

Moldova, Transnistria and European Democracy Policies

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On 25 January 2007, the principal mediators in the settlement process of the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict met in Madrid to discuss how to revitalise the stalled process and to determine what the Spanish OSCE Chairmanship could contribute to the process in 2007. The meeting – at which Russian, Ukrainian and OSCE officials were joined by the European Union (EU) and the United States, as observers to the process – was also meant to familiarise the new OSCE chairmanship with both the bleak prospects for progress in resolving the frozen conflict and the challenges that Moldova and Transnistria face in the coming year.

In its first 15 years of independence, the Republic of Moldova has made only limited progress towards developing an economically viable and democratic state. The country remains impoverished and its leadership has been unable to make progress on solving the internal separatist Transnistrian conflict. Recently, attention towards Moldova and the Transnistrian issue has dwindled, having been placed on the backburner by EU member states and the United States. After hitting a wall in the search for possible options for Transnistria, the EU has become silent on the issue; the OSCE, while defending its own overall significance and purpose, has become weakened; and, in the meantime, Russia has been reasserting its presence. Compounding this disappointment, other issues in the region – Kosovo, energy disputes – have assumed greater urgency than the conflict in Moldova. Nonetheless, the US and EU governments, international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have made their way to Chisinau to discuss democratic consolidation and, hopefully, will now be en route to Tiraspol, the gloomy capital of Transnistria that bolsters Soviet heritage and remains untouched by democracy.

Since 1991, the Republic of Moldova – landlocked between Romania and Ukraine – has been in search of an identity, turning away from its half century-long Soviet-Russian legacy, while not embracing its Romanian heritage. Seventy per cent of Moldova's population are ethnic Romanians, while large Russian and Ukrainian minorities each holds 10 per cent of the total, respectively. The autonomous region of Gagaoez-Yeri – where Christian Turks and Bulgarians congregate – was created in the south in 1992. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union and Moldova's subsequent independence, the elites from the east bank of the Dniester River in Transnistria worried that a newly independent Moldova would join Romania. Fear over this possibility was strong enough to drive Transnistria to break away from Moldova. Russians and Ukrainians are more predominant in Transnistria than they are in the rest of Moldova, although ethnic Romanians are still the largest group.



The Russian-orientated elites broke away from Chisinau's rule and a short war was fought during which the Soviet 14th Army, led by Russian General Lebed, provided support to the Transnistrians. In 1992, President Yeltsin brokered a peace agreement between the two parties. This brought an end to the fighting, but ensured that the break-away region remained beyond Chisinau's effective control. Since then, an uneasy peace has prevailed, but negotiations on a political settlement have produced no tangible results. The conflict was distinctively different from the Balkan wars and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the sense that it was not based on ethnic identities, but driven by economics. The stakeholders in the current, unresolved situation blur their business interests with Soviet nostalgia and Russian patronage. No ethnic tensions exist between the three major groups living in Moldova and Transnistria.

The EU began to pay closer attention to Moldova and to this 'frozen' conflict, which it now perceives as a serious security threat on its immediate border. Between 2003 and 2006, international attention towards Moldova grew significantly as a result of several developments.

First, several influential conflict resolution initiatives were devised in 2002-2003 under the auspices of the OSCE. In 2003, the Netherlands' OSCE Chairmanship placed the resolution of the region's frozen conflicts high on its list of priorities, hoping that at least the Transnistrian conflict could be resolved. Discussions between the mediating parties and others intensified that year. Although no

concrete progress was made, OSCE member states (and thus the EU and US, too) became increasingly aware that Moldova merited attention, even if Russia was an obstacle to resolving the conflict. The subsequent Bulgarian, Slovenian and Belgium OSCE Chairmanships, respectively, also made efforts towards resolving the conflict. All of these endeavours were frustrated by Russian refusals to agree on a common declaration at the end of each year. This year's Spanish Chairmanship has not specifically undertaken the task of resolving the conflict(s); however, it does envisage itself in the role of a pragmatic bridge builder.

