

ANTAGONIZING THE NEIGHBORHOOD: PUTIN'S FROZEN CONFLICTS AND THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, EURASIA, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

March 11, 2020

Serial No. 116–103

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Affairs



Available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/>, <http://docs.house.gov/>,
or <http://www.govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

39–988PDF

WASHINGTON : 2021

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ANTAGONIZING THE NEIGHBORHOOD: PUTIN'S FROZEN CONFLICTS AND THE CON- FLICT IN UKRAINE

Wednesday, March 11, 2020

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, EURASIA, AND THE
ENVIRONMENT
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
Washington, DC,

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2 p.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. William Keating (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. KEATING. Last month marked 6 years since Russia invaded Ukraine, 6 years of conflict in Ukraine, and it is not cold by any means, with cease-fires that failed to hold to this day.

I would like to start the hearing with a brief clip, if we could, from less than a year ago, because I think it is important to remember how devastating this conflict has been and how, importantly, it continues today.

[Video shown.]

Mr. KEATING. I also would like to recognize Ambassador Yelchenko of Ukraine and a delegation of Ukrainian veterans. And thank you for joining us; if you could please stand and be recognized.

[Applause.]

Mr. KEATING. The subcommittee's meeting today, as I mentioned, is to hear testimony on Putin's frozen conflicts and conflict in Ukraine. Without objection, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, extraneous material for the record, subject to the length and limitation in the rules.

I will now make an opening statement. As we have seen from the films that we have just witnessed, the conflict in Ukraine continues. This is Ukraine. However, when we look around the region, Ukraine simply is the most recent incidents where Russia has exploited divisions and deployed resources to destabilize the borders of its post-Soviet neighbors.

Today we are looking at the conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Each took a place in different decades, and Russia's intervention in each was very different as well. However, to this day, none of these countries maintains full control over its borders, and it is instead trapped in the incredibly precarious situation of striving to make critical reforms to strengthen democratic governance and develop closer ties to the West, all while being unable to fully govern and serve all of its citizens.

In Moldova fighting ceased in the 1990's when the conflict displaced some 130,000 people in the multiethnic region of Transnistria. However, despite decades now of dedicated diplomatic efforts, Russian troops remain in the region, and as recently as 2018 were reported to be carrying out military exercises there.

In Georgia, more than 800 military personnel and civilians died in the conflict, and 20,000 Georgia residents were forced to leave their homes in now-occupied regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Ethnic Georgians who remained faced harassment and discrimination and lack access to many basic services and economic opportunities.

In Ukraine, the war still continues in the east. Nearly one and a half million Ukrainians have been displaced, and over 13,000 lives have been lost, including over 3,000 civilians. In Crimea, which was once an economic hub of tourism for Ukraine, people there essentially live in a police State.

It is important that we take the time to assess these conflicts for a few reasons. First and foremost, because of the incredible human toll they have taken on local communities. Innocent civilians have lived through these wars, this destruction, because of Russia's arrogance and aggression. We must not lose sight of how these conflicts have directly harmed generations of Moldovans, Georgians, and Ukrainians.

Further, it is important that we remember that these countries are pro-Western. They are working to strengthen their democracies and ties with Europe and the United States, both economically and in terms of our security partnerships. These are our friends and partners.

If we are to succeed and overcome in the global crisis and challenges we face in climate change, terrorism, and threats from Russia and China, our best path forward is to work together in a broad coalition of partners who share our democratic values. And these countries will be strong partners, once they have achieved sovereignty over their own borders.

Russia clearly knows that, too, and that is the reason why this is not a time for us to let our support wane from these countries, or let politics get in the way of our clear security interest in this region, because finally we cannot be naive and act as if Russian aggression is over. The Kremlin continues to identify fissures in the West and deploy minimal resources to tear wide open and allow them to stay frozen and festering.

We need an informed, realistic response to Russia's tactics. So far, we have failed to reach resolutions to any of these conflicts. Instead, have allowed them to remain distractions that pull resources away from the critical work we must be doing to grow and strengthen our coalition of allies to address the shared challenges and threats ahead.

We did not plan for the conflict in Moldova, nor after that the conflict in Georgia, nor after that the conflict in Ukraine. And, still, none of these conflicts are resolved. It is past time we identify why our efforts so far have not been successful, change course to not repeat the same mistakes, and learn from these conflicts, so that we are prepared to address what we should assume will be inevitable future Russian aggression in the region.

That is why I am pleased we are joined by a distinguished panel of witnesses who can speak to these realities and the realities on the ground, and our efforts to date in resolving them. Thank you all for being here, traveling great distances to join us, and I turn now to the ranking member, Representative Kinzinger, for his opening statement.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To our guests testifying, thank you for being here. To our guests here, thank you for being here as well.

One thing that we need to remember is Russia is kind of a paper tiger. So, militarily, whenever the United States pushes back on Russia, they are quiet. Whenever Turkey pushes back, frankly, on Russia, they grow quiet. They are good at going up to a brick wall, but obviously stopping when they hit that because they have no ability to make it through.

I remember during the initial Crimea situation I was downstairs on the treadmill watching the news, and I remember seeing I think it was a Ukrainian naval commander that stood and faced down Russian forces. And he said, "The United States is with us." And I remember watching that on the treadmill and getting pretty choked up because I knew what it meant to be America and to be an American, and I was very proud.

When we look at the conflicts right now in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, it is important to note that five conflicts exist inside these countries, all carrying their own unique problems. They have one distinct common denominator, however, and that is Russia. These conflicts have shown Russia's willingness to use an advanced set of tools to prevent nations that used to be within the Soviet sphere of influence from moving closer to Western institutions.

One of the five tools developed and deployed by the Kremlin was to hide behind the guise of protecting ethnic Russians across the region. While open hostilities between Russia and Georgia have been going on since the fall of the USSR, it was Putin's distribution of passports to Georgian citizens in 2002 that laid the groundwork for Russian intervention in 1908.

We now see the Russian-occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia slowly moving their borders to occupy more Georgia territory. Many ethnic Georgians in these regions have fled for fear of persecution, and some have died given the lack of medical care provided inside these areas. In Ukraine, Russia used, quote, "little green men" in Crimea and the Donetsk regions. This tactic has allowed the Kremlin to deny any involvement in the invasion and occupation of these territories, even though we know quite better.

As a result, nearly 6 million Ukrainians are now living under the control of Russia and their proxies. This may be one of the most pressing foreign policy issues that this subcommittee faces. What happens there is important to the Transatlantic relationship and to our national security.

Both Ukraine and Georgia have been stalwart allies of the United States since gaining their independence. The continuous provocations by the Russian Federation must be dealt with. While these cases outline the fragile situation Ukraine and Georgia find themselves in, I believe there is a silver lining.

Russia intervened in both countries out of fear that freedom and democracy were approaching their doorstep. Both Ukraine and Georgia had expressed interest in increasing their cooperation with the West, especially with NATO. Putin intervened to prevent democratic values from taking hold in the region. However, this tactic drastically failed.

Last year, the Ukrainians elected a political outsider who ran on an anti-corruption platform and pledged to push back on Russia's malign influence as president. Mr. Zelensky has got a difficult road ahead of him, and the United States and our European partners must be willing to assist Ukraine in countering the Kremlin.

Since Georgia independence in 1991, we have witnessed the Georgia people march toward democracy and a deeper partnership with the West. Just this weekend, our allies in Georgia proved that while Russia occupies their territory, it would not halt them from their goals of EU and NATO accession. Democracy is not easy. It needs to be cared for, and it needs to be fought for. That is what occurred in Georgia.

Following months of negotiations, protests, and violence in the streets, we saw a political compromise rarely seen in established democracies like the United States, let alone a young democracy like Georgia. With the help of the American Embassy in Tbilisi, and our new Ambassador, Kelly Degnan, we witnessed the ruling Georgian Dream Party agree to transition toward a proportional electoral system.

The ruling party willingly gave up some of their power to strengthen and protect their nation's democracy. If this does not demonstrate the Kremlin's failed strategy, I do not know what does. There is still work to be done in Georgia, like ensuring the 2020 parliamentary elections are free from interference and strengthening the business environment to allow Americans and European investment, but our Georgian allies must be commended for their work to defend their democracy.

