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The Next Crimea?

Getting Russia's Transnistria Policy Right

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Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in March 2014 sparked so far unrealized international fears that the pro-Russian separatist republic of Transnistria in Moldova might be the next object of Russian territorial revisionism. This article argues that these fears were predicated on faulty assumptions about Russia's interests and capacities in Moldova. It traces the development of Russian policy in the country from 1992 to 2015, and argues that Russia has primarily been interested in influence over the whole of Moldova rather than Transnistria per se; that Russian policy has been primarily reactive, responding to developments beyond its control; and that these developments frequently show that Russia's power and ability to enforce its objectives are limited.

The unresolved conflict between the Republic of Moldova and the Russia-backed separatist republic of Transnistria in the country's east has received growing attention from Western analysts, media, and policymakers in recent years.[1] Following Russia's annexation of Crimea from Moldova's next-door neighbor Ukraine in March 2014, several Western media outlets speculated whether Transnistria would be "next" on Russian president Vladimir Putin's "list" (e.g. Kashi 2014; Hawksley 2014; "Could Transnistria" 2014). Policymakers chimed in: Moldovan president Nicolae Timofti and European Commission president-in-waiting Jean-Claude Juncker warned Russia against taking Transnistria, and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, Phillip Breedlove, warned that Russian forces "postured" on Ukraine's eastern border were "absolutely sufficient … to run to [Transnistria]" (Buckley and Oliver 2014; Brown 2014; Harding 2014). The outbreak of the Russian-backed separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine in April–May 2014 and Putin's use of the term "Novorossiia" (New Russia) in his annual Q&A phone-in in April fueled further fears that Russia wanted to re-create the historical region of Novorossiia, including Transnistria and much of eastern and southern Ukraine. Russia, it seemed to many, had embarked on an expansionary mission, a neo-imperial (or neo-Soviet) project of territorial restoration through destabilization and manipulation of neighboring countries, fomentation of protest by Russian minorities, and, in the most extreme cases, annexation. As Andrew Wilson argued, "Putin had started on a lot of unfinished business" and declared "a massive revisionist agenda," and Moldova was one of the states "[m]ost obviously next in the firing line" (2014, 162).

Fast forward to the time of writing and such fears have not come to pass, despite public requests by the Transnistrian parliament to both Putin and the head of Russia's Duma for either accession to Russia or recognition of Transnistria as a sovereign state (Bocharova and Biriukova 2014; Tanas and Timu 2014). While Crimea remains firmly annexed and the conflict in eastern Ukraine has tragically left more than 9,000 people dead, Moldova has remained peaceful, save for a wave of protests in 2015–2016 by civil society forces of both a pro-European and a pro-Russian orientation against the deep political corruption in the country. The Russian government has vocally protested against measures such as the fortification of the Transnistrian–Ukrainian border by the new Ukrainian authorities and Ukraine's ban on Russian servicemen stationed in Transnistria transiting Ukrainian territory, but has shown no inclination to either recognize or annex

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Transnistria, instead calling for a “special status” for the region within Moldova and even reducing its financial support for the separatist regime (Urbanskaya 2015). But the perceived threat of Russian intervention is still used by the nominally pro-European Moldovan government to justify its policies of state capture to both its own population and Western policymakers, contributing to the latter’s higher tolerance of the Moldovan government’s conduct (Nemtsova 2016).

One explanation for this state of affairs could be that Russia has simply failed to implement its intentions, whether by accident or due to a lack of resources or other constraints. As Wilson also argued, it was unclear whether Russia would be able “to push on all fronts while it was preoccupied in Ukraine, but it was rightly feared that it would when it could” (2014, 162–63). A narrative could be constructed whereby an ambitious Putin, buoyed by the relatively easy military victory in Crimea and both overestimating local Russian support and underestimating Ukrainian/Western resolve, gave the go-ahead for the rebellion-cum-insurgency in eastern Ukraine in the hope that it would spread to Moldova and elsewhere, only to later have to (temporarily) scale back his ambitions in response to Western sanctions, falling oil prices, and lukewarm local support. This would be a superficially plausible narrative, albeit one that would be impossible to prove without getting inside Putin’s head. Moreover, it would still appear to assume the presence of an expansionary ambition driving Russian policy, potentially ignoring the specific context and circumstances of Russia’s Moldova policy.

This article argues that by analyzing change and continuity in Russian policy in Moldova on its own terms since the fall of the Soviet Union, a more nuanced understanding can be gained that dictates against the kind of reactions and fears evident around the time of the Crimean annexation. Indeed, the picture that emerges from a closer look at Russia’s Moldova policy over time is one of relative disinterest in Transnistria itself (Russia’s aim has been influence over Moldova as a whole) as well as of reactive policymaking and frequently unsuccessful attempts to assert Russian control and to break through local intransigence and power configurations. This raises questions about the validity of any general narrative about Russian policy in the post-Soviet space, such as the expansionary and revisionist one that has gained prominence post-Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Russian policy in Moldova and Transnistria remains an under-researched area of Russian foreign policy. More topical areas such as Ukraine or relations with the West are usually afforded more ink, both in broader studies and as the topic of specialized studies. Notable exceptions include the specialized work of Andrey Devyatkov (2012a, 2012b), Graeme Herd (2007), and Rebecca Chamberlain-Creanga and Lyndon Allin (2010); William Hill’s (2012) account of his time as head of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission to Moldova; and the literature focusing specifically on Russian policy in the post-Soviet conflicts (e.g. Lynch 2000, 2003, 2006; Flikke and Godzimirski 2007). The Transnistria conflict has been more broadly covered in the conflict studies literature, where bodies of work exist covering the causes of the initial conflict (Kaufman 2001; Ozhiganov 1997; Kaufman and Bowers 1998; Kolstø and Malgin 1998; King 2000; Kolstø 2002), its prolongation and intractability (King 2001, 2005; Herd 2005; Kolstø 2006; Meurs 2007; Beyer and Wolff 2016), and potential ways of solving it (ICG 2003, 2004, 2006; Lynch 2004; Protsyk 2006; Beyer 2010, 2011; Kulminski and Sieg 2010; Wolff 2011, 2012; Popescu and Litra 2012). There is also an increasing number of works focusing on internal developments and state-building in Transnistria (Troebst 2003; Matzusato 2008; Protsyk 2009; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011). While I draw on all these literatures below, my aim in this article is primarily to contribute to the literature on Russian foreign policy toward Moldova and Transnistria in particular and the post-Soviet space in general. I argue that better understandings of Russian motives and policy in Moldova are important in their own right, given Moldova’s central position in what is by now a shared Russian–Western neighborhood characterized by increasingly competitive influence-seeking.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, a brief historical background of the Transnistrian conflict is given. In the second section, the evolution of Russian policy toward Moldova and Transnistria over time is described in some depth. In the following three sections, three conclusions are drawn from this analytic description of Russian policy. First, that Russia does not care about Transnistria per se; its support for the separatist republic has been no more than one of many tools by which to achieve its overall objective of maintaining influence in Moldova. Second, that Russian policy has been primarily reactive, responding to events rather than proactively driving them. And third, that despite its apparent position as the dominant regional power, Russia has had a limited ability to influence events on the ground in both Moldova and Transnistria. In the conclusion I consider the implications of these arguments for understandings of Russian policy in the post-Soviet space, calling for detailed analysis of Russian policy in each post-Soviet country and conflict on its own terms.

