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Chapter Three

THE STABILITY OF THE DNIESTER MOLDOVAN REPUBLIC: A POST-ELECTORAL ANALYSIS

THE STABILITY OF THE DNIESTER MOLDOVAN REPUBLIC: A POST-ELECTORAL ANALYSIS⁷⁴

Oazu Nantoi, Stephen R. Bowers, Valeria Ciobanu, and Marion T. Doss, Jr.

Executive Summary

The communists' electoral victory and the elevation of Voronin to the Presidency drew Moldova closer to the Russian Federation and raised new questions about the stability of the Dniester Moldovan Republic.

The existence of the DMR no longer serves Russian interests as it did in the past.

The prospects for confrontation between the DMR and Moldova are greater today as a result of the Communist Party victory.

While President Voronin has privately expressed his disdain for the DMR leadership, he seems willing to accept the existence of the DMR.

By the latter part of the past decade, the DMR existed primarily as a vehicle for criminal activities rather than as a bastion of Stalinism and Russian nationalism.

Weapons left behind by Soviet forces have made the DMR a major factor in illegal arms trafficking.

⁷⁴ In the interest of clarity, this paper refers to the Moldovan separatist entity east of the Dniester River as either Transdnistria or the Dniester Moldovan Republic (DMR) to distinguish it from the Republic of Moldova. Most nations do not recognize the DMR as a nation, however.

The terms "eastern" and "western" Moldova refer to territories to the east or west of the Dniester River. That river runs down the eastern half of Moldova, not the center. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, "western" Moldova refers to the western and central sections of Moldova.

This paper contains information that has been provided "on background." In these cases, no reference is made to the information source. It was also impossible, in some instances, to guarantee the accuracy of the data. Nevertheless, the authors assume complete responsibility for the conclusions and assessments made in this work.

The Presence of Russian Federation Troops in Eastern Moldova

The Republic of Moldova proclaimed its independence on the August 27, 1991 following the disintegration of the USSR. At that time, there were about 30,000 Soviet soldiers in 36 military garrisons on the territory of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. Most of the units belonged to the 14th Army. These troops found themselves in a legal void. Meanwhile, separatist insurgencies in Transdnistria and Gagauzia and the massive arrival in Moldova of Russian mercenaries (most notably, Don Cossacks) made the creation of the Republic of Moldova National Army and the clarification of the legal status of former Soviet military units an urgent matter.⁷⁵

On November 14, 1991, the equipment of the former Soviet military units in the Republic of Moldova was declared property of the state (Decree No. 234 of the President of the Republic of Moldova). On March 18, 1992, the President of the Republic of Moldova issued a decree assuming jurisdiction over military formations located in Moldova. These measures served as a legal basis for the creation of the National Army, but provoked a negative reaction in Moscow. As a result, on March 20, 1992 the Government of the Republic of Moldova and the General Staff of the United Army Forces of the CIS signed an agreement regarding the status of military forces of the former USSR located in Moldova. According to this treaty, about 150 military units in Moldova were to pass under the authority of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Moldova. Another 50 units, considered strategic by the Russians, would remain under CIS control. The units of the CIS were scheduled to withdraw from the territory of the Republic of Moldova by January 1, 1993.

The situation in the localities in eastern Moldova became very serious, however. The units of the 14th Army were in an extremely tense atmosphere. Separatists were already destroying the state structures of the Republic of Moldova. Stores of weapons and ammunition were assaulted by crowds searching for weapons for separatist forces. As a consequence, it was common for officers of the 14th Army to formally pass to the reserves, then immediately receive jobs at the plants from the Industrial Military Complex of the former USSR. At the same time they became members of the Labor Detachments of Collaboration with the militia, the Territorial Emergency Detachments and the Dniestrean National Guard. The amorphous structures of the CIS could not control the situation. Consequently, on April 1, 1992, President Boris Yeltsin issued a decree regarding Russian military units which, in effect, invalidated the CIS-Moldova Agreement.

Open intervention of the 14th Army on the side of the separatists began immediately after the Republic of Moldova proclaimed its independence. In September 1991, the commander of the 14th Army, General Iakovlev, accepted an appointment as President of the Supreme Council of Defense of the Dniester Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. An open transfer of armament to the paramilitary formations of separatists and mercenaries took place. In Spring 1992, separatist troops also obtained heavy armament such as tanks and artillery (including Grad multiple rocket launchers) from the 14th Army. There were cases when entire units passed under the authority of the DMR. The 14th Army openly intervened in the conflict on the side of the separatist regime in spring-summer 1992, ensuring its salvation.

⁷⁵ Gagauzia is in southern Moldova. The Gagauz people are Christians of Turkish extraction. They make up about 3.5% of the population of Moldova (including Transdnistria).

By the end of 2000, there were no Russian troops west of the Dniester and 14th Army had been reduced to about 2,800 soldiers (mostly native to the region) and renamed the Operative Group of Troops. The unit consisted of the 8th Motorized Infantry Brigade with an attached tank battalion and transport helicopter squadron. Its armament includes 119 tanks, 129 armored fighting vehicles, 129 artillery pieces, 36 anti-tank launchers and 7 helicopters.

Ammunition stores are another problem. Most Russian materiel in Moldova is kept at the village of Colbasna. The ammunition stocks in Colbasna were created for the needs of the 14th Army. However, when the evacuation of the Soviet troops from the eastern European states began, Colbasna's ammunition holdings expanded considerably. In 1991, the stores' commandant reported 45,951 tons of ammunition on hand. However, in 1994, within the framework of the negotiations regarding military equipment on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, the Russian military reported only 24,266 tons. This discrepancy has raised suspicions that ammunition has passed to the paramilitary formations of the DMR. On October 21, 1994, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Moldova signed an agreement that stipulated that Russian troops should be evacuated in three years.⁷⁶ Alerted by that agreement, the separatist leader Igor Smirnov issued a decree that banned the evacuation of the ammunition from the territory of the DMR and declared it the property of the "Transdnistria people." In 1994, the stores at Colbasna were divided into two parts, one of which is controlled and guarded by the DMR (the 3rd Motorized Infantry Battalion from Rybnitsa).⁷⁷ Since there is a frontier post at the stores' exit, manned by troops from the State Security Ministry of the DMR, the separatist regime controls the removal of armament from both sections of the stores.

The acceptance in 1996 of the Russian Federation into the Council of Europe was conditioned on the withdrawal of Russian Federation troops from Moldova. On the eve of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) summit in Istanbul in November 1999, the Russian Federation evacuated three trains loaded with auxiliary equipment as a symbolic gesture, but the Russian Federation still maintains a military presence in Transdnistria. The Russian Federation blames separatist leaders for their failure to complete the evacuation. On June 17, 2000, a Russian representative in Vienna presented the schedule of evacuation for the ammunition, but claimed that the schedule could be followed only with the cooperation of the separatist leaders.

