

## **The Moldavian-Dnestr Republic: A Geo-Political Game**

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The author examines the rival claims of Russia and Romania to the ancient principality of Moldova (Moldavia) and the 1992 Dnestr conflict.

**Key Words:** Moldavia, Russia, Romania, Ukraine, Trans-Dnestr.

The seeds of perestroika sown in the 1980's unleashed strong aspirations for national independence in the non-Russian republics. Perestroika also sharpened the desire of the Russians living outside Russia to preserve their positions and to keep the country they were living in under Moscow. Russians in various republics were left somehow to fend for themselves and to defend Moscow's interests. In the process, bloody confrontations erupted in the Caucasus, in Central Asia, and in the Trans-Dnestr region of Moldova.<sup>1</sup>

The 1992 Dnestr war was apparently triggered by local Russians, but with the full encouragement and assistance of Moscow. Russia wanted to keep Moldova under control, Romania at bay, and Ukraine under threat. The question is what did the war accomplish?

### **From the Trans-Dnestr Region to the Dnestr Republic**

The eastern half of the old Romanian Principality of Moldova, or Bessarabia as it was better known for many years, occupies the land between the Prut and Dnestr Rivers. The province was annexed by the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century. It became part of modern Romania in 1918, and was reannexed by the Soviet Union together with Northern Bukovina in 1940. In spite of having been a Soviet Republic for over four decades, no reputed scholar doubted its Romanian nature. The Trans-Dnestr region of Moldova is a different story. Except for short periods of time during the Middle Ages, this area has never been part of Moldova or modern Romania. Moscow, however, began to use this region for geo-political reasons very early during the Soviet era. In 1924 when Bessarabia was part of Romania,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper the terms Moldova and Moldavia are used interchangeably.

the Soviet Union set up a Moldavian autonomous republic in this area of Ukraine with the avowed purpose of reannexing Bessarabia. When Moscow reannexed the province in 1940 and again in 1944, it redrew its boundaries in a very treacherous way. It gave Ukraine the northern and southern reaches of Bessarabia together with most of the territory of the Moldavian autonomous republic. And to complicate the matter, it gave to the new Moldavian Republic a small portion of the left bank of the Dnestr where Tiraspol is located. This is the beginning of a shrewd geo-political game that has served Moscow well for 70 years, but which created a real nightmare in the end.

As long as the Soviet Union was strong and repressive, no republic could think of independence and national boundaries. When the Soviet Union disintegrated and each republic became independent, Moscow began the tedious process of adapting to the new geo-political reality. With regard to Moldova, Moscow tried first to re-attract it to the new "community," but Kishinev refused to join all the functions of the new union pursued by Russia. Instead, the Moldavians organized themselves, elected new leaders, and began to fight for their own goals. In a few years time, they reasserted their Romanian origin and they reimposed the Latin script and the Romanian language. Moreover, for the first time since the 1940 annexation, they began to speak freely of the possibility of reunification with Romania.

The Russians of Moldavia began to show the first signs of concern and opposition towards a possible reunification of Moldova with Romania in the late 1980's and especially after the 1989 Romanian revolution. The Russians complained openly that they might be compelled to learn Romanian and could be discriminated against. They sensed that Moldova would eventually reunite with Romania and they rejected the prospect of losing their privileges. It appears, nonetheless, that the Russians inside Moldova were more inclined to accept such a possibility, but those living on the left bank of the Dnestr opposed it bitterly.

At the beginning, without having any reason to revolt against the Moldavian authorities, the Tiraspol Russians instigated the small Gagauz minority of southern Moldova to declare a separate state. The Russians themselves had brought this small minority to the

former Bessarabia from present-day Bulgaria during the 19th century. The Gagauz are of Turkish origin, but of Christian Orthodox faith. During the Soviet years, they were induced to Russify and many of them became pro-Russian.

Confronted with the first rebellion by the Gagauz after their leaders declared a separate republic in August 1990, Moldova formed special armed volunteer units and sent them to reclaim the region. In spite of the substantial financial, moral, and military assistance received from Tiraspol, the Gagauz did not have any chance of sustaining an independent state. That convinced certain Russian circles in Tiraspol and probably Moscow that if they wanted to pursue their own separate agenda Trans-Dnestr had to split from Moldova.<sup>1</sup>

The self-styled Dnestr Soviet Socialist Republic, also called the Dnestr Moldavian Republic, was proclaimed in Tiraspol in September 1990. It was promptly rebuffed by the government in Kishinev, and it was never recognized internationally as a legitimate state. In December 1990 Moscow, still under Mikhail Gorbachev, also declared the republic illegal. The newly-elected Russian authorities in Tiraspol, however, convened an extraordinary people's congress and decided to ignore Gorbachev and to establish their own state structures. The new authorities were in control of Tiraspol and other smaller industrial centers in the vicinity and claimed the entire area of Moldova located on the left bank of Dnestr.

The Trans-Dnestr region is a strip of land 2,500 square miles in area. It is about 125 miles long and 10-15 miles wide and makes up one-eighth of Moldova's territory. It is a rich agricultural region and produces a large share of Moldova's agricultural output. The only large city in the region is Tiraspol, but the new Dnestr authorities also claim Tighina (called Benderi by the Russians) and its surrounding area on the right bank of the river.<sup>2</sup>

During some four decades of unchallenged Soviet domination, Moscow built industry and sent to Moldova hundreds of thousands of Russians, Ukrainians, and members of other nationalities. While many of them went to Kishinev and other cities inside Moldova, others went to Tiraspol, which became a jumping board for Soviet industrial managers and party activists. The new Russian migrants did not have to learn the local language because they were the masters of the U.S.S.R., and they lived very much as a superimposed class of privileged people. And whereas some Russians who migrated deep

inside Moldova learned something about the surrounding people, those in Tiraspol did not undergo any change of mentality. They were simply Russians living in a Russified city outside Russia, but somehow "outside" Moldova as well.