Again, I want to thank the panel for joining us today, and I want to thank the chairman for calling this. We will have plenty to talk about, and I yield back to the chairman.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you. Now, for a 1-minute opening, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Chairman Keating and Ranking Member Kinzinger, for holding this important hearing on Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. And thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

The fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's marked a critical turning point for freedom and democracy in Europe. For the first time in more than a century, countries in Eastern Europe would have the opportunity to choose the path of democracy and self-government over the tyranny of Communism and totalitarian rule.

For many nations, however, these ambitions were often undermined by Russian desires to prevent these nations from moving closer to the West and away from their influence.

The first decades of the 21st century have seen Russia seek to undermine and outright halt democratic ambitions and sow discord and conflict in former Soviet countries, thus escalating tensions with the West and reviving long-held fears of an aggressively ex-

pansionistic Russia determined to maintain the stronghold on its former satellites.

I look forward to today's hearings with today's witnesses and to a really informative discussion on this very important issue.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. I will now introduce our panel of witnesses. Ambassador Daniel Baer is an American politician and former diplomat currently working as a senior fellow in the Europe Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He served in the Obama Administration's State Department, first as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and then as United States Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe from 2013 to 2017, directly engaging with Russian diplomatic representatives over the conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

Mr. Simon Ostrovsky is an award-winning documentary film maker, an investigative journalist, best known for his coverage of the 2014 Crimea crisis and the war in Eastern Ukraine for Vice News Service where he investigated and made clear that Russia used unmarked soldiers to annex Crimea and highlighted the real and devastating effects on the civilian populations in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

For his coverage of the war, he was awarded the prestigious DuPont Award from Columbia University and was nominated for two Emmys.

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan—is that correct?—is an International Crisis Group analyst for the Eastern Neighborhood. Based in the Tbilisi, she researches and produces reports on regional security issues in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

Ms. Vartanyan travels frequently to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, providing updates on the increasing deteriorating living conditions of those who remain these occupied territories. She has worked for several other news outlets in the past and won the first EU Monitoring Mission's Special Prize in Peace Journalism in 2013.

Mr. Stephen Nix is Regional Program Director for Eurasia in the International Republican Institute. He previously worked at the U.S. Agency for International Development and spent time living in Ukraine. There he served as an outside legal counsel for the Committee on Legal Reform in the Ukrainian parliament.

Mr. Nix's polling work at IRI has provided policymakers with a window into the attitudes of Ukrainians and ethnic Russians living throughout the territories of Ukraine, as well as Georgia and Moldova.

We appreciate all of you being here today, look forward to your testimony. Please limit your testimony to 5 minutes. And without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the permanent record.

I will now go to Ambassador Baer.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DAN BAER, SENIOR FELLOW, EUROPE PROGRAM, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE, FORMER UNITED STATES AMBASSADOR TO THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE

Mr. BAER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and members of the committee. Thank you for holding this hearing and for inviting me to testify alongside such distinguished fellow panelists.

When I was serving overseas, Simon's reporting was a crucial source of information about what was happening on the front lines. I remember when he was captured by militants, beaten, and held in a cellar for several days—a reminder of the risks that journalists like Simon take so that the rest of us can know what is happening.

I am grateful to be here with Ms. Vartanyan and Mr. Nix, too. Crisis Group and IRI do great work around the world, and they attract great people.

In recent years, we have devoted more attention to understanding how the U.S. should manage and respond to China's increasing influence and assertiveness. This is prudent. However, our focus on China should not be a get out of jail free card for Vladimir Putin, nor can we afford to allow our own domestic political convulsions to pervert U.S. foreign policy.

Members of this committee took different votes on impeachment. They should not take different positions on national security threats going forward.

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

Putin uses his backyard as a testing ground for tactics that he can deploy elsewhere, including against the United States and our allies. We saw the invasion of Crimea by little green men, Russian forces that, contrary to the laws of war, did not wear identifying insignia. In Donetsk and Luhansk, the Russian military experimented with techniques that are more often associated with non-State actors in order to carry out their military objectives.

Putin has weaponized energy security, coercing governments by turning off or threatening to turn off natural gas. Cyber attacks are another weapon in Putin's arsenal of aggression. Many Americans were aghast that Russia intervened so dramatically in our 2016 election. None of our friends in Georgia, Ukraine, or Moldova were surprised. They have been dealing with Russian active measures and opportunistic politicians who take advantage of them for years.

Under Putin, Clausewitz's famous aphorism that "War is the continuation of politics by other means" has been inverted. For Putin, intervention in politics is the continuation of war by other means.

My fellow panelists will speak to the humanitarian cost of the conflicts, and these costs should not be seen as distinct from strategic ones. Humanitarian disasters have a destabilizing effect and

represent lost economic opportunity in addition to their human costs.

Looking forward, the U.S. should continue to support the sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, within their internationally recognized borders. In the case of Ukraine and Georgia, this includes continued security assistance and cooperation, which should be coupled with political support and public backing.

In addition, we should continue to invest in European security more broadly, including the European Deterrence Initiative. Furthermore, we should work with NATO and our partners in the region, including Ukraine and Georgia, to coordinate strategy in the Black Sea, which Putin uses as a launch pad to wreak havoc in the Middle East.

The U.S. should remain a resolute partner to Ukraine in its quest to build a more robust system of rule of law and to pursue the reforms that the Ukrainian people recognize as imperative to deliver a better future for their children. Ukraine civil society and independent journalists hold the government to account, and we should take heed of their warnings when things are off track.

In Georgia, just last weekend, the major parties agreed on a framework that, if implemented, lays the groundwork for constructive democratic parliamentary elections later this year. We must support it.

And, Mr. Kinzinger, I saw your statement of support, in addition to Ambassador Degnan's, this week.

The Trump Administration rightfully sanctioned the corrupt former chair of the Democratic Party in Moldova, Vlad Plahotniuc. There have been recent reports, however, that despite travel sanctions, Plahotniuc has been in the United States. This makes our commitment to enforcing consequences for corrupt actors look flimsy and raises questions about why he is being allowed to flout our sanctions. He and any family members that are under sanctions should be removed immediately.

Reportedly, the Trump Administration is planning to make a decision this week about the future of U.S. participation in the Open Skies Treaty. Open Skies has been a tool for showing support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. It is true, the Russians have been uncooperative in their participation in Open Skies and have often acted in bad faith, but we should hold them accountable. Pulling out of the OST would hand Putin a victory.

In closing, I want to again thank Mr. Keating, Mr. Kinzinger, and members of the committee. I hope the committee will continue to engage on this topic and others and will call government witnesses to explain and defend the Administration's approach to these difficult issues.

I am happy to endeavor to answer any questions, and I appreciate your submitting my longer statement for the record.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Baer follows:]



CARNEGIE
ENDOWMENT FOR
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Congressional Testimony

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

Daniel Baer

Senior Fellow

Europe Program

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Testimony before the House of Representatives
Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on
Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

March 11, 2020

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

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

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

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

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

Strategic implications of Putin's aggression

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humanitarian costs of Putin’s aggression

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

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

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

What the U.S. should do

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

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

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

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

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

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

Support Domestic reforms

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

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

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

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

Maintain our toolbox beyond the bilateral relationships

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

I am happy to endeavor to answer any questions.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.
Mr. OSTROVSKY.

**STATEMENT OF SIMON OSTROVSKY, SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT, PBS NEWSHOUR**

Mr. OSTROVSKY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the committee, and, Ambassador, thank you for your kind words. I was not expecting that.

Six years ago today, when I was a reporter for Vice News, I was running around the streets of Simferopol in Ukraine's Crimea region filming a pro-Ukraine protest, which was one of the last public displays in support of Ukrainian Statehood that would be permitted in Crimea before Moscow took total control of the region and formally annexed it just a few days later.

Today, in accordance with the Russian constitution, public manifestations and protests are permitted, but what happens in practice and what is on paper are two very different things. And I know this because I have covered Russia and the former Soviet Union for the better part of the last two decades.

I actually started my reporting career covering the Second Chechen War, which ended that Russian region's aspirations for independence. The Chechen independence movement is considered illegitimate in Russia, but I found Moscow's attitude toward ethnic Russians living under Ukrainian rule to be very different.

Independence-minded Chechens are illegal separatists. Independence-minded ethnic Russians have historic rights to self-determination.

Since Russia took effective control of Crimea, those who disagree with what has happened have had to flee or have been jailed. The few that dare occasionally to protest openly are quickly bundled away in police vans and handed severe sentences. In some cases, they have disappeared entirely.

