

Transdnistria: Old Problems, New Developments

VLADIMIR SOLONARI

I. Introduction

There are several dimensions to the Transdnistrian issue. The first is engendered by the existence of an illegal territorial-administrative entity called the “Transdnistrian Moldovan Republic” (“TMR”), which in the early 90s unilaterally proclaimed its independence and since then has managed to create and sustain the public institutions of an unrecognized state. The Republic of Moldova has never recognized this independence and has always claimed sovereignty over the Transdnistrian territory, a claim which has been supported by the international community as a whole. Since at least the early 90s the official policy of Chisinau authorities has been peaceful resolution of this conflict situation by granting special autonomy status to the Transdnistrian region within the Republic of Moldova. It is implied that such a solution may be achieved only on the basis of a negotiated agreement between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Until now, however, very little, if any, progress has been achieved.

The second, military-strategic dimension is a consequence of the continued presence of Russian troops in Transdnistria, in violation of the clearly expressed view of the legitimate Moldovan authorities and the Moldovan Constitution itself, art.11 al. (2) of which states “The Republic of Moldova will not admit the stationing of any foreign military troops on its territory.”¹ The massive stocks of arms located in Transdnistria since Soviet times further complicate the problem. Since the Istanbul OSCE Summit in December 1999, when Russia undertook to completely withdraw its troops from the region within three years, tangible progress was achieved for a period, but since then the process of withdrawal was effectively stopped because of the resistance of the illegal Transdnistrian authorities.

A final, third, dimension is that of “soft security risks.” These are generated by the lack of transparency and control over the part of the Moldovan border with Ukraine that has stayed under the control of the illegal Transdnistrian authorities. During last several years growing concerns in the international community have been expressed about the prospering trafficking in arms and drugs across this border with the complicity of Transdnistrian, Ukrainian and Moldovan authorities. Since late 2001 the new Moldovan government has begun to tackle this issue seriously, but despite all its efforts until now this section of border remains outside its control, and accusations of pervasive contraband transit across it persist.

This paper will deal with all of these issues. It starts with a short exposé of the evolution of the Transdnistrian conflict, focusing on developments since the new

¹ The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, 1994.

government was installed in Moldova following the February 2001 parliamentary elections and on the discussion of the prospects for settlement. It then analyzes developments concerning the withdrawal of Russian troops and existing problems in this regard, and moves on to assess soft security risks. It ends by discussing EU involvement and policies toward the Transdniestrian issue and the implications this analysis holds them.

II. Transdniestrian Conflict: From Bloodletting to Political Stalemate

The Transdniestrian conflict started in the turmoil of the last years of the Soviet Union and in maelstrom of the “languages debate” in the former Moldavian SSR. The slogan of making Moldovan (Romanian) the only official (“State”) language in the Republic was enthusiastically supported by large segments of the ethnic Moldovan population. Non-Moldovans, who comprised no less than one-third of the overall population and almost all of whom were educated in Russian and used it in their everyday activities, became apprehensive and even hostile. The most militant anti-languages law movement was formed in Transdniestria because Russian speakers comprised a clear majority in the region, its geographic situation naturally separated it from the bulk of Moldova’s territory, and its administrative subordination to Chisinau was historically novel (only since 1940, when the Moldavian SSR was formed, with a break 1941-1944, during which the territory was occupied by the Romanian Army in its war with the USSR). In a short time, the slogans calling for autonomy for the region “to protect the Transdniestrian population against the unjust nationalist laws” were raised. This fuelled “anti-separatist” sentiments in Chisinau, which was a scene of nationalistic violence in the spring and summer of 1990. Escalation of the confrontation led to the secession of Transdniestria in September 1990 (together with Gagauzia in the south of Moldova in August 1990).² Moldovan authorities responded with attempts to forcefully suppress the Transdniestrian rebellion, which led to the armed conflict and bloodshed in the fall of 1991 and the spring and summer of 1992.³

During these early stages of the conflict, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, himself in the final phase of his political career and quickly losing his grip on the political situation, tried to mediate between the two sides while using Transdniestrian discontent as leverage against independence-minded Moldovans. His main political rival, Boris Yeltsin, eager to outbid him, established a kind of informal alliance with the leaderships of the national republics, including that of Moldova. However, after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the political context in Moscow started to change. Russian nationalists came to see in the armed conflict in Transdniestria during the spring and summer of 1992 an excellent opportunity to outmaneuver Yeltsin and other “democrats” by accusing them of “betraying” the Russian-speaking population of Transdniestria. Reluctantly, Yeltsin and his team decided to change sides. They started to put pressure on

² On Gagauzia, see country report on Moldova in this volume.

³ The first bloodshed occurred in November 1991 in the Transdniestrian town of Dubosari. The best analysis of those events is to be found in Charles King, 2000, pp. 120-142. See also Pål Kolstø and Andrei Malgin, 1998, pp. 103-128; William Crowther, 1998, pp. 147-164; Stuart J. Kaufman and Stephen R. Bowers, 1998, pp. 129-146.

Chisinau and closed their eyes when Russian (formerly Soviet) XIV Army stationed in Transdnistria intervened on behalf of the separatist authorities. This intervention in June and July of 1992 led to the defeat of the Chisinau government, which had to conclude an agreement with Moscow and Tiraspol based on the disengagement of the belligerent forces and the introduction of Russian peacekeeping troops in the region.

Initially, the intervention of the Russian forces was provoked by the fact that Transdnistrians were seen as victims of militant Chisinau nationalists. In fact, while in the rest of Moldova former Soviet armed forces were transferred under to the command of the Moldovan Government, only in Transdnistria did the officers refuse to do so and actually threatened to pledge their loyalty to the self-proclaimed Transdnistriantstate. The threat of this army getting out of control⁴ pushed a reluctant Yeltsin to integrate it into the Russian military command. However, with the change of political mood in Moscow, the presence of the Russian troops in Transdnistria and their allegedly “stabilizing role” acquired great importance in the symbolism of Russian politics. This made it extremely difficult for more realistic Russian politicians to press for the withdrawal of the troops from Transdnistria, lest they be accused of betraying of “Russia’s national interest.” However, from a purely military point of view, the strategic value of their presence was doubtful from the beginning, while the costs—both political and financial—were too big to be worth paying. On the other hand, Transdnistrians acquired a clearly disproportionate influence on Russia’s policy in the region and her foreign policy in general. This influence, however, was by any account more significant under Yeltsin’s weak leadership than under the more popular and self-confident Putin.