At present, the situation regarding the evacuation of troops and ammunition remains unclear. On the eve of the meeting of the OSCE Ministers of External Affairs from Vienna on November 27, 2000, Russia made another symbolic gesture, removing 50 wagons of auxiliary equipment. On November 23, the DMR's president, minister of state security, and minister of external affairs were invited to Moscow by the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation to discuss the evacuation schedule. When they came back to Tiraspol, the separatist leaders presented this step as part of "the Agreement Protocol on Military and Property Issues," signed by Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin and the Transdnistrian separatist leader, Igor Smirnov on March 20, 1998 at Odessa. This protocol, signed with the tacit agreement of the Republic of Moldova, stipulates the separation of the materiel into three categories:

- Materiel of the Operative Group of Troops;
- Materiel that must be unconditionally evacuated to the territory of the Russian Federation;
- Materiel that can be sold (The proceeds to be divided in proportion of 50% to 50% between the Russian Federation and the DMR).

The destiny of the Russian military presence in Transdnistria will depend largely on the evolution of the political situation within the Republic of Moldova. The Russian Federation actively influenced the political situation in the Republic when Petru Lucinschi was President by enlisting the support of the Moldovan Communist Party, the Russian language press and Russian secret services. The desired goal was to bring to governance, through the democratic process, pro-Moscow political forces. Such a development would, they believed, facilitate a Moldovan merger with the Russia-Belarus Union, Russian military bases in Moldova and the establishment of Russian as the official second language of the state. This, in turn, could encourage pro-Russian sentiments in the Ukraine. The communist victory in the 2001 elections indicated that this strategy as a sound one.

Historical Background

On March 27, 1918, after the disintegration of the Russian Empire, most of what is now the Republic of Moldova became part of Romania. The slice of Moldova east of the Dniester remained part of Russia. In 1924, it became the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR). In 1940, the USSR annexed the rest of Moldova. In August 1994, combining the recently annexed territory with the MASSR, Soviet authorities created the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). The Soviets created an anti-Romanian phobia to avoid questions from the local population about the legality of annexation of 1940 and formation of the MSSR. In schools, the period between 1918 and 1940 (when western Moldova was part of Romania) was presented as "the period of Romanian-Fascist occupation." From the very first days after the annexation, the Soviet regime attacked entire social groups. Teachers, priests, former officials and farmers (especially those who opposed forced collectivization) were all assaulted. Repeated forced deportations to Kazakhstan and Siberia took place from 1941 to 1949. Forced collectivization and a terrible drought in 1947 resulted in a famine in which at least 200,000 people died of malnutrition. Though there was no food, the Communist regime prohibited the free movement of the local population to other areas from the USSR. The official historiography addressed the famine only after the collapse of the USSR.

Meanwhile, attacks were directed against the population's historical memory and culture. Churches were destroyed. Subscription to the Romanian press was prohibited (only in the MSSR, not in the other Soviet republics) as was the sale of literature published in Romania. With the replacement of the Latin alphabet with Cyrillic, the Romanian spoken by the local population was now called "Moldovan." The fiction that Moldovan was a language rather than a dialect was pushed to the extent that Moldovan KGB officers received a bonus of 15% of their salary for foreign language (Romanian) aptitude. Simultaneously, the idea that the Moldovan nation had no connection to Romania was insistently imposed.

From 1940, the Soviets changed the ethnic composition of the population of Moldova. Despite the fact that the population density of the MSSR was the highest in the USSR (127 persons/square km), there was an influx of Russians. These new arrivals did

⁷⁶ The Russian Duma has not ratified this treaty. In November of 1995, the Duma passed a resolution declaring Transdnistria a zone of strategic Russian interests.

⁷⁷ This battalion has about 350 soldiers and is equipped with armored personnel carriers, a battery of multiple rocket launchers, a battery of six MT-12 anti-tank guns, and an anti-aircraft battery of ZU-23-2s.

not know the language of the local population or the history of this territory and the majority of them were citizens of the USSR. Meanwhile, Moldovans were sent to other Soviet republics under various programs (mobilization to forced work, etc.).

The ethnic composition of Transdniestria is more russified than that of western Moldova. Many of the Russian immigrants had been factory workers who had been sent to work in the more industrialized Transdniestria region. In addition, retired soldiers, most of whom were Russians, often settled in Tiraspol and Bender.⁷⁸ In western Moldova, 69.5% of the population is Moldovan or Romanian and 20.5% is Russian or Ukrainian. In Transdniestria, 58% is Russian or Ukrainian (In Tiraspol more than 80% of the population is of Slav origin.) and 40% are Moldovan or Romanian. In Transdniestria, the concentration of Soviet troops was much higher than in western Moldova.

The conflict started with disputes over national languages. In 1989, in the MSSR, the "Moldovan" language was declared as the state language (recognizing, however, that it is essentially the same as Romanian), though the Latin alphabet was re-imposed. Transdniestrian separatists insisted on keeping the Cyrillic alphabet. By and large, the Moldovan government did not press the issue, but in many places Moldovan zealots fired or demoted citizens who did not speak the language.⁷⁹

The political confrontations on linguistic issues were accompanied by conflicts over Moldova's status. The Moldovan Popular Front rode a call for national independence to overwhelming victory in the 1990 parliamentary elections. Once independence was declared, however, the Popular Front called for reunification with Romania. This caused unrest in the industrial centers of Transdniestria. Transdniestria had never been part of Romania until 1941–1944 when Romania (allied with Nazi Germany) controlled this territory. The cruel realities of the wartime occupation did not engender a positive image of Romania in the eyes of the Transdniestrian population.⁸⁰

Shortly after the Language Act, the United Council of Work Collectives (OSTK) was formed in Tiraspol. The OSTK's stated goal was to combat Romanian nationalism in Moldova. In the 1990 parliamentary elections, the OSTK won most of the seats from the Transdniestria region, while the Moldovan Popular Front won an overwhelming majority of the seats from the rest of the country. The delegates from Transdniestria soon left Chisinau, however, citing threats and violence by Popular Front supporters. Two weeks after the Gagauzian declaration of autonomy on August 19, 1990, Transdniestrians created their own republic (September 2, 1990). Almost immediately, there were violent encounters between separatists and government forces. Since, this conflict was taking place in an area still under Soviet authority, there was no out-and-out warfare between the factions.

That changed in August 1991. Following the failed coup in Moscow (a coup supported by some DMR leaders), Chisinau declared Moldovan independence. In

⁷⁸Bender is located on the western side of the Dniestr. Because it is directly across the Dniestr from Tiraspol and is essentially Tiraspol's "sister city," it was occupied by the DMR. It is the only city in western Moldova occupied by the DMR.

⁷⁹Later, in 1993, there would be similar persecution in the DMR. Teachers and officials opposed to the continued use of Cyrillic were demoted or fired.

⁸⁰The population of the rest of Moldova turned out to be no more enthusiastic. In a referendum in March 1994, 95% of the population voted to remain independent. The Popular Front, by ignoring overwhelming public opposition to reunification went from a position of dominance in Moldovan politics to one of irrelevance. By then, however, relations between DMR leaders and the government of the Republic were beyond repair.

