

Moldova and the Transnistria Conflict: Still a Regional Cold War?

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My recent visit to Moldova on behalf of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and ODIHR/OSCE allowed me to indulge interests first sparked by reading Zoran Nolic's *Atlas of Unusual Borders*. My fellow International Relations Studies colleagues will recall that the Transnistria War erupted in November 1990 involving pro-Transnistria (PMR) independence forces (Transnistrian Republican Guard, irregular militias, Cossack units, and Russian 14th Army), against pro-Moldovan forces (incorporating regular troops, police, and some irregulars) (Baban, 2015, 1-12). The worst of the fighting and forced migration occurred in March 1992. A ceasefire brokered in July 1992 has largely held as this "war by proxy" (with Russia allegedly defending its historic sphere of political influence over its former colony) has become one of Europe's iciest of "cold conflicts" (Luhti, 2015, 3-8.)

It is worth recalling that prior to the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina and the birth of the Moldavian SSR in 1940, Bessarabian Moldova (the territory west of the river Dniester (Nistru) had been part of Romania. Modern Moldova eventually re-discovered its modernity and reclaimed its territorial rights in its Declaration of Independence in 1991 (King, 1994, 345-368.) Sadly, and despite the fall of the Soviet Union, the territorial changes which split Transnistria from the rest of Moldova have remained in place.

It is also important to note that before the Moldavian SSR, Transnistria was part of the Ukrainian SSR (Motyl, 1982, 62-78.) It boasted a (relatively) short-lived autonomous republic called the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, with Tiraspol as its capital (1924-1940) and as today constituted about a tenth of Moldova's total landmass (*Ibid.*) It is an archetypal double minority conflict. As the majority Moldovan community says, "we will never lose you Tiraspol..." and as Transnistria's predominantly Russian residents chant, "Motherland Russia forever..." (Duffy, 2021, 67.) Visiting Tiraspol is a little like going back into Soviet time, as the political time-capsule, which is the Transnistrian conflict, has hermetically sealed this cold-war conflict and beautifully preserved a quintessentially Soviet out-station as if time stood still and its vintage CCCP clocks had abruptly stopped.

Birth of Modern Moldova

Moldova was an early beneficiary of Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, permitting political pluralism at the regional (republican) level (Buwoski et al., 2018). Then everything became unhinged across its most Russian-speaking territory. Loyalties were sorely divided, and old blood loyalties to the Russian motherland ran deep. In the Moldovan SSR, like many other parts of the Soviet Union, national movements proliferated (*Ibid.* 45-67.) In time, these forces enhanced underlying impulses to leave the USSR in favor of uniting with Romania. That spawned a counter-blast from the primarily Russian-speaking ethnic minorities who predominated in areas like Transnistria. The change was gradual but occasionally violent. In August 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian SSR made Moldovan the official language, recognized a linguistic Moldavian-Romanian identity, and the Romanian Latin alphabet in the Moldovan language. In 1990, the words Soviet and Socialist were replaced with "Republic of Moldova" (*Ibid.*, 40-51.) Transnistria, its strange breakaway status crystallized by the power struggles of an increasingly bipolar world order, malingered on with three solitary friends (apart, of course, from Big Uncle Moscow) – namely the three other mostly unrecognized breakaway states: Abkhazia, Artsakh, and South Ossetia.

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The toppling of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania in December 1989 and re-opening the border between Romania and Moldova on 6 May 1990 led many in Transnistria and Moldova to believe that a union between Moldova and Romania was inevitable (*Ibid.*, 45-56.) With the fall of Communist Party rule, Romania appeared much more attractive. This, unfortunately, alarmed the Russian-speaking population, spawned secessionist movements in Gagauzia and Transnistria, and as the nationalist-dominated Moldovan Supreme Soviet outlawed these initiatives, the Gagauz Republic and Transnistria declared independence from Moldova (*Ibid.*, 46-56.) They sought re-alignment with the Soviet Union as independent federal republics, and of course, Moscow's assistance was bountiful. Transnistria thus became one of numerous "unrecognised republics" in the USSR, alongside Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. These self-proclaimed states maintained close ties with each other and are mainly dependent on Russian sponsorship.

