

Problems, Progress and Prospects in a Post-Soviet Borderland: The Republic of Moldova

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Introduction

Conflict in Moldova quickened with the nationalist ferment over matters of language, culture and identity which consumed the Soviet republic in 1989 and surfaced with the secession of Gagauzia and Transnistria in 1990. Civil war, continuing difficulties with territorial separatism, linguistic and ethnic strife, Romanian irredentism and Great-Russian chauvinism number among the most important problems that have plagued the Republic of Moldova since its declaration of independence on 27 August 1991. This paper examines some of the background factors which generated such problems (some of which may appear to have a characteristic borderland nature, and may, indeed, be typical of borderland states), reviews the progress that has been made towards their solution, and assesses future prospects.

History and Geography

The territory of the Republic of Moldova is not coextensive with historic Moldovan lands which are fragmented at the present time. The 1940 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact allowed the Soviet Union to annex the eastern half of the Romanian province of Moldova, and the annexation was confirmed in the 1947 Peace Treaty between the USSR and Romania.

It is worth recalling, however, that Bessarabia (the Russian designation for the territory between the Dnestr and the Prut, derived from an erstwhile Romanian ruling house of Basarab) was Russian from its liberation from the Turks in 1812 until 1917, when it proclaimed its independence from Russia as the Democratic Republic of Moldova, and joined Romania in 1918.

In accordance with Stalin's 'divide and rule' nationalities policy, two of the three regions of the

annexed territory, Northern Bucovina in the north and Southern Bessarabia in the south, were transferred to Ukraine (and now form Chernovtsy Oblast and the southern part of Odessa Oblast respectively). A strip of land along the eastern (or left) bank of the Dnestr river (Transnistria) was detached from Ukraine, however, and added to the central region of the annexed territory to become (in 1940) the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic and (in 1991) the sovereign Republic of Moldova (Figure 1).

In 1990 the Popular Front of Moldova made strident calls for the reintegration of the "historic Moldovan lands" of Northern Bucovina and Southern Bessarabia, while Ukraine flatly rejected what it regarded as irredentist pretensions. In November 1994, however, Moldova and Ukraine signed an agreement which stipulates that the two sides have no territorial claims on each other.

The strip of territory along the eastern bank of the Dnestr, detached from Ukraine and incorporated into Moldova, which constitutes 15% of the republic's territory and provides the focus for the present-day confrontation, has never been considered part of traditional Moldovan lands, although it has always contained a sizeable Moldovan population. Prior to the Revolution in 1917 that left-bank Dnestr border territory formed part of the Tsarist Empire and (in 1924) was incorporated into Ukraine as the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In Transnistria, then, unlike in western Moldova, Sovietisation, and with it Russification, for instance the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, was enforced for more than 70 years. Indeed, since the region formed a border area until World War II, and was thus ideologically vulnerable because of ethno-linguistic

Moldovans and Romanians have always spoken of 'Moldova', while in the West we have generally called the territory by its Russian name 'Moldavia'. 'Dnestr' (or variants, 'Dniester', 'Dniestr') is the Russian designation for the river the Moldovans and Romanians know as the 'Nistru.' In this paper, we refer to the self-styled, breakaway Transnistrian Moldovan Republic by its Russian initials, PMR (*pridnestrovskaya moldovskaya respublika*).

Figure 1



successful – in sharp contrast to most other parts of the Union – and some of the best talent took up agricultural management as a career. The Agrarian Democratic Party is the largest faction in the Moldovan parliament today.

Urbanised and heavily industrialised, Transnistria consists of five *rayony* (or districts) and the city of Tiraspol. It has a mixed population of 40.1% Moldovans (the largest single ethnic group), 28.3% Ukrainians and 25.5% Russians, according to the last USSR census in 1989. Until the 1960s Moldovans made up the absolute majority on the left bank but their proportion declined as a result of centrally promoted immigration, particularly from the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), into the cities to man the factories. This population flow has increased in recent years, and many of today's left-bank inhabitants emigrated from remote areas of Russia during the

1980s, including the PMR 'President', Igor Smirnov, who came from Siberia in 1985. Opposite the city of Tiraspol, where the Russians are concentrated and form a majority of the population, on the *right* bank of the Dniester is the town of Tighina (Bendery), an important junction, linked by rail and road bridges. Tighina, too, was industrialised and populated by Russian workers following World War II, and therefore became a 'left-bank' enclave located on the right-bank of the river.