September, agents from Chisinau kidnapped Igor Smirnov, the OSTK's leader, from the Ukraine. After a separatist blockade of the railway running from Moldova to the Ukraine (through Transdniestria) caused economic disruption in Moldova, Smirnov was released. In December, shortly after his release, Smirnov was elected president of the DMR with 65% of the vote. By spring of 1992, armed clashes between Republican and DMR forces were commonplace.

From the beginning of the conflict, Transdniestrian separatists used violence against their opponents. Armed "guardians" inspected villages opposed to separatism and intimidated the population. Job dismissals, intimidation, even murder of active opponents of separatism, led to an exodus to the western side of the Dniester (about 25 thousand persons before the outbreak of open warfare).⁸¹ As a result, the Republic of Moldova lost its grip on the eastern region and open opponents of separatism within the DMR became increasingly isolated, and therefore guarded in their actions and utterances.

Russian Involvement in Moldova

Russian Federation experts categorically deny that Russia has supported separatism and claim that Russia has involved herself in this conflict because it was necessary and no other country would. However, the content of the first document signed by the Russian Federation as peacekeeper in Transdniestria supports allegations of interventionism. That document was signed in Moscow on July 21, 1992 by the presidents of the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation. The document created a security zone administered by a Unified Control Commission (UCC), which included members from the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation and the DMR. The agreement allowed separatist leaders to maintain the full control over the eastern region of the Republic of Moldova and to be protected by peacekeeping forces of the Russian Federation.⁸² Understandably, this protection has made the leadership of the DMR less willing to compromise than it would be without such protection. The creation of the state structures of Transdniestria continued under the cover of the 14th Army and with political, military, economic and informational support from the Russian Federation. Formally, this process ended with the adoption through referendum of the constitution of the DMR on December 24, 1995.

The Russian mass media has strongly endorsed the positions of the separatists in Transdniestria. As a result, the Russian public has come to view the Republic of Moldova as an aggressor and Transdniestria as a defender of the Russophone population's rights.

There is clearly a pro-DMR lobby in the State Duma of the Russian Federation. The Duma has not yet ratified the treaties between Moldova and Russia signed by both parties in 1990 and 1993. The Duma has repeatedly taken provocative stances regarding Transdniestria. There have been proposals for bilateral treaties between Russia and the DMR. The DMR has been visited many times by Duma deputies. The Duma has created a "Commission for Contribution to Settlement of Political and Economic Situation in Transdniestria." Every time elections take place in Transdniestria (illegal from the point

⁸¹ On December 8, 1991, general elections were held in Moldova. The mayor of the village of Caragas on the eastern side of the Dniestr, organized an event for a presidential candidate. Later, he was found dead in a well.

⁸² On July 2, 1992, forces of the Republic of Moldova attempted to recapture Bender. The offensive was called off when Russian tanks stationed in Tiraspol moved into Bender.

of view of the Republic of Moldova) Russian deputies assist as "international observers" and declare them "free and democratic" despite the protests from the Republic of Moldova. The Russian Federation insists that representatives of the DMR participate in the negotiation of the treaty on friendship and collaboration between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Moldova.

The stability of the DMR stems largely from the fact that the regime serves Russian interests. The education system in Transnistria is based on Russian standards. Transnistrian children study from Russian books. Studies at the State University in Tiraspol are based on Russian standards and the University of Tiraspol is part of the Russian Association of Universities. The Russian Orthodox Church is also actively supporting the separatist regime.

All the leaders of the DMR are citizens of the Russian Federation and travel to different states with Russian foreign passports. Moscow sends these leaders on missions. Some of them were included on the election lists of the liberals of Zhirinovski and of the "Stalinist Block for the USSR" at the last elections in the Duma of the Russian Federation. Tiraspol encourages inhabitants of Transnistria to adopt Russian citizenship. About 65,000 persons have already become citizens of the Russian Federation. We can suppose that this push to increase the proportion of Russian citizens in Transnistria is aimed at providing a pretext for future Russian interference in the internal affairs of Moldova.

There is a consular section of the Russian Embassy in Tiraspol. Though the Russian Federation does not officially recognize the DMR, the presence of this consular section lends the regime credibility. On November 2, 2000, the consular section signed an agreement with the *Edinstvo* (Unity) movement regarding the procedure to obtain citizenship and foreign passports. The pro-Russian *Edinstvo* movement came to prominence after the implosion of the Popular Front. The evolution of *Edinstvo* and its support from the Russian Federation suggest that this may be an attempt to implement a "Costunica" scenario, with a controversial leader (Smirnov) replaced by more attractive leaders (*Edinstvo*). The Republic of Moldova would thus lose one of its major arguments (freeing the DMR's population from dictatorship) for regaining sovereignty over this territory. Understandably, Igor Smirnov and his companions had an extremely negative reaction to this development because they fear that the Russian Federation could stake its future on *Edinstvo* and they could be shunted aside.

The Russian Federation also supports the DMR by providing orders for its products. There is also industrial cooperation. Grad multiple rocket launchers are assembled at Transnistrian plants using parts produced at Russian plants. The Itera company, which is affiliated with Gazprom from Russia, has privatized the metallurgical plant in Rybnitsa (a city in northern Transnistria), which provides about 60% of the budget of the DMR (This privatization was made in the absence of an adequate legal framework, yet Chisinau was silent.). In addition, during the last ten years the Russian Federation has delivered natural gas to Transnistria. The DMR's debts for gas already exceed \$500 million, but the Russian Federation continues to accept token payments of goods in lieu of cash.

Perhaps not every action by Russians in Moldova has been sanctioned by Moscow. Undoubtedly, there were renegade actions. In 1989–1992 the USSR and the Russian Federation experienced the kind of political chaos that makes such actions possible. However, many official Russian acts have benefited the separatists.

Government actions are driven largely by self-interest, and it is undeniably in the best interests of the Russian Federation is to transform the Republic of Moldova into an unofficial protectorate of the Russian Federation. Such an outcome could serve as a lever of influence on the Ukraine and Romania. In addition, key decision makers in the Russian Federation still regard Transnistria as the key to Balkans. Some Russian military experts believe that the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Transnistria would considerably reduce the military potential of Russian bases in the Crimea.

Transnistrian Smuggling and Chisinau

When the Republic of Moldova lost the control over Transnistria, this separatist region became a hub of illegal enterprises. The fact that DMR authorities have access to an official Republic of Moldova customs stamp facilitates such activities.⁸³ The most important of these is the smuggling of excised goods – alcohol, tobacco, and oil. Smugglers take products through the section of the frontier that is controlled by the DMR (The DMR controls the entire eastern frontier with the Ukraine.). The smugglers declare that the products are going to be transited through Transnistria. They therefore do not pay any customs duties or excise taxes. In fact, many of them never arrive on the left side of the Dniester River and another part is distributed in many countries. About 60% of the oil products brought on the territory of Moldova is smuggled. Transnistria has also become a center of a criminal international network that deals in smuggled cigarettes. This business is monopolized by the Sherif firm that is protected by the DMR's Ministry of State Security. The official import per capita of the excised goods, only through the customs that are controlled by the Republic of Moldova, is about 20 times greater in Transnistria than in Moldova. In fact, Igor Smirnov has named his son President of the State Customs Committee. The annual volume of illegal transactions that were performed only through the section of the frontier that is controlled by the Republic of Moldova exceeds the sum of \$500 million.