A QUINTESSENTIALLY POST-SOVIET CONFLICT

The Transnistrian conflict’s roots were a combination of Soviet nationality policy, an uneven division of resources within the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR), and the effects of Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberalizing reforms. The MSSR, geographically equivalent to the present-day

Republic of Moldova, was created during World War II as an uneasy union of today's Transnistria, a strip of land east of the river Dnestr that had been part of the Soviet Union since the early 1920s and, crucially, had never been part of Romania, and areas west of the Dnestr that had been part of Romania in the interwar years and the Russian empire previously. The MSSR was multiethnic: in 1989 primarily Romanian-speaking Moldovans constituted 64.5 percent of the republic's total population, Ukrainians 13.8 percent, and Russians 13 percent. Moldovans were also the largest population group (39.9 perecent) in Transnistria, but here Ukrainians and Russians constituted a combined "Slavic-speaking" majority of 53.8 percent and Russian was the dominant lingua franca (King 2000). Transnistria had come to dominate the MSSR economically and politically: the majority of industry was located there, all the first secretaries of the republic's Communist Party came from the region until 1989, and the majority of the Soviet Fourteenth Army was stationed there, with its headquarters in the regional capital Tiraspol. This imbalance contributed to the emergence of a privileged, Russian-speaking elite in Transnistria with a strong allegiance to the Soviet Union and Moscow. When Gorbachev's reforms in the second half of the 1980s led to the emergence of a Moldovan national movement that gradually embraced ever more radical aims, including independence and possible reunification with Romania, the elite in Tiraspol reacted by asserting Russian-speakers' and Transnistria's own right to autonomy from Chisinau (King 2000, 183–84; Kaufman 2001, 146–48).

The conflict escalated slowly but surely from 1989 to 1992. New language laws in August 1989 defined Moldovan as the republic's only state language and Russian as a language for "communication between nationalities" (Pasechnik 1989). In June 1990, following election victories by the Popular Front of Moldova, the republic's Supreme Soviet declared Moldova to be a "sovereign state" within the Soviet Union; on September 2 an ad hoc assembly in Tiraspol answered by declaring Transnistria a separate Soviet republic (Kondratov 1990). On August 27, 1991, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt against Gorbachev in Moscow, Moldova declared its independence (Gamova 1991). Tiraspol answered with a referendum in December 1991 in which a clear majority supported independence from Moldova and allegiance to the Soviet Union, which ceased to exist within a few weeks as Russian, Ukrainian, Moldovan, and other leaders established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In parallel with the referendum, Igor Smirnov was elected "president" of the new self-proclaimed republic (Kondratov 1991).[2] At the same time Transnistrian militias gradually established control over police stations and other strategic points east of the Dnestr, receiving arms and support from parts of the Fourteenth Army, around 80 percent of whose personnel were from the region, as well as Cossack volunteers from Russia and Ukraine (King 2000, 192–93; Kaufman 2001; Ozhiganov 1997, 179).

The hostilities culminated on June 19–22, 1992, when a Moldovan attack on the city of Bender, on the Dnestr's west bank, was pushed back by Transnistrian forces and Fourteenth Army units ("Russia Edges" 1992). The army had officially been under Russian command since April 1, 1992 (by decree of the new Russian president, Boris Yeltsin) and had maintained official neutrality under orders from the Russian Ministry of Defense, while individual units had openly supported the Transnistrians and commanders and politicians had either washed their hands of responsibility, like Yeltsin, or openly encouraged the military to get involved, like Yeltsin's vice president, Aleksandr Rutskoi (Gamova and Burbyga 1992).[3] At Bender, General Aleksandr Lebed, who had arrived just days before with a brief to stop the fighting and reestablish Moscow's control over the region's troops and weapons, used a show of force by the Russian troops to achieve both these aims (Ozhiganov 1997, 182). On July 21, 1992, Yeltsin and Moldovan president Mircea Snegur concluded a bilateral agreement in Moscow to regulate the conflict (Kuznetsova 1992). To separate the parties, a security zone was established along the Dnestr, and in early August a peacekeeping force consisting of five Russian, three Moldovan, and two Transnistrian battalions was introduced, effectively giving Russia control of the force. The Fourteenth Army's neutrality was confirmed, and its withdrawal was to be discussed further in bilateral talks ("Ten peacekeeping" 1992; Tago 1992).

The Fourteenth Army's intervention and the institution of a peacekeeping regime led, intentionally or unintentionally, to the conflict being "frozen," giving the Moldovan and Transnistrian elites time to consolidate their power on either side of the Dnestr. No political settlement has been reached between the two sides in the subsequent two-and-a-half decades, despite the absence of further armed conflict and an ongoing mediation process led since 1993 by the OSCE with Russia and Ukraine as guarantor powers and, since 2005, the United States and the EU as observers (the so-called 5+2 format). In parallel with the multilateral mediation process, Russia has also promoted separate initiatives, such as the 1997 Moscow Memorandum on normalization of relations between Moldova and Transnistria (signed under OSCE auspices but initially promoted by Russian foreign minister Evgenii Primakov) and the 2003 Kozak Memorandum, a plan that would have made Moldova an asymmetrical federation and Transnistria a federal constituent with veto powers over foreign policy, that was initially accepted but then rejected at the last minute by Moldovan president Vladimir Voronin (OSCE 1997; Kozak 2003).

The sticking point in mediation has primarily been the question of Transnistria's future political status. Tiraspol has wanted full independence or at the very least a confederation of two equal states, while changing governments in

Chisinau (except for Voronin in 2002–2003) have only gone as far as to offer autonomy in a reintegrated and unitary Moldovan state, in part due to strong political and civil society opposition to a federation that would give Transnistrian elites (and thereby Russia) substantial influence over Moldova as a whole (see e.g. Markedonov 2007; Solovev 2008b; Hill 2012, 54–55).[4] A 1993 Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) report highlighted early on the incompatibility of the two sides' positions, and called for a "special status" for Transnistria: "[Transnistria] cannot successfully be governed within a centralized state. On the other hand, it cannot hope to obtain international recognition or a 'con-federalization' of Moldova" (CSCE 1993, 1). Russia has supported a special status for Transnistria, albeit not always in the federation setup described in the Kozak Memorandum.