The stalemate, which resulted from the 1992 agreement on the disengagement of forces, has remained almost unchanged until now, despite a considerable softening of Chisinau's position and its readiness to compromise on a number of principal issues. Indeed, the fact that the Gagauz problem, which has its roots in similar circumstances from the early 1990s was more or less satisfactorily solved, with Chisinau agreeing to create territorial Gagauz autonomy is proof that considerable room would have existed find a mutually satisfactory solution, had the Transdnistrians had any desire to do it. The truth of the matter is that they were never really interested.⁵

The region’s economic survival over the last ten years has been due mostly to two factors. The first is the considerable financial support accorded by Russia, which amounts to approximately \$30 million per year⁶ in indirect subsidies, primarily as “compensation” for stationing Russian troops there, an important reason of why the Transdnistrians have been doing their best to prevent the Russian troops’ withdrawal. Payment by Transdnistrians for consumption of Russian gas was almost non-existent and accumulated debt for this fuel, despite numerous partial

⁴ In all likelihood, there was such a possibility. See the “official” biography of Transdnistrian leader Igor Smirnov, which vividly describes this battle over the loyalty of the offices of the XIYth Army. See Anna Zakharovna Volkova, 2001: 83-84. This book attributes the decision not to proceed with the transfer of the XIYth Army to Tiraspol’s command to Smirnov himself, hardly a persuasive explanation.

⁵ I analyzed this story in Vladimir Solonari, 2000, 41- 71.

⁶ This is the estimation conferred to me by an IMF official working on Moldova.

write-offs, amounts to more than \$600 million.⁷ The second is that starting from 1996 Moldovan authorities passed their custom stamps to Tiraspol authorities, who have since been able to freely use them for the legalization of exports from the region's territory without the payment of taxes and duties to the Moldovan state budget.⁸ Benefiting from these propitious circumstances, some of the Transdniestrian industrial enterprises, most notably metallurgical factory in the town of Rîbnita,⁹ survived economically. It should be noted in this context that the best and most technologically sophisticated industrial enterprises of Soviet Moldavia were located in the Transdniestrian region.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, in the late 1990s some observers even considered that the state of the Transdniestrian economy was not worse than that of Moldova, possibly even better.¹¹ This relatively favorable situation for Transdnistrians, however, began to change late last year with the changes in Moldova's and Russia's policies towards Transdnistria that have led to considerable deterioration in Transdnistria's economic situation (see below).

There is no doubt about the highly authoritarian and unlawful character of the Transdniestrian regime. Numerous allegations about widespread violations of basic human rights (such as free elections, freedom of speech, free and fair trials, etc.) are well documented.¹² However, this regime has been able to generate a considerable amount of support among the local population. The almost ten years that have elapsed since the end of the hostilities on the Dniester have been used by the Transdniestrian leadership to construct a separate regional identity, based on a fundamentalist Slavophile presentation of local history and countless

⁷ See Vladimir Socor, 2001d. Other assessments indicate even bigger figures for those debts, up to \$850 million. See report of the Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms, a World Bank-financed think tank in Chisinau on the state of the Transdniestrian economy as of October 2001 (Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms, p.10).

⁸ This decision of the Moldovan authorities was originally intended as a gesture of reconciliation and as such encouraged by the OSCE Mission in Chisinau. However, the fact that it survived until September 1, 2001, long after its detrimental effects for the Moldovan budget and failure to induce Transdnistriean side to adopt a more conciliatory position became obvious for all to see, gave rise to accusations that corrupt Moldovan officials were benefiting from various contraband deals involving them alongside their Transdnistriean counterparts. See Charles King, 2001, esp. pp. 546-547.

⁹ This factory is known as MMZ, or Moldovan Metallurgical Factory in Russian. Originally built in 1984 using German technology it was one of the best, if not *the* best in the Soviet Union. In the nineties it was highly successful in diversifying its markets and exporting to Western Union and USA, until the introduction of new steel tariffs. (See Charles King, *The Benefits of Ethnic War*, p. 538). According to some estimates, it provided more than half of budgetary revenue of the "state" Transdnistriean budget. (See Igor Munteanu, 2001).

¹⁰ According to the data of the Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms, the Transdnistriean region accounted for about 40 per cent of the Moldovan GDP in 1990, while its population comprised 15.2 and territory 12.4 per cent of the whole country. (See Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms, p. 2).

¹¹ Charles King, 2001, p. 538. However, "official" Transdnistriean figures do not confirm these assessments, indicating an even bigger GDP per capita decline than in Moldova. See Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms, p.14. This paradox is indicative of the difficulties involved in producing any meaningful assessment of the economic situation of an unrecognized "state".

¹² See, e.g., U.S. Department of State, 2001.

denunciations of Moldova's "Romanisers," "Unificationists," "Fascists," etc. Popular fears of new "Moldova's aggression" are unabashedly exploited with political aims in mind.

After the 1992 bloodshed, a negotiation process between Chisinau and Tiraspol started in earnest in April 1994 with the signing (in the presence of the Head of the OSCE Mission in Moldova and the plenipotentiary representative of the President of Russian Federation) of the so-called Parcani Declaration, named after a village on the left bank of the Dniester River. In it, the parties expressed their adherence to the universal principles and norms of dispute resolution, exclusively by means of negotiations on the basis of mutual understanding and accord, and agreed concerning the necessity of defining the *state-legal status of Transdnistria* [italics added].¹³ This Declaration both produced excessive expectations about a quick settlement and caused widespread apprehensions, especially among nationalists in Moldova, about seemingly excessive concessions by Moldovan authorities.¹⁴ It was felt that by this Declaration the Moldovan government put the Transdnistrian regime at an equal footing with it, thereby laying down the basis for progressively losing ground in the negotiation process.

In fact, those apprehensions turned out to be at least partially correct. Tiraspol has been increasingly taking advantage from the more-or-less explicit backing of Russia and later also Ukraine, both of which acquired by the agreement with Chisinau in January 1996 a status of states-guarantors of the would-be Transdnistrian settlement, and by implication also of the negotiating process itself. Quasi-permanent political instability in Chisinau was also exploited by Tiraspol.

So, under pressure from Moscow, in May 1997 a Memorandum "On the basis of normalization of relations between the Republic of Moldova and Transdnistria" was signed by the Moldovan President Petru Lucinschi and Transdnistrian leader Igor Smirnov in the presence of the Presidents of the Russian Federation (RF), Ukraine and the OSCE Acting Chairman who signed it in their own capacities as guarantors and mediators.¹⁵ The last paragraph (11) of this document proved to be of crucial importance. It referred to "the common state within the border of Moldavian SSR of January 1990," in the framework of which the parties resolved to build their relations. This wording of "common state" provoked furious reactions from politicians and bewilderment among legal experts. This formula is not used in international law, and each party tried to fill it with its own meaning. Moldovans insisted it was simply another way of saying "unitary state of Moldova," while Transdnistrians saw it as confirmation of their old idea of a "new state" gradually evolving out of "melting" the two "equal states" of Moldova and Transdnistria. All in all, the Memorandum was a serious setback

¹³ See Soglashenie o printsipakh mirnogo uregulirovaniia pridnestrovskogo konflikta v pridnestrovskom regione respublikii Moldova, 1994.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Tara, May 3, 1994.