The last Soviet census of 1989 and various other data show that Moldavians were still the largest ethnic group in the Trans-Dnestr region, but no longer a clear majority except in rural areas. In 1989, for instance, the region had some 800,000 inhabitants of whom 41 percent were Moldavians, as compared to 31 percent Ukrainians, and only 22 percent Russians. Moldavians were still in the majority in the rural areas of the five districts of the region. According to the same census, Tiraspol had 182,000 inhabitants and was the political and industrial center of the region. Before the war broke out in 1992, Moldavians made up only about 18 percent of its population. During the Soviet years, the former Romanian town of Tighina was also transformed into an industrial center and was taken over by migrants. Consequently, in 1989 only 29 percent of its 130,000 people were ethnic Moldavians.<sup>3</sup> (Table 1)

The Trans-Dnestr region is important to the disputing parties and to Russia in several ways. First, the government in Kishinev cannot pretend to be in control of an independent republic as long as it is incapable of exercising full control over its territory. Second, since the previous authorities built industry in this region, before the collapse of the Soviet Union Trans-Dnestr produced one-third of Moldova's industrial output and more than half of its consumer goods. Third, Moldova receives most of its raw materials and energy from Tiraspol or through this territory. And if the Russian authorities in Tiraspol decide to interrupt the supply of energy to the rest of Moldova, the entire population would suffer, and Kishinev in particular would be most affected. And last but not least, what would happen to this territory if Moldova were to reunite with Romania?

### **Local Aspirations and Objectives**

The Trans-Dnestr Moldavians are a special case because they feel somehow alienated from the Romanian nation. They have never been part of modern Romania and they have been subjected to a high degree of Russification. As a result, their identity is equally affected by their true ethnic aspirations, as well as by the reality of

intermingling daily with their Ukrainian and Russian neighbors. And being somehow "outside" Moldova, they are afraid that in case of reunification with Romania, they will be left out again. Thus, most of them want to stay attached to Moldova and oppose any dismemberment of the republic.

The Ukrainian population of the left bank was traditionally rural and only in recent decades began to move to cities. During the Soviet years, the Ukrainians were submitted to an intense process of Russification, but they continued to look at the Ukraine as their country of origin. The declaration of independence of the Dnestr region took them by surprise and caught them in a delicate situation. One thing is certain however; they have no reason to pay allegiance to the Tiraspol Russians. In the past, they lived peacefully with the Moldavians, but if they were to choose, they would rather choose Ukraine.

Another ethnic group which is small but prominent in cities, is the Jewish group. In 1990 there were around 12,000 Jews in the Dnestr region. Although they were generally Russified, they were mostly pro-Moldavian and neutral in the conflict. The events, however, would not leave anybody alone.

The Russian population of the Dnestr area is overwhelmingly of recent origin and they are confronted with many delicate problems. They make a strong and active group in Tiraspol, the capital of the region, and other cities, but they are still a minority in the area. They also hang on to the Marxist ideology as a political way of life and as justification for claiming the multi-ethnic region.

Tiraspol itself was founded 200 years ago as a military settlement of the old Russian Empire and since then has remained largely a Russian key-city in this corner of Russia and the former U.S.S.R. The city is also close to the strategic Ukrainian sea-port of Odessa, itself highly Russified, and to the Danube, and it is an important military stronghold. It has even been suggested that the Russian armies from the Tiraspol area, backed by Moscow, could keep the entire Balkan Peninsula under control. And initially this was probably the geo-strategic idea behind the new Dnestr Republic; a Russian lever aimed at keeping Moldova under Moscow, Ukraine under control, and the Balkans under scrutiny.

The Dnestr Republic became in a way a Soviet Union in miniature, a dream land for frustrated Russian communists, and a

new hope for embittered Soviet generals. Actually, many of its chief players, from the self-proclaimed president, Igor Smirnov, to the former commander of the 14th Army, General Alexandr Lebed, spoke frequently of reviving the old Soviet Union.

The leader of the new Dnestr Republic appears to be Igor Smirnov, a Russian born in Siberia, who arrived in Tiraspol only in 1987. It is alleged that actually he was assigned to Tiraspol to create a Russian republic. Smirnov was first promoted to various managerial industrial jobs, and then elected to political positions of leadership.<sup>4</sup> To give the appearance of inter-ethnic harmony and social justice, the new leadership recruited several non-Russians and even a few Romanians at the top echelon of the republic. Among them was Stefan Kitsak, a Romanian from Northern Bukovina described as a hardline communist and a professional soldier; Grigore Maracuta, the President of the Supreme Soviet of the self-proclaimed republic; Alexandru Caraman, vice-president of the republic; and a few others.<sup>5</sup> But their presence at the top of the new authorities did not prevent the persecution of the Romanian inhabitants of the area. It only proved that the new state entity was not set up because of fear of ethnic discrimination, but for other reasons. In fact, Lebed, himself an instrumental player in this intricate conflict and scheme, stressed on many occasions the geo-political nature of the conflict.

### **Kishinev, Tiraspol, Bucharest, Moscow: A Delicate Interplay**

Romania began to treat with special vigor the question of Bessarabia and Bukovina immediately after the December 1989 revolution. The media simply demanded the return of the lost provinces, but the government took a more cautious stand. The new Romanian Prime Minister Petre Roman, for example, gave an interview in November 1990 to the German magazine *Die Welt*, stating that Romania's task was to fight for the independence of Moldova, and he added that reunification was entirely possible. Moscow promptly labeled the interview as "an unacceptable interference in the domestic affairs of the U.S.S.R."<sup>6</sup>

Caught in between Bucharest, Moscow, and the rebellious Dnestr Republic, Kishinev resorted to a cautious policy and opted for two Romanian states, but things did not evolve smoothly. Besides, Moscow did everything to split the Romanian majority of the

republic. Gradually, the Moldavian stand cracked, and reformist Prime Minister Mircea Druc was replaced with the more pragmatic Valeri Muravski. It was actually a split between the president, who tilted toward appeasing Moscow, and the Moldavian Popular Front, which was openly pro-Romanian. The ensuing struggle paralyzed the Moldavian Parliament and greatly reduced the power of the Popular Front. The new government, nevertheless, pledged to pursue the same policy of reform and gradual integration with Romania.<sup>7</sup>