So how did it come to this? Well, the day after Crimea held its unrecognized referendum on independence, which was made possible by Russian troops who had taken control of the region, I was traveling around the peninsula asking everybody I met what country they thought we were in. It was a confusing time, so answers varied.

At one point I actually shouted, "What is this country called?" to a group of teenagers who were drinking. And they replied in unison "Russia." Others told me it was still Ukraine. In one case, a guy told me we were back in the Soviet Union.

One woman I filmed at a rally responded by saying something along the lines of "The West has not tasted the Russian jackboot in a while, and it is about time they woke up and smelled the coffee." And I thought it was a pretty colorful way for someone to express themselves, but after my story broadcast, I started getting strange messages from viewers. They had seen the very same woman appear under different names at different anti-Ukraine protests, in different locations around the country. They even sent screenshots from other TV reports she had already been featured in. Same woman, different names.

I started to realize that the grass-roots support for splitting from Ukraine might not be so grass-roots after all. The protests that

were gathering in front of administration buildings and Ukrainian military bases were actually part of a massive propaganda effort that would become the hallmark of Russia's campaign to destabilize and dismember its southern neighbor.

I did not know at the time but we would see echoes of this strategy in the U.S. 2016 Presidential vote, where people ginned up by Russian puppet accounts on social media were told to come out into the streets and face each other in protests. The social media aspect of this strategy might be new, but the messages being put out are not. We saw the same thing happen during the Rwanda genocide. The Hutus used radio broadcasts to dehumanize Tutsis as cockroaches, resulting in a slaughter.

And, in Bosnia, media aligned with Belgrade told Bosnian Serbs gangs of Muslims were on their way to rape and murder their wives and daughters. This one started a regional ethnic war and gave us the term "ethnic cleansing."

When I was in Crimea, the story being pushed on Russian speakers was that a fascist junta had taken power in Kiev, and gangs of violent skinheads were on their way to ban the Russian language through force. Nothing could have been further from the truth. But Russian broadcasts that were blaring at full tilt out of every television in Russian-speaking homes of Ukraine sparked a war that has lasted 6 years and claimed close to 14,000 lives.

The last time I was in Eastern Ukraine was in December filming a report for PBS NewsHour Weekend. After nearly 6 years of war, attitudes had really shifted. No longer did I hear from residents a full-throated defense of Russia's military presence in the region. And unlike Crimea, Russia-occupied Eastern Ukraine has never been formally annexed by Moscow. Its Russian-speaking residents have been left in limbo, living under puppet regimes with no international status and no future.

Many have realized that Moscow's real plan for them is not integration into Russia, but reintegration into Ukraine. Moscow is seeking a special status for the Donbass that would give it veto powers over decisions being made in the Ukrainian capital, like NATO membership or joining the European Union.

Its residents are simply pawns in that plan and are beginning to think that maybe things were not so bad before the war started after all.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Ostrovsky follows:]

Simon Ostrovsky's written testimony for the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Hearing titled "Antagonizing the Neighborhood: Putin's Frozen Conflicts and the Conflict in Ukraine" scheduled for March 11, 2020.

Six years ago today when I was a reporter for VICE News I was running around the streets of Simferopol, in Ukraine's Crimea region. I was filming a pro-Ukraine protest, which was one of the last public displays in support of Ukrainian statehood that would be permitted in Crimea before Moscow would take total control of the region and formally annex it just a few days later. Today, in accordance with the Russian Constitution, public manifestations and protests are permitted. However, what happens in practice and what's written on paper are two very different things.

I know this because I've covered Russia and the former Soviet Union for the better part of the last two decades. I actually started my reporting career covering the second Chechen war, which ended that Russian region's aspirations for independence. The Chechen-independence movement is considered illegitimate in Russia. However, I found Moscow's attitude towards ethnic Russians living under Ukrainian rule to be very different. Independence-minded Chechen's are illegal separatists. Independence minded Russians, have historic rights to self-determination. Since Russia took effective control of Crimea, those who disagree with what's happened have had to flee or have been jailed. The few that dare occasionally to protest openly are quickly bundled away in police vans and handed severe sentences. In some cases, they have disappeared entirely.

How did it come to this? Well, the day after Crimea held it's unrecognized referendum on independence -- which, by the way, was made possible by Russian troops who had taken control of the region -- I was travelling around the peninsula asking everybody I met what country they thought we were in. It was a confusing time so the answers varied. At one point I actually shouted "What's this country called?" to a group of teenagers who were drinking. They replied in unison: "Russia." Others told me it was still Ukraine. In one case - a guy told me we were back in the Soviet Union. One woman I filmed at a rally responded by saying something along the lines of "the West hasn't tasted the Russian jackboot in a while and it's about time they woke up and smelled the coffee." I thought that was a pretty colorful way for someone to express themselves. But after my story was broadcast, I started getting strange messages from viewers. They had seen the very same woman appear under different names at different anti-Ukraine protests in different locations around the country. They even sent screenshots from other TV reports she'd already been in. Same woman, different names. I started to realize that the grassroots support for splitting from Ukraine might not be so grassroots after all. The protests that were gathering in front of administration buildings and Ukrainian military bases were actually part of a massive propaganda effort that would become the hallmark of Russia's campaign to destabilize and dismember its southern neighbor. I didn't know it at the time, but we'd see echoes of this strategy in the US 2016 presidential vote, where people - ginned up by Russian puppet accounts on social media - were told to come out into the streets and face each other in protests.

The social media aspect of the strategy might be new. But the messages being put out aren't. We saw the same thing happen during the Rwandan genocide. The Hutus used radio broadcasts to dehumanize Tutsis as cockroaches, resulting in a slaughter. In Bosnia, media aligned with Belgrade told Bosnian Serbs gangs of Muslims were on their way to rape and murder their wives and daughters. That one started a regional ethnic war. When I was in Crimea, the story being pushed on Russian-speakers was that a "Fascist Junta" had taken power in Kyiv and gangs of violent skinheads were on their way to ban the Russian language through force. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

But Russian broadcasts that were blaring at full tilt out of every television in Russian-speaking homes of Ukraine sparked a war that has lasted six years and claimed close to 14,000 lives. The last time I was in Eastern Ukraine was in December while filming a report for PBS NewsHour Weekend. After nearly six years of war, attitudes had really shifted. No longer did I hear from residents a full-throated defense of Russia's military presence in the region. Unlike Crimea, Russia-occupied Eastern Ukraine has never been formally annexed by Moscow. Its Russian speaking residents have been left in limbo living under puppet regimes with no international status and no future. Many have realized that Moscow's real plan for them is not integration into Russia, but re-integration into Ukraine. Moscow is seeking a special status for the Donbas that would give it veto powers over decisions being made in the Ukrainian capital, like NATO membership or joining the EU. Its residents are simply pawns in that plan and are beginning to think that maybe things weren't so bad before the war started, after all.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

Ms. VARTANYAN.

**STATEMENT OF MS. OLESYA VARTANYAN, ANALYST, EASTERN
NEIGHBORHOOD, INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP**

Ms. VARTANYAN. Good afternoon, Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Today, at this important hearing, I will speak about the situation in Georgia.

I have visited Georgia's two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia many times in recent years, and every time I go I see how life there is growing even more difficult and challenging.

Weak local administrations are unable to provide basic services, and Russia has built up a new militarized divide, hampering movement to and from Georgian-controlled territory. Allowed to fester, local problems can only raise the risk of protracted instability and further violence with repercussions for the South Caucasus region and its people, as well as for already complicated U.S. relations with Russia.

In my testimony, I will speak about three problem areas in particular—the internal situation in the breakaway regions and Russia's rule, ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the situation at the line of separation.

And I will begin with the internal situation, just some examples of what the life on the ground looks like for a local resident. Last year, an old mother of my good friend in Abkhazia had to struggle with broken ribs for weeks only because local doctors could not read the X-ray films. They did not make it on purpose. Most local doctors have not received professional trainings for the kids, and often lack the equipment necessary for even the most basic health checks.

Every time there is a heavy rain in Abkhazia, its main town, Sukhumi, is flooded and travel boats often become the only means of transport because cars cannot get down the water-logged streets. Local policemen pay out of pocket for uniforms and to fuel their cars, motivating them to seek bribes to cover those costs.

Such problems dishearten local people. Nevertheless, the local elites remain broadly loyal to Russia, which is the only regional power that recognizes independence and supports the regions politically, financially, and militarily. Still, some representatives of the de facto leaderships—at least privately—express disappointment at Russia's reluctance to support the further development of the regions as viable States.

