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The Stability of the Dniester Moldovan Republic: A Post-Electoral Analysis

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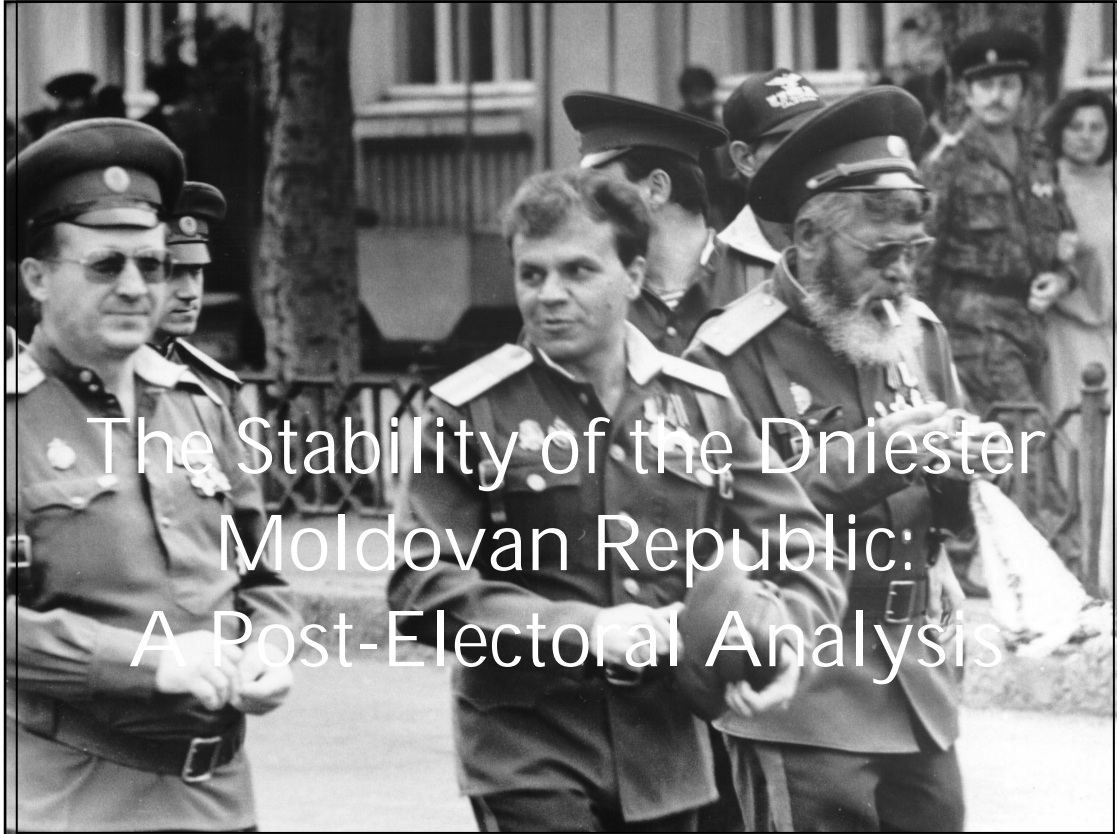
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Executive Summary

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.

President Voronin is 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.

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.¹

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 Dniestrian 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.

¹ 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).

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.

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.² 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).³ 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.

² The Russian Duma has not ratified this treaty. In November of 1995, the Duma passed a resolution declaring Transdnistr a zone of strategic Russian interests.

³ 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.

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 Transdniestria. 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 Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestria 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 1940, 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 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 Transdnistria 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 Transdnistria region. In addition, retired soldiers, most of whom were Russians, often settled in Tiraspol and Bender.⁴ In western Moldova, 69.5% of the population is Moldovan or Romanian and 20.5% is Russian or Ukrainian. In Transdnistria, 58% is Russian or Ukrainian (In Tiraspol more than 80% of the population is of Slav origin.) and 40% are Moldovan or Romanian. In Transdnistria, 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. Transdnistrian 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.⁵

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 Transdnistria. Transdnistria 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 Transdnistrian population.⁶

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 Transdnistria region, while the Moldovan Popular Front won an overwhelming majority of the seats from the rest of the country. The delegates from Transdnistria soon left Chisinau, however, citing threats and violence by Popular Front supporters. Two weeks after the Gagauzian declaration of autonomy on August 19, 1990, Transdnistrians created their own republic (September 2, 1990). Almost immediately, there were violent encounters

⁴Bender 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.

