

Unrecognized Republic, Recognizable Consequences

Russian Troops in “Frozen” Transnistria

Benjamin Potter

Abstract: Since 1993 the Republic of Moldova has been challenged by separatist pressure from the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), known as Transnistria, a parastate within its borders.¹ An uneasy status quo has developed. Russian troops stationed illegally inside Transnistria embolden the dissident government to resist meaningful reintegration with Moldova. Current Moldovan leadership seeks membership within the European Union (EU) and have again called for the removal of unauthorized Russian troops. Coverage of the situation in Transnistria tends to focus on the policies of Russia, the United Nations (UN), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as sole deciding factors, overshadowing the significance of local culture in determining the future stability of the region. An examination of Transnistrian local culture, including an assessment of narratives that have surfaced across local and regional media, offers insights on the pressures surrounding the removal of Russian troops and foreshadows hurdles to reintegration with the Republic of Moldova. **Keywords:** Transnistria, Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, PMR, Pridnestrovie, Tiraspol, Moldova, Russia

Introduction

On 1 September 2020, a crowd gathered in the central square of Tiraspol, the second-largest city in Moldova, celebrating 30 years of independence. Above the street hung red and green banners boasting a

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bold white “30.” Nearby, a group posed with a massive sign depicting a white dove over a stylized number 30. Some attendees even wore commemorative “30 years” T-shirts.² The day was filled with an elaborate military parade, a festival of performances and activities, and a night of fireworks.³ Revelers were not, however, celebrating Moldova’s own independence day; they were gathered to recognize a country that does not exist. The day represents the 30th anniversary of the formation of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), a parastate within Moldovan borders better known to the world as Transnistria.⁴ In 1990, residents of the easternmost portion of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic declared and sought international recognition as a new republic. Territorial claims were ambiguous following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and war broke out in 1992 between the new Republic of Moldova and Transnistria in cities along the Dniester River. Shooting ended when portions of the Russian 14th Army mobilized in support of Transnistria. Through intimidation and overwhelming military superiority, Russia brokered a cease-fire. Owing to the support and presence of the Russian military, the PMR has been able to maintain *de facto* autonomy for the past three decades while continuing to exist within internationally recognized Moldovan borders.⁵

Geographically, Transnistria is a narrow strip of land between Moldova and Ukraine. Politically, this sliver of land has the potential to play an outsized role in determining regional stability and the legitimacy of international border law. With only half a million residents (475,000 in 2015), Transnistria lacks the size to register on most Western intelligence and policy communities, rarely garnering more than cursory remarks.⁶ Despite its small population, however, the circumstances surrounding its creation and continued existence position it to become a focal point for relationships between Russia and the EU, NATO, and the UN.⁷

As an unrecognized parastate, Transnistria maintains many expected characteristics of a state, including a centralized government, a separate monetary system, and its own standing military. Transnistria strives to maintain autonomy and refutes any Moldovan authority within its borders, meaning laws are made and administered by a *de facto* government with no international legitimacy. The nature of this contested zone provides some interesting insights to Western policy makers concerning Russian strategy in the post-Soviet space, and the limits of European coalitions such as NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to project influence outside their own borders.

Today, approximately 1,500 Russian soldiers are stationed in Moldova and fall under two units: The Peacekeeping Force (MC) and Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF).⁸ The smaller contingent, the Peacekeeping Force, exists under a 1992 agreement and is tasked with patrolling the security zone established between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova.⁹ The larger OGRF is stationed without any agreement from Moldova and are primarily tasked with monitoring a massive depot that houses approximately 20,000 tons of muni-

tions. Located in the small village of Colbasna, it served as a storage depot for the Western Military District of the Soviet Union and accumulated substantial stores of munitions in the 1990s as Soviet troops were removed from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.¹⁰ This stockpile worries Moldovan officials and residents alike for the potential to be used in either future military or terrorist action. Decades-old explosives further exceed their shelf life and become increasingly less stable, posing a threat to the environment as harmful chemicals seep into the soil and water, and increase the risk of a catastrophic explosion comparable in size to atomic detonation.¹¹

The OGRF is criticized for frequently conducting unauthorized training exercises in the security zone in clear violation of standing agreements.¹² Joint exercises between the OGRF and Transnistria are meant to bolster the Transnistrian military, an approximately 5,000-strong force, with nearly 15,000 in reserves, equipped and trained exclusively by Russia.¹³ Since 2015, Russian soldiers are refused entry to travel through Ukraine, and Moldova does not allow OGRF soldiers to fly into the Chisinau International Airport.¹⁴ These transportation complications lead the soldiers stationed in Transnistria stay for long periods, sometimes years rotating between the OGRF and the internationally approved MC peacekeeping force, often multiple times during their service.¹⁵ This arrangement is unorthodox for peacekeeping forces, as the soldiers meant to be protecting and cooperating with Moldovan military observers in the MC may have been training to subvert and fight them with the OGRF only months prior.¹⁶

The official position of Moldova is for the removal of the unauthorized Russian OGRF, joint removal or disposal of armaments at Colbasna, and for the implementation of a multinational peacekeeping force administered by the OSCE.¹⁷ These demands, the reasons they have not been met, and the potential reactions of Transnistria should external powers attempt to enforce them, are the subjects to which the article will now turn.

