

STATUS QUO IN TRANSNISTRIA: APPROACHES TO RESOLVING A FROZEN CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

There are several frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, including the often overlooked conflict between Moldova and Transnistria. The Russian Federation holds a key position in this unresolved dispute. This paper will critically evaluate possible resolutions to this conflict and argue that the status quo is likely to persist despite the growing tensions in the region. The question of Transnistria remains important not only for Moldova, but for other similar conflicts between Russia and its neighbours such as Ukraine and Georgia. This paper aims to help fill a gap in contemporary writing on resolutions to the territorial dispute between the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic and the Republic of Moldova. By providing an analysis of three potential resolutions of the conflict from the perspective of the three key players, this work will identify and underline the stumbling blocks that prevent the resolution of what seems to be a deceptively simple problem. These obstacles include the on-going presence of Russian peacekeeping forces, the economic benefits and burdens of the region, historical revisionism, and conflicting territorial claims. With tensions rising between Russia and the rest of Europe, This paper underlines one conflict that is likely to remain frozen unless there is a dramatic shift in direction or goals of the parties involved.

KEYWORDS

Russia, frozen conflict, post-Soviet space, Moldova, Transnistria, conflict resolution, de facto states, unrecognized states

INTRODUCTION

Transnistria is an unrecognised state sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine on the eastern bank of the Dniester River (See Fig. 1). For a little over thirty years, the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) has functioned as a de facto independent state. In this paper, the PMR will be used to refer to the government of Transnistria, while Transnistria will be

used to refer to the region itself. The dispute between Moldova and the PMR is often described as a frozen conflict. This paper will examine three potential resolutions to the conflict through the lenses of the three main actors in the conflict: Moldova, Russia and the PMR (Gherasimov, 2021). The purpose of this paper is to illuminate why this conflict continues to remain frozen over 25 years. To do so it will argue that while the three resolutions of re-integration with Moldova, integration with Russia and Pridnestrovian independence are potentially viable, but the status quo is likely to persist because the on-going stalemate is not only stable but also profitable.

The Transnistrian conflict, while at first glance seems similar to other post-Soviet conflicts, such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it remains distinctive because of the economic, historical and political factors at play. Additionally, the history and fate of the Republic of Gagauzia, which also attempted to break away from Moldova in the 1990s, will only be touched upon to reinforce the position that the PMR takes against re-integration with Moldova.

RE-INTEGRATION WITH MOLDOVA

One of the potential resolutions to the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict is the eventual re-integration of the PMR into the Republic of Moldova. Joining NATO is currently impossible for Moldova as it has not only committed itself to permanent neutrality, but also territorial integrity is a requisite for NATO membership (Devyatkov, 2012: 55). Additionally, EU membership for Moldova is also predicated on a resolution to the conflict. Re-integration is therefore the only option on the table for Chisinau (de Waal, 2020: 38). In 2016 the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) brokered a package of



Figure 1 Map of Moldova, Romania, Transnistria, and Ukraine (University of Central Arkansas, 2021).

eight practical measures to build confidence (OSCE, 2016). So far six have been successfully implemented (ibid, 17) which has included the reopening of the Gura-Bicului Bridge, international recognition of graduates from the university in Tiraspol and international travel using Transnistrian licence plates (ibid.: 146). Another crucial element that fosters the possibility of re-integration is the economic opportunities that Moldova provides for Transnistrian manufacturers. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) between Moldova and the EU has benefited Moldova as well as the PMR by allowing Transnistrian companies to register in Moldova and trade internationally (Ó Beacháin, 2020: 4). On the other hand, Moldovan, Ukrainian, and Transnistrian elites also benefit from the smuggling made possible by the unrecognised status of the PMR and their participation in the criminal economy may hinder the resolution of the conflict. At this junction, it is necessary to question whether these elements are enough to sustain the momentum towards gradual and de facto integration. As it stands, the re-integration of the PMR to Moldova is the best outcome for Moldova given that the alternatives are unacceptable. However, this does not mean that there are no serious reservations in Chisinau about re-integration because the influx of all the new generally pro-Russian voters would completely rearrange the political balance in Moldova (de Waal, 2020: 39).

Moldovan president Maia Sandu made it clear, however, that resolving the conflict would not be possible without Russian support due to the Russian peacekeeping force still present in the country as well as the high level of influence Moscow enjoys in Tiraspol (Wolff, 2020).