Separate from the status issue, another central sticking point has been the withdrawal of Russian troops and military hardware. Despite bilateral and multilateral promises of full withdrawal, around 1,100–1,200 troops still remained as of 2015, as the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) (IISS 2016, 188). The default Russian position, described in more detail below, has been that full withdrawal should follow conflict resolution, that is, resolution of the status question— a linkage and "reverse conditionality" that has caused great frustration in both Moldovan and Western circles.

Russian intransigence and disagreement on status have not been the only factors contributing to the conflict's prolongation. Particularly central have been the lucrative business opportunities presented by the region's gray zone status to the Transnistrian elite, Moldovan, Ukrainian, Russian, and Romanian businessmen and politicians as well as transnational organized criminal networks, and resultant disputes over property and business activity (see e.g. Chamberlain-Creanga and Allin 2010; Popescu 2011, 44; Hill 2012, 136; Roslycky 2009). As Charles King argued about the post-Soviet conflicts in general, the Transnistrian conflict has remained unresolved largely because none of the parties have had enough to lose from a continuation of the status quo (King 2001).

THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN POLICY

As the former imperial center and dominant regional power, Russia has been involved in Moldova and Transnistria "at all levels and in a myriad ways" (Lynch 2004, 41). While developing at times close relations with different Moldovan governments, Russia has consistently irritated Chisinau by pushing for Moldovan acceptance of a Russian troop presence on its soil and supporting Transnistria's bid for a special status within Moldova. In addition to this political support, it has contributed greatly to Transnistria's survival as a de facto state through economic subsidies such as pension payments for the local population and unclaimed debts for gas deliveries. Russian oligarchs have invested in Transnistrian industry. However, Russia has shown no interest in recognizing Transnistria as an independent state, as it did with the Georgian breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, or annexing it like Crimea, and has consistently stated its support for Moldova's territorial integrity. Below, the development of this apparently paradoxical policy is traced from 1992 until the end of 2015.

1992–1996: The Formation of Objectives

During Yeltsin's first presidency (1992–1996), Russian policy was assertive and characterized by military interests. The Ministry of Defense dominated policymaking, introducing and entrenching a permanent Russian military presence in Moldova as a central Russian policy aim. For the Russian military, maintaining bases in the newly independent post-Soviet republics was an attractive alternative to a costly reorganization of defenses along Russia's new borders (Lynch 2000, 83–84). Thus, despite signing a bilateral agreement about withdrawal with Moldova in October 1994 (which was never ratified by the State Duma and therefore, in Russia's view, never came into force), Yeltsin broached the issue of Moldovan consent for a permanent Russian presence with Snegur in June 1995. Snegur refused, citing the 1994 Moldovan constitution's ban on foreign troops being stationed on Moldovan soil (Bulavinov 1995). Moreover, from 1994, Moscow openly argued that a withdrawal of Russian forces should be "synchronized" with a solution to the Transnistrian conflict maintaining both parties' interests and security. This formulation appeared in the October 1994 Russian–Moldovan agreement and would become a mainstay Russian position, interpreted as full troop withdrawal *following* conflict resolution. But the aim of maintaining a military presence did not mean that all troops should be kept in Transnistria, especially as they could be better used elsewhere (the first Chechen War started in December 1994). In December 1994 the number of peacekeeping battalions was cut, and in spring 1995 the Fourteenth Army was reorganized and renamed and its operational staff and officers reduced, prompting General Lebed to resign (Gamova 1994; Musin 1995; Golotiuk 1995). A first attempt at such reorganization in 1994 had been aborted after much negative press in Russia and strong opposition from Lebed, indicating the issue's controversy (Prikhodko 1994; Egorov 1994).

Yeltsin and his government were also pushed toward a more assertive policy by Russian legislative bodies' strong support for Transnistria. The Supreme Soviet passed a resolution authorizing the use of the Fourteenth Army as a "peacemaking" force and accusing Moldova of a "policy of genocide" in July 1992 (Chugaev 1992). The 1993–1995 State Duma had a high proportion of deputies supporting Transnistria, mainly from the Communist Party and the

nationalist Liberal Democratic Party (Mlechin 1993; Kapustina 1996). Duma deputies acted as observers at Transnistrian referendums and elections, provided vocal political support for the unrecognized republic, failed to ratify the 1994 treaty on Fourteenth Army withdrawal, and in May 1995 even adopted a federal law prohibiting such withdrawal (Gamova 1993, 1995; Druz 1995; Zhuravlev 1995). The unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet space served as "convenient springboard[s]" for Duma deputies to attack Yeltsin's policies (Mlechin 1993). Thus, while a mediation track was opened by Russia in 1992 and taken over by the CSCE/OSCE with Russia as a guarantor in 1993, conflict resolution was not proactively pursued by Russia in this period.

1996–2003: Attempts at Cooperation and Conflict Resolution

With the military weakened by the Chechen War, in early 1996 the policymaking initiative in the post-Soviet space shifted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the new foreign minister, Primakov, who in his first press conference promised to redouble efforts to resolve post-Soviet conflicts (Primakov 1996; Shchipanov 1996). This ushered in a more cooperative and conflict- resolution-focused period in Russian policy, demonstrated first of all by Primakov's promotion in the summer of 1996 of what would become the Moscow Memorandum on normalization of relations between Moldova and Transnistria, signed in May 1997 by Transnistrian leader Smirnov and the newly elected Moldovan president, Petru Lucinschi (Timoshenko 1997; OSCE 1997). After Vladimir Putin replaced Yeltsin as Russian president in 2000, Primakov also led a Russian state commission for the resolution of the conflict, which was wound up a year later without having achieved a breakthrough (Putin 2000b; Gamova 2001). International pressure on Russia to withdraw its troops increased in this period. At the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit, Russia committed itself to withdraw its troops and weapons from Moldova (and Georgia) by the end of 2002 (OSCE 1999). After slow but steady progress, partially due to Transnistrian opposition on the ground that contributed to a worsening relationship between Moscow and Tiraspol, the deadline was extended by a year at the 2002 OSCE Porto Ministerial Council (OSCE 2002).

Russia also pursued closer relations with Moldova in this period, helped by the more Russia-friendly dispositions of President Lucinschi (who had been ambassador to Moscow in 1992–1993) and his successor since 2001, Communist Party leader Vladimir Voronin. Russia and Moldova signed an agreement on military cooperation in summer 1997 and one on economic cooperation in summer 1999 (Shaburkin 1997; Olegov 1999). During 2001, additional military agreements were signed, a favorable price for the delivery of Russian gas to Moldova was negotiated (albeit after Gazprom had stopped its deliveries at least once due to outstanding payment), and in November a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed, with a mention in the preamble about Russia's commitment to solving the Transnistrian conflict while maintaining Moldova's territorial integrity (Bagrov 2000; Khanbabian 2001; Gorbunov 2001; Kornia 2001).