On 26-28 June 1991, the Moldavian Parliament sponsored the most daring event to date, the International Ribbentrop-Molotov Conference, which denounced the 1939 Soviet-German Pact that provided for the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and Bukovina. Well organized and well attended, the conference was a great success. Speaker after speaker denounced the Pact and demanded a remedy. The chairman of the Moldavian Parliament, Alexandru Mosanu, declared afterward that the conference was the most important event of his life until that date. The conference was immediately denounced by certain Russian circles, but the course of independence was set for Moldova and reunification with Romania became a real possibility. (8)

The Romanian foreign minister stated again while on a trip to Japan that he expected reunification to be achieved in three stages: formation of a cultural confederation, followed by an economic integration, and, eventually, a German-model merger. The failed Soviet coup of August 1991 led to the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., precipitated the situation, and allowed Moldova to declare its official independence on August 27, 1991. The declaration was adopted almost unanimously, and President Snegur stated that reunification with Romania was Moldova's long-term goal. (9 Confronted with Russian pressure from within and from Moscow, and faced with a grim economic state, Kishinev's attitude toward an early reunification started to cool and President Snegur began to put off the idea.

Kishinev also adopted a very conciliatory tone toward Moldova's ethnic minorities and embarked on a sustained effort to secure international recognition. The Moldavian government provided support for a Russian Cultural Center and for a Foundation for Slavic Culture. It also offered to help the Ukrainian minority who was bitterly complaining against the previous Russification efforts. The government also set up the first Gagauz University and pledged to



print books and offer courses in the Gagauz language. And for the first time, in 1991 Kishinev published a lengthy history of Moldova's Jews covering 600 years of Jewish presence in the republic. In its efforts for a smooth transition to full independence or for possible reunion with Romania, Moldova went out of its way to comply with the provisions of the Helsinki Accords. (10 At the same time, the pro-Romanian Moldavian leaders advocated a pro-Western attitude, but President Snegur began to reorient Moldova to the East.

The new attitude of President Snegur did not help much. In mid-December 1991, Moldova's mission in Moscow was attacked by a mob of some 300 people who accused Moldova of persecuting the Russians. (11 It was the beginning of an open confrontation with the Dnestr region. It was also the beginning of a split between some Moldavian leaders who advocated a quick reunification with Romania, more moderate leaders who advocated caution, and those who out of fear or personal interest preferred independence. In the meantime, the atmosphere in the Dnestr region grew more tense, and the local Russian leaders began to recruit armed volunteers and to prepare for war.

Still popular with the Moldavians, Snegur called for direct presidential elections and won with an overwhelming majority. To bolster his chances, two days before the elections Snegur rallied the Moldavian leaders and denounced the 14th Army of the Odessa Military District. He accused this army of overt aggression against Moldova, of distributing armaments to extremist elements including criminals, and of keeping the population under siege. The Russian leaders of the Dnestr region boycotted the elections and held their own referendum for separate independence several days before the presidential elections. Many Romanians of the region who refused to participate in the referendum were hunted down and beaten up by armed Russian gangs. (12)

If Moscow was not directly involved in the conflict, it was still confronted with a difficult geo-political dilemma. Should it ever relinquish the former Romanian lands, the Trans-Dnestr region would either go to Ukraine, or try to become independent on its own as it did. Such an outcome, however, would pose a big challenge to Russian-Ukrainian relations. From Moscow's point of view, the ideal solution would be to preserve the status quo in a future federation



with Russia, but this was no longer certain. Thus, Moscow and the Russians appeared torn apart between equally unattractive alternatives.

It is worth noting that rational Russian voices suggested in the past that the entire area should be returned to Romania. Now, again one such voice made a similar suggestion in the Russian weekly *Golos Natsii*. It stated that "Moldova's reunification with its ancestral motherland, Romania, is an inevitable historical process that will be accomplished sooner or later." It also said that this was essential for the stability of the region, but it predicted that "during this period, conservative and separatist forces will try to prevent this from happening in various ways." (13)

The leaders of the Dnestr region viewed the situation mostly from Russian and communist points of view. First, they urged Russia to guarantee that it would never allow Moldova to reunite with Romania. Then, in May 1992 Tiraspol organized an "all-Union" Congress of workers aimed at reestablishing the old Soviet Union, including its economy, ideology, army, and territory. And to top everything else, the Russian leaders in Tiraspol admitted openly when they received the leaders of the Crimea Russians that they intended to create "Novorossia," a new Russian state that would stretch from Crimea to the Dnestr. (14)

### **From Enthusiasm to Gloom**

The beginning of 1992 was a bad time for Moldova. Armed detachments of the self-declared Dnestr Republic seized large quantities of heavy military equipment from the Russian units stationed near Tiraspol and openly challenged the Moldavian authorities. In many cases, the weapons, ammunition, and equipment were actually handed to them by elements of the 14th Army. Ion Costas, Moldova's Minister of Internal Affairs, denounced the situation and condemned the provocations of the "hardline communists" in Tiraspol and the "reactionary circles in Moscow" who supported them. (15) The provocations, nevertheless, continued, and the region strengthened its military power with a national guard and with special Cossack units. Soon thereafter armed violence became common.

