

Causal Mechanisms and Regional Interests in the Moldovan-Transdniestrian Conflict

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Introduction

The Transdniestrian war of succession, which reached its most deadly point in June 1992, resulted in years of cumulative tensions between Moldova and Transnistria (PMR). The war's toll was heavy for both sides, with the highest estimates conceding more than 1,000 dead and over 100,000 persons displaced. Moldova, which had newly declared itself a sovereign and independent state, was unable to prevent its eastern region, Transnistria, from seceding. The Russian 14th Army's intervention, notably in May and in June 1992, ultimately proved to be the determining factor in a Transnistrian victory. The end of military confrontation foreshadowed the signing of a ceasefire agreement on July 21st, 1992 between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Moldovan President M. Snegur. The accord, which effectively put an end to most of the armed violence, established the borders for the creation of a security zone and the installation of a tri-partite peacekeeping force, effectively separating Moldova and Transnistria and preventing the reoccurrence of armed conflict. However, as a result no official state status¹ was determined for the PMR. Now, more than twenty-two years later, the situation remains a difficult one, with no official resolution to put it to an end.

In this article², we will attempt to dissect the causes³ of the Moldovan-Transdniestrian conflict. Our interest in the conflict process, however, goes further than that of its origins as we strive to understand how this crisis led to war.⁴ By sequencing the conflict's process into two distinct phases – all post-August 1989 events – we identify the key events that contributed to direct increases in tension between the parties to the conflict. These stages or sequences within the conflict process are

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¹ For an interesting work on the role of status in international relations, see : WOLF, Reinhard, « Respect and disrespect in international politics : the significance of status recognition », *International Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2011, pp. 105-142.

² The article in itself responds to a larger project seeking to answer the question as to what mechanisms within a crisis's developmental phase transform or not into armed conflict. See : LINDEMANN, Thomas and CLEMENT, Maéva, « Introduction. Les politiques symboliques de prévention de guerre dans les crises internationales », *Dynamiques Internationales*, 2015 ; LINDEMANN, Thomas, *Causes of War. The struggle for Recognition*, ECPR Press, 2010 ; LINDEMANN, Thomas, *Sauver la face, sauver la paix*, L'Harmattan, 2010.

³ It is important to note that this article does not take into account Russian interests in any stage of the conflict.

⁴ As Moldova and Transnistria are technically the same entity in the late 1980s, we will not be sequencing the pre-crisis phase in our work.

determined by the following variable: the Moldovan language laws of August 1989 as the triggering factor of the crisis. This triggering factor is of course, one amongst many mechanisms contributing to the steady growth of discord between actors in phase one: from non-violent protests to armed violence within the time frame 1989 to August 1991.

We consider phase two as the point of no possible return from crisis. This stage, which occurs from September 1991 until June 1992, represents the period during which war became inevitable.⁵

Analysis of the key events that occur within the provided timeframe provides additional insight as to the actors' interests at specific times throughout the conflict. Here, we not only focus on the different policies implemented in relation to those interests but also their impact on actors' ability to (mis)manage the conflict. These elements allow us to answer some of the most important questions in regard to our understanding of the conflict's process.⁶

Although this study positions itself within the conflict's developmental process, it would bear relatively little meaning without a basic historical approach to our regional actors. Only by means of this framework are we able to fully provide an explanation as to what factors were responsible for prolonging the crisis and why. To this objective, we therefore propose to use specific selective analytical criteria in our case study. After laying the foundation for a context ripe for conflict, we examine both actors' policies and interests in maintaining an effective deterrence posture and their respective policies of reassurance towards one another, as well as applicable economic and symbolic interests. For each criterion a score between « 0 to 3 »⁷ is provided to indicate the relative strength or weakness of each actor's actions and the policies employed in relation to their interests.

We thus begin our study with a brief summary of the major events, divided into two phases within the timeframe of late 1989 to June 1992. Then, we examine our initiating actor, Moldova. In an attempt to understand the state's characteristics and position with regard to the outbreak of the crisis and conflict, we evaluate this actor with regard to its regime type, the image it projects, and its vision of the enemy. Finally, we provide a rationale for the criteria used to evaluate the course of the conflict.

⁵ Other possible sequences or phases of the conflict process can be considered. For example, phase 1 : from the late 1980s to August 31, 1989; phase 2 : from September 1989 to February 1992; phase 3 : from March 1992 to mid-June 1992; phase 4 : From the end of June 1992 to July 1992. We will limit our case study to a two-phase conflict process.