The Russian stance towards the re-integration of the PMR with the Chisinau government is at face value a favourable one. Throughout the entirety of the conflict, Russia has supported the territorial integrity of Moldova. The closest the conflict has come to a resolution was as the result of the 2003 Russian sponsored Kozak Memorandum (Ó Beacháin, 2020: 5). The memorandum itself would have given the PMR a strong veto capability in a new federalised system. The memorandum was rejected at the last minute by the then socialist president of Moldova Vladimir Voronin. His rejection came at the insistence of Moldova's Western partners. While Russia supports the re-integration of Transnistria into Moldova it does so on terms that are favourable to Russia, specifically those envisaged by the 2003 Kozak Memorandum (Kosienkowski, 2020: 191, 201). Through its support for Transnistria, Russia is able to leverage politics in both Moldova and the PRM. While this leverage is limited (Voronovici, 2019: 296), Russia considers both the PMR and Moldova as part of the wider "*Russkii Mir*" or "Russian World" (ibid.: 296; O'Laughlin et al., 2017: 764).

As a result, tensions arise when the Russian view on how the region should develop differs from that of the EU and Moldova (Gherasimov, 2021). Another angle of Russian influence is the contingent of Russian military and peacekeeping troops stationed in Tiraspol. It is unclear if Russia would remove its troops in the event of Transnistrian re-integration with Moldova. It is however clear that the military contingent is a visible and tangible show of Russian influence in the PMR (Ó Beacháin, 2020: 3). Moreover, the removal of Russian troops is non-negotiable for Moldova and the Sandu government (Necsutu, 2021). Russia also stands to gain significant political influence in Moldova if the citizens of the PMR are as pro-Russia as some sources suggest. Integrating the citizens of the right bank into the Moldovan political system could steer the country away from Europe and into the “Russian World” (Voronovici, 2019: 291).

Conversely, one must question what the position of the PMR is on re-integration. The biggest points of contention when the conflict began were language and culture. The divide can be considered a “civilisational gap” that yawns across the Dniester river (Belitzer, 2015: 46). The entire identity of the PMR is built upon the historical narrative that leans upon the Soviet era and, more recently, the defence of the right-bank and creation of the multi-ethnic political entity. When it comes to re-integration with Moldova, questions of identity need to be taken into account, though it is difficult to know how the population in Transnistria feels (Cojocaru 2006: 269). A good indicator, however, is the fact that most Transnistrians have Moldovan passports; this allows them to leave the PMR and move and work in Moldova or even further west (de Waal, 2020: 39). Furthermore, approximately one in three of the population are pensioners, which in turn leads to the political reinforcement of traditionalist views and scepticism towards Moldova (ibid.: 147). Part of this scepticism is founded in the example of Gagauzia, an ethnically Turkic republic in southern Moldova. While Transnistria fought for its independence in the early 1990s,

Gagauzia sought a federal approach to maintain its autonomy. The Chisinau government has failed to uphold its agreement with Gagauzia, which is now integrated into Moldova (ibid.: 144). Given this political reality, it is not unreasonable for Transnistrians to be sceptical of re-integration with Moldova. From Tiraspol’s perspective, the political status of the PMR is not up for discussion (Devyatkov, 2017: 21). As it stands, the on-going stalemate benefits all those involved (Gherasimov, 2021). Moreover, the status quo of the Transnistria conflict is likely to persist as there is no resolution that all parties can agree on.

In short, while re-integration with Moldova is the outcome that is favoured in Chisinau, Tiraspol would oppose this outcome for political, economic, and historical reasons. However, Moscow might reap unexpected political benefits from Moldovan re-integration.

INTEGRATION WITH RUSSIA

The Moldovan perspective on the annexation or integration of Transnistria with the Russian Federation (RF) is a simple one. This resolution to the conflict is unacceptable to Chisinau as the territorial integrity of Moldova is non-negotiable (Albulescu, 2019: 244). That being said, the conflict between the two has kept Moldova economically stagnant (Gherasimov, 2021). Regardless of the current political environment, the Russian integration of Transnistria might produce a few of the following outcomes. It would immediately scale back the level of Russian influence over Moldova (Kennedy, 2010: 76). With a new definition of territorial integrity, Moldova would find it much easier to join the EU. This in turn could lead to a stronger economy and a resolution of the political woes that have come to define the Moldovan government (University of Central Arkansas, 2021). On the other hand, this may not solve any of the issues that Moldova faces. A fragile economy, a continuous emigration, and corruption scandals are unlikely to be resolved by joining the EU.

In fact, doing so might make the situation worse for Moldova, especially in terms of outward migration. Another possible outcome of the PMR being integrated into the RF is it might facilitate Moldova to re-integrate with Romania (Goltsov, 2020: 165; Devyatkov, 2012: 55). Despite close ties between Bucharest and Chisinau, this form of re-integration seems unlikely under the presidency of Maia Sandu (Luca & Nescutu, 2018). On the whole, it seems that, even ignoring the outright refusal of Chisinau to entertain the notion of ceding the right bank of the Dniester to Russia, the possible outcomes are not positive for Moldova. Here the status quo seems a much more favourable outcome.