Illegal arms sales are another income source for the DMR. For example, it is known that seven Grad multiple rocket launchers, which were produced at the Pribor plant in Bender, reached Abkhazian separatists in Georgia. Additional weapons from the DMR arsenals were shipped to the Middle East as well as Central Asia. While current and former Moldovan officials are reluctant to speak openly, persistent rumors place these weapons in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 1999, Moldovan police arrested a group of DMR soldiers for illegal sale of arms and munitions (plastic explosives and detonators, thermobaric projectile launchers and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles). The group was led by Colonel Nemkov who is the deputy commander of the local Russian peacekeeping forces. Nemkov and his group were apprehended by Moldovan authorities in Bender, a city that lies on the dividing line between the DMR and the Republic of Moldova. On the same day, Colonel Nemkov's son, an officer in the DMR Ministry of Security, and two military associates, were stopped driving a Moskvitch sedan which was towing a trailer. The trailer contained three Iglu ground to air rockets and military telescopes designed for sniper rifles. While Nemkov was convicted in a Chisinau court for trading in illegal weapons, he received a pardon and was immediately released. Upon his return to Tiraspol, he was allowed to resume his position as deputy commander of the Russian peacekeeping forces.

⁸³ Interview with the Honorable John Stewart, US Ambassador to Moldova, Chisinau, 22 May 1997.

Armament from the DMR was also sold to Chechnya. In March 2000, Russian secret services arrested Igor Smirnov's son who had \$1-200,000, believed to be the proceeds of armament sold to Chechens. In Summer 2000, false U.S. bank notes, which allegedly were paid by Chechens for armament, circulated in the DMR. When Vladimir Putin visited Chisinau in June 2000 he was shown an automatic grenade launcher that was produced in Transnistria and used against the Russian Army in Chechnya. The Moldovan Ministry of Interior brought two of the grenade launchers to show as part of an exhibit intended to demonstrate that Tiraspol factories are producing materials for Chechens to use in combat against the Russian Army. The exhibit supported a consistent Moldovan theme that Smirnov and his associates are criminals deserving no official Russian support.

Unfortunately, there is no reliable data about the volume of arms trafficking. And, while there has been extensive media speculation, it is impossible to determine the precise routes used by arms traffickers. One possible avenue for illegal arms shipments is the Tiraspol military aerodrome. Many Moldovan police officials believe this airfield is used for the illegal air transport of military armament. They suspect that the weapons are transported by railroad from Odessa to Iliicevsk. A criminal group composed of former Afghanistan fighters controls this port and it is used for transportation of armament by sea.

The free hand given Transnistrian smugglers stems from the unilateral yielding of the Republic of Moldova. On February 7, 1996, authorities from Moldova and Tiraspol signed the "Protocol Decision Regarding the Customs Services of the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria." The first two articles of this document required the disbanding of the customs services that were created by the DMR along the Dniester River and the creation of a common customs service along the frontier with the Ukraine. Article 3 of this document required the Republic of Moldova to deliver a customs stamp with the inscription: "The Republic of Moldova. Customs Tiraspol" to Transnistria. In ten days, the DMR obtained the customs stamp, but has yet to fulfill the first two conditions. Authorities in Moldova have thus given the separatist regime the ability to legalize the circulation of smuggled goods and to do business outside Moldova as economic agents of the Republic of Moldova. There is no evidence that these economic agents pay anything to the budget of Moldova.

Such concessions by the Republic of Moldova allow the separatist regime to survive economically, maintain an army of comparable size to the Moldovan Army, and operate a repressive state machinery. Chisinau's passivity towards Transnistrian separatism might be excused, since, after the military conflict stopped, Moldovan popular interest toward this problem rapidly waned. In fact, there is even limited support for the separatist regime, cultivated by Russian language newspapers in the Republic of Moldova. One such paper, *Komersant Moldovy*, is financed by a state agency in Tiraspol.

Chisinau's generosity towards Transnistrian separatism is more troubling. It is possible that such generosity by politicians in Chisinau toward the DMR is the fruit of payments to politicians or political campaigns by separatists or criminals.

The DMR has had friends in high places in Chisinau, particularly politicians who came into politics from pro-Moscow political parties. For example, Vladimir Solonari was elected to Parliament in 1990 from *Edinstvo*, which was defending the idea of saving the USSR. Immediately after the disintegration of the USSR, Solonari, who was a deputy in the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, became active in the structures of DMR

and contributed to the consolidation of the Transnistrian state system. He then came back to Chisinau to serve as a deputy from 1994 to 1998. The case of Serghei Gradinari is another example. Gradinari was a deputy in the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova from 1994 to 1998. Immediately after that, Smirnov appointed him Minister of Finance in the DMR government. This position could be a payoff for his support of Transnistrian interests in previous years.

Repression in the DMR

Much of the DMR's stability can be attributed to the regime's repression of the Transnistrian population. The DMR's constitution proclaimed that the DMR was "a democratic, sovereign, independent, legal state." The document contains no reference to the Republic of Moldova and prohibits (Article 8) activity aimed against the sovereignty of the Republic. This provision has allowed leaders from Tiraspol to take repressive measures against opponents of separatism. The Ministry of State Security persecutes attempts by Transnistrian residents to participate in the politics of the Republic of Moldova.⁸⁴ The Helsinki Committee for the Human Rights of the Republic of Moldova revealed that officials from the Ministry of State Security in Tiraspol have arrested the citizens from western Moldova for engaging in political activity in Transnistria. The same ministry hinders every attempt to organize international human rights organizations.

On September 30, 1994, Igor Smirnov issued Decree No. 222 regarding "protection of the population from gangsterism and from other manifestations of the organized crime." According to this decree, every suspicious person can be held in preventive detention for 30 days. Independent lawyers, such as Chisinau attorney Vyatcheslav Turcanu, have access to data on torture at the detention centers and have spoken freely about conditions in DMR facilities. In Transnistria, the citizens do not have the right to defend their rights in court because the judiciary is state-controlled in the Soviet style.

The Ministry of State Security has become an instrument of election fraud. For example, V. Osadciuk, the president of the Tiraspol Election Commission, a body which, in December, 2000, was created for elections to the Supreme Soviet of the DMR, is a colonel from this ministry. His initial appointment and his subsequent behavior have demonstrated the crucial role of the DMR police in securing predictable election results. Even before creation of the Election Commission, the police presence at elections was significant and the role of the police in "electioneering" was remarkable even by post-Soviet standards. Not only did the Ministry count the ballots, it also helped get out the vote on election day.

