

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**Moldova &
The Dniestr Region:
Contested Past,
Frozen Present,
Speculative Futures?**

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Key Points

- * The Dniestr region has consolidated its status and power as an independent entity. It boasts a regime run by 'President' Smirnov that is characterised by "superpresidentialism", a viable legal and illegal economy, strong symbols of statehood, and sustainable military formations and foreign policy pretensions.
- * The Russian Federation has helped sustain the Dniestr region as a quasi-independent entity through direct and indirect means. It has yet to cut subsidies, collect debts, enforce visa restrictions or withdraw FSB direction.
- * Until late 2003 the OSCE-sponsored conflict resolution format appeared ready to accept a federal solution. The rejection of this option by President Voronin signified a shift in the strategic reorientation westwards of Moldova, causing a breakdown in Chisinau-Tiraspol relations and deterioration in Moldovan-Russian relations.
- * Although Moldova is now of rising strategic importance on the EU agenda the EU's energy dependence on Russia (60% of imports) suggests the EU cannot enforce a resolution process that lacks Russian support. Following the "Orange Revolution", Russia is more rather than less likely to uphold its remaining sphere of influence in post-Soviet space.
- * The underlying dynamics that shape the internal security politics of Moldova remain unchanged; the 6 March 2005 Parliamentary elections will have little impact on this reality.

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Moldova & The Dniestr Region: Contested Past, Frozen Present, Speculative Futures?

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Introduction

The influence of a separatist Transdnistria - or *Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika* (PMR) - project had as disruptive impact on Moldovan security politics. The existence of PMR appears an insurmountable block on the consolidation and democratization of the post-Soviet Moldovan state. It corrupts political life within Moldova and frames the nature of Moldova's relations with its nearest neighbours Ukraine and Romania, as well as the Russian Federation, the legal successor state to the USSR.¹ As an unresolved "frozen conflict", it also poses serious "credibility traps" for external actors, such as the OSCE or EU: failure to negotiate a conflict settlement undermines their credibility to external actors; failure to attempt resolution questions their legitimacy and utility. After more than a decade following the introduction of an OSCE sponsored conflict resolution process, PMR has emerged as a diplomatically isolated haven for trans-national criminals and possibly terrorists, but it appears to be economically sustainable and its very survival and durability raises the possibility of its eventual emergence as an independent state.²

This paper addresses four key questions. Why did PMR come into being? How might we characterize the core and defining dynamics of power in PMR ('super-presidentialism', illegal political economy and foreign policy pretensions)? What is the status and effectiveness of current conflict resolution projects? How may the complex relationship between Chisinau and Tiraspol evolve in the future?

The Security Politics of a Contested Past

The preconditions and roots of current post-Soviet Chisinau-Tiraspol relations were grounded in the manner in which the Soviet Union expanded as a consequence of the Great Patriotic War (1941-45). The post-1945 experience serves as a leitmotif in Moldova's historical development: the history of Moldova is one of constant change and contestation of territory and so identities and loyalties. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Principality of Moldova stretched between the Carpathian Mountains and Dniester River. From the 16th to the early 19th century control of the Moldovan territory was disputed between several powers with the Ottoman Empire and Russia as the main rivals. Numerous wars took place and borders and identities were in constant flux, but by the 19th century historical socio-economic differences between right bank Moldova and Transdnistria had become embedded. The Treaty of Bucharest (1812) granted Russia control of eastern Moldova or Bessarabia, the area between the River Prut and the west bank of the Dniester. The Ottoman Empire took control of western Moldova and in 1878 the Ottomans recognized the independence of a Romanian state including western Moldova. Following the October 1917 Russian revolution, Bessarabia declared independence (1918) and its

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parliament called for union with Romania. The Treaty of Paris (1920) recognised the union of Bessarabia with Romania, but the Bolsheviks did not, establishing in 1924 the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) on the territory east of the Dniester River within Ukraine.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, followed by the annexation of the Baltic republics, Western Ukraine, and Moldova by the USSR in 1944–45, helped pave the way for the creation of an “outer empire” through the installation of Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1948. As a result of this treaty Romania was carved up between Germany and USSR, with Bessarabia incorporated through annexation into USSR and combined with most of the MASSR to form the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). Between 1941–1945 a Romanian puppet regime was installed in the Moldavian SSR but driven out shortly before the end of the war when the USSR regained control. In the post-1945 period during the Sovietization (largely Russification) of Moldova, Transdnistria became the centre of heavy industries and the military industrial complex, while Western Moldova was developed as a centre of agriculture. Transdnistria was also a strategic communications hub for the republic, generating political as well as economic elites who were either Russians or Russified Moldovans. Indeed, under state-directed Soviet migration policy, Soviet immigrants doubled their share of the Transdnistrian population during this period. Though Moldovans remained the largest ethnic group in Transdnistria by 1989 with 39.3% of the population, there were 28.3% Ukrainians and 25.5% Russians.³ The Soviet 14th Army was located on its territory. In short, Transdnistria was the centre of military, economic and political gravity of the SSR.

In the late 1980s a resurgence of Moldovan assertive republicanism, which fed into a nationalist sentiment unleashed by the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, took hold. This period witnessed the gradual Moldovanization (de-Russification) of power structures in the SSR and in 1990 Moldova declared its sovereignty along with other republics on the periphery of the Soviet Union. The Gagauz people in the southwest of the republic declared their independence, followed by the Transdnistria region. Although the central power in Chisinau annulled these declarations, elections were held nonetheless in these localities. By 1991, as the Soviet Union collapsed, Moldova’s independence was accepted and it joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The unofficial status of the Moldavian SSR as the breadbasket and vineyard of the Soviet Union was to be sharply contrasted with the experience after 1991: Moldovan links with the Soviet command-control economic system were shattered and the independent Moldova emerged as an unstable, marginal and peripheral entity; a forgotten backwater left to languish in the weeds of a transformed international system.

