

Trains, Trade and Transnistria: Russian Influence in Moldova

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Abstract: With Russia's new found confidence in asserting its influence in the "Near Abroad," the small, landlocked country of Moldova has become, in many ways, the canary in the mine for Russia's policy. Russia's influence is exerted in Moldovan domestic politics through two main vectors: (1) economic influence; and (2) influence in the breakaway region of Transnistria. This influence complicates Moldova's aspirations for EU integration and undermines Western attempts to encourage further democratic and economic reform. Western policy-makers must take this into account by crafting a long-term strategy for Moldova, that encourages reform, while also approaching Moldova's integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions in a framework that draws less on the choice between "East" and "West," and more on building a stable and prosperous Moldova.

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In 1984, Norman Davies labeled Poland "The Heart of Europe," because its experience highlighted the important trends and turning points in European history.¹ Similarly, Lech Walesa, the former leader of Solidarity and first President of Poland, singled out Poles for their "ability to see the future" from their unique historical vantage point.²

If one were to look for a country in a similar position since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a strong case can be made for looking at the small, landlocked country of Moldova. This country has experienced, in an almost exaggerated fashion, the primary trends in the post-Communist experience. And, to the extent that Russia still shapes politics in Eastern Europe, Moldova acts as the figurative canary in the mine, often being the first to signal changes in Russian policy.

While most post-Communist countries experienced economic hardship and political backlash against reforms, nowhere were these more dramatic than in Moldova. Moldova went from having the highest per-capita income in the Soviet Union to being the poorest country in Europe. It went from having the highest population density in the Soviet Union and being a popular retirement area for military personnel, to having negative population growth and nearly a quarter of its population working abroad.³ In 2000, Moldova became the first country to vote an unreformed Communist Party into the government.⁴

Moldova also experienced many of the problems with territorial integrity and the construction of a national identity that typified post-Communist countries.⁵ While not having a

¹ Norman Davies, (1984), *The Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, p. 1.

² Lecture at Truman State University, 11/1/2002.

³ Central Intelligence Agency, (2006), "Country Report: Moldova," *CIA World Factbook*, Washington, DC: CIA, available online at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/md.html>.

⁴ For information on this transition see Luke March, (2006), "Power and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union: The Communist Parties of Moldova and Russia," *Party Politics* 12(3), p. 341-365. Also, Eugene Mazo, (2004), "Post-Communist Paradox: How the Rise of Parliamentarianism Coincided with the Demise of Pluralism in Moldova," CDDRL Working Paper, available online at <http://cddrl.stanford.edu>.

⁵ See Philip G. Roeder, (1999), "Peoples and States after 1989: The Political Costs of Incomplete National Revolutions," *Slavic Review* 58(4), p. 854-882.

strong history of national independence, it was in Moldova that one of the most powerful national protest movements developed. Moldova is a checkerboard of linguistic and ethnic groups, including speakers of: Romanian (aka. Moldovan), Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Gagauz (a dialect of Turkish) and Romany. These linguistic and ethnic differences manifested themselves in separatist movements in the southern area of Gagauzia, primarily populated with Orthodox Christians of Turkish descent, and Transnistria in the east, a primarily Russian-speaking region which was carved out of Ukraine as the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) in 1924. While the situation in Gagauzia was resolved through political compromise, the Transnistrian conflict erupted into a short - but bloody - civil war in which over 1,000 people died. Today it maintains de-facto independence, making it one of several unresolved disputes (or "frozen conflicts") in the former Soviet territories.

This paper looks at Moldova's post-Communist experience as it relates to Russian foreign policy. It argues that Moldova's relations with Russia have reflected and influenced Russia's general foreign policy within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It also contends that the relative neglect of Moldova in Western foreign policy has resulted in a situation that is damaging economically, politically and socially for both Moldova and Europe.

I. Russia Resurgent

Russia's foreign policy has undergone substantial changes since 1991. In the early 1990s, liberals within the government encouraged integration into Western political institutions. Russia's leaders quickly discovered, however, that integration into western institutions such as NATO was not immediately forthcoming. As such, the policy of Western integration was tempered by Russia asserting its role as regional hegemon in the area of the former Soviet Union (now the CIS or "Near Abroad").

Moldova played a key role in this transition. Even before the formal collapse of the

Soviet Union on December 31, 1991, the Transnistrian region declared its independence from Moldova. Independence referendums were first held in the cities of Rybnitsa in December 1989 and Tiraspol in January 1990. On December 1, 1991, Transnistria carried out a region-wide referendum on independence. The legal basis for independence was two-fold: (1) a clause in the draft Treaty of Union which allowed autonomous regions within Soviet republics the right to enter the USSR as independent subjects if the larger republic refused to sign the Union Treaty⁶; and (2) the passage of a resolution by the parliament of Moldova declaring the formation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1940 illegal -- since this formation included the incorporation of Transnistria into Moldovan territory.⁷ Transnistrian calls for independence centered around several issues. For the population of Transnistria, the conflict was mainly about fears of imposition of Romanian language laws and potential integration of Moldova with Romania.⁸ Within the political elite, however, the conflict was primarily a political struggle to maintain their base of power and keep the privileged position that the Transnistrian elite enjoyed under the Soviet Union.⁹

The Russian 14th army played a key role in the ensuing conflict, ensuring Transnistria's de-facto independence. Against the wishes of many in Russia's government, the 14th army and its commanders actively engaged in protecting Transnistria -- essentially conducting their own foreign policy. Despite concerns about Russia's troops acting outside its borders, the West generally remained silent about the conflict, effectively ceding influence over the area that was once a part of the Soviet Union to Russian hegemony. As Allen C. Lynch argues,

Unwittingly, the United States and its European allies, by not pressing Russia on the behavior of its 14th army based in Moldova, seriously undermined the position

⁶ Allen C. Lynch, (2001), "The Realism of Russia's Foreign Policy." *Europe-Asia Studies* 53(1), p. 12-13.