⁶ For interesting theoretical perspectives on the causes of conflict, see : CASHMAN, Greg, *What Causes War ? : An Introduction to Theories of International Conflict*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2nd edition, 2013 ; HENSEL, Paul R., « Charging a Course to Conflict : Territorial Issues and Interstate Conflict, 1816-1992 », *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Fall, 1996, pp. 43-73 ; LEBOW, Richard Ned, *Why Nations Fight : The Past and Future of War*, Cambridge University Press, 2010 ; LEVY, Jack S. and THOMPSON, William R., *Causes of War*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 ; LINDEMANN, Thomas, *Causes of War : The Struggle for Recognition*, op. cit. ; LINDEMANN, Thomas, *La Guerre: Théories, Causes, Règlements*, Armand Colin, 2010 ; LINDEMANN, Thomas, *Sauver la face, sauver la paix : Sociologie constructiviste des crises internationales*, op. cit

⁷ « 0 » for absent; « 1 » for weak; « 2 » for moderate; and « 3 » for strong.

A Chaotic Road to Crisis

Phase 1: September 1989 – August 1991

The end of the 1980s was marked by the development of a new national Moldovan⁸ sentiment, one which drove the nation towards a desire for independence. Characterized by popular protests as well as a number of important socio-political reforms, it was led notably by the Moldovan Popular Front. These national reforms were at the time not only vital for Moldova's path to independence and the construction of its new state, but also were critical in the birth of its new identity. The development of this new political environment effectively paved the way for Transdniestrian⁹ secession.

The mid to late 1980s context characterized by perestroika and glasnost heavily influenced the Moldovan political and social agenda (Kolstø, Edemsky and Kalashnikova 1993, p.979). In 1989, at the height of this period, the situation became increasingly contentious as the Moldovan Soviet Supreme adopted the first of a series of reforms that were perceived by Transdniestria as radical¹⁰ and overly nationalistic (Kolstø et al. 1993). On August 31, 1989, a series of language laws were enacted, officializing the Moldovan language (Latin script over the Cyrillic alphabet). This law forced all elites to pass exams in the recognized language by the deadline of 1994 (Chinn and Roper 1995, pp.296-298). The adoption of a new Moldovan flag, national anthem, and re-institutionalized Moldovan language (all very similar to those of Romania's) set the stage for a crisis that ultimately spun out of control.¹¹ Moldova had become deep-rooted in the pan-Romanian movement by the time 1990 rolled around. The 1990 Moldovan elections confirmed the PMR's fear of a forced reunification with Romania as ethnic Moldovans held the majority and Popular Front members, including President M. Snegur and Prime Minister M. Druc, were noted for their support of reunification (Roper 2001 : 105). In response, the left bank city of Ribnistya declared sovereignty (ibid p.106), and Moldovan nationalistic policies in turn encouraged Transdniestria to develop its own desire for independence. A series of critical events ensued. On May 6, 1990, Moldova and Romania agreed on a day of 'open borders' (Kolstø et al., 1993, p.989); on June 23, 1990, Moldova declared itself sovereign from Russia followed by a complete declaration of independence on August

⁸ The official name of was Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). To avoid confusion, « Moldova » or « right bank » will be used from this point.

⁹ We may refer to Transdniestria as the left bank or the PMR, meaning the Pridnestrovian Moldavaian Republic.

¹⁰ « Report No. 13 », *CSCOE Mission to Moldova*, November 13, 1993, p. 3.

¹¹ « The Moldovan-Administered Latin-Script Schools in Transdniestria : Background, Current Situation, Analysis and Recommendations », Report 2012, *OSCE Mission to Moldova and OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities*, 2012, pp. 6-7.

23, 1991, marking the end of the road for any possible political pacification with the PMR. Subsequently, Transdniestria seceded from Moldova on September 2, 1990.¹²

The Transdniestrian declaration of independence was a symbol of the escalation in the tensions with Moldova. Several months after the declaration, Transdniestria conducted its own elections (which were boycotted by Moldova¹³) and I. Smirnov was elected president of Transdniestria. Gradually, the dissidence increased and in November armed violence between police broke out in the left bank city of Dubossary, causing the deaths of three civilians (Nantoi 2014). The end result was the further development of a climate favorable for war. In this sense, the beginning of violence did not occur between banks but within a city.¹⁴

These actions, in addition to the Moldovan rejection of August 1991 putsch attempt in Russia, undoubtedly played a vital role in the events to follow and had a significant impact on Transdniestrian behavior. The Moldovan declaration of sovereignty supported the left bank fears of reunification with Romania, notably within the Russian-speaking population in that area (Hill 2012, p.50 ; Kolstø et Malgin 1998, p.105). As a result, the situation became a point of no return for the prevention of war.