Through the near-signing of the so-called Kozak Memorandum in late 2003, Russia was briefly on the verge of solving, at least on paper, the thorny question of Transnistria's status and ensuring the establishment of a Russia-friendly Transnistria as an autonomous region within a unified Moldova that could act as a check on any westward move by changing governments in Chisinau. The memorandum was worked out through shuttle diplomacy by the deputy head of the Russian presidential administration, Dmitrii Kozak, between the Moldovan and Transnistrian sides in the summer and autumn of 2003, initially in response to a request by Voronin for a more active Russian mediation. The process ran parallel to the OSCE-led mediation effort, and the other mediators were kept largely in the dark about the process and Kozak's role (Hill 2012, 114–52). As it stood at the time of its proposed signing, the memorandum would have both guaranteed Transnistrian members of a proposed upper house in a unified Moldovan parliament effective veto powers over the vast majority of legislation and, according to a clause introduced in the final few days, allegedly at the behest of the Transnistrian leadership, provided for a Russian peacekeeping presence until 2020 (Kozak 2003; Hill 2012, 139, 147–48). The memorandum was due to be signed by Voronin and Smirnov with Putin present on November 24, 2003. However, Voronin called off the signing ceremony the night before, with Putin reportedly already on his way to his plane in Moscow. Voronin's decision appears to have been due both to Western pressure, with Western diplomats expressing particular concern about the Russian peacekeeping clause and the potentially unworkable political setup of the proposed federation, and emerging protests by the political opposition and civil society similar to those that had toppled Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze just a few days before (Löwenhardt 2004; Beyer 2010; Hill 2012, 155–56). The last-minute U-turn brought an abrupt end to the more cooperative period in Russian policy; it came as a great shock to Moscow and created long-lasting bad blood between the Russian and Moldovan sides (see for example the mutual recriminations between Kozak and a key Moldovan negotiator in Kolesnikov [2005] and Tcaciuc [2005]).

2003–2015: Coercion and Competitive Influence-Seeking

In the years following Kozak, Russian policy took a sharply assertive and coercive turn, involving military, economic, and political measures. Moscow unilaterally suspended its

troop withdrawal, leaving more than 40 trainloads of ammunition (58 had been withdrawn) and around 1,000 troops (MID 2005; IISS 2004, 91). Import bans were introduced on Moldovan meat, fruit, and vegetables in April and May 2005 and wines in March 2006, allegedly for health reasons; wine exports to Russia generated about USD200 million a year for Moldova (Drujinina 2005; "Chisinau says" 2005; Gamova and Simonian 2006). In January 2006 Gazprom cut off Moldova's gas supply for two weeks before it negotiated a gradual price increase in return for a majority share in the national gas company Moldovagaz (Chaika 2006).[5] Russian political and economic support for the Transnistrians also increased, including the reported establishment of a commission to deepen ties. This was not the first time Russia had used its economic or military levers to pressure Moldova. However, the combination of measures indicated a new level of coercive policy from Moscow. The positions of Moldova and Transnistria on the question of the region's status also hardened: the Moldovan parliament adopted a law in July 2005 reiterating Transnistria's status as a region within Moldova and excluding federalization, while the Transnistrian regime organized a referendum on independence in September 2006, with a reported turnout of 77 percent and 97 percent support for independence and the "subsequent free accession of Transnistria to the Russian Federation" (Solovev 2006c; Dubnov 2006).

While triggered by the Kozak debacle, Russia's coercive turn was reinforced by broader regional and international dynamics. This included the westward turn of other post-Soviet states in this period, most notably post–Orange Revolution Ukraine and post–Rose Revolution Georgia (both of which were also subject to import bans and/or gas cut-offs); the revival by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova of the GUAM organization (which Russia correctly perceived as strongly anti-Russian) in spring 2005; and increasing Western influence manifested through NATO and European Union (EU) expansion eastward in 2004 and the launch of the EU's European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003, which included both Moldova and Ukraine as participants. In February 2005 Voronin signed an EU–Moldova Action Plan as part of the ENP, and in elections the next month his formerly pro-Russian Communist Party retained a parliamentary majority on a platform of European integration (Gamova 2005; Prikhodko 2005). In March 2006, after initially dragging its feet due to Russian pressure, Ukraine tightened the customs regime on its border with Transnistria, complying with Moldovan requests to only allow exports stamped with official Moldovan stamps. This drew accusations of a "blockade" from Transnistria, which withdrew from the OSCE-led talks in retaliation, and Russia, which promised "humanitarian aid" to the Transnistrians (Solovev 2006a, 2006b; Solovev and Darin 2006). International pressure for Russia to withdraw its troops was maintained: led by the United States, Western countries made their ratification of the adapted Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty conditional on full Russian withdrawal, much to Russia's annoyance (OSCE 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006). In 2007, once it had become clear to Russia that the CFE treaty would indeed not be ratified, it introduced a "moratorium on compliance" with the treaty (MID 2007).

After the initial coercive turn post-Kozak, a partial thaw in Russian policy occurred in 2007–2008. The coercive measures had brought Voronin back to the table, and in 2007 Russia's import bans were partially lifted and the coercive energy policy somewhat eased, in return for such measures as Moldovan support for Russian WTO membership and an easing of the customs "blockade" against Transnistria (Gamova 2007; Kuzmin 2007; Vyzhutovich 2007). Even the Duma, traditionally Transnistria's staunchest supporter, became more lenient: when recommending in April 2008 that Russia recognize the Georgian separatist republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it stated that such measures were not needed for Transnistria, as "there [were] possibilities for a peaceful resolution of [that] conflict" (Allenova 2008) However, the improvement in bilateral relations was stalled by the election of a pro-European coalition government in Moldova in 2009, following allegations of electoral fraud by the Communists and street protests, and subsequent political stalemate as parliament failed to elect a permanent president to follow Voronin. After the third parliamentary election in Moldova in two years in November 2010, Russia attempted unsuccessfully to broker a more pro-Russian coalition government in Chisinau (Devyatkov 2012a, 56).

Regional and international factors gave reinforcing incentives for a more conciliatory policy in this period. Moldova's importance as a regional bargaining chip was reduced by Viktor Yanukovych's 2010 election as president of Ukraine and the extension of the lease for Russia's Black Sea Fleet naval base in Crimea the same year (Konovalov 2010). Russian–Western relations also improved during Dmitrii Medvedev's presidency (2008–2012). The June 2010 Meseberg Memorandum, concluded by German chancellor Angela Merkel and Medvedev, envisaged the establishment of an EU–Russia Political and Security Committee in return for the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict and raised hopes of a high-level solution to the conflict (Socor 2010). However, the process petered out, with "mixed signals and misjudgment" on both sides about what commitments had actually been made (Remler 2013). Transnistria returned to OSCE-led negotiations in September 2011 after five years away. Combined with the removal of Igor Smirnov from power through his loss in the first round of the December 2011 "presidential" election, this raised hopes about a reduction in Transnistrian intransigence. Smirnov's successor, Evgenii Shevchuk, made some limited progress with Moldova on technical cooperation, including by successfully negotiating the reopening of

freight traffic through Transnistria, closed since 2006, in March 2012 ("Moldaviia i" 2012). Moreover, in April 2012, the OSCE talks achieved an agreement on principles and an agenda for the talks, another sign of improved goodwill (OSCE 2012).

