Geopolitical Journey, Part 2: Borderlands

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Editor's note: *This is the second installment in a series of special reports that Dr. Friedman will write over the next few weeks as he travels to Turkey, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine and Poland. In this series, he will share his observations of the geopolitical imperatives in each country and conclude with reflections on his journey as a whole and options for the United States.*

By George Friedman

A borderland is a region where history is constant: Everything is in flux. The countries we are visiting on this trip (Turkey, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine and Poland) occupy the borderland between Islam, Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. Roman Catholic Hapsburg Austria struggled with the Islamic Ottoman Empire for centuries, with the Ottomans extending northwest until a climactic battle in Vienna in 1683. Beginning in the 18th century, Orthodox Russia expanded from the east, through Belarus and Ukraine. For more than two centuries, the belt of countries stretching from the Baltic to the Black seas was the borderland over which three empires fought.

There have been endless permutations here. The Cold War was the last clear-cut confrontation, pitting Russia against a Western Europe backed — and to a great extent dominated — by the United States. This belt of countries was firmly if informally within the Soviet empire. Now they are sovereign again. My interest in the region is to understand more clearly how the next iteration of regional geopolitics will play out. Russia is far more powerful than it was 10 years ago. The European Union is undergoing internal stress and Germany is recalculating its position. The United States is playing an uncertain and complex game. I want to understand how the semicircle of powers, from Turkey to Poland, are thinking about and positioning themselves for the next iteration of the regional game.

I have been accused of thinking like an old Cold warrior. I don't think that's true. The Soviet Union has collapsed, and U.S. influence in Europe has declined. Whatever will come next will not be the Cold War. What I do not expect this to be

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is a region of perpetual peace. It has never been that before. It will not be that in the future. I want to understand the pattern of conflict that will occur in the future. But for that we need to begin in the past, not with the Cold War, but with World War I.

Regional Reshaping after World War I

World War I created a radically new architecture in this region. The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires collapsed, the Russian empire was replaced by the Soviet Union, and the German empire was overthrown and replaced by a republic. No region in the world suffered more or was left more impoverished by the war than this region. Indeed, the war didn't end for them in 1918. It went on as the grip of empires reluctantly subsided and the new nations struggled within and among themselves.

The collapse of empires allowed a range of nations to emerge as independent nations. From the Baltic states to Bulgaria, nations became nation-states. Many of the borders and some of the nations were fixed by the victorious powers at Versailles and Trianon. They invented Yugoslavia, which means "land of the southern Slavs," out of a collection of hostile nations. They reshaped their borders. If France, Britain and the United States shaped the region, the Poles saved it.

The border between the Russian empire/Soviet Union and Europe is divided into two parts. The Carpathian Mountains form a rough boundary between the Russians and the rest of Europe from Slovakia to the south. These mountains are not particularly tall, but they are rugged, with scattered villages and few good roads. The Carpathians have belonged at various times to all of the countries in the region, but the Carpathians are not easily controlled. Even today, bandits rule parts of it. It is not impossible to move an army across it, but it is not easy, either.

The northern part of Europe is dominated by a vast plain stretching from France to Moscow. It is flat and marshy to the north but generally good terrain for armies to move on. Except for some river barriers, it is the route of Europe's conquerors. Napoleon moved along the plain to Moscow, as did Hitler (who moved across the Caucasus as well). Stalin returned the way Napoleon and Hitler came.

The Intermarium

Following World War I, Poland re-emerged as a sovereign nation. The Russians had capitulated to Germany in 1917 and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, which ceded a great deal of territory, including Ukraine, to Germany. With

Germany's defeat, Brest-Litovsk lost its force and the Russians tried to regain what they had given away in that treaty. Part of that was Poland. In 1920, a climactic battle took place in Warsaw, when an army led by Polish Gen. Jozef Pilsudski, who had struck an alliance with Ukraine that couldn't work, blocked a Soviet invasion.