Why Is Transnistria Important to the West?

The presence of Russian troops in Transnistria provides Moscow with an instrument to exert pressure on the sovereign state of Moldova and a means to prevent the expansion of the European Union and NATO within the perceived Russian sphere of influence. Russian actions flout the authority of international law and represent a destabilizing force in the region.¹⁸ In addition, the frozen conflict plagues Moldova, weakening its statehood, preventing border control, and costing, by some estimates, billions of dollars in lost economic development.

Requests and treaties, even those signed by the Kremlin, have been unable to remove Russian troops or armaments, which now stand as a hurdle to Moldova's Western ambitions.¹⁹ Without border and territorial control, Moldova cannot fully join the EU or NATO.²⁰ A score of UN states have voiced their support of Moldovan territorial integrity, and the UN General Assembly has adopted measures calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops.²¹

Despite external support for Moldova's positions, the Russian troop count has stayed mostly consistent and Moscow has not indicated any serious intent for changing it.

Though Transnistria is a perennial topic for intelligence analysts, most available analysis of the situation tends to focus on the policies of Russia, the UN, and NATO as the primary deciding factors, entirely overlooking the significance of local culture in forecasting how this frozen conflict will eventually play out. Research conducted using the Cultural Topography Framework as a structured analytic tool identifies components within Transnistrian culture that are likely to shape its behavior in response to any external efforts to remove Russian forces from the region.²² Armed with these insights, the international community is better positioned to craft effective negotiating strategies and avoid cultural trip wires that are likely to detonate into conflict.

Transnistria is not the only Kremlin-backed parastate in Russia's near abroad. Under the guise of peacekeeping or foreign aid, Russia stations military contingents around its borders to rouse local aggression and subtly sanction separatist hostility to Western-leaning governments. Should the need for violence arise, these contingents provide a bridge to illicitly support mercenary groups at arm's length, preserving deniability. Comparable parastates include Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in Ukraine.²³ In each of these cases, Russian military presence has led to a latent tension that challenges the sovereignty of the host state and the ability of the international community to intervene. When activated, combat-ready troops in hot spots can quickly destabilize a region in Russia's favor. Over the past several years, Russian president Vladimir Putin has demonstrated Russia's willingness and capability to activate combat troops or mobilize local insurgent groups in these parastate regions. Continued fighting in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine is a frightening case in point, demonstrating how even low-intensity fighting can bring about prolonged international crisis.

Why Now?: The Growing Divide between Transnistria and Moldova

After 30 years of frozen conflict and complacency by the international community, regional trends are bringing Transnistria back into the spotlight. The dynamic of Eastern Europe is shifting as more territories adjust their economic, political, and cultural leanings from Russia to the West. Former Soviet republics have joined NATO and the EU and are diminishing their cultural and linguistic ties to Russia, threatening what Russia perceives as a necessary buffer zone of weak satellite states between its borders and Europe. Transnistria's neighbors in particular, Ukraine and Moldova, seek further distance from the Russian sphere of influence, made clear by two heavily EU-leaning leaders, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine and President Maia Sandu of Moldova. While Russia's soft power (language, culture, and economic ties) among the post-

Soviet republics decreases, motivation for the Kremlin to keep a tangible military presence increases.

While Transnistria's neighbors embrace the West, the pivotal dilemma of Russian presence grows more consequential for regional stability. In 2018, Moldova's foreign minister introduced a resolution to the UN on the "complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova."²⁴ This resolution was to remind the body that Russia had committed to this move 20 years prior (for a smooth process similar to the removal of troops from the Baltic states).²⁵ Since then, anti-Russian sentiment has only strengthened among Moldovan voters. The Moldovan Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), which controls the presidency and, as of 2021, a majority of the Moldovan parliament, has repeatedly emphasized a platform of distancing Moldova from Russia economically, linguistically, and politically.²⁶

Historical and Cultural Roots of Transnistria

The fundamental divide between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova begins in the name.²⁷ As mentioned, the *-nistr-* portion of the word derives from the Dniester River whose significance as a cultural and historic border cannot be overstated. For much of the past millennium, the Dniester River marked the eastern border of the Principality of Moldavia, a Latin-based language speaking civilization from which Moldova and Romania derive much of their heritage.²⁸ This was at its peak under the Moldovan hero Stefan cel Mare, when the territory of Moldavia included modern-day Romania to the west, and nearly all of modern-day Moldova extending east to the Dniester River.²⁹ Today, the Republic of Moldova commemorates Stefan cel Mare with statues, street names, and by printing his likeness on every piece of Moldovan currency. The easternmost region of Moldavia, named Bessarabia (roughly the territory of the modern Moldovan state) would become severed from its roots and grafted into Russian influence.³⁰

