FIIA ANALYSIS – 4

December 2014

# Not Another Transnistria

## How sustainable is separatism in Eastern Ukraine?

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ISBN: 978-951-769-430-8
ISSN: 2342-3323
Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The situation in Eastern Ukraine is often compared with that of Transnistria, the separatist region of Moldova. However, the two cases differ for a number of reasons, all of which will make the "Novorossiya" project much harder for Russia to sustain than Transnistria.

First and foremost, unlike Transnistria, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in their current shape will be unable to influence the everyday political and economic functioning of Ukraine. Vis-à-vis the rest of Ukraine, they are much smaller than Transnistria is in relation to Moldova. The main energy pipelines leading to Ukraine do not cross the separatist territories, and with the economic ties getting severed, the main instrumental function of a frozen conflict – namely to constantly influence and destabilize the target country – is likely to be lost.

There are also several other factors, including: the lack of ethnic, national, linguistic or cultural background that would provide identity foundations for the Novorossiya project; the reliance of the separatists on the continuous, massive presence of the Russian military; the damage already inflicted on Russia's international reputation; the effect on Russian domestic politics; the need for considerable financial assistance from Russia to the separatist territories; and the risk of increasing soft security challenges directly affecting Russia.

In addition to all this, it cannot be guaranteed that the separatist elites will always be fully obedient to the will of Moscow. The a priori readiness to defend and support the action of the local authorities will limit Moscow's room for maneouvre.

Costly both politically and economically, the Novorossiya project is able to serve the Russian strategic objectives vis-à-vis the rest of Ukraine much less than Transnistria was able to do so vis-à-vis Moldova. Hence, one probable scenario is a further escalation of hostilities to expand the separatist-controlled territory, which may unfold relatively soon. However, in the medium term, the gradual restoration of Ukraine's constitutional order in the territory should also be considered possible, within the framework of a larger international compromise and provided that reforms progress in Ukraine.

The The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme
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## Introduction: from federalization to a "frozen conflict"

The present Analysis compares the separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine with that in the Transnistria region of Moldova, examining the historical, identity-related, political, economic, military and security aspects of the situation. Transnistria serves as a basis for comparison for two main reasons.

First, unlike South Ossetia or Abkhazia, the breakaway regions of Georgia, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is neither ethnic nor religious but, rather, political. Second, in both Transnistria and Donbass the main impetus for the conflict was to prevent the westward integration of Moldova[1] and Ukraine, respectively, while Georgia opened itself to the West only a decade after the civil wars against the separatists regions ended in 1992–1993. The main question is whether and to what extent Eastern Ukraine is similar to Transnistria, and whether in the capacity of a "frozen conflict" it would be able to fulfil the same instrumental function, namely to constantly weaken and destabilize the target country and prevent, or at least significantly deter, its gradual integration with the West.

Initially, following the February 2014 change of power in Kyiv, the Russian Federation pursued a federalization agenda in Ukraine. Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov demanded on 30 March that Ukraine should provide the Eastern regions with a wide autonomy, meaning a de facto federalization[2] of the state.[3] However, the Kyiv government was ready only for decentralization, which would have meant expanding the powers of the local communities,[4] but not for changing the very constitutional structure of the country.

Interestingly enough, the federalization idea, although its details remained unclear, resembled a Russian proposal made eleven years earlier to Moldova. The so-called Kozak Memorandum[5] envisaged the federal transformation of Moldova in such a way that would have provided the separatist region of Transnistria with a de facto veto power in all important issues of the country. As such, federalization would have practically disabled the whole of Moldova, and President Vladimir Voronin eventually refused to accept the Russian proposal. The analogy of the Kozak Memorandum could presumably have contributed to Kyiv's decision not to accept the Russian demand for the federalization of Ukraine.

Following the failure of its federalization proposal, Russia's strategic objectives seemed to shift towards weakening Ukraine in another way, namely by creating a non-recognized entity, a frozen conflict in the Eastern regions. Hostilities in Donbass started in early April, when officially unidentified armed men began taking over government buildings, blocking the functioning of the central government and quickly banning the Kyiv authorities from exercising any control over significant parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Although Moscow officially denied its involvement, claiming that the attackers were only loyal activists dissatisfied with the Kyiv government, it was apparent from the outset that the core attackers belonged to, or at least had connections with, various units of the Russian armed

1 Moldova already had the pro-Western option in the early 1990s via the possible integration into Romania. For more information, see: Nelson, 1993, p. 169.

2 Researchers have compared this perspective with Bosnia. See: de Borja Lasheras, 2014.

3 Tisdall, Carroll, 2014.

4 *KyivPost*, 2014.

5 The English translation of the text is available: *Russian Draft Memorandum on the basic principles of the state structure of a united state in Moldova* (Kozak Memorandum).

forces.[6] State administration in the occupied territories was quickly replaced by new, de facto authorities, exercising their power with the active political, diplomatic, military and media support of Russia.

