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INTRODUCTION

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In June 1990, following the example set by Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Republic, the Supreme Soviet in Chişinău declared Moldova sovereign. Henceforth, Moldovans would recognize only those laws approved by their own parliament and maintain relations with the other republics only within "an association of sovereign states." Formal independence came a year later, on 27 August 1991, following the failure of the Moscow coup that sought to unseat Mikhail Gorbachev and preserve the Soviet Union. In the heady times that followed, Moldovans debated basic questions of political organization and, inevitably, the difficult issue of Moldova's relationship with neighboring Romania.

About two-thirds of Moldova's population are ethnic "Moldovans" who speak a language, sometimes called Moldovan or Moldavian, that is indistinguishable from standard Romanian. Ukrainians comprise 14% of Moldova's population, Russians 13%, the Turkic Gagauz 3.5%, and Bulgarians 2%. Some nationalists and intellectuals feel strongly that Moldovans have been severed from their Mediterranean ties "by force of geopolitical and historical circumstances."[1] Indeed, in 1812 Russia annexed Bessarabia, the territory between the Dnestr and the Prut Rivers that comprises the bulk of Moldova. In 1918, after the collapse of the tsarist empire, Bessarabia united with Romania, remaining part of that country until 2 August 1940, when Stalin reannexed it, establishing the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In an effort to diminish Romanian national feeling, the Soviet government proclaimed "Moldovan" an independent language. The Russian language became the language of public affairs, and Russians were placed in positions of authority, effectively blocking ethnic Moldovans "from participating in their own country's development."[2] Thus, in August 1989, even before declaring itself sovereign, Moldova distanced itself from Slavic culture by declaring "Moldovan" its official language.

The toppling of Romania's brutal Ceauşescu regime in December of that year spurred additional interest in reunification; but as Bucharest struggled in its efforts to create democratic institutions and improve its dismal economy, most Moldovans came to favor international recognition as an independent state, a position championed by President Mircea Snegur. In August 1991 Romania became the first state to recognize Moldova's independence, but Bucharest continued to assert that decades of russification had "culturally disabled"[3] Moldova, and the two states failed even to develop substantial commercial ties.

In the elections that followed independence, in December 1991, 82% of Moldova's voters turned out to elect an unopposed Snegur president. Moldovans

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appeared to support both political and economic reform and the idea that Moldova should stand alone, politically distinct from Romania and independent of any union with the other former Soviet republics.[4] However, in 1991 the left-bank region of Transnistria (also referred to as Dnestria or the Dnestr Republic in this volume) seceded from Moldova. Ethnic Russians comprise about 25% of Transnistria's population, and ethnic Ukrainians comprise another 28%. Most of the breakaway forces came from these groups who predominate in Transnistria's largest towns, Tiraspol and Ribnitsa. Romanian-speaking "Moldovans" comprise more than 40% of the region's population, but as a predominantly rural population, they are politically disadvantaged. Moreover, the breakaway forces were aided by Russia's 14th Army, stationed in Transnistria, and many prominent political figures in Moscow defended the right of Transnistria to join the Russian Federation. Of the former Soviet republics, only Moldova faced an insurgency in which the Russian army openly backed the insurgents.

The Snegur government in Chişinău worked hard to build support among its own right-bank minorities. In 1993 it backed away from the idea that Moldova was a second Romanian state, emphasizing instead that Moldova was a *multiethnic* society. The Snegur government also developed an extensive network of Russian schools and publishing facilities, helping it maintain the loyalty of most of the right-bank Russian population; it established a Gagauz university in Comrat; and it signed treaties with Ukraine and Bulgaria guaranteeing rights for ethnic Ukrainians and Bulgarians in Moldova. Russia was offered, but declined to sign, a similar pact.[5]

In February 1994, the Democratic Agrarian Party (PDAM) won control of Moldova's parliament and on 6 March held a non-binding referendum on the issue of reunification. The results were decisive. Although neither the Gagauz nor the Transnistrians participated in the referendum, three-quarters of the electorate turned out, and 95% rejected reunification in favor of independence. Romania questioned the validity of the referendum, "suggesting that the entire Romanian population must vote on reunification."[6]