⁷ Igor Smirnov, (2004), *To Live on Our Land*, Tiraspol, PMR: Tipar, p. 39-40.

⁸ While official union with Romania was not espoused formally by the National Front until its 1992 party conference, it was widely viewed as the goal of the Front's administration in 1990-1991 by Transnistrians. Official propaganda from regional elites helped drive this perception.

⁹ Charles King, (2000), *The Moldovans*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, p. 187

of Kozyrev, who had been arguing that Russia could not afford to engage in such unilateral interventions beyond its borders because of the price that would have to be paid in relations with the Western world. In the process, the Russian government learned that, within the confines of the CIS, Russia possessed considerable latitude of action without running the risk of jeopardising its Western options.¹⁰

This freedom of action within the confines of the CIS has been challenged somewhat by the expansion of the EU and NATO. With these institutions extending to the borders of the former Soviet Union, countries which used to matter little in the minds of Western policy-makers have gained new salience.

In particular, Moldova gained new importance for EU policy with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria into the Union in 2007. No longer a distant country, either geographically or in terms of economic ties, Moldova is now a border state whose stability or instability directly impacts EU members. Romania's accession is particularly important in this regard, as Romania's official policy of "one nation, two states" with Moldova solidifies the identity of Moldova as part of Europe.¹¹

Moldova's economic troubles also have a significant impact on EU member states. The controversy over dual citizenship illustrates this. Romania's nationality policy allows Moldovans to apply for dual citizenship if they can show that their family lived in Moldova during the inter-war period, when Moldova was a part of Romania. Currently, Romania's government estimates that there are over 800,000 applications for dual citizenship, which would allow Moldovans free movement within the EU. While the potential results of this policy were greatly exaggerated by some in the media, especially in the UK, the potential influx of Moldovan workers in the EU labor market emphasizes one way in which Moldova's economic troubles impact other European states.¹² The increased importance of Moldova's economic wellbeing to Western policymakers is

¹⁰ Lynch, (2001), p. 12.

¹¹ George Dura, (2 February 2007), "EU Membership Gives Romania New Opportunities in its Relations with Moldova," *Moldova Azi*, available online at <http://www.azi.md/comment?ID=43020> (last accessed 3/9/07).

¹² Ryan Kennedy, (9 February 2007), "An EU Invasion Waiting to Happen," *RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine*

reflected in the decision of aid agencies to dedicate \$1.2 billion over the next three years to Moldova, more than the entire amount of aid given to Moldova in its previous 15 years of independence combined.¹³ Within this pledge, Moldova also became the second largest recipient of EU aid behind the Palestinian Authority. The EU has also taken a more active role in Moldovan affairs by accepting the role of mediator in the Transnistrian dispute and by putting pressure on Russia to remove its troops from Moldovan territory.

In turn, a consensus for pursuing EU integration has emerged among Moldova's population and political elite. The Institute for Public Policy (IPP) in Moldova found in its 2005 Barometer of Public Opinion that 64.3 percent of Moldovans would vote to join the European Union and only 8.5 percent would vote against it if a referendum were to be held.¹⁴ The relationship between Moldova and the EU was formalized in 2004 with the signing of the EU Moldova Action Plan, which sets the goals and standards for Moldova's eventual accession.¹⁵ It is telling that during the celebrations for Moldova's 15th year of independence, the EU flag was hung alongside the flags of Chisinau and Moldova all along the main streets of the capitol city.

The newfound influence of Europe in Moldovan politics has not gone unnoticed by Moscow. In a major policy speech in Munich, Vladimir Putin expressed his frustration with NATO's refusal to ratify the Adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe until Russia removed its 1,500 peacekeepers from Moldova. He also bemoaned the extension of Euro-Atlantic influence as producing a dividing line that "may be virtual, but...nevertheless dividing,

and Moldova Report 9(4), available online: <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/2/DEEC7799-1159-48A3-9BA0-AAAB6B2D84D2.html> (last accessed 3/12/07).

¹³ See Ryan Kennedy, (5 January 2007), "Unprecedented Opportunities, Challenges Posed by \$1.2 Billion Aid Package," *RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova Report* 9(1), available online: <http://www.rferl.org/reports/pbureport/2007/01/1-050107.asp> (last accessed 3/12/07).

