

TRANSDNIESTRIAN CONFLICT

Origins and Main Issues

Based on the Background Paper "The Transdniestrian Conflict in Moldova: Origins and Main Issues", Vienna, 10 June 1994, CSCE Conflict Prevention Centre

Historical Background

The main part of today's Moldova lies in the historical region situated between the Prut and Dniester rivers and the Black Sea coast. As part of the ancient principality of Moldova which also comprised areas of today's Romania, this region was under Ottoman rule until it was ceded to the Russian empire in 1812 and became a province called "Bessarabia".

More than a century later, after the October revolution, the Moldovan Republic was proclaimed in Bessarabia on 7 February 1918, following an uprising of underprivileged indigenous peasants and soldiers returning from the front, against the mainly Russian upper classes. The following year, the Parliament of the new Republic decided to join Romania.

However, the USSR never recognized Romania's right to this province: in 1924, a narrow strip of Ukrainian land on the left bank of the Dniester river was declared as the "Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic" by the Soviet authorities, as a stepping stone to the re-acquisition of Bessarabia. And in fact, on 28 June 1940, as a consequence of the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the area of Bessarabia was annexed by Soviet troops and proclaimed as the "Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic" on 2 August - together with the previously created Autonomous Republic on Ukrainian territory on the left bank. At the same time, the Ukrainian SSR was given parts of northern and southern Bessarabia (Northern Bucovina and the Black Sea coastal area). During the Second World War, Romania reconquered Bessarabia in 1941 in the course of Hitler's war against the Soviet Union but lost the province again in 1944 to the Soviet Union. In 1947 Romania was obliged to recognize the formal incorporation of Bessarabia into the Soviet Union in the Paris peace treaties.

To an even larger extent than under the Tsarist rule, the Moldovan SSR became again the subject of a systematic policy of Russification. Part of this policy was a strict isolation of the country from the Romanian cultural sphere and the imposition of the Cyrillic alphabet for the Romanian language. In public life Romanian - called "Moldovan" - took only a second place behind Russian.

Rooted in the National Writer's Union, a Popular Front, initially called the "Democratic Movement for Perestroika", began to emerge in the late 1980s. The Front's main goals were the reintroduction of the Latin alphabet and the recognition of Romanian as the official language. It was only after the end of the Ceausescu regime in December 1989 that radical elements of the Front also called for reunification with Romania.

In the parliamentary elections of March 1990, the Popular Front obtained 40% of the mandates and, together with coalition partners, became the dominating political force. One of the first acts of the new Supreme Soviet was the adoption of the Romanian tricolor with a Moldovan coat of arms, and of the Romanian National Anthem on 27 April. On 23 June 1990 a declaration of Sovereignty was passed, asserting the supremacy of Republican legislation over Union legislation, and on 27 August 1991, after the attempted *coup d'état* in Moscow, independence was declared. On 30 January 1992, the Republic of Moldova became a member State of the CSCE, and was admitted to the United Nations on the following 2 March.

Moldova's economy is largely dependent on energy and raw material imports from the CIS. Although President Mircea Snegur signed the Alma-Ata Declaration in December 1991, the former Moldovan parliament was reluctant to ratify the Agreement on Moldova's membership of the Commonwealth of Independent States, mainly due to the opposition of the Popular Front.

The picture changed completely after the 27 February 1994 parliamentary elections when the parties favorable to joining the CIS obtained a comfortable majority. On 8 April the Parliament ratified the CIS and Economic Union Treaty by 80 votes in favor to 18 against. According to the Government spokesman Moldova's membership of the CIS would not entail joining the system of collective security or any military/political blocs. Moldova would also retain its present currency (leu, plural lei) introduced in November 1993.

The Conflict in the Left Bank Areas

In parallel-with Moldova's process of emancipation from the Soviet centre, from 1989 onwards protest movements in the regions with predominantly non-Moldovan populations, i.e. in the left bank areas and in the south of the country, began organizing themselves to resist Moldovan independence efforts. This resistance was mainly motivated by the fear that Moldova, once fully independent, would wish to reunite with Romania. In addition, a strong tendency for the preservation of the Soviet Union and of "Socialist values" was present within these protest movements, in particular among the Slav population and its leadership in the left bank areas.

A major element which led to the escalation of tensions was the adoption of a language law on 31 August 1989, giving Romanian, written in the Latin alphabet, the status of official language. The adoption of the law was accompanied by massive demonstrations in support of its passage in the capital and by counter-demonstrations and protest strikes by ethnic minority groups throughout the country.

