

National Construction, Territorial Separatism and Post-Soviet Geopolitics: The Example of the Transdniester Moldovan Republic

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In the aftermath of the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, numerous conflicts have occurred on the margins of this multi-ethnic state, especially in the Caucasus region and central Asia. In the European part of the former USSR, violent conflict has been less frequent but nationalist dilemmas are no less intractable. The continuing debates about the national rights of the Russian populations of Latvia and Estonia and the unresolved question of the specific roles of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) lend urgency to a search for solutions that accommodate the differing aspirations of the states and nations of the crush zone of east-central Europe. The geopolitical context is changing rapidly as a result of the expanding role of the West in the region, in the guise of NATO and the European Union, and the relative decline of Russian influence.

Almost overlooked in the contemporary geopolitical landscape is the tiny “pseudo-state”² of the Transdniester Moldovan Republic (TMR), a breakaway region of Moldova, one of the former Soviet republics that declared independence in 1991 (Figure 1a). With a population of 670,000 and an area of 4163 square kilometers, the TMR lies east of the Dniester river and is land-locked between Ukraine and the rest of Moldova. The short violent war between Moldova and the forces of the breakaway TMR, supported by volunteer Cossacks from Russia and Ukraine, that peaked in June 1992 received little attention in the West, perhaps because of the coincidental crisis in Bosnia and the Croatian-Serbian war in eastern Slavonia. The indeterminate status of the TMR offers many lessons for the post Cold War world as ethnic tensions, long hidden in the Soviet times, have erupted to violence and produced a dizzying array of new political arrangements. The experiences of a small place can indeed contain lessons for the wider geopolitical environment³.

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that most of the post Cold War geopolitical uncertainties of the former Soviet Union can be illustrated by the TMR-Moldovan conflict. Economic, political, national, military, and social problems, consequent on the end of the Soviet Union, combine to hinder solutions to the TMR situation. Although all of the post-Soviet conflicts have historical antecedents, it is only in the light of the ‘glasnost’ of the Gorbachev years in

the 1980s that they began to emerge on the geopolitical radar. Already in the last two years of the Soviet Union, the Moldovan nationalist revival, focussed on language rights, closer relations with Rumania and the replacement of the Communist party by populist leaders, was generating a backlash in the mixed ethnic region across the Dniester. The military conflict that then began in 1991 and lasted through summer 1992 was a result of the newly-independent Moldova's attempt to implement state control up to the border with Ukraine (King, 1994, 1995). The resulting stalemate has continued to mid-1998 despite the efforts of Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) to mediate an agreement between Tiraspol (the TMR capital) and Chisinau (Moldovan capital) and despite the changes in Presidential and parliamentary leadership in Chisinau.

Study of the TMR crisis sheds light on the different kinds of chaos found in most post-Soviet puzzles. First, the changing geopolitical strategy of Russia with respect to its "Near Abroad" and to the protection of Russians in the former republics is clearly illustrated by the evolving role of its 14th Army and its commanders in the TMR (Selivanova, 1996). Second, the difficulties of the switch from the command economy of Soviet times, with its state allocations and guaranteed markets in the wider socialist bloc, to the chaos of privatized international markets with continued prominence of "*kolkhoz*" (collective) and "*Sovetz*" (Soviet) enterprises at home, has plagued the TMR. Food rationing and hyperinflation in the TMR and for Moldova, the difficulty of adjusting to the loss of its industrial region, have been prominent features of the economic crisis. Third, on the ethnic-cultural front, the creation of a new national identity for the TMR has been a high priority for the TMR leadership since no ethnic majority exists in the region. (Russian, Ukrainians and Moldovans each constitute about one-third of the total TMR population). An emphasis on "civic" ideals rather than ethnic-based nationalism is a feature of the state-promoted activities emanating from Tiraspol, with a notable nostalgia for the Soviet ideology of a civic identity superseding individual national loyalties.. Fourth, the confusion surrounding the struggle for the new state apparatus and the activities of the new state in the TMR has given rise to claims and counter-claims about the legality of

government actions, the nature and scale of corruption, the treatment of ethnic groups and the implementation of human rights, the interest in reaching a permanent settlement to the crisis, and the extent to which the Dniester Republic is democratic. Though regular elections have been a feature of both Moldova and the TMR since 1991, the nature of civic participation and social movements is still uncertain. The question raised by Zakaria (1997), has formal democracy resulted in the formalization and vindication of the victory of anti-democrats in many post-Soviet regions, is still open.

The absence of overt conflicts in the Moldovan socialist republic prior to 1989 distinguishes this case from other post-Soviet conflicts in Abkhazia (Georgia), Nagorno-Karabakh, and Chechnya. In the three Caucasian examples, ethnic conflicts date back for several decades and even centuries, histories that exacerbated the post-1990 situations. In the case of Moldova, it was the disappearance of the Soviet Union that engendered the conflict; in the other three cases, the end of the USSR merely defrosted the existing divides. The crisis phase in the TMR conflict was started by a legislative act of a new Moldovan government instituting a nationalist agenda (Kolstøe *et al.*, 1993). Arguing about who took the first step is pointless, since each successive response amounted to an escalation of the conflict. The ground was already prepared, with prevailing double perceptions of menace, the necessity to mobilize all the forces of the new states to confront the perceived menace, and the lack of time for a reasoned response. These conditions all contributed to create the right environment for an explosion of hostilities (Kaufman, 1996; Chinn, 1997).

We have three aims in this paper. First, we examine the economic, political and military crisis and update and evaluate the possible solutions in light of the unyielding positions of the protagonists. Second, we wish to analyze the options and strategies that are available for new regimes in zones of ethnic conflict for constructing a national identity and an effective state apparatus. Finally, we wish to consider the wider significance of the TMR example for the geopolitical environment of the early 21st century. We contend that unstable and uncertain political territories will mark the new century, and thus, hark back to the early stages of nation-state formation in the nineteenth century. The TMR might therefore be an early example of a new kind of post-

modern geopolitics, one that is difficult both to evaluate and to predict and that should be examined through the geopolitical perspective of the relevant parties, both internal and external.

Our source material consists of official economic and population data from the TMR and from Moldova, detailed interviews with the state officials of the TMR and with local elected representatives of Bendery (the town at the center of the military conflict) in September 1997, the first atlas of the TMR published in 1997, our observations from field-work in the region, and Russian and Western newspaper accounts of the day-to-day developments since 1991. It is evident that opinions vary greatly and remain strongly correlated with the ideology of the protagonists and whether the observer believes that self-determination or protection of existing state borders should be paramount in the making of the post-Soviet territorial delimitations. As is usual in these murky circumstances, both sides have made accusations of genocide and mass murder but the U.S. State Department (1993, 849) concluded that while there were some human rights abuses on both sides, press reports have exaggerated the nature and the extent of the brutalities.

The Geopolitical and Historical Context

The territory of the Transdniester Moldovan Republic extends along the east bank of the Dniester : the length of this narrow band is approximately 200 km, with an average width of only 20 km. The enclave surrounding the town of Bendery on the Dniester right bank dates to the aftermath of World War II, ensuring economic integration into nearby Tiraspol's sphere, as well as the concurrent domination of the Russian and Ukrainian populations in the city (Figure 1b and Figure 2a). The historical development of Transnistria has long been tied to the Slavic world, especially Russia, so that 1991 aspirations for a reunification with Rumania by the Moldovan nationalists in the Popular Front was at odds with the historical ties of the Transnistrian population. Such an orientation also threatened long-standing economic integration with other countries of the CIS, as well as the dependence of the TMR economy on Eastern markets. In 1990, for example, 95% of all Moldovan enterprises were still controlled from Moscow (Kolstøe *et al.*, 1993, 979).

Of the post-Soviet conflicts, the Moldovan one is the most internationalized. In Soviet times, the zones of fighting in the Caucasus were peripheral, hardly registering on the national consciousness in economic or political terms. By contrast, the Transdnister region played a significant role in the Soviet planned economy. After 1990, the number of external actors actively involved in the struggle grew to include Ukraine, Russia, Rumania, the OSCE, as well as the central parties of Moldova and the TMR. The Caucasian fighting involved only Russia, the immediate parties and some regional interests but remained outside the geopolitical reckoning of non-Soviet states. In all cases, however, the fighting has erased any clear distinction between domestic and international actors. In Transnistria, economic issues have played a significant role, with the desire of the pseudo-state leadership to take advantage of the TMR's relative economic power *vis a vis* the rest of the country.