Both the referendum on independence organized by the separatist authorities on 11 May in Donetsk and Luhansk, and the "elections" held on 2 November indicate that Russia is committed to creating a quasi-state outside of Kyiv's control in the rebel-controlled territories of Eastern Ukraine. Since early summer 2014, Russian state propaganda has consistently promoted the separatist "Donetsk People´s Republic" and "Luhansk People´s Republic" as legitimate political actors. Moreover, on 31 August 2014 Russian President Vladimir Putin openly called for discussions on the statehood of Eastern Ukrainian regions, which he called Novorossiya.[7] Moscow was successful in ensuring the full-fledged representation of the separatist territories in ceasefire negotiations held in Minsk in early September.

Apparently, a "frozen conflict" in Eastern Ukraine and the creation of a non-recognized quasi-state without the direct annexation of the territories by Russia, or even without their formal recognition, would allow the Kremlin to limit the damage from the Western sanctions (which would be much greater in the event of annexation or recognition), pushing Ukraine towards the status of a dysfunctional state and thus preventing it from deepening its cooperation with the West. The cautious official reaction[8] by Moscow to the 2 November separatist elections, namely the expression of "respect" for their results instead of formal "recognition" – which the Kremlin knew could entail further EU sanctions[9] – was an important signal that Russia was not seeking a new and immediate diplomatic conflict in its relations with the EU and the US.

This paper argues that even though Russia's actions are in many respects similar to those undertaken during and after the armed phase of the Transnistrian conflict, the quasi-state that is being created in Eastern Ukraine differs considerably from Transnistria, as does the whole separatist movement. Consequently, it will be argued that the creation of a "frozen conflict" in the currently rebel-controlled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts would not bring about similar political results from the point of view of Russia's geopolitical objectives in the broader EU-Russian common neighbourhood in general, and in Russian-Ukrainian relations in particular.

The situation, therefore, will remain volatile, unstable and in the short term prone to another round of military hostilities. In the longer run, however, depending on the state of reform within Ukraine in general and its ability to create a formidable military force, a window of opportunity may open for the settlement of the crisis within the framework of Ukraine's constitutional order, simply because the costs of sustaining the frozen conflict may exceed its usefulness as an instrument of Russia's negative control vis-à-vis the policies of Kyiv.

## Size as a factor

A rough factual comparison already suggests that "Novorossiya" in its current shape should be expected to have a smaller impact on the rest of Ukraine than Transnistria has had on Moldova. In terms of the population, Eastern Ukraine constitutes a significantly smaller share of Ukraine as a whole than Transnistria does in comparison to Moldova. According to

6 For highly detailed evidence based on the equipment used, see: *Russia's Actions in Ukraine*. Background Paper. 2014.

7 EurActiv.com, 2014.

8 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014.

9 *Business News Europe*, 2014.

a July 2014 estimate, Moldova has a population of approximately 3.5 million. The population of the Transnistria region is approximately 510,000,[10] meaning that the separatist territory accounts for approximately one-seventh, or slightly less than 15 per cent of Moldova's population.

When it comes to Ukraine, in July 2014 its population was estimated at 44.2 million. Although reliable data about the exact current population of the rebel-controlled territories is hard to obtain, the voter's registry for the 26 October 2014 parliamentary election provides some estimates. According to information from the Central Electoral Commission of Ukraine, 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens living in the Donestsk Oblast and 1.2 million in the Luhansk Oblast were not able to participate in these elections.[11] (Naturally, these numbers do not include those young people who are not yet eligible to vote).

However, the number of people still physically residing in the occupied territories is definitely much smaller. According to obviously very conservative UN data, some 430,000 refugees have left the region, but it should be taken into account that many people who fled the area are not registered as refugees. All in all, the remaining population in the separatist part of Donbass may be around 2.2–2.4 million at most, but there are even estimates putting the figure at 1.5 million. This constitutes approximately 4–5 per cent of Ukraine´s population. Hence, in relative terms, the population share of the occupied territories in Eastern Ukraine is approximately three times less than that of Transnistria.

Regarding territory, although the frontline is unstable, insurgents currently control approximately one half of Donetsk Oblast and one-third of Luhansk Oblast, which approximates to 20,000 km$^2$ altogether. Considering Ukraine's total 603,550 km$^2$ territory, the separatist control region accounts for approximately 3.3 per cent of the territory. Transnistria is much larger when compared to Moldova proper: of the 33,851 km$^2$ territory, 4,163 km$^2$ are under separatist control, equalling approximately 12 per cent of the country.

Moreover, Transnistria possesses important economic leverages: most of the heavy industry of the former Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic was built on the Eastern bank of the River Dniester, including all the power plants. All the oil and gas pipelines coming from Russia cross the separatist region, empowering Transnistria with an important bargaining chip.

