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Post-Soviet Conflicts Revisited

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Alexander Burian, The Transnistrian Conflict – the Prospects of its Resolution. A view from Kishinev

The origins of the Transnistrian conflict

Historical roots of the conflict

The unresolved conflict between the central government and the leadership of the territories situated east of the Dnieper River plays an important role in the life of contemporary Moldova. This circumstance leaves an imprint on an entire complex of problems which determine economics and politics, international relations, as well as external economic and political strategies of the country. The Transnistrian conflict shows, in concentrated form, some features which are also characteristic of other conflicts (such as the Nagorno Karabakh, the Georgian Ossetian or the Georgian-Abkhaz conflicts). Nevertheless, it has also distinct features which make it different from other conflicts in the post-Soviet area. This concerns the stronger presence of ideological and political factors. The geopolitical and geo-strategic components should also not be discounted.

On top of that, it is important to remember that such components as ethnicity, religion, or demography are absent in the Transnistrian conflict or they do not play an important role. There are also no historical parallels which could serve as a local precedent for conflict resolution, since no serious conflicts have been registered in the area since centuries. The conflict unfolded against the background of the collapse of the Soviet Union and it has political, ideological and geopolitical roots.

Right-bank Moldova

The origins of Moldavian statehood reach back to the XIVth century, when the Moldavian Principality was established east of the Carpathian Mountains. It was a proto-statelike entity which acted as a buffer between the enlightened Europe and the barbarian world. [1]

In the beginning, between 1352 and 1359, Moldova was under the sovereignty of the Hungarian kings, but beginning with the rule of Bogdan I., the Principality won two important attributes of statehood, namely sovereignty and independence. Although sovereignty and independence were concepts whose meaning differed somewhat from the present, their role

in the political life of any state should not be overestimated. Nevertheless, between 1359 and 1538, when the Moldavian Principality was able to determine its own domestic and foreign policies, Moldavian statehood reached its climax. It was then that the possibility emerged to consolidate the evolving Moldavian society, to establish political, economic and military relations with its neighbors and most importantly, to define the state territory, whose borders were recognized by international law.

No less important were the inculcation of such terms as “Moldavian country” “Moldavian”, or “Moldavian language” into the minds of the Moldavians. This was helpful in the process of forming a Moldavian nation. These concepts took root during the XVth and XVIth centuries, not only in the XXth, under Stalinism, as this is insinuated by some contemporary homegrown politicians and historians.

The main geopolitical distinction of the Moldavian Principality at this time was that the Country of Moldova (Ţara Moldovei) was (and still is) located on the fault line, or the boundary between three grand cultures (the Slav, Latin and Eastern), between three major religions (Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam), between three big nations (Slav, Latin and Turkic peoples), as well as three ideological tendencies (Panslavism, Pan-Turkism and Pan-Latinism). The exposed location of a frontier state and a frontier nation made the Moldavian Principality maneuver for centuries between the superpowers, the super-religions and the super-tendencies, trying to stay afloat and to preserve its sovereignty and its national identity.

Nevertheless, Moldova had to accept some conditions at specific times which guaranteed its existence. For example, Moldavians accepted Orthodoxy while preserving vulgarized Latin as their everyday language. They preserved their language and their religion in 1538, when they had to accept the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire. For medieval Moldova, there was no other way to survive in this historical period.

This said, internal and external contradictions made it impossible for the leadership of the Moldavian Principality to choose a strategic partner in order to survive amidst the enduring conflicts of the superpowers with the help of a strong ally. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now realize and understand that it was hard for Moldova to resist the natural gravitation towards Austria, Hungary, the Polish-Lithuanian Principality and, accordingly towards Western Europe, because of the religious discords (Orthodoxy-Catholicism). At the same time, it was impossible to over-

come the natural gravitation towards the Russian Empire because of the discords of a cultural and linguistic ilk. There was a subconscious gravitation towards the Ottoman Empire from among the conservative strata of the population, particularly the boyars, who yearned for the peaceful times and the continuation of their personal well-being.

In the final analysis, the struggle between the superpowers in the VIII-XIXth centuries led to the dismemberment of the Moldavian Principality into three parts: Northern Moldova (Bukovina) was conquered by the Austrian Empire in 1775, and Eastern Moldova (Bessarabia) by the Russian Empire in 1812. Western Moldova (Transpruthian Moldova) remained under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire until 1878.

The history of the three dismembered parts of Moldova continued within the boundaries of different states.

Thus, Northern Moldova (later Bukovina) was a part of the Austrian Empire between 1775 and 1867, between 1867 and 1918 of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, from 1918 until 1940 and 1941 till 1944 a part of the Kingdom of Rumania and 1940-1941 as well as between 1944 and 1991 a part of the Soviet Union. After 1991 until this day Northern Moldova (the Bukovina) has been a part of Ukraine.

Western Moldova which included Moldavian territories from the Carpathian Mountains as far as the Prut River and the Danube Lowlands continued to remain under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire after the second partition of Moldova in 1812. In 1859 it entered a personal union with Walachia (the other Danube principality) to form Moldo-Walachia which in 1861 became a real union and was called, as of 1862, Rumania. The Western part (beyond the Prut River) of Moldova is a part of Rumania still today.