¹⁴ IPP, (2005), "Barometer of Public Opinion in the Republic of Moldova," available online at: <http://www.ipp.md> (last accessed 9/23/06). Other responses to the question were "no response" (4.8%), "don't know" (19.2%), and "would not vote" (3.2%)

¹⁵ A copy can be obtained at: http://europeandcis.undp.org/WaterWiki/index.php/Proposed_EU/Moldova_Action_Plan.

ones that cut through our continent."¹⁶

After the terrorist attacks of September 11th, Russia allowed the US unprecedented access to the countries of the CIS. This included basing troops in Uzbekistan and then Kyrgyzstan. The increased influence of Western institutions, and especially the OSCE, was also reflected in the "color revolutions" that brought pro-Western governments into power in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. In response, Russia has taken a more aggressive attitude in re-asserting its great power status, especially in the "Near Abroad."¹⁷

During the question and answer session following his speech in Munich, Putin suggested that "international relations is just like mathematics. There is no personal dimension."¹⁸ From this perspective, the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions, no matter the intentions behind them, places Russia in a disadvantageous position. EU expansion in Eastern Europe has always been preceded or accompanied by NATO expansion. Putin has made clear that he views this expansion, along with the plans to deploy "flexible frontline" forces and missile defenses to new member states, as an attempt by NATO to encircle Russia.¹⁹ Gains by NATO and the EU in Eastern Europe are viewed as Russia's loss. Again, Moldova has been one of the primary countries to feel the impacts of this new assertiveness. Geographically, Moldova is the new frontline of European expansion. In addition, Ukraine and Georgia, the two other potential candidates for EU integration from within the CIS, are unlikely to be accepted without Moldova. As such, Moldova is viewed a key buffer against further NATO expansion. Moldova's stability is not necessary, and may even be harmful, to achieving this goal.

Russia uses a number of methods for asserting its primacy in Moldovan international relations. The next section will look at two that are primary among these: economic influence

¹⁶ Speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10 February 2007, text available online at: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118135.shtml (last accessed 2/26/07).

¹⁷ Dmitri Trenin, (July/Aug 2006), "Russia Leaves the West," *Foreign Affairs* 85(4), p. 89.

¹⁸ Speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, (10 February 2007).

¹⁹ *ibid.*

and the Transnistria conflict.

II. Economic Influence

Russia's economic links with Moldova are substantial. As with other states in Europe, Moldova is heavily dependent on Russia for oil and natural gas. With the price of both on the increase, the influence of Gazprom on Moldova has increased exponentially. Last year, during the coldest winter of its history, Gazprom shut down supplies of natural gas to Moldova for 16 days, arguing that the price paid by Moldova for gas supplies was too far below market value. Gas flows were restored after Moldova signed a temporary agreement with Gazprom in January 2006, which doubled the price from \$80 per thousand cubic meters to \$160 per thousand cubic meter.

This was not the first time that Moldova and Russia had clashed over gas supplies. Ten years earlier, at the first session of the Russian-Moldovan Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Cooperation, Russia suggested that Moldova should pay its \$430 million debt to Russia, mostly for gas deliveries, in industrial property. The Russian government went so far as to present Moldovan authorities with a list of the enterprises that could be taken over by Russia.²⁰

This past winter, it looked like Moldova was heading towards another conflict with Russia over gas prices. Gazprom insisted that Moldova's price needed to be more in line with the European price of \$250 per thousand cubic meter. Moldova, for its part, argued that Russia's policy of charging VAT from the shipment point, rather than at the consumption point violated the requirements for Russia's WTO entry, and that Moldova should have a lower price point, since Gazprom held a controlling interest (63.4 percent) in MoldovaGaz, which sells Russian gas in Moldova and handles its transit to the Balkans.

An agreement was finally reached only days before the previous contract was due to

²⁰ Sergei Grigoriev, (Winter 1996/1997), "Rhetoric and Reality," *Harvard International Review* 19(1), p. 23.

expire. It set Moldova's gas price for this year marginally higher, at \$170 per thousand cubic meter, but also set progressive price hikes to European prices over the next five years. In exchange for phased price increases, Moldova agreed to hand over its internal gas distribution networks, many of which were created after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to Gazprom, giving the company even greater control over Moldova's gas market.

While the phased price increases give Moldova some stability for future planning, Vladimir Socor criticized the agreement, arguing that Moldova exchanged its assets "permanently and irreversibly, in return for only temporary relief on the pace of price increases, which can continue in an open-ended manner", since Russia has monopoly pricing power in the European market.²¹

Gazprom also has significant economic leverage over Moldova because of significant debts still owed to the Russian company. The Energy Information Administration (2006) estimated these debts at \$780 million in 2004.²² The debt is even higher for the breakaway region of Transnistria, which is estimated to owe Gazprom debts of over \$1.2 billion as of mid-2006.²³

The concern over gas supplies is a critical factor tying Moldova to Russia. When asked what the top policy priorities of Moldova were in 2006, Arcadie Barbarosie, head of the IPP, said simply that Moldova must "avoid a cold winter."²⁴ The new agreement gives Moldova some ability to plan for the longer term in gas supplies, but it also raises question of how the government will pay for gas at European prices in ten years, especially if prices continue to increase. In addition, it is unclear if the new agreement provides any real protection against

²¹ Vladimir Socor, (4 January 2007), "Gazprom Touts Agreements with Moldova as 'Models'," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, available online at: http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371765 (last accessed 1/9/07).

²² Energy Information Agency, (2006), "Country Analysis Briefs: Southeastern Europe," available online at: http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/SE_Europe/NaturalGas.html (last accessed 3/13/07).

²³ Vladimir Socor, (4 January 2007).

²⁴ Personal interview, 11/26/2006.

future shutoffs. Current debt levels already provide plenty of justification for Russia to use gas for influence, and these debt levels are unlikely to decline as prices increase.

