



UKRAINE FIRST, TRANSDNIESTRIA NEXT? PROSPECTS FOR A MOSCOW-SPONSORED ARC OF INSTABILITY

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"A defensive campaign can only be made successful by taking the aggressive at the proper time."

-General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson

"Things are never so bad they can't be made worse."

-Humphrey Bogart

George Kennan wrote amidst the dissolution of the Soviet Union that Transdnistria¹ and other aspiring states "would demand their independence and act in many respects as though they already had it...especially in the Black and Caspian seas region." He cautioned, however, that "much trouble lies ahead in connection with the Ukraine, parts of whose population are stridently demanding independence, whereas the country is in a number of respects very poorly fitted for it."²

The juxtaposition of two articles appearing in the past few days is worth taking note of in light of ongoing contention within Ukraine. The first is an Associated Press report carried on [The Moscow Times](#) website:

"Moldova's president says his country will exercise its "sovereign right" and sign an association agreement with the 28-nation European Union despite external political and economic pressures."

"President Nicolae Timofti did not name Russia in Tuesday's comments but Moscow opposes Moldova seeking that deal with the EU, which Chişinău hopes to sign this year. In the past, Russia has taken punitive trade measures against neighboring Baltic states and Ukraine as those countries sought closer ties with the west."

¹ Transdnistrian separatist leaders declared the independence of the *Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublik* (Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic) in Tiraspol on 25 August 1991 in anticipation of the declaration of the Republic of Moldova's independence, which occurred two days hence, on 27 August 1991.

² George F. Kennan (2014). *The Kennan Diaries*. Frank Costigliola, ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 614.

“On Monday, Timofti met with NATO Deputy Secretary-General Alexander Vershbow, who offered to consolidate security in Moldova, a neutral state. Relations between Moldova and Russia have been strained after Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin's plane was held up while traveling in the region last weekend.”³

The second article is an interview with Dmitry Rogozin, Russian deputy prime minister and special envoy to Transdnistria. It was posted on the Russian news website *Kommersant* under the headline “Moldova is opening the door to NATO.”⁴ Responding to the question, “What will the Russian Federation do once Moldova signs the EU accession agreement in June?”⁵ Rogozin stated:

“The former relationship [with Russia] will be gone. I am convinced that an association with the EU change’s Moldova’s neutral status. There is a definite rule known to all NATO members: to join the EU, one must join NATO. This rule will not be changed for Moldovans. Therefore, association with the EU is the moment when Moldova grasps the doorknob called NATO. The next day, that door will open.”⁶

Rogozin claimed Russia is “taking some steps to dampen the ardor of the fools ready to escalate tensions in Transdnistria,”⁷ where he described the situation as “dynamic” [динамике] and cautioned:

“Transdnistria is not a case where Chişinău [the Moldovan capital] can call the tune. Moldovan politicians pursue EU association despite warnings that the Transdnistrian railcar can be disengaged from Chişinău’s locomotive. If they were patriots, they would hold a referendum, because one party is in favor of EU association while others are strongly opposed. The will of the people should decide, but again with an eye to Transdnistria.”⁸

Assessing the situation in Transdnistria, Romanian scholar Liliana Popescu illuminates Rogozin’s phrase “strongly opposed” when she writes, “If one looks at the maximal acceptable solutions of both sides— the so-called ‘red lines’— one realizes that the content of each side’s red lines does not intersect the other side...the red lines of the two negotiating parties do not overlap at all; they are disjunctive.”⁹ [sic]

Chişinău might well pause to reflect on Rogozin’s railcar metaphor in light of a commentary several days ago by Sergey Lebedev,¹⁰ who declared Transdnistria “the first liberated part of Novorossiia”¹¹ of the “Russian Spring”¹². Making the dubious claim that Transdnistria has lived under conditions of a Ukraine-imposed blockade since

³ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/moldova-plans-to-sign-eu-accord-despite-pressure/500040.html>. Last accessed 13 May 2014.

⁴ “Молдавия берется за ручку двери в НАТО”. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Что предпримет РФ после того, как в июне Молдавия подпишет ассоциацию с ЕС?