¹⁵ Memorandum ob osnovakh normalizatsii otnoshenii mezhgu Respublikoi Moldova I Pridnestroviem, 1997.

for the Moldovan side.¹⁶ A small cushion for President Lucinschi was a Common Declaration of the Presidents of the Russian Federation and of Ukraine, which was signed on the same day in Moscow. Saluting the signature of the Memorandum, the heads of those two mediating states declared that “the provisions of the Memorandum cannot contradict the universal norms of the international law, as well as will not be interpreted and applied in contradiction with the international treaties in force, decisions of the OSCE, common declaration of the presidents of the Russian Federation and Ukraine from January 19, 1996, recognizing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.”¹⁷

Since then, the Transdnistriean leadership has systematically referred to this document to block any progress toward a final settlement, clinging invariably to its “independence.” So far the only progress that was achieved within the negotiating process, besides the avoidance of bloodshed and the preservation of the generally peaceful atmosphere, was repairing and opening bridges across Dniester in May 1999 that had been severely damaged during the hostilities in 1992, as well as reduction of the peacekeeping forces to 500 from each side, i.e. Russia, Moldova and Transdnistria, and of stationary check-posts along the demarcation line.

This was the background against which a dramatic reversal of Chisinau's policies towards Transdnistria took place in the fall of 2001. This volte-face was accomplished by the newly elected Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin, who is simultaneously the First Secretary of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM). He became head of state after the February 2002 parliamentary elections in which his party received more than 50 percent of the popular vote and won 71 out of 101 seats in Parliament.

III. New Moldovan Policies

President Voronin's and his team's new policy towards Transdnistria came as a surprise to many observers, because before the elections the position of the Communists differed very little, if at all, on this issue from that of the other political parties and previous Moldovan leadership. In March 2000, the party's parliamentary group made a declaration on the Transdnistriean issue. It started expressing the adherence of the Communists to the principles of political integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova over all its territory, including Transdnistria, as well as that of peaceful settlement of all outstanding difficulties. It praised the efforts of the international guarantors and mediators, but ascertained lack of tangible progress in the negotiating process. Blaming lack of realism and excessive concentration on the elaboration of the special status of autonomy for Transdnistria, it pleaded for what it called a “new approach” to the negotiations. Effectively, it proposed concentrating instead on the resolution “of the whole

¹⁶ Convincing commentary on the political consequences of the Memorandum is contained Vladimir Socor, 2001b.

¹⁷ Sovmestnoie zaiavlenie Prezidentov Rossiiskoi Federatsii I Ukrainy v sviazi s podpisaniem Memoranduma ob osnovakh normalizatsii otnoshenii mezhdru Respublikoi Moldova I Pridnestroviem, 1997.

spectrum of the concrete issues and problems of the mutual relationship of both banks,” hoping that by so doing it would finally be possible “step by step” to hammer out the future status of Transdniestria, “bearing in mind that the main priority is the interests of the people.”¹⁸

It should be noted that what the PCRDM declaration self-assuredly called “the new approach” was nothing new at all at that moment, and in fact had been practiced by the Moldovan authorities in their dealings with Transdniestria, with the outcome described above. Although avowedly “neutral,” in its approach and trying to give the impression of being equidistant between Chisinau and Tiraspol, the document, by stressing the impotence of “realism” (a code for the recognition of Transdniestria as “almost a state”), sided itself more closely with Tiraspol with Chisinau. To understand how this came about, so one should recall that Transdniestrians were casting themselves as the uncompromising defenders of the Soviet Union and Soviet way of life, which, they claimed, were under the threat from Nationalists, “Românisers,” etc. In this sense they were seen as akin to the Communists. Because the latter saw themselves in almost identical terms, it was only too natural for them to feel a kind of sympathy towards Transdniestrian leaders.

Soon after Voronin’s inauguration it became increasingly clear that for him, a final settlement of the Transdniestrian issue was the number one priority.¹⁹ It can be inferred from his pronouncements and behavior that he sincerely believed in the possibility of a decisive success in a very short time. From his point of view, if before the elections the Transdniestrian regime had its reason d’être in the existence in Moldova of a “democratic” (a negative word in the Communists’ lexicon) and Nationalist government, then since his election there was absolutely no justification in its continuation.²⁰ This reasoning, however, had no echo among the Transdniestrian leadership, who had grown accustomed to “independence” since early 90s. Moreover, it turned out that those sentiments were to a large extent shared by the population of the region.

Initially both sides displayed goodwill. During their first meeting on April 7th, Voronin and Smirnov agreed to make their meetings regular, i.e. monthly, and to continue the negotiation process from where it was left by Voronin’s predecessors.²¹ There were important reciprocal concessions, such as Tiraspol’s freeing of Ilie Ilascu, long held in prison and condemned to death as a Nationalist militant, twice elected *in absentia* as a deputy in the Moldovan parliament on the lists of right-wing parties, and in the 2001 parliamentary elections in Romania

¹⁸ Kommunist, #8 (176), March 3, 2000.

¹⁹ Cf. Voronin’s declaration on the eve of his formal election as President in Parliament: “If Voronin will be elected President, then solving the Transdniestrian problem will become one of the priorities of President Voronin” (INFOTAG Press Agency, April 2, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=626&From_Cat=1&d=1).

²⁰ See, e.g., his speech on Independence Day (23 August), 2001, national holiday in Moldova (INFOTAG press agency, August 28, 2001. Available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=13481&From_Cat=1&d=1).

²¹ BASA-PRESS, April 9, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=11563&From_Cat=1&d=1.

elected Romanian Senator on the list of extremist political party *Romania Mare*.²² Voronin agreed to officially validate in Chisinau all documents issued in Tiraspol, as well as to abolish all customs offices along the delimitation line.²³ The last concession was, of course, a very significant one, in which Chisinau effectively gave up very important leverage on Tiraspol. However, when immediately afterwards Smirnov introduced Transdnestrian “IDs,” a long-prepared but postponed decision, which was rightly deemed highly provocative (it was implied that those “passports” were to be covered by the decision referred to above),²⁴ Voronin reversed his position. He publicly protested and made it clear that the validation decision will not be implemented in respect to Transdnestrian IDs.²⁵

A speedy deterioration of relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol, almost invariably provoked by the intransigent and insolent behavior of the Transdnestrians, led to a complete breakdown on August 8, when after a meeting in Tiraspol both leaders publicly accused one another at the press conference. In particular, Voronin said that in his opinion Smirnov exhausted himself and cannot contribute anymore to the successful resolution of the conflict. He also made it clear that he did not expect any progress until after the December “presidential elections,” which, of course, are considered illegal by both official Chisinau and international observers.²⁶ From this point on Voronin’s tactics became increasingly confrontational. His attention switched to the problems on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border on the left bank of the Dniester River, i.e. on the territory controlled by the Transdnestrians. Obviously, he was deceived by the assurances of support “to make an order on the border” he received during his visit in Kiev on May 18 and at the CIS Summit on June 1.²⁷ He took it as a sign that Ukraine was ready to institute mixed Moldovan-Ukrainian customs offices at the eastern border of Moldova to put pressure on Tiraspol and to effectively isolate Transdnestria.