The separatist territories of Donbass, although accommodating important industrial facilities, do not possess such a crucial position vis-à-vis the other regions of Ukraine. Of course, it would be a mistake to underestimate the economic importance of Donbass: the region used to produce 16 per cent of Ukraine´s GDP, with Donetsk being a key industrial centre.[12] Due to the heavy industry located there, 25 per cent of Ukraine's overall industrial output and 27 per cent of all exports originated from Donbass, with metallurgy and mineral products having the lion's share of the output.

However, despite the impressive numbers, due to the outdated technologies still in use, primarily in mining, Donbass was the recipient of often non-transparent government subsidies. According to a study prepared by a German advisory group for the government of Ukraine in 2014,[13] due to the lack of reliable data it was impossible to ascertain whether Donbass has financed the central government, or vice versa. In turn, in an interview given in early November 2014, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk stated that subsidies amounting to USD 2.6 billion

10 *Noi.md*, 2013.

11 *Unian.net*, 2014.

12 Kirchner, Giucci, 2014.

13 Ibid.

had been allocated to the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts from the central budget annually before the outbreak of the conflict.[14]

As a result of the fighting, economic ties have already been severed between Donbass and Ukraine proper, the infrastructure has been seriously damaged, and large parts of the population – naturally the more agile, younger strata – have left the region. All this diminishes the economic clout of Donbass vis-à-vis the rest of Ukraine. While Transnistria has its own economy and industry, often exporting even to the European Union as well as to Moldova proper, the economy of Donbass will hardly be sustainable if it is separated from its main markets in Ukraine.

Integrating the Donbass economy into the Russian market en masse is hardly an option, mainly because the reconstruction and modernization costs would need to be covered first, and also because Russia does not really need the coal produced in the Donbass mines. Another problem for the Donbass economy is that a large proportion of the labour force has already left the region as refugees, while additional thousands of able-bodied men are getting consumed by the war. Simply put, as a big country and even though it would also suffer economically, Ukraine has more options when it comes to the reorientation of economic ties and substituting the products it used to receive from Donbass (for example, Ukraine currently buys coal from South Africa), than vice versa, and this will have political implications as a result.

### Lack of a clear and separate identity

Another problem concerning the sustainability of a "frozen conflict" is that the separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine do not have a particular territorial identity in the same way that Transnistria does. The territories east of the River Dniester have a much longer history of being separate from Moldova than the twenty-two years that have passed since the 1992 civil war. The present Transnistria became part of the Russian Empire in 1792, and its capital, Tiraspol, was established as a Russian border fortress on the River Dniester. The territories between the Rivers Prut and Dniester of present-day Moldova proper, historically often called Bessarabia, were conquered by the Russian Empire in 1812, and remained under Russian control until 1918. However, most parts of Transnistria belonged to the Kherson and Podolsk Governorates and not to the Bessarabian one.

In the interwar period, Transnistria was again administered separately from present-day Moldova proper, as the former belonged to the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Ukraine, while the latter was part of Romania. Even during the Second World War (specifically 1941–1944), Transnistria was administered by the Romanian authorities separately from mainland Moldova, within the framework of the Transnistrian Governorate. Only the Soviet period between 1944 and 1991 placed Moldova proper and the territories east of the River Dniester into the same administrative unit, namely the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. All in all, during the conflict between 1990 and 1992, Transnistria could indeed refer to the region's traditions of being separate from the rest of Moldova.[15]

The separatist regions of Donbass, in turn, do not have such a tradition of being separate from other parts of Ukraine. Donbass has been continuously administered from Kyiv since 1922, when the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was established, and interrupted only by Nazi occupation. Hence, the historical references made by the separatist leaders of Eastern Ukraine to "Novorossiya" are much

14 *newsru.com*, 2014.

15 For a detailed description of Moldova's 19–20th century history, see the authoritative book by Charles King: King, 2000, pp. 18–90.

weaker than the points of historical reference Transnistrian separatists can make.[16]

Unlike Transnistria, Eastern Ukraine does not have an ethnic or linguistic identity decidedly different from the other parts of Ukraine either. As a starting point, it is important to note that in Eastern Europe ethnic, linguistic and political identities are often flexible, frequently intermingled categories, and ethnic belonging does not automatically mean that the given person would be loyal to the kin state of his/her ethnicity. For example, a Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizen would not necessarily identify him- or herself with Russia in the political sense just because of his/her linguistic background. Moreover, one may legitimately define oneself as being of Ukrainian ethnicity despite being a native Russian speaker.

In Transnistria, although precise data is hard to obtain, ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Moldovans reportedly each constitute approximately one-third of the population. This means that some sixty to seventy per cent of the population has a different ethnicity than the titular nation of Moldova proper. In Eastern Ukraine, however, even though a decisive majority of the population is Russian-speaking, this does not by any means imply that they would all be of Russian ethnicity.

During the last Ukrainian census held in 2001, more than 80 per cent of the respondents living in Donetsk Oblast defined Russian as their mother tongue, but only 38.2 per cent declared themselves to be of Russian ethnicity. The rates are similar in the Luhansk region as well. Hence, the official Russian media discourse is misleading when it tries to justify the separatist movement by claiming that ethnic Russians have the right to self-determination. Ethnic Russians constitute a minority in both regions and their political opinion is far from unified.