Across the river was the Slavic world. Though the territory of the left bank changed hands several times between the Crimean Khanate, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Poland, and the Russian Empire, vitally it was always contained in administrative regions with other portions of Ukraine. Thus, the trade, language, and cultural ties of the residents of the left bank were akin to Ukraine. Today, physical manifestations of Transnistrian culture commemorate the cultural hero Russian field marshal Aleksandr V. Suvorov, who founded the capital city, Tiraspol, and established Transnistria as the westernmost frontier of the Russian empire.³¹ The central square that hosted the independence day parades is named Suvorov Square, in the center of which stands a massive statue of Suvorov. The first versions of the Transnistrian Ruble had the face of Suvorov printed on every note. In the 2007 series of banknotes, Suvorov is only on six of the eight notes as the additional notes added two more cultural heroes: Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, after whom the local university is also named, and Moldavian statesman Dmitry Kantemir, who joined Russia to

fight the Turks, then lost and was exiled to Russia where he became a prince.³² Though Transnistria's cultural heroes represent the republic's three major ethnic groups, all are celebrated for emphasizing the region's connection to the Russian world and Russian heritage.

The two banks of the Dniester developed independently, not coming under common rule until 1812 when the Moldavian Bessarabia region was annexed to the Russian Empire. Despite annexation, the province maintained strong cultural ties to Romania and quickly moved to reunite with Romania following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918. Thus, in 1924 when the Bolsheviks wanted to strengthen support in Bessarabia, the region of Transnistria was deliberately carved out of Ukraine to become the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). It served as a bridgehead for propaganda and expansion into Romania in a ploy to engender Communist support to eventually reclaim all of Bessarabia under Soviet rule. The opposite banks of the Dniester did not become a common administrative district until 1940 when the German-Soviet nonaggression pact ceded Bessarabia to the Soviet Union. At that point, the Moldovan ASSR (approximately modern-day Transnistria) was combined with Bessarabia and the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) was formed.³³ The MSSR remained a part of the Soviet Union for 50 years, and the industrialized Transnistrian region was known especially for its industrial development and high standard of living, while the Bessarabia region remained more rural.³⁴

Tensions arose during the final years of the Soviet Union. In 1989, the MSSR was split by a controversial language law: the Moldovan language written in Latin script would be the sole official state language.³⁵ This law upset the majority Russophone population of Transnistria, who viewed it as discriminatory. It upset the status of the Russian language, as well as reasserted Moldovan-Romanian linguistic identity. In Transnistria, the law led to strikes, civil unrest, and fueled rumors that the Supreme Soviet of the MSSR intended to become part of Romania. From June 1990 to December 1991, the Moldovan Parliament declared the independence of Moldova from the Soviet Union and declared that the initial formation of the MSSR was illegal. From September 1990 to August 1991, the residents of the Transnistria region declared their own independence as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic shortly thereafter, abandoning socialism to become the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR).

Authority and borders were still ambiguous in 1992 when Moldova and Transnistria both attempted to assert control of the region surrounding the Dniester. The exact incident that sparked violence is, of course, a point of contention.³⁶ Transnistrians hold that violence began with Moldavian police, and Moldova holds that violence began with Transnistrian protesters. Regardless, within months, military conflict in urban areas had led to countless civilian casualties and property destruction. In the height of the fighting, Alexander Lebed, in command of the Russian 14th Army, joined the PMR combatants, fighting alongside and equipping them.³⁷ The vast military superiority of the

Russian military led the new Moldovan Republic to quickly capitulate. Overnight, General Lebed became Transnistria's modern cultural hero; to this day, the Transnistrian military academy is named in his honor.³⁸ A peace deal was brokered, and an uneasy status quo has since been maintained.

Cultural Topography

Cultural analysis reveals Transnistrians are not merely an exclave trying to become Russia, but a republic that considers itself an ally of Russia. Transnistrian culture and its de facto autonomy from Moldova is guaranteed by the constant presence of Russian troops. Thus, the demands for removal of said troops are deeply unpopular. Transnistria's paranoid foreign policy is quick to perceive actions as pro-Western provocation and equate any attempt to alter the status quo as Moldovan aggression, whether or not this is the case. Transnistrian rhetoric treats Moldova, Romania, the United States, and Western Europe as one big conspiring group of aggressors with Russia as its sole guarantor. Should external powers attempt to enforce Russian troop removal, it would be perceived as a threat to Transnistrian sovereignty and way of life. Should any actor attempt to intervene, even in Transnistria's favor, their authority is unlikely to be recognized. Moldova's demands to replace Russian peacekeepers with OSCE peacekeepers have not been met. Hopes of soft reintegration are similarly unrealized, as economic and linguistic preferences across the river differ wildly. Though linguistic diversity is proclaimed, daily life is heavily Russified and the Russian language is not diminishing as it is in Moldova or Ukraine. Reintegration with Moldova would reignite the tensions of the 1990s, as a dominantly Russian-speaking population is presented with a Romanian-speaking society. Beyond the removal of Russian troops, the cultural hurdles of reintegration are significant to Transnistrians and Moldovans alike.