In the post-Soviet period, the Russian Federation has successfully disentangled itself from the Baltic States and Western Ukraine, but it is still embroiled in PMR and so remains central to shaping Moldovan security politics. In many ways, PMR might be considered as the Kaliningrad of the Black Sea region. This analogy is not to suggest that PMR is Russian sovereign territory: it is not, as Russia acknowledges. Nor is it to argue that Russia should renounce sovereignty over Kaliningrad: the 1975 Helsinki Final Acts must be upheld. It is, though, to argue that PMR is akin to Kaliningrad to the extent that tensions between Russia’s geo-political and geo-economic interests are apparent in its approach to the region. It is also to suggest that a political settlement to this frozen conflict might serve as a litmus test (or, in the Putin–Kaliningrad formulation, “a pilot project”) that demonstrates and showcases the capacity for cooperation between Russia and the

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EU in the Black Sea region. Only EU–Russian cooperation can facilitate the reintegration of PMR into a stable and sovereign Moldova. Such a negotiated reintegration process might also then serve as a template for the reintegration of South Osetia and Abkhazia into a sovereign Georgia.

Frozen Present: PMR’s Consolidation as an Independent Entity

The Moldova–PMR conflict was most violent in June 1992, with over 1000 casualties, and particularly heavy fighting in the towns of Dubasari and Bendery on the Dniestr River. The Russian 14th Army under General Lebed was deployed as a peacekeeping force – its troops by then were mostly local to the region – but it rapidly became unclear to what extent Moscow controlled Lebed at the Tiraspol HQ, and to what extent Lebed was able to exercise control over sub-units during this period.⁴ This caveat aside, Lebed did denounce the Chisinau leadership as “war criminals” fronting a “fascist state”.⁵ On 21 July 1992, presidents Snegur of Moldova and Yeltsin of Russia signed a ceasefire, and a tripartite peacekeeping force came into being.

The following April 27, the OSCE opened a long-term mission in Chisinau and provided a framework for a comprehensive conflict settlement based on 5 principles:

- ‘immediacy’ (there is a moral imperative to act as Moldova has since 1992 entered a downward spiral of development);
- ‘acceptable’ (the two sides of the dispute and the political process must give fair rights and representation to all sides and both sides should vote on whether the settlement is valid and legitimate);
- ‘harmonized’ (according to international laws, justice and practices – that is in accordance with respect for human rights, elections, good governance and OSCE standards);
- ‘supported’ (by the international community – so that they give economic support, deploy expertise and manage a whole range of tasks to reintegrate Moldova);
- and ‘sustainable’ (security sector reform must be central to the process as this ensures sustainability, the constitution cannot have inherent conflicts between the centre and the regions and must enjoy the support of the majority of residents).

On 24 November 1994 a new constitution proclaimed Moldova’s neutrality. The Constitution granted a special autonomy status to PMR and the Gagauz region and declared Moldovan to be the official language. In 1997 negotiations were resumed with PMR, and an agreement signed granting further autonomy and calling for more talks. It is clear that through the 1990s the Tiraspol elites preferred to uphold the status quo to achieving a settlement of the conflict: the institutionalization of the status quo in PMR has been achieved through the use of state-type institutions to consolidate power. Thus, many analysts and informed observers have argued that the OSCE approach to the political settlement has facilitated the emergence of a *de facto* independent PMR.

The Tiraspol elite under the control of “President” Igor Smirnov, who holds a diplomatic passport issued by the Russian Federation, has advanced PMR’s corporate interests “through lobbying, economic opportunism, political posturing

and creative negotiating”.⁶ Grigori Marakutsa, Speaker of the Supreme Soviet in Tiraspol, stated on 26 December 2003: “Every year we are getting closer to our international recognition”.⁷ PMR has all of the symbolic and many of the actual attributes of an independent state: a constitution, president, national bank and currency judiciary, army, police and militia, strong internal security services, national anthem, coat of arms, and a flag – not to mention the national football stadium.⁸ It also exhibits foreign policy pretensions. In combination these defining characteristics raise the question: what occurs in PMR and who benefits?

Smirnov has stated that PMR “is historically geared to the priority of ties with Russia and Ukraine”.⁹ At the same time it has maintained permanent contacts with leaders of the breakaway republics of South Osetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. On 2 June 2004, for example, Vladimir Smirnov promised to aid South Osetia, including the provision of military help, if Georgia resorted to the use of force: “We [the Dniester region, Abkhazia and South Osetia] have signed a treaty on mutual help in difficult times. If there is an act of aggression, we will not stand aside, we will provide our brothers with all-round help, including military help.” Commenting on the situation in South Osetia following the “Rose Revolution” of November 2003, Smirnov stated that he saw it

“as nothing other but preparations for an act of aggression by Tbilisi. There is nothing strange here. While speaking about the interests of the people, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili is using force rather than methods supported by the people. The developments in South Osetia in the last few days have seen unfriendly steps by the Georgian leaders towards the people of South Osetia, who are friendly towards us. We must prevent an act of aggression.”¹⁰

On 4 October 2004 the three “foreign ministers” of Abkhazia, South Osetia and PMR accused the governments in Chisinau and Tbilisi of

“violation of the existing security and stability system. Given these conditions, Russia holds in continuation the key position in prevention of sizeable armed conflicts. The attempts to discredit the Russian peace maintenance mission are determined by the will to revise and change the historical role of the Russian Federation, actions that could produce unpredictable and dangerous consequences spilling over the regional framework.”

They argued that only the CIS could negotiate a resolution to the conflicts between Chisinau and Tiraspol, and between Tbilisi and Sukhumi and Tzchinali.¹¹ According to Grigory Marakutsa, in 2005 PMR will open diplomatic representations in Moscow and Kiev and \$250,000 has been earmarked in PMR’s budget for this purpose.¹² This prospect is less likely following the result of the Ukrainian presidential elections, however.

PMR can be considered a “super-presidential republic,” in that all political power resides with the presidency.¹³ The president appoints and dismisses all heads of administration and ministers to the Cabinet of Ministers (which replaced the office of prime minister, and is chaired by the president), and an indeterminate legal environment is maintained. The PMR Minister of National Security, Vladimir Antyufeyev, formerly headed an OMON unit in Latvia during the “January events” of 1991 and is currently wanted by Interpol for the murder of Latvian journalists during this period. He restored and reformed the Cossack forces in PMR, and is

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believed to be under the control of and in permanent consultation with Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel and is perceived to be the right hand of the Smirnov clan.