Last week I was in Moscow to discuss situation in the Georgian breakaway regions, and similar to all of these years of the past decade since Russia recognized Georgia's regions, many in Moscow appeared reluctant to increase Russia's investment.

The second issue I want to address is ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There are around 50,000 of them, and they are 25 percent of population in Abkhazia and almost 10 percent of people living in South Ossetia.

In addition to everyday hurdles, the local ethnic Georgians face discrimination from the local de facto authorities. Schools do not

teach in their native Georgian language. They lack the right to run or vote in local elections, and they are kept out of many jobs.

Few ethnic Georgians in these breakaways have local passports, and they are treated as foreigners. The lives of most of them are split between breakaway regions and Georgian-controlled territory, as they must cross into Georgia proper to earn a living, have access to medical care, and receive pensions.

Crossings has never been easy, but in the last couple of years it has become a bigger problem. And the de facto authorities close the crossings more often and for long periods of time with no warning and for reasons that often have nothing to do with security concerns.

In fact, de facto authorities of South Ossetia have closed most crossing points since last September, and many ethnic Georgians living in the region were left with no income to buy food or firewood and went hungry and cold with winter. Some Georgians from these regions told me that if problems with crossings continue, they will eventually have to immigrate.

Finally, a topic some members of this committee are well aware of, which is the process called borderization. For almost 9 years, the de facto authorities and Russian border guards have dug trenches, erected fences, and installed video cameras, to define the line that separates Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia-controlled territory.

Some of these barbed wire fences run through the center of many Georgian villages, and I know that some of you saw this firsthand when visiting the region. That greatly affects the people in the area and provokes many new incidents that may have a potential to turn violent if they stay unaddressed.

For all these years, the current Georgian government has responded with what it calls “strategic patience.” In light of its decision to normalize relations with Russia, Tbilisi made attempts to mitigate sources of friction that could undermine the normalization process. Consequently, the Georgian government has not attempted to stop a force at borderization. In fact, it has even disrupted people by its own—disrupted protests by its own citizens against Russia’s actions.

Nevertheless, there are signs that Georgia’s strategic patience is wearing thin, and last August the Georgian government established a police outpost in an area where Russian and de facto South Ossetian authorities had planned to build new barbed wire fences, which led to a serious escalation in tensions between both sides, and since then massive talks helped to calm the situation.

But if no steps are taken to resolve more fundamental grievances between the two sides, the parties could quickly find themselves again with a potential for violent clashes.

My longer written statement offers some thoughts about how the United States can help to address each of these three areas and encourage greater stability in this troubled part of the world. And I will be happy to discuss these ideas in the Q&A session.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Vartanyan follows:]

Good afternoon, Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Today, at this important hearing, I will speak about situation in Georgia.

I have visited Georgia's two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia many times in recent years, and every time I go, I see how life there is growing even more difficult and challenging. Weak local administrations are unable to provide basic services and Russia has built up a new militarised divide hampering movement to and from Georgian-controlled territory. Allowed to fester, local problems can only raise the risk of protracted instability and further violence, with repercussions for the South Caucasus region and its people, as well as for already complicated U.S. relations with Russia.

In my testimony, I will speak about three problem areas in particular: the internal situation in the breakaway regions and Russia's role, ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the situation at the line of separation. I will begin with the internal situation

Just some examples of what the life on the ground looks like for a local resident. Last year an old mother of my good friend in Abkhazia had to struggle with broken ribs for weeks, only because local doctors could not read the X-ray films. They did not make it on purpose. Most local doctors haven't received professional trainings for decades, and often lack the equipment necessary for even the most basic health checks. Every time there is a heavy rain in Abkhazia, its main town, Sukhumi, is flooded, and rubber boats often become the only means of transport because cars can't get down the water-logged streets. Local policemen pay out of pocket for uniforms and to fuel their cars, motivating them to seek bribes to cover these costs.

Such problems dishearten local people. Nevertheless, the local elites remain broadly loyal to Russia, which is the only regional power that recognizes independence and supports the regions politically, financially and militarily. Still some representatives of the de facto leaderships at least privately express disappointment at Russia's reluctance to support the further development of the regions as viable states. Last week I was in Moscow to discuss situation in the Georgian breakaway regions. Similar to all these years of the past decade since Russia recognized Georgia's regions, many in Moscow appeared reluctant to increase Russian investment.

The second issue I want to address is ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There are around 50,000 of them, and they are 25% of population in Abkhazia, and almost 10% of people living in South Ossetia.

In addition to the everyday hurdles, the local ethnic Georgians face discrimination from the local de facto authorities: schools do not teach in their native Georgian language, they lack the right to run or vote in local elections, and they are kept out of many jobs. Few ethnic Georgians in these breakaways have local passports, and they are treated as foreigners. The lives of most of them are split between breakaway regions and Georgian-controlled territory, as they must cross into Georgia proper to earn a living, have access to medical care and receive pensions.

Crossing has never been easy. But in the last couple of years it has become a bigger problem. The de facto authorities close the crossings more often and for long periods of time with no warning and for reasons that often have nothing to do with security concerns. In fact, de facto authorities of South Ossetia have closed most crossing points since last September. Many ethnic Georgians living in the region were left with no income to buy food or firewood, and went hungry and cold this winter.

Some Georgians from these regions told me that if problems with crossings continue, they will eventually have to emigrate.

Finally, a topic some members of this subcommittee are well-aware of – this is the process called “borderisation.” For almost nine years, the de facto authorities and Russian border guards have dug trenches, erected fences and installed video cameras – solidifying the line that separates Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia-controlled territory. Some of these barbed wire fences run through the center of many Georgian villages, and I know that some of you, saw this firsthand when visiting the region.

That greatly affects the people in the area and provokes many new incidents that may have a potential to turn violent if stay unaddressed. For all these years the current Georgian government has responded with what it calls “strategic patience.” In light of its decision to normalize relations with Russia, Tbilisi made attempts to mitigate sources of friction that could undermine the normalization process. Consequently, the Georgian government has not attempted to stop efforts at “borderisation” – in fact, it has even disrupted protests by its own citizens against Russia’s actions.

Nevertheless, there are signs that Georgia's "strategic patience" is wearing thin. Last August, the Georgian government established a police outpost in an area where Russian and de facto South Ossetian authorities had planned to build new barbed wire fences. This led to a serious escalation in tensions between both sides. Since then, months of talks helped to calm the situation. But if no steps are taken to resolve more fundamental grievances between the two sides, the parties could quickly find themselves at loggerheads again, with the potential for violent clashes.

My longer written statement offers some thoughts about how the United States can help to address each of these three areas and encourage greater stability in this troubled part of the world. I will be happy to discuss these ideas in the Q and A session.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.
Mr. NIX.

STATEMENT OF MR. STEPHEN B. NIX, REGIONAL PROGRAM DIRECTOR, EURASIA, INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

Mr. NIX. Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

The conflicts imposed by Vladimir Putin on Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have created military, political, and policy challenges in all three countries. In addition to providing factual analysis to you today, we hope to provide the subcommittee with recommendations and how the U.S. can engage in all three situations.

Starting with Ukraine, President Zelensky has dramatically enhanced his government's efforts to resolve the crisis in the occupied territories of Donbass and Crimea. 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 the government has reinvigorated 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 Zelensky government in achieving these aims. IRI polling is very clear in stating that 82 percent of Ukrainian citizens want the territories in Donbass to be reintegrated into Ukraine. So it is very clear how the Ukrainian people feel.

In sum, Ukrainians remain resolute in their desire to restore their country's territorial integrity. Until the Kremlin removes its troops, seals the border with Russia, peace 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.

Our recommendations are as follows: first, we believe economic sanctions are having the desired effect. 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 U.S. should also encourage our European allies to continue and expand sanctions.

Second, with a monthly average of approximately a million checkpoint crossings in the Donbass region alone, there is a high level of civilian crossings and traffic across the territories. Why is this important? Ukrainian citizens from Donbass and Crimea cross these checkpoints in order to collect their pensions, to obtain passports, and other important legal documents that retain a legal and social relationship with the Ukrainian government in Kyiv.

Third, the United States should increase its efforts to support the Ukrainian government's goal of filling the information vacuum in Donbass and Crimea. Greater access to information about government-controlled Ukraine will allow residents in the occupied territories to feel more included in Ukrainian society in political processes.