Pilsudski is an interesting figure, a reactionary in some ways, a radical in others. But it was his geopolitical vision that interests me. He was, above all else, a Polish nationalist, and he understood that Russia's defeat by Germany was the first step to an independent Poland. He also believed that Polish domination of Ukraine — an ancient ploy — would guarantee Poland's freedom after Germany was defeated. His attempt to ally with Ukraine failed. The Russians defeated the Ukrainians and turned on Poland. Pilsudski defeated them.

It is interesting to speculate about history if Pilsudski had lost Warsaw. The North European Plain was wide open, and the Soviets could have moved into Germany. Undoubtedly, the French would have moved to block them, but there was a powerful Communist Party in France that had little stomach for war. It could have played out many different ways had Pilsudski not stopped the Russians. But he did.

Pilsudski had another idea. Germany was in shambles, as was Russia, but both would be back. An alliance in place before they revived would, in Pilsudski's mind, save the region. His vision was something called the Intermarium — an alliance of the nations between the seas built around Poland and including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Finland and the Baltic states. This never came to be, but if it had, World War II may never have happened or could have played out in a different way. It is an idea that has been in my mind of late, thinking about what comes after NATO and ambitious concepts of European federation. Pilsudski's Intermarium makes a kind of logical if not historical sense. It is not historical because this borderland has always been the battleground for others. It has never formed together to determine its fate.

The Russian-German Relationship

In many ways, this matter doesn't rest in these states' hands. It depends partly on what Russia wants and plans to do and it depends on what Europe wants and plans to do. As always, the Intermarium is caught between Russia and Europe. There is no southern European power at the moment (the Austro-Hungarian empire is a memory), but in the north there is Germany, a country struggling to find its place in Europe and in history.

In many ways, Germany is the mystery. The 2008 and Greek crises shocked the Germans. They had seen the European Union as the solution to European nationalism and an instrument of prosperity. When the crisis struck, the Germans found that nationalism had reared its head in Germany as much as it had in other countries. The Germans didn't want to bail out the Greeks, and the entire question of the price and value of the European Union became a central issue in Germany. Germany has not thought of itself as a freestanding power since 1945. It is beginning to think that way again, and that could change

everything, depending on where it goes.

One of the things it could change is German-Russian relations. At various times since 1871 and German re-unification, the Germans and Russians have been allies as well as mortal enemies. Right now, there is logic in closer German-Russian ties. Economically they complement and need each other. Russia exports raw materials; Germany exports technology. Neither cares to be pressured by the United States. Together they might be able to resist that pressure. There is a quiet romance under way between them.

And that rivets my attention on the countries I am visiting. For Poland, the specter of a German-Russian entente is a historical nightmare. The last time this happened, in 1939, Poland was torn apart and lost its sovereignty for 50 years. There is hardly a family in Poland who can't name their dead from that time. Of course, it is said that this time it would be different, that the Germans are no longer what they were and neither are the Russians. But geopolitics teaches that subjective inclinations do not erase historical patterns. Whatever the Poles think and say, they must be nervous although they are not admitting it. Admitting fear of Germany and Russia would be to admit distrust, and distrust is not permitted in modern Europe. Still, the Poles know history, and it will be good to see what they have to say — or at least how they say it. And it is of the greatest importance to hear what they say and don't say about the United States under these circumstances.

Romania's Role

The Romanians are in a different position. The Romanians are buffered against the Russians by Ukraine and Moldova, and their sense of unease should be lower. Unlike the Poles and the North European Plain, they at least have the Carpathians running through their country. But what are we to make of Ukraine? Their government is pro-Russian and trapped by economic realities into strong Russian ties. Certainly, the increasingly German-led European Union is not going to come to their rescue. The question in Ukraine is whether their attempt to achieve complete independence is over, to be replaced by some informal but iron bond to Russia, or whether the Ukrainians still have room to maneuver. It seems from a distance that there is little room for them to breathe, let alone maneuver, but this is a question to be put to Ukrainians. They will, of course, vigorously assert their independence, but it will be important to listen to what is not said and what is answered by small shrugs and resignation. There is no more important question in Europe at the moment than the future of Ukraine.