Politics and Ideology

The confrontation on the Dniester is essentially a political struggle. In Moldovan eyes, the political and ideological forces that underpinned the abortive coup of August 1991 – hard line communism, Russian nationalism, the military-industrial complex, and the determination to preserve the union state – have retained a power base in the heavily militarised region and Russified industrial centres on the left bank. Troops of what has now become the Operational Group of Russian Forces in the Transnistrian Region of the Republic of Moldova (OGRF), are, according to the Moldovans, commanded by Russian officers with a political axe to grind. According to this argument, these forces furthered and continue to further the cause of local Russian, or other non-indigenous factions, in a former Soviet republic against the properly constituted state authorities of the newly-independent host country. In short, the Russian military actively supported an armed insurgency

ties with Romania across the Dniestr, Sovietisation was enforced with especial vigilance and vigour.

When the Romanian army – an ally of Nazi Germany – advanced into the Soviet Union during World War II it was wholly determined to destroy communism in Transnistria. Excess of zeal in pursuing this aim resulted in brutality and atrocities which linger in the Transnistrian folk memory, reinforcing fear and suspicion of Romania to this day.

Post-war economic policy sought to develop Western Moldova as an agricultural area, while industrialisation – often of a defence-related nature – was concentrated mainly in Transnistria which is said to contain some 37% of the country's economic potential. Moldovan agricultural development had not, of course, been subject to the Soviet collectivisation disasters of the 1920s and 1930s and the local peasantry on the West bank adapted well to the relatively painless collectivisation of the post-war period.

As was the case throughout the Soviet Union, the peasants were allowed to engage in small-scale private enterprise farming. A successful entrepreneurial peasant farming outlook and mentality survived better than elsewhere in Soviet territory and forms an important element in the mindset of the population in Western Moldova today. Agriculture in Soviet Moldova was, on the whole, relatively efficient, productive and

whose aim was to establish on the territory of an internationally recognised sovereign state a Soviet-style outpost, the so-called PMR, in a post-Soviet world.

The highly Sovietised population of Transnistria, reinforced by a Russian industrial workforce, unsurprisingly, saw matters very differently. This community has proved suspicious of the peasant free-market mentality of the right bank, alarmed by the restoration of the Latin alphabet, and by the declaration that Moldovan (i.e. Romanian) was to be an official language of the Republic together with Russian. Similarly, the adoption of a version of the Romanian tricolour as the Moldovan flag and the Moldovan Supreme Soviet's decision to replace the Russian language version of the country's name – *Moldaviya* – with the Romanian language version – *Moldova*, provoked fears of the possibility of unification of the new state with Romania.

On 2 September 1990 Transnistria declared its secession from Moldova. This left bank refuge for the 'Socialist Choice' enthusiastically hailed the attempted coup in August 1991 while, from the very beginning, right bank Moldova resolutely defied the putsch, vigorously supported RSFSR President Yel'tsin's democratic stand, and resisted peacefully, yet successfully, military attempts to impose the junta's state of emergency.

The PMR has subsequently played host to numerous representatives of Russia's red-brown (communist-nationalist) ideological forces, including hundreds of Cossack mercenaries determined to "*defend their blood brothers*" and to "*hold the frontier of the Russian State*" together with a string of virulently nationalistic demagogues like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Sergei Baburin, Al'bert Makashov and Viktor Alksnis, the last of whom has described the PMR as the base from which the Soviet Union's restoration would begin. Makashov was one of the principal military leaders of the Moscow October 1993 insurgency (in which Baburin and Alksnis were also implicated), while Zhirinovskiy (leader of the misnamed Russian Liberal Democratic Party which has secured an alarmingly high percentage of the vote in Russian elections) has spoken of transforming Moldova into a Russian *guberniya*, or province. *Sovetskaya Rossiya* has described the PMR as "*an island of Soviet power*" and "*a frontier of Russia.*"

Socio-Cultural Identity

It will be evident from what has already been said that there are a number of significant contrasts between the socio-cultural identity of the Russians/Russified population in Transnistria and the right bank Moldovans, though it would be quite misleading to view this contrast simply in ethnic terms as a Russian (or Slavic) versus Moldovan confrontation. Ethnic considerations are discussed in the next section, while some right/left bank contrasts relating to socio-cultural identity are listed in the box on the previous page.