On September 1, new customs stamps were introduced in Moldova, in conformity with Moldova’s obligations under the WTO membership agreement. (Moldova joined the WTO in May 2001, the agreement having been negotiated, of course, under the Communists’ predecessors). These stamps were denied to the Transdnestrians, who had used Moldovan customs documents since 1996, as

²² BASA-PRESS, April 7, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=11462&From_Cat=1&d=1. The other three members of the “group” are still held in Transdnestrian prison.

²³ BASA-PRESS, April 17, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=11420&From_Cat=1&d=1.

²⁴ INFOTAG Press Agency, May 24, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=11389&From_Cat=1&d=1.

²⁵ BASA-PRESS, June 12, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=12184&From_Cat=1&d=1; INFOTAG Press Agency, June 20, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=12329&From_Cat=1&d=1.

²⁶ MOLDPRES Press Agency, August 8, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=13194&From_Cat=1&d=1.

²⁷ See declaration of his aide Victor Doras, BASA-PRESS Press Agency, June 5, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=12079&From_Cat=1&d=1.

noted above. The same day, Moldovan customs officials were supposed to establish mixed Moldovan-Ukrainian customs offices along the eastern border of the country. However, when they came to the designated places, their Ukrainian counter-parts turned them off. Additional negotiations ensued, both with President Leonid Kuchma and Prime Minister Anatolii Kinakh, but did not yield any results. Ukraine not only denied Moldovan officials access to its customs premises, citing international norms, but also allowed Transdnistriean trade across its border and territory.²⁸ Voronin publicly accused Ukraine of non-fulfilment of the gentleman's agreement and hinted that Ukrainian authorities were themselves implicated in contraband activity together with Transdnistriean leaders.²⁹ He went as far as threatening Ukraine to bar its access to WTO by using Moldova's veto and publicly declared that the Moldovan Communists will support Petro Simonenko, leader of the Ukrainian Communist Party, in his bid in the next Presidential elections in Ukraine.³⁰

For its own part, Ukraine emphatically denied all allegations about improper motives. On February 4, 2001 it released a memorandum to the Council of Europe, European Union, OSCE and a range of other international actors, in response to a Moldovan note from January 18 on the situation on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. After refuting all accusations of complicity in contraband it stressed that the Ukrainian State assured effective control over the complete perimeter of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. It also laid bare that from the Ukrainian point of view, the Moldovan actions were aimed not at "improvement of customs procedures but at applying hard administrative and economic pressure that in the final resort would bring complete blockade of the [region's] export capacities," thus leading to the "one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes in Europe."³¹ By using this kind of alarmist language Ukraine came very close to appropriating the Transdnistriean vision of the situation.

Voronin also failed in his attempt to influence the outcome of elections in Transdnistria and thus assure the departure of Smirnov. This move was also provoked by Smirnov, who on September 8 announced his refusal to take part in any further negotiations with Voronin until Moldova stops what he called "economic blockade," meaning, of course, withdrawal of valid Moldovan customs documents from Transdnistriean.³² In response, Voronin said that there is no sense in further negotiating with Smirnov and made it clear that he hoped Smirnov would be ousted as a result of presidential elections on December 8.³³ The Moldovan president made explicitly clear his support for the rival candidates

²⁸ Credible account and commentary is to be found in *Moldavskie vedomosti*, November 6, 2001.

²⁹ Voxpress Press Agency, November 28, 2001.

³⁰ *Moldavskie vedomosti*, November 28, 2001. On February 18, 2002 Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma ascertained "cooling" of relations between the two countries. See INFOTAG Press Agency, the same date, available at: <http://www.azi.md/news?ID=17830>.

³¹ Rendered by Ol'viiia-press Press Agency, February 4, 2002. Available at: <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol08-02-02.htm>.

³² MOLDPRESS Press Agency, September 8, 2001.

³³ INFOTAG Press Agency, October 2, 2001 on Voronin's talk on Moldovan TV on the day before.

in those elections, simultaneously, however, claiming they were “illegal.”³⁴ In September, Moldovan TV began a tough propaganda campaign against the Transdnestrian regime. Voronin also managed to elicit support from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who assured coverage of the Transdnestrian “elections” as well as the situation in Transdnestria generally that would be positive to Moldova and very negative for Smirnov.³⁵ However, all those efforts turned out to be counter-productive. The more Moldovan authorities confronted Smirnov and his team, the more the latter managed to appear to the Transdnestrians in the guise of their “defenders” against the alleged “predators” from Chisinau, no matter that this time those “predators” were not alleged “democrats” but full-fledged Communists. As a result, popular support for Smirnov rose, and in the “elections,” still unrecognized but attended by deputies from Russia and Ukraine as well as the unrecognized statelets of Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia,³⁶ he managed to win 81.85 percent of the popular vote with a 62.89 percent turnout, according to “official” data. Smirnov’s re-election did not change Voronin’s position, and he has continued to refuse to meet and negotiate with Smirnov.³⁷

However, in the longer run the new Moldovan political stance vis-à-vis Transdnestria might bring some tangible benefits to the country. By changing Moldovan official discourse on Transdnestria from one based on the denunciation of “separatism” and “Russian imperialism” that dominated in Chisinau since the early 90s (it was supplemented in middle of that decade by anaemic talk of “reconciliation”), to that focused on fighting the corruption and contraband of which the Transdnestrian authorities were accused,³⁸ Voronin was able to unite the chronically divided Moldovan polity on this issue. This unity allows the

³⁴ INFOTAG Press Agency, October 22, 2001. For reliable analysis, see *Moldavskie vedomosti*, November 6, 2001.

³⁵ See *Moldavskie vedomosti*’s report on Voronin’s visit to Moscow and his talks with Putin on the Transdnestrian issue (*Moldavskie vedomosti*, November 20, 2001). On November 23, Russian State Television RTR broadcasted a very critical program on Transdnestria, which was blacked out in the region and broadcast several days later with a rejoinder. See FLUX Press Agency, November, 26, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=16646&From_Cat=1&d=1.

³⁶ BASA-PRESS Press Agency, December 10, 2001, available at: http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=16862&From_Cat=1&d=1. As one observer from Tiraspol, not particularly sympathetic to Smirnov, privately suggested to the author, Voronin’s inept anti-Smirnov propaganda was so instrumental in driving voters to support their timeworn leader, whose popularity was actually dwindling before the elections started, that some people were wondering whether there was not a conspiracy between the two. While the correctness of this suggestion is completely out of the question, it demonstrates the extent of the misjudgment on the part of the Moldovan leadership.