For Romania, this is vital because its buffer could turn into its boundary if the Russians return to the border. This is why Moldova matters as well. Moldova used to be called Bessarabia. When Stalin made his deal with Hitler in 1939, part of the deal was that Bessarabia, then part of Romania, an ally of Germany, would be seized by the Soviets. This moved Romania farther from the port of Odessa, the critical port on the Black Sea, and across the Dniester River. Bessarabia remained part of the Soviet Union after the war. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Moldova became independent, stretching from Romania to the

eastern bank of the Dniester. The area east of the Dniester, Transdniestria, promptly seceded from Moldova, with Russian help. Moldova became a Romanian-speaking buffer on the Dniester River.

Moldova is the poorest country in Europe. Its primary export is wine, sent mostly to Russia. The Russians have taken to blocking the export of wine for "health reasons." I think the health issue is geopolitical and not biological. If Moldova is an independent, pro-European state, Ukraine is less isolated than the Russians would like it to be. Moldova could, in the distant future, be a base for operations against Russian interests. Every inch that potential enemies are from Odessa is beneficial. There was a reason why Stalin wanted to take Bessarabia from Hitler. That consideration has not dissolved, and the Russians are acting to isolate and pressure Moldova right now and, with it, Romania.

My visit to Romania and Moldova is to try to get a sense of how they view the situation in Ukraine, what they think Russian intentions are and what they plan to do — if anything. Romania is always a hard country to read. Geopolitically, its capital is on the wrong side of the Carpathians if the Russians are the threat, on the right side if Austria or Germany is the threat. Romania is oriented toward the European Union but is one of the many countries in the union that may not really belong there. Unlike the Poles, for whom history and resistance is a tradition, the Romanians accommodate themselves to the prevailing winds. It will be good to find out where they feel the winds are blowing from right now. I doubt that they will do anything to save Moldova and anger Moscow, but it is not clear whether Moldova is in danger. Still, this much is clear: If the Russians are reclaiming Ukraine, then Moldova is an important piece of territory, not only to protect Ukraine but also to create options toward Romania and southwestern Europe. Sometimes small pieces of land that are not on anyone's mind represent the test case.

Turkey is a place I have gone to several times in the past few years and expect to revisit many times. In my book, "The Next 100 Years," I argued that Turkey will be a great power in the next 50 years or so. I'm comfortable with my long-term prediction, but the next decade will be a period of transition for Turkey, from being one of the countries confronting the Soviets under the U.S. alliance system to being a resurgent power in its own right. It will be no one's pawn, and it will be asserting its interests beyond its borders. Indeed, as its power increases in the Balkans, Turkey will be one of the forces that countries like Romania will have to face.

I will be interested in hearing from the Romanians and Moldovans what their view of Turkey is at this point. Its re-emergence will be a slow process, with inevitable setbacks and disappointments, but even now its commercial influence can be felt in the Black Sea basin. I will be interested in hearing from the Turks how they view the Russians (and, of course, Iran and the Arab countries as well as Central Asia). Russia as seen through the eyes of its neighbors is the purpose of this trip, and that's the conversation I will want to have. Poles, Ukrainians, Romanians and Moldovans will all want to talk about Russia. The Turks will want to discuss many issues, Russia perhaps least of all. I will have to work hard to draw them out on this.

A Geopolitical Theory

In the end, I am going to the region with an analytic framework, a theory that I will want to test. It is a theory that argues that the post-Cold War world is ending. Russia is re-emerging in a historically recognizable form. Germany is just beginning the process of redefining itself in Europe, and the EU's weaknesses have become manifest. Turkey has already taken the first steps toward becoming a regional power. We are at the beginning of a period in which these forces play themselves out.