One of the first victims of the conflict was a Moldavian collective farm chairman of the left bank, killed by members of the

new Dnestr guard. In February 1992, guard and Cossack units also launched systematic attacks against the region's Moldavian police. The fiercest attacks were directed against the right bank city of Tighina, and gradually, the conflict escalated and the number of casualties increased. With the conflict getting out of hand, thousands of Moldavians demonstrated in front of the Parliament in Kishinev, and accused President Snegur of passivity and of delaying the process of establishing a national army. At the same time, a group of Moldavians from Dubosari on the left bank of Dnestr broke into a Soviet military installation and took a number of weapons to arm themselves. As a response, Smirnov declared a state of emergency in the region under his control. Tension reached Tiraspol, too, where a strike was organized by activist Russian women who called the soldiers of the 14th Army to join in fighting against Moldova. Thereafter, fights would start and stop, and cease-fire agreements would be continuously violated. And in spite of claims of neutrality, the 14th Russian Army was soon identified as the main culprit in the conflict. (16)

During this period, Romania appealed several times for calm, and the leaders of Moldova rushed to Bucharest for urgent consultations. Romania also joined Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine to guarantee the cease-fire and to find a peaceful solution. Meanwhile, Boris Yeltsin signed a decree to transfer the 14th Army inside Russia, but either he never intended to transfer it, or worse, his decree was ignored. To complicate the situation, the Russian vice president of the time, Alexandr Rutskoi, paid a surprise visit to Tiraspol on April 5 and declared that "the Dnestr Republic exists and must exist." Back in Moscow the next day, he called for Russia to grant immediate diplomatic recognition to the new republic.(17)

Snegur accused the 14th Army of direct involvement in the war and provided evidence to prove his charges of mercenary participation. A Russian mercenary declared on Moldova's television that the Russian security service was recruiting people from among convicts to fight in Moldova. The participation of the 14th Russian Army became more visible, too, and many prominent Russians began to express strong support for the Dnestr Republic. For example, General Albert Makashov, a known communist and ultranationalist Russian, arrived in Tiraspol in May 1992, and was appointed adviser

to the president of the republic. Then, the vice president of Russia declared that Russians in the Dnestr region were faced with genocide and appealed for help. Consequently, more volunteers and Cossacks arrived in the disputed region and the Dnestr began to acquire international notoriety.(18

Ever since perestroika was launched, and especially during these difficult years, the Western countries took a cautious and conciliatory attitude toward Moscow. Following the dismemberment of the Soviet Union and the declarations of independence of various republics, the United States also took a cautious but realistic position. The American Government made it clear that it expected a transition to democracy and free markets in the new republics, as well as full respect for human rights and protection for minorities. With regard to Moldova, Washington adopted a friendly attitude, while implying that the possible union with Romania was an internal matter of the Romanian people. Early in February 1992, Secretary of State James Baker paid a visit to Kishinev, praised Moldova for its respect for minorities, promised international support, and invited President Snegur to Washington. With regard to the growing military conflict in the Dnestr region, the State Department praised the "admirable restraint" of the Government of Moldova in trying to solve the problem and insisted on a peaceful solution. The U.S. Senate also approved a resolution of support for Moldova. And in spite of the fighting, the annual report on human rights for 1992 issued by the State Department was also favorable to the Government of Moldova. (19 Yet, nothing could prevent the eruption of war.

### **A War of Words and War of Guns**

The summer of 1992 witnessed an upsurge of violent conflicts throughout the southern tier of the former U.S.S.R. And while the conflict in Moldova slowly became a full fledged war, Moscow, Kishinev, and Bucharest engaged in intense diplomatic activities. Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev proposed a quadripartite meeting with the participation of Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, and for the first time, Romania. At the same time, Russian President Boris Yeltsin claimed to support the integrity of Moldova and said that he wanted a negotiated solution to the conflict. But the Dnestr leaders rejected most peace proposals and continued to instigate instead the Gagauz militants against Moldova.

In the meantime, Moldova's President sent Yeltsin several messages, which remained unanswered. With the worsening situation on the front line, and with the 14th Army intervening anytime the balance would favor Moldova, Snegur appealed to the United Nations for help to defend his republic against "Russian aggression." On the other hand, the Russian extremist elements launched their own appeals. General Makashov, for instance, gave an interview to *Sovetskaya Rossiya* and called on Moscow to defend ethnic Russians in the Dnestr region. "If we are defeated here, we will be defeated everywhere on the borderlands," he said. (20)

Trying to defuse the conflict, Yeltsin reiterated his decision to withdraw the 14th Army, but this time his statement was received with surprise and anger by Russian extremists and with skepticism by Moldavians. (21 In the midst of the conflict, the Moldavian Parliament sacked Valery Muravsky, the more pragmatic prime minister, replacing him with Andrei Sangheli, a well known communist.(22)

While Moldova's economy was crippled, the Dnestr region, and especially Tiraspol, could no longer function without direct assistance from Moscow. As a result, many local people began to question the policy and aims pursued by the new leadership. Interviewed on Russian television about the future, Smirnov had to answer that his republic might accede to the Russian Federation, but for the moment he called on Russia and Ukraine to guarantee its independence. (23 In the meantime, Tiraspol began to organize its own army and state structures and even introduced a military draft. Also, the former deputy chief of staff of the 14th Army, Colonel Stefan Kitsak, was promoted general and appointed defense minister of the Dnestr Republic.

One of the fiercest battles of the summer of 1992 was the battle for Tighina, and it involved tanks, heavy artillery, and rocket fire. There was street fighting, and armored vehicles charged through the city. According to Western sources, Moldavian forces destroyed 11 Russian tanks, but hundreds of people, most of them Moldavians, were killed. At one point, Tighina was in Moldavian hands, but Snegur's hesitation and direct threats from Moscow made the Moldavians withdraw. Part of the fighting occurred while President Yeltsin was visiting the United States, and Vice President Ruskoi

threatened direct Russian intervention. The 14th Army was again directly involved on the Russian side, and there was a danger of further escalation. According to the British newspaper, *The Independent*, of June 24, as well as other sources, the order for the 14th Army to engage in battle came from Moscow, and Moldavian units were about to start to open fire on that army. "For every shell fired into a Russian military base, ten shells will be fired back," threatened Vice President Rutskoi. Unexpectedly, after his return to Moscow, Yeltsin also threatened Moldova with reprisals, while Defense Minister General Pavel Grachev declared to the weekly magazine *Argumenty i Fakty* that "an appropriate reaction from Russia is essential" when the lives of Russians are at risk. (24)

The escalation of the war raised big question marks in Romania, and there were rumors that Moldova might call on armed help from Romania. During this time, the United States expressed growing concern about the war, and President George Bush discussed the matter with the visiting Russian president. At the same time, Secretary of State James Baker took up the issue with Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev, and the State Department called on Moscow to withdraw its 14th Army from Moldova as promised by Yeltsin. But the war continued. (25)

### **Ethnic Underpinnings of the Conflict**

The fighting and the suffering in the Dnestr region created increasing dissatisfaction and animosity among various groups. With the passing of time, the region was transformed into an area of lawlessness, and a good part of the Russian frustration was directed against local Moldavians. Many of the more active Moldavians, particularly those living in Tiraspol and Tighina, were fired from their jobs, expelled from their homes, or forced to flee the region. On occasion, they were even murdered.