Moldova lies in the zone of contact between diverse geopolitical worlds (Roman, Slavic, Turkish), a zone contested by empires for centuries and in which political borders have shifted repeatedly according to the prevailing power-political configurations. The Moldovan territory is quite varied and can be divided into several sub-regions differentiated by constituent national population(s), historical experience and traditions, as well as level of economic development. In fact, 18 separate linguistic zones have been identified in Moldova (*Argumenty i Fakty*, N 24, 1992) and the multi-national nature of the state belatedly led to a change in state identity from an ethnic definition to a civic one over the past 5 years, as support for the Popular Front dwindled (Chinn, 1997).

The southern areas of Transnistria belonged to the Crimean Khanat, the vassal state of the Ottoman Empire but prior to the absorption of this region by Russia at the end of the 18th century, this frontier was not characterized by any permanent authority. According to the terms of the Iasi peace treaty between Russia and Turkey in 1792, the Ottoman Empire agreed to cede control to Russia over the steppes lying between the Bug and the Dniester (Figure 1a). The ensuing war between Turkey and Russia (concluded by the treaty of 1812) additionally gave Russia control of Bessarabia (the areas between the Dniester and the Prut, up to the delta of the Danube) (Figure 1a).

Transnistria thus lost its frontier status and was incorporated into the Kherson province of the Czarist empire. Bessarabia remained within the Russian Empire following further victory over the Turks in 1878, but after 1918 and the defeat of Russia in World War I, Bessarabia joined the new Rumanian state. Transnistria had once again become a frontier zone (Kolstøe *et al*, 1993; Crowther, 1991).

The territory of the TMR is heir to the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova (ASSRM), created in 1924 by Stalin within the Ukrainian republic, based on the hope of eventual return of the areas lost to Rumania at the end of World War I. The capital of the ASSRM was first established in the small town of Balta, but was later transferred to Tiraspol. The creation of the ASSRM was orchestrated in large part to show that the Moldovan population had its own state within the Soviet Union and that they differed significantly from the Rumanians. While Ukrainians were certainly the dominant ethnic group in the ASSRM (48.5% of the population), the Moldovan population was also sizeable at 30%. In 1940, after the Ribbontrop-Molotov Pact, Bessarabia was incorporated into the USSR. In the new Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova, six of the prior seventeen administrative districts (*rayoni*) of the ASSRM were now included within the new Moldovan republic, and the other eleven *rayoni* remained within Ukraine, subsumed into Odessa oblast. Contemporary Transnistria is thus made up of six districts emerging from the pre-war autonomous administrative unit, the city of Tiraspol, and the enclave of Bendery on the right bank of the Dniester (Figure 1b). In delimiting the new boundaries, Stalin's intention was to compensate the new Moldovan Republic for the joint loss of southern Bessarabia (transferred to the Izmail oblast and later subsumed under Odessa oblast) and northern Bukovina, now part of the Ukrainian oblast of Chernivitsi. Much of the Moldovan intelligentsia emigrated to Rumania between the wars and the remainder were deported by Stalin, to be replaced (after 1945) by Russian and Ukrainian cadres. This emigration and deportation was one of the key reasons cited by Moldovan intellectuals in 1991 for reunification with Rumania. Only in the years, 1941-44, was the TMR territory part of Rumania, a wartime ally of Germany.

Ethnic and Non-Ethnic Territorial Identities

It would be a gross simplification to reduce the conflict between the TMR and Moldovan central authorities simply to ethnic tensions, since Moldovans are the principal group on both sides and in the 1991-92 war, members of the three main ethnic groups (Moldovans, Ukrainians and Russians) fought on both sides (Kolstøe *et al.*, 1993, 974). On this point, virtually every commentator on the Moldovan – TMR dispute concurs. But it is also true that, as in Northern Ireland, there are correlations between ethnic-cultural-national heritage, economic status and political-territorial preferences. A further complicating element is that ethnic relations in the pseudo-state of the TMR remain hostage to the larger (inter)national environment. Each group looks to external supporters, who share either an ideological or cultural affinity, for military assistance, economic aid and political voice in the world's forums.

A key element in the new national consciousness that emerged forcefully in the aftermath of the Soviet Union has been the struggle about history. Key issues include which group was the first to settle in which area, the emphasis on long-vanished territorial divisions, the legitimacy of boundary shifts and the exact delineation of former state boundaries. For separatists, mobilization revolves around the threat to the existence of the cultural or national minority, and the associated risk of its assimilation, dispersion and oppression, as well as the need to mobilize partisan forces to counter oppositional forces. They typically argue for self-determination and compare their efforts to other successful nationalist enterprises, like the creation of Slovenia or Macedonia. For the state apparatus, usually controlled by the majority, adherence to pre-existing borders is crucial, even when it is recognized that the borders were artificially created for short-term political purposes. Fear of the externality effects of one border change (a snowball effect that can influence border decisions geographically removed from the first conflict) persuades most states to adhere to the status quo ante.

Rather than a simple ethnic-based dispute, the TMR is an example of cultural divisions involving several states. Its escalation can be considered quite typical and thus merits more detailed consideration. Kaufman (1996, 125) makes the argument that the TMR leadership used “ethnic outbidding” to increase their power, provoking violent conflict. He believes that the strikes and other manifestations of opposition to Chisinau were provoked and controlled by a cynical TMR political and economic elite that did not wish to give up power to nationalists in Moldova. In his “ethnic security dilemma model”, Kaufman argues that the fear of losing ground to another ethnic group is a powerful motivator for political action and that the TMR leadership played on this fear. In the TMR, mobilization to opposition to central authority “followed a pattern of elite conspiracy...and incumbent Russophone leaders in the Dniestr region used ethnic outbidding to exacerbate mass hostility and the security dilemma in order to increase their own power” (Kaufman, 1996, 125-126). By contrast, Kolstøe *et al.* (1993, 998) conclude that the evidence for opposition to Chisinau in surveys, elections, and referenda is strong enough to merit territorial autonomy for the TMR.

The flaw in the Kaufman argument is that it assumes a univariate and clear distribution of loyalties according to cultural-national identities. As we will show, identity in the TMR, as in many other post-Soviet republics, is a complicated matter. While nationalists prefer to categorize residents as belonging to one group, many people have affinities for more than one identity. This multiple identity choice is common in regions with significant inter-marriage between groups, as is the case in the European republics of the former Soviet Union where inter-marriage between Russian immigrants and the indigenous population was common. The children and grand-children of these families frequently speak both Russian and the indigenous language and when ethnic-lingual identifications are combined with non-ethnic identity (like the civic identity of a Soviet citizen), a layered and inter-woven set of national markers and orientations can easily result in what Taras (1993) has called “matrioshka nationalism”. A simple equation of a census definition of nationality (the category that a person checks on a census form) with orientation is questionable in the multi-

cultural world of the Dniester Republic, and in other former Soviet republics like Ukraine (Pirie, 1996).

It is important to stress the pre-1989 roots of nationalism in the former Soviet Union. As Kaiser (1994, 379) notes, nationalism in the new states and territories that emerged from the former Soviet Union is not the result of a “sleeping beauty” phenomenon, awakening after 75 years of Communism that submerged cultural loyalties to the ideological preference of Soviet citizen. Soviet nationalities policy was instrumental in the making of nations and nationalism (Akbarzadeh, 1996; Beissinger, 1996; Brubaker, 1995; Kolstøe *et al.*, 1993; Laitin, 1996) and as indigenes became more economically and politically mobilized as a result of the growth of an educated indigenous elite, they became more nationalistic and pressed for more control of resources in the territory of the indigenes. In turn, an indigenous national territoriality engendered a reactive national territoriality on the part of local minorities (the so-called third level of nationalism – Kaiser, 1994) as well as an appeal by the (Russian) non-indigenes for assistance. Later, alliances between the Russians and the smaller minorities, such as in Abkhazia, countered the rising nationalisms of the indigenes. As Sack (1986, 34) noted, “territoriality can help engender more territoriality” that tends to be space-filling.

It is easier to build a national identification if it can be shown that there is a correlation between ethnic status and economic status. The elites who try to mobilize national sentiment are likely to be more successful if they can show that there is either active discrimination against the group or that the group suffers from economic neglect. The case is especially strong if the group is regionally concentrated and thus able to mobilize the resources of the region to support their group claims. In Moldova, the Russophone population is concentrated east of the Dniester as well as in the largest cities, including the capital, Chisinau, where the population was about half Russian in 1989. As was typical of the margins of the former Soviet Union, the Russians were more educated, more involved in the industrial and governmental sectors, and more likely to move to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. But, it would be misleading to make the case that the rump state of the TMR is simply the attempt of the Russians to carve out their piece of the Moldovan pie

in the face of a resurgent Moldovan nationalism. The fact that the TMR regime seems to enjoy widespread cross-ethnic support in their autonomous region suggests that other groups are worried about the policies of the Moldovan state, fear the loss of economic status, have been mobilized to support the Russophones or some combination of these motivations. In any case, the TMR situation is not a simple case of majority versus minority nationalisms.