Though inhabitants of Transnistria have access to Moldovan broadcasts and publications, the DMR's print and broadcast media is strictly censored. The population is regularly intimidated with the "danger of unification with Romania." The Republic of Moldova is portrayed as an aggressor in 1992 and as a possible aggressor in the future. This biased media has fanned the fires of separatism.

⁸⁴ In 1994, DMR authorities formally forbade voting in the Moldovan parliamentary elections. In the 1998 elections, there was no formal stricture, but voting was aggressively discouraged, and only about 3,000 Transnistrians voted.

Relations with the Ukraine and Romania

Separatist leaders have cultivated relations with the Ukraine. Because the Ukraine shares a border with the DMR, the Republic of Moldova cannot organize an economic blockade of separatist region without the Ukraine's cooperation. In addition, the DMR benefits from a tremendous volume of smuggled goods passing through this frontier to and from the seaports of Odessa (to the detriment of the economies of the Ukraine and Moldova). Frontier guards are generally corrupt and consequently the frontier between the Ukraine and the DMR is porous. Finally, the Ukraine is important as a fallback ally in case Russia ever loses interest in Transdnistria.

About a quarter of the population of the DMR is of Ukrainian extraction. Vladimir Bodnar, a separatist leader from Tiraspol, is also president of the Association of Ukrainians from Transdnistria. He frequently meets with Ukrainian leaders including the President Leonid Kuchma. During a discussion with representatives of the Government of the Republic of Moldova, Mr. Kuchma declared that the Ukraine would not support any economic blockade of the separatist region because it is populated by so many Ukrainians. Tiraspol has signed bilateral agreements of cooperation with the administrations of Odessa and Vinitza in the Ukraine. These agreements could not have been concluded without the blessing of Kiev. The Ukraine is encouraging the expansion in of Ukrainian language education in the DMR by providing teaching materials and offering scholarships to Ukrainian universities for graduates of Transdnistrian schools. Following the example of the Russian Federation, the Ukraine encourages Transdnistrians to obtain Ukrainian citizenship. However, at present, the number of Ukrainian citizens in the DMR is only 2-3,000. Perhaps this is being done with an eye toward claiming historical Ukrainian rights over Transdnistria if the Republic of Moldova is forced to officially concede the loss of Transdnistria.

According to provisions of a memorandum regarding regulation of the Transdnistrian conflict signed on May 8, 1997 in Moscow, the Ukraine, as well as Russia, has the status of "state-guarantor." In mid-1998 Ukrainian forces joined Russian, Moldovan and Transdnistrian troops in the security zone.

There are no official relations between Tiraspol and Bucharest. The separatist regime continues to pursue an anti-Romanian campaign. The campaign has two basic themes, one based on history and another based on recent events. The historical theme draws on the experiences of Moldova in the inter-war years when "Greater Romania" included most of what is now the Moldovan Republic and during World War Two itself. During these years, DMR officials maintain, Romanian police conducted a campaign of repression against Moldovan residents on the West bank of the Dniester River and also made routine incursions onto the Eastern bank in what was at that time part of the Soviet Union. It was only through the intervention of the Russians, they insist, that the people of this region were spared the brutality of virtual occupation by the Nazis.

Recent events, according to DMR authorities, have witnessed a Romanian return to the practices of the 1940s. As evidence, they cite alleged Romanian military support for the Moldovan forces during the 1992 war. In particular, they charge, Romanian pilots played an active combat role. Their military service was augmented by a steady flow Romanian military hardware across the Prut River into Chisinau. DMR spokesmen charge that Romanian military "adventurism" is now being replaced by a strident form of

"Romanian nationalism" that aims at the "destruction" of the non-Romanian communities on the eastern bank of the Dniester.

Relations between Transdnistria and Romania are limited to the exchange of goods by private economic agents. This traffic is rather limited and there are few Romanian commercial goods on sale in Tiraspol and the surrounding communities. More significant in economic terms is the fact that Transdnistria imports oil from Romania. As a producer of petroleum products, Romania is one of the few regional suppliers for essential energy resources. The uncertainty of the DMR economy and the attendant difficulties in assuring prompt payment, however, inhibit the expansion of this trade. The Rybnitsa Metallurgical Plant is also involved in trading with Romania since a major part of the metal it produces starts out as scrap metal from Romania.

In the spring of 1992 four countries - Russia, Romania, the Ukraine and Moldova - were involved in attempt to settle the Transdnistrian conflict, which, by then, had claimed about a thousand lives. Representatives met in Chisinau, 6-17 April 1992. Romania, which was represented by Prime Minister Adrian Nastase, was the only country that supported Moldova in accordance with international law. Unfortunately, a major battle broke out in Bender on June 18, 1992, causing the failure of the initiative. There is suspicion in Moldova that Russian secret services, wishing to eliminate Romania from the settlement of the Transdnistria conflict, were behind the outbreak. Certainly, the incident worked to Russia's advantage. Since then, though the OSCE has become involved in negotiations, Russia has been in the driver's seat with regard to mediating the conflict.

Relations with Gagauzia

In the interests of keeping Moldova within the Russian orbit, Moscow has aided separatists not only in Transdnistria but in Gagauzia as well. On September 26, 1990 elections in the Supreme Soviet of the so-called "Autonomous Soviet Socialist Gagauz Republic within the USSR" were planned to take place. Mircea Druc, prime minister of Moldova, tried to stop those elections by force and sent several thousand "volunteers" to Gagauzia. That action intensified the opposition of Gagauz people towards Chisinau. In 1994, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova granted autonomy to Gagauzia, but that has not solved the problem. Radical leaders from Gagauzia continued to accuse the authorities from Chisinau of aggravating the social-economic situation.

Relations between Tiraspol and Comrat (the capital of Gagauzia) have been friendly. In 1990, while Mircea Druc's "volunteers" attempted to stop the Gagauz elections, the Unified Council of Work Staffs from the DMR sent dozens of buses full of armed "guardians" to support the Gagauz separatists.⁸⁵ Tiraspol has also offered Gagauzia electricity produced by the thermal-electric station in Cuciurgan. Significantly, even during such times of economic austerity in the DMR, Tiraspol's officials arranged to sell the electricity to Gagauzia at a price well below the market value. In 1999, elections for the Popular Assembly (a legislative body with 35 deputies) took place in Gagauzia. The extremist wing led by Mihail Kendighelean was the big electoral winner. On July 5, 2000 in Tiraspol, Grigore Marakutsa, president of Supreme Soviet of the

⁸⁵The USSR also sent troops. It was the arrival of troops from the Interior Ministry that caused the armed "volunteers" to return to Chisinau. This intervention is a major reason for Gagauzian warmth toward Russia.

