

Moldova - Russia Relations After the Collapse of the Soviet Union

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Moldova was important for both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union because it formed part of the border of both the ruling entities. In this way, it formed a barrier between Russia and the outside world. Thus, Moldova's most important foreign policy relationship is perhaps with Russia. Many document of economic nature have been signed between the two countries, however relations in this sphere were by no means developed as successful as the two states would like. Russia is trying to balance her foreign policy emphasis between relations with the West and the near abroad including Moldova. Russia's motivations in Moldova look familiar to observers of Russian attitudes throughout its "near abroad". From Moscow, Moldova likely appears to be a minor irritation on its "traditional" periphery, not as problematic as Ukraine, Chechnya or the Caucasus, but in the same basket of troubles that would never have happened if the Soviet Union had stayed intact. Moldova was of probably little interest to Moscow, but the presence of an ethnic Russian minority in Moldova altered Moscow's perspective. Moldova's ethnic Russians found the prospect of Moldova's reunification with Romania alarming, because it would alter their status from that of a large and politically powerful force to that of a small and politically powerless minority. Thus, Russia is trying to maintain control of not just the bilateral relationship, but also relations between Moldova and other members of the international community. Russia maintains this control primarily by being uncooperative in talks designed to remove Russian troops from Moldova.¹ On the other hand, Moldova's inexperienced government is struggling in attempts to formulate both domestic and foreign policy. Many problems have been accumulated in Moldova-Russia relations. Russia and Moldova are driven together by economic necessity and by the continuing conflict in the Dniester region. Russia and Moldova are still at loggerheads over gas repayments and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Moldova. There are three main issues in Russia-Moldova relations: gas debts, the status of Transdnestr, and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Moldova.

Russia is Moldova's largest trading partner and the supplier of almost all its energy needs. Most of Moldova's exports go to Russia and over 90 percent of its energy imports come from Russia. Moldova has accumulated large debts to Russian energy firms. Moldova's gas debts have been a major problem for several years. Moldovan President Petru Lucinschi discussed the gas issue during the CIS Heads of State summit in Moscow in January 2000 with his counterpart. However, the Russia-Moldova relationship is now moving in right direction, though Chisinau remains concerned about possible Russian leverage. The first ever Russia-Moldova peacekeeping exercises took place in August 2000 in Moldova, with Transdnestr refusing to take part.

Later in late 2001, Moldovan President Voronin and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the treaty of friendship and cooperation and it could be marked as official confirmation of the major changes that has occurred in the two countries. To all appearances, the new potential for bilateral strategic partnership lies mainly in the realm of economic relations. Both countries regard an arrangement whereby Russia would acquire shares in national enterprises in lieu of money as fully acceptable. The President Voronin government of Moldova continues to look eastward in its foreign policy despite sustained popular protests at his moves toward Russia. A majority of the population is ethnically and linguistically aligned with Romania, a country that has moved increasingly toward integration with Western Europe. Nevertheless, Voronin has deepened ties with Russia and described the relationship between the two countries as a long-term strategic partnership.

***Transnistria Issue:** Transnistria is a separatist region on the eastern border of Moldova. After a short war in 1992 it has enjoyed de facto independence. Moldovan forces and those of the breakaway “Dniestr Republic”, a separatist entity proclaimed in 1990 by ethnic Russian local officials in the Transnistria region of Moldova erupted in March 1992. Over 300 people died in the violence. A cease-fire was declared in July 1992 that provided for Russian and Moldovan peacekeepers to patrol a “security zone” between the two regions. Russian troops are stationed in the region. Russia has, along with Ukraine and the OSCE, been involved in attempting to mediate a settlement between Moldova and the Transdnestrian Republic since 1992. A major step forward in the search for a settlement was the Moscow memorandum, signed in May 1997 by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Transdnestr. The memorandum outlines the basic principles for a settlement in Moldova. It affirms that Transdnestr will have special status within Moldova, and that Moldova will therefore be a “common state”, a term used in the memorandum. Both sides pledge not to use force, but to negotiate agreements with Russia and Ukraine as guarantors with the assistance of the OSCE and CIS. The agreement does not however mention the presence of foreign troops within Moldova, or how power is to be shared between Chisinau and Tiraspol. In 1997, Russian forces were reduced by 40 per cent to around 3,000. However, since May 1997 little progress has been made in reaching an overall settlement. So far, the Moldovan and Transdnestrian leaderships have been unable to reach agreement on the status of Transdnestr within Moldova.*

Russia’s interest in hegemony over Moldova increased noticeably when Romania joined NATO. Furthermore, the Russian military and intelligence apparatus resists losing comfortable billets that have proved lucrative, while nationalists in the Duma call for protection of Russian-speakers in former Soviet territory. Some analyst’s charge that Russia’s behavior in negotiations over Transnistria has shown that Russia, while nominally supporting Moldova’s sovereignty, has in reality used the issue to expand its political leverage over the country. The Transnistria issue is complicated by the continued presence of about 1,500 Russian troops in the breakaway region, as well as huge stockpiles of weapons and ammunition. Russia has flatly refused to honour past commitments it has made to the OSCE to withdraw its forces from Moldova. Russian leaders have also attempted to condition the withdrawal of Russian troops on the resolution of status of Transnistria. Moldovan officials have termed the Russian conditions on troop withdrawal as “blackmail.” Russia has responded with bitter verbal attacks on Moldova’s leadership.² Both Moldovan and Russian officials agree that the tons of munitions in Transnistria must be removed or destroyed before the Russian troops pull out, in order

to prevent the weapons from falling into the hands of criminals, terrorists and other undesirable groups. However, Russian officials maintained that they could not withdraw the munitions without the permission of the Transnistria authorities, who claim that the weaponry is their "property." A positive development was the conclusion of an agreement in May 2001 between the OSCE and Russia on OSCE monitoring and assistance for the troop withdrawal, including the use of an OSCE trust fund to help dispose of the Russian munitions. At the OSCE Summit in Istanbul in November 1999, it was agreed that all Russian forces would be withdrawn by 2002.