⁵Later, in 1993, there would be similar persecution in the DMR. Teachers and officials opposed to the continued use of Cyrillic were demoted or fired.

⁶The 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.

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 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).⁷ 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.

⁷ 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.

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.⁸ 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 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.

⁸ 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.

The stability of the DMR stems largely from the fact that the regime serves Russian interests. The education system in Transdniestria is based on Russian standards. Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestria 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 Transdniestria 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 Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestria), 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 Transdniestria. 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 Transdniestria as the key to Balkans. Some Russian military experts believe that the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Transdniestria would considerably reduce the military potential of Russian bases in the Crimea.

Transdnestrian Smuggling and Chisinau

When the Republic of Moldova lost the control over Transdnestria, 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.⁹ 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 Transdnestria. 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. Transdnestria has also become a center of a criminal international network that deals in smuggled cigarettes. This business is monopolized by the Sheriff 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 Transdnestria 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 Igla 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

⁹ Interview with the Honorable John Stewart, US Ambassador to Moldova, Chisinau, 22 May 1997.

immediately released. Upon his return to Tiraspol, he was allowed to resume his position as deputy commander of the Russian peacekeeping forces.

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 Transdniestria 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 Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestria." 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 Moldova to deliver a customs stamp with the inscription: "The Republic of Moldova. Customs Tiraspol" to Transdniestria. 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

Transdnestrian 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 Transdnestrian 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 Transdnestrian 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 Transdnestrian interests in previous years.

Repression in the DMR

Much of the DMR's stability can be attributed to the regime's repression of the Transdnestrian 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 Transdnestrian residents to participate in the politics of the Republic of Moldova.¹⁰ 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 Transdnestria. 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 Transdnestria, 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 Transdnestria 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

¹⁰ 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 Transdnestrians voted.

a possible aggressor in the future. This biased media has fanned the fires of separatism.

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 Transdniestria.

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 Transdniestria. 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 Vinitsa 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 Transdniestrian schools. Following the example of the Russian Federation, the Ukraine encourages Transdniestrians 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 Transdniestria if the Republic of Moldova is forced to officially concede the loss of Transdniestria.

According to provisions of a memorandum regarding regulation of the Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestria 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 Transdniestria 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 Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestria 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 Transdniestria 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.¹¹ 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 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.¹²

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

¹¹The 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.

¹² July 2, 2000 in Tiraspol, Gagauz Yeri opened a "consular office" headed by Ivan Burgudji.

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 Transdniestria 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.¹³

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, easily won election in spite of being opposed by the 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.¹⁴ This has raised fears that the Republic of Moldova may reunite with the DMR as a Communist state.

¹³Most Gagauzians speak Russian.

¹⁴The 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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

¹⁵ *Tara*, 19 January 2001

¹⁶ *Evenimentul Zilei*, 27 February 2001

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.¹⁷

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."¹⁸

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 even more vigilant and increasingly alert to any threats posed based in the Moldovan Republic.¹⁹

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

¹⁷ Interviews conducted the Moscow staff of the William R. Nelson Institute, March, 2001

¹⁸ Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 28 February 2001

¹⁹ Interview with Serghei Kirlak, Chisinau, 13 March 2001

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 Transdniestrian conflict. After the elections, William Hill, the OSCE representative in Moldova, stated that should Chisinau and Tiraspol adopt constructive positions, negotiations concerning the Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestrian problem and against negotiations in Bratislava or Vienna. It is the "parties who are in conflict who should find a solution", not foreign diplomats.²⁰

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.²¹

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 Vladimir Voronin, in one of his first acts as president, met with DMR President Igor Smirnov. On 16-17 April, Voronin visited the Russian 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 Transdniestrian 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

²⁰ Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 12 March 2001

²¹ Olvia Press (Tiraspol), 5 March 2001

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 Transnistrean 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.²²

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 Transdnistria", 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.²³

Vladimir Voronin's visit 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 Transdnistrian claims of "legality" were underlined by Evghenii Primakov during his two days in Chisinau. Sources on the Moldovan governmental commission for solving the Transdnistrian 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 Transdnistria. 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 evacuation the Russian

²² Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 10 April 2001

²³ Ibid.

