

Issue Brief

Bridge over the Dniestr: Confidence-Building Measures in Moldova

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Sharpening its international profile and broadening its reach to Europe and beyond, the International Peace Institute (IPI) announced the establishment of its new Vienna office in September 2010. IPI has had a forty-year partnership with Austria, manifested by the annual Vienna Seminar that brings together policymakers, academics, and military experts to discuss pressing issues of peace and security and to explore ways of improving the global system of conflict prevention and risk management. Vienna, a traditional center for diplomacy and multilateral negotiations, is home to a number of regional and international agencies, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

An independent, international, not-for-profit think tank, IPI was founded in 1970 in New York and since its inception has occupied offices across from United Nations headquarters. The Vienna office is the first that IPI has created outside of New York.

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Damaged by shelling during the 1992 conflict, the Gura Bicului Bridge, which spans the Dniestr river, was reconstructed in 2001 with money from the European Union. The bridge—along the main highway between the Black Sea and the Baltic coast—should facilitate trade and contacts between Moldova and the break-away region of Transdniestria. But it has never been reopened: only pedestrians and bicyclists are allowed to cross. It stands as a potent symbol of how hard it has been, for the past twenty years, to bridge the two sides of the Dniestr.

Frozen for Twenty Years

Moldova has been a divided country for almost two decades. On September 2, 1991, soon after Moldova declared its independence from the Soviet Union, the “Dniestrian Moldovan Republic” declared its independence. In 1992, fighting broke out between the Moldovan army and Transdniestrian forces backed by the Soviet fourteenth army, which was headquartered in the Transdniestrian “capital” of Tiraspol. On July 21, 1992, a cease-fire agreement was signed between Moldova and the Russian Federation.¹ Pursuant to the agreement, a security zone was created, along with a tripartite peacekeeping force—Russian, Moldovan, and Transdniestrian—overseen by a Joint Control Commission. Since then, the situation has been frozen.

Several attempts at a settlement have been made over the past twenty years, notably by the two guarantor states, Ukraine and Russia, and by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the mediating organization, which opened a mission in Moldova in 1993.² The latest attempt came in 2003 with the “Kozak Memorandum” (named after the chief Russian negotiator at the time, Dmitry Kozak). These various plans have tried to conclude a settlement that respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova, while enabling a high degree of self-government for Transdniestria. But consensus has never been reached. In 2005, the five-sided negotiations (involving Moldova, Transdniestria, and the three mediators), were expanded to include the European Union and the United States (the so-called 5+2 format). But this expanded format has also made little progress.

As a result, Moldova lacks sovereignty over a major chunk of its territory (approximately 4163 square kilometers); it does not control a 452-kilometer stretch of its border with Ukraine³; and it is not able to govern approximately

1 *Agreement on Principles of a Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Transdniestrian Region of the Republic of Moldova*, Moscow, July 21, 1992.

2 For more on the background to the conflict and attempts at a settlement, see International Crisis Group, “Moldova: No Quick Fix,” *Europe Report*, no. 147, August 12, 2003.

3 Since November 2005, an EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) has helped to curb smuggling along the Transdniestrian segment of the Moldova-Ukraine frontier.



Map design by Dora Kemp.

600,000 of its citizens. Indeed, Transnistria—though not recognized internationally—has managed to develop most of the trappings of a state, and has been able to maintain its de facto independence for a generation. Through a combination of competitive businesses, direct and indirect subsidies from Russia, and smuggling, Transnistria has managed to maintain a standard of living not much different than that of Moldova.⁴

A sense of regional identity has evolved in Transnistria due to indoctrination from strictly controlled media, use of Transnistrian symbols and currency, propaganda about the threat posed by “Romanianization,” the development of a regional business community (for example, around the Sheriff group), and the maintenance of close links with Russia, despite the fact that the nearest Russian border is more than 600 kilometers away. A whole generation of Transnistrians have grown up in an “independent” para-state, with few contacts with the outside world, including Moldovans on the other side of the river. For their

part, young people on the right bank seldom go to Tiraspol, and have grown up being told that Transnistria is a black hole.

Two Solitudes?

On the surface, the situation appears to be that of a country divided into two solitudes. One half is looking forward to the European Union, the other half is looking back to the Soviet Union. And yet, there are indications that the situation is neither so simple nor so bipolar.

Moldova is a multiethnic and multilingual country made up of people of Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian descent, as well as Gagauz (Christian Turks). There is a high degree of interethnic tolerance. Even in Transnistria—despite some tensions surrounding schools trying to teach in Romanian—there is relatively good social harmony.⁵ According to a recent poll, residents of Moldova and Transnistria have a rather positive view of each other.⁶

Moldovans want good relations with Russia as well as with the West. While 61.7 percent of Moldovans have a highly positive view of the EU, 58.5 percent have a highly positive view of Russia. Unsurprisingly, 81.7 percent of Transnistrians have a positive view of Russia, and yet 53.1 percent have a good impression of the EU as well.⁷ While 68.8 percent of Moldovans think it is a good idea to seek EU membership, almost half of all Transnistrians (46.6 percent) also share this opinion.⁸ Interestingly, 37.7 percent of Transnistrians think that the biggest impediment to joining the EU is the lack of a settlement to the conflict.