No breakthrough was reached, however, and domestic Russian, regional, and international events have combined to make Russian policy more assertive again since 2012. Putin's controversial return to the presidency in 2012 soured Russian–Western relations and the March 2012 dual appointments of Dmitrii Rogozin, a well-known Greater Russian nationalist who advocated strongly for Russian intervention in the 1992 war and had a reputation for intransigent diplomacy, as Special Representative of the Russian President on Transnistria and chairman of the Russian side of the Russia–Moldova intergovernmental cooperation commission, indicated a potentially antagonistic policy from Moscow (Socor 2012). Moreover, Putin's increasingly assertive promotion of Eurasian integration through the Russia–Belarus–Kazakhstan Customs Union–cum–Eurasian Economic Union put Russia on a collision course with a Moldovan government pursuing closer and closer relations with the EU under the aegis of the ENP's successor, the Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009. Indeed, with the EU and Moldova pushing ahead with their planned Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, in September 2013 Russia reintroduced import bans on Moldovan wine in an effort to make the Moldovans sign up to the Eurasian project instead (Heil 2013). Still, the Association Agreement was initialed, signed, and ratified between November 2013 and July 2014 despite vocal complaints from both Transnistria and Russia about the agreement's impact on Transnistria and amid growing regional and international tension over Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine. Russia promptly added Moldovan fruit to the list of banned imports in July 2014 and meat in October 2014 ("Russia Bans" 2014; "Russia to" 2014).

In addition to these tried and tested economic measures, Russia increasingly sought to influence the political process both in Chisinau and elsewhere in Moldova. In the winter of 2013–2014, bribes were reportedly channeled to Moldovan parliamentarians through the "mafioso" Renato Usatii in an attempt to bring down the government (Wilson 2014, 166). In February 2014, local authorities in the autonomous republic of Gagauzia organized a referendum, condemned by the national government, in which more than 97 percent of voters supported closer relations with the Customs Union and opposed further European integration ("Gagauzia Voters" 2014).[6] Before the November 2014 parliamentary election, Putin welcomed two leaders of the pro-Russian Socialist Party, Igor Dodon and Zinaida Greceanîi, to Moscow in a show of support ("Igor Dodon" 2014). However, the nominally pro-European political parties held on to a razor-thin majority, in large part due to the controversial disqualification of Patria, a pro-Russian party led by Usatii, immediately before the election on charges of having received eight million Moldovan lei in illegal support from Russia; other parties led by Usatii had previously been denied registration ("'Patria' removed" 2014; "Final election" 2014). Still, pro-Russian parties made substantial gains, with the Socialist Party winning the most votes and seats in parliament (20.51 percent of the vote and 25 of 101 seats). The March 2015 Gagauzia gubernatorial election was won by the strongly pro-Russian and Socialist Party-backed candidate Irina Vlah, and in the June 2015 local elections Usatii was elected mayor of the country's second-largest city, Bălți, while Greceanîi lost the Chisinau mayoral election to the pro-Western incumbent, Dorin Chirtoaca, and pro-Russian parties overall had mixed results (Vlas 2015; "Pro-EU Incumbent" 2015).

In the next three sections, I will draw out three conclusions from this narrative pertaining to the likelihood of Transnistria becoming a "next Crimea": First, that what Russia wants is influence over the whole of Moldova; Transnistria is just a means to an end. Second, that Russian policy in Moldova has been primarily reactive. And third, that Russia has had a remarkably limited ability to decisively influence events, even in Transnistria itself.

TRANSNISTRIA IS NOT RUSSIA'S OBJECTIVE

The first conclusion to be drawn from the above is that Russia has not cared about Transnistria per se. Its aim in Moldova has been to maintain as much influence as possible over the country as a whole. Its preferred way of achieving this has been to deal directly with governments in Chisinau, concluding bilateral treaties, seeking Chisinau's consent for a permanent Russian military presence or a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict on Russian terms, and pressuring the government toward choosing membership in Eurasian integration projects over European ones. Support for Transnistria's survival has primarily been a means to this end, a way of maintaining a bargaining chip vis-à-vis both Moldovan governments and Western actors.

This conclusion fits very closely with Russia's declared intentions in the post-Soviet space. Since at least the formulation of the 1993 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia's official policy in the region has been one of maintaining as much Russian influence as possible. The 1993 Concept officially defined the issues of Russians abroad and regional conflicts as both identity and security issues for Russia, and the entire post-Soviet space or "near abroad" as a strategically important region for Russia's security and future development, over which influence had to be exerted. It advocated that Moscow should protect Russian minorities in the former Soviet republics, prevent regional conflicts from escalating, and oppose increased third-party influence

in the region, using force if necessary ("Foreign Policy" 1993). This general aim has been remarkably consistent throughout the post-Soviet period, despite cosmetic changes in rhetoric, as demonstrated by the 2000, 2008, and 2013 foreign policy concepts ("Foreign Policy" 2000; "The Foreign" 2008; MID 2013), the 1997, 2000, and 2009 national security concepts/strategies ("Kontseptsiia natsionalnoi" 1997; "National Security" 2000; "Strategiia natsionalnoi" 2009), and the 1993, 2000, 2010, and 2014 military doctrines ("The Basic" 1993; "Military Doctrine" 2000; "Voennaia doktrina" 2010; Putin 2014b).

As can be seen in the above narrative, the reasons for the establishment of this approach as official policy in the early 1990s were primarily located in regional events and domestic politics, while its prolongation in the 2000s became increasingly about international factors. During Yeltsin's first presidency, the instability and regional uncertainty caused by the Soviet Union's sudden demise and collapse provided politicians who wanted a dominant regional role for Russia the chance to justify this through the perceived needs to protect the rights of the new Russian diaspora against the threatening nationalizing projects of the newly independent Soviet states and to secure regional stability and Russia's security, thereby pushing the government toward a more assertive position (Kolstø 2000; Melvin 1995, 6–7; Lo 2002, 49–50). Adding to this initial impetus of regional instability and domestic identity politics, since the mid-1990s and increasingly since the early 2000s, a key driver of Russian policy both in Moldova specifically and in the post-Soviet space in general was the perception that it was losing relative regional influence to the West, represented by the expanding membership and influence of the EU and NATO and the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine (see for example Devyatkov 2012b, 191–92; Mankoff 2009; Nygren 2008). Moldova and Transnistria were not necessarily vital security concerns for Moscow in themselves, but were caught up in the broader regional dynamic. Moldova was seen by Moscow as a potential "domino" for Western influence in more important regional countries such as Ukraine, leading Russia to insist on Moldova's neutrality and to pursue continued influence in the country (Devyatkov 2012a, 55). Added to this, Russia increasingly saw influence in its own neighborhood as a prerequisite of its self-identification as a great power (Mankoff 2009). As Dov Lynch sums up, Moldova and Transnistria became "a small part of a wider game [...] to ensure that Russia's voice remain[ed] heard across European security matters" (Lynch 2006, 64).