The relationship between Russia and PMR is difficult to characterize precisely. As one report noted: "At its most mischievous, the Kremlin's strategy may view Transdnistria as a second version of Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave near Poland - in other words, a trouble-making outpost on the borders of NATO."¹⁴ Another analyst has argued: "Moscow has tended to see the EU, US and OSCE as rivals for geopolitical influence in its 'turf' rather than as partners in efforts to mediate the serious conflict between the legitimate government in Chisinau and the PMR."¹⁵ President Voronin has concluded that Russia's role is complete and decisive in shaping PMR policy. After the experience of the Kozak Memorandum process (see below) of late 2003, Voronin concluded that President Putin has both the opportunity and the capacity to influence the Tiraspol regime: "I am convinced that, if Russia wants it, this Smirnov will not stay even two hours longer in Tiraspol."¹⁶ This is perhaps to overstate the case, though Russian influence is undoubtedly strong, underwritten as it is by \$50m a year in energy subsidies, which are now calculated from the early 1990s to the present to be the equivalent of \$1bn with interest.¹⁷

Material aid for the Smirnov regime from the Russian government is reinforced by acts of symbolic support by governmental officials. To take one example, on 2 September 2004, PMR marked the 13th anniversary of secession from Moldova with Soviet songs, self-praise and a military parade in Tiraspol. The parade featured "regular troops", "border guards", militiamen, a rapid reaction force, and Russian Cossacks. Pilots, infantry, artillery, radio and communication troops, and bomb disposal experts took part in the parade. A visiting Russian delegation, led by the deputy chairman of the State Duma, Sergey Baburin, told *Olvia-Press* (PMR's press service) that "one genuine reality must be accepted: Moldova is today made of two states - the Moldovan Transdnistrian Republic and the Republic of Moldova, while the Transdnistrians have fully demonstrated their right to choose their fate alone".¹⁸ Moldova has little ability to curtail such contacts, as highlighted in February 2005, when Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin described a visit by a group of Russian MPs to Moldova's breakaway Dniester region without Chisinau's consent as 'interference into Moldova's domestic affairs': "unfortunately nobody informed us about the intention of the State Duma deputies to visit the Dniester region."¹⁹

Political and military levers of control in PMR are buttressed by a managed economic order, both legal and illegal. Sherrif Company, a corporation under the control of the president's son, is PMR's largest business. The Russian firm ITERA controls the majority of shares in the Moldovan Metallurgical Plant (at Ribnita), which generates two-thirds of the region's tax revenues, and the Cuciurgan power station and KVINT brandy factory also provide the PMR with "state" revenues. Smirnov has stated that PMR has a \$53m positive trade balance with the US, Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic, and that "Trade with CIS member countries totalled 639m dollars in the first 11 months of 2004, of which imports made up 440m dollars". Italy, the US, Portugal, Germany, Greece and Poland are among PMR's main trade partners in the West: Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the CIS. In 2004 "imports" from Moldova fell by 20% and "exports" by 15% after economic sanctions were imposed in August (see below), according to Smirnov.²⁰ Just over 50% of PMR's officially registered exports are directed towards two key markets - Russia and Russian companies registered in North Cyprus.²¹

The illegal economy is widely perceived to be dominant and is fostered by PMR's indeterminate legal status. Romanian Foreign Minister Mircea Geoana, for example, characterized the PMR as "a black hole of trans-border organized crime, including drug smuggling, human trafficking, and arms smuggling".²² Trafficked humans, particularly women and children, are transported primarily to the Balkans, UAE, Turkey and Western European 'markets'. President Voronin himself noted that "foreign specialists" and analysts have "calculated that about 2-3bn dollars are being laundered in this black Dniestr zone annually".²³

Elements of the Soviet-era military-industrial complex, which were located in PMR during the Soviet period, are still active. Some arms factories such as the Elektromah and Tochlitmash works produce weapons for the Russian military. However, since the conclusion of the civil war in 1992 there has been a steady stream of allegations that the PMR "defence ministry" sells the products of secret military production lines and surplus materials on the black market to countries involved in regional conflicts or even terrorist organizations, including Chechen rebels and the Abkhaz regime, who are well positioned to purchase such weapons.

In 1993, seven Grad (rocket) units assembled in Tiraspol from Russian parts were sent to Abkhazia, according to an expert analyst Oazu Nantoi, programme director at the Institute of Public Policy (IPP) in Chisinau: "Most probably, the equipment was loaded onto railway carriages and taken to [the Ukrainian cities of] Odessa, Ilychivsk and Mykolayiv, from where they were shipped to Abkhazia. This means that this is an international gunrunning network." In 1998, V Nemkov (a lieutenant-colonel in the PMR armed forces) admitted that he had sold Igla air-to-surface rockets from the Cobasna arms depot in 1996-97. In autumn 2000, Vasilyok mortars, which are manufactured only by factories located in PMR, were seized by the Russian armed forces from Chechen rebels. More recently, in May 2004 three rocket launchers were allegedly sold to Chechen rebels for \$150,000. The airport in Tiraspol is not part of the "security zone" and so OSCE and other foreign observers are unable to monitor exports. The chairman of the Moldovan parliamentary committee for national security, Iurie Stoicov, has stated that he had "information from foreign secret services that certain criminal groups in the Dniester region are selling weapons. Any activities in the Dniester region related to selling armaments abroad are illegal. Any weapons being sold without a strict record may fall into the hands of terrorists, criminal groups or other structures." However, the OSCE mission spokesman, Claus Neukirch, cautioned: "There is often talk about the sale of armaments from the Dniester region, but there is no convincing evidence."²⁴

