

TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT: FROZEN, YET SOLVABLE

Vitalie DIACONU

*Graduate of Monterey Institute of International Studies,
Specialization Conflict Resolution, Edmund S. Muskie Scholar;
teaches the course "Cooperation and Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Eurasia"
at the Moldovan State Institute of International Relations
(Chisinau, Moldova)*

After the Soviet Union's break-up, a series of frozen conflicts emerged in the newly established independent states, specifically in the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria), Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Russia (Chechnia), etc. Although the Transnistrian conflict lacks any ethnical and religious divergences, the conflict still remains intractable (frozen) due to the lack of political will from leaders of the Transnistrian region to constructively negotiate a viable and durable solution to the conflict. Political elites from the Transnistrian region hope that an eventual recognition of Kosovo's independence will grant them additional leverages in negotiating a similar status with the Republic of Moldova. Currently, the world media and international community carefully analyze the results of presidential elections in Serbia and negotiations around the Kosovo problem. Definitely, the Kosovo status will have a major impact on the negotiation process of the Transnistrian conflict. The Transnistrian administration

and several Russian politicians attempt to draw some parallelisms between Kosovo and Transnistria using artificial and naive arguments; however, the international community explicitly expressed their full support for a settlement formula that preserves Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Kosovo cannot represent a precedent for the Transnistrian conflict because the problem with the Transnistrian region is an artificial one. Nevertheless, the Transnistrian conflict can become a successful precedent of the European Union (EU) and Russia joint cooperation in conflict resolution in the former Soviet Union republics. The EU and Russia—together with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ukraine and the United States (U.S.)—can successfully assist Moldova and Transnistria in finding a peaceful and workable solution to the conflict. This report will provide a short historical background of the conflict, analyze the nature of the Transnistrian regime, and evaluate possible future steps in the settlement process.

Transnistrian Conflict: A Brief Overview of the Conflict

Transnistria, a quasi-independent state, is located in the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova on the left bank of the Nistru River, and according to the 2004 census, Transnistria has a population of 555,000, including 32% Moldovan/Romanian, 30% Russian, and 29% Ukrainian.¹ The Transnis-

The present paper represents the personal opinion of the author and does not reflect the position of the institution.

¹ See: "Moldova's Uncertain Future," International Crisis Group, 17 August, 2006, available at [<http://www.crisisgroup.org>], 4 February, 2007.

trian conflict emerged during the last years of the Soviet Union when an anti-constitutional regime was established in the eastern districts of Moldavia and on 2 September, 1990 declared its independence from the Republic of Moldova. Previously, on 19 August, 1990 the Gagauz minority from the southern part of the country proclaimed its independence from Moldova too. The central government from Chisinau condemned both declarations and soon undertook a series of measures to restore the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. In 1994 the Republic of Moldova granted autonomy to the Gagauz minority, a decision highly applauded and supported by the international community.²

While the Gagauz minority took a pragmatical approach, political leaders from Tiraspol have been obstructing the negotiation process of the Transnistrian conflict. After 17 years since the Declaration of Independence (27 August, 1991), the Republic of Moldova still lacks control over its eastern districts because an anti-constitutional regime took power in Tiraspol and claims independence from the central government in Chisinau.

The Republic of Moldova and international community advanced several proposals to solve the Transnistrian problem; however, the conflict still remains intractable. According to the definition provided by the United States Institute for Peace, “intractable conflicts are conflicts that have persisted over time and refused to yield to efforts—through either direct negotiations by the parties or mediation with third-party assistance—to arrive at a political settlement.”³

The Republic of Moldova and leaders of the Transnistrian region attempted to negotiate a possible solution to conflict, but parties failed, yet, to reach a final agreement. The international community, specifically the OSCE, has been trying to mediate the settlement process and proposed several projects which unfortunately did not materialize into a real solution. Initially, parties attempted to solve the conflict in the five-sided negotiation format (Republic of Moldova, Transnistria, OSCE, Russia and Ukraine) which was the architecture of the Russian diplomat Evgeni Primakov, but later the Republic of Moldova insisted to invite the European Union and United States in the negotiation process. On 27-28 October, 2005 a new negotiation format 5+2 was established with the European Union and the U.S. having the observer status.