Second, there was the EU's increased interest in and concern over the well-being and stability of its soon-to-be neighbours. When Brussels devised the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Moldova was a logical participant, as it would soon directly border the EU and lacked a clear possibility for membership. The EU finally established an EU Commission Delegation office in Chisinau and appointed a Special Representative of the EU Council to Moldova to focus on the Transnistrian conflict. Also, the EU and US became observers in the five-sided negotiation format that consisted of the OSCE, Ukraine, Russia and the two conflicting parties. Crucially, by the end of 2005, the EU established a Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Ukraine, on the Transnistrian section of its border with Moldova, in order to facilitate the fight against smuggling, which is an important source of income for Transnistria.

Third, and most importantly, the Moldovan Communist government that came into power in 2001 increasingly despaired at Russian policies. The Communists, led by President Vladimir Voronin, anticipated that the Kremlin would offer its support for a resolution after the government adopted a generally pro-Russia foreign policy stance. But Russia preferred the status quo, which made the Moldovan government gradually lean towards the West. Contacts with the EU, NATO and the US were prioritised over those with Russia and relations with neighbouring Romania and Ukraine improved considerably. Nonetheless, Moldova remained economically dependent on Russian markets and energy.

However, this Western interest in small, impoverished Moldova and its Transnistrian conflict more recently appears to have diminished. Western institutions have lost some of their interest for two reasons.

First, EU coolness derives from a lack of serious commitment by Moldova's leadership to engage in meaningful democratic reform. The EU's decision to include Moldova within the ENP has not been returned by any democratic deepening on the part of Moldova's government. In December 2006, the EU pledged to double its financial assistance to Moldova over the next four years, making 254 million euros available under the ENP. While the funds will be assigned partially to debt relief, a large portion of them will go towards institutional and legal reform, as the EU has expressed frustration at the lack of progress in these areas.¹

Second, impatience has grown at the lack of any progress in terms of settling the Transnistrian conflict. Various proposals for a settlement and increased EU and US involvement have failed to bring the issue any closer to a solution. Substantial circumstantial changes such as increased EU and US involvement, and especially the increasingly productive role that Ukraine played as a negotiator and neighbour after the Orange Revolution, have not brought about the breakthrough that was hoped for a year ago.

¹ 'European Commission announces substantial increase in financial assistance to the Republic of Moldova', Brussels, *EU Press Release*, IP/06/1754, 12 December 2006.

Meanwhile Russia is re-establishing its hold over Moldova and has increased its support for Transnistria. By the end of 2006, relations between Moscow and Chisinau were once again becoming closer. During the November Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summit in Minsk, Voronin and Putin agreed that the ban on Moldova's wine would be lifted, and that in return Chisinau would support Moscow's bid to become a WTO member. Also, both agreed on a new Gazprom gas contract that increased prices from 160 to 170 dollars per 1000 cubic metres in 2007, and that will eventually rise to EU prices of 250 dollars in 2011.² Voronin has stated that he still sees Russia as Moldova's preferential strategic partner.

The sudden friendly relations between Russia and Moldova have awoken suspicions that Moldova might be selling out Transnistria to Russia after all. After courting the West, Chisinau now appears to be moving slowly back into the arms of the Kremlin. The biggest fear, in this case, would be that a new version of the Russian conflict resolution proposal – called the Kozak memorandum of November 2003, which was thought to have been forgotten – might be discussed seriously behind closed doors. This would resolve the conflict on Russia's terms and would place Moldova firmly in the sphere of Russian influence.

Federalisation of Moldova was discussed seriously by all of the parties involved between 2002 and 2004. While Tiraspol supported the establishment of a federation made up of two equal parts, Chisinau pushed for an asymmetric federation in which Transnistria would not have veto power over future Moldovan policies, including the question of possible EU integration. When Moldova turned to the West, Chisinau withdrew its support for federalisation and stood behind an initiative created by Moldovan civil society called the '3D Strategy.' This is a three-stage plan designed to *demilitarise*, *decriminalise* and *democratise* Transnistria and integrate it slowly back into Moldova. The first two parts of the plan refer to the remaining Russian troops in Transnistria, who would need to be withdrawn, and the Tiraspol leadership, which eventually would have to be replaced. The third, democratisation, is a process that would need to occur not only in Transnistria but in Moldova as a whole. Currently, there is not much political, economic or even social incentive for Transnistria to reunite with the rest of the country; a democratic and prosperous Moldova would, the argument runs, be more attractive and more of an inducement to Transnistrians.