The status and role of PMR in shaping Moldova's internal security politics and the wider region – particularly its relationship with Abkhazia and South Osetia and associated informal criminal networks – has implications for economic and political elites in Ukraine. Not only does Ukraine share 460 kilometres of the PMR segment of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border (which is widely considered to be porous), but also there are currently approximately 300,000 ethnic Ukrainians resident in PMR. Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs have taken part in the PMR privatization process, profiting from and contributing to both the legal and illegal political economy. The five-sided conflict resolution format ideally suits the business interests of these companies as it effectively freezes the conflict and upholds the profitable status quo and according to one analyst: "With Moscow's open support, the Dniester region has fulfilled no agreements signed at the five-party talks since 1999."²⁵

Conflict Resolution: from Istanbul to the ‘Kozak Memorandum’

The 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit agreed that the deadline for the withdrawal of Russian troops and ammunition from PMR would be 2002. However, following the Istanbul Summit PMR halted the withdrawal of Russian military hardware, which had been proceeding in accordance with international agreements. In December 2002, at the Porto OSCE Ministerial, the deadline for the withdrawal of Russian weapons from PMR was extended until the end of 2003, and then subsequently further extended into 2004. Russia declared its “intention” to do this, “provided the necessary conditions are in place”, so serving, in the eyes of many observers to the process, to underscore the ineffectiveness of the five-sided OSCE sponsored conflict resolution format.

The 14th Army has been perceived as a Russian lever of control over PMR, and therefore over the strategic orientation of Moldova proper. However, it is increasingly clear to Moscow that new political levers of control need to be developed and the OSCE Porto Summit appears to have signalled that the West was less interested in Moldova, and that Russia was free to take the lead. This provided the opportunity to switch from military to primarily political levers of control in the shape of Russian-sponsored federalization plans. After a visit to Moscow on 7-9 February 2003 by President Voronin, the “Voronin Initiative” appeared on 11 February 2003. This initiative was President Voronin’s contribution to a political settlement based on federal principles and appears to operate on the logic of: “You have the power, we have the control.” The “Kozak Memorandum” was presented on 17 November 2003, and can be understood as the Russian political response to the diminishing utility of military levers of control in PMR. Dmitry Kozak, First Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration, was considered a personal representative of President Putin (he was subsequently promoted to chief of staff in the presidential administration) and he introduced a “Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the State Structure of a United State”. This suggested a “federation on a contractual basis” that would allow the right of PMR secession and recognition of PMR independence, and the “two equal subjects/two unit federation” formula allowed the possibility of a PMR veto of all federal laws.²⁶

On 5 November 2003 President Voronin met OSCE chairman Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (currently NATO Secretary-General) and began to reconsider his position on federalization plans. Although Voronin had initialled each page of the Kozak Memorandum, he had not actually signed it, allowing him to disavow it on 24 November 2003. At the OSCE summit in Maastricht, held from 1–3 December, it became clear that Western OCSE states did not consider Moscow’s approach constructive. The US, EU and European NATO states subsequently rejected the Kozak Memorandum. The US Secretary of State Powell praised the OSCE’s “constructive multilateralism”, and President Voronin highlighted the necessity of Moldovan integration into “Western” Europe as a policy priority.

As a result, it appears that President Voronin and his ruling Communist Party then came under pressure from Moscow. As no party comes to power in Moldova without Russian financial and campaign support, the fact that Serafim Uruchean, the mayor of Chisinau visited Moscow in early 2004 - albeit for “hospital treatment” - was newsworthy. Voronin was facing an implicit choice: Moscow would back or threaten to back an opposition candidate and party in the spring 2005 parliamentary elections unless Voronin ceased his refusal to support the logic of the Kozak Memorandum. Voronin’s choice was to cooperate with Moscow or run the risk of

being replaced by an alternative Moscow-supported candidate. On 17 February 2004, without any publicity, the Moldovan Minister of Reintegration presented OSCE mediators with the “Chisinau view” - the Moldovan government’s comments on the OSCE document that was the basis of the negotiations. However, as the “Chisinau view” was “Kozak II” in all but name, Voronin appeared to have accepted this implicit deal.²⁷

Moldova, or more accurately Voronin, was caught trying to balance stronger tendencies toward European integration with continued Russian influence (as embodied in “Kozak II”). As Vladimir Socor, a prominent analyst of Moldovan security politics has asked, “What kind of political and security order are we to have in this long Moldovan sector? A Communist-run, remote-controlled Russian satellite, or a democratized and European-oriented neighbour? This is what's at stake in the controversy over ‘federalization’.” This question might best be understood as embodying the dualities present in the person of the president, and can be characterized as a battle between upholding Moldova’s national interest and continuing to ensure his personal political viability and hold on power. By early to mid-2004, in the absence of a clear EU policy, even an optimist might well have concluded that Moldova’s national interest would only be upheld as an unintended by-product of the political infighting between Voronin and opposition parties (that the President alleged were Russian-supported). Reorientation towards the West might well have occurred, but only by default rather than by design.

2004: An *Annus Horribilis* in Chisinau-Tiraspol Relations

However, the certainties and absolutes that had characterized political calculations began to change though 2004. The ongoing low-intensity “frozen conflict” between Chisinau and Tiraspol began to heat up as 2004 unfolded. In February 2004, the foreign ministers of EU member states decided to extend the one-year travel ban imposed in February 2003 on 17 senior PMR leaders, including Igor Smirnov and his two sons. The ministers said the stance of the separatist leadership, which they said remained unwilling to engage in full efforts to reach a peaceful and comprehensive solution, was “unacceptable”.²⁸

The regime of visa sanctions against the PMR leadership was intensified in July 2004 in reaction to Tiraspol’s harassment of six Moldovan-language schools (that is, schools that use the Latin rather than Cyrillic alphabet) after the failure of the boards of these schools to register with the PMR authorities. Following a discussion by member states of the EU in the Political and Security Committee (PSC), the EU called on the PMR leadership to halt the intimidation campaign that forced the closure of these schools, condemned the actions taken by PMR armed police, and warned that it would consider “appropriate measures” against those responsible should the situation not improve. The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Rolf Ekeus, characterised the closure as “linguistic cleansing” and on 22 July the OSCE Permanent Council described the PMR actions as “irresponsible and provocative”.²⁹