Now, quickly, to Georgia, in Abkhazia and Ossetia, the frozen conflicts continue to affect Georgian domestic politics in profound ways, particularly regarding security and economic policy. Most notably, the very existence of Russian-backed separatist authorities have been cited as the primary barrier to Georgian accession to NATO.

Public opinion in Georgia is also very clear. Eighty-five percent of Georgian citizens would like to see their country have EU membership. Eighty percent seek NATO membership. Very, very clear that Georgian citizens want their country to be integrated into the West.

In terms of recommendations, we suggest the following. Again, the U.S. should expand sanctions on the Russian Federation. The U.S. 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.

Finally, the U.S. should continue to support the Geneva International Discussions, which are really the only existing format for addressing security, human rights, and humanitarian challenges stemming from these unresolved conflicts.

And then, finally, and very briefly, on Moldova, the Transnistria conflict differs from the other two in that the conflict is generally peaceful. There is frequent people-to-people contact, and both territories have been steadily increasing their economic integration.

Two quick recommendations on Moldova. The U.S. should support Moldova and Ukraine in their continued development of reform efforts, particularly regarding anti-corruption, and the U.S. should also leverage its participation in the five plus two negotiations to build on the successes of the confidence-building measures that have been taking place to date.

And I will close, if I could, with a quote from our late, great Chairman, Senator John McCain, who spoke to a group of us about the territories that are part of our discussion today. Senator McCain said, "Putin wants Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova within the Kremlin's sphere of interest. He believes that keeping the conflicts in the disputed territories alive will help him achieve that goal—a goal we cannot allow him to achieve."

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to take any questions that you might have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Nix follows:]

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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

**Stephen B. Nix, Esq.
Eurasia Regional Director
International Republican Institute**

A nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing democracy worldwide

Stephen B. Nix, Esq.
Congressional Testimony
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
March 11, 2020

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, Zelenskyy'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 7th Military Base in Gudauta, home to the 3,500-strong 131st 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 58th Army, permanently housed at the 4th 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. Akhlagori, 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 14th 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.

Mr. KEATING. I thank the witnesses. I will now recognize myself for 5 minutes. Just quickly if someone has a thought on this, Ms. Vartanyan mentioned this briefly with the Russian people, it is always important to distinguish the Russian people from the policies of Putin himself when that is possible.

Could any of you really get a sense of the Russian people's view of this? Or is the propaganda that is there so widespread that they really do not have a view of this? Anyone? Mr. Nix.

Mr. NIX. As you know, Chairman Keating, we have a fairly robust program in Russia. We cannot really talk about it. As you know, IRI has been designated by the Ministry of Justice, the Russian Federation, as an undesirable organization. As such, any communication with us, any work with us, can be criminally prosecuted.

All I can say is that in our interaction with the opposition leaders in Russia, we hear stories of tremendous economic collapse, economic problems, disaffection with the leadership.

You saw the results of the local elections last fall in both Moscow and St. Petersburg where the ruling party of President Putin did not allow its candidates to run under their own party banner. That tells you something about the slipping support that the regime enjoys right now.

Again, that is anecdotal, but that is what we are hearing from the opposition.

Mr. KEATING. Yes. Thank you.

Mr. Ostrovsky, in your background, you were mentioning in effect the orchestrated manner, how their information is being manipulated. Mr. Nix mentioned about the information barrier that is there. What can we do tactically? Are we doing enough in the U.S.? Can we do more in terms of exposing this and countering these kind of activities?

Mr. OSTROVSKY. I do not know if I can, as a journalist, really give recommendations to the U.S. Government of how they should deal with disinformation and propaganda coming out of Russia and the former Soviet space. But I think there needs to be a wider recognition of its effect, and the fact that it persists to this day, and that it is a serious problem.

But we also need to talk about its limitations. You know, to talk about the question that you asked earlier, I think attitudes really have shifted. And I have seen interviews with Russian sociologists that say that a lot of Russians feel buyer's remorse over the annexation of Crimea and the effect on Mr. Putin's popularity ratings, which were bumped up a good year or two, those effects have now washed away and he is seeing some of the lowest approval ratings that he has seen in his entire 2-decade-long career as president.

So while there is a lot of disinformation floating around, I think its purpose in a lot of cases when it targets us is to confuse the situation rather than push any kind of ideology by sending our various confusing, often contradictory narratives. And in Russia itself, you know, the agenda is usually to improve the Kremlin's and Mr. Putin's own ratings.

Mr. KEATING. Yes.

Ms. VARTANYAN.

Ms. VARTANYAN. Well, I will respond to your initial question about Russian people and their attitude. So I think Georgia provides quite a good example in that because more than 10 years have passed since the war, and during these years I have seen such a great evolution in the way people think and what even my friends in Russia say about what happened in Georgia.

And it started with blaming Georgia for what happened in South Ossetia, and now actually I see more of my friends coming and visiting me in Georgia. And I think one of the reasons for that is actually the policy that the Georgian government has kept. Georgia invited Russians to come, and even now during some of the seasons you can see more Russians actually walking along the central streets and speaking freely Russian than, let's say, 10 years ago.

And I think which kind of approach and which kind of engagement with the people, it helps to really change the moods. And because of that, actually, in my testimony I have been calling on more engagement with those who live in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, because more can be done through more contacts and through more engagement, so that they can see an alternative.

Mr. KEATING. Okay. Ambassador Baer.

Mr. BAER. Yes. Let me just add one thing to your first question, which is I agree that these things have a shelf life and they tend to go rotten like fruits in terms of the Russian people's general attitude toward them.

But the other thing that I recall is that, you know, I used to joust every week with the Russian ambassador about Ukraine, and I never saw him get so angry or red-faced as when I talked about the Russian soldiers who were dying in Eastern Ukraine and that the Russian government would not admit that they were Russian soldiers and that these military men—mostly men—were going home in secret and their families were not being allowed to mourn them and their military deaths.

And that used to drive the Russian ambassador crazy, and I think part of what we should be doing more is reminding people within Russia about the costs that these conflicts have not just for the people in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, but also the costs that they bear for Russians, because they do keep Russia as a pariah in the international community and because they have imposed direct costs on Russians.

Mr. KEATING. Interesting. I now yield to ranking member, Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Again, to all of you, thank you for your testimony. Mr. Baer or Ambassador Baer, to add to what you said, you know, it is an honor to serve your country, even if it is a country we disagree with, and to deny those Russian soldiers the honor of serving their country, even if you very much disagree. If I was asked to not admit I was an American in my service to my country, I would be pretty ticked off, quite honestly.

You also mentioned, talking about Russian disinformation, you know, I have a Russian-created story about me out there. If you did not know, I created ISIS with John McCain actually, and there are people on the internet that believe that, and it is a real problem. You know, the reality is there is always going to be people that

want to accept a conclusion that comports to their world view. The Russians exploit that, and I think it is wrong for any administration ever, under any party, to deny the seriousness of that undermining any kind of democracy.

This is part of the Russian shadow war—the shadow war of misinformation, the shadow war of little green men, because they can say they are not there, is below the threshold kind of actions, whether it is cyber, whether it is space, whether it is putting people in there under a mercenary—the Wagner Group that supposedly Iraq did independently, but are not.

It is important to know hundreds of members of the Wagner Group were killed by U.S. military a few years ago, and Russia was very quiet after that. Russia, as I said in my opening statement, they go up to a brick wall, and when they hit a brick wall they back up. Putin is a smart man. He knows this. But he also knows he can push as far as he possibly can.

And you look at the situation and the conflict recently with Turkey and how quickly, of course, Russia backed down. The point is, Russia is a paper tiger. They are a power in the region. They are somebody that has to be dealt with, but they exist—and I think it was actually John McCain, my good friend, that said they are basically a gas station, and so you go after their energy. Energy is low. That is hurting Russia. They are going to get desperate. But that is how you do these battles, and you are very clear about what their actions are, so they are very weak.

I have got to also mention real quickly, in Georgia, the violations on the line that are happening are significant, including Russian police or local police in the occupied areas that basically are allowed and given automatic weapons when the agreement says that you can, as a police officer, only have a sidearm; the moving of the border.

They understand that the Russian—a Georgian response is exactly what Russia is trying to provoke, and so it puts Georgia in a tough position of, how do we defend our territory but also not provoke a larger Russian response? And that is where American involvement and visits—I have been twice to that part of the area and seen the border. It sends a message to Russia and the people behind the line that the U.S. is paying attention, that they are not forgotten, and that there will be consequences to a broader conflict.