The unfortunate reality of war

Phase 2: September 1991 – June 1992

Between the months of September and November of 1991, both governments sought to pass laws in an attempt to impose their legitimacy. This simply succeeded in increasing animosity between the two actors as fighting began between Moldovan police and Transdniestrian forces in early January 1992 (Ozhiganov 1997, p.174). In March 1992, M. Snegur declared a state of emergency that further inflamed tensions; the next month saw a failed Moldovan attempt to retake the right bank city of Bender through force (Lynch 2004, p.55). Military confrontation continued between the two sides with Bender still up for grabs. The crisis continued to gain momentum until June 1992, and during a very short, but intense clash the Moldovan armed forces finally overtook the city of Bender from the PMR. With victory apparently more or less assured for Moldova, the Russian 14th Army directly intervened on behalf of the Transdniestrians and a major battle between the 14th Army and Moldova ensued on June 19, 1992. The direct participation of the Russian 14th Army in the battle

¹² Gagauzia, Moldova's other breakaway region had proclaimed its independence on August 19, 1990.

¹³ « Transdniestrian Conflict » op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

forced the Moldovan military to retreat within a few days and led to the end of the conflict. By June 21, 1992, Moldovan military forces began to withdraw from the city, and on July 7th Chisinau and Moscow lay the foundations for a cease-fire agreement that was to be finalized on July 21st in Moscow.¹⁵

The events leading to this climatic point and preceding the major battle over Bender illustrate the growth of a violent response that initially was not seen during the first phase. Importantly, these become indicators that the ante had been upped for both players in the conflict.

Popular legitimacy as a catalyst for the Moldovan actions

To further develop an understanding of the underlying causes for the actions of the involved parties, it is necessary from this point on to classify certain characteristics in regard to each state leader and state's policies in the management of the conflict. Here we begin with the crisis initiating country, Moldova.

Moldovan Political Regime = 0, Democratic

The turbulence created by the USSR's perestroika and glasnost policies had a significant impact on Chisinau. The 1989 September crisis triggered by the languages laws had very strong support on the right bank, in which over 500,000 people turned out on at least six occasions prior to August 1989¹⁶ (Ionescu 2002, p.13) to support Moldova's path towards independence. Contrary to the left bank, political legitimacy and public support was very strong in right bank Moldova as major political institutions and protests were centered in Chisinau. The popular movement was one that sought to establish for the first time a state and to rediscover a lost identity. In this sense, one could put forth that thought Moldova's path to independence was not conducted by 'going to the polls' but by a general popular mobilization from the ground up. When general elections were held in 1990, power was brought to a large number of « ethnic Moldovans ».¹⁷

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that Transdnestrian leader, I. Smirnov was present as an observer and is not a signatory party to the cease fire agreement.

¹⁶ « Moldova : No Quick Fix » *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report No. 147, August 12, 2003, p. 3.

¹⁷ It could be interesting to further distinguish between the popular movement occurring from the ground-up to that of those responsible for passing major reforms without consultation of the left bank population.

*Hubristic presentation of the Moldovan state*¹⁸ = +3, *Strong*

Moldovan First Secretary, S. Grossu, originally opposed to Moldovan linguistic reforms during the late 1980s (Parmentier 2003, p.29), later spearheaded Moldova's national movement, but could do nothing to stop it once the situation began to deteriorate (King 2000, pp.121-142). The use of « ethnic nation-building symbols » in Moldova's drive for independence played a very relevant role in the presentation of the Moldovan state (Kolstø 1996). The September 1989 crisis that was derived from the language laws in August, were strongly supported by right bank proponents for linguistic independence but adamantly opposed and considered as aggressive by the left bank Russian-speaking population. As the crisis developed, Moldova implemented additional nationalist reforms which resulted in continued isolation of the left bank population.¹⁹ The Russian-speaking left bank population and its elites were well-off until those reforms came about (Chinn, p.313). Thus the loss of the Russian language's official status after the 1989 language laws was perceived as a threat (Prina 2013, p.3). The day after the vote to enact the language acts, close to two hundred left bank companies went on strike demanding the return of Russian as the official language of interethnic communication.²⁰

As the pan-Romanian movement took root in Moldova, the possibility of reunification with Romania also became a deeply troubling issue in the eyes of the left bank population (Bădescu 2012, pp.25-38). Forced integration of Transdnistria became a real fear accentuated by the fact that the right bank shared both historical and linguistic characteristics with Romania (Cojocaru 2006, p.261). The opposition to the eventuality of forced reunification of the left bank was relevant for several reasons. The majority of the left bank population, representing a Slavic majority, identified themselves with origins other than that of Romanian (Blakkisrud et Kolstø 2011, p.196 ; Şveţ 2013 p.106 ; Troebst 2003). Secondly, from a historical standpoint, the left bank never considered itself as being a part of Romania, except for the years of Romanian occupation between 1941 until 1944. During this period, Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transdnistria were victims of mass atrocities and deportations at the hands of Romania (Dembinska et Iglesias 2013, p.6 ; King 2000, p.95 ; Waters 1997, p.72). This deeply traumatic experienced by the left bank quickly became relived and firmly rooted in opposition as the region perceived it would undoubtedly suffer once more from the