Eastern Rumania (which later was called Bessarabia) became a part of the Russian Empire in 1812. In December 1917, immediately after the Russian October Revolution, Eastern Moldova proclaimed itself the Democratic Republic of Moldova, but was incapable to defend its sovereignty and independence, so that in 1918, it was united with Rumania.

As a result of the settlement achieved between the two governments Eastern Moldova (Bessarabia) was transferred to the Soviet Union on 28 June, 1940. On 2 August of the same year, Eastern Moldova was proclaimed the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic and became one among

16 Soviet Republics of the USSR. It included the former Autonomous Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic which had belonged to Ukraine. At the same time, the territories north and South of Bessarabia (the Khotinsk region in the North and the Black Sea littoral as well as the Danube estuary in the South) was separated from Eastern Moldova and transferred to Ukraine.

Between 22 June, 1941 and August 1944 Rumanian and German troops which participated in the war against the USSR were on Moldavian territory. Between August 1944 and August 1991 was a part of the USSR as a Soviet Republic (a quasi-state entity within the Soviet Union).

On 27 August 1991 the Moldavian parliament proclaimed the country´s independence which was quickly recognized by the international community; and the country became a fully-fledged subject of international law.

Left-bank Moldova

As of the second half of the XIVth century the territory of today´s Transnistria formed a part of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy, and accordingly, from 1569 of the Respospolita. The limits of the influence of the Russian Empire were pushed as far as the Dnieper River after the Russian-Turkish Agreement had been signed as a result of the war of 1787-1791, on 29 December 1791.

Between 1791 and 1917 Left-Bank Moldova was a part of the Russian Empire. After the establishment of the USSR today´s left-bank *raions* of the Moldavian Republic were a part of Ukraine with the center at first in Balta (today Odessa region, Ukraine) and as of 1929 in Tiraspol´.[2] Some researchers hold that the establishment of the Autonomous Moldavian Republic was dictated by the wish of the Federal Center to solve the Bessarabia problem,[3] although, in our opinion, such allegations are controversial, because at that time several ethnicity-based autonomous entities were established in the Soviet Union with no territorial conflicts involved.[4]

On 2 August, 1940, the Autonomous Moldavian SSR was included into the newly established Moldavian SSR. However, this concerned only those regions where the Moldavians had a majority. It is important to mention that the territory of contemporary Transnistria had never been a part of the Moldavian Principality. The decision of the authorities in Mos-

cow was presumably motivated by the fact that the local population subscribed to Moldavian identity (according to 1926 census, 30% of the population[5]). On top of that, we can assume that this was an attempt to set off the transfer of the territories North and South of Bessarabia to Ukraine (the Khotinsk region in the North and the Black Sea littoral as well as the Danube estuary in the South).

During WWII, between 1941 and 1944, Transnistria was occupied by German-Rumanian troops and was a part of the Rumanian protectorate "Transnistria". Between 1944 and 1991 the area on the left bank of the Dniester River belonged to the Moldavian SSR.

On 2 September 1990 the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic (TMR) was proclaimed as a new state on the left-bank territory of the Dniester. Nevertheless, the independence of the new state formation was not recognized by the Moldavian authorities and the international community.

Geopolitical realities and the genesis of the Transnistrian conflict

The perestroika and the beginning of the collapse of the USSR

As a consequence of the perestroika in the Soviet Union, the social activity of the population surged in the 1980s. National and ethnic issues became more acute. In the Soviet republics, public movements emerged which united representatives of the titular nations of these republics.

In the republics which had some tradition of nation building, for example the Baltic republics, the titular nation could organize and prioritize the idea to consolidate society and to win sovereignty and independence from the Union center. In other republics, for example in the Caucasus or in Central Asia, the problem of interethnic and religious discord came to the foreground which generated bloody conflicts.

Nevertheless, in all these republics the contours of independence appeared and independence from the center was identified with the idea to establish one´s own state formation.

In the Moldavian SSR the processes of perestroika acquired a distinct dynamic. The idea to be independent of the Union center which was advanced by Russia herself and the Baltic republics, ran against the idea of reunification with Rumania which was pushed by a small group of literati and young activists. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the

population of the Moldavian SSR, against the backdrop of a tradition of statehood, was exposed to manipulation from self-proclaimed leaders who effectively realized the ideas of their foreign masters. The first signs of a substitution of national by nationalist slogans appeared during the perestroika. They referred not to the Moldavian, but to the Rumanian nation.

In contrast to the population in the Baltic states, the perspective of the demise of the USSR did not rally the Moldavians around the idea of Moldavian statehood, but split it into antagonist groups. Some wanted Moldavian statehood, some unification with Rumania, and some came out unconditionally for the preservation of Moldova as a part of the Soviet Union.

