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The “Frozen” Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue

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The Republic of Transnistria is a separatist region of the Southeastern European state of Moldova. While not much has changed in this “frozen conflict” since a 1992 short-lived war, the eastwards expansion of the European Union and NATO are slowly bringing Moldova to the attention of Western policymakers. The cornerstone of the separatist cause is the Russian Federation, which serves as Transnistria’s protector. Given the 2008 summer war in Georgia, another so-called “frozen conflict,” it is necessary to evaluate how a Russia-backed separatist region in Moldova, accused of human rights violations and weapons trafficking, fits into the wider discussion of European geosecurity and NATO/West-Russian relations for the immediate future.

Landlocked, economically poor, and dealing with a breakaway region, the Republic of Moldova has become a European problem. No longer is that country regarded as distant from “mainland” Europe and easy to overlook, as Moldova now borders both NATO and the European Union (through

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Romania). The post-Soviet Southeastern European country faces challenges at numerous levels, raging from a slow economy and corruption to having a separatist region, the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR), which has been accused by different organizations of a variety of crimes including money laundering, smuggling as well as, allegedly, weapons trafficking. As NATO and the EU continued their eastwards expansion throughout the 1990s and early years of the 21st century, they have come across this still unsolved “frozen” conflict that has its origins in the final days Soviet Union. Furthering concerns is the fact that secessionist Transnistria is an ally of Russia, which highlights its importance for regional security due to ongoing security tensions between Europe/NATO and Russia.

The Moldovan secessionist issue took on a new spin after a short-lived war in 1992 between Moldovan and Transnistrian separatist forces. A determinant factor in the eventual separatist victory, which helped consolidate their position as a de facto state, was the fact that they were actively supported by the Russian military stationed in Moldova, a presence which continues to this day. However, it is only now that Western Europe begins to pay more attention and see the potential ramifications of an officially non-existent, corrupt, secessionist state which is backed by Moscow. The summer 2008 Russian military incursion in Georgian territory and subsequent recognition of the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign states, stresses the importance of finding some kind of solution to the Moldova-Transnistria frozen conflict. A late October 2008 visit by NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer to the Moldovan capital Chisinau may signal a growing interest by Western security agencies in finding a solution to the Moldova-Transnistrian question.

Crime originating from the breakaway region is worrisome and a criminal enclave cannot be allowed to exist between two EU states, should Ukraine join the EU (and NATO as well) in coming years. In spite of little change in Moldova’s political and economic situation in the last two decades, events outside its borders have made this little impoverished state important for the future of Southeastern European security.

MOLDOVA: A BRIEF HISTORY

Moldova is a landlocked nation with an area of 33,371 sq. km. It is squeezed between Romania and Ukraine, with most of its territory between

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1 In Russian Pridnestrovskaià Moldaïskaià Respúblíka, in Moldovan: Republica Moldovească Nistreană.
the Prut and the Dniester Rivers. Moldova is only separated from the Black Sea by a small patch of Ukrainian territory; a few kilometers of Ukrainian territory separate Moldova from Lake Dniistrovsk'yy, which, through a small waterway close to the Ukrainian city of Bilhorod-Dnistrovsk'yy, ends in the Black Sea. This scant patch of Ukrainian land forces Moldova to transport its goods across either Romania or Ukraine, paying respective taxes and tariffs.

Moldova came into existence after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. The area currently known as Moldova was historically known as Bessarabia, and was a point of contention between Russia (in any of its political forms) and Romania. The Russian Empire gained control of Bessarabia in 1812 after the Russo-Turkish War of 1806–1812, at a time when Moldova was under control of the Ottoman Empire. In 1918, just before the end of World War I, Bessarabia declared its independence from Russia and united with the Romania. In 1940 Bessarabia was occupied by the Soviet Union (a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). The Soviet annexation was internationally recognized in 1947 and the area was renamed the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic (Moldavian SSR). On 27 August 1991, the Soviet republic declared independence from the crumbling USSR and renamed itself the Republic of Moldova. Because of its mixed historical background, including attempts by the Soviets to essentially rewrite Moldovan history to create a new identity, analysts argue that modern day Moldova is a republic with no clear antecedents.3

As a result of Russian control of the area, especially during the Soviet period, the Moldovan population is now an amalgamation of different ethnic groups, an issue which, arguably, lay at the center of the separatist course. The majority of Moldovans are of Romanian descent; however, there is also a sizable Russian population. This is a product of Russian migration to the area during the Soviet era in order to industrialize the region,4 as well as a result of moving the Russian 14th Army5 to the country during Soviet times to protect the empire’s southeastern flank from NATO members Greece and Turkey. The minority groups in Moldova include Ukrainian, Russian (both around 10%) Gagauz, Bulgarian, Roma, etc. As early as 1988 there was a recognition that Moldova had an “identity” problem and that the inhabitants of Moldova, coming from a wide array of ethnic

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4 During the 1960s and 1970s, over 500,000 Russian-speaking workers came to Moldova; making Russian for all intents and purposes the *de facto* national language.
5 The Russian 14th army was renamed the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF). The name 14th army will continue to be used for the sake of consistency.
backgrounds, were “a long way from living in a cohesive and friendly family.”

The country, including its breakaway region, has a total population of slightly over four million. However, migration patterns indicate that thousands are leaving the country annually in search of a better life. Interestingly, even if they have an EU neighbor to their west in the shape of Romania, migrating Moldovans seem to mostly prefer moving to Russia. A plausible reason for this is that jobs in Romania, even though it’s an EU member, pay less than jobs in Russia. Remittances are important for Moldova’s economy.

Today, Moldova remains poor (it has been labeled as the poorest country in Europe) and severely underdeveloped. Forced migration and industrialization during Soviet times gave the country a new start, but the momentum has long been lost. Leaders in Moldova’s capital, Chisinau, have been unable to cope with mounting inflation, unemployment, poverty and widespread criminal activity. The country is commonly referred to as “Europe’s black hole,” with crime including trafficking of people, drugs, weapons, and human organs.