Recent Population Developments in the TMR

Cossacks occupied the southern lands of the present-day Transnistria until 1812, a time when the Russian frontier ran along the Dniester. After the Cossacks were subsequently transferred to the Kuban in the North Caucasus, their village populations were mostly replaced by incoming Moldovans. After 1812, the protection of the Russian forces allowed for the consolidation of Moldovans (many came as refugees from Bessarabia), as well as Bulgarians in the south of present-day Transnistria. Russian and Ukrainian migrants followed suit and sizeable cities, including Tiraspol, appeared in the mid nineteenth-century.

At the time of the last Soviet census in 1989, the population of the TMR was approximately 750,000, comprised of 39% Moldovans, 23% Russians, 26% Ukrainians, and 12% Bulgarians, Jews and others. In the larger Moldovan Socialist Republic, there were 13.9% Ukrainians, 13% Russians and 3.5% Gagauzians, with ethnic Moldovans accounting for just over two-thirds of the total. In the region east of the Dniester, the ethnic Moldovan population was largely concentrated in villages lying on the banks of the Dniester and they constituted 60% of the rural population and only 25.6% of the urban dwellers (Figure 2a). By contrast, Ukrainians were 22% of the rural population and 32.7% of urban inhabitants and Russians were 12.6% of rural and 34.6% of urban populations. In Tiraspol, Russians clearly made up the bulk of the population of the Transnistrian capital - Tiraspol - where

they composed 41.9%, as Ukrainians totaled 31.6% and Moldovans accounted for merely 17.7% of the total inhabitants. (Figure 2a)

Over the past 70 years, the population dynamics of the current territory of the TMR show little transformation in national/ethnic composition, with the exception of a notable increase in the Russian population (13.7% in 1926, 23% in 1991). The percentage of Ukrainians has remained largely stable (27% in 1926, 26% at present), while that of the Moldovans has dropped slightly (from 44% to 39%). These changes are explained by the influx of Russians into cities of the present TMR during the period of industrialization promoted by Stalin. A concurrent urbanization of the Moldovan population was also observable during this period, increasing from only 1.4% of the inhabitants of Tiraspol in 1926. However, the Russian populations continue to dominate the urban centers, including Bendery (the second-largest city), where they make up 42.4% of the population. It is important to note, however, that until 1991, Transnistria never witnessed any ethnic-based conflicts with the Moldovans co-existing peacefully with the Russophones.

Demographic Situation since 1991: The political and military conflict in Transnistria directly resulted in a drastic decrease of its population. Before the implosion of the Soviet Union, Transnistria had been a pole of attraction of the Soviet population, even more than the rest of Moldova, due to its favorable climate, the cheap cost of living and the relatively rich consumption basket. As a result of a high natural increase of population as well as net migration, Moldova was one of the Soviet Union's few republics having abundant, though mainly unskilled, labor. In 1987, Moldova was the fourth-least urbanized of the Soviet republics (Crowther, 1991,184) and clearly fell into the middle category of Soviet republics on 1989 indicators of economic and social well-being (Bradshaw and Lynn, 1994). The republic's rate of industrialization in the last Soviet decades was high, as several large construction works commenced. The metallurgical plant in Rybnitsa, the Moldovan power station in Dnestrovsk "of all-Union importance" (a Soviet term), the canned food factories and the cotton textile plant in Tiraspol (with 8,000 jobs) all attracted new workers from Russia and Ukraine. Tiraspol

is located only 100 km. from the large city of Odessa in Ukraine, which contributed to the development of its cultural attraction and to in-migration. This southwest corner of the USSR area was especially attractive for people returning after many years to the European metropole from the far North and the far East, as well as for retired military officers. These migrants felt comfortable in Transnistria because of the hegemony of the Russian language.

Between 1991 and 1997, the population of Transnistria decreased from 731,000 to 657,000, a drop of 10.4%. A decrease in absolute numbers was registered in all the *rayoni* (administrative units) of the TMR but was visible especially in the cities because of their concentration of Slavs, many of whom came to the region relatively late and are more educated and more mobile. Since 1991, despite the influx of Russian-speakers population from the rest of Moldova, all the cities and rural districts of the TMR show a negative balance of migration. In 1993, net in-migration occurred, as some of the 30,000 refugees from the Bendery and Dubossary fighting in 1991-92 returned home. The ethnic proportions of migrants are exaggerated by the cultural division of labor established in Soviet times, in which the Slavs (Russians and Ukrainians) performed the administrative tasks and filled industrial jobs and the indigenous population (Moldovans in this case) worked the agricultural enterprises (Chinn and Kaiser, 1996). Given the relative greater decline of the industrial sector, the net out-migration of the Slavs from the region is more evident.

Demographic trends in the TMR also became definitely negative. The balance of natural increase of population was unusually high in Soviet times. In 1990, the figure stood +6.62 per thousand in Transnistria as a whole and +8.30 in its cities. In 1996, mortality exceeded births by 3.2/1000 in all the TMR and by 5.7 in the countryside (Krivenko and Fomenko, 1995). The separation of the TMR from the rest of Moldova interrupted traditional labor migration between the right and the left banks of the Dniester; Transnistria had traditionally experienced a positive balance of cross-river migration.

The future population trends in the TMR clearly depend on the economy, which is, in turn, dependent on the political situation. Privatization of agriculture and large enterprises has not yet

begun and bread and fuel prices are fixed. The rationale is that the state does not wish to provoke “social explosion” and wishes to protect the vulnerable sectors of the population, especially the 25% who are pensioners (Interview with V.A. Kondakov, Deputy-Chief of the Department of Foreign Economic Activity of the TMR, September 26, 1997). The reliance on large local enterprises, with ties only to the export locations in the far corners of the ex-Soviet Union and with no local networks, has proven to be the most difficult economic problem facing the region after 1991 (Interview with the Chair of the Bendery City Council of Deputies, F.A.Dobrov, September 25, 1997). Until such links are re-established or alternative markets are found for TMR exports, the population is expected to continue to shrink.

The Economic Base of the TMR

The TMR is located on the fertile lands of the Dniester valley. The gentle landscape with its mild climate and black fertile soils, together with the Dniester’s water resources, have created conditions favorable to irrigated agriculture. At the same time, the region is also endowed with abundant mineral resources, forming the bases of the thriving construction and metal industries of Soviet times.

Transnistria is, certainly, the most economically developed part of Moldova, accounting for 39% of its GNP and 70% of all agricultural production, though its area is merely 13% and its population 17% of the Moldovan totals. In many branches of industry, Transnistria enjoyed an undisputed monopoly within Moldova. The TMR played a key role in energy provision with its Moldovan thermal energy station (a capacity of 2.5 Mwt), as well as the hydropower station in Dubossary on the Dniester (a capacity of 40 Mwt). In the metallurgical industry, the big steel mills at Rybnitsa (700,000 tons of rolled metal a year) was dominant, with other important activities in cement production, as well as various types of mechanical construction, electronic goods, textiles and food processing. In the agricultural sector, the bulk of fresh fruit and vegetable production - as well

as the production of canned goods - was similarly concentrated in Transnistria (Tiraspol, Bendery). Thanks to the development of irrigation capabilities, this region had become extremely specialized and a key player in the export markets of all of the former USSR and was especially known for the export of canned fruits and vegetables.

Despite the consequences of the 1991-92 war, the ensuing economic crisis and isolation from traditional markets, the Transnistrian economy was in much better shape than that of Moldova or other CIS republics in the early 1990s. The GNP grew by 4% between 1991 and 1994 at a time of widespread decline elsewhere in the CIS. Home construction in 1993 beat all records in the post-Soviet space due in large measure to the rebuilding of damage in the 1991-1992 war. A large number of “mixed” enterprises created in conjunction with Russian capital were also established (*Rossiiskie Vesti*, March 17, 1994).

Despite these growth figures, traditional economic links between the TMR and the Eastern partners remained problematic because the absence of a common boundary with Russia makes it very difficult to include Transnistria within the rouble zone. The exclave nature of the TMR economy came back to haunt the region in 1994. In August 1993, the Russian Federation decided to establish its national currency and Transnistria was inundated with old Russian roubles. To avoid an economic disaster, the central bank of the TMR acted quickly to establish its own “semi-currency”: each old Russian rouble was thus stamped with the portrait of the famous General Suvorov. The rate of the “suvorov” *vis a vis* the Moldovan lei, the Ukrainian coupon and the Russian rouble remained relatively stable but high inflation required frequent escalation of the denominations. In September 1997, an exchange of \$300 yielded a shopping bag full of small bills, totalling 26 million TMR roubles, a rate of about 850,000 per dollar.