Several cases deserve special attention. During the summer of 1992, the Moldavian media revealed cases of brutality beyond human imagination. For instance, the body of a truck driver, Grigore Besleaga, was found skinned. Valeriu Purice, a Moldavian policeman, was found crucified, with nails driven through his limbs. Many other innocent civilians were thrown in common tombs or in the Dnestr. (26)

In order to scare the Romanian population of the region, the

Dnestr authorities arrested five persons, who apparently were not guilty of anything specific, and charged them with conspiracy, terrorism, and the murder of two local Russians. The most prominent among those arrested was Ilie Ilascu, the leader of the Tiraspol branch of the Moldavian Popular Front. All of them were subjected to unbelievable tortures, and Ilascu was subjected four times to mock executions. What the torturers wanted most was to induce them to confess the crimes they allegedly committed and to make them recant their pro-Romanian attitude. The Russians still hate to face the truth which they hid for 50 years; to admit that Moldavians speak Romanian and are Romanians. Ultimately, Ilascu was sentenced to death in a Stalinist-like show trial, but the sentence was later commuted to life in prison. Two of his colleagues were also sentenced to 15 years and two others to 12 years in prison. The case was taken up by the International Human Rights Law Group of Washington, but for a long while Tiraspol denied the representatives of the group any contact with those arrested. (27)

The Dnestr guards and the Cossacks proved particularly vicious against ethnic Moldavians, but they also attacked ethnic Jews. All these incidents prompted Colonel Mikhail Bergman, the military commander of Tiraspol, to bitterly criticize the Dnestr leaders and to make them responsible for the growing corruption and criminality. He mentioned among others that "armed robbery was not just a typical crime; it was a routine crime." And he added that the city lived outside the law. (28 In turn, the Dnestr leadership accused Colonel Bergman of being an Israeli spy. There was indeed fear among the local Jewish population; Samwil Weizman, co-chairman of the Dnestr Jewish community, quoted several Cossacks who urged "finishing the Jews before dealing with the Moldavians." (29)

The conflict was not actually ethnic, but it did have ethnic underpinnings. The fact that most of the policemen in Tighina were ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, and yet they fought for Moldova, demonstrated that it was not an ethnic conflict. Their officers dismissed the idea that Russian speakers were being persecuted, as claimed by Moscow. And the Russian commander of the Moldavian police in Tighina, Colonel Viktor Gusliakov, denounced the Dnestr leadership and said that "the region was run by a military dictatorship." (30)

Actually, only 25 percent of Moldova's 560,000 Russians reside on the left bank, while 75 percent live inside the republic, with a large concentration in Kishinev. And the Kishinev Russians appealed directly to President Yeltsin, asking him not to defend them against Moldavian President Snegur for whom they had voted, but against Smirnov, who had cut off their supplies of gas and electricity. Pointing out that there were more Russians in Kishinev than in the entire Dnestr region, they assured Yeltsin that their rights as Russians were respected. (31)

The war caused up to one thousand victims, disrupted normal activity, destroyed property, and made about one hundred thousand people refugees. The Helsinki Watch organization estimated that over 51,000 people fled inside Moldova and some 53,000 fled to Ukraine. (32 While Moldavians went to Kishinev, Russians and Ukrainians went to Odessa, thus aggravating an already gloomy economic situation in both republics. The Ukrainian population of the region also suffered during the conflict, but mostly indirectly since they were not considered enemies of the Tiraspol regime. In addition, inheriting formerly Romanian lands, Ukraine did not want to challenge the territorial status quo of this border area.

### **The True Nature of the Conflict**

Ever since it proclaimed its independence, Moldova went to a great extent to appease the Dnestr Russian, but the leaders of Tiraspol rejected any proposals and declared that war was the only course of action with regard to Moldova. Moldova's president also stated that Kishinev was ready to respect their right of self-determination in the event of a possible change of status, but everything was in vain. (33 The commander of the 14th Russian Army, General Lebed, accused Snegur of having organized a fascist state and vowed to extirpate this fascism and to install a "legitimate" president in Moldova. Later, addressing the Supreme Soviet of the Dnestr Republic, Lebed stressed that the 14th Army would never withdraw from Moldova. (34

In July 1992 Presidents Snegur and Yeltsin signed a special convention to settle the conflict, and by August the war began to subside. In a way, it was an acknowledgment of submission by Snegur, and it caused tremendous anguish and frustration among Moldavians who felt cheated and betrayed. Snegur gave in, Kishinev lost control



of the Dnestr region, and essentially, Moldova returned to the old pre-independence status quo. With regard to the true nature of the war, a Russian journalist who spent 26 years in Moldova concluded that the war was not ethnic, but simply political, with the local Russians trying to block the national aspirations of the Moldavian majority. A fact-finding team sent to the region by the Helsinki Commission drew the same conclusion: "The Dnestr conflict was a political, not an ethnic conflict." (35 Given the geographical importance the Russians attach to this border area, it may be concluded that the conflict has been ethno-geopolitical, involving Russia, Romania, Ukraine, and the new state of Moldova.