In April 2001, Vladimir Voronin became the country’s president after his Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova swept through the February 2001 parliamentary elections. Paul Quinlan explains that “Moldova has the distinction of being the first European country in which an unreformed communist party regained control of the government through democratic elections.” This statement, while interesting, needs some clarification, as by “unreformed communist party,” Quinlan may give images about a Stalin-era Moldovan Communist Party. The reality is that Voronin’s government does claim to be democratic and there are projects to pursue greater integration with Europe, which an “unreformed” Communist would not propose to do. Due to Romania’s acceptance into NATO and the European Union (in 2004 and 2007, respectively), both organizations now border this problematic country, making Moldova’s problems no longer distant but part of Europe’s problems.

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By the 1990s the Moldovans were still a nation divided over their common ‘national’ identity. For some they were simply Romanians [. . .] for others, they were an independent historical nation, related to, but distinct, from the Romanians to the west. Still, for others, they were something in-between, part of a general Romanian cultural space, yet existing as a discrete and sovereign people with individual traditions. (p. 40).

7 In a trip to Moldova, reporter Simon Reeve found “a tiny village in the countryside where 32 men have each sold one of their kidneys to Westerners desperate for transplants. In a country where the average wage is less than Pounds 2 a day, Pounds 2,000 for a kidney may seem a princely sum.” P. Paterson, “Off the Map in Moldova,” Daily Mail (London) (12 May 2005), p. 53.

SECESSIONIST WARFARE

Situated between Ukraine and the rest of the territory of the Republic of Moldova Transnistria has been *de facto* independent since 1991, when it made a unilateral declaration of independence from Moldova. Political confrontations and some violent clashes between Transnistria and Moldova escalated into a short military conflict in March 1992. Aided by contingents of Russian Cossacks and the Russian 14th Army stationed in Transnistria since 1956, separatists consolidated their control over most of the disputed area.

A cease fire agreement was signed by Moldova and Russia in July of 1992 which ended the conflict. However, no political solution has been found for this conflict and Transnistria maintains the *status quo* after 16 years of failed negotiations. Russian forces (Operational Group of Russian Forces, the new name for the former 14th Army), and large amounts of ammunition are still stockpiled in the Transnistria contributing to the stalemate vis-à-vis a militarily weak Moldova.

A number of events lay at the root of the conflict. A 1989 law made it mandatory for Moldovans to use Romanian in Latin script, instead of Cyrillic. Article 7 of the law made it compulsory for everyone who worked in a position where he/she had to communicate with customers to speak both languages. Russian-speakers saw this as a discriminatory law. In 1992, a year after the country declared independence, it was increasingly rumored that the country, with its population of ethnic Romanians as a majority, would unite with Romania. Claus Neukirch, from the Centre for Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Research, interprets this move as a “Moldovanisation” or “de-Russification” of the state structures.""10 Stuart Kaufman argues that the Moldovan-Transnistrian war is essentially an ethnic war.10

On 1 December 1991, Igor Smirnov was elected the first president of the Transnistria Moldovan Republic. A wave of low-scale violence followed as Smirnov’s paramilitary force attacked police stations and other authorities that remained loyal to Chisinau, Moldova’s capital. On 19 June 1992, Transnistrian forces stormed the last remaining station in Bender which was still loyal to Chisinau. The capture of Bender is important as a major road and rail line passed through the city. A Journeyman documentary describes the 1992 conflict as a “Sarajevo-style sniper war.”11 All in all, around 1,500 people

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were killed during the period of violence; a mercifully small number compared to the death tolls in other war zones around the world today.

By the end of 1992, the breakaway region had established itself in Moldova’s eastern territory next to Ukraine, with the Dniester River serving as a natural, and effective, border between Moldova and itself. By late 1992, warfare was over, each side was entrenched in its territory and the Moldovan war of secession became a “frozen conflict.” The new country has a government including executive, legislative and judicial powers, as well as security forces.

TRANSNISTRIA A STATE WITHIN A STATE

As a result of the Moldovan armed forces inability to capture or overthrow separatist leader Smirnov, the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic continues to exist. Currently, the de facto state is not recognized as legitimate by any other country in the world, including its protector Russia. The rebellious region has a population of 630,000 and is around 180km long by 30km wide. Transnistria makes up 8% of Moldova but accounts for up to 40% of the state’s industrial production. The default leader of the country, Smirnov, is a former Tiraspol mayor and a former metalworker from Kamchatka in the Russian Pacific who moved to Tiraspol in 1987 as a factory manager, and became the self-declared “president” before the secessionist war. One of his sons heads the “state customs committee,” and owns a football stadium and a Mercedes showroom. Tiraspol, which serves as the capital of this non-existent country, hosts only one tourist site, a 16th-century fortress, which is now a Transnistrian army base and completely off limits to the public. Transnistria also has its own currency and stamps, not accepted anywhere else.

Analyses on the structure of the Transnistrian leadership point out that Smirnov, Minister of Justice Balala and Chief of Internal Security Vladimir Antufeyev [the ex-KGB operative] all arrived in Moldova at the start or since the start of the separatist crisis. The TMR’s ruling elite is largely Russian [and] certain members came to the TMR from senior positions in the Russian government, particularly the Russian parliament (the “Duma’ and the Russian Army”).

13 The armed forces consist primarily of four motorized rifle brigades, a tank battalion, an artillery regiment, and an anti-aircraft artillery regiment. The standing army has some 4,500 troops plus a 15,000 that can be mobilized. The country’s 18 tanks are a courtesy of the 14th Army. See Ibid.
15 Thawing a Frozen Conflict: Legal Aspects of the Separatist Crisis in Moldova”. The Association of the Bar of the City of New York, p. 7.
In 2005, reporter Simon Reeve visited Transnistria, reporting that “a mysterious firm called Sheriff—headed by former Red Army officers—runs much of the economy. It is hard to believe many drivers of shiny new Mercedes in dirt-poor Transnistria earned their money legitimately [. . .] Independence Day was being celebrated when we visited. The Soviet-era army goose stepped along the main road, and small children in uniforms sang ‘Our army is the best army,’ with evident pride.”

The de facto state is a major producer of steel, particularly the Rybnitsa steel works, or MMX. Other companies located in Transnistria include Moldavizolit, Tighina and Odema. The country survives thanks to aid from Moscow, including economic support as well as gas and passports allowing most Transnistrians to claim Russian nationality.

When pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko came to power after Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, he imposed tough customs controls on the border with Transnistria. Russia, which sends assistance through Ukraine, has deplored these as an “economic embargo.” In addition, “a deal between Moldova and Ukraine (called a ‘blockade’ by the regime in Transnistria’s capital, Tiraspol) means that Transnistrian companies need official Moldovan stamps to export eastward. A European Union mission is helping Ukraine and Moldova to control their 1,220km (760-mile) border.”

“Genuinely free elections in Transnistria would be hard to organize, given the lack of independent political parties or media and the omnipresent secret police,” argues The Economist. There are continuous reports of opposition figures, including members of political parties, journalists and civil society who protest against Smirnov’s policies. Smirnov utilizes the Ministry of State Security (MGB), the country’s intelligence service, and his personal security guards to continue to have dictatorial-style control over the country, where the parliament is mostly a symbolic body rather than a relevant one.

In the 2005 during parliamentary elections in Transnistria, the opposition party Obnovlenye ("Renewal") led by Evgeny Shevchuk, gained control of 23 of the 43 parliamentary seats. However, there has been little, if any change in day-to-day policies because of this, as the executive continues to have omnipotent powers over the country. There are very little civil society groups as there is a constant crackdown and censorship by government officials. The EU has not been involved in civil society support in Transnistria;

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19 Gangsters Cornered: Moldova and Transnistria The Economist, (2 July 2005).
what little support that comes from abroad comes from a few projects like Great Britain and the Czech Republic.\(^{20}\)

Moscow-backed Smirnov and his clan is the major cause preventing the re-unification of Moldova. The Bar Association of New York sustains that “the separatists have chosen to make the conflict seem intractable by repeatedly refusing any options short of effective sovereignty [. . . Tiraspol] has attempted to exacerbate [ethnic tensions] and subsequently claim that separation is necessary in order to avoid ethnic conflict and possible genocide.”\(^{21}\)

However, experts point out that for Transnistrian, there is also little gain from returning to Moldova. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi explains that “Moldova has slowly turned into an embarrassment for Western donors [as it] struggles with state consolidation, a weak economy, identity problems and a massive desertion by nearly all of its qualified workforce.”\(^{22}\) On December 10, 2008 dozens of Moldovan pensioners protested outside the UN office in Chisinau to protest the “genocide” against them that the Voronin government is carrying out; arguing that their monthly pension of $100 is not enough for them to survive.\(^{23}\) Additionally, “it seems that the Transnistrian regime has succeeded in instilling loyalty and feelings of belonging among the population.”\(^{24}\)

In September 2006 there was a controversial referendum in Transnistria in which Smirnov was ratified as president. The citizenry also voted in favor of secession from Moldova. Transnistrian authorities say that 97.1% of the

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\(^{23}\) Moldovan Pensioners Protest on Human Rights Day, RFE/RL News (10 December 2008). Available <http://www.rferl.org/content/Moldovan_Pensioners_Protest_On_Human_Rights_Day/1358392.html> (accessed February 18, 2009) Another example that democracy is not exactly flourishing in Moldova proper is that, in early December 2008, there were discussions about whether or not Chisinau would revoke the license of independent and popular Moldovan TV station, ProTV. ProTV has been criticized by Moldova’s ruling Communist Party for allegedly being bias toward the opposition and Romania. Moldova might kick independent TV station off the air. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. December 11, 2008. “The closure of Pro TV Chisinau will be a significant drawback in the already limited broadcast pluralism in the country, and will contravene Moldova’s OSCE commitments in the media freedom field,” said ‘OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Haraszti, M. OSCE Urges Moldova to Renew License of Independent TV Station to Ensure Pluralism Before Elections’ OSCE, Austria, Vienna, December 16, 2008.

population voted in favor of independence.\textsuperscript{25} Around 80% of the country’s 390,000 registered voters participated. According to then-Transnistria “Foreign Minister” Valery Litskai, “integration into Russia will proceed in several phases, and it may take 5 to 7 years.”\textsuperscript{26} This is probably the other major, arguably most important, reason for the lack of a resolution for the Moldovan-Transnistrian secessionist issue, the fact that Moscow does not want Transnistria to reunite with Moldova, as it would loose an important foothold in Southeastern Europe.

**MOSCOW’S RENEWED FOREIGN POLICY: THE BEAR WAKES UP TO PROTECT ITS CUB**

In recent years, particularly after the rise of Vladimir Putin to power, Russia has become once again a global superpower, riding on the economic input it receives from the country’s large oil and natural gas reserves that allows it to have a more aggressive, security-oriented foreign and military policy. A combination of factors have strained relations between Moscow and NATO and, particularly between Moscow and Washington, under the George W. Bush administration. A discussion about how Moldova fits into Russian-NATO/U.S. tensions will follow, but first it is necessary to highlight some of the factors that have pushed for the current tense situation and what analysts seem to regard as a new Cold War:

- Perception that the United States and NATO are trying to isolate Russia by taking over its traditional spheres of influence. NATO already borders Russia in the north through the Baltic States. It would be a huge blow to Russian pride if Ukraine also joined NATO. In 2004, the “Orange Revolution” ousted a pro-Kremlin, semi-authoritarian government and bringing in the pro-West Viktor Yushchenko. Meanwhile, Romania continues with its non-Communist government. In other words, Russia is quickly losing its influence in the region and Russian policymakers see it as a self-evident necessity to stop this trend. William Hill, head of the OSCE mission to

\textsuperscript{25} “The vote in Transnistria shows that the situation following the breakup of the USSR, which left millions of Russian-speaking people outside the borders of Russia, is fraught with instability,” said Yury Kvitsinskiy, a Communist deputy of Russia’s State Duma. “The Russian leadership will have to take account of this, and support the will of the people,” the Russian politician added. See: Weir, F. op. cit. Moscow’s fold.

\textsuperscript{26} Moldova Says Passenger Traffic Restored to Dniester Controlled Dam. Basapress News Agency, (Reproduced by BBC Worldwide Monitory, 6 February 2006). On July 2008, Litskai was dismissed from post of “foreign minister,” after serving in that post for 17 years, ever since the creation of the country. Reports saying that the reason for the dismissal was “was the recent worsening of Transnistria’s relationship with Russia and the pro-Ukrainian stance of Transnistria’s foreign minister.” ‘Smirnov sacks Litskai.’ Moldova Azi News Agency, 2 July 2008, Available <http://www.azi.md/news?ID=50006> (accessed 3 July 2008).
Moldova, has said that “Russia has been in this region for a couple of hundred years. It will eventually have to deal with this loss of empire.”

