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Who's Next? The Russian Initiative in Moldova

By William H. Hill

After Russia's use of overwhelming force in Georgia, it is reasonable to worry that Moscow will mount similar military threats to other neighboring states and former Soviet republics. However, the next major Russian initiative in the "post-Soviet space" is likely to come in the miniscule Republic of Moldova and to cast Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in the role of sage peacemaker in an internal territorial dispute left over from the days of the Soviet collapse.

A small nation of some four million, predominantly Romanian-speaking people wedged between Ukraine and Romania, Moldova sought and won its independence as the USSR disintegrated in the late 1980s. A group of primarily Slavic Soviet political figures and enterprise managers on the east, or left bank of the Nistru (Dniestr) River in the Soviet Republic of Moldavia resisted Moldovan attempts to leave the USSR and proclaimed their small sliver of land a separate, Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. In 1992 Moldova and Transnistria fought a brief, bitter war which the separatists won, with the assistance of a contingent of locally-based Russian troops left over from the Soviet Red Army.

During the conflict in 1992 Moldova appealed for assistance to the UN, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (now the OSCE), and various western nations. Only Moscow heeded Chisinau's call for mediation and brokered a cease fire that left Russian troops in place as peacekeepers. Negotiations for a political settlement have dragged on since that time between Chisinau and Tiraspol (the separatist "capital"), with Russia, and then the OSCE and Ukraine serving as mediators. In 2005 the U.S. and European Union formally joined the negotiations as observers.

With a population roughly the size of Luxembourg, Transnistria's prospects as an independent state were always sketchy. The region supported itself partially through a heavy industrial base left over from Soviet times that enjoyed surprising success in penetrating the EU and North American markets. The left bank enclave received subsidies from Moscow, especially in the form of low-cost natural gas, running at least \$30 million per year. Finally, the region augmented its income and solidified its political position mostly by serving as a haven for smuggling and tax evasion, not only for its own residents, but also politicians and businessmen from all of the neighboring states. "A giant off-shore" is how one Moldovan political figure characterized the region to me.

No state, including Russia, has recognized Transnistria's independence. Moscow's stated policy has always been that Transnistria is a part of Moldova, and the two sides should agree voluntarily on peaceful unification of the country, with a special status for the left bank. However, backed by influential circles in Moscow, Transnistrian leaders have been reluctant to give up their lucrative *status quo* for an uncertain future. Moldova, by most statistical measurements the poorest country in Europe, has few material incentives to win over its breakaway region. Instead Chisinau has generally pinned its hopes on

intervention by a large outside power – Russia, the U.S. or the EU – to coerce Tiraspol into the Republic of Moldova.

In 2003 Moldova and Transnistria almost reached a political settlement of their conflict. The proposed agreement, the so-called “Kozak Memorandum,” brokered by Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration Dmitri Kozak, fell apart at the last minute, partially because of western objections to a provision calling for a long-term Russian troop presence. With Kozak as point man in 2003, Moscow bypassed the existing negotiating mechanism with its broader international participation. Swayed by promises that Moscow would overcome Transnistrian resistance and unite his country, Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin went along with the gambit until the last minute. With angry crowds gathering outside the Presidential Building and frantic calls from western leaders, only at the last moment did Voronin call Russian President Putin and tell him not to come to Chisinau to sign the Memorandum. Putin has reportedly nursed a grudge ever since.

Five years later events are in the works that may repeat this scenario. The leader of the only post-Soviet communist party in power, Voronin turned toward the West after 2003 and declared a policy of European integration. Russia retaliated by banning imports of Moldovan meat, fruit, and wine, placing grave economic pressure on the small country. Moscow also frustrated Moldovan attempts to use Ukrainian, EU, and U.S. support to press Transnistria into a political settlement.

In late 2006, while keeping western negotiators informed of his course of action, President Voronin began a process of repairing his relations with Russia and seeking Moscow’s cooperation in negotiating a settlement with Transnistria. There have been some modest gains from this process, but overall the results are disappointing for Chisinau.