The principal communication axes and the major gas and oil line that link Moldova with the countries of the CIS also pass through Transnistria. Since almost all of the bridges on the Dniester are also located within Transnistria, the area is certainly well aware of its unique geographical location, a fact certified in 1991 by the railroad blockages enacted by women in the TMR that

paralyzed the entire Moldovan state. While there is a chance that the Transnistrian economy can survive without any contact with the rest of Moldova, the latter state, however, needs the cooperation of the TMR for transport and economic communications. Unlike the TMR, which receives no foreign aid, Moldova currently gets over \$100 million a year in Western assistance. On the other hand, the International Monetary Fund has rejected the application of the TMR for a loan.

Current Economic Situation: The industry of Transnistria included some unique large plants which were key elements of the needs of the Soviet economy. These included the parachute silk and electric cable plants in Bendery, and a plant in Tiraspol producing explosion-safe electric machines for oil and gas pipes, coal mines, and nuclear power stations (Table 1). The industry of the TMR continues to depend heavily on exports. Despite the economic blockade, the decrease in industrial production in the TMR since the disintegration of the Soviet Union is comparable with Moldova as whole, though the Transnistrian leadership succeeded in delaying economic collapse by partly maintaining fixed prices and supporting agriculture (Table 2). The establishment of the Transnistrian currency in 1995 was marked by a very difficult year for the TMR, but in 1996-1997, the situation stabilized and did not differ significantly from the economy of Moldova as a whole. On the one hand, the region is vulnerable to demand outside its borders but, on the other, it has seen increased incomes in hard currency from exports of competitive goods, especially of rolled metal from the new plant in Rybnitsa.

Unlike the rest of Moldova, Transnistria is an industrial region, with about half of the industrial production concentrated in the capital, Tiraspol (Atlas of the Dniester Moldavian Republic, 1997, 15) (Figure 2b). Seventy-nine percent of the active population is engaged in industry, construction work or the tertiary sector, with industry as a whole specialized in labor-consuming, and non raw material-consuming activities (Table 1). Before 1991, the food industry was the main industrial branch not only in Moldova but also in Transnistria (37% of industrial jobs) with engineering second and the food industry in third place (15%). Half of the industry consisted of

large and medium plants, a concentration that proved to be a weakness after the disintegration of the USSR. Among these casualties were the huge can factory, "The First of May" in Tiraspol (the largest producer of vegetable and fruit cans in the former USSR), and the cotton textile plant also located in Tiraspol, which employed several thousand people but has now lost its source of raw materials in Central Asia. Few in the TMR believe that there is a chance of reviving this economic link.

The specialization of the TMR industry made it vulnerable during the transition. As elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the textile, clothing and shoe industries were uncompetitive after the removal of Soviet administrative limitations and custom barriers, while the engineering sector suffers from lack of investments. The industrial production of the TMR since 1991 has thus fallen by 58.2%, more than in Russia, especially in the 1991-1995 period (Table 2). Industrial enterprises prefer to store their products even when they are not able to pay salaries to workers and, according to official statistical data, the number of industrial jobs decreased in the 1991-1997 period by 12,000, by 5,000 in transportation and by 1,500 in agriculture (Krivenko, 1996).

Within the Moldovan SSR, the TMR produced 38% of vegetables and 23% of fruits. However, as a result of difficulties with falling demand in the CIS countries and lack of investment, agriculture capacity has been seriously undermined, with enormous decreases evident in all food sectors (Table 3). The decrease of production was especially visible in the export-oriented industrial branches of agriculture - vegetables, fruits and sunflowers. Unfortunately for the TMR, its large can plants were supplied with raw materials from neighboring Moldovan districts just across the Dniester. Though the supplies have not stopped completely because the Moldovan side is also interested in exchanges, they have become much more unreliable. In February 1997, Moldova imposed a 20% tax on agricultural raw materials "exported" to can plants in the TMR. Though the decrease of production is mainly due to low demand, the new tariff was one of the reasons why the dairy plant in Bendery dropped its imports from Moldova from 210 tons of milk to 15 tons (Interview with the Chair of the Bendery City Council of Deputies, F.A.Dobrov, September 25, 1997). Another example of post-1991 adjustment is the supply of sugar. There is one sugar plant in

the TMR in Rybnitsa, and the TMR was a net importer of sugar and vegetable oil before 1991. After the *de facto* secession from Moldova, the use of arable lands in the TMR has been considerably changed so that hectares under sugar beet and sunflower have increased and garden plots decreased.

With respect to foreign economic relations, recent data (first half of 1997) show that the TMR had a positive balance of the foreign trade in the order of \$20 million, with 54% of total production exported (Interview with V.A. Kondakov, deputy-chief of the department of foreign economic activity of the TMR, September 26, 1997). Continuing the trend of integration into the economic complex of the USSR, the TMR depends heavily on trade with the other CIS countries, especially Russia and Ukraine. In 1996, the share of CIS countries in exports was 76.2% and 83.2% in imports (*Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika v 1997*). These ratios, though high, are down from 94% and 83% from the respective 1992 figures (*Atlas of the Transdnierster Moldovan Republic, 1997*) so that some diversification in trading relations is becoming evident. Before 1991, about 72% of the goods exported from the territory of Transnistria were directed to the Russian Federation, and even now, Russia remains by far the main destination of Transnistrian exports (61-63%). Among "foreign" economic partners of the TMR, Moldova places second just ahead of Ukraine, with 12% of the totals in 1996.

Currently, the TMR has economic agreements with 38 subjects of the Russian Federation but the orientation to the Russian market inherited from the Soviet times aggravates the economic situation in the TMR, since Ukraine places different obstacles for transit via its territory. Ukrainian custom services charge an insurance payment in hard currency for transit of TMR goods equal to 130% of the cost of the good as a guarantee that it will not be sold on Ukrainian territory and a similar rule has been established in Russia as well. High rail charges, often resulting in a noncompetitive ratio between quality and price, and other bureaucratic obstacles made it difficult for the TMR to export its traditional agricultural products to Russia, especially beyond the Urals, and to the Baltic states. Transnistria imports mainly oil and other fuels, mostly from the refineries in

Odessa and Kremenchug (Ukraine) and from Russia, as well as timber, chemicals, consumer goods, meat and grains.

Of course, the official statistics reflects only a part of the Transnistrian reality. It comes as no surprise that the population of this multi-ethnic, narrow strip of land between Ukraine and Moldova survives to a large extent due to the proliferation of "black" (illegal) and "gray" (foreign) trade and smuggling, and to the activity of the so-called "*chelnoki*" (shuttle traders) who move large quantities of goods across the new international boundaries. Added to these unofficial activities is currency speculation and, even in official exports, barter constitutes about 60% of the total (Interview with V.A. Kondakov, Deputy-Chief of the Department of Foreign Economic Activity of the TMR, September 26, 1997).

Characteristically, the pressure of economic realities pushes both Transnistria and Moldova to cooperation. In 1997, Moldova led among the "foreign" partners of the TMR in trade increase. Since 1995, there have been several meetings between customs officials of the two sides. They have agreed that transit goods for Moldova crossing the Transnistrian territory are accompanied to the border and that Moldovan custom officials and border guards would leave the Ukrainian railway station of Razdelnaya on the main Kiev-Chisinau line (Figure 1b). In September 1997, this station was probably the only border crossing with controls carried out by three sides - Ukraine, Moldova and the TMR -all on Ukrainian territory. In 1998, further agreements on confidence building measures were signed and implemented consequent on an agreement in May 1997 that included reopening of the Dniester bridges.

The TMR has often been labeled, in Western and in liberal Russian newspapers, as "a reserve of communism" or "a communist nest", an obscure corner of the former USSR where state economic controls are still the norm, where one-party rule continues and where democracy is nothing more than a charade of elections (Sawyer, 1994; King, 1994; Ionescu, 1996). This is a charge strongly denied by government officials (Interview with V.I. Atamaniuk, Vice-Speaker of the Parliament of the TMR, September 25, 1997). It is certainly true that the Transnistrian government

was in no hurry to privatize its economy, especially its large industrial enterprises; it continues to support "kolkhozes" (collective) and "sovkhozes" ("Soviet") agricultural enterprises, and subsidized consumer prices. By September 1997, most retail trade and services were privatized, and the Transnistrian leadership has started the process of public-private partnerships in some industrial plants. According to their official economic conception, the TMR will try to build a "socially oriented economy", with step by step reforms (Interview with V. Atamaniuk, Deputy Speaker of the TMR, September 25, 1997). The national economy is now divided in three parts. The "strategic", export-oriented subjects (mainly large industrial plants) will be shared with private investors, but majority shares will remain in the hands of the state. The most dynamic, intermediate level of activity will belong both to the state and to private owners but can be mixed; while the third level - retail trade and services – has been allocated to private investors.