The failure of Moldova to assert itself over its entire territory led the speaker of the Parliament, Alexandru Mosanu, to call directly for reunification with Romania. Later, realizing that Moldova was neither independent, nor allowed to reunite with Romania, Mosanu resigned his position. As for President Snegur, he had already abandoned his initial aim of early reunification. While internally Snegur was engaged in a power struggle to retain his position, externally, Russia could not be easily challenged. Indeed, the deputy foreign minister of Russia declared openly that the new independent states of the former Soviet Union belong to the Russian "sphere of responsibility." And Russia sent additional troops to the Moldavian area of conflict, allegedly to secure its peace. Shortly after the arrival of the new "peace-keeping" troops, Kishinev realized that they only came to strengthen Russia's geo-political foothold in the area. (36 The bloody war ended, Moscow reasserted its dominion, but the roots of the conflict were not addressed, and the problem remained. In September 1992 Tiraspol organized a mass rally, and the 14th Army took part in a military parade to celebrate the second anniversary of the republic. Smirnov addressed the crowd and acknowledged that the Dnestr Republic had survived only "thanks to Russia and the 14th Army." (37)

With the war ended, the Dnestr Republic reinforced the Cyrillic alphabet on the "Moldavian" language, and it resorted to the old policy of Marxism and Russification. Under such circumstances the new Russian Dnestr University, formerly the Moldavian Pedagogical Institute of Tiraspol, hosted the founding conference of the republic's Communist-Leninist Youth. A new ideological drive was launched

and the persecution against dissent intensified. (38)

The social situation worsened, too, in the Dnestr region, and the 14th Army began to distance itself from the corrupt Tiraspol leadership. Apparently, Army commander General Alexandr Lebed wanted to assert his own authority, and he attacked simultaneously on several fronts. He declared that it would take a thousand years to pull the 14th Army out of Moldova, and he suggested a referendum to determine whether Tighina should belong to Moldova or to the left bank Dnestr Republic. He claimed, nevertheless, that Moldova's independence was a temporary matter, and predicted that its leaders would soon face criminal prosecution. At the same time, Lebed condemned the American "imperialist policy" toward Russia and the Dnestr Republic, but he also turned against the Tiraspol leaders and accused them of corruption and complicity with the "mafia." (39)

The results of the war crippled Moldova and weakened Snegur's position. Caught in between the Dnestr rebellion and the indignant Moldavian population, he approached Tiraspol again and had a dialogue with Smirnov. Snegur offered to grant the territory some autonomy and make it a free economic zone, but Tiraspol rejected the offer. Instead, the Supreme Soviet of the Dnestr Republic demanded the right to keep its own government and army, and recognition of a confederation of Moldova, the Dnestr, and the Gagauz republics. (40)

This time, in a new cross-fire between the pull of Romania and the push of diminishing support at home, Snegur claimed publicly that an imminent irredentist coup was under way and that his life was in danger. He even gave details, saying that supporters of unification with Romania were planning a coup and were ready to provoke a civil war to achieve their aims. Romania denied any involvement and labeled the rumor as disinformation. There were, nevertheless, aggressive demonstrations against Snegur, whose policies had proved aimless. (41)

### **New Contradictory Trends and Options**

The dismemberment of the Soviet Union caught the Russians by surprise and made Moscow speak with several voices. Apparently, the Russians were sorting out their interests and options, while Moscow was crafting a new geo-political stand. The ensuing confusion was high, and most likely it has not been completely dissipated yet. By

1993, for example, some Russians were still dreaming of restoring the former Soviet Union. Viktor Alkins, for example, a reputed Russian extremist who visited Tiraspol in February 1993, declared that the Soviet people would restore the unitary state and that the Dnestr Republic was "the sliver of land on which the Union's spirit has survived and from which the Union's restoration will begin." (42)

Kremlin's attitude was more restrained, but Russia was definitely preoccupied with the preservation of its geo-political interests. On April 28, 1993, Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament signed a special document on national security doctrine which proclaimed Russia's right to intervene militarily in any of the 15 former Soviet republics, allegedly, to defend the territorial integrity of Russia. (43) Also, referring to Yugoslavia, Russia made it clear that any action in the Black Sea and Danube basin required prior agreement from Moscow because these were areas of "traditional Russian interests." (44) In this regard, the Dnestr Republic was indeed its best proxy, but not good enough to restore the former Union.

The failed coup of September-October 1993 probably convinced Moscow that the Soviet Union was dead, but the message did not get to the periphery of the former empire. Certainly, it did not get to the Dnestr Republic. As previously announced, Tiraspol organized its own regular army, consisting of some 7,000 soldiers recruited from among the Russian volunteers and paramilitary forces, among Cossacks, and among the soldiers and officers of the 14th Army. (45)

The status of the 14th Army remained an enigma and some of the statements of its commander, General Lebed, showed that either no one was in full control anymore in Russia, or that Moscow's pledge for a new world order was simply rhetorical. Lebed, who at the time aspired to become Russia's President, underlined again that "the Dnestr region was the key to the Balkans," and that it was a strategic crossroad between Ukraine, Romania and the Black Sea. "If Russia loses this area, he stressed bluntly, it will lose influence on the entire region." He mentioned the possibility of it going to Ukraine, but he overruled this option because it would raise the issue of Bukovina and other Ukrainian-held formerly Romanian territories. He thought of making it a sort of Russian oblast like Kaliningrad, but he also rejected the idea. (46)

What began as a political struggle to preserve the old system,

has become in time a geo-political scheme, and has led to a nightmare that appears to defy any solution. Under these conditions, Moldova opted to consolidate its statehood, to join the CIS economic structures, to approach Romania cautiously, and to cooperate with the West. But every move it made had undesirable consequences, proving that there is very little room for an independent Moldavian republic.

The Moldavian elections of February 1994 produced a more pro-communist and pro-Russian Parliament which immediately threatened to outlaw the pro-union parties. The Parliament also adopted a new Constitution which in a ridiculous way defined the language of the republic as "Moldavian." (47 With regard to the new trend, *Izvestiya* quoted a high Russian Foreign Ministry official who said that the main reason the Moldavian leaders were not willing to join Romania was because they were controlled from outside. "Quite serious forces are involved in the game around Moldova," he said, adding that "there are many more foreign agents per square kilometer in Moldova than in any other area of the former U.S.S.R." (48 However, the hard work of all those agents and their anti-Romanian campaign soon backlashed.