One year later, in response to Moldova's declaration of Sovereignty, a congress of representatives of the Gagauz minority announced the formation of a "Republic of Gagauzia" on 19 August 1990, and on the following 2 September, a "Transdniestrian Moldovan Republic (in Russian "Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika, abbreviated PMR) was proclaimed in Tiraspol, Moldova's second largest city, on the left bank of the Dniester river. That same year, both self-styled independent entities elected their respective parliaments and presidents; in both cases, the elections were boycotted by the Moldovan population and declared invalid by the authorities in Chisinau.

On the left bank the situation escalated into larger scale violence and fighting. The first armed clashes between the Transdniestrian separatists and Moldovan police for control of municipal bodies occurred in Dubossary on the left bank as early as 2 November 1990, which resulted in three civilian casualties. In the following months, communist leaders on the left bank started to set up paramilitary "worker's detachments", on the basis of which a fully armed and professional "Republican Guard" was created in 1991. The 1991 August coup in Moscow, which was condemned by the Moldovan authorities but enthusiastically welcomed by the PMR leaders, led to further tensions.

Reacting to Moldova's declaration of independence, the PMR Supreme Soviet voted to join the USSR on 2 September 1991. Paramilitary formations began to take over, step by step, previously Moldovan public institutions such as police stations, administrative bodies, schools, radio stations and newspapers. Buildings targeted for "take-over" were reportedly defended by human chains of unarmed Moldovan peasants, since the Moldovan police was apparently instructed not to respond with force. On 13 December 1991 however, Moldovan police for the first time returned fire in defending the regional government building in Dubossary.

New clashes took place in March of the following year, and a state of emergency was introduced in Moldova on 28 March. However, fighting intensified in May and culminated on 19 June 1992, when a large scale military battle, involving the use of heavy arms, took place over the control of the city of Tighina/Bendery, situated on the right side of the Dniester but claimed by the PMR authorities. On 21 June, the Moldovan units were driven out from Tighina/Bendery. There have been numerous allegations that the Russian 14th Army, stationed on the left bank, directly or indirectly supported the secessionists. The fighting caused several hundreds of deaths and some 100,000 refugees.

International Peace efforts

On 23 March 1992, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Moldova, Russia, Romania and Ukraine met in Helsinki in the margins of the 9th CSO meeting and adopted a declaration in which they laid down a number of principles for a peaceful political settlement of the conflict, and agreed to create a mechanism for political consultations to co-ordinate their efforts. At subsequent meetings in April and May in Chisinau, the four Ministers decided to establish a Quadripartite Commission and a group of military observers (five from each country), to monitor the implementation of the terms of an eventual cease-fire. However, since the escalation of violence in June 1992, the Quadripartite mechanism has not been working actively and is today in a state of "quasi-hibernation". Medium-ranked representatives nevertheless remained in Chisinau, mainly as members of the respective regular diplomatic missions.

During the first half of July 1992, intensive discussions took place in the framework of the CIS on the question of the possible deployment of a CIS peace-keeping force in Moldova in accordance with the terms of the "Treaty on Groups of Military Observers and Collective Peace-keeping Forces in the CIS", which had been signed on 20 March 1992 in Kiev. At the CIS Summit in Moscow on 6 July, it was agreed on a preliminary basis to deploy a CIS Peacekeeping Force consisting of Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Romanian and Bulgarian troops, if formally requested by Chisinau. Moldova's Parliament delivered a request the following day, but some countries withdrew their consent to participate in a CIS force thereafter. At the Helsinki Summit on 10 July, President Snegur asked that consideration be given to "the question of applying the CSCE peacekeeping mechanism in a way adequate to our situation". However, one of the conditions for CSCE peacekeeping contained in the Helsinki Document, namely the establishment of an effective and durable cease-fire, was considered to be unfulfilled.

A fundamentally new initiative was launched on 21 July, when an agreement was signed in Moscow between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation on principles of a peaceful solution of the armed conflict in the Transdniestrian region of Moldova. The agreement provided for an immediate cease-fire and the creation of a demilitarized security zone between the parties, 10 km left and right of the Dnestr, including also the city of Tighina/Bendery. In a communiqué, the presidents of Moldova and Russia announced a set of principles for a peaceful solution of the conflict, including La. respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova, the need for a special status of the left-bank Dnestr region, and the right of the population of the left bank to decide on its own future if Moldova were to reunite with Romania.