DMR, received the delegation of Popular Assembly of Gagauzia. The delegation was led by Michael Kendiglian, one of Comrat's most hardline officials. As part of that visit, an agreement of collaboration was signed. In that agreement, Gagauzia recognized the legality of DMR. This document states that the coordination of efforts between Tiraspol and Comrat are aimed at creating a common front for weakening the central authority of Chisinau. Since then, the Popular Assembly of Gagauzia has frequently demanded that Gagauzia should be involved in negotiations regarding the organization of a common state.⁸⁶

Relations with Moldova

The DMR's official position toward the Republic of Moldova is uncompromising—the DMR and the Republic of Moldova are two sovereign states with equal rights that, in accordance with the Memorandum of May 8, 1997, could create a common state. Unification is clearly not Tiraspol's preference, however. On July 13, 2000 at Chisinau, Igor Smirnov was supposed to sign the "Agreement Regarding Application of Popular Diplomacy in Order to Reestablish Faith Between the Population from Both Sides of Dniester River." After previously promising to sign this document, Smirnov has now categorically refused to sign it.

Before the 2001 elections in which the Communists regained political power in Moldova, the Moldovan Communist Party developed closer ties with their ideological allies in Tiraspol. Communists from Transnistria participated at Communist meetings in Chisinau and routinely maintained close contacts with Party officials there. Yet, as long as Petru Lucinschi was President of Moldova, those developments had no impact on relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Relations between Communists in Chisinau and those in Comrat have also been friendly. On the eve of anticipated elections for the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Communist leader Vladimir Voronin signed an agreement with 25 deputies from the Popular Assembly of Gagauzia. The deputies pledged Gagauzian support for the Communist Party and Voronin promised to consider the possibility of Moldova's joining the Russia-Belorussia union. They also promised that they would proclaim Russian as the official language of Moldova.⁸⁷

However, Communist support for the hard-line faction in Gagauzia, at least in the past, has not translated into electoral success. This was illustrated by the 1999 election for chief executive (*Bashkan*) of Gagauzia, in which Dumitru Croitor, defeated Georgi Tabunshchik, who had been the first secretary of the local communist party. Croitor is not as radical in his actions and declarations as Kendighelean, but his stance toward Chisinau is not very different.

Communists in the Republic of Moldova fared better than their comrades in Gagauzia. As a result of the parliamentary elections of February 25, 2001, the Communists won and Voronin became president.⁸⁸ This has raised fears that the Republic of Moldova may reunite with the DMR as a Communist state.

⁸⁶ July 2, 2000 in Tiraspol, Gagauz Yeri opened a "consular office" headed by Ivan Burgudji.

⁸⁷ Most Gagauzians speak Russian.

⁸⁸ The Republic of Moldova has a modified proportional representation system. It is designed to weigh in favor of major parties to avoid the kind of multi-party chaos that is often present in pure proportional representation systems. As a result, though the Communists only received 50.2% of the popular vote, they received 70.3% of the parliamentary seats.

New Leadership and Old Issues

Reasons for the Communist Victory

The victory of the Moldovan Communist Party (CP) during the parliamentary elections on February 25, 2001 had a dramatic impact on the Moldovan Republic and the stability of the DMR. This was the most attention focused on this region since the armed conflicts of 1992. The fact that the communist return to power came within the context of the democratization of the RM gave analysts great cause for concern.

While the victory of the communists may have come as a surprise to casual Western observers, local analysts had long predicted victory for Voronin's party. The dimensions of that victory, however, were a surprise even to the communists themselves. Under Moldovan electoral law, the popular results gave them 71 out of 101 seats in the new Parliament.

The success of the communists may be attributed to several causes. The first and most obvious reason was expressed by the CP leader Vladimir Voronin in the immediate post-electoral period. At that time he stated that "the result of the elections represents not only the victory of the CP", but an overwhelming rejection of the current government and its policies.

After Moldova declared its independence in 1991, the RM gained Western support as a result of its important geopolitical position. Consequently, Moldova began its reforms with significant Western encouragement and was soon recognized as a leader in the post-Soviet reform process. The small nation was routinely cited by Western authorities as being a leader of the reform process in the former USSR. Meanwhile, the notion of "reform" was accepted by the local population as the proper solution for Moldova's problems. Unfortunately, the process of transforming the economy into a market system didn't bring benefits for most people. In fact, the standard of living for the average citizen declined during this period. A poor economic environment was coupled with political instability, endless and bitter power struggles, and instability in the political leadership.

A second important factor in the communist victory was the astute political agenda established for the electoral campaign: the liberalization of prices, the reestablishment of order, social guarantees, participation in the Russian-Belarusian Union, and having Russian as the second official state language. All of these nostalgic promises were addressed to people who felt neglected during the ten post-communist years: the rural population, Russian speakers who resented demands that they should learn Romanian and workers who suffered from non-payment of wages.

A third reason for the communist victory was the ineffectiveness of other electoral competitors. The center-right political parties seemed concerned primarily with their internal relationships and failed to establish a favorable popular image in contrast to that of the communists. Had the center-right parties established a unified front, they would have won approximately the same number of votes as the communists. Throughout most of the year prior to the elections, the center-right leaders focused their greatest hostility on each other rather than on their communist rivals.

Being unable to establish their own credibility as a governing force, the representatives of the center-right parties simply maintained that the communist party wasn't ready to govern. The communists, they insisted, would fail just as and the Moldovan Agrarian Democratic party failed when in controlled the government. Petru

Bogatu, writing in an editorial in *Tara*, predicted that a communist victory would bring two results:

- 1) The Moldovan situation would become even worse than before and the government would once again lose popular confidence.
- 2) Moldova's fledgling democratic system, built over the last decade, would collapse and take the economy down with it.⁸⁹

Reactions to the Communist Victory

The Romanian political elite, now under the leadership of former communist Ion Iliescu, was alarmed by the success of the Moldovan communists. One of Romania's leading journals declared that "Moldova has tragically and needlessly surrendered in front of the red tide". Yet, as it made this statement, the editorial suggested that Romania shares responsibility for this development because it failed to establish solid relations with its neighbor across the Prut.⁹⁰

The Russian reaction, if one looks beyond official statements, reflects an element of ambivalence. While the Russian mass media was often effusive in its reactions to the elections, many analysts in Moscow, speaking unofficially, expressed both realism and reservations. Some expressed their concern that Moldova, if drawn considerably closer to the Russian Federation, might constitute a burden to the already burdened Russian-Belarusian Union. Moldova, they observe, is the poorest country in Europe and the development of its national economy has been very slow, even by CIS standards. Moreover, such analysts maintain, Moscow's relationship with the United States may well be further complicated should the impression emerge that Russia is attempting to assimilate Moldova.⁹¹

The official reaction of the DMR concerning the election results was rather cautious. In his first statement, DMR President Igor Smirnov insisted that "the leadership of DMR is waiting to see if Voronin's electoral promises are translated into reality."⁹²

Independent observers in Tiraspol noted that the communist victory was not, in fact, welcomed by Tiraspol's leaders because they felt embarrassed by the dramatic power shift in Chisinau after so many years of denouncing Moldova as the main threat to its security. Even more important was their suspicion that Moscow would clearly prefer Voronin to Smirnov in any Moldovan confrontation. Tiraspol's role as a "bridgehead of Russian interests" in Moldova was shattered and the value—in Moscow—of the Tiraspol leadership was seriously degraded. According to unofficial observers, Tiraspol's leadership fell into a state of panic in the aftermath of the February elections.

