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Regionalism in Moldova: The Case of Transnistria and Gagauzia

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Since 1992, when the Moldovan-Transnistrian dispute erupted into violent conflict, Transnistria has remained virtually independent of Moldova.¹ While the Moldovan government has successfully resolved its other major regional conflict with Gagauzia, Transnistria has been an intractable problem. Gagauzia was the first region to declare its independence on 19 August 1990, however, the Moldovan and the Gagauzian leaderships agreed on the devolution of power and the creation of an autonomous territorial status in 1995. Consequently, the Moldovan case provides a unique opportunity to examine both successful and unsuccessful attempts at resolving regional conflicts. Why was an accommodation possible in Gagauzia, yet elusive in Transnistria? The first part of this essay examines Moldova's contemporary history and specifically addresses the development of inter-ethnic relations, elite mobilization and regionalism before independence in 1991, with a focus on how Moldovan and Transnistrian officials used history, language and culture to justify actions that ultimately led to the 1992 civil war. The next section discusses the origins and the consequences of the Transnistrian conflict. While this conflict was portrayed on both sides as an 'ethnic' struggle over linguistic and cultural issues, in fact, the competing political and economic interests of the Moldovan and Transnistrian elites propelled the conflict. This conflict is most appropriately characterized as one where ethnicity is instrumentalized in order to further rival political agendas. This is not to say that there were not legitimate concerns among the Moldovan population regarding linguistic and cultural freedom. Rather that elites exploited and manipulated these concerns in order to maintain or to attain power. The essay then examines the establishment of territorial autonomy in Gagauzia. The Moldovan government viewed the agreement on Gagauzia's autonomous status as the basis for future negotiations with Transnistria. This hope has so far not been realized as Transnistria's leadership has consistently regarded the Gagauzian autonomy as falling too far short of their aspiration for full statehood.

CONTEMPORARY MOLDOVAN HISTORY

The competing political agendas of Moldovan, Transnistrian and Gagauzian elites and their manipulation of ethnicity for political advantage is rooted in Moldova's contemporary history. Following the Russo-Turkish war of 1806-12 and the conclusion of the Treaty of Bucharest, the Moldovan area between the Prut and the Dniester rivers was annexed by Russia in 1812 and came to be known as Bessarabia. The region enjoyed considerable autonomy within the empire, and during this time, Moldovans comprised 86 per cent of the population (Hamm, 1998: 19). However from the mid-nineteenth century, Russia began to actively assimilate the Moldovan population of Bessarabia. Local government control was rescinded, and the Russian language supplanted the Romanian language in all legal proceedings. In addition, an influx of Russians and other ethnic groups significantly reduced the percentage of the ethnic Moldovan population. While they were still the largest language group, by the 1897 census their numbers had been reduced almost 40 per cent, and they comprised only 14 per cent of the urban population (Hamm, 1998: 25). The russification of Bessarabia intensified in parallel with the construction of a new 'Romanian' identity and state.

The Formation of Greater Romania

The First World War and the Russian revolution provided Bessarabia's pan-Romanian nationalists with an opportunity to press their claims for self-determination and integration with Romania. By spring 1917, public meetings were held throughout Bessarabia, and the cultural demands soon gave way to political aspirations. By the summer, a national assembly was formed (*Sfatul Tarii*) that was largely composed of pan-Romanianists. On 15 December, the *Sfatul Tarii* voted to form the independent Moldovan Democratic Republic of Bessarabia, with borders extending from the Prut to the Dniester River. Significantly, the area of modern-day Transnistria was not included in the new republic. On 27 March 1918, the *Sfatul Tarii* voted to unite with Romania, and by the end of 1918, the areas of Bukovina and Transylvania joined Bessarabia to form 'Greater Romania'.

In order to integrate the newly acquired population into Romania, the state greatly expanded the number of primary and secondary schools, instituted language tests and loyalty oaths for teachers and administrators and implemented ethnically-based quotas for admission to secondary schools and universities.² However the romanianization policies did not lead to ethnic conflict. One reason why ethnic conflict did not occur was that the weakness of a Romanian identity and the weakness of the Romanian state meant that the romanianization efforts were not seriously

enforced by the state. Russian language and cultural influences were still dominant during this period. For example, after 1918, except for a brief period between 1926 and 1927, there was no Bessarabian Romanian language daily newspaper (Livezeanu, 1995: 120). One of the reasons why the Romanian government was less than successful at integrating the Bessarabian population had to do with its perceived chauvinistic attitude towards locals. Romanian administrators were regarded as corrupt, inefficient and elitist. Whether real or imagined, many Bessarabians felt that the Romanians treated them unfairly.

The Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova

By 1944, the Red Army was finally able to capture Bessarabia and later that year, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova was formed by joining Bessarabia with the six districts that had constituted the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR). Consequently, Moldova inherited a large Russian-speaking community from the MASSR, and immigration, particularly of ethnic Slav industrial workers, furthered the russification of Moldova's urban areas. The percentage of ethnic Russians in Moldova almost doubled from 6.7 per cent in 1941 to 13 per cent by 1989. The actual number of ethnic Russians increased dramatically from just 300,000 in 1959 to over 550,000 in 1989 (Trebitc, 1993). As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, ethnic Russians enjoyed disproportional representation in important political and economic institutions. As Kaufman points out, ethnic Moldovans perceived that they were under-represented in the more desirable professions while they dominated the inferior agricultural positions (Kaufman, 1996: 121). This ethnized socio-economic cleavage became part of the demands for reform of the Popular Front movement of the late 1980s.