Meanwhile, Alexey Pushkov, a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, argues that “there seem[s] to be no limit to the eastward expansion of the [NATO] alliance.”

- The United States has reached agreements with Romania and Bulgaria to deploy troops to those countries on a temporary basis, bringing America’s military presence to the Black Sea, also within Russia’s historical sphere of influence.
- The arguable success of the U.S. military in Afghanistan compared with the Soviets’ ill-fated war in Afghanistan in the 1970s.
- Rise of numerous regional powers with global ambitions, like the People’s Republic of China, India, the European Union, Brazil, South Africa, and Iran’s debatable nuclear program, make it necessary for Russian policymakers to assert their country’s status as a world power.
- The Russian military is once again picking up speed, in terms of strength and technological accomplishments, after a disastrous run in the 1990s.
- Interest by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to show himself as capable leader to his military leaders, as well as a suitable successor to people’s favorite Vladimir Putin. Russia’s military intervention in Georgia (to be discussed later) is an example that Medvedev may resort to military means if he deems it necessary.

As previously stated, Russia is the de facto protector of the Transnistria separatist state and, at the heart of it, is the Russian 14th Army.

THE PROTECTORS: THE RUSSIAN 14TH ARMY

Although officially neutral, since the beginning of the Transnistrian secessionist quest, the 14th army has been a cornerstone of Smirnov’s plans and the continuous survival of his pseudo-state and government. During the 1992 conflict, the 14th Army’s commanders allowed the transfer of personnel and weapons from their stockpiles to robust the separatists’ ranks. “The actual decision to intervene was probably taken by the 14th Army commander, Lieutenant-General Iurii Netkachev, rather than by the Moscow leadership” an analyst explains. During the time of the war the lines of

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29 Recent events of a more forward Russian security policy include the resumption of long-range bomber flights, renewed patrols in the Arctic as well as alleged incursions into Georgia.
communication between the 14th army leadership and Moscow were not active; hence this was probably Netkachev’s decision, particularly as Moscow has never claimed responsibility for the intervention of its forces in the Moldovan conflict.\textsuperscript{31} The price for Netkachev’s decision was that he was shortly after relieved of command and replaced by Major General Alexander Lebed.

Arguably, the Transnistrian separatists could not have succeeded, had it not been for the active support of the Russians, particularly as the Moldovan armed forces at the time were weak, poorly armed and organized. Many of the troops of the 14th Army had been born in Moldova and felt a rush of patriotism to fight for the Transnistria cause.\textsuperscript{32} A Romanian senator and former member of the 14th Army, declared in an interview that, during the 1992 war, 14th Army officials gave the separatists 24 tanks, 12 combat helicopters, 37,000 machine and submachine guns, as well as 120 cannons.\textsuperscript{33} One of the major battles during the war took place in the town of Berginder, and it is known that the 14th Army actively aided the insurgents, going as far as battling with them against the Moldovan security forces. On the battle of Bender, Russian 14th Army troops fought alongside the Transnistrians (20–21 June 1992), to push Chisinau’s security forces outside of the city. Then-Russian Federation Vice President Alexander Rutskoi would argue that military action was needed to stop a “bloody massacre” against ethnic Russians in Bender by Moldova’s security forces.\textsuperscript{34} The idea that Russia is a protector of Transnistria and its ethnic minorities has become a pillar to justify the continuous presence of the 14th Army in the \textit{de facto} state.

A 21 July 1992 agreement between Moldovan president Snegur and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, which effectively ended the Moldova-Transnistria war, called for a cease-fire and the creation of a demilitarized zone which extended 10km from the Nistru river on each side, including the town of Bender. The agreement also created the Joint control Commission to monitor the cease fire. Approximately six thousand peacekeeping troops made up a Trilateral Military Command subordinate to the JCC; the number of peacekeeping forces has varied ever since. The catch here is that the JCC and the peacekeepers came from Moldova, Transnistria and Russia. Given Tiraspol self-evident ties with Moscow, Chisinau has been in a perpetual 2-1

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} Even before the 1992 war, the Dniestr separatists received material aid from Moscow. Kaufman explains that as early as 1990, the Soviet civil defense organization and DOSAAF, the official Soviet paramilitary organization, started supplying the Dniestrian volunteers with weapons. Stefan Uratu, March 1995 interview, Chisinau, in Kaufman, “Spiraling to Ethnic War,” pp. 130.


\textsuperscript{34} Romania Liera (23 June 1992) p 1. In Panici, op. cit.
disadvantage regarding decisions carried out the JCC and any operation carried out by the peacekeepers.

On 1999 Moscow agreed that it would be moved back to Russia its 14th Army forces by 2003 at the latest. This has occurred at a very slow pace. In 1995, the 14th Army was re-organized into the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF). Between 1992 and 1999, the number of troops decreased from 9,250 to 2,600. Russia had declared its intentions to destroy Soviet-era ammunition in Transnistria and bring its troops back to Russia in view of the 2001 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE). Tensions with Washington and NATO have caused the Kremlin to pull out of the CFE Treaty, leaving the future of the 14th army in the region uncertain. In any case, the Russians appear to have very little, if any, desire to completely leave their bases in Transnistria.

A late October 2008 visit by NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer to Moldova may signal a growing interest by Western agencies in finding a solution to the Moldova question. During the visit, de Hoop stated that Moscow should honor its agreements and remove its troops from the region.

Mungui-Pippidi argues that “the presence of the 14th Russian Army in the Transnistrian region [is] a visible symbol of the Republic of Moldova’s ‘limited’ sovereignty.” Certainly, Smirnov will continuously look for ways to keep Russian troops within his “country’s” borders. Oazu Nantoi of the Moldovan Institute for Public Policy raises the point that “being an enclave between Ukraine and the rest of the territory of Moldova, [Tiraspol] does not confine with Russia. As a result, the regime of [Transnistria] is much more vulnerable if compared to other conflict points in the post-Soviet era (Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia).”