In response to the schools crisis, on 1 August 2004 the Moldovan customs authorities suspended the customs service to PMR businesses that were not registered in Moldova (that is, did not pay taxes to Moldova), the Chamber of Commerce and Industry ceased issuing origin certificates and Moldovan Railways withdrew the provision of carriages for companies based in PMR. All government privileges to PMR companies were suspended. That very day PMR militia (consisting

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of women's and youth organizations, as well as the "Union of Dniester Defenders and the Black Sea Cossack Troops") retaliated by seizing control of a vital railway station in Bendery (Tighina). An "emergency meeting" of the security council of PMR on 30 July stated: "This will completely destabilize the Moldovan economy and, coupled with suspension of power and gas supply, will spell disaster for the state."³⁰ Moldovan railways halted four PMR trains on 2 August after the Dniester authorities had delayed a Moldovan train in Ribnita for 24 hours and suspended all trains passing through the town of Bendery.³¹ Both Igor Smirnov and the Russian Foreign Ministry described the measure as economic blockade.³²

The Moldovan Ministry of Defence issued an official denial of supposed plans to attack PMR, indicating the extent to which the schools crisis and railway blockade had heightened tension between Chisinau and Tiraspol.³³ This tension was alleviated when Igor Smirnov met a delegation of the EU led by the director-general of the General Secretariat of the EU Council for External Economic Relations, Common Foreign and Security Policy, Robert Cooper. Cooper noted that the visit took place at the personal request of the EU high representative for foreign policy and security, Javier Solana, and stated: "Moldova will shortly become our neighbour, and we hope the crisis will be defused by the beginning of the new school year." He suggested an OSCE draft protocol could become "a solution to the problem". In response, Smirnov argued that Moldovan authorities had sought to exploit the schools issue for political capital ahead of the 2005 parliamentary elections: "The real problem is that an election campaign has started in Moldova. Therefore, if the schools weren't there, Messrs Communists (the Moldovan authorities) would have found some other pretext to put pressure. Their aim is obvious - to tarnish the Dniester Moldovan republic's international reputation."³⁴

On 12 October 2004, at a conference dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Igor Smirnov announced that PMR would hold a referendum to "to prove the legitimacy" of its independence. The results of the referendum would become law and force the international community to acknowledge the PMR people's will: "We must hold a national referendum, with international observers to make sure that there can be no doubt about the legitimacy of our state. The results of the referendum will be a law for us, a law that the international community, above all the United States, the European Union and the OSCE, will have to respect".³⁵ Smirnov had previously argued in August 2004 that holding separate referendums in Moldova and PMR to settle the PMR-Moldovan conflict was a possibility. Such action would be in accordance with the Cyprus settlement model of conflict resolution, and would afford the people of PMR "the right to self-determination".³⁶

These proposed actions point to the emergence of a more concrete PMR strategy aimed at moving beyond the status quo of frozen conflict to outright independence. Smirnov has attempted to manipulate events in order to confront Russia and Ukraine with a dilemma: to choose between a renewed war between Tiraspol and Chisinau or avoid the war by recognising PMR as an independent and sovereign state. In either case, Moldova is rendered a weak and unstable entity, unable to either assimilate PMR or contain the spillover of instability. Ultimately this would allow for the realization of the 'Belkovskiy plan': independence of PMR and the integration of Moldova into Romania.³⁷

A variant of this geopolitical reordering of the western shore of the Black Sea involved the integration of PMR into Ukraine after a "civilized divorce" from Moldova. Vladimir Bodnar is the chairman of the PMR parliamentary committee for security

and defence, the leader of the Union of Ukrainians in PMR (he holds a Ukrainian passport). He has been described as “a key ideologue of the separatist regime” and appears to support such an option.³⁸ Bodnar has chided Ukraine for ignoring the Ukrainian diaspora in PMR (of the 300,000 Ukrainians in PMR, 40,000-50,000 are Ukrainian citizens) for failing to invest in the region and open a consulate:

“Everyone is talking about the Kozak project, but where is the Kiev project? Even if it doesn't exist, we should have it and not be supporting the Kremlin's plan. Ukraine, like always, is left in the bushes. Things could change if Russia and Ukraine, as countries guaranteeing the regulation of the Dniester conflict, had equal conditions; that is, had an equal military and diplomatic presence on the territory of the PMR, equal economic capabilities. But now they only have (equality) in the name: ‘countries-guarantor’.”

He also supported calls for a referendum to resolve PMR's status vis-à-vis Moldova: “Do people want to be with Ukraine? Or do they want to be with Russia? Or should this small territory remain an independent state? Or, after all, should it become part of a Moldovan federation? Let us ask the people! Let the referendum be held under the auspices of the UN and European organizations.”³⁹

Smirnov will not entertain the prospect of the integration of PMR into Moldova proper. It would spell the end of his power base and raise the prospect of legal prosecution. Currently, a “soft landing” option that would provide immunity from personal prosecution and the opportunity to export capital to some third destination does not appear to be in the offing.

2005: A Consolidation of Moldova's Strategic Reorientation?

So much for EU carrots; what of its use of sticks? Chisinau and the West lack the means and capacity to force the Smirnov regime to comply. Following the events in Ukraine, it is likely that Russia will seek to assert its national state interest even more strongly where it can as compensation, and thus it is likely to strengthen, not weaken or sever ties with PMR. Rationally, Russia will seek to use such influence as it has as a bargaining chip in diplomacy with Western institutions, looking for quid pro quos in return for supporting either a negotiated conflict settlement or for adopting a more muscular approach (for example, by cutting subsidies, collecting debts, enforcing visa restrictions, withdrawing FSB direction) to pressure the PMR regime to capitulate.