¹⁸ It is difficult to assess individual Moldovan leaders during the pre-crisis and crises stage – from a Transdnistrian perspective. We therefore turn our attention to the developing context of crisis and the nature of the Moldovan nationalist political reforms.

¹⁹ It is also important to remember that Moldova's other region, Gagauzia will too have difficulty coping with the new reforms and comes into existence on August 19, 1990.

²⁰ « Workers Vow to Continue Strikes - USSR », *Sydney Morning Herald*, Australia, September 1, 1989.

« Romanian fascists ». Specifically identifying itself with a no longer present USSR meant that Transdnistria was alone in its combat against the right bank and Romania, which certainly compounded anti-Romanian sentiment (Natoi 2001, p.1).

*Moldovan Image of the enemy*²¹ = + 3, Strong

Within right bank Moldova, there seemed to be few questioning its legitimacy in its path to independence and its actions to ensure it after the 1989 language laws. There was much more at stake than just that. It was the promotion of a new identity and its own state²² that had seemed to escape it for centuries (King 1994, pp.345-368 ; King 2000, pp.120-167). Moldova suffered mightily during the soviet period which saw the exile of Moldovan intellectuals toward Siberia and the strategic placement of Russian migrants in the country, ensuring the country's process of the Russification (Parmentier 2003, pp.27-28). The extent of this went as far as convincing the country that it was distinct from Romania despite the two countries' shared heritage and language (Dima, 1991, p.54). The Moldovan path towards independence meant it had to figure out three major identity based issues all linked to the linguistic question: the integration and the use of the Latin alphabet, the formalizing of a state language, and the recognition of the linguistic identity of Moldova (Ionescu 2002, p.13). In this sense, Moldovans were rejecting the Russian language in their pan-Romanian movement (King 2000, p.3). « [...] These were acts of historical justice, the first step toward reappropriating a Romanian identity obscured by some seven decades of Soviet propaganda (ibid p.4). » In the context surrounding glasnost and perestroika, coupled with the linguistic movements in the Baltic states (Parmentier 2003, p.30), Moldovan intellectuals became inspired to ensure their own linguistic liberalization (Ionescu 2002, p.13 ; Natoi 2014).²³ For the Romanian speaking population, it was time to open the door towards its own path to independence. This meant that no compromises were possible in the act of declaring only one official national language and national state.²⁴

Moldovan interests without means to manage conflict

Transdnistria officially seceded from Moldova on September 2, 1990. Prior to the 1989 crisis with Moldova however, the territory naturally did not have an official government in place. Many of the left bank leaders were members of the Moldovan parliament. This made it difficult to position

²¹ It is important to note that right bank Moldova's historical grievances have more to do with Russian than with the PMR.

²² « Report No. 13 », op. cit.

²³ « Moldova : No Quick Fix », op. cit., p. 2.

²⁴ « Moldavians demonstrate », *Daily Breeze*, California, September 1, 1989.

themselves within an official, unified policy towards or for Transdnistria prior to the 1989 crisis. But the actions of the left bank population, coupled with those of the elites, constituted a set behavior for left bank, which in this sense are included in a policy post-1989. We will therefore concentrate our efforts on Moldova during the crisis, which appears more relevant to understanding the causal process.

Moldovan deterrence posture

Phase 1: September 1989 – August 1991

Moldovan Deterrence = +1, Weak

Moldova, the stronger of the two sides, may have been able to implement a relatively effective deterrence posture²⁵ pursuant to Transdnistrian actions. At no time was Moldovan state security at risk, though it lacked military alliances and even a credible military. Its forces outnumbered those of the Transdnistrians alone. However, it is important to recall that those forces were composed at some point in time of approximately 10,000 plus police officers and then another 60,000 volunteer reservists. (Roper 2001, p.107). Moldova's deterrence posture is probably better explained by its coercive actions than by its armed forces in the first phase. On September 4, 1990, Chisinau formed a corps of 10,000 to be used against both Transdnistria and Gagauzia (Ozhiganov 1997, p.163). On November 2, 1990, it engaged separatist forces in the left bank city of Dubossary, resulting in the deaths of three people. Moldova had the upper hand in military force in this first phase, but this had little to no impact in convincing or forcing Tiraspol from continuing its path towards full separation. Deterrence was never properly established early on by Moldova. A few reasons may explain this reality. The first is most likely due to the fact that that Chisinau was not seeking in itself to cause conflict with the left bank although it was readily unprepared for war with Tiraspol. It also appears that neither side had the military capability to prevent the unfolding of the crisis. Furthermore, Transdnistria's responses to the sociopolitical reforms were not foreseen by the Moldovan decision makers with the realization that they would ultimately lead to a major crisis that could not be resolved. Unable to prevent the PMR from breaking away and thus allowing continued « separatist » action directly resulted in the increase in tensions.