Republic of Moldova

After the Soviet coup attempt of 1991, the Moldovan parliament adopted the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova. It sought to assert its sovereignty over the entire territory of the now-former MSSR (Haynes, 2020, 6-34.) Tensions erupted in Transnistria. On 5 April 1992, Vice-President Rutskoy of Russia told 5,000 people assembled in Tiraspol that "Transnistrians should demand independence" (*Ibid.*) The first fatalities in the emerging conflict occurred on 2 November 1990, two months after the PMR's 2 September 1990 declaration of independence. Moldovan forces entered Dubăsari to separate Transnistria into two halves but were stopped by the city's inhabitants, who occupied the Dniester bridge (*Ibid.*) A second Moldovan attempt to cross the Lunga bridge took place on 13 December 1991. After this second failed attempt, there was a lull in military activity until 2 March 1992, considered the beginning of the War of Transnistria. Moldova was admitted as a member of the United Nations on August 27, 1991, after its formal declaration of independence (*Ibid.*) The armed conflict lasted until 21 July 1992, in three areas along the Dniester river. The cold conflict was briefly hot.

A ceasefire agreement was signed on 21 July. This official document, whose details were primarily dictated by Moscow, was signed by the presidents of Russia (Boris Yeltsin) and Moldova (Mircea Snegur (*Ibid.*) The agreement provided for peacekeeping forces to observe the ceasefire involving Russian, Moldovan, and PMR battalions under the orders of a joint military command structure, the Joint Control Commission (JCC). It is estimated that nearly a thousand people were killed in total, with many others wounded (*Ibid.*) Unlike many other post-Soviet conflicts, IDP's (internally displaced persons) did not reach large numbers in the War of Transnistria. Volunteers from Russia and Ukraine, including Don and Kuban Cossacks, fought on Transnistria's side (*Ibid.*) There is no interpretative consensus on the precise number of volunteers or the exact military role they played in the Transnistrian conflict, but these militias probably numbered several thousand (*Ibid.*)

Memories of the Civil War

During the Transnistria War, UNA-UNSO members fought alongside Transnistrian separatists against Moldovan government forces to defend the sizable ethnic-Ukrainian minority in Transnistria (*Ibid.*) Shortly before the escalation of the conflict in late June 1992, Romania provided military support to Moldova by supplying weaponry and sending ubiquitous military advisers (*Ibid.*) Volunteers from Romania also fought on Moldova's side. However, the exact numbers recruited are disputed, and the militarization was undoubtedly something of an irregular recruitment drive and may have offered more political than strategic military weight.

Moldova held a snap parliamentary election on 11 July 2021. Ahead of the vote, there was controversy over whether polling stations should be opened in the disputed territory of Transnistria to allow Moldovan citizens living in the region to participate in the election (Grzegorzczuk, 2021). It was argued that the opening of polling stations would be illegal, and the Moldovan authorities would be unable to guarantee a fair electoral process. Finally, and late in the day, the Central Election Commission (CEC) decided against polling in Transnistria itself (*Ibid.*) It was a bit like this rump part of the country cast a dark and foreboding shadow over the entire election. The memorialization and evidence of mortality from this long-running conflict litter the classrooms and public buildings of modern Moldova. The past is still present, and the frozen war constantly threatens a volcanic upsurge. Perhaps this snap election may bring a rocky road to democratic progress.

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Transnistria and the 2021 Parliamentary Elections

The territory occupied by the Transnistrian independent authority is located within the internationally recognized borders of Moldova. The Transnistrians are primarily supported by the Russian Federation, which maintains a military presence in the region. For all intents and purposes, it is “Little Russia,” a fact which is reflected in the import and export of all significant non-perishable goods (Vlas, 2021.) Although Transnistria continues to fall under Moldovan jurisdiction, life in the territory is regulated by the legislation adopted by the secessionist authorities and is solidly Russian speaking (*Ibid.*) Moldovan legislation is neither practically effective nor statutorily enforced in Transnistria. In a surprising decision on 5 June, the Central Electoral Commission had initially sanctioned the opening of 44 polling stations in Transnistria, 41 of which are located on territory under the constitutional control of the Moldovan authorities and three of which are in areas controlled by the secessionist authorities. This is the first occasion the CEC has advised that polling stations should be opened in areas controlled by the separatist authorities. Moldovan citizens living in Transnistria can exercise their right to vote in the specially opened polling stations in the areas controlled by the Moldovan authorities (*Ibid.*)