Transnistrian Identity: The Russkiy Mir

Knowing the historical context, it should come as no surprise that the most pronounced cultural factor at play is the Transnistrian identity as part of the "Russkiy Mir" or Russian World, with strong historical precedent. Transnistria does not aspire to become Russia; it considers itself already inseparably tied to Russia and merely seeking recognition. According to a 2017 law, the Russian flag is flown with the PMR flag in all official settings to emphasize their partnership (or dependence).³⁹ As mentioned, most Western literature on the region mistakenly calls Transnistria "separatist," belying the fact that Transnistrians view themselves and their land as being and having been constantly under Russian influence, and the rest of Moldova as separatists abandoning that world. Transnistrian as a Russian identity is much deeper than a linguistic or even ethnic exclave.⁴⁰ Transnistrians consider themselves and their land a component of the Slavic world as legitimate as Moscow or St. Petersburg.

Transnistria has also been characterized by the West as a holdout of the Soviet Union—a group of nostalgists unwilling to integrate with the world. While

it is true that, in contrast to its neighbors, Transnistria embraces its identity as a post-Soviet country, the Cultural Topography Framework encourages a look below the surface of a cultural trait to test its robustness. The wave of de-Communization that swept Ukraine and Moldova, demolishing statues of Lenin and removing the hammer and sickle from public use did not reach Transnistria, and these Soviet-era symbols are still displayed proudly. The official flag and crest are identical to those of the former MSSR, featuring a bold sickle and hammer. Political structures such as the “High Soviet” have maintained their names from the time of Communist rule. However, it is critical to realize that to Transnistrians, these symbols have detached from Soviet political meaning and now represent only worker solidarity and national pride. Expanded official use of Soviet symbology ended and is used only in preestablished limited capacity in favor of flag colors without the sickle and hammer as seen on military uniforms, license plates, export products, banknotes and coinage, as well as adorning official buildings. The fact that Soviet symbols are not perpetuated in new forms corroborates statements from Pridnestrovian officials insisting the sickle and hammer has lost its Communist, totalitarian meaning and is valued solely as a portion of heritage.

This difference in cultural perception already led to conflict in 2012, when Moldova outlawed the display of the sickle and hammer. This was met with outrage in Transnistria, calling it “thoughtless” and an “absurd situation,” saying “if [Moldova] is negotiating with us while we act under our flag, and at the same time considers this flag to be criminal . . . according to this logic, should our President also be fined?”⁴¹ Transnistrians also considered this move disrespectful of veterans of the Soviet Army, who could no longer, by those laws, wear their awards. Admittedly, this cultural difference is difficult to reconcile as Moldovans view their time in the Soviet Union as foreign occupation and annexation. In contrast, an entire section of Transnistria’s 30th-anniversary parade was dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, complete with iconic Russian tanks rolling down Suvorov Street, followed by graduates of the Russian-funded Lebed military academy wearing reproduction uniforms of the Red Army.⁴²

Today’s problems, however, concern today’s soldiers. Transnistrian foreign minister Vitaly Ignatyev echoed an oft-repeated sentiment, “It is very important that Russia also accepts Transnistria as a part of the Russian world.”⁴³ In the context of removing Russian troops, Transnistria’s cultural identity serves to halt their removal despite external criticism.⁴⁴ Strong Russian identity legitimizes and even normalizes the perpetual presence of Russian troops and strong cooperation, even reliance on, the Russian government. The president of Transnistria called the question of removing Russian forces an “artificial problem,” indicating that not only is it not seen as a problem, but rather as the preferable arrangement.⁴⁵ Should these Russian troops be replaced with a multinational OSCE force, the OSCE would be seen as a foreign occupying force, and potentially an enemy to the PMR.

Transnistria Perceptual Lens: Russian Guarantor, Moldovan Aggressor

The thing is that in fact the peacekeeping mission on the banks of the Dniester began not 27 years ago, as is commonly believed, but still from 1792, when Generalissimo Suvorov founded the city of Tiraspol. And since then, since 1792, a Russian soldier has been protecting peace and quiet on the banks of the Dniester. Therefore, today's peacemakers have inherited the simply glorious mission of their great-grandfathers, great-great-grandfathers, grandfathers and fathers. And they continue this mission.

~ President Vadim Krasnoselsky, PMR⁴⁶

Cultural self-identification with Russia and the derivative distrust of Moldova has led to an enormous barrier in cooperation. Simply put, Transnistria perceives Russian military presence as the single guarantor of security for their way of life and regard Moldova (whether represented by peacekeepers in the Joint Control Commission [JCC], politicians in peace discussions, or demonstrators advocating for change) as agitators with ulterior political motives. While the world views Moldova as having full sovereignty within its borders, Transnistria views themselves as Moldova's peer—not its territorial ward. Therefore, unilateral actions by the Moldovan government are considered by Transnistria as an escalation of conflict.⁴⁷ Serious distrust of Moldova hinders cooperation between the three members of the JCC tasked with controlling the Transnistrian security zone.