The new environment prompted Smirnov to take what might be regarded as emergency actions to respond to this new "threat" to the DMR's stability. Non-governmental organizations in Transdnistria, which, for the most part, are manipulated by the government, were quickly mobilized to counter any popular ambivalence about Tiraspol's relations with Chisinau. All NGO leaders suspected of weakness in the face of the new challenge were removed. Their replacements came from the ranks of the most hardline among the DMR leadership. Meanwhile, security forces were called upon to be

⁸⁹ *Tara*, 19 January 2001

⁹⁰ *Evenimentul Zilei*, 27 February 2001

⁹¹ Interviews conducted the Moscow staff of the William R. Nelson Institute, March, 2001

⁹² *Evening News, ProTV*, Chisinau, 28 February 2001

even more vigilant and increasingly alert to any threats posed based in the Moldovan Republic.⁹³

In April, the Moldovan Parliament finally approved a new government headed by Vasile Tarlev with Vladimir Voronin as President. The ceremony of investiture took place at a session of the Parliament and the Constitutional Court. Deputies and members of the Constitutional Court, ambassadors accredited in Chisinau, members of Government, hierarchical representatives of the Orthodox Church, representatives of the local Parliament in Gagauzia led by Mihai Kendighelean, participated in the ceremony. Significantly, representatives of the DMR Supreme Soviet didn't attend the ceremony, even though Grigorii Maracuta (the president of the DMR Supreme Soviet) initially indicated that he planned to attend.

Impact on the Stability of the DMR

The new Moldovan leadership declared during the political campaign that one of the main priorities of a communist administration would be the solution of the Transdnistrian conflict. After the elections, William Hill, the OSCE representative in Moldova, stated that should Chisinau and Tiraspol adopt constructive positions, negotiations concerning the Transdnistrian conflict could be successfully completed by determining the juridical status of the region. "There is no reason, at least not a reasonable one, for delaying negotiations. The existing obstacles have been only artificial ones". President Voronin has opposed what he refers to as "excessive internationalization" of the Transdnistrian problem and against negotiations in Bratislava or Vienna. It is the "parties who are in conflict who should find a solution", not foreign diplomats.⁹⁴

The communist electoral success alarmed those elements of the DMR leadership who fear that their stability is undermined by the type of negotiations suggested above. Even more detrimental to the DMR's stability is Voronin's support for Moldovan membership in the Russian Belarus union. Obviously, the Russian Federation would oppose a separatist regime in Moldova and the utility of the DMR government would vanish. "Olvia-press" in Tiraspol immediately broadcast an interview with Valeriu Litkai, "the grey eminence" of the DMR who heads the DMR Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to Litkai, Tiraspol will not allow its relationship with Chisinau to be determined exclusively by the prospect of Moldovan membership in the Russian-Belarus Union.⁹⁵

It may also be significant, from Tiraspol's viewpoint, that Voronin is not an ethnic Russian but is an ethnic Romanian who was born in the Transdnistrian village of Carjevo. More important, in private, he has been very critical of Smirnov and his colleagues and has insisted that they have no right to speak on behalf of people who live in Transdnistria. Some former Voronin associates believe that the President would actually like to remove Smirnov and his political associates from Tiraspol.⁹⁶

Following Voronin's assumption of the presidency there were three events that demonstrated that Voronin's election would quickly determine the fate of the DMR. The first was on 9 April 2001, when the new president, in one of his first official acts, met with DMR President Igor Smirnov. On 16-17 April, Voronin visited the Russian

⁹³ Interview with Serghei Kirlak, Chisinau, 13 March 2001

⁹⁴ *Evening News, ProTV*, Chisinau, 12 March 2001

⁹⁵ *Olvia Press (Tiraspol)*, 5 March 2001

⁹⁶ Interview with former Member of Parliament Vasile Nedelciuc, 5 June 2001

Federation where he discussed, among other things, relations with the DMR. On 18-19 April, Moldova has been already visited by Evghenii Primakov, the Head of the State Commission of the Russian Federation, visited Moldova in order to "discuss and clarify" the Transnistrian situation.

The most significant of these events was the meeting on 9 April, which was initiated by President Voronin who viewed the meeting as a means of stimulating the negotiation process. Voronin and Smirnov were joined by several key officials: Vasile Sturza, the president of the State Committee for Solving the Transnistrian conflict within the Government in Chisinau, William Hill, the OSCE representative in Moldova, Petro Cialii, the Ukrainian Ambassador to Moldova, and Aleksandr Novojilo, the representative of the Russian Presidency in the process of negotiation between Chisinau and Tiraspol. As the meeting began, Vasile Sturza, stressing a positive and optimistic attitude in Chisinau, declared Moldovan support for creating a new strategy for solving the Transnistrian conflict within the context of broader international participation in the forthcoming Bratislava meetings. Sturza's optimism was not immediately rewarded and Igor Smirnov continued to display what most observers regarded as an inflexible attitude.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chisinau-Tiraspol dialogue continued to be based on certain fundamental assumptions. First, the Moldovan Republic and the DMR represent two single subjects, equal in rights, and who maintain their sovereignty and legitimacy. The words "harmonization of customs and fiscal legislation...", noted in the concluding documents, acknowledge this position. Second, DMR authorities enjoy the same legitimacy as Moldovan officials. Voronin, by signing the conference document, committed Moldova to cancel the "customs and fiscal prohibitions of Moldova at the border of Transnistria", thus acknowledging Smirnov's authority over "the state frontier" while making no reference to the border with the Ukraine. The word "conflict" does not appear in the document.⁹⁷

Voronin's visit to the Russian Federation followed within only a few days. In fact, it came even before the Moldovan Parliament had selected the leaders of the new government. Yet, the results of the meetings are significant for the stability of the DMR. Voronin participated in a series of meetings with officials from the Russian Federation, including the leadership of "Gazprom". The latter meeting was especially significant in securing basic Moldovan energy needs but also represented the willingness of the Russian leadership to alleviate one of the key vulnerability of the Moldovan Republic. In taking such a step, Russia clearly identifies itself with Chisinau after many years of maintaining a more reserved position.