In the post-war period, the Soviet leadership encouraged the creation of a distinct Moldovan identity as one of the 'brother' nations of the USSR. New russification policies changed the alphabet for the Romanian language back to Cyrillic, and Russian was promoted as the dominant language of inter-ethnic communication, higher education and public life. A new mythology was created in which Soviet scholars spoke of a distinctive Moldovan language that was the foundation of a distinctive non-Romanian Moldovan national identity.³ While today language does not constitute the basis of a separate Moldovan ethnicity, the legacy of the Soviet period has created a unique Moldovan ethnicity and identity apart from Romania.

Perestroika

As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, reforms introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s provided an opportunity for titular nations to

express their resentment against Soviet russification policies. With the explosion of non-state controlled 'informal' groups in 1987, Moldovan intellectuals organized discussion groups that demanded greater cultural and linguistic freedom. By mid-1988, these informal pro-reform groups organized the Democratic Movement in Support of Restructuring to press for democratization and redress for discriminatory practices imposed upon the Moldovan majority and certain ethnic minority populations. While the Democratic Movement pressed for the recognition of Moldovan as the official state language (using the Latin rather than Cyrillic alphabet), it also articulated a linguistic agenda that focused on cultural and linguistic freedom for ethnic Gagauzi, Ukrainians and Bulgarians. In essence, this was a typical civic umbrella movement resembling that in other Soviet republics in the mid-stage of perestroika. The main division in Moldovan society was among the political elites and those counter-elites that aspired to power. As Kolstø, Edemsky and Kalashnikova argue, 'It is a gross simplification to present the conflict as a showdown between ethnic Moldovans and the "Russian-speaking" part of the Moldovan population it [the conflict] is essentially political in character' (Kolsto *et al.*, 1993: 975).

At this time, Moldova had no official language, though Russian was the dominant language of urban society, in administration, factories, commerce, and educational and political institutions. For example in 1989, only 10 per cent of Chisinau kindergardens conducted classes primarily in Romanian, and in Tiraspol there were no Romanian language elementary or secondary schools (Chinn and Roper, 1995: 299). By 1989, the Democratic Movement and its supporters had largely won the linguistic debate. The Scientific Council of the Moldovan Academy of Sciences recommended that Moldovan be made the official language, and the Democratic Movement was able to organize well-attended rallies and demonstrations in support of this demand.

In May 1989, individuals from within the Democratic Movement, Democratic League of Moldovan Students, Ecological Movement and other associations organized the Popular Front, and it quickly became the leading Moldovan opposition bloc. Its main platform was the promotion of linguistic and cultural freedom (Enciu and Pavelescu, 1998). While the Front spearheaded the opposition to Soviet policies of russification, several of its leading members were actually top-ranking ethnic Moldovan Communist Party apparatchiks. These reform party leaders recognized that to maintain power, they would have to join forces with the opposition.

In August 1989, the Moldovan Supreme Soviet proclaimed Moldovan (using the Latin alphabet) as the state language.¹ While the language law required those working in public services and education to acquire facility

in both Moldovan and Russian, it allowed a period of five years to gain language facility. From this time the Front adopted a much more radical and ethnicized platform than the earlier Democratic Movement. The pan-reform agenda of the Democratic Movement was rejected in favour of a pro-Romania agenda. This shift in focus and the exclusivist elevation of the Moldovan language sparked an immediate response by the Russian-speaking community that Crowther has labelled 'reactive nationalism' (Crowther, 1991). According to Crowther, ethnic minority-led conflict was instigated because of a threat to the status quo (in this case a privileged elite). The promotion of the Moldovan language, particularly in an area such as Transnistria, threatened the existing Slavic elites. Transnistrians had dominated economic and political institutions in Tiraspol and in Chisinau. At the same time the newly dominant Moldovan elites in the Popular Front such as Mircea Druc, Iurie Rosca and others in Chisinau instrumentalized the language and cultural issues to consolidate their position in the fast-changing political environment.

In September 1989, Gagauzian leaders proclaimed the creation of an independent republic in the southern part of the country. In addition, ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Bulgarians left the Front and joined with ethnic Russians to form the Internationalist Movement for Unity (*Edinstvo*) which was a pro-Russian culture and language organization. *Edinstvo* joined with the United Council of Work Collectives in Tiraspol to organize factory strikes and demonstrations against the language law. Transnistrians were the group most opposed to the language law because it was the most visible sign of the shifting balance of power away from ethnic Russian to Romanian-speakers (King, 2000: 186). This shift in power was also evident during the 1990 election to Moldova's last Soviet-era parliament. The Communist Party fractured into a country-wide reformist wing and a regionally concentrated conservative faction that consolidated its control over Transnistria and Comrat in Gagauzia. The reform communist faction cooperated with the Popular Front, and collaboration between these two groups extended into the electoral arena where one could find the names of leading Communists among the nominees of the Front (Crowther and Roper, 1996: 144). Unlike earlier elections to the Supreme Soviet, the March 1990 elections were generally free and fair. Following the election, the Popular Front formed a parliamentary coalition with other parties that held over 66 per cent of the seats. Popular Front member Alexandru Mosanu was named speaker, and the parliament confirmed a government composed almost entirely of ethnic Moldovans. Mircea Snegur, a leading Front supporter, was elected president by the parliament, and Prime Minister Mircea Druc was a strong advocate of union with Romania. During this period, Front MPs and the

Druc government pursued a pro-Romanian and pro-unionist agenda that further alienated the Russian minority. Iurie Rosca, president of the Front's parliamentary faction, stated that 'Moldova will unify with Romania - it is inevitable. We need time for Russia to lose power in Moldova. People do not remember what it is like to be part of Romania.' However individuals such as President Snegur maintained a policy of 'one people, two states' that rejected reunification. While Romanian political leaders supported reunification, the Romanian public was much more ambivalent. In May 1990, the ethnic minority elites who controlled the city governments of Tiraspol, Bender⁶ and Ribnita refused to accept the legitimacy of the new parliament and asserted 'sovereignty' over all local institutions. Tiraspol organized several referenda throughout Transnistria and Bender in which voters overwhelmingly favoured 'sovereignty' from Chisinau. It was from this foundation of two competing claims to 'sovereignty' that the conflict over the status of Transnistria developed during the following two years.