The Ethnic Factor

The total population of Moldova is 4,367,000 of whom 754,000 live in the capital city, Chisinau. The largest ethnic group, the Moldovans themselves, number 2,800,000 (or 65% of the total population). Of the three other major ethnic groups, the 600,000 Ukrainians (14%) come second with 560,000, Russians (13%) in third place, followed by the 153,000 Gagauzi (who constitute 3.5% of the population but who are concentrated in the southern corner of Moldova, along the border with Ukraine). 70% of Moldova's Russians live on the right bank, 30% on the left. The left bank ethnic mix consists of 40.1% Moldovans, 28.3% Ukrainians, 25.5% Russians and various other minor national groups.

The Gagauzi are Turkic speaking Orthodox Christians whose ancestors fled Ottoman rule in north-east Bulgaria during and after the Russo-Turkish war of 1806-12. There have never, therefore, been any grounds for religious tensions between them and the indigenous population. Most of the refugees settled in Bessarabia, which became Russian territory in 1812. Some 140,000 of Moldova's 153,000 Gagauzi are concentrated in south-western Moldova.

The PMR Russians, it must be emphasised, form but a minority in what they regard as their "*little piece of Russia.*" Indeed, numerically speaking, they constitute a minority within a minority, for they represent only 30% of Moldova's total Russian population and only 25% of the total population of the left bank. However, given their strong-arm military backing and the *de facto* partition of Moldova, some 170,000 PMR Russians continue to be in a position to severely constrain the social and political choices of the Transnistrian Moldovan and Ukrainian majority ethnic groups whom they have now effectively isolated from the Moldovan heartland and from the political process in Chisinau.

The Left/Right Bank Divide

LEFT BANK	RIGHT BANK
1. The left bank refers to its territory as “Pridnestrovyje” (Russian for “the land on the Dnestr”).	The right knows the left as “Transnistria” (“the land across the Nistru”).
2. Sovietised for 70 plus years.	Sovietised only since 1940s. Quasi-Western orientation.
3. Urban. Mainly industrial (strong links with military-industrial complex). Left bank (15% of Moldovan territory) has disproportionately large share of country’s economic potential (40%).	Rural. Traditional peasantry; largely successful agriculture, but right bank (85% of Moldovan territory) has disproportionately small share of country’s economic potential (60%).
4. In favour of socialist ownership in industry and of the Kolkhoz system. Communist suspicion of right bank free-market mentality.	Entrepreneurial mentality; broadly in favour of privatisation and the ‘free-market.’
5. Retention of USSR, Moldovan SSR symbols (flag, coat-of- arms, anthem). Romanophobia.	Adoption of Romanian symbols (flag). Romanianisation.
6. Cyrillic alphabet for 70 years plus; restoration of Latin alphabet deeply resented.	Cyrillic alphabet imposed by Stalin; return to Latin alphabet welcomed.
7. In favour of reconstituting USSR as a unitary state. Fear of reunification with Romania.	Vigorous assertion of nationalist aspirations; formerly expressed desire for reunification with Romania.
8. Pro August 1991 coup and October 1993 Moscow rebellion.	Against August 1991 coup and October 1993 Moscow rebellion.
9. Very close links with Russian military, seen as protectors.	Fear and resentment of Russian military, seen as occupiers.
10. Left bank Russians wield a degree of political influence out of all proportion to the size of their constituency.	Right bank Russians neither pro-imperial nor ultra-nationalist.

The PMR Russians have never lost an opportunity to play the ethnic card for all that it is worth. Presenting themselves as an unfortunate minority whose human rights were being trampled underfoot by Chisinau’s repressive policies of enforced Romanianisation and desovietisation, they have fuelled ultranationalist sentiments in Russia, and prevailed upon Moscow to adopt a robust posture with regard to the protection of Russian interests abroad. They have also succeeded in securing Moscow’s ‘protection’ with the help of Russian

peace-keeping forces and the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF).

It is instructive to recall that in Moldova (as throughout the former Soviet Union) administration, the education system and the media greatly favoured the Russian population. There were far fewer Moldovan and Ukrainian schools and publications than representation proportional to their populations would entail. Of Moldova’s 600,000 Ukrainians, only 52,000 claim to be fully proficient in Ukrainian, while 220,000 say they no

longer know their native tongue. Facilities for Ukrainians on the left bank are very poor, and today most Ukrainians there speak Russian.