It has become clear that while Russia will deal with any secession within its borders in the harshest manner (i.e. Chechnya), it has no problem supporting secessionist movements abroad, like in Moldova or Georgia, if these groups are pro-Moscow. Another important comparison can be made to the situation in the recently separated Serbia-Montenegro. Russia was one of the countries (as well as the People’s Republic China, Spain, Bulgaria, among others) that supported Serbia against immediate recognition of an independent Montenegro, arguing that this could encourage secessionist movements in other regions.

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36 Mungiu-Pippidi, op. cit.
Russian support for an independent Transnistria, but lack of support for an independent Montenegro.  

RUSSIA-NATO/EUROPE: MOLDOVA AND TRANSNISTRIA
IN THE BIG PICTURE

Moldova’s domestic security issues, the existence of Transnistria, as well as Chisinau’s and Tiraspol’s overall foreign policy, must be put in the context of current Russia-NATO relations. As NATO expands eastward, it now touches Russian borders through the Baltic States. The 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest did not bring the acceptance of Macedonia and Albania as members, however, it seems clear that NATO’s next push will be in southeastern Europe, and perhaps even in the Caucasus, should the Washington-friendly Georgia be accepted. This has brought the Atlantic Alliance into a clash with Russia’s aggressive foreign policy, as Moscow attempts to maintain control over its historical spheres of influence.

In southeastern Europe, current discussions center on Ukraine’s potential future as a NATO member. Most likely, Ukraine will be joining the Membership Action Plan (MAP) which is the next step on the road to membership.

Ukraine is important to NATO, the US and Russia for a number of reasons. It is geographically located next to Russia and within its borders lay

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39 One can argue, though that ethnic ties also make up some of Russia’s policies vis-à-vis Serbia and Moldova. Serbia is a Slavic nation which traditionally has regarded Russia as protector (same can be said about Bulgaria, another Slavic state). Meanwhile, Transnistria is also made up mainly ethnic-Russians (though it must be pointed out that some ethnic-Russians fought on the side of the Chisinau government during the brief secessionist violence). Hence, from this point of view, Russia has see to it to uphold its role as protector of the Slavic world, current tensions in its relationship with Ukraine notwithstanding.

40 Estonia’s anti-Russian policy, particularly regarding Soviet-era statues in the country as well as toward its ethnic Russian minority, which include former Russian military personnel, has been a source of tension between the two capitals.

41 And perhaps even Azerbaijan if Georgia is accepted and serves as a precedent and Azerbaijan maintains a Western-friendly attitude.

42 Ukrainian Foreign Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk discussed Ukraine’s NATO membership in a lengthy interview in 2007 with the Ukrainian Den newspaper. During the interview, the Ukrainian diplomat explained that

we [Ukraine] still have a very long way to accession. We should at least join the Membership Action Plan (MAP). This is the moment to tell people that this does not mean future membership in the alliance at all. For example, the state of Croatia has been implementing the MAP for nine years now. It means the distance between the membership action plan and membership itself is very long.

the ports for Russia’s Black Sea fleet. In addition, the country is an important transit point for gas and oil and as a result has a booming economy. Tensions in recent years between Moscow and Kiev revolve around Ukraine’s alleged lack of payment for the gas it purchases from Russian giant Gazprom. In 2003, there was a small conflict between Moscow and Kiev over the ownership of Tuzla Island in the Kerch Strait.

Russian General Lebed has been quoted as saying that the Dniestr region is “the key to the Balkans.” Indeed, a Moscow-friendly de facto state in Southeastern Europe that allows a continued military presence would essentially be a forward-operations base, and a security thorn and reminder for both NATO and the United States about (arguable) Russian presence. Transnistria serves as a potential deterrent for a potential NATO or U.S. military campaign against Russia through Southeastern Europe. In addition, historically-Moscow friendly Belgrade would probably feel better to know that troops from “Uncle Ivan” are not far away, as Russia has been Serbia’s historical protector, World War I being an example of this.

In 2007 the European Union carried out another expansion wave, admitting Bulgaria and Romania as its newest members, though much later than other former-Warsaw Pact states. After the NATO 2004 and EU 2007, only a handful of countries in the region remain that are neither EU nor NATO members: Serbia, Montenegro, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ukraine, and Moldova.

Thanks to the latest wave of expansions, both the EU and NATO now, literally, are bordering a state regarded as a black hole. Should Ukraine join either the EU or NATO (or both) in the coming years, there would be the awkward scenario of having Moldova, with all of its problems, state squeezed between two EU/NATO countries (the EU usually being regarded as some kind of “city on a hill” organization). “Russia is determined not to lose Moldova to NATO, and the international current energy context favors her designs.”

The United States has also begun creating a military presence for itself close to Moldova, and Russia. Washington has signed deals with Romania and Bulgaria to deploy, on a temporary basis, American troops to bases in both countries. From one point of view, American and Russian troops are

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43 After the 2008 summer war in Georgia, Russia has increased its military presence in the separatist republics. Reports include a planned naval station in Sokhumi, Abkhazia. Under the Russian Navy’s modernization program, sixteen new ships are said to be planned for delivery to the Black Sea Fleet by 2015. Socor, V. ‘A Rogue Fleet in the Black Sea,’ Eurasia Daily Monitor 5 (2007) (November 26, 2008).
44 Socor, V. ‘Isolated Moldova Being Pulled into Russian Orbit’ RFE/RL Research Report 2 (50)
45 Mungiu-Pippidi, op. cit.
The “Frozen” Southeast

now close to each other, one in Romania and the other in Transnistria, with only weak and unstable Moldova between them. Analysts conclude that the American lease of Bulgarian and Romanian bases development has altered Black Sea geopolitics.47

Nevertheless, the United States has largely not involved itself in the Moldova-Transnistria conflict. This somewhat changed on 2004 when then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made a brief stop in Moldova while en route to a NATO summit in Turkey. During the stop, Rumsfeld met with Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin and declared “certainly the obligations that were undertaken at Istanbul some five years ago need to be fulfilled.”48 The obligation he was referring to was a 1999 pledge by Russia to remove its ‘peacekeepers’ from Transnistria.

