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

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Chapter Three

THE STABILITY OF THE DNIEPER MOLDOVAN REPUBLIC: A POST-ELECTORAL ANALYSIS
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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.

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 Transdniestria 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 military units an urgent matter.

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 Transdniestria).
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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 material 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 “Transdniestria 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 ammunition 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 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 material into three categories:

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

80 The 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.

81 On December 9, 1991, general elections were held in Moldova. The mayor of the village of Caragaz 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 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, which were produced at the Priboi 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 Moskwitch 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 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 Chișinău 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 Iliichevsk. A criminal group composed of former Afghanist 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. Chișinău’s passivity towards Transdniestrian 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, financed by a state agency in Tiraspol. One such newspaper, Komsomol’tsy Moldovы, is managed by military personnel from the Soviet style.

Chișinău’s generosity towards Transdniestrian separatism is more troubling. It is possible that such generosity by politicians in Chișinău 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 Chișinău, particularly politicians who came into politics from pro-Russian 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 Transdniestrian state system. Then he came back to Chișinău to serve as a deputy from 1994 to 1998. The case of Serhei 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 Transdniestrian interests in previous years.

Repression in the DMR

Much of the DMR’s stability can be attributed to the regime’s repression of the Transdniestrian 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 Transdniestrian residents to participate in the politics of the Republic of Moldova. 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 Transdniestria. 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 Chișinău attorney Vyatcheslav Turcanu, have access to data on torture at the detention centers and have spoken freely about conditions in DMR facilities. In Transdniestria, 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 Transdniestria 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.
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. A post-electoral analysis of the elections in 1992 revealed that those separatists who advocated closer ties with the Ukraine benefited at the polls. The Ukraine is encouraging the expansion of Ukrainian language education in the DMR by providing teaching materials and offering scholarships to Ukrainian students. 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 Dniestern 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 of 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 Dniestern.

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. Tiraspol has also offered Gagauzia electricity produced by the thermal-electric station in Cuciurcan. 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 USSR.

The 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.
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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, and the DMR insisted upon them. This document states that the coordination of efforts between Tiraspol and Comrat 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.

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 it controlled the government. Petru

66 July 2,2000 in Tiraspol, Gagauz Yeri opened a “consular office” headed by Ivan Burgodji.

67Most Gagauzians speak Russian.

68The 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.
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 realism and a sense of palpable concern for the development of its national economy has been very slow, even by CIS standards, which, for the most part, are manipulated by the government, were 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. 95

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 to Chisinau, members of Government, hierarchical representatives of the Orthodox Church, representatives of the local Parliament in Gagauzia led by Mihai Kondighielean, participated in the ceremony. Significantly, representatives of the DMR Supreme Soviet didn’t attend the ceremony, even though Grigori 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. 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 unity of the DMR government would vanish. “Olivia-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 Transdniestrian village of Carjovo. 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 Transdniestria. 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 DRM. 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

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
93 Interview with Serghei Kirilch, Chisinau, 13 March 2001
94 Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 12 March 2001
95 Olivia Press (Tiraspol), 5 March 2001
96 Interview with former Member of Parliament Vasile Nedelciu, 5 June 2001
Federation where he discussed, among other things, relations with the DMR. On 18-19 April, Moldova has been already visited by Evgeni 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 Cialli, the Ukrainian Ambassador to Moldova, and Aleksandr Novojoblo, 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.

97 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. 98

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, during which he stressed the importance of Chisinau and Tiraspol’s “common security to special services”.

On 1 May 2001, Voronin made an official visit to Moldova, Vasile Socovici, accompanied by other officials of the Byelorusian 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.

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:

97 Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 10 April 2001
98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.
100 Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 19 April 2001
101 Radio Romania Actualitati, 5 May 2001
102 Evening News, ProTV, Chisinau, 13 April 2001

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 a 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 April 12, 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

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. 103
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 privatization 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 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:

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. 103

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