As events in Kosovo and Georgia developed in 2008, Moldova sought to portray itself as more moderate and reasonable than Tbilisi. Moldova did not recognize Kosovo, declared itself a neutral country (already guaranteed in the 1994 Moldovan constitution), and ostentatiously announced that it had no need to seek NATO membership. Chisinau was rewarded in March, when after theatrical hearings the Russian Parliament advocated recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but recommended only a special status for Transnistria within Moldova. On August 25, one day before he announced Moscow’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian President Medvedev met with Voronin in Sochi and reaffirmed Russia’s dedication to seeking a peaceful resolution of the Transnistrian conflict.

The formal Transnistrian political settlement negotiation process goes on, although there has not been an official round of negotiations since February 28, 2006, when Moldovan negotiators walked out in protest of Transnistrian provocations. The mediators and observers in the so called “5+2” process – Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, the EU, and the US – continue to call regularly for resumption of the negotiations. The latest meeting of mediators and observers took place September 8 at OSCE Headquarters in Vienna, ending with a hopeful statement.

Meanwhile Moscow has intensified contacts with Voronin and Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov brokered a one on one meeting between Voronin and Smirnov in April; the two had not met in person since August 2001. Shortly after his Sochi conversation with Voronin, Medvedev also received Smirnov. The blustery Transnistrian leader, whose line is usually that he has nothing to discuss with Voronin except bilateral relations between their two states, announced meekly after his talk with Medvedev that the two sides needed to meet to bring their positions closer together.

Expectations in Moldova and Russia are now widespread that Voronin and Smirnov will get together once more in the near future, to be followed by a meeting of both of them with Medvedev. Lavrov has floated a trial balloon in the Russian press that revival of the Kozak Memorandum might be a good basis for reaching a solution in Moldova.

President Voronin is under great pressure to reach agreement now to unite his country, or give up on what has been the highest priority of his two terms in office. National elections must be held in Moldova no later than spring 2009, when Voronin's second and final term as president runs out. The sitting Moldovan Parliament must approve any settlement at least six months before the end of its term, so there are only a few weeks left before a Transnistrian settlement becomes impossible for the remainder of this legislative term. For Voronin, who was born and raised on the left bank during Soviet times, and who desperately wishes to see his country united, the pressure must be extreme.

Moscow will not go after Moldova with military means. The small contingent of Russian troops now stationed in the Transnistrian region (around 1400) is probably no match for either the Moldovan or the Transnistrian armed forces. Any Russian reinforcements need to come through or over Ukraine, not a realistic possibility in current political circumstances. Including their armies, special forces, militia, interior ministry and security troops, both Chisinau and Tiraspol can muster between 13000 to 18000 men under arms. This is enough to deter each other (and the Russians), but probably not enough to take and hold significant territory. In addition – as opposed to Georgia – no one on either side in Moldova wants to fight. The quarrel along the Nistru is between political and economic elites, and not inimical communities, ethnic, or national groups.

Russia has already established a public posture on Moldova that implies clearly: "Here is how we deal with friendly countries that don't join NATO and don't use violence to settle separatist conflicts." Moldova has not yet received its reward from Russia, but Moscow is stringing Chisinau along with the hope of a pot of gold at the end of this rainbow. The crucial time will come, much as it did in 2003, if and when a solution presented to Chisinau in its separate 2008 track with Moscow turns out to have a crucial catch in it, such as a bilateral agreement with significant obligations, perhaps a long-term troop presence.

In 2003 western negotiators (I was one of them) repeatedly argued with our Russian counterparts that negotiating a political settlement in Moldova was not and should not be a zero sum game. We tried to convince Moscow that there were win-win solutions that protected and furthered the fundamental security interests of all parties in the region, indeed in the Euro-Atlantic area. Obviously we did not succeed; Russia apparently considered primacy in the region more important than cooperation. In 2008, with the strategic security environment much worse, Russia seems bent on pursuing the same myopic path.

With respect to Moldova in 2008, the absence of a solution to the Transnistrian question will be better than a bad solution that cripples the country's chances for reform and integration into Europe as a whole. For any settlement to succeed, Russia must be a part – but so must the rest of Europe and the North Atlantic community, i.e. the EU and US. Commenting on US actions elsewhere in the world, the Russians are fond of proclaiming that unilateral solutions do not work. The conflict areas on the periphery of the former USSR like Moldova are places where they ought to listen to their own advice.

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