Negotiations over the difficult issue of Transnistrian separatism continued. On 21 October 1994, Chişinău and Moscow agreed that withdrawal of the 14th Army, now called the Operational Group of Forces, would be synchronized with a political settlement and occur over a three-year period. But, as Stuart Kaufman and Stephen Bowers point out in this volume, Moscow interpreted this agreement to mean that the army would be withdrawn over a three-year period *after* a final agreement on Transnistria's future status was made. Tiraspol had little incentive to make concessions as long as the 14th Army remained, and little progress was made toward a political settlement. In February 1995, Snegur and Yeltsin signed a protocol permitting joint military activity if either side requested it to ensure regional stability. Many Moldovans believed that this agreement encouraged even greater Russian involvement in their affairs.

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In December 1995, after rejecting Chişinău's offer of "autonomous republican" status, Tiraspol held its own referendum, overwhelmingly approving a new constitution that proclaimed the region a sovereign and independent state. Russian politicians divided over the issue. Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov and ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky openly supported the new constitution, which went into effect on 17 January 1996. But two days later, Yeltsin, Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma, and Snegur jointly guaranteed Moldova's territorial integrity, recognizing Transnistria as a constituent part with a "special status."[7] Both Yeltsin and Kuchma had reasons to uphold the principle of territorial integrity. Yeltsin had invoked the principle in justifying his unpopular war against Chechnya, while Kuchma hoped to consolidate Ukraine's frontiers with both Russia and Romania. Ukrainian–Romanian relations were complicated by Stalin's seizure of northern Bukovina and southern Bessarabia from Romania during the Second World War. In addition, Bucharest contested the loss of Serpents' Island in the Black Sea, which had been Romanian between 1878 and 1948 and which has air defense installations and probably gas and oil deposits.

During the campaign to join the Council of Europe in early 1996, the Yeltsin government again pledged to withdraw Russian troops from Transnistria, even while some high-ranking officials continued to call for a permanent military base in the region. However, the Russian Duma consistently opposed any concessions in Transnistria. On 9 February 1996, by a vote of 301 to 4, it approved a resolution stating that Russian troops should remain in the region because they played "a stabilizing role." The resolution also asked that a Russian consulate be opened in the "Dnestr Republic."[8] In November 1996, by a vote of 284 to 29, the Duma declared Transnistria "a zone of special strategic interest for Russia" and requested that Yeltsin consider installing a permanent military base there.

On 17 June 1996, Snegur and Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov initialed an agreement that seemed to ratify the status quo: namely, that Transnistria function as an independent state. However, needing the support of the political Right in the forthcoming presidential election, Snegur subsequently refused to sign the agreement and generated further controversy by acknowledging that Russia's Transnistrian forces carried a peacekeeping mandate, which seemed to justify their presence.[9]

The good news is that Moldovans can debate the ongoing controversies generated by Transnistrian separatism because Moldova continues to develop democratic institutions. Despite its many problems, the tiny country managed to adopt a new constitution on 28 July 1994. Inevitably, the constitution rekindled the language controversy by declaring "Moldovan" the official language of the country. Snegur and others tried to change the official language to Romanian, arguing that it is possible for Moldovans to be independent but still speak Romanian, much in the way that independent Austrians speak German. On 9 February 1996, these efforts were rejected by the Moldovan parliament by a 58 to 25 vote.

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The first presidential campaign under the new constitution was held in the fall of 1996. Economic issues predominated. After all, Moldova's GDP and its industrial output had fallen by a record 8% during 1996,[10] and the GDP was probably less than one-half what it had been in 1990. Said one elderly worker who had not received her pension in three months: "Before, we were the richest republic in the Soviet Union. Things have never been worse here."[11] Transnistria's fuel imports from Russia account for more than one-half of Moldova's foreign debt,[12] and Moldova as a whole remains dependent on Russia for energy and raw materials and on the CIS for agricultural markets.