The most recent proposals came from Ukraine and the Russian Federation. At the GUUAM summit (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova) of 22 April, 2005 the newly elected President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko advanced his “seven steps” proposal to solve the Transnistrian conflict. Later, on 16-17 May, 2005 the Ukraine presented—during the five-side consultation format in Vinitza—its “Plan for Settlement of the Transnistrian conflict” based on “the seven steps” approach. An important issue for disagreements was Art 3, Chapter II of the plan, which called for “early free, transparent and democratic election to the Supreme Council of Transnistria, under international control, as an essential element for Moldova’s recognition of the Supreme Council as a legitimate representative authority of the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova.”⁴ In order to conduct free and transparent elections, it is necessary to establish a period of transition to democracy, since under the current regime in Tiraspol, political opposition and independent media are seriously oppressed. Not surprisingly, the Rumanian President Traian Basescu (participant at the GUUAM summit) categorically opposed the proposal to conduct such elections in the Transnistrian region. In this regard, Oazu Nantoi argued that the Vinitza Plan “will legalize the Transnistrian Supreme Council in the context of the international community, without granting any guarantee that Moldavian state

² See: “Trouble Brewing in Moldova’s Gagauz Autonomy,” The Jamestown Foundation, 14 March, 2002, available at [http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=25&issue_id=2217&article_id=19239], 3 February, 2008.

³ Ch. Crocker, F.O. Hampson, P. Aall, *Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict*, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington D.C., 2005, p. 5.

⁴ O. Nantoi, “The Ukrainian Plan of Transnistria: Pros and Cons,” *EuroJournal.org*, June 2005, available at [<http://eurojournal.org/files/nantoi1.pdf>], 1 February, 2008.

will afterwards be reunified.”⁵ The Republic of Moldova promised to carefully analyze the document and suggested to implement the “3D Strategy” prior to elections in governmental institutions of Transnistria. The “3D Strategy” stands for democratization, decriminalization and demilitarization of the Transnistrian region.

A much more debatable proposal to solve the Transnistrian conflict was the “Kozak Memorandum” drafted by the Russian Special Envoy to Transnistria, Dmitri Kozak. Initially, Moldova agreed to sign the Kozak Memorandum, but after consultations with Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the President of Moldova Vladimir Voronin refused to sign the specified document. In his speech of 25 November, 2003 President Voronin stated, “the plan proposed by the Russian Federation is a response to a true compromise between the sides. ...However the document is of such strategic importance that it cannot be adopted against the resistance of one or another side. ...Obviously, Moldova’s European integration option requires the support of the European organizations, in particular of the OSCE, for this settlement plan. ...Under these conditions Moldova’s leadership describes the signing of this memorandum as premature before the coordination of its text with the European organizations.”⁶

President Voronin’s statement underlines an important element of the Republic of Moldova diplomacy: accession to the European Union remains the strategic priority of the country. Therefore, one may assume that political leadership from Chisinau will not undertake any steps that might jeopardize Moldova’s prospects for accession to the European Union. Furthermore, prior to adopting a decision on the final status of Transnistria, the Republic of Moldova will consult the European Union, the United States and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The Kozak Memorandum had several vulnerable points that could have seriously jeopardize Moldova’s statehood. When Russia presented the Kozak Memorandum for Moldova’s federalization, the leader of the Transnistrian region Igor Smirnov demanded that the 14th Russian Army remains in Moldova for a period of 30 years.⁷ The final version of the Kozak Memorandum shrunk the period of Russian Army’s stay in Moldova to 20 years. Nevertheless, maintaining the Russian Army in the Transnistrian region, even for such a period, can seriously change the dynamics of Moldova’s cooperation with Brussels and its prospects for European integration.

Furthermore, the presence of the Russian army in the Transnistrian region violates Moldova’s Constitution which explicitly highlights country’s neutrality status. In addition, the Russian Federation committed at the Istanbul summit in November 1999 to withdraw its army and munitions from the Republic of Moldova until 2002.⁸ Six years have passed since the deadline and the Russian Federation still fails to comply with its commitments from Istanbul summit. The Kremlin conditions the withdrawal of its army on the political settlement of the conflict, while Chisinau insists on full and unconditional withdrawal of the Russian Army and munitions from Moldova. Although Moscow attempts to argue that the Russian army has only an international peacekeeping mandate in Moldova, on 8 July, 2004 the European Court for Human Rights adopted the following resolution: “in 1992 Russia had committed an act of aggression against Moldova and up to recent the eastern area of the Republic of Moldova is under Russian occupation.”⁹

⁵ O. Nantoi, “The Ukrainian Plan of Transnistria: Pros and Cons,” *EuroJournal.org*, June 2005, available at [<http://eurojournal.org/files/nantoi1.pdf>], 1 February, 2008.