²⁵ On this subject see : FREEDMAN, Lawrence, *Deterrence*, Polity, 2004 ; GEORGE, Alexander and SMOKE, Richard, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, Columbia University Press, 1974 ; KAUFMANN, William W., *The requirements of deterrence*, Center of International Studies Princeton University, 1954 ; SCHELLING, Thomas C., *The Strategy of Conflict*, Harvard University Press, 1981 ; SNYDER, Glenn H., *Deterrence and Defense : Toward a Theory of National Security*, Princeton University, 1961.

We have attributed the rating of « 1 » or « Weak » to Moldovan deterrence policy. Moldova undertook important measures to be militarily persuasive through recruitment. During the first stage of the conflict, the balance of power was undeniably on the Moldovan side. At that point the Russian 14th Army has declared its neutrality and had not yet intervened directly.

Phase 2: September 1991 – June 1992

Moldovan Deterrence = 0, Absent

The stakes were raised in the second phase of the conflict. Here, Moldova's objectives remained the same in terms of preventing full Transdnistriean secession. Its commitment to this was more dedicated. In turn, the conflict continued to spiral out of control. Conscious of the deteriorating situation, Moldova decided to call up over « call upon 15,000 for service in four motor infantry brigades, an air defense brigade, a communications unit, and special operations forces » (Lynch 2000, p.112) to provide itself with the necessary means to manage the conflict. Between the 9th and 13th December 1991, Transnistrian forces lay siege to the cities of Dubossary and Bender, followed by a failed Moldovan offensive in Dubossary. Military assaults from both sides intensified from March 1992 onward. During this time, the PMR benefitted from military assistance from the Russian 14th army and from the arrival of Russian Cossacks, solidifying the PMR's position. Between the 14th and 15th of March, PMR forces attacked Moldovan positions on the left bank.

Fighting continued to intensify throughout May and June 1992. Before the Russian 14th Army intervened on June 19, Moldova had already placed heavy artillery and tanks in to Bender (Selivanova 1996, p.66) and had supplied itself with Soviet MiG-29s, tanks, mortars and howitzers (Ozhiganov 1997, p.178); from the 14th's military remaining equipment abandoned in Moldova after its withdrawal from the right bank years prior to the crisis. Despite Moldova's mobilization towards the city of Bender, the Transdnistriean did not pull out of the city. Moldova retook the city after a few days of intensive fighting. Defeat was likely at this point for Transdnistria until the 14th Army's intervention drove our Moldovan forces and put an end to the war. Moldova benefitted from Romanian military and technical assistance during the conflict but the latter remained inactive during the war (Tkach 1999, pp.152-153). Moldova's continued attempts to take Bender in the beginning of 1992 probably indicate a balance of power in Moldova's advantage, though the tide swung favorably for the PMR at this stage of the conflict thanks to the Russian 14th Army. This inevitably modified

the balance of power between Chisinau and Tiraspol as well as the latter's continued efforts in the war. Thus, we evaluate Moldovan deterrence at "0".

Moldovan Policy of reassurance

Phase 1 : September 1989 – August 1991

Moldovan Policy of Reassurance = 0, Absent

The nature of the Moldovan reforms in both stages of the crisis made it impossible to reunite both banks. Problematics surrounding historical, ideological and identity issues underscored diverging positions as to the future of both entities within one Moldova. Moldova and Transdniestria quickly became bogged down in a self-filling symbolic escalation of tension as violence became the only possible solution to the crisis. Moldova recognized neither Transdniestria's declared independence nor its referendum. There was little to no attempt to turn towards a comprehensive policy seeking to pacify and maintain the unification of the Moldovan state through peaceful means. It only overturned the August 1989 language laws in 1994 (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007, p.92). The implementation of such reforms in August 1989, however, meant that it was certainly too late to back track on its position because of the overwhelming support from the right bank population.

