

Moldova – Transnistria

Marina Khamitsevich

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1) Introduction

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, a number of conflicts arose in areas of some of the post-Soviet states, usually where the new international borders did not match the ethnic affiliations of local populations. These conflicts are often referred to as Frozen conflicts. The term is used for situations in which there is no active armed conflict but at the same time no peace treaty or other political agreement that would satisfy the conflicting parties. Therefore, the conflict can start again at any moment, creating an environment of insecurity and instability.

At the moment there are several conflict zones on the post-Soviet territory. This report dwells upon Transnistria (self-proclaimed Pridnestrian Moldovan Republic not recognized by international community). This topic gained particular attention in the context of Russia-Ukraine confrontation. The report attempts to reveal causes and different perspectives of conflicting parties.

2) Conflict Background

Transnistria is a narrow strip of land (4,163 square kilometres) located east of the Dnieper River. It borders Ukraine to its East. In total, Transnistria is home to some

500,000 people, with Russian and Ukrainian Slavs making up 59% of the population and Moldovan Romanians 32%. The capital, Tiraspol, a city of 200,000, is almost three-quarters Russian and Ukrainian.

Transnistria has been linked to Russia since the treaty of Jassy, signed in 1792 when Moldova was still part of the Ottoman empire. In 1918-1940 today's territory of Transnistria has been part of Romania. From 1945 to 1991, the Dneister's east bank was part of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the 15 republics of the USSR. When created, the mainly Russian-speaking Dniester region, formerly an autonomous part of Ukraine, was added to Romanian Bessarabia.

After World War II, Transnistria had been heavily industrialised and though it accounted for only 17% of the old Soviet republic's population, it produced 40% of its GDP.

In June 1990, as the Soviet Union was breaking up, the Slavonic language-speaking population revolted against the Moldovan parliament's adoption of a law making Romanian the sole official language.

On 2 September 1990, the "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic" (PMR) was proclaimed; "Pridnestrovie" being the name for Transnistria in Russian. The republic is not recognized by international community.

In March 1992 Moldovan nationalist forces tried to regain control of Transnistria, where 60% of the population is Russian or Ukrainian. The Moldovans were repelled, in part by the 14th Russian Army, which had its headquarters in Tiraspol. A ceasefire that June ended the fighting but froze the conflict.

The cease-fire led to the creation of a three-party Joint Control Commission, consisting of Russia, Moldova, and Transnistria, which supervises a demilitarised security zone on both sides of the Dniester River. Transnistria has been a "frozen conflict" ever since.

3) Conflicting parties positions

The Transnistrian region retains a strong economic, cultural and political orientation east, towards the CIS, and especially Russia and Ukraine. The possibility of union between Moldova and Romania in 1990 caused fears among the Russian-speaking population that it would be excluded from most aspects of public life. A desire to defend a Russian-speaking culture seen as threatened was at the heart of the conflict. As a result, in September 2006 Transnistria's voted for independence and subsequent association with Russia (97.2 percent). The country has created its own constitution, flag, national anthem, military, police, postal system, and currency. The Speaker of the Transnistrian parliament also appealed to the Kremlin for incorporation into Russia. But Transnistria remains a defacto state, unrecognised by sovereign members of the international community - including Russia.

Moldova, in its turn, seeks integration with the EU. It signed the Association Agreement with the EU that includes the Deep and Comprehensive Agreement on Free trade with the EU. International obligations undertaken under this agreement are seen as an unprecedented campaign of blockade directed at Transnistrian businesses (following the requirements of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU,

Moldova is reported to refuse to issue the necessary documents to Transnistrian firms)¹. At the same time Transnistria needs access to the European market and Moldova as to the two main destinations for Transnistrian goods.

The results of the Transnistria referendum of 2006 are seen as questionable in Moldova, alternative statistics on people aspirations exist². Transnistrian claims of economic suffocation, exclusion or negative spillover from EU integration are denied by Moldova: Tiraspol was invited to participate in talks on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU, the preferential trade regime for Transnistrian companies was extended till the end of 2015.

The analysis of this conflict requires a broader view as it involves not only Moldova as Transnistria as interested parties. Confronting Russia and Ukraine both act as guarantors of a peaceful settlement to the conflict on the Dniester. Over two decades, Moscow claimed that Transnistria should be part of Moldova. However, Kiev expressed concern about the use of Transnistria as a platform for “separatist actions” in the Odessa region and moved to introduce administrative restrictions on the de facto border. Moscow, in turn, sees these actions as a “blockade” against the PMR and as an attempt to change the current format of the peace settlement (or at least make some major adjustments)³. Also worth noting is the fact that the Moldovan-Transdnestrian conflict is the closest ethno-political confrontation in Eurasia to the borders of NATO and the EU.

¹ <http://www.russia-direct.org/qa/revealing-post-soviet-identity-complex-transnistria>

² <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/two-big-factors-could-shift-status-quo-transnistria>

³ <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/3-reasons-why-moldova-could-become-next-ukraine>

Therefore, internationally, the participants of the conflict settlement negotiations are far from united in their interests and ambitions.

4) Conflict resolution process

The above-mentioned complications explain the lack of significant progress in conflict resolution. Since 1997, the OSCE has managed a conflict resolution process which now engages seven parties in the “5+2” format which involves the two conflicting parties (Moldova and Transnistria), an intermediary (the OSCE), two observers (the U.S. and the EU), and two guarantors (Russia and Ukraine). The OSCE-brokered talks have helped to defuse occasional crises and to keep the sides in dialogue, but no framework agreement has yet been accepted by all sides.

To contribute to a sustainable settlement of the Transnistrian conflict it is important to increase the level of confidence-building measures and initiatives of the intermediary states jointly with the conflict Sides in order to extend and consolidate economic and social links between the Sides⁴. These measures could ensure that conflict settlement negotiations progress more easily.

5) Conclusion

The conflict over the Transnistrian region dates back to the end of the Soviet Union and the establishment of an independent Moldovan state. However, until now very little tangible progress has been made towards a sustainable conflict settlement. Understanding

⁴ Stefan Wolff. The Transnistrian issue: moving beyond the status-quo.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224472/evidence-stefan-wolff-the-transnistrian-issue.pdf

both worldviews is inseparable from successful efforts to restore stability in the region. Political will, ability to compromise and persistent confidence-building measures are needed from all actors for the official talks in the 5+2 format to succeed.

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