

Self-Determination Conflict Profile

Moldova / Transdnistria

By Robert M. Cutler

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History

In the late fifteenth century, what is now known as the Transdnistria—the region on the eastern bank of the Dnistr River and with the border of today's Ukraine for its eastern limit—was part of the Kingdom of Lithuania. By the mid-sixteenth century it had passed into the Ottoman Empire, of which it

remained a part until the late eighteenth century, when the whole western coast of the Black Sea from Odessa to Varna (now in Bulgaria) became embroiled in military conflicts among the Ottoman, Russian, and Austrian Empires. From that era it emerged as part of the Russian Empire. After the Bolshevik Revolution and First World War, it became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, until Stalin redrew the internal borders of Moldavia and Ukraine in 1940, when it was attached to a remnant of the former Romanian province of Bessarabia to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. There it remained until 1991, when it became part of independent Moldova.

The Transdnistrian conflict erupted also from the fact that after the USSR began to collapse, the non-Moldovan population began as early 1989 to organize a resistance to Moldovan independence

efforts, out of fear that this would lead to a reunification with Romania. Russians in Transdnistria represent only about one-quarter of the population there, but a majority of the urban population. Another quarter of the general population are Ukrainians and two-fifths are Moldovans, mostly in the countryside. The adoption of a language law in

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August 1989, which gave the status of official language to the Romanian language written in the Latin alphabet, was instrumental in promoting tensions.

In August 1990 a "Transdnistrian Moldovan Republic" was proclaimed in Tiraspol. Large-scale violence and fighting ensued, producing several hundred deaths and roughly 60,000 refugees. Many have accused the Russian 14th Army, deployed in Transdnistria, of supporting the secessionists. In March 1992, a military conflict erupted between the separatist leaders in Transdnistria and the Moldovan authorities in Chisinau. Despite Chisinau's softening of language legislation in the spring of 1994 to accommodate nonethnic Moldovans, and despite the Moldovan government's readiness to grant special status to the Transdnister region, the situation has not improved.

Despite the beginning of negotiations on Transdnistria's obtaining special status within Moldova, the Chisinau authorities still have no control over the breakaway region, while the "Transdnistrian Moldovan Republic" has no international recognition. Nevertheless, in a very provocative move in August 2000, Tiraspol (the administrative center of Transdnistria) established its own Foreign Ministry, a representative of whom subsequently attended a Russian-sponsored "summit conference" with the "foreign ministers" of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia.

Profiles of Major Organizations

The governments of the Russian Federation and Ukraine are assisting the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to mediate between the government of Moldova, with its capital in Chisinau (renamed from the Soviet-era Kishinev), and the self-proclaimed and unrecognized Transdnistr Moldovan

Republic, which is centered in the city of Tiraspol, the headquarters of the Russian 14th Army.

Role of United States

The United States is not directly involved in the negotiations. It has an indirect role through its membership in the OSCE and also through its promotion of GUUAM, the Georgia-Ukraine-Uzbekistan-Azerbaijan-Moldova security entente that emerged in the mid- and late-1990s but which achieved only very institutionalization in early 2001.

Proposed Solutions and Evaluation of Prospects

Western interests in a settlement originated in the surprisingly large quantity of armaments (including light arms) possessed by the 14th Army, and the fear that these could be destabilizing if sold to other regional insurgents. For example, insurgents in Georgia and freebooters in Azerbaijan are known to have obtained many weapons from ex-Soviet soldiers in Europe who were withdrawn to Kaliningrad, and whose military property was their only capital asset; it was feared that Transdnistria could become a secondary source of supply.

A Russian-Ukrainian-Romanian-Moldovan forum created to resolve the conflict in March 1992 was never implemented, but a ceasefire—negotiated by OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, and Romania—was implemented in July 1992. Since then, a trilateral Russian-Moldovan-Transdnister peacekeeping force has been in place, with an OSCE mission on site since mid-1993. In December 1993, OSCE ministers affirmed that Transdnistria should have a special status within Moldova and that the issue of Russian troop withdrawals should not be linked to other questions. Russia has pledged these withdrawals but has not redeemed that pledge.

Despite the signing of a Memorandum on Normalization of Relations in May 1997, Transdnistria's demands for statehood and for the transformation of Moldova into a confederation of two equal states have blocked progress. The OSCE, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine mediated these negotiations, which resulted in a series of decisions taken in Kiev on 16 July 1999, about establishing a common border and a common defense and economic space between Transdnistria and the Moldova. However, these decisions have not been implemented. The reason is the lack of resolution of Transdnistria's legal status. Thus, the Transdnistrian side supposes, for example, the existence of two armies under a single command, which is unacceptable to Chisinau.

The proposals by the OSCE have until recently been instrumental in promoting movement toward a political settlement of this conflict in Moldova. That is in part because the Russian government has not had the means to influence the situation militarily, and the (civilian) ethnic Russians in Transdnistria have not been interested in pressing further any separatist demands. However, the communist victory in Moldovan elections in early 2001 changes that situation. Until now, Moldova has insisted that the roughly 2,500 troops remaining from Russia's former 14th army be withdrawn from Transdnistria. New Moldovan leaders, however, have said that the Russian troops could not leave before their arsenal was evacuated. It is conceivable that the new Moldovan leadership will

invite the Russians to guard those munitions and even offer Moscow a military base in the Transdnistrian region. As this would make the separatist authorities in Tiraspol politically superfluous, such a move could the conflict.

Other suggested solutions have included the establishment of "federative relations" between Transdnistria and Moldova, on condition either that Moldova joins the Belarus-Russia Union, or that Transdnistria at the same time maintains a confederate relationship with Ukraine.

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