Regarding the political loyalties of the local population, the last reliable, properly procured data is from April 2014, when the Kyiv Institute of Sociology conducted a comprehensive survey in Eastern Ukraine on attitudes towards separatism.[17] In the Donetsk region only 27.5% of respondents were in favour of the idea that the region should secede from Ukraine and join Russia, while 52.2% were firmly against. In Luhansk, the secession supporters constituted 30.3%, while 51.9% were against. When compared to the proportion of ethnic Russians in the region, it is apparent that it cannot be taken for granted at all that an ethnic Russian would automatically be loyal to Russia instead of Ukraine.

16 The weak historical roots are well demonstrated by the fact that even President Vladimir Putin referred to "Novorossiya" erroneously in his Valdai speech when he said that "*there was essentially a single region with its centre at Novorossiisk, and that was how it came to be called Novorossiya. This land included Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Nikolayev, Kherson and Odessa Region.*" However, the whole *Novorossiyskaya guberniya* existed only once for 20 years, between 1764 and 1783, and then for seven years, from 1796 until 1802. As pointed out by Vitaly Portnikov, the Russian president basically mixed up present-day Novorossiysk (founded only in 1838) with the former centre of the *Novorossiyskaya guberniya* that is today's Dnipropetrovsk. This city was originally called Yekaterinoslav, but was briefly named Novorossiysk between 1797 and 1802, when it was the centre of the second *Novorossiyskaya guberniya* (the centre of the first *Novorissyskaya guberniya* was Kremenchug). Another *faux pas* by Putin was that Kharhkiv actually never belonged to this administrative unit. Although Donetsk and Luhansk were parts of it between 1796 and 1802, it is still unusual to claim any territorial possession based on a short-lived administrative unit that existed for just seven years, and did so more than two centuries ago. For more information, see: President of Russia (a), 2014, and Portnikov, 2014.

17 The Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (a), 2014.

An earlier poll, conducted in February 2014,[18] showed that 31.8% of ethnic Russians living throughout Ukraine would have welcomed the unification of Russia and Ukraine into a single state, while the rest were opposed to it. Among ethnic Ukrainians, the idea of unification naturally received much lower support: only 8.7% were in favour.

All in all, in addition to the above-demonstrated lack of credible historical roots, the available public opinion data shows that separatism in Eastern Ukraine does not have a decisive ethnic component either. This will make it very hard for the separatist leaders (with backing from Russia) to construct a new political identity distinct from the Ukrainian one. In the case of Transnistria, being separate from Moldova proper for several long and recurring periods of time has made it easy to build up a different identity, but Donbass separatists, even if supported by Russian official discourse, cannot convincingly present and rely on a similar historical heritage. Separation from Ukraine would duly have to be built on negative sentiments born during the hostilities, which, however strong they may be at the moment, do not equate with ethnic or even historical differences and can, therefore, be overcome.

### Continuous external military involvement is required

Unlike in Transnistria, in Eastern Ukraine the Russian armed forces will need to be continuously and massively involved, in order to prevent Ukraine from regaining control over the separatist territories. This is an important difference compared to Transnistria, where the re-eruption of military hostilities has never been a serious threat since 1992.

The non-recognized republic of Transnistria came into existence after the Moldovan civil war, which lasted from March to July 1992, came to an end after the intervention by Russian army units led by General Alexandr Lebed.[19] After the ceasefire agreement was signed, the military option was taken off the agenda by Chişinau itself, most importantly because the separatists were considerably stronger than the under-financed, poorly equipped armed forces of Moldova proper.

According to *The Military Balance 1992*, the armed forces of Moldova consisted of only 12,000 personnel with no heavy armaments listed at all (except for 30 MiG-29 fighters), while the separatists had approximately 15,000 men in arms.[20] As asserted, the separatists received a vast amount of heavy weaponry from the Russian forces through various channels, which contributed to their superiority over government troops.[21] By means of the continued stationing of its forces in the breakaway region, and by capitalizing upon the economic and political leverages it had over Moldova, the Kremlin has always been able to ensure that the Chişinau government would not attempt to resume the hostilities. In effect, this required a very limited investment by Moscow: the so-called Operative Group of Russian Forces stationed in Transnistria was eventually reduced to some 1,500 personnel, out of which 350 are peacekeepers.[22]

Unlike the Transnistria situation, the armed phase of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is far from over. Moreover, it goes without saying that the military forces at Kyiv's disposal will be much larger and more capable than those of Moldova. The military operation by the Kyiv government resulted in a rapid retreat by the

18 The Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (b), 2014.

19 For details of the Russian involvement, see: Chinn, 1996, pp. 103–119.

20 *The Military Balance 1992–1993*, p. 80

21 Pintea, 2004, pp. 95–137.

22 *The Military Balance 2014*, p. 180.