Another important economic factor tying Moldova and Russia is the magnitude of trade between the two countries. Moldova received a painful reminder of the importance of Russian imports to its economy last year when Russia banned the import of Moldovan wine. As a part of the USSR, Moldova and Georgia developed as the main wine-making regions for the Soviet Union. After the transition, and with most of its industry either collapsing or lost in Transnistria's succession, Moldova came to rely even more heavily on the export of its agricultural and wine products. Estimates place the wine industry somewhere near 25 percent of Moldova's GDP, with 80 percent of all Moldova-produced wine (excluding fortified wine) exported to Russia.²⁵ Prior to the ban, Moldovan wines enjoyed popularity in Russia due to their reputation from Soviet times and their low price (about \$2.50 a bottle).

In March, Russia's chief epidemiologist, Gennady Onishenko, announced that Russia would ban the import of Moldovan and Georgian wines because of the health risks posed by pesticides, heavy metals and other hazardous substances.

Observers within Moldova quickly criticized the move as political retribution for the country's closer relations with the West. Indeed, they had strong grounds for this complaint. It is interesting that only the two countries seeking EU integration, Moldova and Georgia, were hit by the ban -- for example, wines from Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia were not affected. Moldovan wines are also exported to a number of countries with much higher import safety standards, including countries in the EU and at least 36 states in the US. Additionally, as is argued by Vlad Spanu, president of The Moldova Foundation, the economic collapse of Moldova in the 1990s left few wine growers with the resources to purchase the fertilizers and pesticides

²⁵ Vlad Spanu, (22 March 2006), "Russia Prepares to Deliver a Knockout Punch to the Moldovan Economy," *The Moldova Foundation*, available online: <http://politicom.moldova.org/stiri/eng/11270/> (last accessed 12/13/2006).

that they were accused of using.²⁶

The effects of the ban were palpable. Moldova's trade deficit with Russia was \$193.2 million in January-November 2006, compared with a surplus of \$86 million during the same period in 2005.²⁷ Growth in Moldova also dropped precipitously. Moldova-Vin estimated costs of the ban at \$180 million between March 2006 and January 2007.²⁸ Losses to the total economy were much higher, as the ban not only affected wine-makers themselves, but also included industries in bottling, boxing, and export among others. The National Statistics Bureau announced in January that 2006 industrial production dropped 6.9 percent, compared with production statistics in 2005. This was the first time in six years that Moldova had posted such a loss.²⁹

Moldova eventually retaliated, promising to block Russia's WTO accession if the wine ban was not lifted. In November, Putin announced that the ban would be lifted, and, in exchange, Moldova agreed two days later to support Russia's WTO membership. Initially, plans were made for exports to be resumed at the beginning of 2007, contingent on tighter export restrictions on the Moldovan side, including a new system of export stamps which would allow regulators and consumers to directly trace the source of exported wine and new restrictions on the labeling practices of wine-makers. Later, Onishenko announced that wine from Moldova would only be imported through one customs office. Then the date for the beginning of import resumption was re-set to the end of January or mid-February, and then again to March. As of this writing, Russia has still not lived up to its agreement to re-start the import of Moldovan wines. Every day that Moldovan wines are not on the market in Russia, re-entry into the market

²⁶ Vlad Spanu, (22 March 2006).

²⁷ RosBusiness Consulting, (10 January 2007), "Moldova Posts Trade Deficit with Russia," available online: <http://www.rbcnews.com/free/200701109192156.shtml> (last accessed 1/11/2007).

²⁸ RosBusiness Consulting, (19 January 2007), "Moldova Estimates Losses from Russia's Wine Ban," available online: <http://www.rbcnews.com/free/20070119192156.shtml> (last accessed 1/21/2007).

²⁹ Basa-Press, (23 January 2007), "Moldovan Industry Dropped by Almost 7% Last Year in Premiership over Past Six Years," available online at: <http://www.basa.md/?c=news&id=296915#296915> (last accessed 1/23/2007).

becomes more difficult as cheap wines from other countries, such as Greece, begin to take larger market shares.

It is clear that Moldovan economic dependence on Russia is extremely high. While Moldovan manufacturers have tried to find outside market for Moldovan goods, the production of wine and agricultural goods is a tough market to penetrate, especially with the European Union. And while Moldova's exports to both the European Union and the United States continue to increase, they are still very small compared to the magnitude of trade with Russia.

Even if one were not to accept the premise that Russian economic actions against Moldova are punishment for its closer relations with the US and EU, a widespread perception persists within Moldova that this is the case. This makes it difficult for Moldovan policy-makers to convince the population that the short-term havoc caused by Russian economic retaliation is justified by the prospect of EU integration in the long-term. Even the recent increase in aid from the EU and other donor groups is relatively small compared to the influence Russia has over Moldova's economic and industrial base.

III. Transnistria

The second major area of Russian influence is the frozen conflict in Transnistria. Not only was the 14th army the major factor in creating the current situation, but Russia has been the primary player in maintaining the status quo. Approximately 1,500 Russian peacekeepers remain in the area, ostensibly to keep peace between the two sides. More important than the troops themselves, however, has been Russia's continuous duplicity in its diplomacy on the issue.

Russia has been one of the primary diplomatic actors in negotiations to resolve the dispute between Chisinau and Tiraspol. The treaty on the conflict which ended the conflict was not between the Moldovan and Transnistrian sides, but between Moldova and Russia.³⁰ In the

³⁰ The "Agreement on Principles of Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Pridnestrovian Region of the Republic of Moldova" was signed by Boris Yeltsin and Mircha Snegur on July 21, 1992.

current 5+2 negotiation format, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE play the role of primary mediators in the conflict with Moldova and Transnistria, while the EU and US were recently added as observers. Among these intermediaries, Russia holds special sway. Three recent controversies highlight both the strong influence of Russia on politics in Transnistria and how Russia is able to prevent Moldova from taking actions that might undermine the status quo.