⁶ M. Emerson, “Should the Transnistrian Tail Wag the Bessarabian dog?” Center for European Policy Studies, 11 January, 2005, available at [http://www.ceps.be/Article.php?article_id=133], 31 January, 2008.

⁷ See: M. Vahl, M. Emerson, “Moldova and the Transnistrian Conflict,” Center for European Policy Studies, Retrieved from the European Center for Minority Issues, available at [<http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/1-2004Chapter4.pdf>], 31 January, 2008, p. 16.

⁸ See: “Istanbul Document 1999,” Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, January 2000, p. 50, available at [http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1999/11/4050_en.pdf], 30 January, 2008.

⁹ O. Nantoi, op. cit.

Previously, the ratification of the Treaty of Conventional Forces in Europe was an important “carrot” that Washington and Brussels could bargain with Moscow in exchange for Russia’s engagement to comply with its commitments from the Istanbul summit. In this regard, the United States stressed, “ratification by NATO Allies of the Adapted Treaty is awaiting Russia’s compliance with adapted CFE flank provisions and continued fulfillment of its Istanbul summit commitments regarding withdrawals of Russian forces from Georgia and Moldova.”¹⁰ However, the recent decision of the Russian Federation of 12 December, 2007 to suspend the implementation of its obligations under the CFE Treaty seriously undermines prospects of withdrawing the Russian army and munitions from Moldova.

According to the former OSCE Ambassador to Moldova William Hill, Russia retains 1,500 troops and approximately 21,000 tons of munitions in Transnistria.¹¹ Ceslav Ciobanu, a Senior Fellow at the U.S. Institute for Peace and the former Moldovan Ambassador to the U.S. argued that “the withdrawal of Russian troops, whose presence on our territory is against our Constitution, would undoubtedly create more favorable conditions for the final settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, as well as it would contribute to consolidation of peace and security in the region.”¹² Therefore, the Republic of Moldova and international community should focus on identifying serious levers that could interest the Russian Federation to withdraw its army from the Transnistrian region. Although Russia suspended its participation from the CFE Treaty, NATO and the European Union, most probably, will continue the current approach to condition the ratification of the CFE Treaty by the NATO Allies on the withdrawal of the Russian Army and munitions from Moldova and Georgia. The presence of the Russian army in the Transnistrian region provides a vital support to the anti-constitutional regime of Tiraspol in strengthening and consolidating its illegal institutions.

The Transnistrian Regime

In a recent interview of 14 December, 2007 for the Euronews, the Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin stated that the Transnistrian region is led by a group of “Mafiosi/criminals which transferred Transnistria into private hands and they’ve been developing a separatist regime for nearly 16 years.”¹³ The President of Moldova is not the first person to qualify the separatist regime in the Transnistrian region as a criminal one. Previously, Oazu Nantoi has also labeled the Transnistrian regime as anti-constitutional and totalitarian.¹⁴ Definitely, the separatist leaders from Tiraspol attempt to qualify their regime as a democratically elected one, pointing to the seven undemocratic referendums conducted in the Transnistrian region. The Republic of Moldova, supported by the international community, has never recognized the results of these referendums because the minimum democratic standards lack in the Transnistrian region. The present anti-constitutional regime of Tiraspol oppresses any kind of political opposition and independent mass-media as well as obstructs the development of civil society in the region, etc.

¹⁰ “Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty,” U.S. Department of State, 18 June, 2002, available at [<http://www.state.gov/t/ac/rls/fs/11243.htm>], 3 February, 2008.

¹¹ See: W. Hill, “Moldova and Europe: Bridging Gap,” Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 26 April, 2005, available at [http://www.osce.org/documents/mm/2005/04/14079_en.pdf], 29 January, 2008.

¹² C. Ciobanu, “Moldova and the ‘Frozen and Forgotten’ Conflicts in Post-Soviet States,” United States Institute of Peace, 22 July, 2004, Retrieved from the Institute for Public Policy, available at [<http://www.ipp.md/public/biblioteca/74/en/Report%20July%2025,%20revised.doc>], 5 January, 2008.

