity, Transnistria is supported by widespread illicit economic activity largely linked to a single business conglomerate called Sheriff. Siphoned profits from the resale of subsidized Russian energy and the smuggling of cigarettes, counterfeit goods and food has created a black economy that reaches beyond Transnistria's borders into Moldova and Ukraine. In addition, access to Russian energy has led to a robust industry of cryptocurrency mining, earning the territory a reputation for money laundering. Unsurprisingly, this black economy has contributed to the persistence of corruption within Transnistria, Moldova, and Ukraine. Sheriff's control of much of Transnistria's economy grants its owners control of economic and political activity in Transnistria and influence in negotiations with Moldova.

These challenges have contributed to the continued emigration of Transnistrian citizens, particularly youth. The Transnistrian education system is underfunded and jobs are scarce, causing many citizens to seek work in Russia or the EU, which is made possible with a Moldovan passport. Reliable census data is lacking the region, but estimates indicate that approximately 375,000 people live in Transnistria, including very large populations of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians.

## ***History***

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, political and industrial leaders in Transnistria mobilized citizens and took action toward independence from wider-Moldova to protect their vested interests. These actions and the Moldovan government's response sparked an armed conflict that lasted approximately two years. At the time the Russian 14<sup>th</sup> Army was stationed in Transnistria, radically altering the balance of power when Russian forces intervened in the ensuing conflict on behalf of Transnistrian troops.

The violence peaked in March 1992 before a ceasefire was brokered in Moscow on July 22, 1992. Ultimately, the hostilities of 1990-1992 claimed the lives of approximately 1,000 people and displaced thousands more. Within the ceasefire's provisions, the ceasefire agreement established a security zone between the newly demarcated territories, the development of a Joint Control Commission to control the implementation of security measures and restrictions against the use of economic sanctions and blockades against each other. Currently, a contingent of approximately 1,600 Russian soldiers remains as peacekeepers and security forces for Russian munitions depots containing upwards of 20,000 tons of munitions, though many of those forces are likely Transnistrians serving in the Russian military. The munitions depots are of great concern to Moldova and the region due to Transnistria's widespread black market. Eliminating this security threat has been a focus of negotiations, with limited success. Since the ceasefire, negotiations have occurred in a 5+2 format (Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe + EU and United States) and have mainly been focused on the resolution of military and economic issues. However, a long-term political solution to the conflict has not been reached, and it continues to impact the politics of Moldova today.

## ***Current Situation***

IRI conducts regular national opinion surveys in Moldova on sociopolitical issues including the Transnistrian conflict. IRI polling from February 2018 indicates that 64 percent of Moldovan citizens outside of Transnistria believe that Transnistria should be reintegrated to Moldova as a normal region with no special status; only 21 percent of citizens believe that Transnistria should exist as an autonomous entity within Moldova. Moldova's political parties endorse various iterations of these settlement plans, largely aligned with their party's geopolitical orientations. Several pro-European parties promote a full reintegration of the territory and withdrawal of Russian troops, while the current president's Socialist Party has published a plan for federalization of the territory, though it has recently softened its rhetoric on the issue. However, there is little political will to act, as IRI polling demonstrates that Moldovan citizens see Transnistria as a minor problem when compared to Moldova's economic problems, emigration and corruption. As a result, no party wishes to raise the simmering but controversial issue in advance of upcoming presidential elections.

Transnistria comes under increased scrutiny during election periods, as the population is part of the wider Moldovan electorate and is allocated two seats in Parliament. They make up a small but active voting bloc, accounting for 2.5 percent of total votes cast in the 2019 parliamentary elections. However, we have observed in our work with political parties in Moldova that parties are mostly unable to contact voters in person or distribute campaign materials due to restricted access to the region and constraints on fundamental freedoms. This disconnect from the campaign

process makes voters susceptible to vote buying and organized bussing, thereby undermining public trust in Moldova's election results.

Resolution of Transnistria's status is also an obstacle to the fulfillment of Moldova's EU Association agreement. Transnistria has quietly benefitted from Moldova's growing ties with the EU through the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). Among other terms, the DCFTA gives Transnistrian exports the same status as other Moldovan goods if they register as Moldovan companies. As a result, two-thirds of Transnistrian exports go west to wider Moldova and the EU. These economic links are a lifeline for the Transnistrian economy and can be built on for future integration efforts with Chisinau and the EU.