On September 22, voters in Transnistria went to the polls to vote on a referendum on the future direction of the region. They were asked two questions: (1) "Do you support the Moldovan Republic of Pridnestrovia (PMR) moving towards independence and subsequently freely acceding to the Russian Federation?" and (2) "Do you agree with the PMR giving up its independence and becoming a part of Moldova?".³¹ According to official figures, 78.6 percent of voters in the region took part in the referendum, with 97.1 percent voting for the first question and 94.6 percent voting against the second question. Internationally, the referendum was ignored. This was the seventh such referendum on independence since 1990. As before, the OSCE, EU, US and Ukraine all refused to recognize the election results as valid. OSCE Permanent Council Chairman, Belgium Ambassador Bertrand de Crombrughe, stated flatly, "OSCE believes the future of Transdniestr [sic] is to be a part of Moldova, and the solution to the Transdniestr problem must be reached through negotiation."³²

Russia's position, on the other hand, was much more ambiguous. Many suggested that the referendum was taken on the instigation of the leadership in Moscow. And the referendum was quickly followed-up by a referendum in the similar breakaway region of South Ossetia in Georgia on November 12. Motivations attributed to Moscow were manifold. Oazu Nantoi, an

³¹ Pridnestrovia is the Russian version of Transnistria. The author here has chosen to use the Romanian spelling, as it is the one most commonly used in the Western literature. It should be noted that the choice of terms carries with it some political baggage, as either side objects to the use of the other's spelling. Some people get around this by using a combination of the two, Transdnistria or Transdnister, but these tend to just raise more questions rather than working effectively as a compromise.

³² Quoted in *Mediapuls*, (14 November 2006), "OSCE: The future of Transdnister is Within Moldova," available online at: <http://www.puls.md/en.php?id=435> (last accessed 11/14/2006).

expert in the Transnistria situation for the IPP, suggested that the referendum was "staged by Moscow's puppets on the Kremlin's instruction" in order to "exert pressure on the Republic of Moldova to convince it to accept, maybe in an altered form, provisions of the Kozak Memorandum."³³ Others pointed to the referendums as a method for Russia to slow down Kosovo's independence from Serbia, by drawing parallels to the recent independence referendum in Montenegro.³⁴ Still others pointed to the wording of the questions, and specifically the part about accession to Russia, as proof that the referendum was the first steps in a campaign by Moscow to re-integrate, in a real way, the states of the Soviet Union.³⁵

Russia's response to the results was similarly opaque. As has traditionally been the case, representatives of Russia's lower house, the Duma, voiced support for the referendum. Duma Vice-Speaker Sergei Baburin said that if Russia did not recognize "the will of our compatriots" it would be committing a "historical error."³⁶ Similarly, a statement posted on the Russian Foreign Ministry's website stated, "It is hardly right and sage in contemporary Europe to ignore, and, more so, show no respect for such a way of people expressing their will."³⁷ Putin, on the other hand, in response to a question on the referendum during a visit to Paris on September 22, stated that Russia respected Moldovan territorial integrity.

Whatever the motivations, and despite Putin's position on the issue, the end result was to embolden calls for independence among the elite in Transnistria. Since the referendum, the

³³ Quoted in *Regnum*, (17 September 2006), "Moldavian Political Analyst: Russia will use Transdnestr referendum to exert pressure on Chisinau," available online at: <http://www.regnum.ru/english/706287.html> (last accessed 12/4/2006).

³⁴ *Oxford Analytica*, (26 September 2006), "Moldova: Vote strengthens Tiraspol and Moscow," available online at: <http://www.oxan.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB129271> (last accessed 3/12/2007).

³⁵ See Victor Yasman, (15 September 2006), "Russia: Independence Votes Popular in the Kremlin," *RFE/RL*, available online at: <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/09/BA6F0EF6-04A6-4D50-A114-486B978A1F54.html> (last accessed 12/4/2006).

³⁶ Quoted in *RFE/RL*, (17 September 2006), "Transdnistrians Say 'Yes' to Independence, Union with Russia," available online at: <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/09/03a18397-f4b2-426a-a751-b013bac5c331.html> (last accessed 12/4/2006).

³⁷ Quoted in *Interfax*, (13 September 2006), "Moscow urges Europe not to ignore Transdnistria referendum," available online at: <http://www.interfax.ru/e/B/politics/28.html?id=11587774> (last accessed 12/4/2006).

political leadership in Tiraspol has refused negotiations that are premised on Transnistria becoming a part of Moldovan territory.³⁸ Partially for this reason, negotiations in the 5+2 format have yet to be restarted, leaving Moldova's territorial integrity, a precondition for EU integration, in limbo for the foreseeable future.

Another example of Russia's influence in the region came with the December 2006 presidential elections in Transnistria. The incumbent, Igor Smirnov, who had led Transnistria since it declared independence from Moldova, found himself potentially facing a strong opponent for the presidency. In the December 2005 parliamentary elections, an opposition party, Obnovlenie (Renewal), won a majority in the Transnistrian parliament, still called the Supreme Soviet. The group is largely seen as an offshoot of the Sheriff company, which is the second-largest corporate interest in Transnistria. For most analysts, Obnovlenie's victory in the elections marked the increased power of groups who supported independence for the region and attempts to gain international recognition, over the early winners of Transnistria's indeterminate status in the international community.³⁹ The leader of the party and Speaker of the Supreme Soviet, Yevgeny Shevchuk, a lawyer and former bank manager, was immediately seen as a challenger to the monopoly Smirnov had enjoyed on power in the region.