As stated previously, Moldova sought to quell resistance and to retake control over Transdniestria. There was no backtracking for Moldova at this stage. Transdniestrian fears also remained very strong concerning possible Romanian reunification. As states P. Kolstø : « The Moldovans could have reassured the Russian speakers in 1991 only, of course if the result of a referendum at that time had been strongly in favor of independence rather than reunification. This precondition, while not testable, is not altogether likely. There are indications that pro-unification sentiment was running much higher in 1991 (Kolstø 2002, p.272, fn11). » Chisinau did nothing to appease these concerns.

Phase 2: September 1991 to June 1992

Moldovan Policy of Reassurance = 0, Absent

The effectiveness of policy of reassurance can only be determined by how it impacts the actor to which it is applied. Moldova's increased attempts to pacify the situation were likely due to a deteriorating situation. Once again there were no efforts to reverse the language laws or relieve the left bank fears of reunification. By the time the war rolled around in both March and in April 1992,

the reassurance offered was too little too late. Though the Russian 14th Army had not directly entered into the conflict, it had already been providing military assistance to the left bank. On March 19, 1992, Moldova sought to normalize the situation and offered Transdniestria an economic free zone²⁶ but this failed to bring about the intended results. Ten days later, Moldovan President M. Snegur issued an ultimatum to Transdniestrian authorities (Kolstø et al. 1993, p.987). These efforts came after a unilaterally declared Moldovan cease-fire. In April, an international disarmament commission was brought to the region that included both protagonists, as well as Russia, Ukraine, and Romania. Already two months into war, these were last minute attempts to pacify an increasingly volatile state of affairs.

Previous to these efforts, on March 15, 1992, Moldova called upon the left bank population in attempt to provide calm to the situation.²⁷ However, in M. Snegur's address to the left bank, he accused I. Smirnov of seeking to incite a civil war.²⁸ These accusations only inflamed the situation as twenty-one people were killed in armed violence the day after. This event forced the Moldovan government to impose an ultimatum, demanding that the dissidents put down their arms in forty-eight hours²⁹ or face armed violence.³⁰ A state of emergency was declared by M. Snegur as a response to the increasing level of violence as the war moved closer to the city of Bender, situated on the right bank of the Nistru River (Parmentier, 2003 : 40).

Moldovan economic interests³¹

Phase 1 : September 1989 – August 1991

State of the economy = +3, Difficult; Economic sanctions = 0, Absent

Phase 2 : September 1991 – June 1992

State of the economy = +3, Difficult; Economic sanctions = 0, Absent

²⁶ « Moldovan premier puts forward Dnestr peace plan », *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 16 mars 1992.

²⁷ « Apelul Guvernului Republicii Moldova către locuitorii din raioanele de pe malul stîng al Nistrului », March 17, 1992.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ « 21 slain in fierce Moldovan clashes », *The Toronto Star*, 16 mars 1992.

³⁰ « Rebels get 48 hours to disarm in Moldova », *The Age*, Melbourne, Australia, March 17, 1992.

³¹ As the conflict is segmented into phases of intensity and not into that of other interests, we have regrouped the economic interests of both phases of the conflict into a single explanation as it remains the same throughout.

The case has been made that the conflict did involve major economic and industrial interests amongst competing regional elites. This is, though, secondary to the issues surrounding Transdnistria within the causal process towards war. For Moldova, the loss of the Transdnistrian region represented an important set back for an economy already reeling due its separation from the former Soviet Union. Chisinau was highly dependent on energy, manufacturing and raw materials – all markets that the USSR was able to provide during the Soviet period (Keune and Orlova 1999, pp.119-120). Transdnistria represented one third of the Moldovan agricultural economy and maintained strong ties to post-Soviet states (Lynch 2000, p.111). Moldova's defeat in the war caused heavy economic and industrial losses. It is reported that in 1992 Transdnistria represented 35% of Moldova's industrial production, 90% of electricity production, and close to 40% of the Moldova's total GDP (Ciobanu 2008, p.94). Therefore, Moldova had a very strong interest in preventing Transdnistria from seceding. It would have been ill advised to implement economic sanctions on the region. In fact, late in the crisis, Moldova attempted to bargain with the PMR through the establishment of an economic free zone. For the Russian-speaking left bank elites, possible reunification with Romania would undoubtedly meant the loss of economic status and privileges in a heavily industrialized region.