TRANSNISTRIA

The principal explanation for Transnistria's opposition to the agenda of the Popular Front was that the region's ethnic composition was unlike the rest of Moldova. In Transnistria, approximately 55 per cent of the population are ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians, and aside from Bender and a few right-bank villages, the region had never been part of Romania.⁷ Therefore pan-Romanian appeals by the Popular Front caused considerable fear among many Transnistrians. They refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the 1989 language law. For Transnistrians, the return to the Latin script in the 1989 language law was unacceptable. While the Transnistrian constitution guarantees that Moldova has an equal legal status with Russian and Ukrainian (Article 12), it is always written with the Cyrillic alphabet. In January 1990, a referendum on territorial autonomy was held in Tiraspol and passed by 96 per cent of the population. Even those who view the conflict as an 'ethnic' one admit that the 'Dniestrian Russophones are not, then, an ethnic group; they are a coalition of ethnic interests (Kaufman, 1996: 11). In essence, this is a conflict between Moldovans and a regionally concentrated Russophone population that has a 'Soviet' identity.

The Mounting Conflict

After the formation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic in September 1990, the conflict between Chisinau and Tiraspol quickly accelerated. By early 1991, several Transnistrian cities including

Tiraspol, Ribnita, Dubasari and Bender began to form paramilitary organizations (Nedelciuc, 1992: 70). The August 1991 Soviet coup clearly demonstrated the division between Moldova and Transnistria. While the Moldovan leadership denounced the coup leaders, the Transnistrian leadership, including future president Igor Smirnov, supported the coup. Transnistria attracted unreformed communists throughout the former Soviet Union. Shortly after the coup, Vadim Shevtsov, a former head of the Soviet OMON Special Forces in Riga, came to Transnistria and became head of the Ministry of State Security.

When Moldova declared independence on 27 August 1991, Transnistria quickly followed suit on 2 September. The Moldovan government viewed the new Transnistrian leadership, especially its leader Smirnov, as traitors and terrorists rather than as a legitimate government of a separate republic. The Moldovan government kidnapped Smirnov and leaders of the Gagauzian separatist movement on Ukrainian soil and brought them back to Chisinau but had to release them after one month following a Transnistrian railroad blockade. Later in December, Smirnov was elected President of Transnistria. During 1991 and 1992, the Transnistrian paramilitary force was strengthened by the transfer of men and arms from the Russian 14th Army, and from the huge stockpile of weapons and ammunition stored in the Transnistrian town of Kolbasnaia. The exact figures are unclear but approximately 40,000 tons of ammunition (much of it dating to the Second World War) are stored in Transnistria. Prior to 1992, there were approximately 10,000 servicemen and some 60,000 reservists. In practice, the distinction between the Transnistrian regulars and the 14th Army was blurred. Soldiers were often placed under the command of the Transnistrian military, and in December 1991, the 14th Army's commander, General Gennadii Yakovlev, accepted the position of Transnistrian Defence Minister. The Transnistrian military was also bolstered by a large contingent of Don Cossacks that arrived in late 1991. Military clashes occurred throughout 1992 along the Dniester River boundary between the Moldovan and the Transnistrian paramilitary units in which over a hundred people were killed. As a result Nationalists inside the Moldovan parliament were radicalized and brought intense pressure on Snegur to undertake decisive military action to resolve the conflict. In late March 1992, a state of emergency was declared, but military efforts to crush the separatist units were repulsed.

In the politics of the Russian Federation the conflict in Transnistria became an important test case for the defence of ethnic Slavs in the near abroad. In April 1992 Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev warned that Russia could intervene to protect the rights of ethnic Russians, and Russian president Boris Yeltsin placed the 14th Army under direct

Russian control (the 14th Army had been to this point under CIS control). Effectively, Russian soldiers were now stationed on foreign territory. The Russian Congress of People's Deputies passed a resolution in support of the population in Transnistria and Russian Vice President Alexander Rutskoi visited Transnistria to provide his support. Rutskoi's visit occurred during the state of emergency, and he did not officially inform Chisinau. Thereafter, 14th Army commander Lieutenant-General Yuri Netkachev intervened actively on the side of Transnistria.⁸

While Russia figured prominently in the conflict, Ukraine and Romania were also important international actors. During March and April 1992, the foreign ministries of Moldova, Romania, Russia and Ukraine met on several occasions to create a framework for negotiations and a cease-fire. The Russians acted as proxy representatives for the Transnistrians. An agreement was finally reached, and a cease-fire commenced on 7 April 1992. The agreement established a four-party commission to monitor the cease-fire and the withdrawal of military forces. Russian demands that the 14th Army should be used as a peacekeeping force and that representatives from Transnistria be formally included were rejected by Moldova, Romania and Ukraine, and led to a break-down in the negotiations.

By May, the level of violence had greatly increased. The heaviest fighting occurred close to the border between Moldova and Transnistria, particularly in the cities of Dubasari and Bender. On 11 and 23 May, elements of the 14th Army reportedly attacked the villages of Cocieri and Cosnita which are located near Dubasari. While most of the population supported the Transnistrian leadership and the 14th Army, some Transnistrians declared their support for Moldova. In early June, several members of the renamed Christian Democratic Popular Front (FPCD) Tiraspol branch were arrested. These six members became known as the 'Ilascu group', named after their leader, Ilie Ilaşcu, who was the president of the FPCD Tiraspol branch. These six individuals were later convicted of terrorist acts against the state and given the death penalty. While the sentence was rescinded and two individuals were released, the other four have remained imprisoned since 1992. The arrest of these FPCD members eliminated the last major opposition within Transnistria.