Shevchuk, however, decided against facing Smirnov in the presidential elections. According to him, the reason he did not run was because he was afraid of causing instability in the country. He told one interviewer: "As Speaker of Parliament, I have to be responsible and understand that serious political problems could arise if I am suddenly seeking the post as President."⁴⁰ Most analysts do not simply accept this interpretation of events. After all, if, as

³⁸ *Oxford Analytica*, (21 December 2006), "Moldova: Tiraspol line hardens ahead of negotiations," available online at: <http://www.oxan.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB131212> (last accessed 3/14/2007)

³⁹ *Oxford Analytica*, (10 January 2006), "Moldova: Political era ends in separatist statelet," available online at: <http://www.oxan.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB123375> (last accessed 3/15/2007).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Times Staff, (9 December 2006), "For opposition leader, the survival of Pridnestrovie is more important than who has the top job," *The Tiraspol Times*, available online at: <http://www.tiraspoltimes.com/node/402>.

Shevchuk himself contends, the basis for free and fair competition are already existent in Transnistria, why would he be worried about instability because of a competitive political race? *Kommersant* noted that during the previous summer, Smirnov made several trips to Moscow and gained the support of the Russian government as the "tried and true" candidate. Meanwhile, Shevchuk was urgently called to Moscow, and announced his decision not to run shortly after his return.⁴¹

The results were unsurprising. Smirnov, who had a huge advantage in media attention, funding, and elite support won with 82.4 percent of the popular vote.

Russia can play the role as king-maker in Transnistria precisely because it is Russian support that allows the breakaway region to function. While the region, as noted above, owes an enormous debt to Gazprom, there have been no serious efforts to collect on that debt. Similar to Belarus' "economic miracle," the economy of Transnistria has benefited greatly from cheap gas and oil shipments from Russia. At the same time, Russia's peacekeeping forces are a major force in maintaining the status quo. Russia also has strong informal influence in Transnistria, as popular opinion generally supports strong relations with Russia, if not outright unification. As one long-time Moldovan journalist flatly told me, "Russia could change things in Transnistria overnight if they wanted to."

Related to the economic leverage discussed above, Russia also has substantial influence in preventing Moldovan actions that might alter the status quo. Many of the actions discussed in the previous section were seen by some observers as retaliation against Moldova for the establishment of a joint customs regime with Ukraine in March 2006. The agreement required that products coming from Transnistria must have a Moldovan customs stamp, indicating that the business was registered in Moldova.

⁴¹ *Kommersant*, (11 December 2006), "Igor Smirnov Wins a Fourth Term in Office," available online at: http://www.kommersant.com/p729111/r_527/Transdniestr_Presidential_elections (last accessed 12/11/2006)

Some support for this can be found in the restoration of passenger railway traffic through Transnistrian territory. Along with the new customs regime, Moldova decided to run its passenger trains on a route that bypassed Transnistrian territory. The Moldovan government had a multitude of reasons for taking this action. Among others, Moldovan authorities could not regulate what happened to travelers on the border. Stories about "fines" collected by Transnistrian "officials" on passengers coming through the territory were commonplace, especially among foreigners.⁴² Moldovan authorities also had difficulty enforcing its own visa requirements on transportation coming from the territory.⁴³ The decision also had the effect of cutting Transnistria off from transportation to Russia, a critical lifeline for many residents.

Shortly after the announcement that Russia's ban on Moldovan wines and meats would be lifted, Moldova announced, on December 15, that passenger railway traffic would be restored to Moscow, via Tiraspol. Among others, ex-minister of Economy and Trade of Moldova, Valeriu Lazar, told an interviewer that this was certainly a "concession from Moldova" to help change the context of relations between Moldova and Russia.⁴⁴

In his New Year's address, just before the clocks struck midnight and a mass of fireworks lit the night sky, President Vladimir Voronin gave a short speech about his hopes for the New Year. In this speech he said, "I believe that this year precisely will be the last year of our territorial disintegration, that it will be the year when the genuine and final reintegration of our Motherland will start."⁴⁵ The next day a meeting of journalists was held with the Minister of Reintegration, who said that the Government had a plan to bring final settlement to the Transnistrian question. When asked for specifics on the plan, he said that it hinged on improved

⁴² See ex. Stephen Henighan, (2002), *Lost Province: Adventures in a Moldovan Family*, Vancouver, BC: Prospect Books, p. 113-120.

⁴³ Indeed, a colleague of mine was detained at the Moldova/Romania border for not having a proper visa because passports were not stamped coming through Transnistrian territory.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *Moldova Azi*, (29 November 2006), "Valeriu Lazar: 'Context of Relations between Moldova and Russia Seems to Change,'" available online at: <http://www.azi.md/comment?ID=42098> (last accessed 12/5/2006).