In late June and early July 2021, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) a radical, right-wing nationalist group participating in Moldovan elections, organized demonstrations on the Pridnestrovian border.⁴⁸ The AUR is far from a mainstream party (receiving less than half a percent of the parliamentary vote) and presently does not have widespread support in Moldova or endorsement by the Moldovan government. As such, the demonstrations received little coverage in the Moldovan press. However, to Transnistria it was another story entirely; there, the press asserted that the AUR were provocateurs carefully planned and sent specially by Moldovan authorities.⁴⁹ In Transnistrian media it was framed as an instance of Moldovan agitators specially and deliberately harassing peaceful Transnistrians, who were, thankfully, protected by Russian forces.⁵⁰

The following quote from the United Council of Labor Collectives of Transnistria summarizes the response:

We draw the attention of international observers to the fact that Moldova once again demonstrates the absence of peaceful cooperation and peaceful coexistence with Transnistria in its plans. The authorities of the Republic of Moldova com-

mitted a deliberately planned provocative act . . . we see no other alternative to a peaceful existence, except for the [Russian] Peacekeeping Mission in the Security Zone. We consider unacceptable any provocative acts on the part of pro-Western structures aimed at fighting the Russian world.⁵¹

Commenting on a brief confrontation between the demonstrators and border guards, Transnistria's official news source made sure to note that "the Unionists provoked the PMR border guards and tried to overpower one. Russian peacekeepers intervened in the scuffle, who stood between the sides to extinguish the conflict."⁵²

To Transnistrians, it is unimportant that these demonstrations were performed by a fringe radical group, as their perceptual lens is tinted to see any action from across the river as pro-Western provocation, which justifies Russian peacekeepers to protect their sovereignty. The Transnistrian government actively skews events to promote this perception. In the last 18 months, news source *Novosti PMR* published 28 articles in the security column, most often based on statements by the president or secretary of defense.⁵³ Thirteen explicitly advocated for sustained or expanded Russian involvement in the security zone and PMR, while 20 blame Moldova for uncooperative or aggressive barriers in the JCC.⁵⁴

The distrust Transnistria has for Moldova is severely underplayed by the multinational organizations overseeing the ongoing negotiations. For instance, after a visit to Moldova this January, the chairman of the OSCE reported the positive measures being made, saying he was pleased by the results. While the very same week, commenting on the same events, Transnistrian secretary of defense and JCC cochair Oleg Belyakov reported in an interview that the process had not made any positive measures and had been stalled and politicized by Moldova.⁵⁵

Support for Transnistrian sovereignty and support for Russian troops are culturally inextricable. Transnistrian patriotism implies support for Russian troops at home and abroad. Defense Secretary Belyakov is very vocal and recorded in several interviews enthusiastically crediting Russian troops for peace, naming Russia a "guarantor of safety" and advocating for Russian involvement in other conflicts.⁵⁶ Further indicators of pro-Russian military sentiments in Transnistria are prevalent. Internal celebrations reflect the perception of Russian troops as defenders, including monuments, anniversaries, and the national holiday "Day of the Russian Peacekeeper."⁵⁷ This holiday celebrates what Transnistria's internal newspaper referred to as "what is recognized as the most successful peacekeeping operation in history."⁵⁸ Even the language choice in internal media reflects this cultural factor, as the Russian military is referred to as peacekeepers or defenders rather than troops or soldiers, words in Russian that more directly connote war.⁵⁹ To Transnistrians, giving up Russian protection

signifies abandoning a major portion of culture. It is presently unlikely any other peacekeeping force will be seen by the residents as credible and unbiased, but rather as another aggression from the Moldovan side.

Transnistrian Norms: Russian Language Funnel to Russian Work/Study to Cultural Isolation

Language is doubtless a pronounced cultural factor in Transnistria. Recall the first fight for independence in the early 1990s was in part reactionary to the adoption of Moldovan in place of Russian as Moldova's official language after the fall of the Soviet Union. The dominance of the Russian language in Transnistria orients the culture eastward and converges with migration trends to limit the opportunities of young professionals. The Transnistrian government boasts its multilingual standards, recognizing three official government languages: Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan (although an obsolete modification of the Romanian language in a Cyrillic alphabet, a language that is only preserved in PMR). Yet, it is undeniable that Russian is the primary language for official and social exchange.

In contrast with the rest of Moldova, usage of the Russian language in Transnistria continues to increase due to its role as the main educational language. A study of elementary schools found that 83 percent of children attend Russian-only schools, while only 72 percent of the population report speaking Russian as their native tongue. Another 7 percent attend combined Russian and Moldovan or Ukrainian schools.⁶⁰ Higher education follows the same trend and is heavily Russophone: a faculty analysis of Transnistria's largest university shows a staggering preference for Russian internet services. Only 3.2 percent of the listed professors used a Gmail account, while the remainder overwhelmingly favored Yandex.ru and mail.ru—the search engine market share in Moldova is 95 percent Google, 3.4 percent Yandex, and 0.58 percent mail.ru, the polar opposite.⁶¹

Young adults experiencing economic stagnation from Transnistria are following Moldovan trends to seek work abroad, a demographic decline that some call “existential.”⁶² Demographic decline in Moldova is the worst of any European country.⁶³ Romanian-speaking Moldovans often travel to work in Europe, speaking Romanian or picking up a similar Romance language. For the Russian-speaking Transnistrians, opportunities are more limited and lead a substantial number to work inside the Russian Federation. The continued cycle of Transnistrians being educated in Russia, working in Russia, and then returning to Transnistria on a Russian pension, weakens the ties of the residents across the Dniester's two banks.