In the summer of 1992 Bender became a flash point for the conflict. Bender's strategically important location on the right bank of the Dniester linked Moldova to the rest of the former Soviet Union. During the spring and summer, Transnistrian regulars captured most of Bender's police stations. On 19 June, Transnistrian elements attacked the last police station that was still loyal to Chisinau. Initially, the Moldovan military was able to repel the attack, but on the night of 20–21 June, 14th Army

tanks rolled into the city and within a few short hours, Transnistria captured Bender. The capture of Bender was a turning point in the military conflict as the Moldovan side realized that it could not defeat the Transnistrians as long as they enjoyed the support of Russia's 14th Army. Estimates of casualties vary, but perhaps as many as a 1,000 died during the military conflict.⁹

The Agreement to Institutionalize Autonomy

The intensification of the conflict over Bender forced the Russian government to actively intervene to bring a settlement. In June, Yeltsin replaced Netkachev with Major-General Alexander Lebed, and in July 1992, Yeltsin and Snegur signed a cease-fire agreement that ended the hostilities. While Smirnov was present at the meeting, he did not sign the agreement. It contained a provision granting Transnistria a special status and guaranteed Transnistria the right of self-determination should Moldova change its statehood, something that had been offered to Transnistria much earlier. The agreement also established a security zone composed of Moldovan, Russian and Transnistrian forces. A tripartite Joint Control Committee (JCC) was formed to observe the military forces in the security zone and maintain order. The peacekeeping forces were first deployed on 29 July 1992 and consisted of six Russian, three Moldovan and three Transnistrian battalions.

The civil war, and particularly the violence in Bender, had an immediate impact on Moldovan overall domestic politics. In July almost all the members of the FPCD-dominated government resigned, and Andrei Sangheli was named Prime Minister. The Sangheli government chose to focus more on economic issues than regional issues. Also in July, President Snegur removed Defence Minister Ion Costas from his post, and in January 1993, Petre Lucinschi replaced Mosanu as parliamentary speaker. For many Moldovans, the strident nationalism of the FPCD was to blame for the escalation of conflict during the spring and the summer. The irony is that while the civil war forced a fundamental moderating change in the Moldovan government, it entrenched the militant Transnistrian leadership. As King notes, the conflict in Bender became part of the new mythology of Transnistria and its new identity construction (King, 2000: 197). Those that were associated with the conduct of the war in Transnistria, such as Smirnov, his advisor Valeri Litskai (later named Foreign Minister), Grigore Maracuta (speaker of the Transnistrian parliament) and Vladimir Atamaniuk (deputy speaker) were viewed as heroes. While Moldova has had four different governments since the war, there has been no significant change in the Transnistrian leadership.

The Role of International Intervention

The OSCE: To bridge the gap between the two sides to the conflict, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) established a mission in Chisinau in May 1993. This organization has been a significant actor during the post-military conflict period in Moldova by its encouragement of dialogue between Moldova and Transnistria. The OSCE itself has been a controversial figure within the negotiations. Some OSCE mission heads have been considered too supportive of either Moldova or Transnistria and not viewed as impartial. For example in 1997, Donald Johnson was declared *persona non grata* by the Transnistrian government because they felt that he was too favourable to the Moldovan side. The Moldovan government was equally critical of his replacement John Evans for being too sympathetic to the Transnistrians. On the advice of the OSCE, the two sides established 'expert groups' that were responsible for negotiations. Prior to this, negotiations occurred at an inter-parliamentary level but were not at all successful.¹¹ However, the creation of special negotiation teams did not end the stalemate. Philip Hahn, the head of the OSCE mission in Moldova in 1994, stated that the situation resembled 'a family feud - they will not see or speak to each other, and this will last for the next six to ten years.'¹²

The 14th Army: The July 1992 agreement left the status of the 14th Army unresolved. Yelstin's April 1992 decision to place the unit under Russian control was regarded in Moldova as tantamount to foreign military occupation. This issue was so sensitive for Moldova that an article was included in the new constitution forbidding the stationing of foreign troops on Moldovan territory. The Russians had consistently linked the withdrawal of the 14th Army to a settlement on the final status of Transnistria. This process came to be known as 'synchronization'. The OSCE, however, at its Budapest summit in 1994 rejected the linkage. After two years of negotiation, the presidents of Moldova and Russia finally signed an agreement in 1994 that called for the withdrawal of the 14th Army within three years 'from the date of entry into force' of the agreement. This clause was particularly important because Russian officials argued that the agreement only entered into force upon approval by the Russian Duma, which has steadfastly refused to ratify it. Another problem is that the agreement specifically refers to the withdrawal of the 14th Army. In 1995, the 14th Army was downgraded to an 'operational group of Russian forces' (OGRF), and therefore, it is unclear whether the agreement is legally binding on the renamed military force operating in Transnistria.

The political fallout from the civil war continued throughout 1993. There were several defections from the FPCD, and Lucinschi's Agrarian Democratic Party (PDA) began to fill the political vacuum. While the FPCD no longer enjoyed its absolute parliamentary majority, the party had enough votes to block the passage of any constitutional or basic law. The legislative stalemate forced early parliamentary elections in February 1994. In order to prevent Transnistrians from participating in the elections, President Smirnov declared a state of emergency from January through March 1994. Although the Central Election Commission established alternative voting sites for Transnistrian residents, very few individuals participated.¹⁰ The elections further signalled the *de facto* recognition of a separate Transnistria and marked a turning point in Moldovan domestic politics. The FPCD, which had held a majority of seats in the previous parliament, was reduced to less than nine per cent of the seats while the PDA captured an absolute majority. The success of the PDA signalled a fundamental shift in Moldovan politics. The 1994 parliamentary elections indicated that only a small minority of the Moldovan population embraced the pro-Romanian, anti-state position of the FPCD. In March, a non-binding referendum was held in which more than 95 per cent of voters favoured Moldova's continuing independent statehood, and in April, the parliament ratified CIS membership. The new Moldovan constitution adopted in July 1994 gave Transnistria a special form of autonomy (Article 111). The PDA's more balanced approach to Transnistria, overwhelming public support for statehood and CIS membership should have facilitated negotiations, however, the Transnistrian government steadfastly maintained that any final agreement had to be made between two sovereign states.

