

The Dog That Finally Barked? Separatism and Hybrid Warfare in Southern Bessarabia

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As the crisis in his country continued to heat up last November 2014, it was perhaps not surprising that Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko would travel to neighboring Moldova to meet with its prime minister and [in public remarks](#) stress his vision of a “free, democratic, and prosperous future” for both states “in a wider European family.” Some were even [surprised](#) (as evidenced



The author in Tarutyne Raion, Southern Bessarabia, in July 2006.

by the frequent choice of “Poroshenko Speaks Romanian” as a headline) that he was able to do so in the language of his host country—a language he learned growing up in the town of Bolhrad in southwestern Ukraine, a city once part of the interwar Romanian kingdom and one that today represents a key center of the multiethnic Budjak region on the southern Bessarabian steppe.

While Poroshenko’s linguistic facility in Romanian came as no surprise to more seasoned observers—after all, in May 2014, he took the opportunity during a campaign [speech](#) in Chernivtsi to argue in that language for the compatibility of diverse ethnic and religious communities with the idea of Ukrainian citizenship—recent developments in the region of his birth have proven to be much more unexpected.

Despite the multiethnic nature of its population¹—the Budjak region (defined as the nine westernmost raions of Odesa oblast plus the cities of Izmail and Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiyi) has long been overlooked by scholars of national minority politics or interethnic relations. Indeed, compared to places such as Transcarpathia or Moldova’s Gagauzia (to say nothing of Transnistria or Abkhazia), Budjak could perhaps best be described as the place where the proverbial dog of ethnic conflict never barked. Other than some early (and quickly abandoned) attempts to form a Bulgarian or Bulgaro-Gagauz republic

¹ According to the 2001 Ukrainian census, as Marcin Kosienkowski recently [noted](#), some 40% of residents are Ukrainians, with Bulgarians (21%), Russians (20%), Moldovans (13%; also claimed as Romanians) and Gagauz (4%) making up the rest.

on both sides of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border in the aftermath of the fall of the USSR, the region largely remained off the radar screens of scholars and government analysts alike.

That absence, of course, does not signify that it *ought* to have remained off those radar screens, let alone that it will not be a locus of conflict in the future. Recent experience with Russian “hybrid warfare” or “soft power” tactics has led many belatedly awakened policymakers in the West to focus on “flash points” where such tactics could most easily succeed. Notable recipients of such attention are the city of Narva and the Ida-Virumaa region in Estonia (derided by one Estonian policymaker as a “Mecca” for visiting officials) as well as Latgale and other parts of Latvia, which are all predominantly or overwhelmingly Russian-speaking.

However, while anticipating and planning countermeasures to such scenarios is indeed an important task, a narrow focus on these regions alone misses the point. Arguably the true lesson of Crimea and the Donbas should be that, unlike previous “frozen conflicts” (like Transnistria or Abkhazia, which at least had clear political or ethnic divisions from the rest of Moldova and Georgia respectively), the Kremlin has no need of *actual* cultural divides in the target country of such tactics. Often, only the most minimal level of discontent is sufficient to serve as a pretext for turning artificial divisions into real ones. Take Crimea, for instance, where current “prime minister” Sergei Aksyonov was a fringe figure whose pro-Russian party [received](#) a mere 4% of the vote in the previous election; or more notably, the Donbas, where Denys Pushylin, first leader of the self-declared Donetsk People’s Republic, [scrounged up](#) only 0.08% of the vote in his 2013 parliamentary run.

Accordingly, given the chance for spillover/contagion with a Moldova that—via its Gagauz autonomous region as well as Transnistrian separatist republic—Russia is still very much trying to shift from a European course, Budjak should be a region worthy of attention in its own right—a determination that recent events make even more concrete.