Like most regions of the former Soviet Union, both Moldova and the TMR have seen catastrophic falls in the order of 50% or more in the output of industries. It is more difficult to calculate the drop in agricultural production but it is clear that traditional markets have not been replaced by new buyers. The street markets in Tiraspol are certainly more poorly provided in the range and quality of food products than other Russian cities of the European zone and the Tiraspol markets seem more similar to those east of the Urals. It is clear that economic decline has been exaggerated by poor political relations between neighbors and the disruption to local exchanges caused by the political strife. Though the confidence-building measures between the TMR and Moldova are slow in taking hold, it is in the interest of both parties to decrease dependence on external markets. Especially for the TMR, economic dependence on Russia makes the region vulnerable to political pressure from Moscow.

The Crisis and its Aftermath

In August 1989, the Moldovan parliament adopted an amendment to the Constitution of the Republic stipulating that the Rumanian language would become an official state language and would

be written in Latin script. The Soviet Union had worked assiduously to separate Moldovan and Rumanian and to stress script (Cyrillic and Latin) and dialectical differences, while encouraging Moldovans to promote their own identity. In the new parliament that was elected democratically in March 1990, the nationalist forces, claiming to be the “true” democrats and opponents of the Communist regime, proclaimed the sovereignty of the republic and adopted citizenship and language laws that were considered discriminatory by the Russophone population. Though the new laws promoted “romanization” in social and economic life, they were much more lenient than similar laws adopted at the same time by the Baltic republics. Russophones in certain occupations would thus be constrained in the new Moldova to learn the new official language of Moldova, now with Latin script. (Chinn, 1997). The government also acted to replace officials of Slavic origin with representatives of the titular population, a move perceived as a threat to the status of Russians and Ukrainians. Despite the attempt, the percentage of Moldovans in government posts in the country (50.6% in 1990, 54.9% in 1992) continued to remain lower than their share of the total population.

In the course of the academic year, 1991-1992, the percentage of Russian-language secondary schools dropped from 51.3% to 43% (International Interim Report, 1992). In normal times, such a decrease could be interpreted simply as a necessary adjustment of the school system to reflect the demographics of the population since during Soviet times, a considerable number of Moldovan parents wanted their children to attend Russian-language schools in order to help their career prospects. In 1992, however, following the declarations of the top echelons of government officials as well as those of the Popular Front that held power in Chisinau, the precipitous drop only acted to worsen the crisis.

The central authorities in Chisinau ignored the protests against the language policy that were largely concentrated in Transnistria and which later transformed into mass strikes. The workers of the large industrial enterprises east of the Dniester elected strike committees in August 1989 that, in turn, came together under the auspices of the United Council of Work Collectives (UCWC) to oppose the policies coming out of Chisinau. It is these strike committees that began the movement

that eventually led to the TMR. In January 1990, a referendum in the region approved the autonomy of Transnistria (more than 90% support in Bendery and Tiraspol) and on September 2, 1990, the UCWC proclaimed the creation of the TMR. This proclamation, however, did not immediately amount to Transnistria effectively leaving Moldova. In March 1991, more than 93% of the TMR voters supported the continuation of the Soviet Union. In August 1991, the leaders of the TMR lent their support to the coup in Moscow, partly because of shared ideological orientations but also in hopes of obtaining the support of the old Communist elite in the fight against Chisinau. By contrast, the Moldovan leadership backed Boris Yeltsin. On August 27th, 1991, after the failed putsch in Moscow, Moldova declared independence from the USSR.

At the same time, the situation was also deteriorating in Gagauzia⁴, another of the self-proclaimed republics of Moldova. The two recalcitrant republics lent each other more than merely political support with Transnistria lending armed support to Gagauzia when the latter was threatened with impending invasion from Chisinau. Unlike Transnistria however, Gagauzia is made up of the rural and largely poor lands of the Budjal in the south of Moldova, while its Turcophone population is not numerous and lacks key urban centers, factors rendering it more dependent on the Chisinau authorities. Since the early 1990s, the Gagauze have been consistently promised a measure of autonomy (Chinn, 1997).

The important steps in the escalation of the conflict occurred in Autumn 1991, when the paramilitary wing of the UCWC transformed itself into the “guardians of the Dniester” and Tiraspol called up “worker militias”. Such paramilitary structures could not coexist peacefully with the security forces of a Moldovan state that was attempting to enforce the laws made in Chisinau. Bloodshed began in November of 1991, when “worker militias” attempted to take control of police forces in Dubossary, an event that triggered the conflict between Moldova and the TMR several weeks later and intensified in May of 1992. (Table 4). Another key episode in the conflict occurred in the TMR exclave of Bendery on June 19th, 1992, when armed convoys from Chisinau attempted to take control of the town. Between 500 and 1000 people were killed and 60,000 – 100,000 refugees

are estimated to have fled over the Moldovan frontier into the Odessa oblast of Ukraine following the bloodshed of mid-1992 (*Izvestia*, June 25, 1992; International Interim Report, 1992). After some initial hesitation, the TMR was openly supported in its struggle by the Russian 14th Army stationed in Transnistria and it is widely believed that the use of 14th Army tanks in the battle for Bendery turned the tide (Gray, 1992; Kolstøe *et al.*, 1993, 988). Russian forces had provided the TMR fighters with artillery as well as tanks and openly took sides after the assumption of 14th Army leadership by General Alexander Lebed. Most of the 14th Army soldiers were local recruits and could see themselves as defending their homeland. Chisinau, on the other hand, was undoubtedly aided in its efforts by Rumanian arms exporters as well as by external military advisors.

In July 1992, Russia and Moldova signed a treaty that called for the separation of the armed forces of both sides within a period of seven days, and created a trilateral governing commission made up of Moldova, Russia and Transnistria. This commission had at its disposal armed forces furnished by all three countries. Following the terms of this treaty, Russia sent in special peacekeeping forces (separate from the 14th Army) into the conflict zone. The neutral status of the 14th division was, again, reasserted, with its status and time of departure to be negotiated by Moldova and the Russian Federation.

Though the treaty signed in July 1992 put an end to open hostilities, the conflict continues to simmer as a “cold war”. In 1994, Moldovan parliamentary elections showed the profound transformation in the balance of political power in Moldova. The Christian Democratic Front that united the nationalist forces was dealt a severe loss dropping to less than 15% of the seats in the new parliament. The Agrarian Party, whose electoral campaign was largely supported by the organizational infrastructure of the old Communist party bureaucracy and the economic *nomenklatura*, including the agriculture departments of the rural districts and the directors of the large agricultural *kolkhozes*, as well as the Social Democratic Party (“reformed” ex-communists), swept to an overwhelming majority in the new legislature. These parties represented the interests of the economic elites who were well aware of the vital importance for Moldova of multilateral cooperation

with the CIS, and bilateral trade with Russia. In mid 1994, Russian share of Moldovan trade was 62%, with another 6.5% with Ukraine, 2.3% with Belarus, with the total for all CIS countries at 75% (*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, May 17, 1994). Moldova receives about 70% of its fuel from Russia and the other 30% from the Ukraine (*Moscow News*, August 15, 1993).

Approximately 80% of Moldovan voters voted against unification with Rumania, decided in a referendum held on the same day of the parliamentary elections. The results merely confirmed that one could not ignore the legacy of almost two centuries of historical development that had placed Moldova squarely within the geopolitical space of the former USSR, and certainly not within Rumania's. The personal experiences of a great number of Moldovans following the opening of the borders only served to certify the wide gap between living standards that existed between their country and Rumania. The attitude of some Rumanian nationalists who treated the Moldovans as "second-class Rumanians" further polarized the situation. Paradoxically, the referendum weakened the positions of both the Popular Front in Chisinau, who tried to avoid the referendum and the Tiraspol authorities, who could not play on the fears of Transnistrians becoming a small minority in a unified Rumanian world. The Moldovan elections served to advance negotiations between Chisinau and Tiraspol, which were also fostered by the economic difficulties on both sides. In April 1994, a meeting between Presidents Snegour (Rumania) and Smirnov (TMR) in Tiraspol resulted in economic rather than political contacts. The National Bank of Moldova opened an office in Tiraspol to facilitate money transfers and agreements were drafted between institutions responsible for road transportation and infrastructure. The police forces of both sides agreed to cooperate against organized crime.