Aside from the political fallout, the loss of Transnistria had an enormous impact on the Moldovan economy. Most of Moldova's light industries and energy facilities are located in this region. Almost 25 per cent of the country's industrial production is located in Transnistria, and 87 per cent of Moldova's electricity and 100 per cent of its large electric machinery output come from this region. This is the reason why Transnistrians held so much economic power in Soviet Moldova and continue to have a negative economic influence on Moldova today. Transnistrian customs agents patrol the Moldovan border with Ukraine which not only accounts for a loss of tax revenues for Moldova but also contributes to organized crime and weapons smuggling. In addition, the Moldovan government has lost revenues because of the inability to privatize state-owned enterprises in Transnistria.

Transnistria's relationship with Russia and Ukraine: While Transnistrian officials enjoy a relatively close relationship with Moscow, especially with hard-line communists and nationalists in the Duma, their political agendas do not always coincide. In 1994, the Transnistrian parliament passed a resolution which stated that if the Russian forces should withdraw, all military equipment would revert to Transnistria. Russia, however, maintains the right to remove or to destroy the huge stockpile of weapons and ammunition. The status of this stockpile is just one of the issues that has caused disagreements between Tiraspol and local Russian military commanders. For example Lebed's replacement in 1995, Lieutenant-General Valerii Yevnevich, has antagonized the Transnistrian leadership by destroying military stockpiles.

For obvious geographic reasons, any discussion of removing weapons and ammunition by train from Transnistria to Russia must involve Ukraine. Because of its own separatist movement in Crimea, Ukraine has consistently supported Moldova's territorial integrity. The Ukrainian foreign ministry participated in the April 1992 cease-fire agreements. By 1995, Ukraine's visibility in the negotiation process became sharper, having resolved its own regional problems, most notably the Crimean issue, through an institutional accommodation. Moldovan-Ukrainian cross-border cooperation was strengthened (for example, on a new customs regime). Michael Wygant, head of the OSCE mission in 1995, stated that 'while Ukraine cannot replace Russia, it has a very important role to play in the negotiations'.¹³

The Memorandum: After months of negotiation, Moldovan and Transnistrian officials endorsed a memorandum in July 1996 on the settlement of the conflict. Although the two-page document contained much of the same text as found in previous agreements, the introduction of new concepts caused President Snegur to refuse to sign the document. Snegur was concerned about the Transnistrian interpretation of certain clauses. For example, the memorandum stated that the parties would 'continue the establishment between them of state-legal relations'. Transnistria interpreted this clause as establishing sovereign state-to-state relations. The clause that caused the most concern, however, stated that the parties would 'build their relations in the framework of a common state'. According to Grigore Maracuta, the speaker of the Transnistrian parliament, the concept of a 'common state' was first developed by Transnistrians and has four general elements: divided powers, delegated powers, unified powers and borders within the former Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.¹⁴ Maracuta stated that a common state is defined as an equal partnership between two states.

The memorandum became an important issue during the 1996 Moldovan presidential election. Presidential candidate Lucinschi argued that Snegur's failure to sign the memorandum prolonged the conflict (Lucinschi neglected to mention that he and Snegur had both been members of the PDA). After Lucinschi's second-round victory in December, it was hoped that his leadership would put an end to the conflict. Many believed that his position within the former Communist Party would enhance his ability to work with the Transnistrians and enable him to resolve the stalemate.¹⁵ Once in office, however, he also refused to sign the document because of concerns over its interpretation. Moldovan officials insisted that a separate annex be included that elaborated all of the disputed points. Although Lucinschi and Smirnov eventually signed the memorandum in May 1997, Smirnov and the Transnistrians never formally acknowledged the annex. Donald Johnson, head of the OSCE mission in 1997, believed that events had overtaken the memorandum and its defects were too many. Therefore, he recommended to the OSCE Permanent Council not to endorse the document.¹⁶ Johnson was correct – the memorandum had no lasting influence on the negotiation process. Throughout 1997, meetings of the JCC or the expert groups occurred infrequently, and there was little progress on the final status of Transnistria. Part of the problem was that the composition of the Moldovan expert group changed after every presidential and parliamentary election, and these changes delayed the process.

Odesa and Kyiv Summits: The next stage of conflict resolution saw a bipartite intervention by Russia and Ukraine. With the active support of Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, Lucinschi and Smirnov concluded an agreement in Odesa in March 1998 that called for a reduction in the number of peacekeeping forces and the re-building of the bridges that were destroyed or damaged during the fighting in 1991 and 1992. While the two sides made no progress on the core issue of Transnistria's status, these confidence-building measures were important and by the summer of 1999, most of recommendations had been implemented. Nevertheless, the negotiations would sometimes lapse for months and only the intervention and pressure of Russia and Ukraine would force the Transnistrians back to the table.