¹³ “Moldova’s Balancing Act between Russia and Europe,” *Euronews*, 14 December, 2007, available at [<http://www.euronews.net/index.php?page=interview&article=459585&lng=1>], 3 February, 2008.

¹⁴ See: O. Nantoi, “About the Situation in the Eastern Districts of the Republic of Moldova (1992-2000),” Institute for Public Policy, Chisinau.

Because the Republic of Moldova lacks control over the Transnistrian territory, the specialized literature often points to the shadow economy as the main source of revenue in the Transnistrian budget. The main mechanism of the shadow economy is smuggling in goods, trafficking in human beings and trafficking in weapons. According to the International Crisis Group report, Transnistria became a major route for trafficking in human beings to Russia and Arab countries.¹⁵ Transnistrian leaders such as Vadim Antyufeyev were wanted by the Interpol for crimes committed in Riga in 1990-1991.¹⁶ In addition, Ceslav Ciobanu estimates that approximately 40% of Moscow's prostitutes came from Transnistria.¹⁷ Along with trafficking in human beings, Transnistria has often been accused of trafficking in illegal weapons. According to a Russian News Agency, the Moldovan leadership emphasized in 2005 that Transnistria supported the Saddam Hussein regime by supplying—illegally—military munitions to Iraq.¹⁸ Furthermore, based on the Alexander Busyghin's evidence, the Moldovan Prime Minister Vasile Tarlev stressed that Transnistria supplied military weapons to Chechnia and during the Beslan school tragedy of September 2004 Chechen terrorists used weapons manufactured in Transnistria.¹⁹ Lately, on 27 March, 2007 the Moldovan News Agency "Infotag" cited an Italian reporter, Paolo Tessadri, who argues that Transnistria provides al-Qa'eda, Hamas Movement, The Grey Wolves, The Kurdistan Workers' Party, and Hezbollah with weapons.²⁰

Willing to promote a better dialog with leaders from the Transnistrian region, the Republic of Moldova agreed on a series of compromises to advance the settlement process. In 1996 the Republic of Moldova agreed to grant Transnistria the right to use Moldova's customs stamp without requiring Transnistrian economic agents to register with the Moldovan State Registration Chamber. In addition, the Republic of Moldova agreed not to collect taxes and duties on goods bound for Transnistria at the Moldovan customs office. Chisinau expected that political leadership from Tiraspol will adopt a constructive approach in the negotiation process, but leaders from the Transnistrian region used this opportunity to engage in re-export schemes which brought them enormous revenue. According to the International Crisis Group the re-export schemes was the following: "goods arrive at the nearby Ukrainian ports of Odessa and Illichevsk marked with Transnistria as their final destination, thereby avoiding Ukrainian customs duties. They are shipped to Transnistria by road or rail but soon after arrival are re-exported to Ukraine or across the internal border to Moldova."²¹

Furthermore, the present ICG report indicates that only in the first seven months of the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) activity on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border (December 2005-June 2006), smuggling of frozen chicken could potentially cost the Ukrainian government approximately €35 million. Thus, Transnistria has strong interests in maintaining the status-quo in the conflict settlement because this brings enormous illegal revenue to Transnistrian leaders. For example, "the annual turnover of the biggest company in Transnistria, Sheriff, is around \$2 billion, which is 5 times bigger than the budget of Moldova."²² Furthermore, Ceslav Ciobanu estimates that "contraband and smuggling of weapons, alcohol, oil, drugs, pharmaceuticals, tobacco and other goods on

¹⁵ See: "Moldova: No Quick Fix," International Crisis Group, 12 August, 2003, available at [<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm>], 28 November, 2005.

¹⁶ See: "Moldova: No Quick Fix," International Crisis Group, available at [<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm>], 10 March, 2007.

¹⁷ See: C. Ciobanu, op. cit., p. 30.

¹⁸ See: "Voronin obvinil Pridnestroviu v pomoshchi rezhimu Husseina," *Lenta. Ru*, 29 October, 2005, available at [<http://lenta.ru/news/2005/10/29/moldova/>], 4 February, 2005.