To implement the cease-fire, a tripartite Joint Control Commission (JCC) was established in Tighina/Bendery, consisting of Moldovan, Russian and PMR delegations assisted by a group of 30 military observers, 10 from each of the parties. In the case of violations of the cease-fire agreement, the JCC was authorized to take urgent and appropriate measures to restore the peace and re-establish law and order, and also to prevent the occurrence of similar violations in the future" (Art. 4), The July 21 Agreement also provided for trilateral peacekeeping forces, consisting of 5 Russian, 3 Moldovan and 2 Transdnestrian battalions. These forces operate under the Trilateral Joint Military Command, which in turn is subordinated to the JCC. The peacekeeping troops began deployment on 29 July 1992. The cease-fire has largely been observed until the present, although numerous incidents in the security zone guarded by the trilateral forces have been alleged by both sides.

The Main Problems on the Way to a Political Settlement

Based on the reporting of the CSCE Mission, the following paragraphs are an attempt to describe more in depth the four main issues which have been at the core at discussions since the beginning of the conflict and which are crucial to a political settlement: the language issue, the question of unification with Romania: the 14th Russian Army and the discussion on a special status for Transdnestria.

a. The Language Issue

The language issue was, as already mentioned, at the very origin of the conflict in Moldova. In particular on the left bank, the language legislation introduced in 1989 is widely regarded as the cause of the subsequent political troubles and the armed conflict in Transdnestria. Long before the declaration of sovereignty and months before the possibility of unification with Romania was publicly discussed, the language legislation became the clear signal for a process of emancipation from the Soviet legacy. On 30 August 1989, the Constitution of the Moldavian SSR was amended by Article 70 which introduced Romanian as "the State Language", written in the Latin alphabet. Russian was described as the interethnic "language of communication", and the language of the Gagauz population was to be protected and developed. On the following day, a "Law on the Use of Languages on the Territory of the Moldavian SSR" was passed, stating that Russian would be the language of communication to be used throughout the Republic on the same footing as Romanian, and that Romanian, Gagauz and Russian would be the "official languages" in areas with a predominantly Gagauz population. The use of various minority languages (i.a. Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Yiddish) was also guaranteed.

Article 7 of the law prescribes that persons holding positions in state administration and public organisations, which bring them in contact with citizens (public health, education, culture, mass media, transport, trade, services, etc.) must know Romanian, Russian, and, in areas with a Gagauz population, also Gagauz at a "level necessary for fulfilling their professional obligations". Such persons would have to undergo language examinations from 1 January 1994 onward, which would determine if they could keep their current jobs.

It is this - at first glance quite moderate - language legislation which sparked the disturbances at the origin of the secessionist movements in Moldova. The main focus of criticism was the de facto abolition of Russian as official language, and Article 7 of the language law, which was perceived as a threat to their existence by Russian speakers on both sides of the Dnestr. Article 7, although seemingly balanced, has an asymmetric impact, since practically all Romanian speakers know Russian, but not all Russophones speak Romanian.

On the left bank, the Supreme Soviet of the self-proclaimed PMR abolished the 1989 language law on 9 September 1992, and reinstated the use of the Cyrillic alphabet for Romanian, including the teaching of the language in schools). The schooling situation for Romanian-speaking children is further complicated on the left bank since Romanian schools have been closed apparently in "retaliation" for the conversion of Russian-speaking schools on the right bank. The Moldovan authorities however point out in this regard that Romanian language schools were heavily underrepresented during Soviet times.

The language question has continued to deepen the rift between Chisinau and Tiraspol. According to Moldovan statistics, 33,000 Russians and Ukrainians emigrated in 1992. The 1 January 1994 deadline was later relaxed, but apprehensions about language testing have persisted.

b. The Question of Unification

The initial stages of Moldova's process of emancipation from communist rule brought about a reassertion of Romanian ethnic and cultural awareness. This was not surprising since under the former regime, everything was done to discourage cultural exchanges with Romania and to eliminate references to the existence of a common cultural heritage. Since December 1989, after the overthrow of the dictatorship in Romania, a movement within the Popular Front openly advocated (re-)unification, an idea which was encouraged by some official circles in Romania as well. Drawing on historical arguments, many Romanians deny that there is such a thing as a

Moldovan national identity at all.

However, it became evident quite soon that a majority of the population of Moldova would not support a merger with Romania for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the prospect of becoming a small rural province in a relatively centralised country which, in addition, had grave economic problems, became less and less attractive. Furthermore, the prospect of unification was totally unthinkable for Moldova's Slav minorities on both sides of the Dnestr, and became one of the motors of the Transdniestrian and Gagauz secession. It is worth recalling in this context that between 70 and 75 % of Moldova's Slav population lives West of the Dnestr river.