Phase 1: September 1989 – August 1991

Policy of recognition = 0, Absent

In its attempt to establish independence, Moldova was both a state and a people seeking international recognition. This became very apparent in the number of national reforms that were implemented in a rather short period of time. Questions surrounding “moldovanization” and the creation of the Moldovan language and population go back as far as the 1920s (King 2000, pp.36-38). It would have been the first time in centuries that Moldova would have had its own state, (Lynch 2004, p.31) as historically it was dominated or controlled by the Ottomans, the Russian Empire, Romania, or the Soviet Union. The search for the Moldovan identity is still relevant today for many of the population as is evidenced by those who speak Romanian over Moldovan or vice-versa. The first period, as previously explained, is characterized by Moldovan reforms seeking to establish an independent state, free from Russian influence. The sociopolitical reforms were therefore very cultural in nature.

Moldova was a witness to similar successful independence movements in the Baltics, from which they were influenced by popular demand.³² However, the language laws of 1989 were seen as discriminatory toward Russian-speakers.³³ Promoters of reunification with Romania isolated even further the left bank. The Popular Front's parliamentary president, I. Rosca confirmed this desire: « Moldova will unify with Romania – it is inevitable. We need time for Russia to lose power in Moldova. People do not remember what it is like to be part of Romania (Roper 2001, pp.105-106). »

Phase 2: September 1991 – June 1992

Policy of recognition = 0, Absent

That the majority of the Moldovan sociopolitical reforms took place during the first phase does not imply that national sentiment took a back seat during the second phase. However, Moldova faced the Transdnistrian dilemma. In fact, identity remained on the political agenda throughout the 1990s, notably with the new Moldovan constitution of 1994. Contrary to the first phase, Moldova's quest for recognition extended to the international stage, when it joined both the UN and the OSCE. Part of this was an attempt to attract international attention to its conflict, and the Moldovan desire for recognition ~~is~~ became the driving force behind their efforts.

Transdnistrian steps towards territorial consolidation

In this section we will examine Transdnistrian policy toward Moldova through both stages of the conflict. Throughout both phases of the conflict it is apparent that Tiraspol's major objective was to ensure their complete secession and independence from Moldova.

Transdnistrian deterrence posture

Phase 1: September 1989 – August 1991

Transdnistrian deterrence = 0, Absent

Throughout the first period, Transdnistria, just as Moldova, took necessary measures to guarantee the finalization of their independence. Experts have qualified Transdnistrian security fears as being related to identity-based issues because of the language laws and possible reunification with

³² « Moldova : No Quick Fix », op. cit., p. 2

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Romania. If we accept Transdnistria's deterrence as its ability to put to a halt to Moldova's military advance, then it would be qualified as absent in the first phase. Transdnistria benefited from the Russian 14th Army's presence and their large stocks of Soviet arms and munitions on their territory,³⁴ estimated at over 40,000 tons (Hill 2002, p.5). Though powerful, it is said that the 14th was a highly unorganized unit and detached from Moscow's orders (Mörike 1998, p.124). Furthermore, the 14th's inability to overtly and directly commit to engaging Moldovan military forces during early stages of the conflict did to some extent convince decision makers in Chisinau that it would indeed remain neutral throughout the conflict. In 1990, Russian troops were estimated at around 23,000, most of which were in the Russian 14th and stationed in Tiraspol (ibid p.124). PMR's deterrent is considered absent as it did not have its own forces during the primary stages of the crisis. Additionally, the loss of the Transdnistrian region for Moldova could be potentially devastating. However, a major rationale for the lack of deterrent could be explained by the opaque role of Russia and the 14th army (ibid pp.125-126); this may provide a possible reason as to why Moldova could not be deterred from increasing tension and confrontation.

Phase 2: September 1991 – June 1992

Transdnistrian deterrence = +2 Moderate

An absent Transdnistrian deterrence related to the 14th's commitment issues and Moldova's inability to win it back did not help prevent war in March of 1992. Though Transdnistria's deterrence was boosted by the Russian 14th Army's direct intervention in the second stage of the conflict, it came far too late to prevent the Moldovans from their attack on the right bank city of Bender. The conflict had thus already spun out of control before the 14th's full military engagement. The Russian 14th was a considerable military force to be reckoned with. Even in late May, there remained questions surrounding its allegiance. Yeltsin originally declared the 14th Army as neutral, but evidence shows it was quite apparent what side Russia would take in the war. I. Smirnov and G. Marakutza had been meeting with A. Lukianov and were promised assistance (Nouzille 2004, p.254). On April 1, 1992, Yeltsin took full control of the 14th, previously commanded by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in fear that the 14th's ties to the local population would draw them out of the 14th's command (Mörike 1998; pp.124-125). Already in January 1992, the PMR was in the process of putting together its own military forces. Though local officers of the 14th had

³⁴ It is difficult to know when exactly the Russian 14th Army began supporting Transdnistria. It is highly likely that military assistance began before the second phase.

already been involved to this point, I. Smirnov publically called for the 14th's officers to integrate into the PMR's national guard (ibid. p.125). In spring of 1992, Cossacks from different parts of the former Soviet states arrived in Transdnestria to take part in the conflict. It is estimated that they numbered anywhere from 700 to 1000 (Lynch 2000, p.113 ; Ozhiganov 1997, p.176) and Yeltsin will call upon Russia General Alexandre Lebed to take control of the disorganized 14th Army.