⁶ Прежних отношений уже не будет. Я убежден, что ассоциация с ЕС – это изменение нейтрального статуса Молдавии. Есть определенное правило, его знают все натовцы: чтобы вступить в ЕС, необходимо вступить в НАТО. Это правило под молдаван не будет меняться. Поэтому ассоциация с ЕС – это момент, когда Молдавия берется за ручку двери под названием НАТО. Завтра эта дверь откроется.

⁷ Мы предпринимает определенные действия, чтобы охладить пыл придурков, которые готовы лезть и в Приднестровье.

⁸ Здесь не Приднестровье заказывает музыку, а Кишинев. Несмотря на предупреждения, что приднестровский вагон может отцепиться от кишиневского локомотива, молдавские политики идут на ассоциацию с ЕС. Если бы они были патриотами, они сначала должны были провести выборы, которые стали бы своеобразным референдумом, потому что одни партии в Молдавии выступают за ассоциацию с ЕС, а другие – категорически против. И вот на основании волеизъявления людей надо принимать решения, но опять же с оглядкой на Приднестровье.

⁹ Liliana Popescu (2013). “The Futility of the Negotiations on Transnistria.” *European Journal of Science and Theology*. 9:2, Supplement 2, p. 115.

¹⁰ Сергей Лебедев (2014). «Восстание в Новороссии.» [Sergey Lebedev, “Rebellion in Novorossiia.”] *Русская народная линия*. 6 May 2014. http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2014/05/06/pridnestrovo_e_tnicheskaya_istoriya/. Last accessed 13 May 2014. The news service’s political orientation is made clear by its use of the tag line «Православие Самодержавие Народность» or “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationalism”.

¹¹ Первой освобожденной территорией Новороссии стала Приднестровская молдавская республика.

¹² «Русская весна».

1990, Lebedev turns to Moldova's western neighbor, Romania:

“Romanian authorities, led by the ambitious and eccentric President Traian Bănescu, launched a campaign to annex the Republic of Moldova, which in a climate of already unsettled relations between Moldova and Transdnistria further intensified the conflict of the Dniester.”¹³

Raising (some might say, relishing) the prospect of the Transdnistrian conflict going “hot” à la Ukraine, Lebedev writes:

“All these years, no one recognized Transdnistria as it lived alone and hoped for a reunion with Greater Russia. And now the situation has radically changed due to the crisis in Ukraine, as well as the complicated situation in Moldova and Romania.”¹⁴

Of course, another way to see *Novorossiia* is as the American Russian analyst Paul Goble does, *viz.*, a lurking “Moscow-sponsored arc of instability into the Balkans.” For those confounded by Russian actions in the face of the economically and militarily stronger (if not wholly unified in purpose) Western nations that comprise NATO and the EU, perhaps the preceding sentence to the Stonewall Jackson quote above will help: “Only thus can a weaker country cope with a stronger; it must make up in activity what it lacks in strength.”¹⁵ Indeed, to the consternation of many Western analysts, Russia can be seen to “take the aggressive” by widening, not constraining the conflict, stirring forces seeking partition in western Ukraine—for example, ethnic Hungarians in Transcarpathia¹⁶ and ethnic Romanians in Northern Bukovina¹⁷—as well as in Moldova. Some offer a more discriminating, and not wholly unconvincing argument that within this “arc of instability”:

“The Ukrainian and Crimean crisis is not the beginning of a chain of national self-determination and redrawing boundaries. Rather, they are attempts to ‘arrange the pins’ to avoid infringing on the rights of ethnic minorities and to resist extremes that allow people to aggravate [literal translation: “sharpen”] the ethnic question.”¹⁸

Given the *plus ça change* of Russia's near-abroad policy, the frustrated puzzlement of some Western leaders over the state of affairs in the Black Sea littoral is difficult to rate. Sarah Paine wrote about Russia's “traditional and highly successful strategy for empire” in her masterful 2012 book *The Wars for Asia 1911-1949*. Russia, she wrote:

¹³ «власти Румынии во главе с амбициозным и не вполне вменяемым президентом Траяном Бесеску начали кампанию по аннексии республики Молдова (Молдавии) к Румынии, что в условиях неурегулирования отношений Молдавии с Приднестровьем вновь обостряет конфликт на Днестре.»