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 Transdnistrian 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.²⁴

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 Transdnistrian conflict, which remains a "delicate problem, a sensitive one" for the Moldovan stability for its integration and for the territory.²⁵ 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 Transdnistrian crisis.²⁶

On 13 April, the Belarus Ambassador to Moldova, Vasile Socovici, accompanied by other officials of the Byelorussian Embassy, visited Tiraspol. Officials in

²⁴ Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 19 April 2001

²⁵ Radio Romania Actualitati, 5 May 2001

²⁶ Rompress, 6 May 2001

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 Transdniestria 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.²⁷

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: 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 Igor Smirnov as a legitimate leader;

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 Transdniestrian 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:

²⁷ Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 13 April 2001

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

As a means of solving the Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestria. 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.²⁸

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. 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.

²⁸ In the early days of the Voronin administration, Russia has indicated that it will demand cash payments for supplying natural gas to Moldova.

APPENDIX

The Opposition View: Trading Sovereignty for Illusory Integrity

On May 16, 2001, President Voronin met in Tiraspol with his “counterpart,” Igor Smirnov. There was great interest for this event especially as several days earlier, on May 12, Vladimir Voronin had been denied entry to DMR territory where he wanted to visit the Noul Neamt monastery (in Chitcani, on the right Dniester bank, officially in the security zone).

In Tiraspol Vladimir Voronin signed five documents (“Protocols” or “Agreements”). They comply with the Joint Declaration of the leaders of the Moldovan Republic and DMR signed on April 9th in Chisinau and with the Memorandum regarding the normalization of the relations between the Republic of Moldova and DMR (Moscow, May 8th 1997). Essentially, these documents refer to bilateral documents regulating the relations between two subjects of international law after the end of the armed conflict between the two states.

The most important of these documents is arguably the “Protocol regarding the mutual recognition of the documents issued by DMR and the Republic of Moldova.” By signing this document, Voronin has acknowledged the right of the separatist regime in Tiraspol to issue the whole range of official documents granted by a sovereign state to its citizens. This together with Voronin’s commitment to recognize the documents issued and authenticated by notary public offices, show that the Moldovan President has abandoned both the population in the areas controlled by Igor Smirnov and all the assets of the Moldovan state in Transdnistria. It is also apparent that this Protocol facilitates the international recognition of the DMR, as Article 2 reads “The parties will inform foreign states and international organizations about the documents coordinated by the two parties.” The Republic of Moldova will grant freedom of commercial activities to all companies from Transdnistria outside of Moldova, just like in the case of the customs stamp, which Moldovan officials gave to DRM customs officials several years ago. In the meantime, the inhabitants of the separatist area, especially those who for over ten years have regarded themselves as citizens of the Republic of Moldova, are left to the mercy of a hostile regime.

Article 4 regarding foreign investments and cooperation in the investment field univocally and explicitly admits the existence of two different territories, the Republic of Moldova and DMR (“The parties will address the diplomatic, consular and economic representatives on the territories of the Republic of

Moldova and of the Dniester Moldovan Republic asking them to use the stipulations of the this Protocol in their activities as citizens and economic representatives of their own countries"). This implies that there is already an understanding between Vladimir Voronin and Igor Smirnov regarding the boundaries between the two territories. It is the same kind of agreement that Hitler and Stalin had back in August 1939 when they drew their own frontiers on the political map of Europe.

The Protocol concluded after the meeting of the leaders of the Republic of Moldova and DMR has an article stipulating that the Government of the Republic of Moldova must devise a plan to pay the Moldovan state debts to DMR. It is obvious that such a relationship can only exist between two states. The most important article in the Protocol regards paying damages to DMR for the armed conflict from 1992. The very presence of such an article in a documents signed by the Moldovan President is a sign that Vladimir Voronin is on a par with Igor Smirnov when approaching the tragic events of 1992. Igor Smirnov, however, never forgets to reiterate that in 1992 the Republic of Moldova committed an act of aggression against the "Transdnestrian people." Therefore, all the Moldovan citizens who fought for the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, including those who died in the 1992 events, will be labeled as "aggressors" in the near future.

The documents signed on May 16 in Tiraspol, as well as various events or statements related to the Transdnestrian conflict (such as the participation of the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Moldova in the meeting of the CIS Defense Ministers' Council in Baku, May 18 2001, for example), allow us to make some predictions about the evolution of the events in the near future.