While Russian is still common in Moldova, the prestige it once held is lost. Government functions are moving away from Russian and implementing Romanian as the younger population comes of age. This cultural factor is critical to keep in mind in anticipating how Transnistrians would react should they be forced to reassimilate with Moldova.

Transnistrian Values: Autonomy over Economy

Economic reintegration is a hallmark of soft conflict resolution, and such economic indicators have been a part of goal setting in the OSCE and Moldova. In the past, Moldovan politicians have focused on strengthening economic motivations for Transnistria to reintegrate, hoping that economic development and opportunities would draw Transnistrians into Moldova, such that a soft solution for reassimilation would naturally be reached. This assumption is misguided, as the economic culture within Transnistria tells a different story: current culture indicates that Transnistrian autonomy from Moldova is more valued. Transnistrians immensely value their autonomy and will cling to it even if it means weaker economics and fewer opportunities.

During the time of the Soviet Union, Transnistria enjoyed a standard of living twice the average of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic and produced 40 percent of the republic's gross domestic product. Economic prosperity did not last long after declaring independence and by the mid-1990s Transnistria was faring poorly.⁶⁴ Today, average incomes in Tiraspol are nearly 40 percent lower than the Moldovan average. Not only has average income decreased, but internal Transnistrian bureaucracy makes it difficult for residents to do business outside its narrow borders.

Transnistria insists on using its internal currency, in which it differs from comparable parastates. South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and the Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk use the Russian Ruble. Nagorno-Karabakh issues an internal currency, but its use is very limited in preference for the local Armenian Dram. Transnistria's Pridnestrovian Ruble lacks international recognition, meaning external financial transactions of any size must be made at Moldovan or Russian banks. Pragmatically, it is an inconvenience, requiring resources to print, eliminating digital or credit card payments, and making business more difficult; yet, it signals a desire for isolation from external economies and a strong claim to autonomy that Transnistrians value.

Any discussion of modern Transnistria is incomplete without mention of Sheriff, a business conglomerate super monopoly with enormous power in Transnistria. Economic stagnation and lack of competition have allowed Sheriff to take control of many industries, branching into nearly every profitable business sector: gas stations, a TV channel, a phone network, supermarkets, printing/publishing, construction, bread baking, a hotel, a football team, car dealerships, advertising, and a distillery.⁶⁵ The Transnistrian desire to remain autonomous has prevented any international companies from establishing external competition to Sheriff's monopolies, and the mammoth resources of Sheriff discourage small business domestically.⁶⁶ Due to economic isolation, the conglomerate Sheriff monopolized most of the trade in the region, and its influence has bled into politics.

A Russian newspaper reported that Sheriff contributed more than 50 percent of the country's tax budget and is involved in 60 percent of trade.⁶⁷ The majority political party, Obnovlenie or "Renewal" has close ties to Sheriff, and

thus Sheriff's agenda will almost certainly be reflected in PMR's government.⁶⁸ If the status quo is beneficial for Sheriff, there will be significant resistance to resolution or reintegration. Sheriff benefits from the current status quo and uses its political power to maintain it, likely meaning Transnistria will not be drawn closer to resolution by economic motivators if it requires a sacrifice of autonomy.

Findings and Policy Suggestions

Ultimately the purpose of the Cultural Topography Framework is to provide relevant guidance to potential policy directives. A look at Transnistria's history and culture has offered many valuable insights: Russian preference permeates every aspect of culture as Transnistria considers itself fundamentally a part of the Russian world and views Russia as an infallible guarantor of peace. Negotiations by the OSCE and JCC will continue to stall so long as culturally informed distrust of Moldova and the West is sufficient to distort perception and equate actions of unrelated groups to Moldova. Furthermore, economic soft resolution does not appear persuasive and market reintegration unlikely. In short, cultural barriers are plentiful.

Nonetheless, progress is being made; slow but meaningful confidence-building measures genuinely make a difference. The OSCE and EU Border Assistance and Mission to Moldova (EUBAM) already oversee a number of confidence-building measures.⁶⁹ Measures are aimed at overcoming the cultural divide through policy and humanitarian initiatives, such as establishing Latin-script Romanian schools in Transnistria, fostering a linguistic similarity across the riverbanks, to open doors for Transnistrian youth to work and study in Europe. These efforts are slowly chipping away at Russian cultural dominance and focus on such programs should be renewed to combat Russia in the social and cultural sphere and continue even while pursuing more aggressive diplomatic action.

Another policy orientation would suggest cutting off Transnistria from Moldova entirely. However, this tempting option strengthens, not counters, the problematic cultural factors that have kept the banks from reuniting. Transnistrian isolationism allows for Russian supremacy, therefore any policy should aim at facilitating partnership (or at least communication) across the banks.

Scenarios

The most optimistic scenario is the removal of the Russian OGRF from Moldova. Imagining that the Kremlin fulfills this commitment, there would still be barriers. Likely even after the removal of Russian troops and functional government reassimilation, the internal culture will retain a strong degree of Russian preference and may take generations before full cultural assimilation is achieved. Thus, looking ahead it should not be surprising to see a counterintuitive rise in pro-Russian sentiment in Moldovan politics when former Transnistrians participate in Moldovan democracy.