The implication of the conclusion that Russia cares little about Transnistria per se is that any Russian move to annex the de facto republic or recognize it as a sovereign state is unlikely. Such a move would deprive Russia of its perhaps primary bargaining chip in the struggle for influence over Moldova. Pål Kolstø (2014) argues that Russia "would immediately lose whatever leverage it may still have in Moldovan politics." That may be a slight exaggeration given Russia's above-mentioned close ties to politicians in Moldova proper and Gagauzia. Moreover, while Moldovan politicians and the Moldovan population would be loath to see Transnistria formally separate from Moldova, it is unclear whether the return to the Moldovan political scene of a couple hundred thousand pro-Russian voters and the Transnistrian elite, tipping the overall balance firmly toward pro-Russian political forces, would be welcomed.

If Transnistria itself was a prize asset in Russian identity and strategic thinking, like Crimea, this first reason would be less important. After all, Russia arguably wanted to maintain influence over the whole of Ukraine as well, and yet it still annexed Crimea, greatly damaging its relations with Kiev. However, Transnistria is nowhere near as important to Russia as Crimea. Consider Putin's justifications for the Crimea annexation in his speech to the Russian Federal Assembly on March 18, 2014 (2014a). These ranged from Crimea as the location of Prince Vladimir's adoption of Orthodoxy, which "predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus" to a mention of the "legendary city" of Sevastopol, home of the Black Sea Fleet, and a lamentation of the 1954 decision to transfer Crimea from the Russian to the Ukrainian Soviet republic. Russia had not simply been "robbed" when Crimea became part of independent Ukraine, Putin argued, it had been "plundered." Such rhetorical flourishes reflected the central position of Crimea as a "lost" Russian land in Russian nationalist discourse, a discourse that Putin had increasingly drawn on in his third term as president (Sakwa 2015, 68; Hopf 2016). Similar words would be unthinkable in a speech about Transnistria and Tiraspol; even the discourse about a divided Russian nation that has become prominent in recent years would have limited purchase applied to that tiny strip of land and its motley crew of inhabitants (Laruelle 2015). Transnistria may have had relevance as part of the wider region of Novorossiia, but even that term has disappeared from Putin's discourse since spring 2014 (Laruelle 2016). This difference also applies to Moldova and Ukraine in general. Ukraine and Ukrainians are regularly referred to by Russian leaders as brothers of Russia, part of the same family with the same religious and cultural heritage (Hopf 2016, 245). No such pride of place is given to Moldova or Moldovans. Russian interests and concerns in the country are more limited and concerned primarily with geopolitical aims such as limiting NATO expansion.

REACTIVE RUSSIA

The second conclusion to draw is that Russian policy in Moldova has been, on the whole, reactive. Despite a relatively clear goal of maintaining influence and a few key aims meant to achieve this goal, such as Moldovan consent

to a military presence and a solution to the Transnistrian conflict on Russian terms, there is little evidence of a concerted, overall plan. Instead, Russian policy initiatives frequently appeared driven by external events, as reactions to developments beyond policymakers' control or unrelated to Moldova and Transnistria themselves, such as power struggles in Moscow.

The prime example of this was the way in which Russia became directly involved in the conflict in the chaotic post-Soviet months of 1992. Claus Neukirch argues that the Fourteenth Army had stopped taking orders from Moscow at least from around September 1991, and the Russian government could not be held responsible for its actions until June 1992, when it installed Lebed as commander (Neukirch 2002, 235–36). Lebed's subsequent operation against the Moldovan army had several reinforcing motivations: stopping the fighting from escalating further, securing Russian control over the Fourteenth Army's personnel (who had been joining the Transnistrian militias) and weapons (which had been stolen or sold by corrupt local commanders), and silencing the nationalist forces in Moscow accusing Yeltsin of inaction (Kaufman 2001, 157–58; Ozhiganov 1997, 182; Devyatkov 2012b, 191). These included the vice president, Aleksandr Rutskoi, who visited Transnistria along with presidential adviser Sergei Stankevich in April 1992 and openly supported the separatists, the dominant forces in the Supreme Soviet and the Congress of Deputies, and several civil society groups calling for the protection of Russians abroad (Kondratov 1992a, 1992b; "The Sixth" 1992).

Other seemingly proactive Russian measures, including the Moscow Memorandum and the Kozak Memorandum, also appear to have been motivated to a large degree by either reactive or external motivations. The Moscow Memorandum was first launched in the summer of 1996, between the first and second rounds of a Russian presidential election in which Yeltsin faced a strong challenger in Communist Party leader Gennadii Ziuganov. A more active policy in the post-Soviet space and the endorsement of General Lebed, who had himself been eliminated as a candidate in the first round with 14.5 percent of the vote, were potentially crucial for Yeltsin's chances of reelection (Ionescu 1996). The memorandum was thus almost certainly motivated as much by domestic concerns as by some proactive desire to resolve the Transnistrian conflict or realize Russian aims in Moldova. As Moldova's President Snegur eventually refused to sign the agreement, it was finalized only after the more Moscow-friendly Petru Lucinschi won Moldova's presidential election in December 1996 (Selivanov 1996; Timoshenko 1997). Lucinschi insisted on a reference to Moldova's territorial integrity, and a compromise was reached whereby a clause was added referring to a "common state" (Prikhodko and Gornostaev 1997). However, the agreement was vague concerning practical measures for conflict resolution, and was not followed up by Moscow with sufficient pressure on the elites in Chisinau and Tiraspol, who interpreted the agreement and in particular the idea of a "common state" in widely different ways (Vinogradov 1998; Prikhodko and Gornostaev 2000; Hill 2012, 56). This showed the limits of Russia's interest.

The fact that the Kozak Memorandum would on paper have led to a realization of Russia's aims in the conflict has been taken as evidence of its proactive, manipulative nature. However, even though the secretive mediation process revealed Russia's "habit of unilateral action" (Lynch 2004), it does not automatically follow that it was a carefully calculated part of a "project" to reestablish Moscow's power in the region (cf. Baev 2008, 69). Several factors were combining in 2003 to provide a strong incentive for Russia to try to institutionalize its influence in Moldova. Chief among these was the upcoming 2004 eastward expansion of NATO, which was to include Moldova's neighbor Romania. President Voronin told the then head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, William Hill, in early 2003 that he suspected the Russians wanted to legitimize a military presence before that took place, and that pressure on the Moldovan government to consent to a presence had increased (Hill 2012, 94–95). The EU's scheduled expansion in 2004 and the 2003 launch of the ENP had also prompted rival Eurasian integration projects to gather steam, with Russia putting pressure on Moldova to join the plans for a single economic space between Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine agreed in February 2003. Added to this was the December 31, 2003, deadline for Russia's full withdrawal of leftover Fourteenth Army military equipment from Moldova, as initially agreed for 2002 at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit (OSCE 1999). Moscow had maintained after Istanbul that it saw withdrawal as conditional on conflict resolution, and post-Kozak argued that the "so-called" Istanbul commitments were only political and not legally binding (Prikhodko 2000; Sisoev 2004; OSCE 2004). Nevertheless, between 1999 and 2003 it had also signaled that the deadline was taken seriously and removed large parts of the designated equipment (Putin 2000a, 2001; Hill 2012). Ignoring the deadline would thus have led at least to a loss of face, and the pressure was on to resolve the matter before the upcoming OSCE Ministerial Council in Maastricht on December 1–2, 2003.