For the United States, Turkey's emergence is beneficial. The United States is ending its wars in the region, and Turkey is motivated to fill the vacuum left and combat radical Islam. Those who argue that the Turkish government is radically Islamist are simply wrong, for two reasons. First, Turkey is deeply divided, with the powerful heirs of the secular traditions of Kemal Ataturk on one side. They are too strong to have radical Islam imposed on them. Second, the Islamism of the Turkish government cannot possibly be compared to that of Saudi Arabia, for example. Islam comes in many hues, as does Christianity, and the Turkish version derives from Ottoman history. It is subtle, flexible and above all pragmatic. It derives from a history in which Turkish Islam was allied with Catholic Venice to dominate the Mediterranean. So Turkish Islam is not strong enough to impose itself on the secularists and too urbane to succumb to simplistic radicalism. It will do what it has to do, but helping al Qaeda is not on its agenda. Still, it will be good to talk to the secularists, who regard the current government with fear and distrust, and see whether they remain as brittle as ever.

While the United States can welcome a powerful Turkey, the same can't be said for a powerful Russia, particularly not one allied with Germany. The single greatest American fear should not be China or al Qaeda. It is the amalgamation of the European Peninsula's technology with Russia's natural resources. That would create a power that could challenge American primacy. That was what the 20th century was all about. The German-Russian relationship, however early and subdued it might be, must affect the United States.

It is not clear to me that the American leadership understands this. Washington's mind is an amalgam of post-Cold War cliches about Russia and Europe and an obsession with terrorism. This is not a time of clear strategic thinking in Washington. I find it irritating to go there, since they regard my views as alarmist and extreme while I find their views outmoded and simplistic. It's why I like Austin. I know that the Poles, for example, are deeply concerned that Washington doesn't understand the issues. But in the United States, Washington makes position papers and only rarely history. The United States is a vast nation, and Washington thinks of itself as its center, but it really isn't. The United States doesn't have a center. The pressures of the world and the public shape its actions, albeit reluctantly.

I have no power to shape anything, but for Washington to support Poland they need to be shown a path. In this case, I am going to explore the theory that Pilsudski brought to the table, of the Intermarium. I regard NATO as a bureaucracy overseeing an alliance whose mission was accomplished 20 years ago. From an American point of view, moving France or Germany is both impossible and pointless. They have their own interests and the wrong geography. It is the Intermarium — Poland,

Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and perhaps Bulgaria — that represents this generation's alliance. It blocks the Russians, splits them from the Germans and gently limits Turkey's encroachment in southeastern Europe.

The Intermarium countries remain infatuated with the European Union and NATO, but the infatuation is declining. The year 2008 and Germany's indifference to these countries was not pleasant, and they are learning that NATO is history. The Poles must be the leader of the bloc and the Romanians the southern anchor. I think the Poles are thinking in these terms but the Romanians are far from this idea. I'm not sure. I want to find out. For me, a U.S.-backed Poland guarding the North European Plain, with Slovakia, Hungary and Romania guarding the Carpathian approaches, would prevent what the United States should fear the most: an alliance between Russia and Germany plus Western Europe. The key is the changing perception of the European Union in the Intermarium. I want to see how far this has come.

Nothing, of course, could be further from Washington's mind. Washington still thinks of Russia as the failed state of the 1990s. It simply doesn't take it seriously. It thinks of the European Union as having gone over a speed bump from which it will recover. But mostly, Washington thinks about Afghanistan. For completely understandable reasons, Afghanistan sucks up the bandwidth of Washington, allowing the rest of the world to maneuver as it wishes.

As I said, I have no power to shape anything. But it is the charm of the United States that powerlessness and obscurity is no bar to looking at the world and thinking of what will come next. I am not making strategy but examining geopolitical forces. I am not planning what should be but thinking about what will likely happen. But in doing this I need a reality check, and for this reality check I will start in Romania.