¹⁹ See: A. Busygin, "Chechenskie boeviki dobyvaiut oruzhie v Pridnestroviu," *UTRO.RU*, 27 October, 2005, available at [<http://www.utro.ru/articles/2005/10/27/490006.shtml>], 4 February, 2008.

²⁰ See: "Il Venerdi Italian Daily: Transnistria is Weapons Supermarket on Last Plot of USSR," *Moldova Azi*, 27 March, 2007, available at [<http://www.azi.md/news?ID=43763>], 5 January, 2008.

²¹ "Moldova's Uncertain Future."

²² C. Ciobanu, op. cit.

Tiraspol-Odessa line are bringing these \$2 billion a year to Smirnov's regime, whose budget has amounted to a total of \$85 million."²³

In order to stop the illegal activity in the Transnistrian region, the Republic of Moldova undertook a series of measures by re-establishing on 3 March, 2006 the customs regime agreed previously by the Moldovan and Ukrainian Customs Services on 15 May, 2003. According to the current customs regime, Transnistrian economic agents willing to engage in export-import operations have to register, temporarily or permanently, with the Moldova State Registration Chamber. Transnistrian leaders immediately started to speak of an "economic blockade" and "humanitarian crisis." The Transnistrian arguments lack any substantial rationale and are easily refuted because there is not any economic blockade. While Transnistrian leaders speak about an economic blockade, the export of goods from the Transnistrian region increased in 2007 with approximately 67% comparatively to the year of 2006.²⁴ Furthermore, by registering with the Moldovan State Registration Chamber, economic agents from the Transnistrian region enjoy commercial preferences in the framework of the Autonomous Trade Preferences (ATP) granted to Moldova by the European Union on 21 January, 2008. The Republic of Moldova is the only country from the CIS enjoying such preferences in trade cooperation with the European Union. Based on the granted ATP, economic agents can export goods manufactured in Moldova to the European Union markets on a reduced or zero customs rate. If economic agents had not register with the Moldovan State Registration Chamber, they would not have been able to take advantage of commercial preferences while exporting local goods to the European Union markets as well as to CEFTA member states. Therefore, the so-called "economic blockade" implied by the Transnistrian leaders is nothing else than a fiction. The present customs regime on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border is another constructive step of the Moldovan authorities to provide a legal framework for economic agents from the Transnistrian region and to offer them commercial benefits on exports to the EU and CEFTA member states. In addition, the present customs regime allows the Moldovan authorities to control the export and import across its borders. This policy aims, also, to establish a stronger and more efficient control on the state border and thus decrease smuggling in goods, trafficking in human beings and illegal weapons.

Another positive step to curtail smuggling in goods from the Transnistrian region is the EU decision from 21 September, 2005 to launch a border monitoring mission on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. Initially, the EUBAM had a mandate for two years, but recently its mandate was extended for another two years until 2009. The main goal of the EUBAM is to assist Moldovan and Ukrainian authorities in firm control of the Transnistrian section of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. The EUBAM became an important tool in reducing illegal revenue of Transnistrian leaders and thus advancing the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict as well as increasing the EU credibility and enhancing stability in the region.

The Transnistrian Puzzle: What's Next?

The main puzzle with the Transnistrian conflict is that the problem remains unsettled despite the lack of any ethnical and religious divergences that exist in many other contemporary "frozen" conflicts. Population from the Transnistrian region is not different from population from the right bank of

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ See: *Moldova News*, 14 December, 2007, available at [http://newsmoldova.md/news.html?nws_id=664839&date=2007-12-14], 4 February, 2008 (in Moldovan).

the Nistru River. Therefore, any attempts to label the conflict as “interethnic” have no rational background because according to the 2004 national censuses, Moldovans represent the largest ethnic group on both banks of the Nistru River. The Transnistrian region has a population of 555,000, while the Republic of Moldova’s population is approximately 3.4 million inhabitants, of whom 78% are Moldovan/Rumanian, 8% Ukrainian, and 6% Russian. The present data shows that more Russians live in Moldova than in Transnistria; therefore, the Transnistrian conflict is not an interethnic conflict, but rather an artificial one initiated and maintained by the anti-constitutional regime from Tiraspol.