There was also added impetus from both international mediators and Moldova for a solution. The 2003 Dutch OSCE chairmanship had made the Transnistrian conflict a priority, and President Voronin had promoted a commission to draft a joint constitution, requested more active Russian involvement in the form of a presidential representative (a role Kozak eventually filled), and showed an openness to accept a federal solution despite widespread skepticism in Moldova (Löwenhardt 2004; Hill 2012, 86–87). An early draft of Kozak's memorandum, as seen by Hill in September 2003, was closer to Moldova's position than Transnistria's, reflecting the fact that Kozak's

mediation was partly a Moldovan-initiated process (Hill 2012, 116–17). As acknowledged by Hill, in order to be successful in achieving both sides' agreement, Kozak would have to move closer to the Transnistrian position, which had always included demands for a Russian military guarantee. Russia almost certainly used the Transnistrian position to some extent as a convenient cover for its own interests. Combined with the resources put into the process in the form of Kozak's shuttle diplomacy, the memorandum could be called proactive. However, it was also a reactive attempt to realize two related Russian aims in the face of increasing Western influence: the conflict would be solved (at least on paper) on terms favorable to Russia and by Russia, reasserting its regional influence through the assumption of a perceived peacemaking success and achieving its aim of institutionalized influence without having to break its Istanbul commitments.

There were several reasons for Russia's Transnistria policy to be reactive rather than proactive in the 1990s and early 2000s, despite the clear aim of increased influence. First, for a long time Russia simply did not have the capacity to use scarce resources on an issue that was secondary to several other domestic and foreign policy questions. The aim of regional hegemony was usually pursued "on the cheap"; this changed only partly in the 2000s when Russia had more economic resources (Lo 2002, 76–77; Mankoff 2009, 81–82). Second, the co-ordination between the different institutions involved in policymaking in the post-Soviet space, including the ministries of foreign affairs and defense and the presidential administration, was often poor, in the manner of "bulldogs fighting under the rug" to increase their influence (Mankoff 2009, chapter 2).

One could argue that the evolution of Russian policy since 2003 indicates the development of a more proactive approach. The more coordinated coercive approach in the years after Voronin's Kozak snub, the subsequent heavy-handed promotion of regional integration projects, and the more direct attempts to influence national and regional Moldovan politics all point in this direction. Russia has certainly developed more strings to its bow in terms of how it seeks to assert its influence, both in Moldova and the post-Soviet space as a whole. It has also become much more assertive and willing to use force to achieve its aims in the region, as evidenced by the 2008 Georgian war and the ongoing Ukraine crisis, in contrast to what many Russians saw as a "supine and defeatist" foreign policy in the 1990s (Sakwa 2008, 249–50).

However, a substantial part of the explanation for this more proactive approach has been a Russian reaction against the perceived threat to its influence in the post-Soviet space, represented by the eastward expansion and increased influence of the EU and NATO. The extent to which this factor is decisive in explaining Russian assertiveness is hotly debated, with many analysts preferring to emphasize instead factors such as Putin's personality or Russian great-power ideology as drivers of policy (see Götz 2016 for an overview). But that it forms part of the explanation is without doubt, and in the case of Moldova is supported by the coercive turn in policy from late 2003. As stated openly from at least the 1993 Foreign Policy Concept onward, Moscow had always opposed increased third-party influence in the post-Soviet space. However, until 2003–2004, Moscow did not need a proactive policy to achieve this aim. In a country like Moldova, Russia's troop presence, the unresolved Transnistrian conflict, and Moldova's dependence on Russian gas and export markets afforded Russia the de facto influence it desired. In Devyatkov's (2012a, 55) words, Russia's policy was one of "protectiveness and reactivity," "mostly driven by fears that the post-Soviet space [would] fragment." The fact that policy only became consistently assertive after 2003–2004, when the West's growing influence became clear through events like Voronin's Kozak snub and subsequent Western turn, points to a fundamentally reactive rather than proactive Russian policy.

Thus, while Russian policy in Moldova has become more assertive in recent years, this has primarily been in response to and in an attempt to revive lost influence. Moreover, even with the development of a more proactive policy, Russia has been unable to manipulate events fully to its advantage.

MOSCOW'S LIMITED POWER

The third and final conclusion to draw from a survey of Russia's Moldova policy over the past two decades is that for a country with aspirations to great power dominance, Russia has had a hard time imposing its will. This has been true of its relations with successive Moldovan governments, which have increasingly been assisted by the possibility of support from the West. However, it has also been the case in its relations with the Transnistrian regime, questioning the notion, prevalent in the West and in official Moldovan discourse, that the Transnistrian leadership has been merely a foreign stooge more or less directly controlled from Moscow (Lynch 2004, 41, 74–81).

Russia's limited power vis-à-vis Moldova has been evident from its inability to get successive Moldovan governments to agree to either of its key aims. Moldovan leaders have frustrated Moscow at several moments in the past 25 years, including when President Snegur refused to sign the Moscow Memorandum and his successor Lucinschi insisted on a reference to Moldova's territorial integrity. President Voronin's last-minute refusal to sign the Kozak Memorandum was Russia's perhaps greatest failure, and was the moment when the growing relative influence of the West first manifested itself. More recent attempts at manipulation or influence, including Russia's failed bid to create a pro-Russian coalition government in 2010 and the attempts to bribe parliamentarians in 2013–2014, also failed

to produce the desired results. The suspension of Usatii's party days before the November 2014 election, carried out by Moldovan institutions controlled by the then government, shows the relative power advantage that can be gained from local control.