We propose that a very late, 14th Army intervention in mid June 1992 may have led Moldova to believe before that the army would not directly engage Moldovan forces, though they had already been providing heavy military equipment and assistance with logistics to the Transdnestrian side : « [...] It appears that the 14th army did send mixed signals throughout all of this. That was the problem. The Transdnestrians felt they could rely on the 14th army support (they, after all, had been receiving arms and men long before 1992). The Moldovans felt that the 14th army would stand aloof so long as the fighting did not escalate seriously. »³⁵ Thus we accord the score of « 2 » to Transdnestrian deterrence because of Russian 14th Army support with consideration to its misleading position.

Transdnestrian Economic Interests

Phase 1: September 1989 – August 1991

State of the economy = +3, Difficult; Economic sanctions = 0, Absent

Phase 2: September 1991 – June 1992

State of the economy = +3, Difficult; Economic sanctions = 0, Absent

The economic question becomes relevant with regard to the status question of the left bank elites. The Russian-speaking population dominated the hierarchal and industrial positions. I. Smirnov, for example was at one time the factory director of Electromash. Elites were scared off by the potential reunification with Romania, though Moldova did not seek to take away elitist positions. A one point, Moldova arrested I. Smirnov but he was quickly released as Transdnestria threatened to cut off gas supplies.

³⁵ Charles King quoted in: Kolstø, 2002 : 270.

Transdnestrian Symbolic Policy

Phase 1: September 1989 – August 1991

Policy of recognition = 0, Absent

Moldovan sociopolitical reforms constituted a major fear for Transdnestrians as « [...] the most visible sign of the shifting balance of power was from ethnic Russian to Romanian speakers. »³⁶ This independence movement « inevitably led to a “Moldovanisation” or “De-Russification” of power structures. By 1991, ethnic Moldovans occupied nearly 90 per cent of leadership positions within the government and the state administration. »³⁷ Hence, just as is the case for Moldova, the PMR was, by its actions, seeking recognition. The PMR held referendums on independence in January and May of 1990. The importance of obtaining an official status for the Transdnestria cannot be underestimated as these referendums were unquestionably in favor of the establishment of the PMR. These events shaped an official political agenda for years to come (Ibid : 106). On March 12, the PMR prohibited the use of the Latin script and it refused in April to accept the new Moldovan tri-color flag. Later in June, Tiraspol sought to create an economic free zone with Chisinau in which Russian was the official language.

Phase 2: September 1991 – June 1992

Policy of recognition = 0, Absent

By the time the second phase was commenced, the PMR had already consolidated power within its territory. Efforts from here on out, were focused on maintaining its security apparatus and rebuffing Moldova’s advances. Transdnestria was not seeking to reassure or to play any role in its drive towards independence; its perception was that it was purely reacting to Moldovan aggression.

Conclusion

The Moldovan-Transdnestrian case study represents a unique opportunity to academics in that it demonstrates the limitations of rational deterrence in relation to the difficulty of interpreting actors’ intentions. Ambiguous signals from Russia and the lack of an overt 14th Army agenda (until very late in the second phase) were significant factors that affected the outcome of this conflict. While

³⁶ Charles King cited in : Roper, 2001 : 105.

³⁷ « Moldova : No Quick Fix », op. cit., p. 3

rational deterrence would indicate that Moldova should have been able to either deter, coerce, or defeat the PMR during the first phase of the crisis, what it does not take into account is the overwhelming negative impact that Moldova's national policies had on the left bank population and the resulting perception of mis-recognition.

Additionally, this case study provides further clarification on the causes of conflict. What this confirms is that a substantive analysis requires a return to the root causes. From a causal perspective, such analysis helps to us to better grasp and evaluate the ripening of a conflictual situation. For both Moldova and Transdnistria, economic interests were of major concern. Their fears only became a reality when their interests were potentially in jeopardy. When we observe the chain of events that takes place over time we note that factors such as identity, language, and nationalism all had an impact at a crucial time. The fact that the two banks were not in conflict prior to August of 1989 (when the language laws were passed) provides evidence of the influence of such factors on the perceptions of left bank Russian-speaking population. As such, they must be considered to be triggering factors of the conflict, and bring new significance and importance to considerations regarding the role of security and economic aspects.

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