⁴⁵ Broadcast on Moldova 1 television, 12/31/06.

relations with Moscow in exchange for further guarantees of Moldova's neutrality.⁴⁶

Russia's strong influence over outcomes in Transnistria has broader effects on Moldova's policies. Moldova's international relations are heavily shaped by efforts to re-integrate Transnistria. As Nicu Popescu, a research fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies, puts it, "[T]he true architect of the foreign policy of Moldova since the declaration of its independence has been neither Mircea Snegur, nor Petru Lucinschi, nor Vladimir Voronin, but Igor Smirnov."⁴⁷ And, in reality, the only outside countries that have the power to swing the status quo in Transnistria are Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine's primary influence comes from its bordering the region, and it has already done what it can in helping Moldova set up a customs regime, which leaders in Tiraspol call an "economic blockade." The EU and US remain only observers in the negotiation process, with little, if any, pull over any of the parties to the conflict. Meanwhile, the OSCE has very limited ability to affect change, as its members are sorely divided on the issue. In a recent meeting on the issue of "frozen conflicts," US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns stated that Washington lends its full support to Georgia and Ukraine in resolving the disputes. At that same meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized "some forces" in the OSCE for trying to use the organization to promote one-sided, politically loaded approaches to the problem.

Interestingly, even Moldova's ability to affect change is severely limited. In an interview with Yuri Ataman, director of the Joint Committee for Democratization and Conciliation, he expressed that his primary hope for reconciliation between the two parties lay in promoting people-to-people contacts that would foster trust and understanding between the two groups.⁴⁸ Oazu Nantoi, suggested that democratization of the region was the primary key to bringing the groups back together, as the disinformation given by the media in Transnistria and the

⁴⁶ Contents of this meeting were relayed to me by a participating journalist.

⁴⁷ Nicu Popescu, (22 January 2007), "Foreign Policy of Moldova is Decided by Transnistria," *Moldova Azi*, available online at: <http://www.azi.md/comment?ID=42837> (last accessed 3/9/2007).

⁴⁸ Personal interview, 8/5/2006.

authoritarian government made re-integration impossible.⁴⁹ Similarly, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party told me that the primary obstacle to re-integration was the "false consciousness" that people in Transnistria were living under.⁵⁰

These policy analysts are correct to point out that there is a lot of information that breeds suspicion towards Moldova in Transnistria. For example, at one gymnasium (grades K-12) that I visited in Tiraspol, a special display was made for books on Transnistrian history. These included one that transposed pictures of Mircha Snegur, Moldova's first president, and President Vladimir Voronin with Nazi symbols and pictures of Hitler.⁵¹ Another, written by President Smirnov himself, included graphic pictures of people killed during the conflict.⁵²

None of the solutions proposed above, even if they were to be implemented in Transnistria, are likely to make a difference in the short- or even in the medium-term, especially with the heightened intransigence of the Transnistrian government. The only strategy which Moldova could unilaterally initiate in the short-term would be to accept Transnistria's independence, a policy which has no domestic support.⁵³

From the above, it seems clear that Russia is the party to the dispute that has the most leverage and influence over the resolution of this dispute. Yet the recommendations made by Russia for resolving this dispute seem difficult for Moldova to accept, at least while keeping its hope for eventual EU integration. On December 4, 2006, Igor Ivanov, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, suggested the 2003 Kozak Memorandum might be used as a way forward for negotiations between Tiraspol and Chisinau. This memorandum, initialed by the parties, but never signed or ratified, calls for the creation of an asymmetric federal state, which would give representatives of Transnistria and Gagauzia a blocking coalition over major

⁴⁹ Personal interview, 7/12/2006.

⁵⁰ Personal interview, 12/4/2006.

⁵¹ A.Z. Volkova, S.I. Beril, V.R. Okushko, I.N. Galinsky, V.P. Zaharov, N.V. Babilunga, and B.G. Bomeshko, (2000), *Is it Possible to Recur?!...* Tiraspol, PMR: Tipar.

⁵² Igor Smirnov, (2004), insert between p.80-81.

⁵³ *Oxford Analytica*, (21 December 2006).

decisions. It also calls for the stationing of Russian soldiers on Moldovan territory for the next twenty years. Both provisions would likely block Moldova's European aspirations, since Transnistrian leaders have regularly stated their opposition to becoming a part of the EU. Similarly, the EU is unlikely to accept a country that is stationing Russian troops.

The other model proposed recently by Russia is a "Kosovo-style" solution. Putin has said several times that he would support such a solution. Of course, the situation in Kosovo has yet to be resolved. As such, this seems to be more of a move to link the two issues in an effort to support Serbia, than a legitimate proposition for conflict resolution. To the extent that an eventual Kosovo settlement is likely, it appears that a "Kosovo-style" solution would involve either territorial division, continued stationing of peacekeepers, or both. Only the former would allow Moldova to keep its EU goals.

IV. Moving Forward

It should be clear from the above that Russian leverage in Moldova is far superior to that exercised by the EU or the US. While there is a broad consensus for European integration within Moldova, as well as a general pride in being "European," these goals are severely limited by continued dependence on Russia. It should also be clear from the above that Russian policy is explicitly designed to frustrate Western influence in Moldova and ensure that Moldova is not able to move into the primary Euro-Atlantic institutions. Such a policy is not out of line with general Russian policy, as a dependent and territorially divided Moldova is unlikely to contribute to what some leaders fear is the increasing encirclement of Russia.

At the same time, this situation is at least partially due to a long period of neglect by Western institutions. It is telling that Chisinau is home to the largest Russian Embassy in the CIS. Russia has long viewed Moldova as a key area of strategic interest for its activities in the Balkans. It is only relatively recently that Moldova has become more salient for Western policy-

makers, and this is primarily because of the issues of labor migration and human trafficking.