separatists in June–August 2014, and Russia had to intervene on a massive scale in order to prevent the Kyiv government from regaining control over the whole separatist territory. Although the Ukrainian armed forces could not repel the overwhelming Russian offensive in mid-August 2014, they were able to mount considerable resistance and inflicted heavy losses on the attacking forces. Despite the defeat at Ilovaysk, the Ukrainian military, strengthened by the volunteer battalions,[23] is indeed a force to be reckoned with.[24]

This means that Russia will need to maintain considerable military forces in Eastern Ukraine in order to keep the separatist regime in power there, and to prevent a successful resumption of Kyiv's operation against the breakaway region. An important difference compared to Transnistria is that Kyiv has not yet declared its intention to finally take the military option off the agenda, and will probably not do so in the near future either. Hence, unlike in Transnistria, in Donbass Russia will need to station highly trained, professional troops equipped with heavy weaponry. Prolonged, massive military involvement will keep Moscow on continuous high alert. Consequently, the role of a party to this military conflict will delegitimize Moscow's efforts to both act and appear as a mediator in the conflict, which it successfully did in the Transnistrian conflict. In other words, Russian troop presence in Donbass will not have the same legitimacy as the stationing of Russian forces in Moldova, as stipulated by the 1992 ceasefire agreement that ended the hostilities.

### Political costs

The war in Eastern Ukraine has incurred much higher political costs for Russia both at home and abroad than its involvement in the Transnistrian conflict ever did. The 1992 intervention into the Transnistrian conflict did not have any serious repercussions in the West, as the world was paying much closer attention to the unfolding crisis in Yugoslavia, as well as to the internal turmoil within the post-Soviet Russian Federation itself. Since then, after the conflict was "frozen", the role of Russia in Transnistria, even though it was viewed controversially and even negatively by some Western actors, has remained a peripheral question that has had no practical impact on the state of relations between Russia and the West.

Furthermore, one may even argue that Transnistria has often served as a Russian bargaining chip in order to shape Moscow's relations with the European Union and the United States. This was the case in the 1999 Istanbul Summit, where Russia could trade off the promise to withdraw its forces from Moldova and Georgia in exchange for the Western countries' consent to sign the Adapted Treaty on the Conventional Forces in Europe, which was more beneficial for Russia compared with its predecessor, which was signed in 1990. In 2003 the Kozak Memorandum was used as an alternative conflict-settlement plan to torpedo the proposal by the Dutch OSCE presidency to deploy EU peacekeepers to Moldova. The Meseberg Memorandum[25] signed in 2010 by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and German Chancellor Angela Merkel aimed to use the Transnistria conflict as a field of EU–Russia crisis management cooperation, which was fully in line

23 *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, 2014.

24 Officially, Russia denies its military involvement and recognizes the participation of Russian citizens only as volunteers. However, significant evidence suggests that this has not been the case, including NATO satellite imagery (NATO (a), 2014), and pictures taken of Russian heavy weaponry by local residents in Eastern Ukraine, such as in the *Ukraine at War blog*, 2014. The presence of heavy equipment obviously negates the official Russian argument about the volunteers: even if a soldier volunteers, the presence of Russian-made tanks, artillery systems and other weapons would not be possible without official, state-level involvement.

25 *Memorandum*, 2010.

with Medvedev's efforts to intensify relations with the European Union. Furthermore, the Memorandum also proposed exploring the possibilities of setting up an EU–Russia Political and Security Committee, which would have been an important victory for Russia because the idea originated from Medvedev's June 2008 notion of a new European Security Treaty[26] proposal which, if realized, would have provided Moscow with an institutionalized veto position on issues of European security.

Russia was never placed under any economic or political sanctions because of its involvement in Transnistria. As tensions along the River Dniester have not erupted again since 1992, the conflict has not had a serious impact on the overall security of Europe during the last two decades.

The crisis in Eastern Ukraine, however, has already severely damaged Russia's international reputation and its relations with the West. Both the United States and the EU, which, paradoxically, essentially did not go beyond rhetoric even after the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014, have now introduced economic and political sanctions against the Russian Federation. The damage to Russia's reputation as a reliable international partner will be long-lasting, regardless of how successful or sustainable the "Novorossiya" project is.

Moreover, according to the NATO Wales Summit declaration, the Russian actions in Ukraine have fundamentally changed the Alliance's "*vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace*".[27] As a result, NATO has decided not only to significantly increase its defence spending, but also to establish a robust military presence on a rotational basis in the Baltic states. From Russia's perspective, massive NATO forces dispatched to the Baltics is precisely the kind of military danger the Military Doctrine of 2010[28] mentioned: "*the deployment (buildup) of troop contingents of foreign states (groups of states) on the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies and also in adjacent waters*".[29] In other words, Moscow's military interference in Ukraine has seriously backfired in the sense that it has induced the establishment of a NATO troop presence directly in Russia's backyard.