President Voronin's willingness to compromise Moldova's sovereignty so apparent in late 2003 was reversed through 2004, mainly as a result of frustration at Tiraspol's intransigence and unwillingness to fulfil agreed commitments. Coincidentally - Smirnov argues that this was the primary purpose - such actions also had the effect of accruing political capital ahead of the parliamentary election in spring of 2005. In September and October 2004 Voronin stated that his administration would no longer negotiate with the Transdnistriean administration and noted that the idea of federalization was now to be considered outdated (no reason to prolong an “imposed script” according to the “negative practice of the process of negotiations”), confirming other conflict resolution methods would be applied. He argued that a multinational peace mission should replace Russian peacekeepers in PMR: “instead of respecting the treaty and help Moldova settle this conflict, Russian forces support Smirnov and his regime”. Current negotiations had produced little by way of

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substantive results and “Smirnov and the Russian and Ukrainian authorities are seeking to freeze the conflict and let the Transdnistrians cement their independence”.⁴⁰ Voronin dismissed such talks as “fruitless and counter-productive. We have analyzed the situation and found out the sides have already signed 99 documents. Moldova abides by 99% of them, and Transdnistria - 1%.”⁴¹

This echoed an earlier statement in which he stressed: “All these years, the Transdnistriean regime has been and will remain a puppet regime, because it is ruled from the capitals of Russia and Ukraine. A lasting settlement of the Transdnistriean conflict depends in fact entirely on the Russian Federation's position. We want to clarify this position to the very end.”⁴² His statements were surprisingly vociferous and colourful, identifying a litany of abuse and corrupt practice, attacking Tiraspol’s “aggressive militarism”, “secret police repression”, “intimidation of the population”, “linguistic cleansing” and “brutality towards children”. Indeed, not to mince words, PMR’s leadership represented a “totalitarian regime of a fascist type” led by “a handful of adventurers who had robbed 700,000 people of the right enter the 21st century”.⁴³

From President Voronin’s perspective, in terms of moving the conflict resolution agenda to a format and process better suited to Chisinau’s objectives, 2003-2004 can be understood as a success. The status and implications of PMR are no longer viewed as an internal Moldovan security issue, but rather, in the words of one Moldovan newspaper: “If so far Europe viewed the Dniester conflict as a scandal between two villages located on different banks of the Dniester river, now the international community admits that this conflict threatens regional and even continental security.” Moldova’s reintegration will increasingly be supported by the EU and US and so included in their working agendas, as well as the OSCE.⁴⁴ Voronin’s bottom line is that “The Dniester region can receive the broadest powers on the condition that the region remains an integral part of Moldova ... We have grown cold towards the federalization idea and there can be no return to it.”⁴⁵

Given these new realities, what might Western policy makers within the EU do to help create and implement a policy that has a stronger focus on conflict resolution and so a greater chance of success? The European Parliament resolution on Moldova, passed on 18 December 2003, characterized the state as having a weak administration that lacks effective democratic controls, noted that eighty percent of the market is informal and that little tax revenue is raised, and charged that controls over the Eastern border were non-existent and the social system was ineffective. Moldova, for example, only accounts for a meagre 0.04% of EU’s imports. Ivan Borisavijevic, the European Commission's envoy to Moldova, stated in March 2004 that the main obstacles on the road of Moldova's integration with the EU are the Transdnistriean conflict, corruption, and poverty, as well as a lack of genuine reforms. As a result it will take Moldova at least 10-15 years to catch up with those former communist countries that have approached EU living standards in the last decade. Progress is undermined by the weakness of the economy, an underdeveloped infrastructure, limited investments, and high levels of corruption.

The EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched in May 2004. The aim of ENP is to promote prosperity and stability through the promise of the extension of ‘4 freedoms’ to the EU’s neighbours. The ENP has buttressed the existing contractual frameworks – Partnership and Cooperation Agreement – which govern relations between the EU and Moldova. This policy needs support to become an effective instrument of stabilization and Moldova provides an opportunity and a challenge to it.

There are compelling reasons why the PMR frozen conflict should be considered an issue of rising strategic importance. First, by 2007, Romania will be an EU member state (or by 2010, if delays arise), and the “soft security” threats that emanate from PMR will have become more obvious and less easy to dismiss—particularly as similar “soft security” threats in the Balkans will hopefully diminish as Balkan reintegration into the Euro-Atlantic security order gathers pace. Second, as EU third-echelon enlargement in the Black Sea region (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia) will be unlikely, EU contributions to the unification of Moldova is likely to be presented as a compensatory alternative to membership. Third, as the Balkans stabilize and the European Security and Defence Policy gains operational confidence and strength, it will become harder to avoid the logic of the deployment of civilian and/or military instruments in PMR. Fourth, a failure to uphold the credibility of the EU’s wider partnership policies will be exposed by inaction. For its part, Moldova has few other strategic options than to embrace closer EU integration given the September 2003 decision by Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan to sign an agreement to form their own common market before 2010, so undermining the utility of the CIS.

In early November 2004, Ambassador Ian Boag, the new chief of the European Commission Delegation to Moldova, based in Kiev, stated that the EU seeks a more active role in the PMR settlement process “to develop practical actions aimed to create a favourable environment for settlement of the Transdnestrrian crisis”.⁴⁶ The Commission has recently proposed to Moldova and Ukraine to implement a computerized system to exchange information between the customs services of both countries. The system is aimed at fighting illegal trafficking on the border and other crime. The EU begun to discuss a proposal for Action Plans with Moldova (as well as Ukraine, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Israel, Palestinian Authority) and the establishment of an EU office in Chisinau. The EU Action Plan was signed on 22 February 2005, and the newly appointed EU envoy was only given reporting authority and was not empowered to negotiate.

