

## Transnistria: A Black Hole?

EU seeks thaw in 'frozen conflict'

**The European Union needs to resolve the long-standing issue of Transnistria with a solid policy that clearly addresses the breakaway territory. That is the view expressed by Cristian Preda, a Romanian member of the European Parliament. He made his comments in January at a public hearing on the EU's role in "frozen conflicts" hosted by the parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs.**

"There is need for a firm hand, because this direction must be understood," Preda said in a story posted on the Romanian Financiarul.ro Web site. "The 'we will see about that later, let us be creative' attitude and other similar ones are an assertion of weakness, of the inability to formulate the problem. We cannot ignore this reality,

which is in our immediate neighborhood." The EU's high representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy must take a more active role in helping to thaw out this frozen conflict, Preda said.

Transnistria is a sliver of land bordering Ukraine and separated from the rest of Moldova by the Dniester



Moldovans protest the recount of disputed election ballots in April 2009. The country's domestic problems have kept the European Union from accepting the country as a full member.

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

River. Inhabitants consider themselves more ethnically Russian than Moldovan. The region broke away from Moldova when it split from the crumbling Soviet Union in 1990. A civil war followed and ended in 1992 with no real solution. The issue remained mostly dormant until fighting broke out in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, which sparked renewed interest in Transnistria's static situation. The EU and other European institutions have provided aid, expertise and peacekeepers to stabilize the region to prevent it from erupting into another conflict.

Transnistria is five percent of Moldova's land mass. It is slightly more prosperous than the rest of Moldova — which is mostly agrarian — because it has some steel manufacturing. Transnistria has its own currency, postage and military, holds elections, issues passports and behaves as an independent government. Transnistria uses the Cyrillic alphabet, while Moldova uses the Latin alphabet. In fact, Transnistria closed schools that did not comply with a government edict to use only the Cyrillic alphabet.

Apart from those issues, government corruption, black markets, drug smuggling, human trafficking and ethnic politics complicate matters in the territory.

Moldova wants a reincorporated Transnistria, and the United Nations and EU support that goal. Transnistria is a small buffer zone between Moldova and Ukraine, two countries that are increasing their ties with Europe and aspire to EU membership.

But the region's lawlessness deters Europe from allowing Moldova full membership in European institutions. Countries aspiring to become members of the EU must meet the standards outlined in the *acquis* — a legislative framework with 35 chapters, each with a large number of acts — as part of the negotiation process.

Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov, and those who profit from the situation, do not support reunification. Multilateral talks on the issue in April 2008 ended without results.

To further complicate matters, Russia has a stake in keeping the status quo. This conflict of interest was addressed in a December 2006 Central Asia-Caucasus Institute study titled "The Wider Black Sea Region: An Emerging Hub in European Security." In it, the authors contend that Russia continues to dominate the "negotiation processes and peacekeeping formats, increasingly identifiable as a party to these conflicts rather than a neutral mediator."

Transnistria is less than 100 kilometers from the EU's new borders, and Abkhazia and the North Caucasus are just across the Black Sea. The report states that continued instability in these conflict zones will affect Europe. "Should these conflicts erupt to large-scale violence — an eventuality whose likelihood is growing, not receding — Europe will be affected significantly." On the one hand, the report states, the flow of refugees would reach Europe, along with drugs, arms and migrants. On the other, since the EU is so close to the region, it would force the union to play a leading role in conflict resolution and peacekeeping. "Indeed, this is made

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— Benita Ferrero-Waldner  
EU external relations commissioner



A statue of Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin stands in front of a government building in Tiraspol, Transnistria, a breakaway region of Moldova that identifies more with Russia.

GETTY IMAGES

all the more pressing by Russia's partial role in the conflicts, making it unviable as a peacekeeper and honest broker. Building stability in this environment is hence an increasingly important priority for the EU. This, in turn, can only be achieved through the resolution of the conflicts of the region," the report stated.

Russia supports Transnistria without recognizing the state as independent. There were Russian forces and weapons in Transnistria before the fall of the Soviet Union. In the Agreement on the Adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, signed at the OSCE Summit in Istanbul in November 1999, Russia agreed to remove all its troops and arms from Moldova by December 2002. However, 1,200 unauthorized Russian peacekeepers remain in the territory, as well as 20,000 to 40,000 tons of Russian weapons

stored in Transnistria because of a lack of funds to ship the stores back to Russia.