The 5+2 negotiation format has recently shifted its focus from military and political efforts to eleven working groups on confidence-building measures that impact the lives of everyday citizens. These working groups have demonstrated real progress on issues such as university accreditation, increased travel access, and agricultural matters. These developments are positive, but future work must build on these measures and achieve a long-term political settlement. As Thomas de Waal of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes, "A spirit of pragmatism prevails in the conflict, which contrasts it with the conflicts in Ukraine and the South Caucasus[, but] the dispute is perpetuated by the rival geopolitical orientations of decisionmakers on two sides."

We believe that a solution must be achieved for the good of citizens on both sides of the Dniester river. The current human rights situation in Transnistria is concerning. Human rights lawyers and former Transnistrian soldiers have raised allegations of hazing and torture in the military, which relies on forced conscription. One recent high-profile case is that of whistleblower Alexandru Rjavitin, a young soldier who fled to Chisinau in 2015 and shared his experiences about humiliation and violence in the military. Alexandru recently disappeared, resurfaced in the Transnistrian military, and recanted all his former statements, raising concerns that he was abducted and coerced. Additionally, Transnistrian law offers poor protections for religious freedom, victims of domestic violence and gender-based discrimination, and civil society is sparse and often government-aligned. Steps toward reintegration are vital to ensure greater transparency into the humanitarian situation in Transnistria and an opening of civic space.

### ***Recommendations***

While there is not a clear path to resolution of the conflict, there are meaningful opportunities for U.S. engagement:

- First, the United States should support Moldova and Ukraine in their continued development and reform efforts, particularly regarding anticorruption. Until the economic incentives of the status quo change, a political solution will remain elusive. Committed anticorruption efforts from Chisinau, Kyiv and the nearby major Ukrainian port of Odessa have yielded tangible results in the past. Jointly administered Moldovan-Ukrainian customs checkpoints on the Transnistrian border supported by the EU have drastically reduced the flow of contraband. We also applaud the United States' public designation of oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc and statement of support for Moldova in its fight against corruption. Focused actions like these indicate to corrupt actors that the United States is aware of and involved in anticorruption efforts around the world.

- Through continued development assistance and a continued focus on anticorruption, the United States can support Moldova and Ukraine as they resist the corrosive effects of corruption present in Transnistria. Ultimately, strong and transparent governments in Chisinau and Kyiv are the building blocks for a lasting political settlement.
- The United States should also leverage its participation in the 5+2 negotiations to build on the successes of the confidence-building measures to date. The confidence-building measures have increased the de-facto integration of the two sides and have improved the lives of citizens, but their true potential lies in the reopening of conversation around a long-term political solution. The United States should also consider the utility of sanctions on Russia to compel a withdrawal of Russian troops from the occupied territory.
- Finally, the United States should deepen its support for democratic development in Moldova. Moldova needs a strong political class that can adequately represent the views of all Moldovans and build consensus around a viable solution to the Transnistrian conflict. The current divisions in Moldovan politics on this issue represent a healthy contest of opinion, but no party has the support and stability needed to mount a sustained push for a political solution. By supporting the longevity and representative nature of Moldova's political parties, the United States can help the Moldovan government present a united front in negotiations. IRI and other international development organizations have been involved in this work and will continue to foster democratic principles in Moldova with the support of the United States government.

### ***IRI in Moldova***

In Moldova, IRI works with political parties, national party leaders and emerging political actors, local government officials, civil society organizations, and citizen activists towards three aims: promoting more accountable and inclusive political parties at the national level; fostering the emergence of new leaders and new voices in the political system; and enhancing party and government officials' representation of citizens at the local level. For example, IRI supports individual parties in strengthening internal structures (e.g., regional territorial organizations, youth wings and women's organizations), increasing financial transparency, crafting responsive communication and outreach strategies, and promoting an inclusive political culture. IRI has also monitored parliamentary elections in Moldova and made recommendations to improve election administration and voter access for Transnistrian voters. With these efforts, IRI supports both Moldova's overall democratic development and its ability to resolve the political obstacles to a solution on Transnistria.