Transnistria has been de-facto independent for 15 years. During this period, it established most of the characteristics of a full-fledged state, including all of the necessary symbols, a currency, armed forces and other assets, all under Russian patronage. There are still some remnants of the Russian 14th Soviet Army present, who now act as peacekeepers; in addition, there are huge stockpiles of outdated but dangerous Soviet weapons. The territory's indeterminate status helps the Russian elite benefit from illicit trafficking. This elite consequently has little incentive to support change to the current status quo. The referendum that was held last September, in which over 95 per cent of the indoctrinated and impoverished population said 'yes' to independence and to the country's eventual membership into the Russian federation, was in this sense essentially a propaganda stunt. Russia noted the outcome; but did not take any action. Western states did not recognise the vote.

The population of Transnistria is stuck in a time warp. The streets look identical to those of the Soviet Union in the 1980s and, for the most part, the people are closed off from any outside information. Its orientation is completely focused on Russia,

² 'Moldovan President announces gas deal with Russia', *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 10, No. 235, Part II, 21 December 2006.

which also creates language problems for the Romanian-speaking majority of Transnistria. The unrecognised entity is an authoritarian and isolated police state, where human rights offences go undetected. There is neither democracy, nor a democratic tradition. As working directly with the Tiraspol leadership in regards to democracy and development has been ruled out by Western donors, support for civil society is the only remaining option available to foster democratic change. Eventually, a strengthened and active civil society would help bring about change in Transnistria, which in turn would be an important ingredient to integrate the territory back into Moldova.

Civil society in Transnistria is small, isolated and underdeveloped. Institutions were either set up by the political leadership or are traditional organisations from the Soviet past (trade unions, etc.). There is, however, a growing community of individuals and groups who are critical of the regime. This community consists of journalists, a few advocacy groups, human rights defenders and activists who act at the municipal level. Genuine and independent Transnistrian civil society finds itself in a difficult position, as it is monitored closely by the Ministry of State Security and faces severe difficulties in being able to function and/or receive outside funding. Those who are active in NGOs or non-state media organisations are constantly in danger. In general, political awareness and activism is low among these organisations. Initiatives are mostly undertaken by people who want to solve practical problems of society or by groups that work from a human rights perspective. Civil society is completely focused on the appalling situation in Transnistria and views on the EU and other Western institutions generally do not spark anything more than simple curiosity.

In recent years, civil society in Transnistria has met with the increased attention of foreign donors. In this respect, the most prominent entities are the Soros Foundation Moldova, the British Peace-building Framework Project, the US Embassy, several German political foundations and some Scandinavian NGOs.³ Unlike the US, the EU has not been a direct supporter of civil society in Transnistria. Apart from issues of political will, the bureaucratic procedures of EU funding would not allow specific support to go to individuals or extremely small organisations in Transnistria. The EU has only been physically present in Moldova since 2005, and does not have the 'on the ground' experience held by Western NGOs and local EU member state embassies. Even with this experience, supporting civil society in Transnistria is still a tricky business for both beneficiaries and providers.

So what are the main issues that donors should focus on in regards to supporting civil society in Transnistria?⁴

- **Funding for civil society.** It is almost impossible for Transnistrian NGOs to access international funds. A website that compiles information and links (in English, Romanian and Russian) on funding schemes and opportunities offered by large international organisations, donors and NGOs would be highly beneficial. Such an instrument would be a valuable source of information for grassroots civil society organisations and donors too, as it could serve to avoid the duplication of efforts. As many NGOs do not have access to the internet, the most essential information from the website could be printed and distributed by donor organisations and Embassy personnel.

³ Ondřej Soukup, Report on 'The situation in Transnistria', People in Need, Prague, November 2006, <http://www.clovekvtsni.cz/index2.php?parent=546&sid=404&id=644>.