The domestic effects are not insignificant either. Whereas the intervention into the conflict in Moldova did not have any meaningful impact inside Russia, the war in Ukraine certainly does. It is true that the 14th Army's role in bringing the armed phase of the Moldovan conflict to an end endowed its commanding general, the charismatic Aleksandr Lebed, with a positive image,[30] but this had no other visible influence on Russian domestic politics.

The crisis in Ukraine, however, has undoubtedly affected Russian domestic politics. Despite the heavily flawed discourse in the government-controlled media,[31] the Russian population is far from being clearly supportive of the war. On 22 September 2014 tens of thousands attended the anti-war rallies organized in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities.[32] According to a nationwide poll conducted by the Levada Center in August 2014, although the majority of Russians agree with the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine, 17 per cent of Russian respondents stated that Russia bears responsibility for the

26 President of Russia, 2009.

27 NATO (b), 2014.

28 President of Russia, 2010.

29 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010.

30 *The New York Times*, 1996. For a detailed account of General Lebed's intervention, see: Lebed, 1995, pp. 423–462.

31 Pynnöniemi, 2014.

32 BBC, 2014.

bloodshed and destruction in Eastern Ukraine.[33] Slightly more, 26% of Russian respondents, agreed that there was a war between Russia and Ukraine, which contradicted the Kremlin's official non-involvement discourse. According to an October poll by another pollster, VTSIOM, only 11% of Russians would support the annexation of Donbass into Russia, while 23% of respondents were in favour of recognizing the independence of the separatist regions.[34]

Another manifestation of differing opinions is that the so-called "Russian March", a traditional gathering of Russian nationalists commemorating the victory over Poland in 1612, was this year deeply divided over the war in Ukraine. On 4 November, in addition to the rally of hardcore Russian ethnic nationalists, an alternative march was held as well, whereby demonstrators opposed the war against Ukraine on the ideological grounds of Slavic brotherhood.[35]

The military losses in Eastern Ukraine are fanning the flames of dissent in the Russian population. This is yet another difference compared to Transnistria: while the 1992 operation was brief and the small losses suffered by the Russian forces were not publicized, the same cannot be said of Eastern Ukraine. Although reliable data on Russian losses is not available, 246 Russian soldiers have reportedly been killed in Ukraine, another 33 captured and 538 seen in action.[36]

To a certain extent, the circumstances surrounding the losses in Eastern Ukraine are similar to those in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Although the Kremlin either keeps silent about the exact numbers, or tries to downplay them, news nevertheless spreads among the population. This has a negative effect on the credibility of the ruling elite, and it is unclear just how long support for the military involvement in Ukraine can be maintained among the Russian population if the death toll mounts.

### Economic and financial costs

Managing the occupied Eastern Ukrainian territories from the economic perspective is likely to entail a serious burden for Russia. First and foremost, the remaining local population needs food, housing, heating, education, and social and medical services. The Kyiv government will obviously not provide the necessary services, leaving Moscow with limited choices.

However, the sheer size of the separatist territories makes this task much more complicated than it was in the case of Transnistria. This is particularly so because due to the extensive war damage, a serious humanitarian crisis may unfold not only in the war-torn big cities, such as Luhansk in particular, but also in rural areas. The situation is well documented by both the Russian media and by many international reporters. The fact that hundreds of thousands of people have left the region as refugees clearly indicates just how grave the humanitarian situation is. This was certainly not the case in Transnistria, where the conflict displaced approximately 100,000 people.[37]

War damage is another difference compared to the war in Transnistria: in 1992 the warring parties employed neither heavy artillery nor air power, and the whole conflict was over much more quickly than the war in Ukraine. Hence, a lot less damage was inflicted on the

33 Levada Center, 2014.

34 LB.ua, 2014.

35 RFE/RL, 2014.

36 The data is from the website www.lostivan.com, accessed 7 November 2014. Information on losses has been gathered by the Russian Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. A deputy of the local assembly in the Pskov region, Lev Shlosberg, committed to investigating the fate of soldiers from the Pskov Airborne division, mentioned "heavy losses" in an August 2014 interview: *Hartiya97*, 2014.

37 European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2010.

local infrastructure than in Eastern Ukraine, where not only objects of military importance, but also purely civilian, residential areas have long been the target of massive artillery shelling, fired by both sides. Public services, such as heating, electricity and the water supply system have been damaged, and the transport infrastructure decimated (often professionally demolished, like the railroad bridges west of Donetsk[38]).

Rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure, including the repairs to heavy industry, would be costly (estimates are not yet available), and the Russian state budget is already under strain due to the falling energy prices and the Western economic sanctions. Coal mines may serve as a good example of how extensive the damage to industry is: news reports claim that out of 93 mines in Donbass, only 24 are still operational, while all the others have ceased operations. Without electricity, water pumps do not work: many mines were flooded, 10 of them completely, while several others are in a precarious condition.[39]

Crimea may provide a rule of thumb for estimating the likely costs: supplying the peninsula, where the population is smaller and no war damage has been inflicted, is likely to cost Russia some 5.4 billion USD per year, according to an official Russian estimate from September 2014. In addition to this, Moscow will need to cover Crimea's budget deficit, previously supported by Kyiv, to the tune of an additional 1.5 billion.[40] Due to the factors mentioned above, Eastern Ukraine will probably cost much more. The subsidies, previously paid by Kyiv to support Donbass's outdated heavy industry, will also place an extra burden on the Russian budget.