³⁷ See, e.g., Voronin’s press conference in Moscow on the eve of the elections: INFOTAG Press Agency, December 6, 2001. On OSCE mission’s position see BASA-PRESS Press Agency, January 30, 2001, available at: <http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=17553>. However, Russia and the OSCE insist that the negotiations should be resumed. See *Moldavskie vedomosti*, 2001, November, 20, 2001.

³⁸ Voronin himself publicly accused Transdnestrian leaders of benefiting from contraband of enormous volume, allegedly bringing up to \$2 billion in revenue annually to them. He also accused Tiraspol of financing anti-Communist demonstrations in Chisinau, spending \$30 million per a day for that. See *Moldavskie vedomosti*, April 6, 2002. Those figures, however, were never taken seriously either in Moldova or outside. See, e.g., Vladimir Socor, 2002a.

Moldovan leadership to deal with the Transdniestrian problem from a much more advantageous position than in the past. Voronin's right-wing opponents, who readily disagree with him on every other issue, supported him on this particular one,³⁹ and his party obligingly followed his new course.

The USA,⁴⁰ the European Parliament,⁴¹ the Council of Europe⁴² and the OSCE,⁴³ worried about continuous reports of smuggling of arms and drugs from Transdniestria, granted Moldova their diplomatic support and in particular strongly blessed the Moldovan president's efforts aimed at the establishment of stricter controls over the country's eastern border. Significantly, this support from the West was forthcoming without alienating Russia. In fact, by recognizing Russia's role as "guarantor" of the eventual Transdniestrian settlement in the Basic Treaty signed and ratified late last year,⁴⁴ and by making several strong pro-Russia and anti-NATO declarations,⁴⁵ Voronin managed to persuade President Putin that Moldova is a more valuable and reliable partner for Russia than Transdniestria. As a result, Moscow's policies towards Transdniestria became visibly skewed in favor of Chisinau and against Tiraspol.

On January 1, 2002 Chisinau introduced new customs requirements for exporters of Moldovan goods called "certificates of origin," and once more denied them to Transdniestrian products. Russia accepted this new rule and thus refused to accord to Transdniestrian products those tax preferences that all CIS countries have for exporting merchandise to Russia. This exerted a heavy toll on the Transdniestrian economy. Since then, the economic and financial situation in Transdniestria has deteriorated significantly, with arrears for payment of pensions and wages

³⁹ Characteristically, a respected Romanian (Moldovan) language weekly "Jurnal de Chisinau" avowedly supported this policy while continuing to profess anti-Communism. See, e.g., Jurnal de Chisinau, March 7, 2002.

⁴⁰ See Moldovan Government Press release on the meeting of the US Ambassador Pamela Smith with Prime Minister Vasile Tarlev. BASA-PRESS Press Agency, December 4, 2001, available at: <http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=16792>.

⁴¹ See declaration of Elisabeth Scroedter, co-chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Cooperation with Moldova. FLUX Press Agency, September 19, 2001, available at: <http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=13812>.

⁴² See Functioning of democratic institutions in Committee of the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe. Moldova. Report. Rapporteurs: Josette Durrieu, France and Lauri Vahtre, Estonia, Doc.9418, 23 April 2002, par. 114. Available at the Council of Europe's website: www.coe.int.

⁴³ See press release of the Moldovan Presidential office after Voronin's meeting with Ambassador William Hill, Head of the OSCE mission in Chisinau, INFOTAG Press Agency, September 20, 2001, available at: <http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=13824&d=1>.

⁴⁴ See critical commentary by Oleg Serebrian as reported by FLUX Press Agency, November 22, 2001. Available at: <http://www.azi.md/cgi-bin/page.cgi>.

⁴⁵ For informed critical assessment of Voronin's policies towards Putin see Vladimir Socor, 2001b; 2002b.

accumulating.⁴⁶ It was officially affirmed in the region that since the beginning of 2002 and up to early April its industrial production declined by 20 percent due to “Moldova’s economic blockade.”⁴⁷ Anyway, for the first time since the commencement of the conflict Moldova has begun to deal with Transdniestria from a position of relative strength.

However, these actions of the Moldovan leadership provided Transdniestrian propaganda with the ammunition to blame all economic and other difficulties on Chisinau.⁴⁸ International mediators, and in the first place the OSCE, have demonstrated their uneasiness with the lack of negotiations between Chisinau and Tiraspol, thus putting pressure on Moldovan authorities to soften their stance toward Tiraspol.⁴⁹ It is also not clear how long Moscow will hold Chisinau’s side in this situation,⁵⁰ or whether the Transdniestrians will be able to find other routes to circumvent what they call an “economic blockade” imposed by Moldova. Because of this it is so far too early to say whether final settlement has become any more achievable than in the early phases of the Transdniestrian drama.

IV. Military Dimension

In 2001, considerable progress was achieved on the withdrawal of Russian troops. This was unrelated to the policies of the current Moldovan government, which if anything keeps silent on this issue,⁵¹ and rather represented a cumulative effect of the international pressure put to bear on Russia during last several years and a newly-found determination by Vladimir Putin to finally come terms with the realities of the post-cold war era. In particular, at the 1999 Istanbul OSCE Summit, the Russian Federation committed itself to complete withdrawal of its

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Ol’viiia-Press. January 29 2002. available at: <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol156-01-02.htm> (“official” press release) and Ol’viiia-press, February 27, 2002 (interview of Elena Chernenko, “minister of economy” of “TMR”).

⁴⁷ It “officially” affirmed that from the beginning of the year through early April, Transdniestrian industrial production declined by 20 percent due to Moldova’s “economic blockade.” Ol’viiia press, April 5, 2002 (interview of Valerii Panasenko, “minister of industry” of the “TMR”), available at: <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol118-04-02.htm>.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Ol’viiia press, May 5, 2002 (reporting from the officially-sponsored May Day rally in Tiraspol). Available at: <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol103-05-02.htm>.

⁴⁹ See e.g., press conference of Kimmo Kiljunen, Vice President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, on May 22, 2002, as reported in *Flux*, May 23. Not only did he call for the immediate resumption of negotiations but also was reported to have invited Transdniestrian “deputies” to participate in the Berlin session of the Assembly in July 2002. Cf. Ol’viiia-press Press Agency, May 23, 2002.

⁵⁰ The Russian State Duma demonstrated some reticence with Putin’s policies towards Transdniestria when it adopted, on February 22 2002, an Address to the President of the Russian Federation calling him to facilitate the resumption of negotiations between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Document is available at: http://www.dnestr.ru/docs/doc_0202_12.htm.