For all the inflammatory nationalistic and pan-Slavic rhetoric that still emanates from Tiraspol (and still finds echoes in certain circles in Moscow), and for all the provocative manipulation of the ethnic card and of human rights issues, in general inter-ethnic relations in Moldova at large have not been adversely affected. More than 70% of Moldova's Slavic population reside on the right bank and do not appear to feel threatened to any significant extent following Moldovan independence. With few exceptions this Slavic majority is strongly in favour of Moldova's territorial integrity and the reintegration of the left bank, and has not sided with the PMR Russians in any way.

Military and para-military forces on both sides, including the combat elements that fought in the 1992 civil war, are ethnically mixed. Casualty figures correctly reflect the ethnic mix of the populations in question and thus provide further grim evidence that the conflict is not an inter-ethnic dispute. On the left bank, for example, Moldovan casualties predominate, followed by Ukrainians and Russians. However, a great many Russians and Ukrainians – some of whom served with distinction – were killed or injured fighting for the (right bank) Moldovan cause. A 'Transnistrian people' as such does not, of course, exist and the Dnestr conflict has not split the population of Moldova along ethnic lines.

Moldova and Romania

For nearly half a century of communist dictatorship following annexation, the border between Soviet Moldova and Romania was sealed. Despite the genuine ethno-linguistic links between Romanians and the majority of Moldovans, the Soviets enforced the notion (which is by no means a fiction) of a separate Moldovan 'people' and 'language', (as distinct from Romanians and Romanian). In an address to the Romanian parliament in February 1991 (on the first official visit to Romania by any leader from Soviet Moldova since its annexation), the then President Snegur strongly affirmed the common Moldovan-Romanian identity, noting that "*We have the same history and speak the same language*", and referred to "*Romanians on both sides of the River Prut*." In June 1991 the Romanian parliament vehemently denounced the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina, describing the territories as "*sacred Romanian lands*." The Romanian Foreign Minister

subsequently referred to the "*evanescence*" of Romania's borders with Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina.

Following cultural Romanianisation and the eventual independence of Moldova, there was a general expectation especially in Romania, though also to some extent in Moldova (despite Chisinau's doctrine of "*two independent Romanian states*"), that the two countries should and would unite. The underlying feeling was that the Romanians wanted their country (which they, at least, see as having been dismembered by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) to be reunited. The Moldovans, however, after their initial, and perhaps injudicious, acquiescence to the idea during their first stirrings of national self-awareness, clearly no longer share the Romanians' enthusiasm. In January 1993, four senior parliamentarians, including Moldovan parliamentary chairmen Alexandru Mosanu, all moderate advocates of unification with Romania, were forced to resign their posts. Throughout 1993 Moldova continued to distance herself from Romania and abandoned her notion of "*two independent Romanian States*." For some time now Moldova has striven to establish a truly independent, multi-ethnic state and there has been no desire to trade a Russian 'big brother' for a Romanian one. Opinion polls have consistently revealed that less than 10% of Moldova's population support unification with Romania.

In June 1994 Moldova dropped the Romanian national anthem, "*Romanian, Awake!*" which it had borrowed in 1991, at which time eventual unification with Romania was envisaged. Moldova's 1994 Constitution defines the state language as "*Moldovan*" (rather than "*Moldovan (Romanian)*" or "*Moldovan which is identical to Romanian*", the other options presented). Chisinau has repeatedly reproached the Romanian government for its unwillingness to come to terms with the idea of real independence for the Republic of Moldova: Romania should let Moldova "*be master in its own home*", and "*strictly respect the right of [Moldova's] people to determine their own future*." Romania was the very first country to be visited by recently elected Moldovan President Lucinschi, who, while keen to intensify cooperation with Romania, especially in the economic sphere, is, nonetheless, a firm believer in a truly independent Moldovan state.