By way of comparison, maintaining the "independence" of Transnistria costs far less. One part of these costs is the supply of natural gas, for which Transnistria has paid hardly anything. According to an expert analysis from 2013, the separatist region's gas debt could amount to around 3.7 billion USD, accumulated over 22 years.[41] As Moldovagaz is owned by Gazprom, tolerating Transnistria's non-payment is more of a political question than an economic one. In addition to the gas subsidy, Russia provides regular and occasional budgetary support, as well as humanitarian aid. However, if compared to the Crimea, these amounts are minuscule: between 2008 and 2012, some 27 million USD was provided annually to the separatists as regular budgetary support, in addition to occasional transfers of 10–30 million.

As well as the direct costs of maintaining the separatism in Eastern Ukraine, one also needs to factor in the indirect financial costs of Russia's war in Eastern Ukraine, namely the consequences of the economic sanctions, which exacerbate Russia's general economic downturn. This is a fundamental difference compared to the Transnistrian conflict, over which Russia did not have to face any economic sanctions at all.

The only actual economic benefit for Russia may be that several advanced military industry plants are located in the separatist territories. Russian forces have reportedly started "evacuating" a number of key military industry plants[42] and transferring all the production lines to Russia. However, while capturing these factories may serve strategic purposes, it neither eases nor compensates for the economic and financial burden of maintaining the separatism in Eastern Ukraine.

38 Yahoo! News, 2014.

39 *The Daily Mail*, 2014.

40 *The Moscow Times*, 2014.

41 Całus, 2014.

42 *Euromaidan Press*, 2014.

### Soft security risks

Unlike Transnistria, the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine directly border Russia, which may pose serious soft security risks for Moscow. As in all conflict zones, criminality is also on the rise in Eastern Ukraine. Separatists often conduct extra-judicial killings and torture,[43] as well as kidnappings for ransom.[44] Rebels often seize civilian cars and demand money in exchange for their return.[45] The "confiscated" cars often end up in Kharkiv second-hand car market: their main benefit compared to used cars arriving from Western Europe is that their registration documents are completely valid, the previous owner being a Ukrainian citizen.[46] Corruption is skyrocketing: in an interview given on 29 October 2014, a prominent leader of the Donetsk separatists, Pavel Gubarev, admitted that combating corruption must be a key priority for "Novorossiya".[47]

Moreover, the massive influx of small arms and light weapons from Russia poses the imminent danger of an illicit arms trade. The weapons captured from abandoned Ukrainian barracks and from defeated Ukrainian units are the most obvious arms trade items, as they are probably not registered anywhere at all. As pointed out by Mark Galeotti, the crisis in Ukraine provides a golden opportunity for Russian organized crime networks to expand their activities in the neighbouring country.[48]

Hence, these soft security risks may well affect Russia. Currently, the border between Russia and the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine is not being monitored reliably. If the separatist quasi-state consolidates, it will probably be isolated from the rest of Ukraine by the frontline or demarcation line, and will have to conduct all of its trade and most of its people-to-people contacts through the neighbouring Rostov region of Russia. This may perpetuate the high level of soft security threats, particularly those concerning criminality. The first signs are already visible: three rebel fighters from Luhansk are officially suspected of killing two policemen on 3 November as far from the conflict zone as the Moscow region.[49]

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that the line of military subordination and political authority within the Donetsk and Luhansk republics has not been properly established. There is extensive media coverage on Russian Don Cossack forces under the command of Nikolay / Mykhailo Kozitsyin, who kidnapped OSCE observers in June 2014,[50] much to the consternation of other rebel leaders. Another loose-cannon actor in the conflict is Crimean Russian warlord Igor Bezler and his militants in the Donetsk region. In early July, Bezler even attempted to capture Donetsk and oust self-declared Prime Minister Alexander Borodai, after which the DNR declared him a terrorist.[51] No doubt the lack of centralized rule over Eastern Ukraine will accentuate the risk of exporting crime and violence to the territory of Russia.

In addition, Russia probably cannot guarantee that the leaders of the separatist entities will remain wholly obedient to Moscow. It is more likely that – in much the same way as Igor Smirnov in Transnistria – the separatist leaders are going to pursue their own political and

43 Amnesty International, 2014.

44 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014, p. 29.

45 Luhn, 2014.

46 Interview with Ukrainian expert in September 2014.

47 *Novorossiya Today*, 2014.

48 Galeotti, 2014.

49 *Govorit Moskva*, 2014.

50 *Spiegel Online International*, 2014.