⁵¹ There was a moment in the early stage of Voronin’s Presidency when he came close to accepting legalization of the Russian troops’ presence in Transdniestria. If he never returned to this issue it was probably due to the lack of interest on Putin’s side more than anything else. (See Vladimir Socor, 2001a).

troops from Moldovan territory by the end of 2002,⁵² and to withdraw and/or destroy its conventional armaments and equipment limited by the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) by the end of 2001.⁵³ At the time it was a real breakthrough, which ended five years of procrastination by the Russian Federation concerning implementation of its obligation on troop withdrawal, undertaken in 1994 in accordance with a bilateral Agreement between Russia and Moldova from October 1994.⁵⁴ It should be kept in mind that the really important issue was the withdrawal and/or destruction of Russian armaments, not of military personal, whose number of about 2,500 or possibly less is rather negligible.

Through the autumn of 2001 there existed considerable doubts as to whether the RF would finally honor its commitment concerning withdrawal and/or destruction of the conventional weaponry covered by CFE Treaty. Matters were further complicated by the claim of the Transdniestrian leadership that those weapons constitute "the property" of the region, and could be withdrawn only after paying due "compensation" to Transdniestria, and by the noisy resistance to the withdrawal rendered by militant "patriotic" organizations in Transdniestria (covertly supported, it goes without saying, by the separatist leadership). It took applying a serious political and probably also economic pressure by the Russian Federation as well as financial concessions (Russia agreed to cancel \$100 million out of Transdniestria's \$800 million debt to Gazprom) in exchange for a promise to stop blocking troop withdrawal from the region. In September-November the process was speeded up and successfully completed by November 16, i.e. ahead of schedule, when the Russian Foreign Ministry officially announced this fact. The Russian command in Tiraspol reported dismantling in place 239 "units" of treaty-limited weaponry and repatriating another 125 to Russia for storage or recycling.⁵⁵

There is no doubt that this was a very significant achievement, but it is also true that the task facing Russia is probably even harder. According to the latest OSCE Chisinau Mission data, ca. 16,000 tons of weapons and ammunition are to be evacuated from Transdniestria, and to accomplish it will require ca. 350 train convoys, while 26,000 additional tons of ammunition will have to be disposed of, i.e., either exploded under control or dismantled at the spot.⁵⁶ To facilitate the accomplishment of this task and in accordance with the OSCE Istanbul Summit Declaration,⁵⁷ a fund for voluntary international financial assistance was created, administered by the OSCE. According to the OSCE Chisinau Mission data, ca. \$23 million were collected for this purpose, and more than half of that money was supplied by the USA, followed by Switzerland, the Netherlands, and other small European countries, while no major contribution has come from Germany, France or Great Britain. Of this, approximately \$6 million was already spent on the

⁵² Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (1999a), par. 18,19.

⁵³ Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (1999a).

⁵⁴ More detailed account could be found in Vladimir Solonari, 2000, 60.

⁵⁵ See Vladimir Socor, 2001c.

⁵⁶ Moldavskie vedomosti, February 9, 2002.

⁵⁷ Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (1999a), par. 19.

construction of a small factory for the disposal of arms near to Colbasna, where a stock of arms is situated.⁵⁸

However, there are serious obstacles to this task. Russia began to implement it at the end of last year, when three train convoys were dispatched to the RF, but then the Transdniestrian authorities returned to their tactics of sabotage, blocking the departure of the fourth train convoy. Since early 2002, their position hardened considerably. Besides demanding further financial concessions from Russia, primarily in the form of the cancellation of gas debts (at least \$100 million, but possibly more),⁵⁹ they “officially” called the destruction of the munitions “barbarous” acts, complained about the damage done to the environment and organized noisy anti-withdrawal demonstrations by the local historicized publics.⁶⁰ However, when the OSCE Mission in Chisinau brought to Moldova US-built equipment for the environmentally-friendly utilization of armaments (the “Donovan” camera) Transdniestrian authorities banned its access to the region, claiming that it does not meet their environment standards.⁶¹ This development prompted Chief of the OSCE Mission in Chisinau Ambassador David Swartz to make a strong statement on May 2 regarding problems that appeared in the process of implementation of the Istanbul Summit decisions. Ambassador Swartz made it clear that it is increasingly doubtful that the timetable envisaged in the documents will be met, and that all problems are due to the intransigence of the Transdniestrians. Of 46,000 tons of armaments still stocked in Colbasna, 26,000 are to be evacuated by train, which is still possible but technically very difficult.⁶²

There are two further points to make regarding the military aspects of the Transdniestrian conundrum. The first concerns the balance of armed forces in the region besides the Russian forces and ammunition to be withdrawn under the OSCE Istanbul Summit agreement, i.e. of the Moldovan and Transdniestrian armies. According to Moldovan data, which the Transdniestrians dispute only slightly, Moldovan army personnel amount to 8,500 men, while the Transdniestrian army has about 7,500 men. The Moldovan army has 3.5 times more armoured vehicles than that of Transdniestria (209 and 115 respectively), but Transdniestria possesses 16 tanks, while the Moldovans have none. The Moldovans have 209 artillery units (guns and mortars) and the Transdniestrians 115. The air forces are almost equal, with Moldova possessing 31 aircraft and Transdniestria 29. Given the difference in population, Transdniestria appears much more militarized than Moldova, with Moldova having 2.16 military men per thousand inhabitants while Transdniestria has 6.4.⁶³ Be that as it may, those figures mean that even in the case of complete withdrawal and/or dismantling of

⁵⁸ Istanbul Summit Declaration, par. 19.

⁵⁹ Transdniestrian financial claims were laid down publicly in a statement of Viaheslav Sapronov, “chief of industrial complex” of the “TMR” (Ol’viiia-press, April 10, 2002, available at: <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol35-04-02.htm>).

⁶⁰ See Ol’viiia-press, January 15, 23, 29, 30, 31, February 18, 19, 20, March 4, 18, April 5, 10, 24.

⁶¹ See Ol’viiia-press, April 29, 2002.

⁶² Info-Prim Press agency, May 2, 2002, available at: <http://www.azi.md/news?ID=18888>.

⁶³ INFOTAG Press Agency, August 23, 2001.

Russian munitions in Transdnistria, this region will not lie defenseless in the face of Moldova's military. As of now, it looks highly unlikely that Moldova would ever try the military option.

The second concerns peacekeeping forces, which number 2,500 men from Russia, while Moldova and Transdnistria contribute 500 each and Ukraine has 10 military observers. Their mandate stems from the July 21 1992 ceasefire agreement, which ended hostilities on the Dniester. Clearly, their presence and future is not connected to the issues of withdrawal of Russian troops discussed above. There are signs that Russia would like to see them to play a role as "military guarantors" in a future settlement of the Transdnistrian conflict, but to it in such a way as not to provoke suspicion from the West.⁶⁴ As of now, this issue seems to be barely touched in the negotiations.