A closer look at trading patterns also debunks a few myths. Whereas around half of all Moldova’s trade is with the EU, the EU is also Transnistria’s biggest market (although, of any individual country, Russia represents the single biggest market). According to the Moldovan Statistic Bureau, between January and November 2010,

4 For more on how the Transnistrian economy works, see section III of International Crisis Group, “Moldova’s Uncertain Future,” *Europe Report* no. 175, August 17, 2006. It is worth noting that in 2010 Moldova ranked ninety-ninth out of 169 countries ranked in the Human Development Index.

5 In Transnistria, Moldovan is written in Cyrillic, while in the rest of the country the state language is written in Latin script.

6 See “The Perception of Moldova’s and Transnistria’s Residents Towards Russia, The West, and Each Other,” funded by the British Embassy Chisinau, conducted by the independent centre for analytic research New Age (Transnistria) and the sociological company CBS-AXA (Moldova), June 2009.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

around one-third of Transnistria's trade went to the post-Soviet countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), while 45 percent went to the EU. Some estimates put the latter figure at closer to 60 percent.

These figures show that in terms of trade and attitudes, Moldovans and Transnistrians are looking both East and West. And yet, despite the similarities in language, culture, and outlook, people living on either side of the Dniestr have very few contacts with one another. Over the past few years, political dialogue has broken down; there is little interaction among civil society and few contacts among the youth. This lack of communication fuels suspicion and mistrust, and creates an inefficient outcome for both sides (except the opportunists who profit from the status quo). The majority of people on the right bank (78.1 percent), and over half of the people on the left bank (56.1 percent) think that a separate existence has harmed both sides. In particular, people on both sides believe that their living standards have fallen as a result. An overwhelming majority of respondents (87.4 percent) to a recent poll believe that resolution of the conflict is important for the future of Moldova and Transnistria.⁹

Shared Vision of the Future

While people across Moldova seem to share a common desire for a settlement to the conflict, their leaders lack a shared vision of the future. Some members of the Moldovan political elite call for the "reintegration of Transnistria" within a Moldova that has a strong Romanian identity, on the road to EU accession. Within these circles there is little support for a "federal" or "confederal" arrangement, or for the use of Russian as an official language. The Transnistrian leadership, under President Igor Smirnov, as well as his supporters in Moscow, maintains its dream of independence, and sees itself as a bastion of Russian interests. It feels that it has little incentive to compromise.

Eventually, a compromise will have to be found. The European Union does not want a Cyprus- or

Georgia-like situation on its doorstep, while an independent Transnistria is not viable in the long-term: not only because of its size, but because the EU, Romania, and Moldova wouldn't like a little Kaliningrad enclave on their border, and Ukraine would probably be wary of having a break-away region in the West that could act as an example to Crimea in the East. That said, Transnistria objects to being "reintegrated" into Moldova, where it would be treated as a junior partner, and Russia would not simply abandon Transnistria. So concessions will have to be made on both sides, with guarantees (i.e., in regard to the cultural and linguistic identity of Transnistria) and a creative power-sharing formula.

Are conditions becoming ripe for a settlement? The new Moldovan government, which came into power in December 2010, wants to achieve a viable and lasting solution to the Transnistrian conflict.¹⁰ The issue has the attention of the European Union, particularly Germany, which regards the settlement of the conflict as a potential outcome of constructive engagement with Russia.¹¹ The EU is working closely with the new government to realize a deep and comprehensive free-trade area with Moldova, and has set out an action plan for visa liberalization. This would create a pull factor that benefits all Moldovans, including Transnistrians. And it would make Moldova more attractive, both to Transnistrians and to international investors. Greater "Europeanization" would also open up new business opportunities for competitive Transnistrian industries (like steel, textiles, machinery, and alcohol), and enable recognition of Transnistrian diplomas. That said, proponents of "Europeanization" must be careful that Transnistria's interests and identity are taken into account, otherwise "Europeanization" will be seen as another word for "Romanianization"—which is one of the reasons that the conflict started in the first place.

The situation in Transnistria remains unchanged, although constitutional reforms are under discussion that would, on paper, give greater

⁹ Ibid, p.18.

¹⁰ While the Communist Party won the highest percentage of votes (almost 40 percent), a coalition government has been formed between the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova, the Democratic Party of Moldova, and the Liberal Party of Moldova.