Despite its reliance on Russian support, the Transnistrian leadership was also frequently a challenging partner for Russia, rather than a puppet it could control at will. Even if Tiraspol could not directly oppose Moscow, Igor Smirnov ("president" from 1991 to 2011) and his allies used their power on the ground to counteract Russian troop withdrawal, pressure Moscow for financial compensation for munitions they argued were Transnistrian property, and oppose a solution to the conflict that did not take account of their interests (Prikhodko and Gornostaev 2000; Sergeev and Volkhonskii 2000). As argued by Hill, had the Russian government put all its might behind forcing the Transnistrians to comply with the withdrawal of Russian weapons, Tiraspol would have had to comply. However, several of the local Russian commanders and soldiers still sympathized with the Transnistrian cause, and Moscow was often reluctant to force the issue (Hill 2012, 69–70). Tiraspol's moves could be petty, but effective: following the conclusion of the Moscow Memorandum, for example, the Transnistrians failed to show up for a scheduled meeting between the mediators and the two sides hosted by Russia at Meshcherino in September 1997, marking "the beginning of a four-year pattern of obstruction, evasion, and delay" (Hill 2012, 56). The September 2006 referendum on Transnistria's independence was a good example of Russia's and Transnistria's diverging interests. Moscow's original support for the referendum, probably motivated by a desire to dissuade Western states from recognizing Kosovo by showing the precedent it could set, weakened when the Tiraspol authorities formulated the referendum question to include a reference to Transnistria's "future integration" into Russia. This was not part of Russia's plans and caused frustration and irritation even among Tiraspol's supporters in Moscow (Solovev 2006c).

Corruption in Smirnov's immediate circle also contributed to dissatisfaction in Moscow when it emerged, for example, that large amounts of "humanitarian aid" delivered by Moscow in 2006 had been used for state and security services wages and that gas revenues due to Gazprom were being siphoned off (Solovev 2008a).[7] From around 2000, Russia attempted to build up an opposition to Smirnov, probably with the hope of eventually replacing him with a more easily controllable leader or make him more controllable by reminding him that he was replaceable. However, he was reelected in both 2001 and 2006 (ICG 2004, 6–7). When Smirnov's political power was finally broken with his exit in the first round of the December 2011 "presidential" election, Moscow's preferred candidate, Anatolii Kaminskii, proceeded to lose in the second round. The winner, Evgenii Shevchuk, was equally pro-Russian and the result thus represented only a small loss of prestige for Russia, but the process once again illustrated Russia's limited ability to dictate the course of events on the ground (Reutov 2011). As long as cautious support for Tiraspol was seen as a key tool in Russia's quest for continued influence in Moldova, the Transnistrian regime was able to resist Russian pressure to a certain extent, safe in the knowledge that Russian support would not be completely cut.

CONCLUSION

Prediction is perilous, but based on the above analysis of Russian policy toward Moldova and Transnistria over the past two-and-a-half decades, it is clear that Transnistria is very unlikely to be the "next Crimea." Aside from the practical difficulties of annexing and administering a territory with which it does not share a border, such a move would undermine Russia's attempts to maintain influence in Moldova proper and would be worth little in terms of strategic or political benefit. Of course, similar things could have been said of Crimea in February 2014, and a strong case can be made that the occupation and annexation of Crimea were themselves reactive, opportunistic moves (see, e.g., Sakwa 2015; Treisman 2016). However, Crimea had both much greater strategic significance as the home of the Black Sea Fleet and a much more central place in Russian nationalist discourse than Transnistria (or Moldova) will ever have. Russia is more likely to pursue a policy of "more of the same"—support for a special status for Transnistria within Moldova that would act as a check on Moldova's westward orientation, as part of a broader policy of support for pro-Russian political forces in the rest of Moldova in the hope of limiting Western influence. While recent reductions in financial support for Transnistria indicate resource constraints and a potential weariness with the unresolved conflict, it is also unlikely that Russia would accept a resolution of the status question not taking account of its interests, unless it had other cast-iron guarantees of its continued influence in Moldova, which no one is likely to give (Beyer and Wolff 2016). The possibility of Russian recognition and/or annexation of Transnistria cannot be ruled out completely. However, going by Russia's reactive policy so far, a change in this direction would only be likely if there was a substantial shift in Moldova's political orientation, for example toward open pursuit of NATO membership, and particularly if such a change came about as a result of a Maidan-style revolution. Even then it would be unclear whether seizing Transnistria would help Russia's objectives or if Moscow would care sufficiently to do so, but in the context of an already polarized international environment where it has little left to lose, it could decide to cut its losses.

This of course assumes that there is in fact no proactive grand plan driving Russian policy that has merely been halted due to limited resources. One could argue that the

annexation of Crimea has set a new precedent in terms of how far Russia is willing to go to achieve its aims in the post-Soviet space. This may be true, but it does not follow that Russia's interests and priorities are uniform across the post-Soviet space. Even a cursory glance at the separate post-Soviet conflicts reveals a different approach from Russia in each case, rather than some blanket imperialist project (Markedonov 2015), and the same is true for policies toward the different post-Soviet states. Thus, while one should not draw conclusions about Russia's policy in Ukraine or Crimea based on its approach to Moldova or Transnistria, the same applies vice versa: each case has a specific context and dynamic that should be analyzed in its own right, informing our understandings of Russia's multiple policies (rather than one single policy) in the post-Soviet space. This should make Western policymakers think twice about tolerating the undemocratic tendencies and corruption of the nominally pro-European parts of Moldova's elite, at least if such indulgence is made on the assumption of creating a bulwark against imminent Russian aggression. Recent protests and elections in Moldova indicate that such indulgence only adds to popular frustration and increases the likelihood of pro-Russian parties' success.

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NOTES

1. For the sake of simplicity, the Romanian "Transnistria" is used throughout this article both for the separatist republic and for the geographical area it encompasses, while the Russian "Dnestr" is used about the river separating this area from the rest of Moldova. No political stance is implied.
2. As with more recent referendums in the post-Soviet space, it is doubtful whether this result accurately represented public opinion (see Kaufman 2001, 150–51). However, it is entirely plausible that a majority of the Transnistrian population did support independence, given the hostile rhetoric in both Moldova and Transnistria at the time.
3. On May 27, Yeltsin ordered the Army's withdrawal, but his order had little or no effect on its dispositions and a serious attempt to implement it would potentially have caused mutiny on the ground (Litovkin 1992; Taylor 1997).
4. This did not change with the change of "president" in Transnistria from Igor Smirnov to Evgenii Shevchuk in 2011, although Shevchuk was more pragmatic regarding practical and technical cooperation.
5. Both these and previous gas price increases arguably had commercial as well as political motivations, in particular ones in the late 1990s. See Devyatkov (2012b, 185-86).
6. Gagauzia is a small territory in southern Moldova with a population of around 100,000–150,000. The Turkic Christian Gagauz ethnic group makes up more than 80 percent of the territory's population. The territory shared similar concerns to Transnistria in the early 1990s but an autonomy arrangement was negotiated and signed in 1994. However, it is still the most pro-Russian region in Moldova outside of Transnistria. See Tudoroiu (2016) for an in-depth analysis of recent events in the region.
7. Gazprom's non-collection of payment from Transnistria was almost certainly intentional and meant as an unofficial subsidy; the problem arose when it emerged that Smirnov's government had collected payments from the population that then went unaccounted for.

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