In an interesting recent development, U.S. Under Secretary of State William Burns declared at a 2008 OSCE meeting in Helsinki that “Russia’s suspension of its implementation (of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, CFE) and its military presence in Moldova and Georgia are major concerns.”49 A week before these declarations, General Bladimir Boldirev, commander of the Russian land forces, visited the Transnistrian region; the declared goal of the visit was to inspect garrisons of Russian peacekeepers.50

According to Oazu Nantoi, from Chisinau’s Institute for Public Policy, the Transnistrian conflict “is a geopolitical conflict used by Russia to keep Moldova under its control and to avoid the enlargement of NATO, the consolidation of GUUAM, etc.”51 The researcher defines the EU and United States’s behavior towards Russia as “cautious” vis-à-vis Moldova. While this is most likely true, the non-interference policy that Brussels (EU) and the Washington has towards Moldova, comes into collision with the expansion that Brussels (NATO) and Washington are having vis-à-vis Southeastern Europe, the Balkans and the Black Sea.

A comparison can be made between Moldova and other former Soviet states due to their uneasy relationship with Moscow after the collapse of the USSR. For example Estonia has maintained a sometimes tense relationship with Moscow. Like Moldova and Georgia, “[Estonia’s] smallness makes it very difficult to defend [it] against a potential aggressor with military means

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49 US sees Russian troops in Georgia, Moldova as threat Agence France Presse (5 December 2008).
50 Transnistrian Conflict Updates (Chisinau, Moldova). Association for Participatory Democracy ADEPT (10 December 2008).
or to pursue an independent line in international affairs.” Unlike the two other countries, however, Estonia does not have a secessionist problem. Georgia has two, and the summer 2008 war proves that Georgia’s military might, even with Western training, cannot match Russia’s current military capabilities. Moldova is lucky in this sense that it does not physically border Russia, however its armed forces are too weak to stand up to the 14th Army. This may explain why Voronin has in recent years pursued Western support but has avoided, unlike Georgia’s Mikheil Saakashvili, hinting at a new military confrontation with Tiraspol.

Analysts argue that, “as a de facto state, Transnistria should be regarded as a security threat if for no other reason that there is no outside control [. . .] over Tiraspol’s impressive security structures.” The next section will discuss more of Transnistria’s realities, highlighting the necessity for international oversight, particularly as the regime in de facto power can only be catalogued as criminal and dangerous.

TRANSNISTRIA: CRIME, CORRUPTION, AND IMPUNITY

Leaving aside the issue of Russia-Europe security tensions, Transnistria is a security issue for Europe due to the organized crime that occurs, including ongoing human right violations at the hands of the mafia-style “government” of Voronin and his family and entourage.

During a visit to Transnistria, reporter Simon Reeve for the British daily The Mirror said that “Transnistria has a Wild West feel and is a centre for smuggling [. . .] Even Interpol doesn’t operate there.” Racketing includes poultry, a “common scam is to smuggle American chicken-meat in and out of Ukraine’s protected home market, at a profit of some euro700 ($950) per tonne.” A commonly known ‘fact’ is that Transnistrians eat 12 times as much chicken as Germans do, judging from the tonnes of poultry that are imported. Moldovan and Western officials argue that corrupt Ukrainian custom officials allow contraband in and out of Transnistria through the Ukrainian port of Ilyichesk.
Anti-Smirnov organizations, reporters, and politicians virtually do not exist in Transnistria. A couple of documentaries have reported how anti-Smirnov Transnistrians are regularly threatened and harassed, ending with such individuals having to move “across the river” to Chisinau. According to different human rights groups, over 200 Transnistrians are missing, presumed dead at the hands of Tiraspol for having carried out some kind of action that was considered anti-Transnistrian, making them enemies and targets of the regime. A member of the Helsinki Committee group, M. Belinski, mentioned during an interview how he was kidnapped and harassed by unknown gunmen, who took his passport and other documents, pressing a gun to his head so he would not return to Transnistria to attend a trial.58

The pseudo-state is also a major hub for human trafficking and abuses; much has been reported about the lucrative prostitution business in Tiraspol.Prostitutes who manage to escape their pimps cross the river to Moldova where an aid center has been set up. Records of physical abuses against prostitutes in Transnistria have been well recorded.59 It seems clear these prostitute networks operate with the acceptance, probably even cooperation, of Smirnov.

Poverty is as harsh as in Moldova. A reporter who visited Transnistria explains that “only here [Tiraspol] you see new buildings anywhere, they always have the same name: Sheriff.”60 Smirnov and his family own this chain, which includes supermarkets, sports stores, vodka, and even a football team; hence the lion’s share of the local economy.

An important figure for Transnistrian daily life is Dimitri Soin, the leader of an ultra-radical youth movement advocating full secession from Moldova and uniting with Russia, as well as a member of the local MGB (Transnistria’s intelligence service). The Argentine revolutionary, Ernesto “Che” Guevara serves as the group’s role model. The documentary Transnistria—Europe’s black hole makes a point to demonstrate Soin’s self-confidence, bordering on arrogance, in his Transnistrian hideout.61 The documentary highlights that Soin’s nationalistic youth party is more radical than even Smirnov himself vis-à-vis independence from Moldova.

What is of concern is the man’s past. He has an arrest warrant from Interpol.62 In an interview for a documentary, the man defines himself as a

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kind of Yasser Arafat who has been squeezed to only be able to live freely in his residence (for Soin that would be Transnistria and Russia) as he is unfairly wanted by security agencies everywhere else.63

Weapons trafficking is perhaps the most controversial issue regarding Transnistria, mainly because of the lack of hard evidence regarding this dangerous activity. The weaponry that allegedly is being transferred abroad to conflict zones in the Balkans, Chechnya, and in Africa comes from two sources:

- It is produced by Transnistrian factories
- It comes from Soviet-era weapon stockpiles. By the end of the Soviet Union, the retreating Soviet forces withdrew eastwards from East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia and concentrated their unused weaponry in several stockpiles. The largest in South Eastern Europe are located in Transnistria, particularly in the Kolbasna munitions depot. The weapons donated to Transnistrians separatists during the 1992 conflict came from such arsenals. According to Russian data, the quantity of munitions in the stocks of the 14th Army currently amount to 21,000 tons of equipment; about half of the 42,000 tons that existed in 1994.