Just as Chernomyrdin was instrumental in orchestrating the Odesa summit, Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin was largely responsible for organizing the Kyiv summit a year later in July 1999. In Kyiv, the two sides agreed to establish five 'common spaces' including a common border, defence, judicial, economic and cultural space. Lucinschi and

Smirnov left it to the expert groups to elaborate these spaces, and even in Kyiv, it was clear that they had different interpretations. Lucinschi stated that a common defence space would be based on the creation of a single military force while Smirnov insisted that Transnistria would maintain a separate military. Moreover, Smirnov argued that any discussion concerning weapons and ammunition in Transnistria was a matter for Moscow and Tiraspol. The Moldovan press and news agencies were highly critical of the Kyiv summit, calling it 'resultless' and stated that the leaders 'did not sign any important documents'.¹⁷ Ironically less than a week after the Kyiv summit, the Cuciurgan power station located in Transnistria cut off electrical power to Chisinau. Moldovan Prime Minister Ion Sturza claimed that the decision to cut off the electricity was not made by the power plant but by Transnistrian officials. The power station claimed that Moldova owed over \$12 million, and unless it paid, no electricity would be delivered. The Moldovan response was to secure energy from Ukraine and Romania. Both Moldova and Transnistria are dependent on Russia, but because the Cuciurgan power station is located in Transnistria, the region was able to use its energy leverage over the rest of the country.

Economic issues have become extremely important during recent negotiations. While Moldova and Transnistria both owe debts to Gazprom, it is unclear how to settle the accounts. Moldova's energy debt to Gazprom is approximately \$200 million while Transnistria's debt is more than \$500 million. In the 1990s the Russian government subsidized Transnistria's energy needs, but recently the attitude of the Russian government and its energy suppliers has changed. In March 2000, Alexander Pushkin, deputy chairman of Gazprom, wrote a letter to the Transnistrian parliament in which he stated that 'Gazprom cannot be a donor for Transnistria. The reluctance to pay for gas is a gross political and economic blunder the entire responsibility for which shall be on the region's leaders.'¹⁸

The Istanbul Summit: Apart from the question of the status of Transnistria, the other key issue is the removal of the Russian forces from Transnistria. The agreement to withdraw all Russian forces was initially signed in 1994, and while there are less than 2,500 troops remaining, there is an immense stockpile of ammunition and equipment. While Russia has destroyed several tons of ammunition and has transported equipment from Transnistria, the status of the OGRF has not fundamentally changed since 1995. These forces are a tangible sign of Moldova's conditional sovereignty. Moldova's dependency on Russian energy as well as the Russian market has limited the country's ability to press for a conclusive

agreement to resolve the status of these forces. A significant development came at the OSCE Istanbul summit in November 1999 when Russia agreed to a declaration to remove all forces from Moldova by the end of 2002, without any conditions and without any linkage to resolving Transnistria's status. With the coming to power of Putin in January 2000, however, the Russian Foreign Ministry backtracked from this commitment and made public a note addressed to the Transnistrian leadership stating that the military withdrawal would have to coincide with a political agreement on the status of Transnistria by 2002. The Moldovan Foreign Ministry was quick to point out that the Istanbul declaration made no mention of synchronization. Moreover, the Moldovan Foreign Ministry noted that the Istanbul declaration was a binding commitment within the OSCE framework.

Putin's role in resolving the conflict: The Russian president has been a significant actor in this conflict. It was Yeltsin who placed the 14th Army under his direct control, and he and his prime ministers were a party to every significant document signed by Moldova and Transnistria. Therefore, the election of Vladimir Putin was bound to impact on the negotiations. Prior to his June 2000 visit to Chisinau, many Moldovan politicians hoped that Putin would unequivocally support the Istanbul declaration and revitalize the negotiation process. In fact, Putin's discussions with Lucinschi focused on the rescheduling of Moldova's gas debt and the status of Transnistria. While Putin expressed his support for Moldova's independence and territorial integrity, he also stated that Russia would only 'try' to withdraw troops from Transnistria as required by the Istanbul declaration (*Basapress* 2000c). At the end of his visit, Putin announced the formation of a new commission to resolve the conflict. Significantly, he appointed Yevgenii Primakov, former prime minister and architect of the 1997 memorandum, the head of the commission. Leading Moldovan politicians expressed anxieties over Primakov's ability to be even-handed. Gheorghe Marin, a leading Moldovan parliamentarian, stated that he was concerned whether Primakov would interpret the concept of a 'common state' from the Transnistrian perspective (*Basapress* 2000b). Putin's policy, consequently, appears to have returned to the pre-Istanbul position of Russia on the 'synchronization' of an agreement on the status of Transnistria with the removal of Russian forces.

A Change in the Regime: Implications for Settling the Conflict

Transnistria has continuously left its imprint on national-level transition politics in Moldova. Recent changes in Moldovan institutions have

become linked to the issue of Transnistria. In March 1999, Lucinschi issued a decree to conduct a consultative referendum at the same time as local elections scheduled for 23 May. In his decree, Lucinschi proposed the creation of a presidential regime. One of the reasons offered by Lucinschi for this change from a semi-presidential to a strong presidential system was that it would place him in a stronger negotiating position with the Transnistrians.

Over 56 per cent voted yes in the referendum, and subsequently, Lucinschi proposed a draft law to give the president the sole authority to appoint and remove cabinet ministers. In addition, he proposed reducing the size of the parliament from 101 to 70 members and changing the electoral system from a strictly proportional representation system to one that combined proportional seats with single member district seats. Almost all of Moldova's political forces opposed the draft laws. International organizations such as the Council of Europe also expressed their concern over the constitutional change. In a speech delivered to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 25 June 1999, Lucinschi defended his proposal and explained that Moldova's political instability required the concentration of power in a strong executive. He argued that the inability of the Moldovan government to enact economic reform or resolve the status of Transnistria demonstrated the need for a presidential regime that would allow one individual to assume responsibility rather than a diverse group of parliamentarians and government officials.