V. Soft Security Risks

On November 6, 2001, addressing the Warsaw Conference on the Central and Eastern European countries' combating terrorism, President Voronin referred to Transdnistria and claimed that Moldova had been convinced by its own experience that regions which stay under control of separatist forces "are permanent sources of instability and tension, favorable milieu for black market trafficking, arms and drugs smuggling, money laundering and illegal migration." On the basis of these assessments, he asked for international support for Moldova in its dealings with Tiraspol.⁶⁵

There are good grounds for such assessments. According to UNDP data, in 1997-1998 more goods were imported to Transdnistria than to the rest of the country, with respectively 1.7 and 3.1 times more spirits, 9.7 and 19.4 times more alcoholic beverages and 252 and 90 times more cigarettes. Given that Transdnistria makes up about 15 percent of the population of the country as a whole, this discrepancy is an indication of the wide-spread fraud, with imports destined for Moldova being registered as bound to Transdnistria but than redirected, thus escaping paying customs.⁶⁶ A son of the Transdnistrian "president" Igor Smirnov, Vladimir, is head of the customs office of Transdnistria and is simultaneously widely believed to have financial stakes in the "Sheriff" company in the region, which is accorded substantial tax exemptions by the regime for export-import operations. No wonder that, as the report of the Monitoring Committee of the

⁶⁴ While briefing journalists after meeting the Moldovan president on February 1, 2001 Vyacheslav Trubnikov, head of the Russian Federation's Commission on the Settlement of the Transdnistrian Conflict, was reported to have said that military guarantees were needed during the period of settlement of the Dniestr conflict. "The ways and methods of elaboration of military guarantees for the population of Transdnistria will be negotiated later, including at the level of the OSCE," he stressed. BASA-PRESS Press Agency, February 1, 2001, available at: <http://news.ournet.md/cgi-bin/ournet/mnews/page.cgi?ID=17605>

⁶⁵ INFOTAG Pres Agency, November 6, 2001.

⁶⁶ See Common Country Assessment: republic of Moldova, UNDP, 2000, available at the site of Transparency International – Moldova, http://www.transparency.md/Docs/CCA_en.pdf, p. 3.

Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly puts it, "the [Transdniestrian] regime appears to be completely corrupt."⁶⁷

Transdniestria is widely believed to be a source of smuggling and illegal trade in arms, munitions, explosives, drugs, people, stolen cars, money laundering, etc. As is common with many post-conflict situations, after the military conflict of 1992, the number of crimes involving the use of firearms and explosives in Moldova considerably increased and reached 404 registered cases in 1994, declining to 275 in 1999. In 1995-7 a group of Russian military men were indicted for illegally stealing, profiting from the inadequate supervision of the stocks of arms in Transdniestria, of two "ground-to-air" missiles, three "Igla" type devices, more than 50 kilos of explosives and automatic pistols with telescopic sights. The arms and munitions were confiscated from the group, but many more are believed to have been traded illegally to criminal elements in Odessa, Lvov, Vinita and Micolaev. Just in 1999, 978 pieces of arms, 100 grenades and mines, and 6401 munitions were retrieved from illegal circulation in the territory of the Republic of Moldova.⁶⁸ On May 23 2002, several anti-tank mines were reported to have been found in the southeastern part of Moldova, near the town of Stefan-Voda.⁶⁹ Not less frightening are reports that some Transdniestrian factories started illegal production of new types of armaments, including modified devices of the BM-21 "Grad" type, grenade cup discharges, automatic pistols of the "UZI" type, and others.⁷⁰

While in 2002 Moldova acquired international notoriety due to reports of trafficking from its territory in human beings, particularly in women and minors, for sexual exploitation to some countries of Europe, mostly in the Balkans, Transdniestria has been also referred to as one of the centers of this activity.⁷¹

However, it should be noted that sometimes reports concerning Transdniestria bear signs of sensationalism and contain numbers that seem to be highly doubtful. So, when in early March 2002, President Voronin publicly accused anti-Communist protestors in Chisinau (see chapter on Moldova in this volume) of receiving financing from Tiraspol in the range of \$30,000 per day and \$200 million in total "for the overthrow of the present authorities in Moldova," this allegation were immediately ridiculed in the Moldovan press as completely fantastic.⁷² However, a little later his not more plausible assertion that the annual

⁶⁷ Committee of the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe, par. 110. It is claimed in this report that "Sherif" has a monopoly on external trade and a turnover of \$4 billion – hardly credible assertions.

⁶⁸ Common Country Assessment: republic of Moldova, UNDP, p.10.

⁶⁹ BASA-PRESS Press Agency, same date.

⁷⁰ Common Country Assessment: republic of Moldova, UNDP, p.10.

⁷¹ See, e.g., press conference of Kimmo Kiljunen, Vice President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, on May 22, 2002, as reported in *Flux*, May 23. Not only did he call for the immediate resumption of negotiations but also invited Transdniestrian "deputies" to participate in the Berlin session of the Assembly.

⁷² See, e.g., Dmitri Ciubasenco's commentary, March 11, 2002, available at: <http://www.azi.md/comment?ID=18127>.

income of Smirnov and his entourage out of contraband equals \$2 billion—an unimaginable sum not only for Transdniestria, but also for Moldova as such, whose annual GDP is about \$1 billion—was reflected in the recent Council of Europe report with this figured increased by two.⁷³ Characteristically, while high-ranking international diplomats sometimes express their strong concern over the alleged arms traffic from the region, they usually decline to confirm or deny any numbers.⁷⁴

It is probably in the nature of things that given the closed nature of the separatist regime and its demonstrative readiness to ignore all possible international norms, outside reporters are inclined to deny Transdnistrians any benefit of the doubt. Even allowing for a dose of sensationalism and exaggeration in some of the reports on this region, there is no way to deny that its sheer existence and stubborn refusal to cooperate with the outside world in good faith and lend itself to any kind of independent inspection is an international scandal, bound to produce strong and legitimate concern over the consequences of this state of affairs for the neighboring countries and Europe in general.

In this context it is rather regrettable that Ukraine refuses to even consider Moldovan proposals to institute mixed customs posts on the Transdnistriian portion of the border between the two countries, with the participation of the customs officers from a neutral state such as Germany,⁷⁵ even if the Ukrainian government sincerely believes, as it publicly says, that all accusations of trafficking via this portion of the border are unfounded.⁷⁶

VI. Risk Assessments and Policy Recommendations

The EU Country Strategy Paper 2002-2006 gloomily asserts that “for the international community Moldova is in a relatively marginal geographical position. This, together with its small size and lack of resources, may explain why there has been relatively little interest shown by the international community in Moldova, despite the country’s burning problems.” Although it is said that “many observers believe that Moldova cannot achieve durable political and economic stabilization, unless Transdnistriian problem is solved,” there is no strategy for

⁷³ Committee of the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe, par. 110. No reference is provided. A little below, the traffic between Tiraspol and Odessa is said to have been estimated at about \$2 billion. (Ibid., par. 112). The authors are obviously unconcerned by this discrepancy.