In the TMR, the commander of the 14th Army, General Alexander Lebed, widely known in Russia for his role in the Afghan war and through his many interviews with the media, was often cited as a savior of Bendery and Transnistria. By 1994, he was in conflict with the TMR authorities whom he accused of corruption (Petersen, 1994; Sawyer, 1994). By August 1994, Moscow announced the restructuring of the 14th Army (whose size had been reduced to less than one

division) and, under this pretext, removed Lebed from his post as commander.⁵ In a March 1995 referendum, 93 % of the TMR voters supported the presence of the 14th Army in the territory and it was clear that it would be very difficult for Russia to withdraw its armed forces in the face of such perceived dependence on them by the Transnistrians.

Stalemate in the negotiations to end the stand-off were motivated further in 1995 by the severe food crisis and rapid inflation in the TMR and the election of Petru Lucinschi in 1996 as President of Moldova. Lucinschi argued that his good contacts in Moscow (he had been First Secretary of the Central Committee of Moldovan Communist Party and later, a member of the CPSU Central Committee and a member of the Politburo) would help to gain Russian support for the Moldovan position. By the middle of 1997, further Russian pressure to reach agreement resulted in the signing by Presidents Smirnov and Lucinschi of a memorandum in Moscow on May 8, 1997 that provided a basis for a settlement. Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, and Niels Helveg Petersen, the acting chief of the OSCE mission to Moldova, also signed the memorandum as guarantors. The agreement states that the two sides will develop ties within a single state existing inside Moldova's January 1990 borders but the special status of the TMR still has to be negotiated. President Smirnov especially welcomed the fact that two large countries--Russia and Ukraine-- became the guarantors of the TMR sovereignty (RFE/RL Newline, May 9, 1998). Further agreements between Moldova and the TMR reached in Odessa on March 20, 1998 in the presence of President Kuchma (Ukraine) and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin have not been met. The main aim of these confidence building measures is to build trust, open bridges to trans-Dniester traffic and to decrease the presence of military forces in the region. The bridge at Dubossary has not yet become available to heavy trucks and the TMR insists that the bridge can only be open if a bilateral agreement is signed which will exclude its use for military purposes. Also proposed is a reduction of the peacekeepers to 500 troops from each of the participating countries and an invitation for Ukrainian peacekeepers into the security zone. (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 4, 1998, 5).

The ongoing problems of the TMR can be illustrated by the current situation in the city of Bendery, a predominantly Russian-speaking, multi-ethnic industrial center where 98% of its population voted in 1990 for the sovereignty of Transnistria. In autumn 1997, there were about 800 Moldovan policemen in Bendery, controlling a bloc within the city called Varnitsa, a Moldovan enclave within the Transnistrian enclave on the right-bank of the Dniester. With a population of about 5,000, residents of Varnitsa get pensions from the city of Bendery and use its municipal facilities, but are under the formal jurisdiction of Moldova and not that of the TMR. In Varnitsa, there are branches of the Moldovan State Road Inspections, a passport office, the Moldovan court of justice and other state institutions. The effort to extend Moldovan control over the whole city of Bendery unleashed the events in June 1992. The inhabitants of Transnistria sometimes have to address these Moldovan state institutions because civil acts made in the TMR are not recognized in Moldova, but they are accepted by other CIS countries.

Political Organization and Identities in the TMR

The TMR is not recognized officially by any country, although the pseudo-state has attempted to join the CIS. The republic has been in *de facto* existence for almost eight years and has most of the attributes of an independent state: legislative, executive and judicial powers, an independent central bank, an army (“the national guard”), a police force and its own currency, Transnistrian roubles. The TMR is a presidential republic, whose current president, Igor Smirnov, was re-elected in February 1998 with 71.9% of the vote. Smirnov lived in the Far East before being appointed director of a Tiraspol factory in Soviet times. The legislative powers of the TMR lie in the Supreme Soviet with two chambers. Each of the large national/ethnic groups (Moldovans, Ukrainians and Russians) have official status and theoretically each has veto power in all key decisions, though this right has not been applied. The president, Smirnov, is Russian; the president of the Supreme Soviet, Marakutsa, vice-president Karaman, and the president of the Defense Council, General Kitsak are

Moldovans, as are the majority of the other leaders of the TMR and the personnel of the armed forces. According to official declarations, the TMR is defined as a civic nation, bound to protect human rights and not national rights. On the economic front, the government of the TMR pledges not to interfere in the workings of private enterprises on its territory.

The Transnistrian Chamber of Representatives consisting of five deputies from each of seven municipal units (two cities of Tiraspol and Bendery and five *rayoni*) and the Chamber of Legislators, where there are 32 deputies elected by constituencies according to a majoritarian system. All the deputies have full-time work in the parliament with joint sessions of the two chambers at least once a month. In autumn 1997, there were three electoral blocs, "independents", the "Movement for the Development of Transnistria", and "People's Power" ("*Narodovalstie*"). In the parliament, fractions can only be formed by a minimum of 15 deputies. Because of this high threshold, there are only two fractions, "Agrarians" and "People's Power". However, on important questions, the parliament tends to vote unanimously.

In the TMR, there are about 200 parties and movements, most very small. In autumn 1997, there were five communist parties of different ideologies. The most influential social movements are the United Council of Labor Collectives, whose leaders Smirnov, Marakutsa and others were the founding-fathers of the TMR; the Women Strike Movement, led by Galina Andreeva; the Movement of Defenders of Transnistria; the Union of Reserve Officers; the Black Sea Cossack Army and the Union of Moldovans. But there is no significant opposition to the authorities, which can be partly explained by the presence of a common threat to Transnistrian autonomy and identity and by collective memory of the 1992 war and tragedies.⁶

One of the most important political principles of the TMR, of which its leaders are very proud, is equal rights for all three official languages - Russian, Ukrainian and Moldovan. All official documents and inscriptions are published in the three languages; there are Russian, Ukrainian and Moldovan secondary schools (though over 90% of the pupils are instructed in Russian - Atlas of the

Transdnierster Moldovan Republic, 1997, 22); and at the Dniester State Corporative T.G. Shevchenko University of Tiraspol, there are classes in each of the official languages.

As in many other parts of the former Soviet Union, intermarriage between the ethnic groups is fairly common. In the TMR, about 15% live in mixed marriages and multilingual households result. The absence of ethnic strife in the TMR has been attributed to different explanations. Western observers, such as the U.S. Department of State, have criticized the TMR leadership for human rights violations (RFE/RL Newline, 31 January, 1998) while Moldovans claim that the TMR does not allow free expression of language, cultural and political rights and maintains a repressive security ministry (Ionescu, 1996). Despite some claims of fraud (Kaufman, 1996), it is clear from the high ratios of those surveyed that the TMR leadership has popular opinion on its side and support for autonomy in referenda clearly crosses ethnic lines. It is a mistake to equate the TMR separatism with a simple expression of ethnic territoriality; it is indeed a multi-dimensional dispute that includes "territorial issues but is also wrapped in questions of ethnicity, security, ownership, national identities and idiosyncrasies, pluralism, ideology, religion, and undoubtedly other factors" (Lamont, 1995, 68).

Babilunga (1998) reports the results of a recent survey of 350 respondents in the TMR, conducted by the Tiraspol polling firm "Strategia", under the sponsorship of the Carnegie Foundation. Eighty-two percent were in favor of keeping the TMR and 91% were in favor of the process of integration into the CIS. In response to another question, "will the situation in the TMR improve as a result of rapprochement with (state name given)?", Russia was named by 66% of respondents, Ukraine by 17% and Moldova by 16%. In answer to the question, "do you consider yourself to be a citizen of the former Soviet Union?", 84% of Russians in the TMR agreed, as did 82% of the Ukrainians and 70% of the Moldovans. Clearly, the legacy of the former Soviet Union as well as support for the republic in close relationship with Russia are evident in these survey results and the survey suggests that opinion is unchanged since 1991, despite the many meeting with Moldovan and Russian officials.

The constitution of the TMR allows double citizenship. According to the official data, 88% have citizenship of the TMR, and the variation across ethnic groups is not large, with 78% of Moldovans, 90% of Ukrainians and 90% of Russians having TMR citizenship. Nine percent each have the citizenship of Moldova and Russia (Babilunga, 1998). Because of the difficulty of travelling on a TMR passport, many TMR residents use Russian or Moldovan passports (Interview with Fedor Dubrov, Chair of the Bendery City Council of Deputies, September 24, 1997).