Lucinschi failed not only to convince the Council of Europe but also Moldovan MPs. This was critical because in order to call a binding referendum, Lucinschi needed a parliamentary majority. By summer 2000, Lucinschi's support within the parliament was at its lowest point in almost four years, and finally on 5 July 2000, the parliament approved a series of constitutional amendments consolidating a parliamentary regime. Most importantly, the amendments stipulated that the president would be elected, and if need be, dismissed by the parliament. The amendments passed in the first reading by a vote of 92 to 5. Lucinschi failed to promulgate the law after the first vote (in essence vetoing the law), but the parliament re-voted the law 87 to 4. Once Lucinschi's term expired on 15 January 2001, the country became a parliamentary regime with an indirectly elected president. What impact will this change in the type of regime have on the negotiations with Transnistria and the prospects for conflict resolution? The president was responsible for assembling the expert group that negotiated with Transnistria, and predictably, Lucinschi argued that the parliament's decision was a retrograde step in the negotiation process: 'We were very close to

resolving the conflict, but now I don't know what the parliament will do in the future.' On Moldovan television he warned that the parliament's decision 'may complicate the process of settlement of the Transnistrian conflict' (*Basapress* 2000a). The OSCE was divided on the issue. OSCE Chairwoman, Benita Ferrero-Walder, stated in a visit to Moldova immediately after the parliament's decision that she did not believe that the introduction of a parliamentary regime would have any negative impact on negotiations with Transnistria. In contrast, William Hill, head of the OSCE mission in Moldova, argued that the constitutional changes would delay the negotiating process since the Transnistrians would refuse to negotiate until the Moldovan side formalized a new procedure for selecting the expert group.¹⁹

GAGAUZIA: AN INSTITUTIONAL ACCOMMODATION

While Gagauzia's demographic and socio-economic background are different than Transnistria, the concentration of a russophone population made for some similar demands. However, unlike the conflict with Transnistria, Moldova was able to successfully resolve the dispute involving the ethnic Gagauzi located in the county's southern districts. The Gagauzi are a Turkic language-speaking people of Orthodox Christian faith who were highly russified during the Soviet period, and even today, Russian remains their primary language of commerce and education. As discussed previously, the Gagauzi initially participated in the meetings of the Popular Front under their umbrella organization, *Gagauz Halki* (the Gagauz People). However as the Front transformed from a reformist to a pan-Romanian organization, the *Gagauz Halki* demanded independence for the Gagauzi. In August 1990 the Gagauzi announced the formation of their republic with Comrat as the capital. There had never been any historical or institutional precedent for the creation of Gagauzia. They adopted national symbols and organized a local defence force. The Gagauzi and Transnistrians cooperated in several areas (such as defence and economic issues). As in Transnistria, Gagauzi elites supported the August 1991 coup, and the Moldovan declaration of independence only hardened the Gagauzi position on seeking greater autonomy.

The assertion of Moldovan sovereignty over Gagauzia, however, was not seriously contested. Unlike Transnistria, there was little armed conflict and violence. Regional governance in Gagauzia was not as developed as in Transnistria. The context of conflict with the Moldovan government was also very different. Gagauzia lacked an industrial base to its economy, was much more dependent on Chisinau for its economic viability and

lacked a compelling foreign policy issue that would have been of interest to Russia (for example, a 14th Army or significant ethnic Russian population). These factors, combined with the Moldovan military defeat in Bender, created a positive environment for compromise. Discussions occurred throughout 1993, but after the February 1994 parliamentary elections and the repudiation of the Popular Front elites and overwhelming victory of the former nomenklatura, the Moldovan government entered into a final phase of negotiations with the elected Gagauz elite. A Moldovan law of January 1995 recognized *Gagauz Yeri* (Gagauz Land) as an autonomous territorial unit with a special status of self-determination. Individual villages, and not counties, are the administrative unit of *Gagauz Yeri*. Villages in which ethnic Gagauzi comprise over 50 per cent of the population needed to secure a majority in a referendum to join. Villages with less than 50 per cent Gagauzi could also hold a referendum if one third of the villagers agreed to the referendum. In the first referendum on 5 March 1995, three towns and 26 villages joined.²⁰

At the same time, Article 1 of the law states that Gagauzia is a 'constituent part of the Republic of Moldova' (*Monitorul Oficial al Republicii Moldova*, 1995: 3). The Gagauzi elect a governor (*Baskan*) and a popular assembly. Elections for the *Baskan* and the popular assembly were held in 1995 and 1999. The Moldovan government and international organizations like the OSCE hoped that the special status of Gagauzia would serve as a model for Transnistria.²¹ The irony is that many Transnistrians are unwilling to accept territorial autonomy precisely because of developments in Gagauzia since 1995. Almost all Transnistrians, and indeed most Gagauzi, believe that Gagauzia is not truly autonomous and that there has been a slow reconcentration of power back to Chisinau. Recently, Mikhail Kendigelian, chair of the popular assembly, told a sitting of the Transnistrian parliament that Gagauzia had decided to revise its relationship with Chisinau based on the Transnistrian concept of a common state (*Infotag* 2000a). The fact that there is still tension between Chisinau and Comrat should not be taken as a failure of Moldova's conflict resolution strategy to institutionalize autonomy. Political disagreements are inevitable, but a breakdown of the process would be marked by violence, and there is no evidence thus far of a danger of renewed violence in Gagauzia.