This focus is unfortunate for several reasons. First, it tends to bring an ill-considered nationalistic aspect to discussions of policy towards Moldova that distorts the situation and prevents discussion of long-term thinking. When Romania announced last year that 300,000 Moldovans had applied for Romanian citizenship in August and September of that year, British newspapers headlined with warnings about a "Moldovan Invasion." The Daily Star wrote that "without money and prospects, 300,000 Moldovans are heading to us."⁵⁴ Similarly, The Daily Telegraph wrote, "Hundreds of thousands of Moldovans could come to Great Britain next year."⁵⁵ The reality of the situation is, of course, much more subtle. While a large portion of Moldova's population works abroad, many of them work in Ukraine and Russia, both of whom have booming labor markets in their large cities and not enough native labor to fill the vacancies. Romania too draws in a large portion of Moldovan immigrants who help fill a labor shortage that the Romanian government estimates at over 200,000.⁵⁶ Yet, because of the nationalistic phobias that the issue of labor migration appeals to, EU countries have not reacted as well as they should have to the problems posed by the closing of the Romanian border in January 2007.

Second, this focus tends to promote short-term thinking. While international aid is useful in helping Moldova offset short-term balance-of-payment deficits and rebuild neglected infrastructure, it is not a long-term solution to Moldova's poverty. In addition, there are realistic fears that such aid, without being accompanied by significant administrative and economic reform, will have little impact on wellbeing.⁵⁷ Aid must be accompanied by a program that structures leader's incentives towards reform. Romania, through its chamber of commerce is

⁵⁴ *The Moldova Foundation*, (9 October 2006), "Great Britain Press Writes about 'The Danger of a Moldovan Invasion'," available online at: <http://social.moldova.org/stiri/eng/19099/> (last accessed 3/15/2007).

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *The Moldova Foundation*, (5 February 2007), "The Moldovans' application for Romanian citizenship excel the number of the Romanian ethnicity in the Republic of Moldova," available online at: <http://www.politicom.moldova.org/stiri/eng/28680> (last accessed 2/7/2007).

⁵⁷ Ryan Kennedy, (5 January 2007).

already taking steps in this direction, bringing interested investors from Romania and Moldova together. There is a perception among some in Moldova that foreign investment is simply not going to come to Moldova, even with further economic reform. As such, the investment climate has remained a real weakness in Moldova's reform efforts.⁵⁸

In addition, public statements by the EU that further expansion will be placed on hold indefinitely, or that put a specific timeline on Moldova's potential entry -- some have suggested it will be at least 20 years before Moldova is considered -- only serve to frustrate efforts of those who use EU integration as a primary incentive towards reform. Setting high standards for entry is one thing; setting arbitrary timelines for entry only encourages the delay of difficult decisions until the time when entry is more realistic.

Finally, there is a danger that this focus will result in too much emphasis being placed on stability. Moldovan identification as European has been a primary motivator for the political and economic reform that has taken place so far, and is likely to continue as a primary check on abuses of power in the future.⁵⁹ Western institutions must avoid the temptation to be less critical of the current government for fear of instability in the country.

In general, Western countries need to come up with a long-term strategy to guide the development of relations with Moldova. This should include the prospect of EU entry if Moldova reaches certain specific milestones, increased EU ties and benefits that can be achieved short of full EU integration to increase connections between Moldova and Europe, efforts to promote international investment and economic linkages with Moldova, and targeted aid for diversification and infrastructure development. The ultimate goal of these policies should be to

⁵⁸ In the 2006 Heritage Foundation *Index of Economic Freedom*, Moldova's index score was 3.10, but its score for ease of foreign investment was 4.0 or "high barriers." To give some idea of comparison, none of the countries had an investment barrier score above 2.0 at the time they entered the EU, even though other reform scores were not all that dissimilar to Moldova's. Similarly, Moldova ranked 83rd out of 155 countries surveyed by the World Bank in its *Ease of Doing Business Report*.

⁵⁹ In all my interviews about democratization in Moldova, the most important factor identified by individuals for why Moldova is a parliamentary democracy and has not experienced the levels of authoritarianism in Belarus was simply, "We [Moldovans] are 'European.'"

create a stable and prosperous Moldova that is capable of enforcing its laws and discouraging corruption.

V. Conclusions

Russian influence on Moldova is strong and deep. The Moldovan economy is largely dependent on Russia, both for energy supplies and for export markets. Territorially, only Russia is in a position to decisively alter the status quo in Transnistria. These points of influence are unlikely to dissipate anytime soon.

This is a challenge for Moldova because it frustrates the consensus for EU integration, and because it hurts Moldova's economic development and reform efforts. While Moldovan companies have made some efforts to open new markets, it is a difficult process, especially given Moldova's dependence on the agro-industrial and wine industries. In addition, it has resulted in Moldova becoming a major center for smuggling, human trafficking and labor migration.

The US and EU have significant leverage in Moldova but it is unlikely that either will supplant the overarching Russian influence anytime soon. Indeed, efforts to supplant Russia might backfire as it would likely result in a Russian backlash, forcing Moldova to make a painful decision on who to support. Nonetheless, a long-term strategy to help diversify Moldova's market, encourages economic reform, and gives Moldova enhanced prospects for eventual integration with the EU (even if not full membership), can make a substantial difference.

In the end, Moldova will have to be a test of a new policy framework. With the level of Russian influence in Moldova so high, forcing a choice between "East" and "West" is a fool's errand. The real question should be one of how to help Moldova become a stable and prosperous neighbor and partner. Such a result would be beneficial to all involved, and success in this approach to policy in the CIS could set a precedent for greater cooperation in other areas as well.

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