Let me ask first off, Mr. Baer and Mr. Nix, when we talk about NATO, Ukraine and Georgia and NATO, there has been some resistance all over in the United States, but generally I think the American people are very much in support of this, but there is resistance in Europe.

When you have troops in Georgia, Russian troops in Georgia, and they say that is the reason we cannot bring them to NATO, all that does is send Russia a lesson that all you have to do is put a few troops in a country and they will never join NATO. Can you briefly talk about that? And then you, Mr. Nix.

Mr. BAER. Sure. I mean, I think, Mr. Kinzinger, you quite aptly put the problem in front of us, which is that when we allow Russia to deny these countries the opportunity to make their own decisions about their security arrangements simply by occupying part

of these countries, we create an incentive for Russia to do that elsewhere where it wants to.

And, obviously, we have—our policy has been since 2008 that NATO is open to membership to Ukraine and Georgia, and that we envision that eventuality. I think, you know, because the conflicts remain unresolved, that is a stumbling block as we talk with Europeans and other NATO allies.

I think one other point to make—that they are making is to remind everybody that our assistance to Georgia, in particular in this case, is not a one-way street. Georgians have sent over 10,000 soldiers over a decade to serve with ISAF in Afghanistan. And so Georgia and Ukraine—and we have done joint trainings with the Ukrainians as well—we do have a security relationship with them, and it is potentially even more two-way street over the long run.

Mr. KINZINGER. That is right. We need Georgia—if you look at their location in the region, it is either stuff goes through Russia or Iran or Georgia. Georgia, pound for pound, has actually provided more force to Afghanistan than any country except the United States.

Mr. NIX.

Mr. NIX. That is a salient point, that Russian presence has been the biggest barrier to NATO membership for Georgia. Again, the numbers are overwhelming in support. This is what the Georgian people want. You have correctly pointed out that our European friends are more reluctant.

There are a couple of ideas percolating, one of which I know you are very aware of, and that is to perhaps exempt the occupied territories from the provisions of Article 5. That has been discussed. We have tested it in polling data. There is public support for that, but it is still very tricky in domestic politics in Georgia.

That could be seen in some circles as being some sort of concession, and so I do not think you will see that come up prior to the Georgian parliamentary elections in October. But in the long term, I think it does have some appeal and it is worth further discussion with our European allies.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you. Time flies when you are asking questions, but not when you are watching other people ask questions. Thank you all.

I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Vice Chair Spanberger.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to our witnesses here today. I appreciate your participation in this hearing and the thoughts that you have provided. Ambassador Baer, you spoke about your—I do not remember, did you call it jousting with the Russians during your time at the OSCE. And I was wondering if you could perhaps just expand on that a bit more, and could you expand on—I would love your perspective on how Russia does use its role at the OSCE and other international organizations to disrupt peace and reconciliation in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

And from your perception, what can the United States do to account for the strategy that we see them employing, so that we can better enable international institutions to support peace efforts?

And the question is directed to Ambassador Baer, but I welcome anyone else who wants to add something as well.

Mr. BAER. So I think that is a really interesting question that merits a long discussion, which, you know, I mean, the Russians are actually incredibly talented multilateralists. They participate in the United Nations, OSCE, other multilateral fora, and they often have the most skilled lawyers. They have people who have institutional knowledge and remember and can quote, you know, when you say, "I think we should do X," they say, "Oh, but in 1993, you proposed this," and blah blah blah.

And so, you know, I think they are serious about their engagement in these fora. What they are not serious about is building a system of law and principles and institutions that can undergird a peaceful international politics. They use these fora as ways to advance their own national interest and only their own national interest as—and I should say, as President Putin defines it, which is really, I mean, President Putin's personal interest. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Russia has no foreign policy as such. It only has domestic policy that manifests itself in their international political engagements.

And so I think what is important for us to recognize is that they are often trying to trap us into withdrawing from international fora. They are trying to be just difficult enough to get us to pull the plug.

And one of the things that we should be wary of—and that does not mean we should not hold them accountable, but we should be wary of taking the bait and discarding things that are useful to us and that are consistent with our general principled approach to building out an international system that is girded in institutions and universal principles, so that we can over the long run bring others like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, knit them more firmly into the international community, and hold Russia accountable.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Would anyone else want to comment on that? Perfect.

Well, so then, if I can go back to the OSCE just a bit more, and the work of the OSCE's Conflict Prevention Center, as well as OSCE's special monitoring mission in Ukraine. I would love for you to elaborate a bit on that work, and if you have any specific recommendations that you would make that the United States, from a policy standpoint, could be doing to best support these initiatives. I would love to hear your thoughts on that.

Mr. BAER. So the CPC at the OSCE works across the OSCE area, and they play an important function, particularly in supporting the missions that are deployed and early on in crises, in facilitating diplomacy, et cetera.

As for the SMM, you know, it is pretty remarkable to me that it has been 6 years since we negotiated the agreement for the SMM. And I have got to tell you, it was thanks to Victoria Nuland, I was—my team and I were negotiating over the course of several days. The OSCE, as you probably know, decides everything based on consensus, which means that you have to get the Russians on board.

And, you know, indeed the Russians were, at that time, claiming that there were these gross violations of the human rights of Rus-

sian speakers in Eastern Ukraine, and so part of the argument for deploying the SMM was to be an observer mission, to document those things as well as any other issues of concern related to OSCE principles.

And we were unsuccessful in getting them to allow an OSCE office in Crimea. That was—an SMM office in Crimea, and that was part of the last piece of negotiating. And I wanted to hold out for that, and Ambassador Nuland told me, “Baer, make the deal.” And I did, and I am, you know, pretty astonished at how successful the OSCE has been over 6 years. And I know there are always complaints with the mission of over 1,000 people that are spread out across some difficult territory.

But I think they have done remarkable work in documenting on a daily basis what is happening on the ground. And for policy-makers that has been incredibly important, and for the Ukrainian government that has to make a case not only to its own people but also to the world about what continues to happen at the line of contact, what are overwhelmingly and have been for years, overwhelmingly Russian and Russia-based separatist violations of agreements that have been made.

You know, if there were not an objective body to document those things, the political situation would be worse, and the situation on the ground I think would be more violent than it is today. And so I think the United States should continue to support the extension of the SMM, and we should continue to try to seek to support wherever we can their technical capacities and make sure that we are paying our share of the budget.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you very much.

I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Representative Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Russian-backed protracted conflicts in countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are incompatible with our strategic interest in a prosperous and peaceful Europe. The United States has punished Russian aggression against these sovereign countries by imposing robust sanctions, as Mr. Nix pointed out, on Russia, publicly condemning Russia’s malign actions and stiffening Ukrainian and Georgian defense efforts through arms sales.

We must continue to defend Europe against Russia’s attempts to undermine rule of law, democracy, and sovereignty.

Russia’s behavior has been increasingly aggressive in the Sea of Azov and in the Kerch Strait, where it has bolstered its naval presence and begun kind of interfering with Ukrainian shipping and naval transit.

Ambassador Baer, how should the United States support Ukraine against Russian efforts to diminish freedom of navigation?

Mr. BAER. Thank you, Representative Wagner. I think, you know, I only had a moment to highlight it in my opening comments, but I think one of the things that this—that we should not lose track of in this hearing is the importance of the Black Sea region strategically.

And you mentioned the recent Russian efforts to limit navigation in the Kerch Strait. There was an unprovoked attack on Ukrainian naval vessels in December of—14 months ago. That was one of the

instances—by the way, I mentioned the Open Skies Treaty in my opening testimony. That was one of the instances in which we used an extraordinary Open Skies flight in order to bring Ukrainians, as well as other partners and allies, on board to overfly and to see what was going on on the Earth below, land and sea.

And so I think one of the things that is really important is for us to make sure that we are including Georgia and Ukraine and, you know, Moldova does not have Black Sea frontage, but Romania is a partner in the Black Sea, as well as Turkey, in developing a concerted strategy to have security in the Black Sea region.

As I said, Putin uses that not only as a way of menacing the Ukrainian navy or that—or the Georgians, but he uses it as a launching pad in order to wreak havoc in the middle East, and I think we should be concerned about it for that reason as well.

And going back to Mr. Kinzinger's point, you know, this is one of the reasons why we have a strategic interest in having a long-term partnership with these countries, not just protecting them from conflicts but also partnering.