⁴ Some of the arguments here are derived from writings for the conference 'What chance for democratisation? The state of Civil Society in Transnistria', organised by the Council of Europe in Vadul lui Voda, Moldova, 15 December 2006.

- **Information on Transnistria.** Little information is available in English on Transnistria, let alone on its civil society. Funds for internet services and translation (websites of Transnistrian NGOs, forums, blogs, etc.) would be helpful for outside donors to become better informed on the current situation.
- **Targeted support.** International donors should make an effort to try and reach civil society organisations with grassroots credentials. A bottom-up approach demands that support be provided to concerned and organised citizens at the community level; e.g. the organisations of school teachers that were established after the Transnistrian 2004 school crisis. Donors need to be proactive in the search for recipients and should consider giving small grants to the NGOs and groups that are not officially registered but which are often more critical in their work.
- **Focus initially on local governance and the media.** Local governance is important since there are a great deal of concrete actions that can be taken at the municipal level that would not directly affect or embarrass central authorities. Improving the situation of pensioners or establishing more accountability and transparency in school funding are two of many examples. The media is crucial because Transnistria is isolated – with the exception of the internet – from Western information. All television channels and most newspapers are in Russian. A focus on supporting free media outlets – including those produced in Romanian – with information about Moldova and from Western countries is needed. In these areas, civil society initiatives require concrete financial assistance such as computers, communication equipment and offices, as well as ‘know how’ through training. Nonetheless, donors should set clear but simple criteria for the implementation of projects.
- **Facilitate ties between Moldovan and Transnistrian civil society.** It is important that projects are implemented on an equal basis among the more advanced Moldovan NGOs and their Transnistrian counterparts. Joint organisations, including branch offices from both banks of the Dniester, that focus on the areas outlined above would be helpful in this respect. Such initiatives should receive structural funds to guarantee stability and capacity-building. One good example is the National Endowment for Democracy-funded Resource and Development Centre for Transnistria that was established by Moldovans and Transnistrians. The Centre publishes periodic bulletins on human rights issues, which also provide some information on NGO funding opportunities.
- **Make use of neighbourhood experiences.** NGOs from Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Slovakia as well as Ukraine are often better informed about the situation ‘on the ground’ in Transnistria than their Western counterparts. They have experiences worth sharing in regards to establishing independent civil society organisations and advocating reform and democratisation through transparency and accountability.
- **Focus on training.** In many of the south-eastern European countries that have received increased civil society funding in recent years, there has been too much focus on talking-shops, which has led to conference fatigue. Indeed, conferences can be useful but the main focus should be on practical training programmes. Training, instead of high-level meetings, will also make it possible to attract more young people and to break down youth’s

current 'wait and see' mentality. Training should be organised abroad initially, taking Transnistrian circumstances into account.

- **Donors should be aware of Government Non-Government Organisations (GONGOs)** that are set up by the Transnistrian authorities. These organisations are established to counter independent civil society and the influence of both Western NGOs and external funds. One example is the pro-Russian Transnistrian youth organisation, Proryv ('Breakthrough'). Such anti-democracy protection has intensified in the wake of the 'colour revolutions'.
- The EU and US should make it clear to the Transnistrian authorities that **harassing independent civil society organisations** will not be tolerated. If necessary, additional political pressure or sanctions could be applied, beyond the current travel ban on the Transnistrian leadership.
- **Do not fully exclude contact with political forces in Transnistria** and consider fostering cooperation between reform-oriented politicians and Transnistrian civil society organisations. There are more moderate and reformist legislators in the Supreme Soviet of Transnistria. These worry that the one-sided character of the regime could hurt business, and are keen to see ties with Chisinau (and the EU) explored. Although it is currently weak, the legislature could eventually play an important role in transforming Transnistria.

It is unlikely that the Transnistrian conflict will be solved any time soon. As long as the current Tiraspol leadership is able to survive economically and receives assistance from Russia, it will feel secure in power. The best prospect now is for the gradual integration of Moldova and Transnistria through economic development and democratisation, instead of a speedier federalisation of Moldova that would most likely result in a non-viable state. It should be clearer than hitherto how integrally democratisation and sustainable conflict resolution are related. This needs to be reflected in European policies.

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