In this regard, it is impossible to trace any parallel lines between the Kosovo problem and the Transnistrian conflict. In the Kosovo case, the demand for independence is based, also, on the ethnical composition of the province. Ethnic Albanians represent the major ethnic group in Kosovo (of approximately 2 million inhabitants, over 90 percent are ethnic Albanians),²⁵ while the population from the eastern districts of Moldova is not different from the population on the right bank of the Nistru River. In Kosovo, the former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic conducted a massive ethnic cleansing campaign against ethnic Albanians from the Kosovo province. On the other side, the international community has been highly applauding the Moldovan government policies toward national minorities, which enjoy large cultural and linguistic privileges. As Oazu Nantoi points in his paper, nearly “160 thousand in the total number of 580 thousand people of the Transnistrian area, have become citizens of the Republic of Moldova. They are categorically against granting a “special legal status” to the region under the control of the separatist regime.”²⁶ Therefore, the population from the Transnistrian region is not different from population of the right bank of the Nistru River. Speaking in terms of the Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin, the conflict is an artificial one, created and maintained by the local regime from the Transnistrian region.

In addition, Transnistrian’s claims for self-determination—based on local referendums—have no legal grounds. For example, in the Montenegro’s case, the referendum was part of negotiation with the Serbian government, while in the Transnistrian problem referendum was never an issue on the agenda. Furthermore, the referendum in Montenegro complied with international standards and norms, while referendums in Transnistria have never been recognized by the international community.

In the official statement of the U.S. Department of State of 18 September, 2006 regarding the last referendum held in the Transnistrian region, it is stated, “the international community has made clear, Transnistria is a part of Moldova, and yesterday’s efforts [17 September, 2006] by the Transnistrian regime should not be recognized as anything other than an attempt to destabilize Moldova.”²⁷ Therefore, the Transnistrian region has not legal ground to become an independent state entity or/and apply the possible Kosovo precedent as a universal model.

Since the conflict is an artificial one and easier to solve, one may ask: why the conflict still remains frozen? The Transnistrian conflict definitely can become tractable if parties—specifically, the Transnistrian regime—will show more political will and desire in searching a viable solution to the conflict. In the specified interview for the Euronews, President Voronin stated, “since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. the ‘key’ has been, and still is, in the hands of the Russian Federation’s authorities.”²⁸ The present statement emphasizes the essential role played by the Russian Federation in the settlement process of the Transnistrian conflict. Russia has the necessary economic and political tools to control and influence the local regime in the Transnistrian region. One may argue that without the support of Russia, the Transnistrian regime has limited opportunities to manage with economic and

²⁵ See: J. Hooper, “Kosovo: America’s Balkan Problem,” *Current History*, Vol. 98, No. 627, 1999, p. 159.

²⁶ O. Nantoi, “The Ukrainian Plan of Transnistria: Pros and Cons.”

²⁷ “Rejecting the Independence Referendum in Moldova’s Transnistria Region,” U.S. Department of State, 18 September, 2006, available at [<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/72413.htm>], 4 February, 2008.

²⁸ “Moldova’s Balancing Act between Russia and Europe.”

financial problems of the region. Recently, on 20 December, 2007 the Russian government agreed to provide financial assistance to the Transnistrian region worth of 675 million rubles, thus satisfying Mr. Evgeni Shevchuk's (speaker of the so-called Transnistrian Supreme Soviet) request.²⁹ Because Moscow refused to provide such financial assistance to the Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov, many scholars began to speak about a possible successor of Mr. Smirnov in Transnistria. Thus, the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* underlined that Moscow might shift its support in favor of Mr. Evgeni Shevchuk. According to *Kommersant*, Mr. Smirnov made a strategic mistake during the parliamentary elections to the Russian Duma of 2 December, 2007 by not supporting the Unified Russia party, while Mr. Shevchuk called local population to vote for this party.³⁰