In another likely scenario, the frozen conflict stays frozen for years to come. Certainly, the current status quo is not ideal for reasons outlined earlier, but it is not yet broken. Transnistria strives only for international recognition; no part of their cultural narrative or political rhetoric suggests expansionism or territorial aspirations beyond the Dniester. The benefits of Russia maintaining Transnistria diminish as the bill for Transnistrian energy subsidies increase, and the present military units become further isolated. Russian support in Transnistria has already peaked. Until and unless Moldova is formally and fully accepted into the EU or NATO, there is little urgency for Chisinau or Tiraspol to disrupt the current state of affairs.

This is not to say war will not again erupt. While there are significant motives on the Moldovan, Transnistrian, and Russian sides to prevent violence, the likelihood of regional conflict in Transnistria seems not much more outlandish than the war in Donbas did prior to 2014. However, before intervening in an Eastern European civil war, NATO should be well informed not only of adversarial military capabilities but also combatant cultural factors at play. The cultural topography outlined offers insight into the salient threats to regional stability and forecasts what challenges may be met if kinetic action is undertaken.

From a conventional military standpoint, Moldova already stands at a significant disadvantage. Compare Moldova's limited standing army of 6,000 to the PMR armed forces of more than 10,000 strong. Add to that the Russian OGRF, Russian armor, artillery, and air support. Furthermore, more than 100 joint training exercises in the security zone make Russia and Transnistria ready for conflict.⁷⁰ Moldova has neither the military strength nor relevant training to maintain a strong defense. In the event of conflict, Chisinau will likely turn immediately to NATO and U.S. forces stationed in Romania.

Transnistrian culture doubtlessly frame any reignition of conflict as external provocation, and Transnistrians will look to Russia to stop it. The situation will therefore quickly devolve into a proxy war, and a means for Russia to flaunt the willingness of NATO and U.S. forces to make good on their commitments to Moldovan sovereignty. If Chisinau ever took the extreme move to reassert control over all of Moldova, it would be built on the same unresolved tensions of 30 years prior.

Should future conflict be an unconventional or low-intensity engagement, Transnistria is also at an advantage. Though not internationally legitimate, PMR border crossings are already set up to halt and inspect vehicles, restricting entrance to arms or explosives entering the area. The opposite is not true on the way back to Moldova. Transnistrian provocateurs could conceivably carry out several attacks on Moldovan population centers. It would take Moldova some time to react and ensure security, while Transnistrians can follow the tactic of the first war and retreat to the river, fortifying on a natural barrier and preventing ground forces from crossing. Some have even speculated the tactic of seizing or destroying the Dubossary dam to cause Moldova a drinking water crisis.⁷¹

United States' Perspective

Some American policy makers see Transnistria as an opportunity to counter Moscow's military meddling and call out the Kremlin for clear violation of international norms. Former national security advisor John R. Bolton, in an article published on 13 May 2021, suggested that President Joseph R. Biden's administration take a more aggressive stance against Russia's unauthorized presence:

Moldova, tucked between Ukraine and Romania, is a frozen conflict ready for melting. Purportedly independent Transnistria, a Russian invention, exists separately from Moldova only through Moscow's continued military presence. Simply raising international attention to this post–Cold War anomaly would startle the Kremlin, and a determined new government in Chisinau now provides the opportunity for Washington to step up.⁷²

Transnistrian media immediately had a response. The following is abridged from a publication on 17 May 2021 in PMR's English edition of the state-owned news *Novosti PMR*:

As we can see, the well-known “super-hawk” of American foreign policy extremely focuses on stereotypes, believing that the proclamation of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic was exclusively a combination of Moscow. In terms of his level of thinking, he is pretty close to the nationalists of Chisinau [who] even 31 years later are unable to understand that the cave nationalism encouraged by the USA . . . causes absolute rejection of our republic's inhabitants. . . . What is behind this blatant provocation? [Americans] are expansionists, and often open aggressors . . . we can conclude: de facto allied relations between the PMR and Russia should only be strengthened. This is the only guarantee of maintaining stability and peace on the Dniester.⁷³

Though this response does not equate to a threat, it illustrates clearly that Transnistrian culture distorts American intent before any real action begins. As backward as it sounds, American actions, no matter the intention, will be conflated to pro-Romania/western Moldovan nationalism, and any opposition to Russian regional authority will be equated to regional expansionism. While complicating cultural factors do not negate a just cause to engage in the future, U.S. authorities should not expect in a hypothetical engagement to liberate a grateful population from Russian occupation. To the United States, it may seem Russia's lack of cooperation is the only thing preventing a resolution to this conflict—but at least for now, Transnistrians see Russia's (albeit illegal) presence as the only thing preventing civil war.

To the extent that the United States has interests in the region, it would be wise to use diplomatic and economic power to counter Russian influence while working to introduce nuance into the Transnistrian cultural narrative. Reinforcing Moldova economically could slow the population crisis as well as put Transnistrian exports in European markets. This would expand the job base at home in Moldova to encourage Transnistrians to stay and discourage isolation with market opportunities. Additionally, a less isolationist Transnistria may encourage Ukraine to provide easier access to school and work opportunities by entering the bordering Odeska oblast. Odeska is a sufficiently Russophone region to eliminate the language barrier, but with growing Western sentiment that could over time influence the Transnistrian population.