Accusations about the smuggled weaponry ranges from sub-machine guns to missile parts. According to reports, as many as 70 portable surface-to-air Igla missiles disappeared from an ex-Soviet military stockpile in Transnistria.64 In an interview, former Moldovan Defense Minister I. Costas explains that Tiraspol’s major revenue come from exporting weaponry, including Kalashnikovs assault rifles, land mines, and grenades.65 He explains that cement, for example, is used as a pretext for exports, which include weaponry.66

Part of the problem is the stockpiles of Russian weaponry are almost literally in open air, with very little supervision by Russian forces. International weapon supervisors, namely from the OSCE, are more often than not denied access to view these stockpiles and record if any of the weaponry is actually missing, as Tiraspol can deny the supervisors’ entry whenever it pleases Smirnov.67

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63 Transnistria—Europe’s Black Hole, Available <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0iFK03hrKs&feature=related> (accessed February 17, 2009) (see 1min 00sec onwards). Soin is not the only Transnistrian” who is wanted by Western security agencies. Smirnov himself as well as his cabinet cannot enter Europe for fear of being arrested. In addition, Vladimir Antyufeev, head of Transnistria’s MGB, is wanted by Interpol for a series of murders in Latvia when he was a KGB official. Transnistria: Trafficking Arms on Europe’s Doorstep, Available <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RB9U4_f9Ug&feature=related> (accessed February 19, 2009) (see 1min 55sec onwards).

64 “Gangsters Cornered, Western Governments Doubt the Authorities’ Undocumented Explanation That the Missiles Were Destroyed After Water Leaked on Them.


66 Ibid.

Transnistrian “officials” continuously deny that they are involved in weapons smuggling, arguing that they not have enough to even arm themselves. Moldovan officials offer the contrary position. In an interview with the Western media, Russian General Lebed provided some breakthrough news. During the interview the Russian General acknowledged that weaponry out of the main weapons ammo depot in Kolbasna was unaccounted for, including suitcase bombs that could contain mini-nuclear warheads, and he had no knowledge of their current location.68

Former KGB and current MGB official Soin has himself being accused of trafficking nuclear warheads.69 In a documentary, Brian Johnson Thomas, an arms expert writing for the British newspaper The Sunday Times, says he met with Transnistrian weapons traffickers, posing as the representative of a North African insurgent group, and he was offered three small dirty bombs for $500,000.70 The arms expert would later recognize Soin, the former KGB agent and now leader of the radical youth movement, as the person he had met who had offered him the weaponry. However, Johnson Thomas never got to see the actual bombs.

Another source of accusations by Moldovan officials regarding Transnistrian weapon production are Transnistrian factories, to which no one seems to have access. According to Tiraspol those companies are either in disuse or have been reconfigured. In a documentary, a journalist was shown around 1/3 of the Eletromarsh industrial complex where the foreman showed industrial equipment being built.71 According to Moldovan and OSCE officials, they are producing conventional weaponry, including Kalashnikov rifles, Makarov pistols, mortars and rocket launchers. Tiraspol repeatedly denies access to these manufacturing plants, adding to the mystery and myths of what is exactly being produced in them.72

In November 2005, as proof of growing EU interest in the conflict, Brussels created the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM). The goal of EUBAM is to monitor the Ukrainian border with Transnistria to combat any kind of illicit activities going on there. As reported by the International Crisis Group, EUBAM’s findings “suggest that Transnistria is not the arms and drug

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69 Transnistria—Europe’s Black Hole. Documentary Available <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0iFK03hrKs&feature=related> (accessed February 17, 2009) (see 00min 14sec onwards).
72 In an interview with Transnistria’s depute industries minister, the “official” explains that during the 1992 war Transnistrian plants did produce weaponry for the insurgents, but these are no longer in service as the Transnistrian armed forces have more than enough equipment. Ibid. Available <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KKtD4nmFac&feature=PlayList&p=1907AE7A31FDC21B&index=2> (accessed February 19, 2009) (see 17min. onwards).
trafficking black hole critics have long contended [there is no] evidence of organized arms smuggling and only minor drug trafficking.” The report findings are controversial as they clash with accusations coming of Chisinau about Tiraspol’s lucrative and ongoing weapons trafficking business.

GEORGIA AND THE RIPPLE EFFECT

The August 2008 events in Georgia, another frozen conflict, namely the incursion of Russian troops into Georgian territory and the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent republics may have, in the near future, repercussions in Moldova. The significance of the developments in Georgia vis-à-vis Moldova include:

1. Russia is willing to resort to military force if necessary to protect its interests, be its national territorial integrity or the territorial integrity of its “allies.” This is important considering that there are already Russian troops, under the veil of “peacekeeping,” in Moldova. Russian nationalist leaders may see it as a matter of survival to maintain influence and friendly governments abroad. As NATO and the United States expand their influence throughout southeastern Europe, areas like Transnistria will be of great importance for Russia’s security strategy.

2. Russia may resort to recognition of a pro-Moscow secessionist region. So far the Kremlin has stopped short of doing this with Transnistria, but events in Georgia set a precedent that Moscow may resort to this, which could be a terminal blow for Moldova’s political integrity.

3. President Voronin and the Moldovan leadership should not make a faux pas and over-read whatever support they may have from Western powers and avoid harsh military-oriented decisions vis-à-vis Transnistria. While Georgia is Washington-friendly and has been rumored to be a potential NATO member, Moldova falls less in the scale of importance for either the United States NATO or, in spite of some initiatives, the European Union. It is in the best interest of the Moldovan leadership to find a negotiated solution to the Transnistrian issue, since, in the unlikely scenario that violence erupts again,


74 Interestingly, seeking to extend its reach into Russia’s backyard, the European Union proposed deeper ties with six former Soviet nations. The proposed new “Eastern Partnership” with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus is the boldest outreach to ex-Communist nations since the EU expanded in 2004 and 2007 to embrace the Baltic and all the former Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe. Castle, S. ‘EU Proposes Deeper Ties to 6 Ex-Soviet Nations International Herald Tribune, 3 (December 2008). A senior European diplomat, who was not authorized to speak publicly on the subject, said that if the EU did not engage with these countries, there was a growing likelihood that Moscow would. If you don’t offer these countries a future, there’s always Russia, he said.
the Moldovan government and military would find themselves without allies to ask for aid and fighting Russian-backed Transnistrian military forces.