The intensity of the events related to the Transdnestrian problem comes from the fact that in November 1999 at the OSCE summit in Istanbul the Russian Federation made a commitment to withdraw its ammunition and armament from the territory of the Republic of Moldova by 2001. Unwilling to carry out its promise, the Russian Federation needed a Moldovan leadership that would legalize its military presence in Moldova. To this end, the Communist Party prevented the election of the President by the former Parliament and had a decisive contribution to the dissolution of the Parliament and the early elections on February 25. Before the February 2001 elections, a detailed scenario regarding the fate of Moldova and Transdnestria was developed; this scenario started to be put into practice immediately after Vladimir Voronin was inaugurated as President on April 7, 2001. The rough outlines of this scenario are as follows:

Under the pretext of solving the Transdnestrian conflict, the Republic of Moldova will soon become a confederation with two (Chisinau, Tiraspol) or even three (if we include Comrat) subjects with equal rights. This confederation will be accepted at the earliest possible date as a member of the Russia-Belarus Union. Immediately after the meeting on the 16th of May at Tiraspol, the Russian Federation Duma has started the preparations to create a legal frame and a favorable public opinion in order to achieve this goal.

The agreements reached between Chisinau and Tiraspol will be enforced through a mechanism of "warranties" soon to be released. This mechanism will confirm Moscow's mediating role in the Chisinau-Tiraspol relations. Russian military presence on the territory of the Moldovan Republic will be one of these "warranties.". At the same time, the admission of the newly formed Confederation in the Russia-Belarus Union will legitimate the establishment of Russian military bases in Moldova.

The incident on May 12, when president Vladimir Voronin was denied access to the Noul Neamt monastery by the Transdnestrians is part of the same scenario. The public was thus led to believe that president Voronin tried to intervene but the "evil" Igor Smirnov didn't let him. Thus the responsibility was lifted from Voronin and at the same time the Russians continue the process of taking complete control over the Moldovan Patriarchy using Justinian.

In the near future the communist MP's will initiate a procedure to alter the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova and during that process it will become clearer what kind of Confederation Moldova is going to be a part of according to this scenario. At the same time both the head of the state and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will do everything to persuade Europe on Moldova's intentions of becoming part of the EU (the Europeans are so naïve as to believe the statements of the politicians in the ex-Soviet countries).

Another problem is to ensure that the Republic of Moldova, once a part of the Belarus-Russia Union, can no longer leave the Union even if the leadership changes. Kremlin has already gone through the painful experience of the collapse of the former USSR and understands this is the most difficult problem. To solve it, they will modify the core structure of the state bodies of the Republic of Moldova (a bicameral Parliament, with a consolidated presence of the DMR and Gagauz Yeri MP's, etc.) Russian capital will be used to privatize the strategic areas of the "Confederation's" "national economy" and the investments will be directed toward DMR industry, to make sure that the living standards of the population on the left bank of the Dniester are higher than those of the population on the right bank. Moldovan citizens and

especially DMR citizens will be even more persistently encouraged to adopt Russian citizenship. The formal end of hostilities will naturally allow the Russian Federation to open consulates in DMR. At the same time, since they are components of the "common state," DMR and Gagauz Yeri will have a high degree of independence that will allow Russia to formally recognize them as independent states in case the situation on the right bank of the Dniester goes out of control.

It's obvious that this scenario is not the only possible one. Of particular interest is Igor Smirnov's situation. Some analysts think that Vladimir Voronin, by making bigger concessions (compromises) than his predecessors, is trying to catch Voronin off-guard at the presidential elections that will take place in DMR in December 2001. Then, they hope, Moscow will dispose of the much-hated Smirnov and will support another person who will not be so tainted by his relations with the criminal underworld. However, since everybody – including OSCE and the Moldovan leadership – accepts Smirnov as the legitimate representative of DMR interests, when Igor Smirnov is the most consistent proponent of Moscow's interests, it is very unlikely that the Russian Federation will do so.

Another issue of interest is the Communist Party's stance as to the DMR problem and Voronin's actions. It is obvious that lower-rank communists in the Parliament are not aware of the current issues related to DMR and the future of the Moldovan state. Time will probably give us an answer to this question. Voronin is not likely to have problems with his own party, since he is the most authoritative figure inside the Communist Party and, above all, the communists believe that the collapse of the USSR was a crime and any activities related to the restoration of the former USSR is noble and justified.