Moldova and Ukraine

While perhaps in the initial turmoil Ukraine may have harboured hopes of recovering its former territory of Moldovan Transnistria, Kiev seems to

Moldovan President Petru Lucinschi

Lucinschi was born into a peasant family in the Moldovan village of Raduleni Vechi, Floresti district, in 1940. He took a degree in history from the State University of Chisinau in 1962 and later graduated from the Higher Party School in Moscow. From 1960 to 1971 he worked in the Moldovan Komsomol and rose to the position of First Secretary. Lucinschi served in key posts in the Communist Party of Moldova and the Communist Party of Tajikistan. He returned to Moldova in November 1989, having been elected first secretary of the Moldovan Communist Party's Central Committee. 1990-1991 Lucinschi was secretary of the CPSU Central Committee – probably the most senior party job ever held by an ethnic Moldovan. After the August 1991 coup he again returned to Moldova for a spell in the Supreme Soviet. 1992-93 he served as Moldovan Ambassador in Moscow. Lucinschi was elected parliamentary chairman in January 1993. He gained 54.07% of the vote in the second round of voting in the presidential election on 1 December 1996. His opponent, the incumbent President Snegur, gained 45.93%. A former senior Soviet apparatchik, Lucinschi is keen to dispel the image that he is "*Moscow's man*." He intends to use "*his close personal contacts with the Russian leadership for the benefit of our country*." An experienced and very skilful politician, and a champion of compromise, consensus and consolidation, Lucinschi has sought to establish a government of national unity.

have come to the view, as the Dnestr insurrection escalated, that a Russian ultranationalist, militarised exclave to the west of independent Ukraine presents it with a serious security problem. Indeed, as the March 1997 Ukrainian President Kuchma's visit to Moldova clearly showed, the resolution of the Dnestr conflict and the withdrawal of the OGRF will be greeted with much the same feeling of relief in Kiev, as in Chisinau.

Kuchma said that Ukraine intended to increase its participation in the settlement of the Dnestr problem, while Lucinschi expressed great appreciation for Ukraine's important role as a mediator. Trade turnover between Moldova and Ukraine increased by nearly 300% in 1996 as compared with 1993, and the declaration of a

customs union was signed. The Moldovan-Ukrainian Border Demarcation Commission has agreed on over two-thirds of the boundary and a bilateral border treaty is expected to be finalised by 1 July 1997. One of the disputed sections lies in the lower reaches of the river Prut near Giurgiulesti, where Moldova hopes to build an oil terminal to reduce energy dependency on Russia by ensuring cheaper oil supplies by sea. Moldova's debt to Gazprom (Russia's state gas company) totalled US\$401m in December 1996, and Russia cut gas supplies to Moldova by 50% from mid-December.

Local Autonomy in Gagauz Yeri

The self-styled Republic of Gagauzia proclaimed its independence from Moldova in August 1990. A 600-strong force of irregulars – the so-called

Bugeac battalion (who were supported militarily and politically by the PMR separatists) – was formed to protect the interests of the breakaway republic. To this end the paramilitaries seized weapons and conducted occasional armed raids on government installations in southern Moldova. Following delicate and protracted negotiations between Chisinau and Komrat (the capital of the unrecognised republic), Moldova accorded a 'special juridical status' to *Gagauz Yeri* (the Gagauz Land) in January 1995.

Moldova's creation of an autonomous territorial unit as a form of self-determination for the Gagauzi and a constituent part of the Republic of Moldova – the first move of its kind by an East European state – has been praised as a potential model for resolving ethnic disputes in post-communist Europe. A referendum was held to determine which villages would join Gagauz Yeri. Georgi Tabunshchik, an ethnic Gagauz, was elected to the post of *bashkan* (or governor), and there were elections to the legislative body for the region, known as the Popular Assembly.

In June 1995 after the elections, the then Moldovan Prime Minister Andrei Sangheli declared an end to the conflict between the Gagauz separatists and Moldova. The *Bugeac* battalion was formally disbanded, an amnesty was granted until late August for the handover of weapons and the paramilitaries were incorporated into the specially created, so-called 'Military Unit 1045' of the Interior Ministry's Carabineer Forces. However, despite official pronouncements in Chisinau that the decommissioning of arms has been successfully