Official Russian skepticism about Transnistrian claims of "legality" were underlined by Evghenii Primakov during his two days in Chisinau. Sources on the Moldovan governmental commission for solving the Transnistrian problem indicate that Primakov came to Chisinau to meet specialist groups from Chisinau and Tiraspol and to discuss with them a new project for determining the status of Transnistria. The new project was developed by the Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE, with participation of Chisinau and Tiraspol. The project is generally referred to as the "Primakov project" and, in its initial form, called for the federalization of Moldova, a condition long rejected by Moldovan authorities. During his visit, Primakov also stated that the problem of

⁹⁷ Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 10 April 2001

⁹⁸ Ibid.

evacuation the Russian Federation's troops from Moldova's territory was not a Russian priority. Such a position represents a rejection of a long-held Moldovan demand for a withdrawal of these forces.

On April 19, Primakov visited Tiraspol. His time in the DMR began with a private meeting with Igor Smirnov, followed by a briefing for journalists and meeting with the "deputies of the legislative Committee" of DMR. Within the framework of these meetings, Primakov announced the "small steps" policy in solving the Transnistrian problem and he underlined the necessity for all parties to renounce extreme solutions. Smirnov, in his concluding remarks to journalists, declared that Russian President Vladimir Putin has created "two separate committees" for economic collaboration between the Russian Federation and Moldova, one for Chisinau and one for Tiraspol. This action, he insisted, proves that Russia endorses the notion of two Moldovan states.⁹⁹

During these diplomatic exchanges, Voronin took an important action calculated to strengthen his position among opposition factions in Moldova while further undermining Smirnov's position. On 12 April, mass media in Chisinau broadcast Vladimir Voronin's letter addressed to Smirnov and asking Igor Smirnov to "pardon" Ilie Ilascu and the other members of the so-called Ilascu group as a humanitarian gesture during Easter. While the other members of his group remained in prison, Ilie Ilascu was set free on 5 May 2001 and transferred by Tiraspol's security to special services in Chisinau. Upon arriving in Chisinau, Ilascu first asked to meet President Voronin whom he thanked for having obtained his release. The President affirmed that the meeting with Ilascu took place around 11 o'clock and that Ilascu was "in a pretty good mood and cheerful".

Romanian President Ion Iliescu reacted enthusiastically to news of Ilascu's release, describing it "as a very important political moment" and the result of a political evolution and international pressure. Iliescu described this action as an important indication of promise for a political resolution of the Transnistrian conflict, which remains a "delicate problem, a sensitive one" for the Moldovan stability for its integration and for the territory.¹⁰⁰ Adrian Severin, the president of the Parliamentary Administration of the OSCE, echoed President Iliescu by agreeing that this act provided hope for a more rational and constructive approach of the Transnistrian crisis.¹⁰¹

On 13 April, the Belarus Ambassador to Moldova, Vasile Socovici, accompanied by other officials of the Byelorussian Embassy, visited Tiraspol. Officials in Tiraspol used this meeting to consolidate economic relations between the DMR and Belarus. They also gave the Ambassador a set of documents purporting to be the results of the referendum in Transnistria on the question of having the DMR join the Russia Belarus Union as a separate member. The results, they explained to the Ambassador, indicated great enthusiasm on the part of all the residents of the DMR.¹⁰²

On 1 May 2001, Voronin made an official visit to Romania during which he participated in the ecological summit of the Carpathian-Danubian countries, which took place in Bucharest. During his stay, Voronin met President Iliescu and they called for pragmatism in Romanian-Moldovan relations, underlining the necessity of economic cooperation. Among the most important issues discussed by the two presidents were:

⁹⁹ Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 19 April 2001

¹⁰⁰ Radio Romania Actualitati, 5 May 2001

¹⁰¹ Rompress, 6 May 2001

¹⁰² Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 13 April 2001

creation of business centers in the capitals of both states, construction of railroads with European gauge tracks, sustaining Moldovan efforts for adherence to the South Eastern European Stability Pact and other international organizations, and greater use of Romanian financial support for privatisation of energy, transport, and agricultural companies in Moldova.

The tone of the new Moldovan foreign policy became clear by when Voronin, at the invitation of his Ukrainian counterpart, Leonid Kuchma, announced an official visit to Kiev. With this recognition of the importance of the Ukraine to the Moldovan agenda, Voronin has indicated that relations with Moscow, Bucharest and Kiev are Moldova's first concerns. Byelorussia is also considered important and Voronin quickly indicated his intention to visit this nation in the first days of his administration.

Summary: Voronin as a Factor on the Stability of the DMR

Vladimir Voronin, in his first actions as President, has indicated the following:

- He is willing to accept – if only for limited time - Igor Smirnov as a legitimate leader;
- He has a record of personal hostility toward Smirnov;
- He sees the DMR as a genuine state and is willing to recognize the DMR's sovereignty.
- He is willing to forgo the internationalization of the Transdnistrian dispute and will allow the Russian Federation to control resolution of this problem with Moldova and thereby guarantee Moldova's territorial integrity.
- He is apparently willing to accept a Russian military presence in Moldova.

The position of the officials of the Russian Federation can be expressed in the following assumptions:

The Russian Federation, even after the communist success in Moldova, seems reluctant to pressure Transdnistrian leaders. The Russian Federation apparently has no interest in reestablishment of the territorial integrity of Moldovan Republic.

As a means of solving the Transdnistrian conflict, the Russian Federation intends to create a "guarantee" mechanism, through which it may direct the internal political processes in Moldova and maintain Moldova under its unofficial protection. This goal can be achieved by imposing the internal organization of a "common state", thus allowing Russia to control Moldova's behavior. The Primakov Memorandum of May 1997 is a first step toward this goal.

In spite of the fears of the DMR leadership, the Russian Federation is likely to continue to promote at least some elements of the separatist regime in Transdnistria. Should the DMR completely disintegrate, Moscow loses its status as "guarantor" of Moldova's security. Moldovan membership in the Russian-Belarus Union is not likely to change this.

The Russian Federation's role in Moldova will be irreversibly legalized should the new government facilitate the privatization of key Moldovan industries by means of Russian economic agencies, especially those controlled by Russian criminal organizations. Russian "generosity" in supplying the DMR with natural gas at no charge for almost a decade indicates how such control may be developed.¹⁰³

In summary, it is important to recognize that while Voronin's election to the Presidency represents a threat to the DMR's stability, the new administration is not inclined to exploit Tiraspol's vulnerability at this time. The key item on Voronin's agenda is strengthening the domestic situation of the Moldovan Republic and direct confrontations with the DMR will not advance that goal. The greatest threat to the DMR, therefore, is posed not by Chisinau's actions during this time but by Tiraspol's reactions to a perceived threat. The DMR's refusal to allow Voronin to travel to Tiraspol to visit his elderly mother shortly after his assumption of the Presidency is an indication that local authorities may well be reverting to the attitudes and action of the past decade. Should Smirnov and his associates begin to operate on the basis of a paranoid fear of being undermined by a more attractive Moldovan alternative, they will prove themselves to have been their own worst enemies. The consequences of such an over-reaction are likely to be tragic and raise the real possibility of a return to the violence of the first post-Soviet years.

¹⁰³ In the early days of the Voronin administration, Russia has indicated that it will demand cash payments for supplying natural gas to Moldova.