At first glance, possible Russian attitudes to integrating Transnistria seem clear cut. Russia supports the PMR culturally and economically and therefore integration would make this support simpler. The Russian position is more complex, however, as it is grounded on two political realities. Firstly, through the entirety of the conflict Russia has expressed support for the territorial integrity of Moldova (Goltsov, 2020: 161-162). Secondly, despite its vital economic support, Russia has not officially recognized the PMR, which can be seen as the highest political goal for a breakaway republic (Ó Beacháin et al., 2016: 443). At a time when the conflict was closest to being resolved, Russia made its intentions clear with the 2003 Kozak Memorandum which envisioned Transnistria integrated into Moldova, not Russia. One of the motivations for this is that Russia would lose out on the advantages it currently gains from its relationship with Transnistria (Rogstad, 2018: 59). This comes in the form of Russia's ability to leverage Moldova, for example by preventing it from joining the EU. Another aspect of this is undermining the Europeanization efforts of western countries in what Russia considers its sphere of influence (Kosienkowski, 2020: 7). If, by some change in policy in Moscow, Transnistria were to be integrated into the RF, there are two further concerns that would need to be addressed. First of these is the inevitable financial burden of integrating and modernising .

Transnistria. If the integration of Crimea is taken as an example, integrating Transnistria could have significant economic repercussions (Ballard, 2019). A speculative total cost of Russian subsidies to Transnistria in 2017 was approximately \$500 million (Devyatkov, 2017: 20). The subsidies Moscow paid to Crimea in the first five years after its integration into the RF ranged between \$1 and \$2.5 billion (Ballard, 2019). Transnistria is much smaller than Crimea and has no strategic infrastructure, it is not unreasonable to assume that it too would need a significant overhaul on top of the existing subsidies, a significant part of which goes to paying pensions (de Waal, 2020: 147). The second concern would be the international backlash of integrating Transnistria in light of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Regardless of Russian intention, anti-Russia analysts in the West would exploit this as evidence supporting their views. Taking all this into account, it seems for Russia the status quo would likely be the preferable option.

What then of the Transnistrian perspective on integration with Russia? Remaining a part of the Soviet Union and later Russia was fundamental to Transnistrian identity and the creation of the PMR. Pro-Russian views among the elites in Transnistria have not changed (Potapkina, 2020: 123-124). Former President of the PMR Yevgeny Shevchuk maintained that integration with Russia is the inevitable future of Transnistria (Shaw, 2016: 178). In 2006 the PMR held a referendum that reflected the positions of the Smirnov government of either independence or integration with Russia (Albulescu, 2019: 246). Despite withholding official recognition of the republic, Russia supplies it with vital and non-replaceable economic and material support as well as the power symbol of Russian military forces in Tiraspol (Kosienkowski, 2020: 12). Transnistria is no mere Russian puppet but has its own interests (Devyatkov, 2017: 17-18). By integrating with Russia, the PMR would lose its unrecognised autonomy. Additionally, by becoming part of Russia, the PMR would irrevocably sever ties with Chisinau and the West, from which it is currently profiting via both the

DCFTA and through the grey economy enabled by its unrecognised status. On the other hand, integration with Russia offers a vision of stability and by extension continuity of the political narrative the PMR was founded on (Cimmino, 2019: 16-17). From a Transnistrian perspective, the benefits do not seem to outweigh the costs of joining the Russian Federation. However, when considering the Moldovan and Russian outlooks, it becomes clear that all sides in this conflict stand to gain more from leaving the situation on the right bank of the Dniester as it is. Put simply, integration with Russia is staunchly opposed by the Chisinau government and is unlikely to provide tangible benefits for either Moscow or Tiraspol.

PRIDNESTROVIAN INDEPENDENCE

A third possible resolution to the Transnistria conflict would be independence for the PMR. From a Moldovan perspective this presents many of the same issues as in the discussion of integration with Russia. Moldova insists that the PMR has no right to international recognition (Deyatkov, 2012: 57). There are, however, a few further elements worth noting here. First of these is that Moldova has committed itself to peaceful resolution of the conflict (de Waal, 2020: 143). This could mean that if the PMR were to gain recognition as an independent state, Moldova would not allow the conflict to violently re-ignite. Another element is that successive governments in Chisinau have had no comprehensive strategy for resolving the conflict. Coupled with a volatile political situation in Chisinau characterised by a dysfunctional government and parliament, the inertia of the situation is unsurprising (Gherasimov, 2021). This inertia is compounded by a third factor. Transnistria is not a pressing political or social issue in the popular discourse in Moldova (de Waal, 2020: 38). While the problem of Transnistria burdens the government of Moldova, the issue is not important to most Moldovans (ibid.) Without political pressure from the citizenry, there is no impetus to change

the status quo. Moreover, approximately one fourth of the population of Moldova has emigrated in recent years and accurate data on public opinion is difficult to quantify (Gherasimov, 2021). Some research suggests, however, that there is resistance in Moldovan society to any engagement or legitimisation of the PMR (de Waal, 2020: 40). Taking all this into consideration, it is likely that the status quo will continue to persist.