Perhaps the most interesting opportunity is to erode Transnistrian cultural barriers indirectly while developing Moldova. Corruption in Moldova has been a major obstacle to development and a focus of improving the country; the desire to counter Russia should not distract or cover up corruption. One proposal is withholding support until certain anticorruption cases are tried or terms are met. Applying resources to anticorruption rather than military measures may seem backward for a state with Russia on their doorstep. However, Transnistrian media would doubtless jump on the story of Moldova being penalized by the West for endemic corruption and capitalize heavily on the opportunity to paint their rivals in a bad light. At first accepted as a victory in the Transnistrian public conscious, this would establish a distinction between U.S. and Moldovan interests and allow more room for action with lessened danger of being misinterpreted.

Policy makers face a choice: the temptation to stand up for the underdog and directly confront Russia in Moldova is tempting but would only confirm Transnistrian cultural bias standing in the way of reassimilation. The best course of action would be adopting policy decisions to counter the difficult narratives in Transnistrian culture indirectly, bringing cultures closer and building bridges for future generations. In so doing, the Kremlin-backed frozen conflict would become less satisfactory to Transnistrians and Moldovans alike, perhaps being the final straw to prompt a voluntary Russian removal.

APPENDIX

The articles from *Novosti PMR* used for analysis in note 54 are as follows:

ПГТРК, “Vadim Krasnoselsky: Ammunition Disposal in Kolbasna Village Is the Internal Business of Pridnestrovie and Russia,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 20 December 2019; ПГТРК “Head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the PMR Urged His Colleague from Moldova to Fight Crime, Not to Enter Politics,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 30 January 2020; and ПГТРК, “Moldovan Side Continues to Block Visits of Military Observers,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 6 February

2020; and ПГТРК, “Oleg Belyakov: JCC Should Make Sure That Peacekeeping Operation Continues in a Right Track,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 20 February 2020; and ПГТРК, “JCC Called on Residents of the Security Zone to Surrender Weapons and Ammunition Voluntarily,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 20 February 2020; and ПГТРК, “Oleg Belyakov: Chisinau Is Trying to Undermine the Stability in the Security Zone Using Primitive Provocations,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 4 June 2020; ПГТРК, “According to the JCC, Citizens of the PMR and the RM Consider Only on the Positive Side of the Peacekeeping Operation,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 22 July 2020; and ПГТРК, “The PMR President Held the Security Council Meeting,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 3 July 2020; ПГТРК, “Oleg Belyakov: Peacekeeping Entities Should Not and Will Not Participate in Political Processes,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 8 October 2020; ПГТРК, “Moldovan Delegation Disrupted the JCC Meeting Again,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 22 October 2020; ПГТРК, “Oleg Belyakov: At Peacekeeping Posts, Unknown Persons Scatter Leaflets Threatening Residents of the PMR,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 29 October 2020; ПГТРК, “Oleg Belyakov: Peacekeeping Forces Are Working in a Standard Way,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 1 November 2020; ПГТРК, “Oleg Belyakov: 2020 Became Another Year of Hard and Relentless Work for the Peacekeepers to Preserve Peace in the Region,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 28 December 2020; ПГТРК, “Приднестровская делегация в ОКК настаивает на том, чтобы все миротворческие механизмы работали в полном объеме,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 19 November 2020; ПГТРК, “The Deputy of the Russian Federation State Duma Called the Talks about Russian Peacekeepers’ Withdrawal from the PMR Ill-Advised and Thoughtless,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 29 November 2020; ПГТРК, “Vadim Krasnoselsky, “Any Attempts to Destroy the Existing Peace Guarantee Mechanism Can Lead to Rollback of the Moldovan-Pridnestrovian Conflict to the de facto Situation of the Early 90s,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 3 December 2020; ПГТРК, “Вадим Красносельский призвал не поддаваться на провокации молдавской стороны в Зоне безопасности,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 4 December 2020; ПГТРК, “Vadim Krasnoselsky Met with Journalists of the Russian TV Channel NTV,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 4 December 2020; ПГТРК, “The President

Held a Meeting with the Co-Chairman of the JCC from Pridnestrovie,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 11 December 2020; ПГТРК, “The Parliamentary Commission on Foreign Policy and International Relation Prepared Draft Statement on Inadmissibility of Escalation in Security Zone,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 11 December 2020; ПГТРК, “Oleg Belyakov: The Moldovan Side Is Trying to Imbalance the Peacekeeping Operation Mechanisms,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 17 December 2020; ПГТРК, “The President Discussed with the Co-Chairman of the JCC from Pridnestrovie the Current Situation in the Security Zone and the State of Affairs during the Year,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 25 December 2020; ПГТРК, “Oleg Belyakov: 2020 Became Another Year of Hard and Relentless Work for the Peacekeepers to Preserve Peace in the Region,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 28 December 2020; ПГТРК, “This Year’s First Meeting of the JCC Was Disrupted,” *Новости Приднестровья*, 14 January 2021; and “ПМР предложила обсудить увеличение численности российских миротворцев,” *Ria.ru*, 13 February 2020.

Endnotes

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