The Russian Army in Moldova

Based in Moldova since 1956, Soviet 14th (Guards) Army, headquartered in Tiraspol, was transferred to the CIS Armed Forces in January 1992. President Yeltsin's decree of 1 April 1992 subsequently placed what remained of the 14th Army under Russian jurisdiction. Throughout 1990-91 and subsequently, the heavily politicised 14th Army – whether under the Soviet, CIS or Russian flag – has covertly provided the Transnistrian separatists with weapons, training facilities, manpower, finance and moral and administrative support. By late June 1992, however, when General Lebed was appointed army commander, Russian combat power in Moldova consisted essentially of one somewhat under-strength and under-equipped motor rifle division: the 59th Motor Rifle Division. Lebed described his army as “*belonging to the Transnistrian people*” and declared that it would remain in Moldova indefinitely. Russia's 14th Army continued throughout 1993 and beyond to recruit residents of Moldova's Transnistrian region in violation of international law. In October 1994 Moldova and Russia concluded an agreement for the withdrawal of 14th Army, which for ‘President’ Smirnov was “*unacceptable*” and for Lebed a “*crime.*” Following former defence minister Grachev's April 1995 directive on the reorganisation of 14th Army and Yeltsin's June decree on removing Lebed from military service, Major-General Valeriy Yevnevich was appointed commander-in-chief of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) in the Transnistrian Region of the Republic of Moldova. Yevnevich was promoted Lieutenant General shortly after having assumed command on 14 June 1995. According to Yevnevich, the OGRF is well manned (two-thirds of the personnel are serving under contract) and equipped (though no new models of equipment have been received since 1990), and the level of training is reasonably high. All members of the OGRF must now hold Russian citizenship. There are hardly any delays over pay. Over the last year or so the group's overall strength has been reduced from 6,500 by more than 1,500 men; more engineering and other hardware has been returned to Russia; and the destruction of the huge stockpiles of munitions located near Colbasna (reportedly one of the largest arsenals in Europe) continues – albeit slowly.

completed, weapons are still circulating illegally in the region. The weapons voluntarily surrendered to the police were but “*a drop in the ocean*”, affirmed Colonel of Police Ilie Stamat, Chief of the Directorate of Internal Affairs in Gagauz Yeri, in August 1996. Vasile Uzun, the *bashkan's* first deputy, emphasised that: “*there had been no order in Gagauzia for five years, and that it would take time for the rule of law to replace the rule of the gun.*”

The 1997 Gagauz budget envisages greater expenditure in the social sphere, culture and education and for the first time ever funding will be provided for printing school books in the Gagauz language. President Lucinschi's support was greatest in Gagauz Yeri where he was backed by more than 93% of the voters.

However, institutional uncertainties (inherent in the law on Gagauz Yeri) with respect to shared central and regional jurisdiction are likely to lead to practical problems of administration for quite some time to come. Despite Moldova's obvious commitment to its ethnic minorities and strenuous endeavours to achieve a compromise solution, it remains to be seen whether, as the Turkish defence minister has put it, Moldova has “*solved the Gagauz problem.*”

Recent Developments and Future Prospects

From the standpoint of the Moldovan government, the evident progress made with neighbouring Romania and Ukraine, and in Gagauz Yeri, contrasts sharply with the persistence of the far larger problems associated with territorial separatism in Transnistria. The PMR leadership continues to lose no opportunity to consolidate and confirm state structures.

In September 1995, during a memorable sitting of the Russian State Duma (which featured Vladimir Zhirinovskiy assaulting Father Gleb Yakunin and a woman deputy), ‘President’ Igor Smirnov, a guest of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, appealed to deputies to recognise the statehood of the PMR. In November of the same year, the Duma called on President Yeltsin to declare the PMR a zone of special strategic interest to the Russian Federation, to consider recognising the PMR as an independent state and to open a Russian consulate in Tiraspol. In referenda held in December 1995 in the PMR (and declared illegal by the Moldovan government), 82.7% of voters approved a new constitution which proclaimed the PMR to be “*a sovereign, independent, democratic and law-based state*”; 89.7% of voters were also in favour of the PMR joining the CIS.

The Strategic Significance of Moldova

A distinction may be drawn between Moldova's global strategic significance and its regional strategic significance. During the Cold War the territory of Moldova – in peacetime – formed part of the Soviet Union's Odessa Military District. In the event of war it would have been mobilised to provide support for a strategic offensive operation in the South-Western Theatre of Military Operations against the Balkans, Greece and Turkey, with the Suez Canal and the North African coast as its second strategic objective. The headquarters for this strategic axis was located in Chisinau (Kishinev). With the end of the Cold War, the collapse of communism, and the demise of the Soviet Union, however, Moldova has lost its global strategic significance.