The position of the Russian Federation on Pridnestrovian independence is as clear as that of Moldova, albeit less explicit. Russia continues to support the PMR but refuses to recognize it as an independent state. In a 2011 interview, the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs Lavrov announced that “no international institution supports the independence of Transnistria” (Deyatkov, 2012: 57). Very little is likely to change without the consent or support of Moscow. The continued lack of recognition and support for independence makes for distinct indicators of the Kremlin’s intent. As it stands, the 2003 Kozak Memorandum is the closest all parties came to a resolution. Moreover, the memorandum is emblematic of the Russian approach to PMR independence and Transnistria as a whole. Russia prefers for the PMR to be an unrecognised client state and with it retain the political leverage in Moldova (Ó Beacháin, 2020: 7). Discounting for a moment the Russian stance toward Pridnestrovian independence, an independent PMR would provide a staunchly pro-Russian buffer state in the “near abroad” (Toucas, 2017; Cimmino, 2019: 16). This begs the question of how much influence Russia would still exert in an independent PMR. Russia has the means and opportunity to change the situation in Transnistria, if it were to choose to do so. The fact that the conflict has remained frozen for close to 20 years is a strong indicator that Russia prefers the status quo.

Since its very inception, the PMR has had independence as one of its goals. Reinterpreting history, the PMR has created all the trappings of statehood and unified an

ethnically diverse population into a state (Voronovici, 2019: 299). To this day, the PMR “maintains a full complement of parallel institutions” (Cimmino, 2019: 16) which allows it to function the way any other state would. The one key missing component is international recognition. Even its Russian patron does not officially recognise the PMR as it does with other client states, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Ó Beacháin et al., 2016: 448-449). Even if Russia were to recognise the PMR, there is no guarantee that other nations would do the same. The recognition of Russia alone does little for the independence of the PMR. An additional consideration is that independence would bring with it a heavy financial burden. Furthermore, the economy in Transnistria is caught in the stranglehold of the Sherriff conglomerate, which dominates both the economic and political landscape (de Waal, 2020: 58, 148). The RF currently supplies the PMR with vital support that is propping up the economic and social stability of the PMR (Devyatkov 2012: 58). This support is manifested in natural gas supplies in the value of above \$6 billion since 2009, as well as financial aid as loans and grants at a value of \$100 million annually (Koskienkowski, 2020: 12). If Russian support were to dry up as a result of independence, the PMR could likely implode. This financial reality would make independence untenable. It becomes apparent then that for all the rhetoric and the foundation myths, the financial and political situation is better suited to maintaining the status quo in Transnistria. In brief, the PMR desires independence but might well collapse under it, while Russia and Moldova continue to signal their opposition to independence.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored and evaluated three possible resolutions to the Transnistria conflict and in doing so presented the maintenance of the status quo as the most probable outcome. Viewed from the perspectives of the three main actors involved, the nuance and difficulty of finding a resolution become clear. There is a culture of pragmatism in the region, and when mutual interests align,

a solution can be quickly reached (de Waal, 2020: 155). This evaluation has made clear that a political resolution to the conflict remains deceptively simple on the surface. As long as the parties involved maintain their political and economic positions, the situation will not change (de Waal, 2020: 137). This is augmented by the fact that all three actors profit from the current stalemate (Goltsov, 2020: 165). Going forward, both Moldova and Russia are likely to muddle through without doing much to change the situation in Transnistria (Devyatkov, 2017: 21). There is a possible avenue from which change might come in the future. Eventually, the ageing population of Transnistria will die and the next generation of Transnistrians who have never experienced life outside of the PMR will have a dominant voice in the future of their country (Gherasimov, 2021). It is unclear if those who remain in Transnistria will lean towards Europe, Russia or even support independence. Like Moldova, Transnistria suffers from depopulation due to economic migration to both the East and the West (Kolosov & Crivenco, 2021: 270). Worsening economic and societal conditions may produce the conditions for radical change, until then the fate of Transnistria is unlikely to change. The continuation of the status quo might seem like a disappointing result, however, a peaceable dispute is better than a war.

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