Mrs. WAGNER. In the interest of time, I appreciate that. Russia aggressively uses its energy dominance as a coercive foreign policy tool. However, I understand that some hope the Southern Gas Corridor, which will connect Caspian Sea natural gas reserves with European markets, will diminish Russia's leverage in Europe.

One of the Southern Gas Corridor's three new pipelines is set to run through Georgia, where Russia has fomented protracted conflicts in key regions.

Ms.—I did not get your proper—Vartanyan; am I close? Are you concerned that Russia will seek to destabilize the situation in Georgia to undermine the Southern Gas Corridor project?

Ms. VARTANYAN. Russia is already very well present in Georgia. Russia bears responsibility for the regions of the conflict of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I mean, the Russian fleet—Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, and Russian military bases are located in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are the territories that they are very close—they are very central, especially South Ossetia, inside Georgia.

So because of that, it is so important, actually, to pay attention to the developments on the ground. And United States plays a very important role. On the one hand, it supports Georgia's policy on no recognition. But on the other, United States is also part of the negotiations before that have been taking place so far.

And I think that the United States can continue and reinforce its participation in that, and that can potentially—hopefully, that can help to sustain stability on the ground and also prevent new incidents and violence.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you. During the cold war, the United States used Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and Voice of America to spread the truth of freedom and democracy to the world behind the Iron Curtain.

Mr. Nix, what role does Russian propaganda and disinformation play in maintaining frozen conflicts in post-Soviet countries? And how should the United States use organizations like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe to respond? In 1 second.

Mr. NIX. Thank you for that, Mrs. Wagner. Well, certainly, Russian information plays a huge role in Ukraine and also in Georgia. In the Ukraine case, I would say this. It is definitely affecting public opinion in the occupied territories. People there watch nothing but Russian television.

The Zelensky government, as I said in my opening statement, has made a concerted policy change in how to deal with Donbass and Crimea, and that is to engage with the people who live there. They want to create connections and relationships. They want to make it easier for people to cross the border.

The information space is very important. The Zelensky government has launched a Russian language television broadcast into Donbass in a way to educate people on the reforms that he is undertaking under his presidency and to connect up with the citizens. They need help. They need assistance from us. So, in addition to the American-based VOA broadcast, which should be enhanced, we should be supporting the Zelensky government in all of these efforts to—

Mrs. WAGNER. That is a very good recommendation. I thank you for that.

I am out of time. I appreciate the indulgence of the chair, and I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Representative Fitzpatrick.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all for being here. Mr. Nix, my question for you regarding Ukraine has to do with the perception—your perception of the current attitudes of the Ukrainian people with respect to the United States, with respect to NATO, with respect to the EU.

I served as an FBI agent in Ukraine post-Crimea, pre-Donbass, and I always took note of this in my travels throughout the country. Where do you see their attitudes right now toward the United States, toward NATO, and toward the EU?

Mr. NIX. Thank you for being here, Mr. Fitzpatrick. We appreciate the role that you have played in Ukraine and your strong advocacy of Ukraine's sovereignty.

With regard to public opinion, it is very, very clear. Every poll that IRI conducts in Ukraine, the numbers in support of EU membership and NATO membership trend upward. The vast majority of Ukrainians want to see their country in the European Union, and a majority want to see their country in NATO.

Now, obviously, those numbers differ when you do the breakdowns between Western Ukraine and Eastern Ukraine. But still, even in Eastern Ukraine, a majority of citizens want to see their country in Western institutions. And, in fact, the way the question is asked, should Ukraine be part of the EU or Putin's Customs Union?

And the results are very clear. Ukrainians want their country as part of the West.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. And in that data, is there a disparity between the age groups?

Mr. NIX. Well, obviously, young people are more predicated toward the West. Pensioners are more inclined, to the degree that people do support the Customs Union, that is relegated to older people.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. And with regard to the policy change you referenced regarding President Zelensky doing more outreach to both Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, do you believe that that change is in an attempt to reunify the country, or something else?

Mr. NIX. No. I think it is a clear attempt to reunify the country. And, again, it is a stark departure, with all due respect, from the previous Presidential administration. But his goal is to reach out and connect up with these people. That is why I said in my opening statement a million people cross the checkpoints, and there are very few checkpoints.

In fact, in Luhansk, many people prefer to cross between the border between Russia and Ukraine proper, not the point of contact because it is easier. So a lot can be done by the United States to assist the government—more border crossing, ease of travel. And I can tell you, I have been to the border crossing at Kalynchak and Kherson Oblast right across from Crimea. If you look across 200 yards to the Russian side, there is a gleaming bus terminal, there is a taxi place, there is restaurants, there is cafes. Standing on the Ukrainian side, there is the border guards, us, a small kiosk to pass out some information, and a beer tent with a dirt floor and some sleeping dogs.

That is the difference between what people see when they leave Crimea and when they enter Ukraine proper. And it was a calculated decision by the Poroshenko administration—and I understand it—they did not want to accept the status quo. So they did not want to invest in a structure on the Ukrainian side, but this is a long-term engagement. Peace will take some time. The government very badly wants to make it easier for people to cross from the occupied territories, both in Donbass and Crimea, and that is an important initiative that the U.S. can engage in.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. So what is the current status of border crossing right now? Because I have never been to Crimea. I hear it was always considered a huge vacation destination—beautiful area for the Ukrainians to go to. Do you see that increasing?

And, second, and I will just finish with this last question, do you see any realistic prospect of reunifying Ukraine?

Mr. NIX. Well, as to Crimea, yes, it was a popular place. I used to vacation in Crimea when I lived in Ukraine, and it was very, very popular. The numbers are down. The economy in Crimea is suffering. There is a lack of tourism, but there is another big issue, and this goes to connecting up with the Ukrainian people.

The Zelensky government is trying to figure out now what to do about water. There are huge water shortages in Crimea. People do not have sufficient drinking water. What does the government do? As you know better than anybody, Mr. Fitzpatrick, 4 years ago Ukraine shut off all the water supply. There is a vast series of canals that have been built connecting the Dnipro River and fed into Crimea and supported—basically supplied 90 percent of Crimea's water supply.

The Ukrainian government has to decide whether or not to turn the tap back on to alleviate the suffering of the people, Ukrainians still living in Crimea. But the question is: does that contribute to military and industrial enterprises that are propped up by Russia? Those are the types of tough decisions that Zelensky has to make,

but my understanding, he is leaning toward turning on the water again because he wants to help improve the lives of daily Ukrainians.

As far as your final question, is reunification possible, yes, I believe it is. Again, the majority, the vast majority of Ukrainians want to see their country united again. I think President Zelensky is determined to do that, but it will be small steps like the prisoner exchanges and other exchanges.

It is a very long-term prospect, and I truly believe, as I said in my opening statement, that sanctions will be the only thing that will ultimately bring Vladimir Putin to the negotiating table on Donbass and Crimea both.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Thank you, sir.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

I appreciate, Ambassador Baer, your comments on Open Skies, on the Open Skies Treaty. I share the importance of continuing that. I was with General Walters just a few weeks ago. He echoed the same sentiment, so I hope that treaty that is on pause, you know, can continue because there are advantages. And you just brought forth a very important one in the Black Sea area and that enable incursion.

You know, one of Putin's greatest goals must be—in the area we are talking about is to seek division between the U.S. and our allies, our European allies. And I would just like your opinions, how seamless is our approach right now? What are some concerns you might have in that regard? What can we do to make sure that the division does not extend to something that will hurt our ability in the area that we are discussing today?

Ambassador Baer, do you—

Mr. BAER. Let me be quick at the outset and just say I think you are quite right that it is an objective to divide the U.S. and Europe, and obviously to divide European countries within each other and against each other. That is an objective of Putin's government.

And one other thing that I think is really important to highlight, especially in this context, is the importance of you all, because I think one of the challenges we have today—and I was in Munich a few weeks ago for the security conference—is that the Europeans are not exactly sure where the United States stands. And so even those who willing to still be good partners with us do not actually know exactly what we stand for right now.

And we can go into the reasons for that, but I think one of the—whatever one diagnoses the reasons being, one of the affirmative things that can happen is for members of the House and Senate to carry the flag and to drive home the importance of the Transatlantic relationship, our commitment to it over the long term, and our commitment to the same principled kind of foreign policy that has been a hallmark of Republican and Democratic administrations since the end of World War II.

Mr. KEATING. That brought me to another point that I think is important, too. What is the importance and why is it—other than deflecting the blame away from himself, why is Putin targeting, in your opinion, Ukraine for the fiction that they were involved in interference in the U.S. elections in 2016? Ambassador?