⁷⁴ E.g., Rudolf Perina, former American Ambassador to Moldova and special negotiator on conflicts in Eurasia, was reported to have said that the US is worried about illegal trafficking of armaments from Transdnistria, but declined to confirm or refute the Moldovan government’s figures. INFOTAG Press Agency, April 17, 2002. Available at: <http://www.azi.md/news?ID=18703>.

⁷⁵ President Voronin first put forward this plan on February 1. Moldpress, February 1, 2002. Available at: <http://www.azi.md/news?ID=17590>. Ukrainian response was forthcoming on February 13 (Moldpress Press agency, reporting Ukrainian Foreign Ministry’s briefing). The most recent common statement of the customs officials of the two countries negotiating over this issue seems to suggest a slight change of Ukraine’s position in favor of a more cooperative attitude towards Moldova, but it is too early to say whether this change will produce any tangible result. (See BASA-PRESS Press Agency, May 17, 2002).

⁷⁶ BASA-press Press Agency, February 5, 2002. Available at: <http://www.azi.md/news?ID=17639>.

EU involvement with this issue envisaged. Only after “an internationally recognized political agreement is reached on the status of the region” should EC cooperation be extended to Transdniestria, it is asserted.⁷⁷ This lack of interest and policy towards Transdniestrian issue on the part of the European Union is unfortunate. As was shown above, the Transdniestrian conflict has serious negative implications for the whole of Europe, not only Moldova. It is a region which is out of control of any recognized state, and thus of the international community as a whole. In its territory a significant amount of explosive materials and armaments are located, with a high risk of their unauthorized proliferation. The conflict creates motives for Russia’s continuous involvement in the region and disproportionate influence in this part of Europe. It significantly complicates relations among Moldova, Ukraine and Romania and hinders prospects the development of Moldova and the neighboring territories of Ukraine and Romania. Finally, given the lack of control of Moldova’s eastern borders, there are good reasons to suspect a large amount of unauthorized commercial activity there, providing a breeding ground for criminal networks extending far beyond Transdniestria as such. Even if there is a flavor of sensationalism and outright exaggeration about reports of trafficking in armaments, drugs and human beings from the region, the sheer continuous existence of a regime which, for a number of years, has overtly defied all international norms and binding treaties should be a matter of concern for the European community as a whole.

In what follows, the main policy priorities and recommendations are enumerated.

1. Clearly, to assure the complete and timely withdrawal of Russian troops together with the destruction and/or withdrawal of armaments stockpiled in the region will be the main priority until the task is solved. Not only continuous and close monitoring are advisable, but also political and diplomatic pressure on Russia and lending of technical and financial support, if necessary, are called for.
2. Helping Moldova establish thorough customs control over the eastern border is another immediate priority. The key lies with Ukraine, which until now has been extremely unwilling to meet the Moldovan request of allowing establishment of mixed Moldovan-Ukrainian customs offices on the border, either because of Ukrainian sensitivity to sovereignty issues, or for whatever other reason. To persuade Ukraine to modify its position on this issue or to help both countries find an acceptable solution, more international involvement will be necessary. Ukraine’s current bid to accede to the World Trade Organization may provide a good chance for this.
3. Final resolution of the Transdniestrian dispute by means of granting this region territorial autonomy within the integral Moldovan state is a more remote objective. The failure of President Voronin’s 2001 diplomatic “blitzkrieg” is a case in point. Here a long-term multi-faceted and realistic strategy will be needed, as well as a larger involvement by the international community, including, preferably, the EU. Simultaneously it should be added that President Voronin’s insistence that a change of regime in Transdniestria is a sine qua non for any reintegration of Moldova is most probably correct. For these changes to be effected peacefully, concerted efforts of the European

⁷⁷ European Union, 2002, pp. 6, 8, 14 respectively.

institutions are advisable. In particular, while the reluctance to be seen as dealing directly with the authorities of the unrecognized Transdnestrian “state” is a perfectly legitimate reason for caution on the part of the EU, it is hardly a good pretext for not making its help available to civil society groups such as NGOs, university, independent press, etc. in the region.

There is no doubt that with the imminent enlargement of the EU, the relevance of the issues discussed in this paper for the longer-term interests of the Union will only increase. The recent initiative of British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw on the elaboration of the EU policy towards those countries of the former Soviet Union that will not become members of the EU in the foreseeable future, but which will constitute its immediate neighbors following enlargement, i.e. Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, is an indication of the growing awareness among EU decision-makers of this situation.⁷⁸ The main conclusion of this paper is that while elaborating this new policy towards Moldova, Transdnestrian problem should be accorded special attention.

European Union currently is the dominant player on the European political scene and there is no substitute for its active role. No other international organisation carries a weight, economic, moral and political, which is even remotely comparable to that of the EU. In the Moldovan context EU has an additional advantage in comparison with NATO that it does not touch the sensibilities of the Russophile part of the country’s population and political elite. Thus its more active role is unlikely to provoke additional tension. EU should not try to substitute other international organisations dealing with Transdnestrian issue, as OSCE or the Council of Europe, but rather to augment their effectiveness by bringing its resources and expertise to the area. Any further neglect on the part of the EU is bound to be highly counterproductive.

Vladimir Solonari graduated from (later Moldovan) State University in 1981. Department of history.. He received his Ph.D from Moscow State University in the history of the British Labour Party in 1986. In 1986-1990 he taught contemporary European and American history at Moldovan State University, department of history. In 1990 he was elected to Moldovan Parliament in the first (relatively) free elections. He served in Moldovan Parliament for eleven years, having been twice reelected. From 1994 to early 2001 he was a Chairmen of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and National Minorities. In 1993-2001 Vladimir Solonari was a member of the Moldovan Parliamentary delegation to the Council of Europe and in 1997 a Vice-Chairman of its Parliamentary Assembly. Simultaneously in 1997 to 2001 he served as a member for Moldova on the European Commission “For Democracy Through Law” (Venice Commission), a consultative border of experts under the Council of Europe advising on issues concerning transition to democracy in the countries of Eastern

⁷⁸ On April 15 2002, the Council of the European Union approved this initiative, see 2421. Council-General Affairs. Press Release: Luxembourg (15/4/2002) - Press:91 Nr: 7705/02, available at: <http://ue.eu.int/cig/default.asp?lang=en>. For reaction in Moldova see Nicu Popescu, *Moldova - EU: Neighbours, Associates or Strangers?* Available at: <http://www.azi.md/comment?ID=18867>. Jack Straw proposed to grant those countries a status of “special neighbors.”

and Central Europe. In 2001 for nine months he was a Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC and from March 2002 he is a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, DC.