At the same time, Moldovan officials at the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna have invited the US and EU to become more actively involved in the settlement of the conflict in PMR.⁴⁷ They also called on Russia, Ukraine and Romania to support the declaration of stability and security for Moldova in order for Moldova to enter the Stability Pact during the OSCE Council of Ministers in Sofia, 6-7 December 2004. This initiative had the support of Javier Solana, the EU Foreign and Security Policy Chief, and suggested a very real alignment of the Republic of Moldova and the EU.⁴⁸

The OSCE Council of Ministers adopted a draft but failed to adopt a final document at the end of the Sofia session because of lack of consensus, though most OSCE member states said Russia remained under the obligation to withdraw its troops and weapons from Moldova and Georgia. The deputy head of the CIS states department at the Russian Foreign Ministry, Nikolay Fomin, stated: “Russia will not sign the declaration on stability and security for Moldova. In the basic political accord Russia admitted territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Moldova. This is enough for development of the relations between our states and it meets mutual interests.”⁴⁹

According to OSCE sources, the draft declaration reiterated the obligation for the Russian Federation to respect its commitments assumed at the 1999 Istanbul summit regarding the complete and unconditional withdrawal of troops and ammunition from Moldova. US Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that the US

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would make its ratification of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Adapted Treaty conditional upon the willingness of the Russian Federation to fulfil its commitments on unconditional withdrawal of all troops and ammunition from Moldova and Georgia, assumed at the Istanbul summit. Moldovan Foreign Minister Andrei Stratan stated: “The presence of Russian troops in Moldova is illegitimate, because it violates Moldovan laws and international treaties.”⁵⁰

Following the election of President Yushchenko of Ukraine in late 2004, it is highly likely that Ukraine will seek to speed up its strategic reorientation westwards and support OSCE and EU efforts to secure conflict resolution. To this end, Ukraine will probably be far more willing to effectively close the PMR–Ukrainian border and deprive the illegal economy of its transit routes. In late January 2005, following a meeting at the inauguration ceremony of President Yushchenko, Ukraine and Moldova resumed talks on enhancing control at the border between the two countries.⁵¹ The newly appointed Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Boris Tarasyuk identified the Transdnistria settlement efforts as “one of the most important tasks of Ukraine's national security.” In a very strongly worded statement he noted that Ukraine regards Transdnistria as:

“Europe's black hole, where very few get fabulously rich while hundreds of thousand eke out hand-to-mouth existence. I am convinced that the existence of the Transdnistrian and other puppet regimes, impeding the building of a unified Europe, are strategically disadvantageous for the Russian Federation as well ... We must recognize also that the illegitimate, corrupt regimes of self-styled republics have nothing in common with the legitimate rights of the people living in such territories.”

Signalling a new approach to PMR and a more active and independent role within the OSCE-sponsored five sided format, he stated: “Terms such as ‘sanitary cordons’, ‘red lines’, ‘spheres of influence’ and the like ought to be withdrawn from European diplomats’ vocabulary. Ukraine is not an exercise ground for geopolitical battles between the European Union, United States, and Russian Federation.”⁵²

The results of the presidential elections in Romania have also reinforced the pressure for Moldova to consolidate its strategic reorientation westwards. Romania's new President Traian Basescu declared Romania's willingness to participate in the negotiation process on the settlement of the Transdnistrian conflict during a press conference in Moscow in mid-February 2005: “no matter what would be the final variant of the Transdnistrian settlement, it must be based on respect for Republic of Moldova's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity”. He also underscored Romania's support for the process of Moldovan European integration: “The European partnership with Moldova is not only a project, but a priority. In the first place, we shall support Chisinau's steps, aimed at the implementation of the RM-EU Action Plan.”⁵³

It is also clear that President Voronin of Moldova has hardened his attacks against Smirnov and Russian support for PMR and appears much more willing to entertain closer EU integration efforts. In late January 2005 Voronin prevented Russian and Ukrainian ambassadors entering Tiraspol, leading Smirnov to respond: “Moldovan authorities' decision to ban the entrance to the Dniester region by Russian and Ukrainian diplomats Nikolai Ryabov and Pyotr Chkalov pursues far-reaching aims.” In his view, “attempts are made to put an end to Russia's presence in the Dniester region and replace Russian peacekeepers will foreign ones. In addition, this is made to change the format of the talks - with the involvement of the US, the EU and

Romania. Moldova is trying to exclude the Dniester region as a participant in the talks.”⁵⁴

Future Trends/Plus Ca Change?

Looking to the 6 March 2005 parliamentary elections in Moldova, Smirnov has stated that it is too early to make any forecasts about the winner: “We are ready to continue talks in the future but only on an equal footing. Nobody will allow Chisinau to impose rules on the Dniester nation.”⁵⁵ PMR authorities will not allow citizens living within PMR territory to vote in the parliamentary elections. PMR authorities have also dismissed the elections as an important factor in challenging the status quo. Grigoriy Marakutsa, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, has stated: “there is no reason to expect any major breakthrough in relations with Chisinau in 2005” following the elections. “There is no serious political force in Moldova which could be described as friendly towards the Dniester region. If the Communist Party remains in power, one can expect only more tension. If another party wins, it will not be a friend of ours either.”⁵⁶ Smirnov noted with alarm the prospect that Russia would adopt a reduced role in the settlement of the Dniestr conflict and has sought to maintain the five-sided format.⁵⁷

It is clear that the 2003 OSCE–Russia–Ukraine moves to federalize Moldova, thereby giving greater legitimacy to PMR, would not have been in the longer-term interests of the EU or Moldova. However, while there are compelling reasons why the EU and NATO should focus on Moldova, and it is likely that pressure will continue to build for Moldova to become an issue of rising strategic importance, it is not clear if this process can occur in a decisive manner. Despite the fact that in early 2005 the EU announced its intention to appoint a special envoy to Moldova to help end the frozen conflict,⁵⁸ the PMR elite remains intransigent. Moreover, as the EU is 60% energy dependent on the Russian Federation and has higher priorities in its agenda than conflict settlement and resolution in PMR, the prospects of somehow strong-arming Russia are unrealistic.

Indeed, the expectation that Russia after the “Orange Revolution” might acquiesce to a negotiated settlement, and so accept a reduction in its ability to manage its sphere of influence, remains slim. As Gleb Pavlovsky, an advisor to President Putin, announced: “Russia is currently revising its policy in the post-Soviet space and the mechanisms of its implementation.” As a general principle, “any country [that would] promote the doctrine of Russia’s rollback will certainly create a conflict in relations with this country. This must be clearly understood.”⁵⁹ Konstantin Zatulin, a member of the State Duma committee on CIS affairs, reiterated this contention, arguing: “At least, we are a superpower in the territory of the former Soviet Union. I mean the CIS and the Baltic states. We are a superpower in relation to Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia.”⁶⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Moldovan state officials, not least President Voronin, refer to this territory as the Dniestr region rather than PMR. My grateful thanks to Anne Aldis, Jos Boonstra and Mel Huang for comments and feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. All errors of fact and weaknesses of interpretation remain mine alone.