Mr. BAER. Because when somebody will buy a story, you sell it.

Mr. KEATING. Yes. Any other comments on that at all? Mr. Nix mentioned sanctions. What would you recommend for the type of sanctions? Is it against the oligarchs? Is it against—what is your—when you say “sanctions,” further sanctions, what did you have in mind?

Mr. NIX. I would advocate for a combination of both sectoral sanctions and individual sanctions. Again, we believe that they are having the desired effect. And to go back to your point, Mr. Chairman, about Russia dividing the allies, I think the sanctions issue is one where they have had success.

We need to convince our European allies that they should not just merely extend European sanctions on the Russian Federation; they need to expand them as we have.

Mr. KEATING. Any other comments on those points? Any other members seek to be recognized? Representative Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. If you do not mind, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. NIX. I understand that Georgia is interested in negotiating a free trade agreement with the United States. How would a U.S.-Georgian trade agreement impact the economic situation of average Georgians and internally displaced persons and those living in the occupied territories?

Mr. NIX. That is a trade agreement that the Georgian government would actively seek, it covets, because it would drastically improve the economy. If you look at the polling data, the economy is the biggest issue among Georgian voters. I mean, we cite to the NATO and EU numbers, but when you ask, what is the most important problem facing Georgian citizens, it is the economy and jobs. And certainly a trade agreement would help jumpstart the Georgian economy, which has been in free fall primarily because of Russian boycotts on Georgian goods.

Mrs. WAGNER. I have one more question. Do you mind? In 2018, Georgia launched a peace initiative to improve the quality of life in the disputed regions. Ms. Vartanyan, how has the peace initiative furthered prospects for peace in Georgia? And how can the U.S. support these efforts?

Ms. VARTANYAN. Well, it is a great topic for me to discuss.

Mrs. WAGNER. Yes.

Ms. VARTANYAN. Also, we at Crisis Group wrote a very comprehensive report on the situation with the development of trade prospects with the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. And during my travels to Abkhazia, for instance, I could see that actually many more people want to do trade. And this is mainly because of problems with the economy in Russia, and also the fact that they started receiving less funds after Crimea annexation and also with problems with the economy and sanctions related to issues.

And this is the very moment actually to act, and that was very positive step from the Georgian side, that they started developing the plan. And I understand that we are still making—some certain initial steps have been made.

And if you allow me—you mentioned some free trade agreement, and I understand this is something that is still in discussion. But

the EU has already signed free trade agreement with Georgia, and has already contributed heavily to the Georgian economy.

And not only—initiatives like these, they provide space, and they give more ideas, you know, to those who work on the conflicts, because, for example, with EU trade agreement, it potentially can expand to the areas that are not under direct control of the Georgian government. And I understand that there are some European diplomats that are doing thinking on that.

We wrote about this in the report. I will be happy to share more ideas. But I see that you have 2 more minutes, and would you allow me to jump on another question that you mentioned—Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty?

Mrs. WAGNER. Yes.

Ms. VARTANYAN. You know, in my past life, I used to be a journalist, and I spent 4 years working for the Radio Liberty. Georgia is a great country in terms of providing good lessons included for Ukraine. In 2009, Radio Liberty, they opened a new program, a Russian language one, which is part of the Georgian service. It is called Ekho Kavkaza, and I had an honor to work for it.

This is a program that brings together journalists from the breakaway regions and from the rest of Georgia. It is 1-hour show, you know, with news and stories from all these places. And I should say that in the beginning when we were starting, it was extremely controversial thing because not everyone wants to hear the story from the other side.

Ten years have passed. They actually celebrated an anniversary some weeks ago, and I can tell you that now with Ekho Kavkaza it is the only one that in many cases provides the alternative to anything that is developing on the ground. And people turn to it, even local ones, when they want to hear an alternative about the developments on the ground, because this is the only source of information made by the local journalists alternative to the Russian propaganda.

So I would say that for me personally it is a very good example how you start despite difficulties and problems, and you still reach out to the other side. You engage with them, and you actually by—by giving them a chance to work with you, you are not fighting propaganda with propaganda. But you are working with them and you give them a chance to get good source information.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you very much. I appreciate the indulgence of the chair.

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you.

Mrs. WAGNER. And this peace agreement—or, pardon me, the free trade agreement, Mr. Chairman, is something that we should probably talk about pursuing.

Mr. KEATING. Great. Well, thank you. Thanks, Representative.

As a final invitation for comment, you know, when we organized this hearing, we did not organize a hearing on Ukraine, individually on Moldova, individually on Georgia, individually—we put the three countries together for a reason.

And I think if you wanted to have any final comments, if you could, just tell us in your view what is the importance of, for instance, what happens in Ukraine to Georgia, the importance of

what happens in Ukraine to Moldova, the importance to the U.S. and the importance to our European allies.

Mr. NIX.

Mr. NIX. Mr. Chairman, I think the common link, you mentioned the situation in the Black Sea. That is a common link between the three countries, and so you have the weaponization of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation. It is now bristling with airfields and surface-to-air missiles. It is used as a staging point to maneuver against both Ukraine and Georgia on the Black Sea.

And then, finally, the link to Moldova is, that is exactly how the Russian 14th Army in Transnistria is supplied—through air transport from Russian bases in Crimea. So that is one of the common links that we face in these three conflict areas.

Mr. KEATING. Great. Anyone else before we close? Ambassador Baer.

Mr. BAER. Yes. I think, you know, there are two recent events that connect to what we are talking about today in the last few weeks—the terrible humanitarian disaster in Idlib and the possibility of—well, the reality that close to a million people have been displaced and add to the humanitarian toll already of what has been an incredibly violent and devastating war in Syria, and the announcement I think this morning or last night that Putin has now successfully gotten the Duma to extend his potential rule until 2036.

You know, the first connects to why, you know, Crimea matters to the broader picture, not only to us but to our European allies, because the security of the Middle East is a crucial issue for them and one that their domestic publics are seized with.

And the second I think connects to what we are talking about here today, because as much as we talk about Putin's desire to control Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia through these conflicts, and to use them as tails that wag the dog, in my time in government, I came to believe that actually his bigger interest was not necessarily controlling them per se, but actually preventing their positive examples.

The power of a democratic, prosperous Ukraine that has rule of law and that treats its citizens fairly, no matter their background, is one that would provide a powerful counter-example to the Putin who wants to rule until 2036 and who robs from his own citizens and does not run a system that actually delivers for them a promising future.

And the same is true, obviously, of Georgia and Moldova. And so to me it is even worse than it looks, because it is actually spite that causes him to try to tear these countries apart and prevent their progress, because he does not want to have to deal with the powerful example that they might set and show the Russian people what is possible in their country as well.

Mr. KEATING. I could not agree more. I think that there is no coincidence that the act of war started when they were unable to control the political side of things as Ukraine was moving toward EU membership. That is unquestionable, and that is what I think precipitated this as well. It is, once more, a reminder that in all of these three countries we began with a film of a hot war that is going on right now in Ukraine, something for us to always keep in

mind, that all of these countries are on the front line. They are on front line in terms of the hybrid warfare that is occurring from Russia, and they are in the front line with an active military and hostile war that is occurring in Ukraine.

Once again, we are honored to have veterans here this afternoon from Ukraine. Your presence is greatly appreciated here to remind us that you are indeed on the front line.

With that, I will adjourn and thank our witnesses for a very, I think, enlightening hearing. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 3:37 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

William R. Keating (D-MA), Chairman

March 11, 2020

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Wednesday, March 11, 2020

TIME: 2:00 p.m.

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

WITNESSES: The Honorable Dan Baer
Senior Fellow
Europe Program
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
(Former United States Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe)

Mr. Simon Ostrovsky
Special Correspondent
PBS NewsHour

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan
Analyst
Eastern Neighborhood
International Crisis Group

Mr. Stephen B. Nix
Regional Director
Eurasia
International Republican Institute

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MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment HEARING

Day Wednesday Date 3/11/2020 Room 2172

Starting Time 2:00 Ending Time 3:37

Recesses (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

William R. Keating

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TITLE OF HEARING:

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

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See Attached

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

Ambassador Dan Baer's Testimony

Mr. Simon Ostrovsky's Testimony

Ms. Olesya Vartanyan's Testimony

Mr. Stephen B. Nix's Testimony

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or
TIME ADJOURNED 3:37

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Subcommittee Staff Associate

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