In other words, "cultural Romanianness" was soon complemented by a current of "political Moldovanness". Support for the Popular Front, whose representatives still advocated reunification, began to erode massively in 1991, but the Front managed to block the Parliament until the elections on 27 February 1994, where it received only some 7.5 % of the votes. Parties standing for an independent Moldova, the Agrarian Democratic Party of Moldova and the Socialist/Unity Bloc, received 43.2 % and 22 % of the votes respectively, and obtained a solid majority in the new parliament. The first post-communist elections were however boycotted by the PMR authorities, who prevented the elections from taking place on the left bank.

One week after the elections, a "public opinion poll" was held on 6 March on the future status of Moldova. Again, it could not be held on the left bank. Although the opposition had called for a boycott of this non-binding referendum, the turnout was 75% of the total population, of whom more than 95% expressed their support for the continued independence of Moldova.

Allegations that Chisinau was seeking unification with Romania had always been promoted in the propaganda of the authorities in the left-bank areas. The outcome of the public opinion poll therefore sent an important signal and eliminated a major obstacle on the road to negotiations with the leadership of the secessionist regions.

c. The 14th Russian Army

In December 1991, Soviet forces on the territory of Moldova, mainly consisting of units of the 14th Army, were taken over by the CIS command structures. However, Moldova claimed jurisdiction over these forces, and in negotiations with the CIS command in March 1992, obtained jurisdiction over most forces on the right banks of the Dniester only. A decision on the forces of the left-banks was deferred. On 1 April 1992, the forces on the left bank were integrated in the Russian armed forces by decree. Numerous rounds of negotiations between Moldova and Russia took place during the following two years on the withdrawal of the Russian 14th Army, with the last - 9th - round taking place in Moscow on 7 and 8 June 1994. The principle of withdrawal has been accepted by the Russian side and is confirmed in the Moscow Agreement of 21 July 1992. However, negotiations on a corresponding timetable have so far been unsuccessful. Russia's position, contested by the Moldovan authorities, is that the withdrawal should be synchronized with a political settlement of the conflict in the left bank areas.

The presence of the 14th Russian Army in the left-bank areas remains the major military issue in the region. Numbering an estimated 5000 soldiers and extremely well armed, it is the only armoured force in Moldova capable of offensive action. Many inhabitants and officials of the self-proclaimed PMR believe that the 14th Army protects them against the right bank and contributes to a stable political situation in the region, whereas in Chisinau, its presence is regarded as creating an atmosphere of instability.

The role of the 14th Army in the left-bank areas is ambiguous. During the time of armed confrontations in 1992, the army took an active role and intervened to end fighting in Tighina/Bendery. Moreover, it can be said with reasonable certainty that arms transfers from the 14th Army to civilians and paramilitary groupings took place during the hot phase of the civil war. An engineering battalion, previously an engineering unit of the 14th Army, was transferred with its equipment to the jurisdiction of the military authorities of the PMR. It is also established that great numbers of left bank soldiers of the "Dniester Republican Guard" were and are being trained by the 14th Army and use its facilities. There has been a considerable military build-up under the rule of the separatists in Tiraspol: it is estimated that PMR forces consist of 5,000 active personnel, divided into four motorized brigades with supporting units. A relatively large reserve capacity is also being trained. In addition, there are various paramilitary units ("Delta" and "Dnestr" battalions), border guards and Cossacks.

It has to be said, however, that the relations between the PMR leadership and the 14th Army have become anything but harmonious. The commander, Gen. Lebed, has repeatedly accused the left-bank authorities, and in particular "President" Smirnov of corruption. Lebed is a popular figure among the Slav population, because in their perception he put an end to the civil war by deploying his forces against it.

The continued presence of a Russian army in this area - more than 1,000 km west of Russia's borders - also raises concerns in the neighboring states of Moldova and is viewed by them as internationally destabilizing. In this context, the strategic importance of the territory of Moldova, lying at the crossroads of the Slav world, the Black Sea and the Balkans, needs to be kept in mind.