Researchers studying the Transnistrian problems are interested to find out if Mr. Shevchuk may conduct a more pragmatical approach in negotiating a possible solution to the conflict. During a recent visit to Moscow, Mr. Shevchuk made an important statement which may determine the future course of the Transnistrian regime in negotiations with Moldova. As a local newspaper states, the speaker of the Transnistrian Supreme Council said, "anything is possible, including the option of a common state with Moldova at some point in the future."³¹ Previously, Mr. Shevchuk excluded possibilities for a common state with the Republic of Moldova. Interestingly, but the present statement was made in the aftermath of the last meeting from 22 January, 2008 between the Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin and the Russian President Vladimir Putin. Considering that this meeting—most probably—was the last one between the two incumbent presidents, many scholars expect a serious progress in the settlement process of the Transnistrian conflict. The Russian media covered in deep the visit of President Voronin to Moscow. The *Kommersant* newspaper stated that Russia is preparing to present a new plan for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. According to the Interlic News Agency, the plan would propose a solution formula based on a federal state. Furthermore, the agency argues that the Russian Federation may insist on signing an international treaty with the European Union and United States which would validate Moldova's permanent neutrality status.³² The issue of neutrality should not provide any disagreements because the Republic of Moldova is already a neutral state and insists on international recognition of its neutrality. However, possible disagreement may arise on the issue of maintaining the Russian army in the Transnistrian region. The Republic of Moldova still insists that Russia complies with its commitments undertaken at the OSCE Istanbul summit in 1999 to withdraw the army from the Transnistrian region.

Although Russia has the "key" to the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, the solution should be searched and reached in the present 5+2 negotiating format with the European Union and the United States having a decisive say. If the Russian Federation propose a second "Kozak Memorandum," it is not difficult to predict the position of Moldova and mediators involved in the negotiation process. The solution to the Transnistrian conflict must consider interests of all parties involved in the settlement process. Whatever solution will be advanced (federation, confederation, unitary state, etc.), the Republic of Moldova should consult the European Union and the OSCE to ensure that the settlement formula does not undermine Moldova's prospects for future accession to the European Union.

The European Union and the U.S. has succeeded once to stop Moldova from signing a document that could undermine Moldova's statehood. Participating in the negotiation process, Brussels and Washington will become key players in solving the Transnistrian conflict and removing a potential source of instability and insecurity in the expanding EU and NATO.

²⁹ See: "Mockva vydedit Pridnestrovuiu 675 mln rublei po prosbe 'Edinoi Rossii,'" Newsru.com, 20 December, 2007, available at [<http://www.newsru.com/russia/20dec2007/money.html>], 4 February, 2008.

³⁰ See: "Lider Pridnestrovia idet protiv techeniia," *Kommersant*, 28 January, 2008, available at [<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?docid=846356>], 4 February, 2008.

³¹ "Pridnestrovie Parliamentary Speaker Keeps All Options Open with Moldova," *The Traspol Times*, 1 February, 2008.

³² See: "Voronin-Putin's Meeting: A New Attempt to Solve the Transnistrian Conflict?" Interlic News Agency, 22 January, 2008.

C o n c l u s i o n

In order to advance the settlement process, it is vital to promote confidence and security measures on the both banks of the Nistru River. In this regard, the international community highly supported the recent initiatives on confidence and security building measures proposed by the Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin. In his interview for *Komsomolskaia pravda* in Moldova (local newspaper), President Voronin put forward a series of practical measures aiming to bolster the settlement process. The Moldovan leadership proposed to enforce the free movement of people and goods on both banks of the Nistru River; to improve infrastructure that connects Moldova with its eastern districts, including transportation corridors Leuseni-Chisinau-Dubasari and Chisinau-Tiraspol-Odessa; to create a joint TV broadcasting company, etc. These measures can establish an environment of trust and confidence, which later will set the necessary background for a successful reintegration of the country. Most importantly, local people living on the right and left banks of the Nistru River will benefit from such activities. Moldovan President's initiatives are very attractive to the Transnistrian regions—especially roads infrastructure—and political leadership from Tiraspol can accept these proposals or reject them and deprive local people from better living conditions. Instead of imposing migration taxes on entrance to the Transnistrian region, political leaders from Tiraspol could take a more constructive approach and abolish such taxes and ensure a free movement of people and goods on both banks of the Nistru River. A single economic, customs, financial and monetary system will benefit all parties involved in the negotiation process, especially the Transnistrian region; therefore, leaders from Tiraspol should refrain from steps that can destabilize the situation and impede the free movement of people and goods. The Republic of Moldova has made the first step to improve confidence and security between people, and leaders of the Transnistrian region should accept this step and engage constructively in implementing joint projects to provide better living conditions on both banks of the Nistru River. The settlement is possible: it is necessary to show a real political will and take a constructive approach in the negotiation process to reach a peaceful and workable solution to the Transnistrian conflict.