About half of the residents of the TMR see themselves as a specific ethno-cultural entity, distinct from neighbors and they believe that this identity has been forming for centuries under Russian influence. The process of defending the republic against Moldova coupled with a threat factor that views the TMR as isolated has speeded up the process of self-identity. Only 15% support unity with Moldova, 15% want federation with Russia, 20% wish to join the Russian-Belarusian union and 83% want consolidation of the TMR statehood (Babilunga, 1998). (More than one answer was possible). There is therefore the formation of a new identity in the TMR and this development challenges observers who view national identities as unchanging, uniform and singular. In the TMR, the visible signs of a new national construction are evident and in less than a decade, a new identity has taken shape.

Possible Scenarios for the Transnistrian Puzzle

Like many post Cold War conflicts, the resolution of the TMR-Moldovan dispute lies near dormancy. The key outside player is Russia and to a large extent, the continuation of Transnistrian secession will depend on the negotiations between Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. For Russia, interested in maintaining a foothold in the Balkans, agreement with Moldova on economic and military issues within the context of the CIS takes precedence over support for Russophones in Transnistria (Selivanova, 1996). Recent Russian positions in roundtable talks suggest that a growing frustration in Moscow government circles with the perceived intransigence of the Tiraspol authorities

is hostage to the interests of more nationalist players in the Russian Duma, on both the left and the right. While each participant in the TMR stalemate is adamant about the adoption of its resolution to the conflict, no participant, direct or indirect, is interested in resuscitating a “hot state” of fighting. The current (mid 1998) positions of the parties can now be defined and some possible scenarios considered.

Moldova: The initial strategy of President Mircea Snegour appeared to be full incorporation of Transnistria, considered vital to the economic future of Moldova, despite the pre-1990 evidence for Transnistrian distinctiveness. Although Snegour was ready to use all means necessary to achieve his objectives, including military intervention, this strategy resulted in an impasse and served to aggravate the regional problem. Following the war of 1992, the conditions for reconciliation proposed by Moldova foresaw the transformation of Transnistria into an autonomous district of Moldova with limited rights; central control of the city of Tiraspol and the ability to administer 50% of all state revenues collected within the TMR would be retained by Chisinau. Officially, Moldova called for a speedy withdrawal of the 14th Army, a request reaffirmed in 1997 by President Boris Yeltsin whenever Moldova wanted. The date of the pullout (three years from October 1994) that Russia promised has passed and there seems no great urgency since, in reality, the Moldovan authorities appreciate the stabilizing role offered by the Russian army in Transnistria.

Recent elections in Moldova of President Petru Lucinschi in 1996 and a coalition of center-right parties coming to power after general elections in March 1998 (the Communist party received 30 percent of the vote but the center and right parties formed a blocking coalition) have not changed the geopolitical calculus, despite Lucinchi’s claim of close relations with Moscow. The vice-president of the TMR, Alexander Karaman, said that the coming to power of “right-wing forces in Chisinau may drive the settlement of the Dniester problem region into a blind alley”. Since former President Mircea Snegur heads the ruling “For Democracy and Reforms” parliamentary alliance, Karaman

believes that the memorandum of principles signed in Moscow in 1997 is now in jeopardy (RIA Novosti April 27, 1998 as reported in BBC Global News Bank, April 27, 1998).

Transnistria: At the beginning of the conflict, the TMR accepted proposals of regionalization or even economic autonomy, in effect a *de facto* self-government. Later, proposals were offered by the TMR leadership for a Moldovan federal structure that would group three distinct subjects - Moldova proper, Gagauzia and Transnistria; following the 1992 war, this proposal took the shape of a loose confederation with a large amount of sovereignty for the subjects. The Transnistrian regime thus modeled itself after other small states, such as Luxembourg or Singapore: Saul Cohen (1991) has termed these small states as “gateway” countries, since they take on the function of intermediaries at the juncture of broad geopolitical, cultural and economic spaces. In this light, President Smirnov of the TMR has suggested the establishment of a free trade zone that would serve as a bridge between Russia, the Ukraine and the Balkan nations

The federalization of Moldova that was first proposed by the Transnistrians did not account for the interests of the Russophone population of the major cities of the right bank - Chisinau and Beltz - where Russians constitute almost half of the local population. A “Belgian option” - the creation of ethno-cultural communities with local powers - was initially supported by President Snegour but it became evident that this option was too exotic for Moldova. Another proposal called for creating a parliament with separate national chambers, though this strategy was rejected by the Moldovan parliament at the time (*Nezavissimaya Gazeta*, 9 July 1992).

More recently, the TMR position has hardened. President Smirnov has stated that the TMR should be integrated into the full political and integration processes of the CIS since “the Transnistrian republic has proved its viability during the previous seven years. Under current conditions, it is necessary to preserve the sovereignty of both Moldova and Transdnierster and to build a common state consisting of two equals” (RFE/RL Newline, October 24, 1997). The TMR wants “the creation of a common state on a confederal basis and on the issues of partition, of

delegation and of integration of the competencies of two *equal* subjects” (Interview with the Vice-Speaker of the Supreme Soviet of the TMR, Vladimir Atamaniuk, September 25, 1997; his emphasis).

According to an agreement signed in October 1994, Russia is supposed to remove all troops from the region within 3 years and also hand part of the army property and equipment to the TMR and to Moldova. However, because of the unwillingness of the TMR to give up weapons, Russia has suspended the destruction of weapons and stopped the removal of equipment. The fear is that the Georgian disaster, where vast quantities of arms fell into the possession of the belligerents after Russian troop pullout, will be repeated.

Russia: All important political circles in Russia are interested, first of all, in maintaining Russian influence in the Moldovan zone that has traditionally served as Russia’s entry-way to the Balkans and remains vital considering the events in former Yugoslavia. Russia has, in fact, declared on several occasions that the withdrawal of the 14th Army was linked to the resolution of the Transnistrian status as part of a united and indivisible Moldovan state. This message was directed clearly towards Chisinau, where Moscow hoped to find a stable and convenient partner in a united Moldova inside the CIS.

The continued debate surrounding the 14th Army, remains tied to the numerous guarantees made by Moscow to the Transnistrian population. Further, there remains the issue of the enormous army resources accumulated in the TMR since Soviet times that were geared towards the deployment needs of several divisions in the south-west. The TMR authorities have declared that all military installations found within its territory belong to the TMR “by law”. Russian government officials reject this proposition and also object to the eventual transfer of former Soviet possessions into the hands of Chisinau. The immediate Russian objective was to prevent the use of the weapons of the 14th Army by either side in the conflict but, of course, this problem became intertwined with relations with the Russian and Russophone populations of the district and there is little doubt that the support of 14th Army personnel was crucial in the early years of the TMR.

In his many public pronouncements, General Alexander Lebed, before his removal as 14th Army commander, considered it paramount that the 14th Army be transformed into a *de facto* Russian army base, as was accomplished in Georgia. This base could then serve as a guarantor of Transnistria's independence. According to the "Lebed Plan", the status of the TMR within Moldova would be like Finland within the Russian Empire or contemporary Tatarstan, following the signing of its treaty with the Russian Federation. The TMR leadership rejected this proposition, however. Continued attempts by Lebed as well as his military commander, stationed in Tiraspol Col. Bergman, completely to discredit the Smirnov regime by accusing it of corruption, thus rendering it more pliant to negotiations with Moldova, were especially noteworthy and received plenty of attention in Moscow and in the West.

After the 1992 war, there were, in effect, two Russian positions, the governmental one elaborated by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev that tried to reconcile the positions of the warring parties and that of Russian Vice-President Rutskoi that supported Tiraspol (Selivanova, 1996). These two positions are still relevant as indicated by recent events. In September 1997, leftist politicians from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine joined in the 7th annual independence day celebration in Tiraspol and were strongly condemned by the Chisinau authorities (RFE/RL Newslines, September 5, 1997). In October 1997, at the time of the CIS Chisinau summit, President Boris Yeltsin declared that Russia is ready to withdraw its troops anytime that Moldova asks. Tiraspol and Chisinau closely monitor political maneuverings in Moscow since the outcome there is crucial for the resolution of the TMR dilemma.

Rumania: The Rumanian strategy, if it is elaborated, is largely based in an integration of Moldova into the Rumanian state. Radical Rumanian nationalists would also like to reclaim all of Bessarabia (including those parts that now lie outside of Moldovan control), as well as Northern Bukovina. These two regions are now overwhelmingly Ukrainian in composition and any push in these directions would cause conflict with Ukraine and possibly spread. As far as Transnistria is

concerned, according to President Ion Iliescu, Rumania would not make pronouncements concerning its absorption though Bucharest would support eventual reassertion of Moldovan control over Transnistria. Rumania was quite open in its support of the Christian Democratic Front whose objective is complete reunification of Moldova and Rumania.

