

**Monkey Cage**

# How people in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria feel about annexation by Russia

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In the wake of the brazen yet choreographed annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation many are wondering who is next on Russian President Vladimir Putin's list? Beyond the worrying prospect of Russian irredentism in eastern and southern Ukraine, speculation inevitably falls upon three post-Soviet *de facto* states that have long been propped up by financial subventions from Moscow. The Kremlin recognized two of these separatist entities as independent states in August 2008 following the short Russo-Georgian war: the Republic of South Ossetia and the Republic of Abkhazia, both in Georgia. The third, the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), commonly known as Transnistria to English-speakers, remains unrecognized by Moscow. (This week its Supreme Soviet sent an official note asking if, in the light of Crimea, it, too, could join the Russian Federation).

Since South Ossetia and Abkhazia have garnered little recognition as independent states, all three remain *de facto* states, namely political entities that have achieved enduring 'internal sovereignty' on a portion of the territory of a recognized post-Soviet state – in this case the Republics of Georgia and Moldova – but lack 'external sovereignty' in the international system. While not officially recognized, *de facto* states are enduring entities on the world political map, and their politics and populations deserve nuanced study.

So how do people in these entities feel about Russia? In 2008 we began a research project to study public attitudes and internal dynamics within the post-Soviet *de facto* states in the wake of the 'Kosovo precedent.' Putin described this self-servingly in his address to the State Duma on March 18 as "a precedent our western colleagues created with their own hands....when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country's central authorities." (Kosovo, of course, was not subsequently annexed as Crimea was). Our research was supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation and involved invaluable cooperation from Vladimir Kolossov of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow.

We traveled to Transnistria and Moldova in June 2009, to Abkhazia in late 2009, South Ossetia in the spring of 2010, and a fourth *de facto* state that has separated from Azerbaijan, the Nagorny Karabakh Republic, in summer 2011. As well as conducting elite interviews, we also contracted for public opinion surveys to be conducted following established and rigorous social science standards in each location. Social scientific research faces significant logistical, political and ethical challenges in *de facto* states. Despite limitations, we were able to organize representative public opinion surveys in all four entities. Our research has generated a series of academic papers, with more in preparation. These shine some light on the entities Charles King once termed "informational black holes." We report here the results of three key questions.

## 1. Was the dissolution of the Soviet Union a right or a wrong step?

While the collapse of the Soviet Union was nonviolent in most places, the waning of centralized power and absence of Moscow as outside arbitrator triggered violence in Moldova and the Caucasus. A ‘war of laws’ between nested Soviet governance structures spiraled into ethno-territorial conflict, war and forced population displacement. South Ossetia’s population fell from 98,527 in 1989 to an estimated 40,000 today (some estimates are lower). Abkhazia had 525,061 people in 1989, over 45 percent of whom were ethnic Georgians. This population was largely driven from their homes in the wake of the brutal war of 1992-94, with the partial exception of the southern Gal(i) District. The 2011 census in Abkhazia recorded its population as around 240,000, an estimated considered high by some. Violence was briefest in Moldova, with PMR establishing itself largely but not exclusively on the eastern bank of the Dniester/Nistru River. Its latest census records places its population at over 555,000, a multiethnic population made up of self-identifying ethnic Moldovans, Russians, Ukrainians and others, all significantly Russophones living in a Russified cultural sphere distinct from the rest of Moldova.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, in sum, was felt acutely in these, for the most part, formerly relatively prosperous regions within the Soviet Union. It is thus little surprise that the strong majority of people of all ethnicities (except the ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia) consider the dissolution of the Soviet Union a ‘wrong step’ as they lost the economic security and political stability of that regime. Vladimir Putin’s much cited, and over-interpreted “geopolitical catastrophe” remark resonates with most. The two decades since have been characterized by political uncertainty, economic isolation, recurrent violence (in Georgia) and widespread poverty.

## **2. Do you trust the current Russian leadership?**

Our survey research in the three entities was conducted while Dmitry Medvedev was president and Vladimir Putin was Premier of the Russian Federation. Amongst the many questions we asked about trust, inter-ethnic relations and geopolitical orientations, was one concerning the Russian leadership. As the survey results reveal, there are strong levels of trust of the Russian leadership. With the important exception again of self-identifying ethnic Georgians (mostly Mingrelain language speakers) in Abkhazia, residents of the three de facto entities look favorably upon the Moscow power center and in South Ossetia and PMR, trusted Medvedev/Putin more than their respective presidents. In a parallel question in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, more than 75 percent of the Abkhaz, Armenians and Russians in Abkhazia and Ossetians in South Ossetia want the Russian troops on their territory to “remain forever.” For populations who see themselves as the targets of Georgian military action in 2008, the Russian troop presence allows them to “sleep well in their beds,” a phrase often repeated in the Georgian separatist regions.

## **3. What is your preference for the political future of your entity?**

With three options of independence, integration into Russia or return to the ‘parent state’ (Georgia or Moldova), opinion in the three *de facto* states is more mixed than for other questions. Only small minorities prefer a return to the situation at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union, though the high ratios of ‘don’t know/refuse to answer’ among Georgians/Mingrelians in Abkhazia suggest a hesitancy to give an honest answer on this question. For most residents, it’s a straight choice between independence (which Abkhazia and South Ossetia believe they already have) and annexation to Russia. While majorities of Russians and Ukrainians in the PMR, Ossetians and Armenians in Abkhazia prefer to be part of Russia, support for the status quo is seen in Abkhazia by the politically-dominant Abkhaz and those Georgians/Mingrelians who ventured an opinion.

The conclusion is that the prospect of annexation by the Russian Federation would likely be welcomed by a plurality of residents of Transnistria, and the overwhelming majority of those remaining in South Ossetia. Abkhazia is a more

complex case. It seems likely its ethnic Abkhaz-dominated power structure would have difficulties resisting its paymasters in Moscow if the latter decided they were open to ‘welcoming’ the republic into the Russian Federation.

Annexations such as these, like that of Crimea, would obviously be viewed widely as illegal acts, and vociferously opposed by the parent governments of Moldova and Georgia. De facto state leaders claim that the *uti possidetis juris* principle that allowed constituent Soviet Republics to be recognized as international states violated their self-determination rights, and that their entities consolidated in defensive response to the aggressive ethnonationalism (‘fascism’) that swept to power in the post-Soviet parent state. They, in short, have long articulated the storyline that Russia recently used to justify its actions in Crimea. But, unlike Crimea, they did experience war and ethnicized violence, were never willingly part of a post-Soviet successor state, and have endured despite international isolation for over 20 years.

Crimea has now eclipsed Kosovo as the most relevant and meaningful precedent for post-Soviet de facto states. Were the Russian government to repeat the same secessionist choreography they just used – beefed up troop presences on the ground, a sponsored flash referendum, quick recognition and acceptance of the results in Moscow, followed by formal annexation – the Crimea precedent would likely gather up three of the four post-Soviet de facto states (Nagorno-Karabkh is the exception) for absorption into the Russian Federation. Europe’s political map would be re-written once again by reverberations from the collapse of the Soviet Union.