On April 6 in Odesa, a few dozen people claiming to represent various ethnic minorities in the Budjak region held a conference—which due to the lack of alternate facilities was held in a restaurant—at which they declared the founding of a new “National Council of Bessarabia” (*Народная Рада Бессарабии*, NRB). Electing as the “chief of its presidium” one Dmitriy Zatuliveter, head of the previously obscure Organization of Transnistrians in Ukraine, the group released a manifesto on a Russian-registered [website](#) in which it decried “discrimination” against ethnic minorities in the region, and called for far greater autonomy in the region even while nominally rejecting separatism. The reaction of the Ukrainian authorities was swift: some two dozen people were [arrested](#) by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU)² on the

² The SBU has continued its pursuit of the conference organizers: at the the end of April, several other activists were [detained](#) on the day of a planned NRB press conference.

day after the conference, leading one Ukrainian site to [crow](#) that the movement had been “smothered in its cradle.”

While initial reports [accused](#) existing ethnic minority leaders such as former Party of Regions member of parliament and Bulgarian leader Anton Kisse of having been the “initiator and chief ideologue” of the NRB, he and other figures vehemently [rejected](#) these accusations, going further to condemn the NRB leadership as “lacking people with authority or anyone ready to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions,” concluding that the Council was “clearly provocative in nature.”

Certainly, Kisse and other local leaders have been pushing the Ukrainian central government for more power. The latter’s efforts to come up with some sort of decentralization plan for the country that stays within the red line of federalization opens up space for leaders like Kisse to push for more authority under some type of new “[administrative-territorial division](#),” if not quite along the lines of early (and quickly abandoned) 1990s efforts mentioned earlier.. That said, it is of course far from certain that these new “administrative divisions” would be specifically ethnic (let alone pro-Russian) in character—but in the current regional context, it cannot be ruled out.

Indeed, a key reason why the Budjak ought not be overlooked is the regional factor, particularly the impact of nearby Moldova. (There are other regional players such as Bucharest and Sofia, which to varying degrees seek to champion the rights of their co-ethnics in the region, but these efforts are not nearly comparable to the interference seen from other sources.) To the north of the Budjak lies the Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia, whose recently elected leader Irina Vlah [declared](#) to Deutsche Welle that “the fact that the Gagauz are pro-Russian is not a secret to anybody,” and which had against the wishes of the central government in Chişinău earlier held a referendum in which the population overwhelmingly rejected Moldova’s association agreement with the European Union. Moreover, nearby is the separatist republic of Transnistria, [host](#) to some 1500 Russian troops and 400 “peacekeepers.” As Moldovan historian Gheorghe Cojocaru recently [commented](#) to Radio Free Europe, the NRB represents in part the work of “anti-Western” political forces in Chişinău as well as Gagauzia and Transnistria to “reproduce the Moldovan ‘model’ of weakening the state by exaggerated demands for self-determination on ethnic grounds and to create a broader anti-European front.”

Ultimately, in the short-term future, the NRB is unlikely to transform itself into a “Bessarabian People’s Republic” along the lines of the separatist entities in Donetsk and Luhansk. For starters, it lacks a common border with either Russia or even (contrary to what John R. Haines asserts in an otherwise outstanding [report](#) on the region) with Transnistria; therefore, thus infiltrating “little green men” into the area would be far harder than in eastern Ukraine. Moreover, the Ukrainian security services have stepped up their activity in the area, and are finally beginning to learn some lessons from their ongoing campaign against terrorist activities (including a spate of bombings) in Odesa itself as well as

Kharkiv and elsewhere. And local leaders—such as the ethnic Bulgarian Dora Kostrova—have challenged those behind the NRB to [explain](#) “why they want a repetition of the scenario seen in the east of Ukraine.”

Nonetheless, to succeed in the Budjak, the Kremlin does not actually have to send in troops. Like elsewhere, the use of hybrid tactics is likely to be sufficient to destabilize the area. Merely drawing Ukrainian attention away from the east of the country is arguably an end in itself. If Ukraine and its Western allies—especially NATO and EU members Romania and Bulgaria—do not closely monitor the situation, outside provocateurs might well be able to exploit legitimate economic grievances in the Budjak (such as the lack of an effective highway link to the rest of the country) to foster interethnic tension and undermine what has heretofore been a salutary example of the emergence of civic Ukrainian identity. In so doing, the Kremlin could set back the cause of European integration for not just one but two countries in its near abroad—a fate that Bolhrad’s most famous son would do well to avoid.

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