However, it must be noted that in the event of the emergence of some form of reconstituted Soviet Union, or Russian/pan-Slavic area of influence in the context of some kind of East-West confrontation, then Moldova would again become a springboard for operations against the Balkans, the Black Sea outlet, and the South-East Mediterranean coast. In this connection it is interesting to note that General Lebed has described the Dnestr area as "*the key to the Balkans,*" observing that "*if Russia withdraws from this little piece of land, it will lose that key and its influence in the region.*"

A more positive development was the joint statement in January 1996 by the Presidents of Moldova, Russia and Ukraine on the need for a speedy settlement to the Dnestr conflict by defining a special status for Transnistria as part of the Republic of Moldova. However, the signing of a *Memorandum* on normalising relations between Moldova and Transnistria, which was due to take place in Moscow in the presence of the three presidents on 1 July 1996, has been postponed *sine die*. In the words of special presidential adviser, Anatoli Taranu, the document was "*finally buried*" when Igor Smirnov sent a letter to President Lucinschi proposing that it be signed with the aim of establishing *interstate* relations.

In November 1996 (for the second time within one year) the Russian State Duma declared Transnistria to be a zone of Russian special strategic interest. Igor Smirnov was reelected in December 1996 for another five year term as PMR 'president'. He was forthright about his intention to consolidate the PMR state system. Referring to Moldova's proposal to grant Transnistria a special legal status within the framework of a unified Moldova, he stated that:

"We will strengthen the independence achieved through such difficulties and defended with blood... Transnistria exists in fact; it is a reality. If Chisinau realises that, we will manage to settle all differences. But only through talks between equals. We do not need anyone to present us with any status,"

In February 1997 Donald Johnson, Head of the OSCE Mission in Moldova, recommended that the OSCE should not support the *Memorandum* as it

failed to confirm the OSCE's basic principles on Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In March the PMR threatened to suspend the OSCE mission in Tiraspol.

According to the Moldovan-Russian agreement concluded in October 1994, the withdrawal of the OGRF from Moldovan soil will be "*synchronised*" with the settlement of the conflict in Transnistria, as Russian Defence Council Secretary Yuriy Baturin confirmed during his visit to Moldova in February 1997.

Since the PMR leadership wants the Russian military to stay, seeing them as protectors, the synchronisation principle offers a powerful disincentive to engage in genuine negotiations aimed at reaching a meaningful agreement. Insofar (as we have seen) as there has been little real progress with regard to the political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict – though the idea of "*a kind of mini-Dayton near Moscow*" has been mooted in Chisinau – it remains to be seen just what the promise implicit in the three-year timetable, actually amounts to in practice.

Indeed, it is still unclear when the countdown on the three-year schedule began, or is actually to begin. Russian deputies maintain that the agreement must first be ratified, which by mid-March 1997 the Duma has signally failed to do. (When Russia was admitted to the Council of Europe in January 1996, it undertook to ratify within six months the army withdrawal agreement.) Moreover, many personnel of the former 14th Army were locally recruited – 60% of the officers and 80% of the NCOs. The

Peace-keeping on the Dnestr

Russian, Moldovan and PMR peace-keeping forces have been operating in Moldova in the 225km long, 4-15km wide, security zone along the Dnestr since late July 1992, after the end of the civil war. As early as September 1992, Moldova publicly challenged the impartiality of the Russian peacekeepers, charging them with allowing the PMR separatists to maintain men and material in the security zone. The PMR, for its part, was able to continue to create and consolidate the structures of an independent 'state' (government departments, armed forces, border guards, banking system, etc) under the protection of the peacekeepers. Russia has reduced her peacekeeping force from six to two battalions since 1992. There are currently three battalions of Moldovan troops, three PMR battalions, and two Russian battalions serving as peace-keepers on the Dnestr.

situation is slowly improving and conscripts are now sent from Russia, but withdrawal still remains a somewhat vacuous notion.

On a number of occasions Moscow has raised the issue of establishing a military base in Moldova: Armenia and Georgia have already accepted Russian bases on their territories. Thus far any such proposal has been rejected in accordance with Article 11 of the Moldovan Constitution which states that: "*The Republic of Moldova declares its permanent neutrality (and) does not admit the stationing of foreign military units on its territory.*" It seems, however, that Moscow continues to pursue a policy of equivocation and prevarication that has characterised its military involvement in Transnistria since the creation of an independent Moldovan state in 1991. In one guise or another – OGRF, peacekeepers or military bases – there will almost certainly be a Russian military presence in Moldova as the Dnestr conflict smoulders on for quite some time to come.

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