Tens of thousands of students and teachers began to demonstrate in March 1995 against replacing the Romanian language and history courses with the so-called Moldavian courses. Confronted with such a strong opposition, President Snegur proposed that the language be renamed Romanian, but the Parliament rejected it, and slowly the dissension split the leadership of Moldova. (49

The hard liners of Tiraspol also rejected the Moldavian-Russian agreement with regard to the withdrawal of the 14th Army and its equipment. Igor Smirnov issued a special order prohibiting the removal of the assets of that Army from his territory and declared it the property of the Dnestr Republic. In the meantime, Moscow downgraded the 14th Army to the status of an operational group and replaced its outspoken commander. On June 1995, General Valery Yevnevich took command of the unit and he immediately urged the group of local women protesting the departure of General Lebed to refrain from interfering in military affairs. The new commander also criticized the leaders in Tiraspol and stressed that he had no intention of rendering the military equipment to a third party. (50

The continuing defiance of the Dnestr region, the harsh

economic crisis, and the resurging language question, polarized Moldova again and led to new political alliances. As a direct result, Snegur lost the presidential bid, and in December 1996 Petru Lucinski became the new president of Moldova. (51)

Lucinski is a Soviet-type politician who became a social-democrat, but he, too, was caught between the expectations of his population and Moscow, Tiraspol, and Bucharest. He visited Romania in July 1993 when he was the speaker of Moldova's Parliament and presented his stand before the Romanian Parliament. He noted the common language and history of the two states, but advised Romania to view Moldova from a realistic point of view rather than a historical one. He also avoided any references to a possible union and asked his audience to accept Moldova for what it was. Lucinski even declared later at a press conference that unification with Romania would be in his opinion a sure way to war and it could create a second Yugoslavia in the region. (52)

With regard to the Dnestr area, Lucinski did not score any better than his predecessor. His statements emphasizing that he did not favor union with Romania did not soothe Smirnov and the Tiraspol Russians. Still fearing a possible union of Moldova with Romania, in April 1997 Smirnov declared that he would not object if Ukraine would shift its border to the Dnestr and if the Trans-Dnestr region would join Ukraine. (53)

Lucinski tried to please everybody and was determined to reassert Kishinev's sovereignty. He announced early in his mandate that Moldova was not interested in joining the North Atlantic Alliance. But he asked the Alliance to provide security guarantees and offered Moldova to serve as a bridge between NATO and Russia. Moscow was not pleased and continued to pressure Moldova to accept Russian military bases on its territory. It also insisted that Moldova grant dual citizenship to its citizens of Russian origin, a request which if granted would allow Moscow to interfere to allegedly defend the interests of the local Russians. (54)

Moldova and the Trans-Dnestr Republic reached a new memorandum of understanding in February 1997. This time the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe firmly opposed the agreement. OSCE denounced the document and warned Kishinev that it did not correspond to the "basic principles of the sovereignty

and territorial integrity of Moldova." The same international body cautioned Kishinev that signing the agreement could set an "extremely unfortunate precedent." (55)

Desperate to settle the Trans-Dnestr conflict, in July 1997 Lucinski granted Tiraspol all its demands: the right to its own constitution, parliament, flag, state symbols, and anthem. The official languages of the region were to be "Moldavian," as Tiraspol wanted to call it, as well as Russian and Ukrainian. And the agreement granted the region the right of self-determination in case that Moldova would lose its independence, another allusion at a possible reunification with Romania. This time, the Tiraspol leaders rejected the very idea of describing their republic as an integral part of Moldova. And to complicate the matter, they set up a special commission to delimit the borders of the republic. (56)

One may wonder what do the Tiraspol Russians really want? Is union with Romania imminent and people do not know about it? Indeed, in August 1997, Moldova's National Security Minister Tudor Botnaru made an unusual statement for the Flux press agency and publishing group. With regard to the Trans-Dnestr problem he said that a solution is unlikely to be found soon unless Russia changes its attitude. With regard to Romania he said that unification of the two countries would be good for both, but could not be based on the 1918 or 1941 models. (57)

There is also apparently a new mood or at least new interests in Moscow. In September 1997 several prominent Russian Duma deputies told the visiting speaker of the Romanian Parliament that Russia would not necessarily oppose the reunification of Moldova with Romania. On a larger geo-political scheme, they urged Romania to avoid membership in NATO because "the Americans would cheat Romania," and they insisted that Romania has no reasons to fear Russia. (58) Is Russia trying to approach Romania in a different manner, or it is just another voice in the Kremlin's dissonant choir? And what could be the new Russian objectives?

## **Conclusions**

The events that affected the former Soviet Union during the last decade lead the scholar to conclude that the armed actions carried out by ethnic Russians in the non-Russian republics were orchestrated by Moscow. When the Soviet Union was strong and still growing,

Moscow had global objectives. When it collapsed, Moscow had to redefine its goals and to settle for regional objectives. As long as Moscow was seeking to expand toward Europe or to defend itself against the West, Moldova was an advanced outpost or a buffer zone for the Soviet Union. When perestroika made Moscow look inward, Moldova lost its initial importance and Russia began to make certain adjustments. The process was accelerated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union which compelled Moscow to come up with a new geo-political theory.