**TRANSNISTRIA, A KALININGRAD OF THE SOUTH?**

Russia supports the Transnistrian government, however, it continuously stops short of recognizing it as a separate state, probably because it does not want to promote separatist feelings within its own borders. In an attempt to perhaps gain some publicity and support, as well as to demonstrate Moscow’s support for their cause, Smirnov, as well as Abkhazia’s “President” Sergey Bagapsh and South Ossetia’s “President” Eduard Kokoyty, appeared together on Russia’s Channel One Europe TV in November 2006. In the Russian Television program called *Judge for Yourselves* the three leaders made a case for the self-determination and independence of their respective states, arguing that these secessionist movements were “a defense mechanism against our annihilation.”

It is unlikely that renewed military actions between Moldova and Transnistria could begin again in the near future, especially because Chisinau understands, particularly due to the 2008 summer war in Georgia, that Moscow will actively support Transnistria, as it did in 1992, and little aid can be expected from NATO. Currently, the Russian military is beefing up its presence in the recently recognized regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which signifies that Moscow is looking at a permanent present in those “countries,” under the cover of being protectors of their independence. No such actions have been taken in Transnistria, particularly because Chisinau has not provoked Tiraspol or Moscow into carrying out such operations.

Whether or not Transnistria does become a “Kaliningrad of the South” (a Russian enclave between Poland and Lithuania, where Russia holds a significant military force) will depend on the development of Russian-NATO/U.S. relations in the near future. If the relationship continues to deteriorate, like, for example, the Obama presidency pushing for the construction of a missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, Russia may probably continue building Forward Operation Locations (FOL) bases, in Kaliningrad, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and, perhaps, Transnistria.

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The Russian military is renowned for its constant secrecy, so it is unclear if a bigger presence in Transnistria (as peacekeepers or any other label the Kremlin wishes to utilize) will over-extend the Russian military’s capabilities. There is certainly plenty of military hardware in the Transnistrian stockpiles, but qualified troops and officers may come up short, especially as the Russian government has announced plans that it aims to downsize the size of its military.77

Finally there is the issue of the 1999 agreement that says that Russia is actually supposed to withdraw its troops from Transnistria, which it has yet to do. Sending more troops, instead of taking them out, may alienate its relationship with NATO. At the same time, governments across Europe were silent, essentially giving their tacit acceptance, to Russian military operations against Georgia, including Russian warships leaving the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol en route to Georgia.

What does this add up to? More than anything that Transnistria should not be regarded yet as a “Kaliningrad of the South” as, in spite of some initiatives and declarations, neither Tiraspol nor Moscow currently wish to take that extra step to attempt to unite Transnistria to Russia as an enclave. However, worst case scenarios should be contemplated, should situations arise that may spiral into violence. For example, Transnistria could declare independence, which could lead into a new war with Moldova, which could push the 14th Army into active combat on the side of the Transnistrians.

Smirnov appears to have little interest in joining Russia as he prefers to be the heat of state of a mini-state, rather than an official vassal to Moscow. Nevertheless, the cornerstone of his regime’s existence is the Russian military, hence he cannot afford relations with Moscow to grow cool, nor afford the 14th Army to leave Transnistria.

CONCLUSIONS: PAWN TO ROOK

It is sometimes ironic that defining events occur in places not traditionally in the mainstream of international media and policy making. Kuwait became a household name after Iraq’s invasion in 1991. Rwanda gained international prominence only after the 1994 murder of over 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The year that the First Chechen War broke out reminded people that Russia and its predecessors did not make up one ethnically or ideologically homogenous empire. How many people knew that Afghanistan was controlled by an ultra-conservative, violent group calling itself the Taliban before 11 September 2001? Today, people realize how painful, if not outright

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impossible, it is to lead a normal life in Zimbabwe or Sudan. Similarly, Moldova does not appear on the radar of many, save Moscow, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Kiev and Bucharest.

Nevertheless, Moldova is an important issue that needs to be observed. At the micro level, it is a frozen conflict that mixes the lines of separatism pushed by ethnic issues as well as promoted by selfish interests of individuals like Smirnov, a former factory worker, who wishes to remain indefinitely in power. Separatist and secessionist conflicts are widespread in the post-Cold War world, though they are not necessarily linked, from Sri Lanka’s Tamils to France’s Corsica; from Turkey’s Kurdish population to Indonesia’s Aceh region. How the Moldova issue plays out will set a precedent for how other separatists conflicts are solved, especially in which Moscow has interests. The Serbia-Kosovo issue ultimately ended in full secession by the breakaway region, which probably makes Tiraspol leaders believe that they can attain a similar goal at some point in the future. Even if secession cannot be achieved, some level of separatism probably could, though an ongoing status quo probably serves Smirnov’s growing oligarchy just as well.

Regarding security issues, Moldova will continue to be one due to the lack of control of its secessionist region, Transnistria. Crimes including prostitution are issues which even affected neighboring Romania and Bulgaria when they applied to the EU for membership. As Transnistria is outside the control of Interpol or other security agencies, this, indeed, is a black hole where crime of any kind can occur and can affect, and does affect, neighboring states. Regarding weapons trafficking, while data on this is often contradictory, huge amounts of Soviet-era ammo stockpiles do exist and they should be removed as soon as possible, and Transnistrian industries should be checked by international monitors to ensure that they are, as Tiraspol officials argue, not producing any type of conventional weaponry.

At the macro level, namely Russia-NATO/Washington relations, Moldova is nothing but a pawn, important not because of anything going on within its borders but because of a changing international political and security spectrum. A Moscow-friendly, independent (or even de facto independent) Transnistria provides Moscow with a forward operations base in Southeastern Europe, close to Serbia, the Black Sea and keeping Ukraine under check from two sides. On the other hand, loosing Transnistria to the West would mean the almost complete consolidation of the region in NATO’s favor. In the event of a war between Russia and NATO (which would most likely be called World War III), Southeastern Europe would be a critical operations theater necessary to cement control of the Black Sea and the Dardanelles, which controls maritime traffic in and out of the Black Sea into the Mediterranean Sea.

In 2005, Estonian Socialist Marianne Mikko, member of the European Parliament who chaired the EU-Moldova Parliamentary Cooperation
Committee, declared that “the existence of this running sore should not be tolerated in a country that is likely to be a neighbor of the EU after Romania’s accession in 2007.” Years after this declaration, with Romania as an EU/NATO member and discussion on Ukraine’s future in Brussels (vis-à-vis both the EU and NATO), the ‘running sore,’ also known the Moldova-Transnistria, continues to exist.

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