In an April 2009 report titled "Synergies vs. Spheres of Influence in the Pan-European Space," the Centre for European Policy Studies, or CEPS, states that Russian support would help resolve frozen conflicts.

"The EU should push forcefully for the 5+2 format (Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, plus the EU and United States) to be the principal negotiating forum," the CEPS report stated.

A mediation process involving the OSCE, Russia and Ukraine has been ongoing since 1992, the EU Web site reported. "The key principles of EU support for the settlement process are: support to the OSCE mediation efforts aimed at establishing a viable and democratic Moldovan state; withdrawal of Russian ammunition without further delay; readiness for a greater EU involvement." The last 5+2 meeting took place in February 2006.

The mediation process continues with the EU and other mediators and observers "urging Moldova and Transnistria to resume the 5+2 talks."

Europe has been assisting Moldova with reforms since 1993, when the OSCE established a mission there to support efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. Since then, the mission has expanded and has as its main objective "to assist in negotiating a lasting political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, to consolidate the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova and to reach an understanding on a special status for the Transnistria region," the OSCE states.

The mission also covers a broad spectrum of human-dimension issues, including human and minority rights, democratization, media freedom and combating human trafficking. Since 1999, the mission's task has been to help with the removal and destruction of Russian ammunition and armament from the region and to ensure the transparency of the process, the OSCE stated.

OSCE and EU advisors are at the borders with Ukraine and Moldova. The EU Border Assistance Mission has had 200 of its agents on the borders since 2005. Additionally, the



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, left, greets Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov at a castle outside of Moscow in March 2009. Medvedev hosted trilateral talks with Smirnov and then-Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin to try to settle the ongoing Transnistrian conflict.



EUROPEAN PRESS AGENCY

European Neighborhood Policy program sends money and personnel to the region to help build political relationships and assist in economic integration to the rest of Europe.

Transnistria is what some diplomats call a “black hole,” Stephen Castle wrote in the British newspaper *The Independent*. The territory is suspected of organized drug and human trafficking and of supplying mortar tubes, small arms and sniper rifles to Africa, Abkhazia and Chechnya, he stated.

“In December 2003, reports surfaced that Alazan [nuclear] rockets ... had disappeared from the sprawling weapons stockpiles of [Transnistria],” said Alex Kliment, a Eurasian analyst who has written for Britain’s *Financial Times* newspaper. He called Transnistria “a major source of legal and illegal weapons for conflict zones in the former Communist bloc and the Middle East and a key transit point for narcotics.”

“The [border] mission is important for the overall situation for Europe and the world. There is said to be smuggling of drugs, trafficking of people and arms, possibly nuclear material,” said Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU’s external relations commissioner.

All the statements and posturing over the small region do little to alleviate the problems of the people living in Moldova and Transnistria. Moldovans have sought work abroad, but with the economic downturn, are less able to send enough money home to support their families. This may contribute to forced labor and human trafficking problems. More than 25,000 Moldovans were likely victims of trafficking for forced labor in 2008, according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report. “Moldovan women are trafficked primarily to Turkey, Rus-

sia, Cyprus and United Arab Emirates and to other Middle Eastern and Western European countries. Men are trafficked to work in the construction, agriculture and service sectors of Russia and other countries,” the report stated. “There have also been some cases of children trafficked for begging to neighboring countries. Girls and young women are trafficked within the country from rural areas to Chisinau, and there is evidence that men from neighboring countries are trafficked to Moldova for forced labor.”

Ferrero-Waldner told the Moldovan parliament in November 2009 that the country “faces formidable challenges on many fronts — economic, financial, social and political. But it does not stand alone, as long as it acts in its own interest through continued, determined efforts to stabilize its internal situation. I have every confidence that you will tackle the difficult reforms ahead, because you know they are crucial to your future success.

“Let me share my vision with you,” she said. “I see a prosperous Moldova, its society reconciled and its territorial integrity restored. Europe’s history of reconciliation and unification in the last half century has a lesson to offer. It has brought prosperity and stability to us, and in sharing our experience with you, we hope to see you fully reap the same benefits.”

To reach the goal of full EU inclusion, Moldovans are making necessary changes, cooperating with EU institutions and working toward the future. Transnistria and its related issues are a stumbling block. But the international community’s ongoing willingness and ability to mediate and provide resources for regional and local development help to stabilize the region until an agreement can be reached. □