The new Russian geo-political theory was elaborated by the Foreign and the Defense Ministries, and it defined the world outside the former U.S.S.R. as the "Far Abroad," and the former Soviet republics outside Russia as the "Near Abroad." Allegedly, the Foreign Ministry espoused a more liberal and more democratic approach and insisted on the importance of the Far Abroad. Eventually, in May 1992 the Defense Ministry came up with a new military doctrine, stressing the strategic importance for Russia of the Near Abroad, which was to be considered a sphere of exclusive Russian interest. This approach prevailed. (59 Of special interest for Moscow was to compel the non-Russian republics to allow Russian troops on their territories and to entrust them with guarding their borders. This would have granted Moscow effective control over the former territory of the Soviet Union. (60)

The new Russian geo-political and military doctrine was fully in place by the time of the second Moscow coup of October 1993, and even those leaders who were considered democrats subscribed to it. For example, referring to the Near Abroad, Russia's Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev spoke of the danger of "losing geo-political positions that took centuries to conquer." Referring to the Russian military actions in the non-Russian republics, he preferred to use the term "peace-keeping operations" aimed at defending various minorities. And in April 1995, Kozyrev warned that if necessary, Russia was prepared to use military force to protect ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics. (61)

President Boris Yeltsin also went along with this new geo-political concept. Moldova's President Mircea Snegur, who considered himself a friend and a staunch supporter of Yeltsin, went to Moscow after the October 1993 coup. He congratulated Yeltsin in



writing, reminded him that the Trans-Dnestr separatists had fought against him during this dramatic struggle, and insisted on meeting him, but Yeltsin refused to see him. Apparently, once the Near Abroad was defined and the decision to hold on to it was made, Moscow only needed to devise the ways and means to implement it. (62)

Moldova has been a complex geo-political case for Russia in recent years and has confronted Moscow with a difficult dilemma. The way Moscow will solve this problem will be illustrative for Russia's new policy toward Romania, toward Ukraine, and toward southeast Europe. Moldavian Russians, and especially those living in the Trans-Dnestr region, view the possible reunification of Moldova with Romania with fear because they risk losing their positions of power and privilege. Recently, however, Moscow began to see Moldova only as a bargaining card, willing to give it away for the right price as it gave away East Germany. And the price appears to be first of all geo-political.

The geo-political complications caused by this area started in the 1940's, when from a Russian point of view Ukraine was a separate state only on paper. An ever ambitious and expanding Soviet Union gave Northern Bukovina and the northern and southern reaches of Bessarabia to Kiev because at the time it was inconceivable for Moscow that one day Ukraine would become independent. Since Russian control over Ukraine was complete, the partitioning served Moscow's interests toward central Europe and the Balkans. The rest of the former Bessarabia was transformed from the beginning into an artificial state without any *raison d'être* and probably for possible future negotiations and compromises with Romania. For the retreating Russia of this decade, the 1940 partition of the former Romanian lands has backlashed because it only made a bigger and stronger Ukraine.

Ukraine is probably the hardest geo-political dilemma for Moscow. As long as Russia controls the Trans-Dnestr region behind Ukraine and has a strong ethnic presence in Donbas and Crimea, Ukraine cannot really afford to challenge Moscow or to act fully as an independent country. Indeed, for the last several years, Tiraspol has been a perfect bridgehead to keep Moldova away from Romania and Ukraine under threat. Ideally, Russia would like to make Ukraine a junior partner in a new sort of union and to convince

Romania to stay away from any Western military alliance. However, it is hardly imaginable that Kiev will accept a new loss of independence, and it is equally difficult to imagine that Moscow will freely renounce Ukraine for good.

If Moscow manages to convince Ukraine to join a future union with Russia, it will probably be willing to let the Trans-Dnestr area return to Ukraine. If Moscow succeeds also in keeping Romania away from NATO, or better still, if it manages to attract it in a new military arrangement, it will most likely return the remainder of Moldova to Romania. And why do the Tiraspol Russians hold on so stubbornly to Tighina on the right bank of the Dnestr? Because under such a scenario, Moscow could also return Tighina to Romania "in exchange" for Bucharest renouncing the left bank. It will be a perfect solution for Moscow. Ukraine will get even more land for its subordination, Romania will get a consolation prize, and Russia will continue to play big brother while retaining its domain.

What happens if Ukraine does not go along with Moscow's scheme? Russia could then turn to Romania and allude to returning the entire Bessarabia. And what if Romania with its sad historical experience with Russia will not trust Moscow and instead will try to compromise with Ukraine? The first step in this direction has already been made with the recent signing of the Romanian-Ukrainian Treaty. As it is, the treaty is disadvantageous to Romania, but terms may change in the future when Moldova decides to join Romania. Moscow will bitterly reject any direct Romanian-Ukrainian agreement that disregards its interests. But because Russia is no longer sure of itself, or because it is still sorting out options, Moscow continues to speak with various contradictory voices. In the meantime, Trans-Dnestr remains a rebellious republic and Moldova continues to exist without having a *raison d'être*. It only exists for Moscow's geo-political reasons.

And what will Moscow do in the near future if by trying to play both the Ukrainian and Romanian cards, it loses both of them? Will Russia continue to play 19th century geo-politics in this new age? Will Moscow be able and willing to direct huge resources and to continue to police the non-Russian republics? It should be remembered in the first place that such policies led to the collapse of the old Russia and contributed to the exhaustion of the former Soviet

Union. The New Russia is confronted with hard choices. It is up to Moscow now whether the Russia of the new millennium becomes a normal European country or remains a backward hinterland of the world.

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# **Heredity and Humanity: Race, Eugenics and Modern Science**

Roger Pearson, Ph.D.

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## **Promoting Rural Community Development in Africa: States versus Grassroots Organizations<sup>1</sup>**

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Centralization of administrative decision making and political power constrains community development in African states. The relative absence of individual autonomy, as well as restrictions on entrepreneurship and participation at the local level, creates conditions under which an institutional framework supporting voluntary grassroots organizations (GROS) can develop within communities. This paper shows why and how centralization inhibits local development. Data from the literature, particularly on rural development programs, are used to demonstrate the effectiveness of GROS in promoting the development of rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Key Words:** Africa, political centralization, corruption, multi-ethnic states, grass roots organizations, community development.

Attempts by African states to increase and extend their strength through centralized political power and administrative structures were justified in terms of nation-building and economic modernization in the context of ethnic and communal divisions that characterize their societies (Apter 1965; Gars 1963; Huntington 1965). These approaches were especially dominant in the early years of independence, when the state was viewed as the fundamental actor in the development of newly formed African nations. Supporters of centralization have further pointed out that the state must centralize power to fulfill its redistributive function, which is essential to support areas (mainly rural) with weak tax bases (Leonard and Marshall 1982) and communities that lack resources and skills.

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