² In parts of the OSCE frozen conflicts still remain frozen fifteen years after the end of the Cold War. Little headway has been made toward resolution of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh or in breakaway regions of Moldova and Georgia.

³ Marius Vahl & Michael Emerson, 'Moldova and the Transdnestrian Conflict', in *Europeanization and Conflict Resolution: Case Studies from the European Periphery* (Ghent, Academic Press, 2004), p4.

⁴ Moscow did threaten to bomb Chisinau's airfield in retaliation for a successful raid by Moldova on PMR positions. Author's confidential source.

⁵ Trevor Waters, "Security Concerns in Post-Soviet Moldova", Paper G94, Conflict Studies Research Centre, April 2001, p5 & 8.

⁶ Nicolas Whyte, "Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transdnestria", International Crisis Group, 17 June 2004. Nicholas Whyte is Director of ICG's Europe Programme.

⁷ "No End in Sight", *IWPR'S Balkan Crisis Report*, No 524, 5 November 2004.

⁸ In the late 1990s an ethnic Russian businessman, Victor Gusan, founded a football team, named Sheriff, in Tiraspol. Sheriff has won the league every season since 2001. Chris Stephen, "More trouble expected on terraces than on field as Moldova switches stadiums back to capital", *The Irish Times*, 13 October 2004, p12. The strength of the illegal economy supports symbols of statehood.

⁹ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Moscow, 31 March 2004.

¹⁰ "Moldovan Breakaway Region Pledges To Help South Osetia In Dispute With Georgia", *Interfax news agency*, Moscow, in Russian, 2 June 2004.

¹¹ "Transdnestria, Abkhazia and South Osetia Claim that Moldova and Georgia Would Like to Use Force", BASA-PRESS, 5 October 2004.

¹² Infotag news agency, Chisinau, in Russian, 21 December 2004.

¹³ "Residents of Transdnestria cannot elect their leaders democratically, and they are also unable to participate freely in Moldovan elections". See: Freedom House Report on Transdnestria for 2004:

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2004/countryratings/moldova-Transdnestria.htm>. See also: "Severe Violations of Human Rights in the Transdnestrian Region of Moldova", Statement by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) and the Moldovan Helsinki Committee, 11 August 2004:

http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=3955.

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¹⁶ ProTV, Chisinau, in Moldovan, 1 December 2004.

¹⁷ Tod Lindberg, "Turmoil in Transdnestria", *The Washington Times*, 1 June 2004.

¹⁸ "Transdnestria Marks 13th Anniversary of Secession from Moldova with Military Parade in Tiraspol", BASA-PRESS, 2 September 2004.

¹⁹ Infotag news agency, Chisinau, in Russian, 9 February 2005.

²⁰ Infotag news agency, Chisinau, in Russian, 28 December 2004: "In August-September 2004 alone, the losses from exports totalled 41.38m dollars, while another 32m dollars' worth of products failed to be exported."

²¹ Vladimir Socor, "Western Diplomacy Unmoved by "Linguistic Cleansing" in TransDniestr", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 August 2004.

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²⁴ Dumitru Lazur, "Tiraspol rockets for Chechens", *Jurnal de Chisinau*, Chisinau, in Moldovan, 28 May 2004.

²⁵ Corneliu Mihalache, "Government Paper Defends Moldova's "Pro-Western" Stance", *Moldova Suverana*, Chisinau, 21 October 2004, p1.

²⁶ "Forum of Moldovan Non-governmental Organizations Not Warming Present Federalization Project", November 20 2003: BASA-PRESS, <http://www.azi.md/news?ID=26740>; Vladimir Socor, "Pro-Western Moldovan Groups Resisting Russian-Controlled "Federalization", *IASPS Policy Briefings: Geostrategic Perspectives on Eurasia*, Advanced Strategic & Political Studies, Washington, DC, 26 November 2003 Number: 41.

²⁷ Author's confidential interview, Chisinau, Spring 2004.

²⁸ World of Information Moldova Country Report, 18 May 2004, p1.

- ²⁹ Europe Information Service European Report, 31 July 2004. Up to eight schools in PMR are said to use the Latin script to teach Moldovan students. The Moldovan language is virtually identical to Romanian. PMR authorities claim that Moldovan is only an official language of the region when written in Cyrillic script. Five thousand pupils have been studying the language in the Latin script for over ten years.
- ³⁰ Moldova received 60% of its power supply from the Cuciurgan power station (located in PMR) and imports Russian gas via a pipeline that transits PMR. According to a decree by President Igor Smirnov, imports from Moldova into the Dniester region are subject to a 100% duty. *Infotag news agency*, Chisinau, in Russian, 2 August 2004.
- ³¹ *ITAR-TASS news agency*, Moscow, in Russian, 3 August 2004.
- ³² Nicholas Whyte, "In Search of a Solution", *IWPR'S Balkan Crisis Report*, No 524, 5 November, 2004; "Moldovan-Dniester Railway War Enters Second Day", ProTV, Chisinau, in Moldovan, 3 August 2004.
- ³³ Moldovan Radio, Chisinau, in Russian, 4 August 2004.
- ³⁴ Olvia-press web site, Tiraspol, in Russian, 10 August 2004. PMR education minister, Yelena Bomesenko, noted that the education system of PMR was based on Russian standards, while Moldova adopts a Romanian-French model.
- ³⁵ Olvia-press web site, Tiraspol, in Russian, 12 October 2004. An opinion poll published on 11 October said that two-thirds of respondents back a referendum on independence (see Olvia-press news agency web site, Tiraspol, in Russian, 11 October 2004).
- ³⁶ Olvia-press web site, Tiraspol, in Russian, 31 August 2004.
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This article is written in memory of Trevor Waters (1940-2003).

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