The ideological basis of this unification strategy is the negation of the existence of a separate Moldovan national identity and its incorporation within Rumanian ethnicity. Well aware that it would be quite difficult for Rumania to establish control over Transnistria given the lack of historical precedent for such a claim, Rumanian authorities hoped to use the TMR as a bargaining chip with the Ukraine for Bessarabia and/or Northern Bukovina. This has been one of the key reasons why Rumania has had a strong interest in allocating Transnistria to the Moldovans.

Ukraine: The interests of the Ukraine in Transnistria center largely on the protection of the latter's Ukrainian population, as well as maintaining peace along its south-western borders. The Kravchuk administration (1991-1994) wanted to avoid Ukrainian involvement in the Moldovan conflict. For Ukraine, plagued as it is with its own separatist concerns in Russian-dominated Crimea, direct support of the Tiraspol authorities was unthinkable (just as it was for the Russian government). Kiev was also wary of any potential problems with Rumania that could have led to a re-emergence of the latter's territorial demands. After 1994, Ukraine became more directly involved in the discussions of the TMR issue and in 1998, finally joined Russia in guaranteeing the implementation of any agreement between the TMR and Moldova.

Scenarios: On March 20, 1998, Presidents Kuchma (Ukraine) and Luchinschi (Moldova), Prime-Minister Chernomyrdin (Russia) and the TMR leader, Igor Smirnov met in Odessa to discuss ways of restarting the peace process in Transnistria. This meeting was caused by the obvious failure of the Moscow memorandum to make any considerable contribution to the improvement of the situation around the conflict in Transnistria because all sides interpreted it in different ways. The meeting led

to the signature of three documents suggested by the Russian delegation, with some corrections made by the other participants. It contained a protocol about the activity of the four sides in continuation of the political arrangement of the Transdnestrian conflict, the joint declaration of Russia and Ukraine and the agreement between Moldova and Transnistria about further development of the peaceful process.

Vice-President of the TMR Karaman declared that the organization of the meeting just a few hours before the parliamentary elections in Moldova on March 22 was only "an imitation of negotiations" and "an attempt to provide political support to certain forces in Moldova". At the same time, a movement to promote the TMR's accession to the Union of Russia and Belarus was created in Tiraspol under the leadership of Karaman. The founders of this movement are the Union of Ukrainians of Transnistria, the Union of Moldovans, the Union of War Veterans, the Union "Memory" and the Communist Party of Transnistria. On the other side of the Dniester in Moldova, the bloc "Socialist Unity", which contested the March 1998 national elections proclaims the same goal, is convinced that Moldova has to enter this Union. They also believe that Moldova should recognize the statehood of Transnistria and make Russian the second state language. (*Izvestia*, March 21, 1998, 4 and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 21, 1998, 5).

A draft agreement by the Joint Control Commission allows the TMR have its own constitution, parliament, flag, state symbols, and separate anthem, and continue to operate with three official languages. The draft also gives Transnistria the right of self-determination if Moldova loses its independence (unity with Rumania) and also the right to consult in foreign policy and budget decisions. The TMR can also determine its own structure of local government. Though local residents are annoyed with the frequent security checks by the peacekeepers and non-recognition of the TMR status (Interview with Fedor Dubrov, Chair of the Bendery City Council of Deputies, September 24, 1997), they understand that this situation is likely to continue indefinitely.

It is evident that the basis for a permanent agreement between the TMR and Moldova lies in the Joint Control Commission document but its implementation is constrained by the balance of

political power between the Yeltsin government and the opposition in Moscow, by the balance between the socialist bloc and the center-right coalition in Chisinau, and by the development of a separate TMR identity that is constituted as loyalty to the Smirnov government. Whether three sets of circumstances will coincide to allow the implementation is uncertain and in the meantime, the TMR continues to remain in geopolitical limbo. In the meantime, the elites on all sides have been able to use the hostilities to promote their own agendas, economic, national and political. There is little incentive for them to move to a resolution and so, it is the external parties – Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE – who are most likely to move the resolution agenda forward.

Conclusions

The experiences of the “*Secessionist Internationale*” demonstrate that, while nationalism and separatism may be linked quite intimately, they cannot be conceived as identical ideologies. It is certainly not accidental that three of four self-proclaimed republics (Abkhazia, Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh) had autonomous status during the Soviet era; the TMR did not. It is precisely such an autonomous status that allowed for the development of conditions conducive to the development of national/regional elites and their particular interests, supported by vast client networks, answering only to federal authorities. With the new political and economic conditions emerging in the democratization of the Gorbachev years, these national elites felt a distinct threat to their previously privileged positions and thus opted for nationalism as the best conduit to continued influence. At this point in time, their interests coincided quite neatly with those of the national intelligentsias, based largely in the realms of culture and the human sciences and which provided for the ideological needs of the elites. The democratic pretensions of the elites sustained during the early days of the political and economic reforms were fast transformed into nationalism and separatism. It is nearly impossible to find mono-national spaces within Eastern Europe so the new republics thus began a campaign of “mini-imperialisms” directed towards their own ethno-cultural minorities. Yet within

the regions that these minorities called home, these very same processes of independence were also taking hold, particularly in those cases where the regions possessed some degree of autonomy.

The history of Transnistria shows that nationalism at any territorial level always provokes vehement counter-reactions, and that conflicts can emerge even in locations previously unaffected by prejudices or traditional hostilities, or even in those regions lacking any significant concentration of an ethnic minority. Once conflicts of this nature reach the phase of violence, they are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to resolve with political means. The memorandum of understanding between the TMR and Moldova, agreed under Russian pressure in 1994, and subsequent attempts to build on it have generally failed and the current situation is still unresolved and will likely remain so in the absence of concerted and consistent Russian interest. Any kind of confederation, now the most likely scenario for the TMR, would be akin to complete independence in these post Soviet times (Kolstøe *et al.*, 1993, 996). Pseudo-states such as the TMR can continue to operate as *de facto* states in the geopolitical debris of the former Soviet Union and other failed states. This new kind of state structure can thus be expected to become a more or less permanent feature of the early twenty-first century global scene.

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Abstract

The Transdniestrian Moldovan Republic (TMR) is representative of a new kind of quasi-state that has emerged from the geopolitical debris of the former Soviet Union. Starting at the time of the end of the Soviet Union, this mixed ethnic region east of the Dniester river has tried to assert its autonomous status. The aftermath of the war between the TMR and Moldova has resulted in a stalemate with the presence of Russian troops and a state of “cold peace” across the Dniester. The TMR authorities have been successful in promoting a new regional identity and have tried to construct a national consciousness that is civic-based but relies on close economic and social ties to Russia. Economic and population trends have been strongly negative since 1991 for the region and attempts to replace Soviet-era economic links have generally failed. The positions of the parties to the crisis are reviewed and the current situation is described and possible resolution scenarios are outlined. In the next few decades, we can expect to see more examples of this kind of “pseudo-state” that retains a precarious, unrecognized status in the geopolitical interstices of great power control.

Footnotes

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² We use the term “pseudo-state” to indicate a special kind of geopolitical entity that has formed in the wake of the territorial implosion of the former Soviet Union. Other post-Soviet examples include Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Chechnya. Elsewhere, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Somaliland and perhaps, the Palestinian Autonomous Areas of the West Bank and Gaza constitute other examples of this genre. These territories share an uncertain political status, non-recognition by other countries, internal dissension and hostile relations with neighbors, and reliance on large states for economic aid and military support. See the article by Kolossov and O’Loughlin (1998) for more details on the “pseudo-state” phenomenon.

³ We will use the term “Transnistria” and “TMR” interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to the self-declared autonomous region in eastern Moldova, east of the Dniester river. The official name is the “Dniester Moldovan Republic” (DMR) or sometimes “Transdniester Moldovan

Republic” (TMR) after the Russian “Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki” (PMR). The term “Dniester Republic” is often seen.

⁴ The Gagauze are a Turkish-speaking Christian minority, concentrated in the south of Moldova and comprise about 4% of the population of the country (Kolstøe *et al.*, 1993, 975)

⁵ Lebed later ran for President of the Russian Federation in June 1996 and finished third in the first round of voting. Throwing his support to President Boris Yeltsin in the run-off, Lebed was appointed as National Security Chief and in this office, he negotiated an end to the fighting in Chechnya. Fired in October 1996, Lebed was elected as governor of Krasnoyarsk krai in May 1998 and is widely expected to run again for President. (*Economist*, July 11, 1998, 19-21).

⁶ There is now a museum in Bendery in memory of the victims in the fighting in June 1992. The local authorities have published a book of photographs that document these events from the TMR perspective and sell banners and emblems that mark the fifth year commemoration of the fighting.