¹⁴ «Все эти годы никем не признанная ПМР жила одной только надеждой на воссоединение с Большой Россией. И вот теперь ситуация радикально меняется в связи с кризисом на Украине, а также сложной ситуацией в Молдавии и Румынии.»

¹⁵ Quoted in George Francis Robert Henderson (1900). *Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., p. 418.

¹⁶ At a recent protest accusing the Hungarian government of being “an agent of the European Union, one protester was quoted approvingly in the Russian news outlet Правдивые новости России: Украины, Белоруси и мира [“True Russia Press: Ukraine, Belarus, and the world”] saying “How is the status of Crimea an internal affair of the Russian Federation, and the issue of Transcarpathia is not Hungary's internal affair?” [«Как вопрос о статусе Крыма является внутренним делом Российской Федерации, так и вопрос Закарпатья — внутреннее дело Венгрии»]. See: <http://pravdoryb.info/budapesht-zayavil-o-gotovnosti-deystvovat-po-krymskomu-stsenariyu.html>. Last accessed 14 May 2014.

¹⁷ “Romania could demand ‘autonomy’ for the descendants of Romanian citizens living in Northern Bukovina, which once belonged to Romania, especially as according to Ukrainian media, more than 100,000 local residents already have a Romanian passport.” [«Румын есть потенциальные возможности потребовать «автономии» для потомков румынских граждан, живущих на территории Северной Буковины, некогда принадлежавшей Румынии. Тем более что, по данным украинских СМИ, более 100 тыс. местных жителей уже обзавелись румынскими паспортами.»] See: <http://pravdoryb.info/budapesht-zayavil-o-gotovnosti-deystvovat-po-krymskomu-stsenariyu.html>. Last accessed 14 May 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid. The statement is attributed to Dmitry Danilov, Deputy Director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Science. [«Украинский кризис и Крым — это не начало цепочки национальных самоопределений и перекройки границ. Есть попытки расставить флажки, чтобы не допустить ущемления прав национальных меньшинств и удержаться от крайностей, которые позволяют обострять национальный вопрос»]

“[S]ought security through creeping buffer zones combined with astutely coordinated diplomacy and military operations against weak neighbors to ingest their territory at opportune moments. Russia surrounded itself with buffer zones and failing states. During the tsarist period, the former were called governor-generalships, jurisdictions under military authority for a period of initial colonization and stabilization. Such areas generally contained non-Russian populations and bordered on foreign lands.”

“Russia repeatedly applied the Polish model to its neighbors. Under Catherine the Great, Russia partitioned Poland three times in the late eighteenth century, creating a country even less capable of administering its affairs as Russia in combination with Prussia and Austria gradually ate it alive. Great and even middling powers on their borders were dangerous. So they must be divided, a fate shared by Poland, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, China, and, post World War II, Germany and Korea. It is no coincidence that so many divided states border on Russia. Nor is it coincidence that so many unstable states sit on its periphery.”¹⁹

Russia’s objective in Transdnistria a decade ago was to federalize the Republic of Moldova—an interstate, not ethnic, conflict between two “abruptly asymmetric states”²⁰—much as it claims to seek in Ukraine today.²¹ Returning again to Popescu, she writes:

“The Transnistrian de facto quasi-state, as well as of the other de facto quasi-states in the post-Soviet space...is a de facto extension of Russia, led by Russian citizens and benefitting from a wide range of freedoms derived from the lack of constraints of the international law, and endangered by the legalist approach required by the EU.”²²

The historian Robert Skidelsky recently wrote, “[B]efore we drift into Cold War II, we would do well to recall why we had the first one,” counting among these reasons, “legalism and moralism on the Western side.”²³ Skidelsky continues:

“Following its ‘victory’ in the Cold War, the West made a serious mistake by refusing to concede any form of regional hegemony to Russia, even in countries like Ukraine and Georgia that had once formed part of the historic Russian state. Rather...the West actively sought to pry the ex-Soviet countries from Russia’s orbit. Many of them were eager to escape the Kremlin’s gravity, and NATO expanded eastward into the former Soviet bloc in Central Europe, and even into the former Soviet Union, with the admission of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In 1996, the 92-year-old Kennan warned that NATO’s expansion into former Soviet territory was a ‘strategic blunder of potentially epic proportions’...Kennan warned against a foreign policy that was ‘utopian in its expectation, legalistic in its concept...moralistic...and self-righteous’.”²⁴

Writing in 1956 and presaging Kennan’s later observation about the dangers of a “moralistic and self-righteous” foreign policy, the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr warned of a “moral universe that makes everything quite clear, too clear” in the field of foreign affairs:

¹⁹ S.C.M. Paine (2012). *The Wars for Asia 1911-1949*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 83-84.