In the fall of 1988 there were several demonstrations where increasingly radical slogans were voiced: “Moldova-for the Moldavians” or “Trunk-Railway Station-Russia”

In response to this, demonstrations were held in Tiraspol´, where participants demanded to “speak a human language”

The language problem

On the Congress of the USSR Writers´ Union in March 1988 a motion was introduced to extend official status to the languages of the titular nations of all Soviet Republics. Pursuant to this step, demands were advanced in Moldova to recognize the identity of the Moldavian and the Rumanian languages, to write the Moldavian language with the Latin script as well as to make it the state language of the Moldavian republic.

The discussions around the “language legislation” reflected the depth of the cleavage and the lack of shared understanding among the population of the Moldavian SSR. The population was split along linguistic lines into two communities which did not communicate with each other. An everyday, vulgar nationalism emerged. It took different forms in Kishinev, Tiraspol´ or Komrat, but its essence was the same everywhere, namely a homo sovieticus mentality unfolding under the conditions of undeserved freedom. Some insisted that only Rumanian should obtain the status of a state language while others demanded equally adamantly that Russian should receive the same status. 6 The publication of the draft law entitled “On the use of languages on the territory of the Moldavian SSR” in March 1989 was a defining moment in the genesis of the conflict. The project

was promulgated on behalf of the Moldavian Writers´ Union. It triggered a negative response among parts of the population which was not proficient in Moldavian. This led to the emergence of a public movement which came out for the introduction of two state languages, namely Russian and Moldavian.

On 11 August, 1989 the OSTK (United Council of Work Collectives) was established. The OSTK came out against the draft law which according to its leaders and sponsors was apt to lead to discrimination along national lines in the realization of the right to work. The OSTK began to stage strikes in enterprises in left-bank Moldova.

Despite the strikes, the Supreme Soviet of Moldova extended the status of state language to Moldavian on 31 August, 1989, triggering a new wave of strikes.

The People´s Front and the idea of unification with Rumania

The weakening of the Union center, and the “sovereignizatsia” of the Soviet republics led to public debates concerning different scenarios for the future. In the Moldavian SSR two incompatible options were voiced with a lot of fracas, namely the unconditional preservation of Moldova as a part of the USSR and the unification with Rumania; i.e. people clung to the precedents which had been supplied by history. To be sure, there were suggestions to establish a Moldavian state, but they were voiced feebly and in a defensive mode, since they were confronted with the dilemma what should be done with Moldova beyond the Prut River, with the Bukovina and Southern Bessarabia. These territories had been parts of the mediaeval Moldova, but today belonged to Rumania and Ukraine.

In May, 1989, the Moldavian People´s Front was established which united several nationalist organizations. The ideology of the people´s front was based on the idea to create “Grand Rumania” which was to include the Moldavian SSR without Transnistria, but with the Bukovina and Southern Bessarabia. At this juncture, pipe dreams about an “exchange” of territories with Rumania and Ukraine as the only correct option for the future of Moldova obtained currency.

As a counterweight, the “Interdvizhenie” movement was established in Transnistria. As mentioned earlier, the OSTK was established in Tiraspol´. The OSTK began to hold strikes in the enterprises of left-bank Moldova which was predominantly inhabited by ethnic Russians and

Ukrainians. The further evolution of the political process in the Moldavian Republic demonstrated clearly that the number of those who supported unification with Rumania did not even match the minimal threshold set for elections, namely 4-6%. The People´s Front itself which at the time promoted unification with Rumania did never participate in elections with such slogans. On the contrary, in order to survive in Moldavian politics, the People´s Front was forced to evolve from a "national liberation movement of Rumanians on occupied territory" (1990) to a Christian Democrat National Party (2000) with a banal program which showed no traces of unification with Rumania. [7]

Against the background of a society with a prevailing totalitarian mindset and the incapability to assess the situation critically, the response to the – however negligible – presence of partisans of the idea to unify Moldova with Rumania was totally inadequate. Given the lack of a dialogue between the supporters of different political positions, the public visibility of the partisans of unification triggered panic reactions. Moscow also presented the events in Kishinev through the only Union TV channel at the time as steps toward the unification with Rumania. The situation was complicated by the fact that the Transnistrian population trusted this channel much more than the information disseminated by Kishinev TV.

Print media which were not controlled by the Communist Party and to all appearance financed by the intelligence services added fuel to the fire by terrifying the population with apocalyptic scenarios of the unification with Rumania. The Communist party of Moldova also exacerbated the situation: in order to strengthen their unstable positions, the Communists started to scare the population with the specter of unification.

The *angst* before a unification of the Moldavian Republic with Rumania after the 1918 model appeared in paranoid and eschatological forms, and became a mass psychosis, particularly after the fall of the Ceaucescu dictatorship in December 1989. What for some Moldavians was the liberation from the complex of national humiliation, became the harbingers of "the end of the world" for others. During the fall of the Ceaucescu regime Kishinev was awash with demonstrations carrying slogans demanding unification with Rumania, while the Russian-speaking population of the Moldavian SSR was paralyzed by fear. [8]

In the Transnistrian industrial centers the population reacted particularly touchily to similar ideas. The word "Rumanian" was used as a synonym for "fascist". Driven by fear, the population, and also a part of the Molda-