What thinking underlines the CEC decision? Well, the motivation is relatively pragmatic and straightforward. The answer lies partly because the Transnistrian electorate is viewed as more pro-Russian and supportive of communist and socialist parties (*Ibid.*) Moldovan parties of that ilk backed them having the chance to run their polling bureau. A few opportunistic parties thought that they could exploit an electorate being poorly informed about Moldovan politics. For many years no electoral debates are held in the territory for politically obvious reasons. Any formal or informal election campaigning in the past by anyone unsympathetic to Moscow has resulted in public disorder and occasionally riots (*Ibid.*) Certain parties, therefore, have a stake in opening polling stations in Transnistria, not least because it would provide opportunities for electoral fraud. In the end, they did not get the chance to gain from this largesse.

Although the CEC’s decision was ultimately annulled, it has raised some critical questions about Moldova’s capacity to organize free and fair elections and how Transnistria can be genuinely integrated into this process. Moldovan citizens living in the occupied areas of Transnistria certainly have the same rights as those living in the territory controlled by the constitutional authorities. Few could dispute the argument raised by several opportunistic parties that they should vote and express their opinions freely and fairly. However, finally, the CEC decided this should only be done following the existing legislation and international standards (Tanas, 2021.) Otherwise, Moldova would effectively have to delegate aspects of its sovereignty to the secessionist authorities. So, the elections did not cross the river, and all polling stations were kept within Moldovan territorial control.

Results of the 2021 Election

The Pro-Western President Maia Sandu’s Party decisively took these Moldovan snap parliamentary elections. Almost all Western election observer missions noted “smooth” and “peaceful” as adjectives to describe polling and counting. Sandu’s center-right Action and Solidarity (PAS) achieved almost 53%, and the former President Igor Dodon’s Socialists and Communists (BECS) bloc barely 27 percent. In geographical curiosities like Transnistria, this may ameliorate the shadowy sense of “Russian under the table dominance” and help to pull local politics back into the mainstream orbit of Moldovan pro-western centrism (*Ibid.*) In time, that may weaken Russia’s influence in the country (*Ibid.*)

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the European Parliament in a joint statement described elections as “competitive and well-run” despite some shortcomings (*Ibid.*) International Observers certainly saw evidence of PACE’s concerns about (relatively isolated and low-level) but (nevertheless) potentially biased election administration and campaign financing. Few locations could have been politically sensitive or open to “low key” electoral bribery as Transnistria (*Ibid.*) In time, this hotbed of Communist-era nostalgia may lose its resolutely Soviet sentimentality.

Concluding Observations

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Transnistria's pro-Moscow stance may also dissipate as the economic attraction of Romanian and European Union cooperation injects political realism into a conversation that has been for too long about "red" if not "rose-tinted" Communist reminiscence. Many international observers noted in their statements that "it was a privilege to be part of an electoral process" in one of the poorest countries in Europe, which (in juxtaposition) possesses one of the richest agricultural and folk histories (*Ibid.*) Apart from the likes of Transnistria, the general post-election atmosphere was probably relief that the result had been decisive. It was difficult to detect any sense of enthusiasm with mainstream Moldovan politics. In an election scarred by corruption and undelivered political promises, few political saints were on display. However, Sandu was undoubtedly seen as a "least bad" option among a sea of convicted criminals and political lightweight.

For the time being, the political leanings are likely to be more Brussels than Moscow-focused. Ultimately, the size of the electoral majority suggests that Sandu may have sufficient parliamentary power to do some good. That said, Transnistria remains a ticking time-bomb severing the mainstream European leanings of Moldova's majority community from its beleaguered Russians. Like that old CCCP Grandfather clock in the attic, the time for renewed conflict with Moscow could percolate any hour, threatening the new European leanings of this impoverished Euro-state. This may threaten the newfound stability achieved by Sandu and be reflected in a decisive political victory. The Party of Action and Solidarity received 52.80% of the vote and won an absolute majority in parliament, taking 63 of the 101 seats, an increase of 48 (*Ibid.*) President of Moldova Maia Sandu stated after the election: "I hope that today is the end of a hard era for Moldova, I hope today is the end of the reign of thieves over Moldova." (*Ibid.*) She must (however) do something about Transnistria and other minority claims. Minorities have a way of "punching above their weight" in this remarkable region, still schizophrenic in its modernization trends and ancient traditions.

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Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.