Transdnestr probably remains concerned that Moldova could move towards closer ties with Romania, even to possible eventual unification. This prompt closer Russian support for Transdnestr. The term common state is being interpreted differently by Chisinau and Tiraspol, and any move towards closer ties between Bucharest and Chisinau could lead to Tiraspol arguing that the common state should allow a high degree of autonomy for Transdnestr, and Moscow may well back this stance. The Russian 14th Army, stationed in Transnistria, played a vital role in the conflict between the government of Moldova and the Dnestr Republic. Its commanders permitted the transfer of weapons from their stockpiles in Moldova to the Transnistrian militia and volunteered the services of "Cossack" forces that entered the region once fighting broke out. There were approximately 1,000 "Cossacks" in Transnistria in 1994. Furthermore, strong indications suggested that elements of the 14th Army actively intervened on the side of the separatists during the fighting, using their heavy weapons to turn the tide in the fighting. Eventually, however, it became evident that the Transnistria conflict was not about ethnic issues, especially once implementation of the language law of 1989 was delayed, and the Popular Front extremists lost much of their power, but about political systems. The Transnistrian leadership wanted to return to the days of the Soviet Union and was wary of the Yeltsin government and the reformists. In July 1992, an agreement negotiated by presidents Snegur and Yeltsin established a cease-fire in Transnistria, which brought an end to the worst of the fighting in Moldova. Transnistria was given special status within Moldova and was granted the right to determine its future should Moldova reunites with Romania. Russian, Transnistrian, and Moldovan peacekeeping troops subsequently were introduced into Transnistria. However, maintaining the agreement was complicated by the instability of Russia's central government and by the implications of the 14th Army's involvement for Russia's domestic politics. The 14th Army's commander, Lieutenant General Aleksandr V. Lebed, was politically extremely conservative and despite repeated warnings from his superiors to restrain himself, had stated publicly that he would not "abandon" Transnistria's ethnic Russians. Like Lebed, Russia's conservatives generally considered abandonment of the ethnic Russian minority to be an anathema. In 1995 nationalists in Russia, whose strength was growing, were ready to protect the "rights" of Russians in the "near abroad" and would, no doubt, politically attack moderates who might be willing to end the conflict through compromise. By 1994, however, relations between the Transnistrian leadership and the 14th Army had deteriorated to the point that both sides were accusing each other of corruption including arms trafficking, drug running, and money laundering and political provocation. General Lebed also saw many in the Transnistrian leadership as not cooperating with Russian efforts to mediate the conflict and as actively hampering the peace process. After the 1994 change in Moldova's government, compromises were made by both the Moldovan and the Russian governments to improve relations over the issue of Transnistria. The status of the 14th Army was scheduled to be reduced to that of an "operational group," General Lebed was to be released from his position, and the number of officers was to be

reduced. The two countries signed an agreement in October on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria within three years. Moldova accepted a linkage between withdrawing Russian troops and achieving a political solution to the conflict in Transnistria. Transnistrian observers, who had feared that the Yeltsin government would strike a deal without their consent, saw the agreement as a blow to their existence as a Russian entity and also to their illegal money-making activities and walked out of the negotiations. However, peace was not to come so easily to Transnistria. The October 1994 agreement was a "gentlemen's agreement" that was signed by the two prime ministers and was to be approved by the two governments, but would not be submitted to the countries parliaments. The Moldovan government approved the agreement immediately, but the Russian government did not, citing the need to submit it to the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, although it still had not submitted the agreement in mid-1995. According to General Lebed, three years was not enough time to withdraw the 14th Army and its materiel, although an American company working in Belarus offered to buy the 14th Army's ordnance and destroy it. Some members of Russia's Duma flatly refused to consider withdrawing the 14th Army. Under these circumstances, there was little hope for the agreement to be implemented. In mid-1995 General Lebed resigned in protest over the still-scheduled downgrading of the 14th Army.

Russian President Putin showed interest in giving a new impetus to Russia-Moldova relations and to reach a settlement of the Transdnestr issue. On 17 June 2000, Putin visited Moldova and affirmed Russia's acceptance of Moldova's territorial integrity, and the creation of a special state commission headed by former Russian Prime Minister Yevgenny Primakov to find a resolution to the Transdnestr problem. He also discussed the issue of gas payments with Moldovan president Petru Lucinschi. Putin However, it seems that Putin is also interested in re-exerting control over Moscow's former domain. Transnistria provides the excuse Russia needs to remain a military and political presence in the region, with the result that solving this long-standing problem is not likely to seem desirable to Russian policymakers in the foreseeable future. Moldova's energy and trade dependence on Russia provides the Russian government with convenient ways to press Moldova into line. Russia has repeatedly failed to fulfill its Istanbul commitments to withdraw munitions and troops from Transnistria, and therefore it has not yet obtained the adapted CFE (Conventional Armed Forces in Europe) treaty it wants. Russia needs a new approach to Moldova: one that recognizes that Russia has far more to gain from better relations with the EU and the United States than from playing Cold War cat-and-mouse games aimed at keeping a few hundred troops in Moldova or Georgia. Russia needs to set aside suspicion and work with its Western partners, cooperating to foster stable, prosperous economies in the former Soviet space, especially among the Western NIS.

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