¹¹ See the Merkel-Medvedev memorandum of June 5, 2010, (Meseburg). "President Medvedev, Chancellor Merkel focus on European Security," *The Voice of Russia*, June 5, 2010. Available at <http://english.ruvr.ru/2010/06/05/9168814.html>. And the Final Statement of the tripartite meeting between France, Germany, and Russia in Deauville, October 19, 2010.

power to the Prime Minister. Presidential elections in Transnistria are scheduled for December 2011. Smirnov (who is now seventy-one years old) is expected to win, although constitutional changes and a business elite that is interested in greater export opportunities could create some pluralism.

What is badly needed is for Moldovans and Transnistrians to start talking more about a common future, and to take small and pragmatic steps to make that a reality. There are powerful forces on both sides of the river that are profiting from the status quo. There are also influential external players with their own agendas. These will be hard to move. But since the lack of a settlement is hurting the vast majority of people on both sides of the river, they both have a vested self-interest in cooperating.¹² It is therefore essential to intensify confidence-building measures across the Dniestr. In particular, it would make sense to focus on improving contacts between the youth (the generation that does not know the other side), and the business community that can profit from new opportunities. At the same time, the challenge is to demonstrate to the elite, particularly in Tiraspol, that the cost of not cooperating over the long term will be greater than the short-term benefit of intransigence. Here, the prospect of EU integration (in terms of opening up business, education, and travel opportunities) can create a rosier vision of the future for all.

Confidence-building Measures

Whatever shape Moldova will take in the future, Chisinau and Tiraspol will have to find a way to work with each other. As the old saying goes, you can't choose your neighbors.

The Moldovan government tends to refer to the Transnistrian leadership as being illegal and unrecognized. Yet, there is no denying that they exist, and have existed for a generation. Like them or not, they are the de facto authorities of the region that they control. And if Moldova wants to "reintegrate" them (a loaded term in itself), then it will have to work with them.

There are signs that the new Moldovan government is willing to reach out. The new government program, agreed to and made public on January 14, 2011, resolves, among its objectives and priority actions, to

- create conditions for the reintegration of the Transnistrian region in the economic, informational, political, social, and cultural life of Moldova;
- develop a reintegration strategy and coordinated policy with the competent national institutions;
- implement confidence-building measures, strengthening linkages between people, training local inhabitants in the transformation and "Europeanisation" of the Republic of Moldova;
- create conditions to remove all existing barriers to the free movement of persons, goods, and services between the two sides of the Dniestr;
- develop a dialogue with the authorities, business, and civil society in the Transnistrian region in order to create preconditions for the reintegration of the country; and
- develop and implement joint projects, including with the support of external partners, which would help increase the welfare of people on both banks and would create a favorable atmosphere to encourage negotiations in the 5+2.

The European Union is planning to support the confidence-building process. This will build on EU-funded projects carried out by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) that have been going on since March 2009 to promote community-level cooperation in areas like health care, social affairs, and the environment. At the same time, a series of working-level contacts (overseen by the OSCE) have been held between Moldovan and Transnistrian officials to identify cooperation across a spectrum of issues including security, economics, and humanitarian affairs. In 2010 the two sides agreed to reestablish the passenger railway service between Chisinau, Tiraspol, and Odessa, and started to discuss restoring normal telephone communication between the two river banks. Some embassies and civil-society groups have taken initiatives of their own, for example facilitating contacts among young people, sports teams, and cultural groups, and promoting the development of small- and medium-

¹² For more on the philosophy of cooperation and why people, over the long term, have an enlightened self-interest in working together, see Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic, 1984).

sized businesses.

However, the Moldovan government has no national (re)integration strategy, and there is no shared set of objectives among the parties. The process thus far has been largely ad hoc. As a result, there is a lack of buy-in among the relevant ministries, few benchmarks for moving forward, and no way of measuring progress.

If the OSCE (this year under Lithuania's chairmanship) and the other mediators want to make progress toward creating an environment that is more ripe for a settlement, bottom-up confidence-building measures rather than a top-down negotiation process (with nothing new on the table) might be the way to go. For its part, the EU could make more effective use of its economic leverage to influence the confidence-building and settlement process, especially if it has identified Transdniestria as a priority. The Moldovan government could start working on a national integration strategy, and strengthen the capacity of the Bureau of Reintegration (as called for in the government program).

Perhaps it will also soon be time to start a new

round of confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs). The OSCE Mission to Moldova drew up a package of proposals in 2005, borrowing ideas from the *Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty* and the *Dayton Accords*. This package—which has yet to be implemented—includes protocols on a range of issues including exchange of information, inspections, reductions, weapons-manufacturing facilities, small arms and light weapons, joint training, and disaster relief. There is also a *Protocol on Ammunition Destruction and Ammunition Stockpile Management*. The latter is particularly important since there are still an estimated 20,000 tons of ammunition at a massive depot in Colbasna in the north of Transdniestria. Most of this material no longer has any military value, but poses a major risk to public safety.

In conclusion, while a settlement of the Moldovan situation (which is no longer a conflict) may still be some years away, the time is ripe to introduce a series of confidence-building measures that can narrow differences and bring mutual benefits to communities on both sides of the river. It's time to build bridges across the Dniestr.

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