51 *Russkaya Planeta*, 2014.

economic agenda, and will try to capitalize on the fact that Russia will need to maintain its support for Novorossiya under any circumstances, if it wants to sustain the project. Hence, this may generate a "tail wagging the dog" effect, namely that separatist leaders on the ground may influence Moscow's policies towards the region, and not vice versa. Separatist leaders pursuing their own economic agenda – possibly connected to organized crime activities – may well contribute to the soft security risks discussed above.

## Conclusions

Since the Russia-proposed federalization of Ukraine has become unrealistic, the Kremlin is seemingly following a strategy aimed at creating a frozen conflict in Eastern Ukraine. However, unlike the Transnistrian territory of Moldova, Eastern Ukraine will probably not be able to fulfil the main instrumental function of a "frozen conflict", namely to constantly weaken and destabilize the target country, due to a multitude of reasons.

The separatist-controlled part of Donbass is much smaller in terms of both territory and population in relation to mainland Ukraine than Transnistria is to Moldova. This area constitutes only around 3 per cent of the country's territory as a whole, and its population – radically decreased by the outflow of refugees – is only 4–5 per cent of pre-war Ukraine's. Moreover, Ukraine proper is not dependent to such an extent on the separatist territories as Moldova is dependent on Transnistria concerning industry, power generation, energy supplies, and so forth. Even though Ukraine has lost a considerable proportion of its heavy industry during the war in Donbass, in reality most of those industrial facilities were already outdated, worn-down and depleted, and keeping them operational required massive state subsidies.

In addition, while Transnistria has its own functional economic ties not only with Moldova, but also with Ukraine, Russia and also the European Union, the Donbass economy will hardly become functional again, if it remains separated from its main market, Ukraine, by the frontline. This means that Russia will probably have to bear all the financial costs of maintaining Donbass, including the subsidies and the reparation of the war damage necessary for the resumption of normal life there.

The separatist-controlled regions of Eastern Ukraine will also require significant and constant military resources from Russia. While Transnistria came into existence as a result of a stalemate, and the re-eruption of military violence has never been a real option since the 1992 ceasefire, this is certainly not the case in Eastern Ukraine. Unlike Moldova, Ukraine has large, increasingly potent armed forces, and is unlikely to give up the intention to regain control over the lost territories. Hence, in order to prevent a military operation by Kyiv, Moscow will need to station significant, battle-ready forces either in Eastern Ukraine, or adjacent to it on the Russian side of the border. In contrast, Transnistria, as a quasi-state, could have been maintained by the presence of the minuscule Russian force of between one to two thousand soldiers that have already been stationed in the region for 22 years.

Another important difference is that while the involvement in Transnistria has never seriously dented Russia's international image, or affected its domestic politics, the crisis in Ukraine definitely has. Relations with the West have slumped to an unprecedented low since the end of the Cold War, including severe economic sanctions, and the losses suffered by the Russian forces in Ukraine have sparked protests inside Russia. These factors already make it very costly for Moscow to maintain the "frozen conflict" in Eastern Ukraine, and the political costs are likely to rise in the future.

This is particularly so because the separatist leaders – just like their counterparts in Transnistria – are unlikely to remain fully obedient to Moscow's will. Instead, they will probably pursue their own political and financial agendas,

utilizing the fact that Russia cannot abandon the region, which may well lead to a "tail wagging the dog" effect.

In addition to all this, the porous border between the separatist territories in Eastern Ukraine and mainland Russia will make Russia highly vulnerable to the soft security risks posed by the existence of a political "black hole", meaning primarily criminal activities.

All in all, the likely political, economic, military and security costs of maintaining the frozen conflict in Eastern Ukraine will far exceed those of Transnistria, while the foreseeable political benefits will be much smaller. Ukraine, of course, does and will suffer from losing control over parts of its territory, but will not become politically disabled to the same extent as Moldova.

This leads the authors to the conclusion that maintaining the present status quo is not beneficial enough for Russia, as the costs far outweigh the benefits. At this point, Moscow is basically left with two main options, as simply abandoning Eastern Ukraine is clearly out of the question for Russia.

An "escalationist" option, more likely in the short run, is to increase the territory of the quasi-states already created in Eastern Ukraine by taking over additional parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, as well as the southern territories of Zaporishya Oblast in all likelihood, and creating a land bridge to Crimea. This would entail completely crushing the Ukrainian army, which would obviously do its utmost to resist such an offensive. The subsequent massive territorial, military, economic, human and political losses incurred may well have the potential to fully disable Ukraine and essentially deprive it of the right to take sovereign decisions in both foreign and domestic policy.

Another, "moderate" option is that following a short period of maintaining the frozen conflict in Eastern Ukraine in its current state (and possibly extending the rebel-controlled territory slightly), Moscow would accept an internationally-agreed compromise, the essence of which would be, however, the restoration of the Ukrainian constitutional order in the Eastern regions. The likelihood of this option will increase in the medium-term perspective, provided that the "escalationist" scenario does not materialize and the reforms in Ukraine progress, raising the standard of living in the country.

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