CONCLUSION

Since January 2000, the status of Transnistria has received a great deal of attention from international organizations. Representatives from the

OSCE and the U.S. State Department have come to Moldova to discuss a settlement to the conflict. At the Moscow CIS summit held in January 2000, the issue of Transnistria was discussed for the first time, and Putin's June visit highlighted Russia's renewed role in the resolution of the conflict. There has been little movement, however, on the fundamental issues. First, there is the issue of competing sovereignties. President Smirnov wants the Transnistrian and the Moldovan constitutions to have equal status. The Moldovan government has maintained that the Transnistrian constitution must be subordinate to the Moldovan one. Second, Transnistria wants its final status ratified as a state-to-state treaty. Smirnov wants all relations between Transnistria and Moldova based on a treaty rather than a law. The Moldovan government wants to grant Transnistria autonomy using a law, as in Gagauzia, rather than a treaty which denotes statehood. Third, the definition and division of economic, military, political and social competencies remains unsettled. It is unclear what impact the change from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary regime will have on the negotiation process. The president has been just as unsuccessful at negotiation as the parliament was in 1992 and 1993. However, the parliament's decision on constitutional changes is likely to delay the negotiation process at least in the short run as Moldovan and Transnistrian politicians accommodate to the political changes.

If the civil war had been exclusively an 'ethnic' war, then this conflict should have been resolved by now. Unlike ethnic conflicts such as Cyprus, there is considerable interaction among Moldovans and Transnistrians. There are packed buses that hourly transport people and goods back and forth between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Hundreds of students from Transnistria study at Moldova State University and the Free and Independent University of Moldova. The reality is that the nature of the conflict has evolved over time into a regional conflict. Initially in 1989 and 1990, there were legitimate linguistic and ethnic concerns on the part of many Transnistrians. However, the Transnistrian leadership used these concerns to solidify their position. The Transnistrian political and economic elites would have much to lose if the stalemate were to end, as they would not only lose their political influence but their economic privileges. Transnistria has become known as a haven for drug and weapons smuggling. Russia and the international dimension have always figured prominently in the Transnistrian conflict. Until Russia places significant political pressure on Transnistria, there is little incentive for these individuals to negotiate a change.

Aside from the international dimension, the conflict has domestic economic and political consequences. The Moldovan economy suffers because of the current stalemate. The government is unable to collect

taxes, control important energy resources or privatize certain industries that are controlled by Transnistria. While there is a general political consensus that the resolution of the conflict should be based on a grant of autonomy, there is no consensus among the political elite as to who should be accountable for the process. President Lucinschi claimed that the lack of presidential power thwarted his attempts at conflict resolution. MPs, however, claimed that it was Lucinschi's inability to resolve the conflict which undermined his authority. The discussions over Transnistrian autonomy also have an impact on relations between Chisinau and Gagauzia. Not content with the autonomy granted in 1995, the Gagauzi argue that they want the same concessions and autonomy that Chisinau is willing to grant to Transnistria. Fundamentally, they want greater control over tax and revenue issues. The on-going struggle between Chisinau and Comrat illustrates that regional conflicts never truly end. There are always disagreements and conflicts between the centre and the periphery. The goal of conflict resolution should be to create a legal framework in which disputes can be peacefully negotiated.

NOTES

1. Moldavia was the Soviet-era name for present-day Moldova. In this article, I only use the name Moldova.
2. During this time, most Romanians refused to acknowledge a distinctive Moldovan ethnicity. Therefore, the term 'ethnic Romanian' was applied to any Romanian-speaker. Even today, many Romanians do not recognize Moldovans as ethnically distinct.
3. Dyer (1999) notes that the russification process was not linear. During the 1950s, Moldovan literature flourished compared to the 1960s and 1970s.
4. Kolsto, Edemsky and Kalashnikova (1993: 981) argue that the language law was not undemocratic and contained articles protecting the linguistic rights of other ethnic groups.
5. Iurie Rosca, president of the parliamentary faction and chair of the Executive Committee of the Christian Democratic Popular Front, interview with the author, Chisinau, 27 April 1994.
6. While the city of Bender is under the control of Tiraspol, it is actually located on the right bank of the Dniester and was part of Romania during the inter-war years.
7. Ethnic Ukrainians constitute approximately 28% of the Transnistrian population while ethnic Russians are 25%.
8. Some such as Kaufman and Bowers (1998) argue that Moscow provoked the violence in Bender in order to justify military intervention. However, there is no conclusive evidence that supports the contention that the 14th Army acted on the instructions of Moscow.
9. The Moldovan government claimed that 231 died during the conflict and another 845 were injured. The numbers reported by the Transnistrians were much higher.
10. Central Election Commission decision No.255 governed elections for 'citizens of the Dniester left-bank raions and the city of Bender'. See International Foundation for Electoral Systems (1994: 2-56).
11. Yuri P. Ataman, Chairperson of the Joint Committee for Democratization and Conciliation, interview with the author, Chisinau, 6 March 1997.
12. Philip Hahn, Former head of the OSCE mission in Chisinau, interview with the author, Chisinau, 4 June 1995.

13. Michael Wygant, Former head of the OSCE mission in Chisinau, interview with the author, Chisinau, 6 June 1995.
14. Grigore Maracuta, Speaker of the Transnistrian parliament, interview with the author, 22 May 1997.
15. Lucinschi was a first secretary in the Communist Party and the highest-ranking ethnic Moldovan in the Communist Party.
16. Donald Johnson, Former head of the OSCE mission in Chisinau, interview with the author, Chisinau, 8 August 1997.
17. Basapress went on to say that the 'talks in Kiev have not changed one little thing in the stance of the Tiraspol leadership'. See Basapress (1999).
18. As quoted in Infotag (2000b).
19. William Hill, Head of the OSCE mission in Chisinau, interview with the author, Chisinau, 21 July 2000.
20. The villages did not have to be contiguous, and therefore, there are some villages that joined that are surrounded by areas that are not part of Gagauz Yeri.
21. Michael Wygant, former head of the OSCE mission in Chisinau, interview with the author, Chisinau, 6 June 1995.

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