²⁰ Lilliana Popescu (2013). *Op cit.*, p. 121.

²¹ A “Memorandum referring to the principles of normalizing the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and Transdnistria” was signed in 1997 by the head of the Moldovan state, Petru Lucinschi, and the head of separatist Transdnistria, Igor Smirnov. Among other provisions, it gave Transdnieseria veto powers to in foreign affairs. In 2003, the so-called Kozak Memorandum to implement provisions of the 1997 Memorandum would have federalized the Republic of Moldova, ending Transdnistria (and Gagauzia) with the power to block decisions in parliament, the right to be represented disproportionately in comparison with their population, and would legalize the stationing of Russian troops in Transdnistria for another 15 years. Moldova ultimately refused to sign the Kozak Memorandum in favor of committing Moldova to EU accession.

²² Popescu, *op cit.*, p. 122.

²³ Robert Skidelsky (2014). “Kennan’s Revenge.” *Project Syndicate* [22 April 2014 online]. <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/robert-skidelsky-uses-the-ukraine-crisis-to-revisit-the-west-s-cold-war-era--containment--doctrine#hUCRd5QEgHJ6eYXF.99>. Last accessed 14 May 2014.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

“For self-righteousness is the inevitable fruit of simple moral judgments, placed in the service of moral complacency.”²⁵

Good intentions notwithstanding, the United States [and perhaps *sans* the point about good intentions, Russia, too] should be mindful that it is easier to foment civil conflict than to contain its spread; and easy to deceive oneself about the virtues of quasi-*Sturmabteilung* paramilitaries masquerading as, for example, a national guard or a self-defense force. As the United States contemplates various courses open to it in Ukraine, it would be wise to remember that simple truism as well as Niebuhr’s admonition.

An extended quote from George Kennan’s 1986 essay “Morality and Foreign Policy” sums up the case. Cautioning that:

“Practices or policies that arouse our official displeasure in one country...”

one might offer as an example of which, an unwelcomed plebiscite in eastern Ukraine:

“...are cheerfully condoned or ignored in another. What is bad in the behavior of our opponents is good, or at least acceptable, in the case of our friends. What is unobjectionable to us at one period of our history is seen as offensive in another.”

“The question inevitably arises: is it principle that determines our reaction? Or are there other motives?”²⁶

Kennan continues with particular application to contemporary events:

“There have been many instances... when the U.S. government has taken umbrage at the behavior of other governments on grounds that at least implied moral criteria for judgment, and in some of these instances the verbal protests have been reinforced by more tangible means of pressure...The interventions have served, in the eyes of their American inspirers, as demonstrations not only of the moral deficiencies of others but of the positive morality of ourselves; for it was seen as our moral duty to detect these lapses on the part of others, to denounce them before the world, and to assure—as far as we could with measures short of military action— that they were corrected.”

“Those who have inspired or initiated efforts of this nature would certainly have claimed to be acting in the name of moral principle, and in many instances they would no doubt have been sincere in doing so. But whether the results of this inspiration, like those of so many other good intentions, would justify this claim is questionable...”

“[W]hile we are quick to allege that this or that practice in a foreign country is bad and deserves correction, seldom if ever do we seem to occupy ourselves seriously or realistically with the conceivable alternatives. It seems seldom to occur to us that even if a given situation is bad, the alternatives to it might be worse— even though history provides plenty of examples of just this phenomenon.”²⁷

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²⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr (1958). “The Moral World of John Foster Dulles.” *The New Republic* (1 December 1958), p. 8.

²⁶ George F. Kennan (1986). “Morality and Foreign Policy.” *Foreign Affairs*. 64:2, pp. 205-218.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/40521/george-f-kennan/morality-and-foreign-policy>. Last accessed 14 May 2014.

²⁷ *Ibid*.