In the assessment of the CSCE Mission, the continued presence of the 14th Army contributes to the maintenance and solidification of attitudes and political structures which are incompatible with the principle of territorial integrity of Moldova.

d. The Status of Transdniestria

Direct talks between the executive branches of Moldova and the PMR were initiated at the beginning of 1993, and unofficial negotiations almost led to an understanding on the principles of mutual relations. However, the understanding was blocked by the "Supreme Soviet" of the PMR, which instead proposed a "draft treaty on the separation of powers between the subjects of the Moldavian confederation", amounting to an international treaty establishing virtual independence for Transdniestria. Other contacts took place between formally appointed parliamentary delegations, without success: PMR parliamentarians proposed the establishment of a "Moldavian Confederation" as a member of the CIS, consisting of equal and independent states subjects of international law. Moldovan representative aimed at restoring national unity consisting of equal and independent states subjects of international law. Moldovan representatives aimed at restoring national unity with a "special constitutional and legal status being granted to the Transdniestrian regions of the Republic".

Meetings of the "troikas", i.e. of the Presidents, the Speakers of Parliament and the Prime Ministers of both sides which have taken place twice in 1993, were an encouraging sign in itself, but failed to achieve any progress on the question of the future of Transdniestria either.

If in the early days of independence the Moldovan Government advocated a unitary state, probably in reaction to long decades of Russification, it has now become ready to recognize a special status for Transdniestria, even declaring that everything is negotiable with the exception of the idea of granting it a status as a subject of international law. A draft law on a special status for Transdniestria was discussed in the Parliament in Chisinau in 1993, but without the participation of the Transdniestrian delegates. The draft law on a special status of the "territory densely populated by the Gagauz people" seems to be further advanced since it has been accepted by the parliamentarians from the Gagauz areas. However, pro-Romanian members of the National Front considered it as a "crime against Moldova's interests".

Work on the new Moldovan constitution, of course most important in the present context, was much delayed due to the stalemate in the Parliament which persisted until the elections on 27 February 1994. Ironically, the absence of Transdniestrian delegates had, by increasing the relative power of the National Front, made it even easier for the latter to block any progress in constitutional matters - in which it had no interest since it advocated unification with Moldova. One of the first tasks of the newly elected Parliament is to finalize the Constitution.

Reinforcement of the territorial integrity of Moldova along with an understanding about a special status for Transdniestria is the declared policy of all OSCE States. The OSCE Mission has made detailed proposals for a special status of Transdniestria involving substantial self-rule in the political, legal, economic, social and cultural spheres, and has pointed out the need for guarantees that Transdniestria would have the right to determine its own future if Moldova were to decide to give up its statehood.

A new attempt to start negotiations between Moldovan and Transdniestrian leaders and to reach an agreement on Transdniestria settlement was initiated by the President of Russian Federation in February 1994. His personal representative from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited Chisinau and Tiraspol in March and April and had talks with political leaders as well as with the OSCE Mission in Moldova.

As a result, leaders of Moldova and Transdniestria met twice in April 1994. Their first meeting was a preliminary one with the limited group of advisers and took place on 9 April. The second one, on 28 April, ended with the signature of a declaration in the presence of the Head of the OSCE Mission and the Representative of the Russian President. The joint declaration includes statements of a determination to seek a comprehensive solution of existing problems, and undertakes to begin the process of negotiations on financial and economic problems, as well as on questions of Transdniestria's legal and constitutional status. The basis of negotiations - as was agreed - will be OSCE Mission proposals and ideas put forward by the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation.

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In arguing against too far-reaching autonomy for Transdniestria, it is sometimes pointed out that ethnic Moldovans form the largest single group with 40% of the area's population. Without the city of Tiraspol with its very high proportion of native Russian speakers, they would even represent the absolute majority. On the other hand, the Slavs themselves form a majority if the distinction between Ukrainians and Russians is ignored.

It has, however, been said in many instances that the conflict in the Transdniestrian areas is not primarily an

inter-ethnic one, but a dispute involving different values, ideologies and experiences, in which economic factors also play a role. The area east of the Dniester accounts for 12% and 17% of its population but produces 35% of the total national income.

In the assessment of the OSCE Mission, there is a distinct feeling of “Transdnestrian” identity going beyond ethnic lines, justifying a special status for the area. Many ethnic Moldovans living on the left bank have an aversion against being governed directly from the centre, prefer to speak Russian, and do not consider themselves as “Bessarabians”. Several prominent political figures in the self-proclaimed PMR are ethnic Moldovans. At the same time, it should be noted that west of the Dniester - where the majority of ethnic Ukrainians and Russians live - Slavs and autochthonous Moldovans have peacefully coexisted since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, even during times of violence and heavy fighting in Transdnestria. A spreading of violence to other parts of Moldova did not take place.