During the campaign Snegur supported independent Moldovan statehood, even while allying himself with the Popular Front, which continued to seek a united Moldovan–Romanian state. Snegur curtailed media coverage of his opponents, blamed Moldova's parliament for the decline of real wages and the high social cost of economic reform, called his adversaries "traitors" and "enemies of the people," and warned that he would "turn to the people" in a referendum to dissolve the parliament, even though the constitution did not give him this right.[13] Snegur's authoritarian rhetoric thus became a central issue in the campaign, and, in a run-off election on 1 December 1996, Snegur was defeated by former parliamentary speaker Petru Lucinschi, who had no party affiliation. According to one observer, Moldovans preferred Lucinschi's Western image and his emphasis on the importance of divided political authority. "[Snegur's] strategy of intimidation proved less effective than might have been expected from a population conditioned from Soviet days to obey and vote for the number one leader and to fear reprisals for the slightest disobedience."[14]

On 8 May 1997, Lucinschi and Smirnov signed a memorandum recognizing the integrity of Moldova's Soviet-era borders (specifically those of 1990). The agreement states that Moldova and Transnistria will work together "within the framework of a single state," but Tiraspol interprets this to mean a confederation of two internationally recognized entities. Although Yeltsin and Kuchma also signed the document, Russian troops will remain until Tiraspol asks them to leave. The Smirnov government opposes withdrawal, and, in the view of one analyst, "the agreement puts little pressure on Tiraspol to do anything more than agree to further talks."[15]

On 2 June 1997, Romania and Ukraine signed a treaty confirming their existing borders and signifying that Bucharest had given up its claim to teritory in Bessarabia and Bukovina. Negotiations defining maritime borders are to continue. And, Ukraine has agreed not to deploy offensive weapons on Serpents' Island. Romania's objective is to join NATO, and Constantinescu and Kuchma announced that the treaty "closes the book on past disputes in the name of a common future, and facilitates both countries' joint entry into Europe as full partners."[16] Two days earlier, Kuchma signed an accord with Russia, settling their differences over the Black Sea fleet and winning Moscow's renunciation of any claim to Ukrainian territory.

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For Moldova, the most pressing issues continue to be economic. The winter of 1996–1997 brought some of the coldest weather in 50 years—and the grim news that Russia's Gazprom had decided to dramatically cut its gas deliveries. In the view of Julie Mostov, "Relying on Russian energy without having the resources to pay for it is, at present, at least as dangerous to Moldova's sovereignty as the physical presence of Russian troops."[17] Trade with the CIS has declined recently, due largely to the imposition of Ukrainian tariffs, but there is good news as well. Except for Transnistria, where inflation continues at about 20–30% per month, inflation has been brought under control. By mid-1996, the private sector already accounted for at least 60% of GDP, and some 14,000 private farms had been established.[18] Responding in part to pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, Lucinschi is trying to raise the pension age, privatize the energy sector, and expedite the buying and selling of land. Parliamentary elections, now scheduled for February 1998, may be held earlier if parliament continues to block these and other reform initiatives.

This special volume of *Nationalities Papers* analyzes Moldova's conflicts and accomplishments in detail, while providing broad historical perspectives. Michael Hamm begins the volume by examining the growth and development of tsarist Chişinău, then officially called by its Russian name, Kishinev. The frontier community, he suggests, had a distinctive history and blend of peoples which gave it an exotic flavor for Russians and Romanians alike. Wim van Meurs documents the evolution of the quest for a Moldovan national identity, and Charles King examines the dynamics of "indigenization" in the interwar Moldovan ASSR. "The syntax of Moldovan essentially has remained Romanian," according to Donald Dyer, who concludes his essay by discussing the political significance of the language issue.

Jeff Chinn and Steven Roper assess Gagauz objectives and the December 1994 agreement to give the Gagauz autonomy. "For Europe," they observe, "this agreement broke new ground in granting a small nation control of its affairs within a larger state." The conflict in Transnistria is analyzed in two jointly-written essays. The Norwegian scholar Pål Kolstø and the Russian scholar Andrei Malgin argue that neither ethnicity nor ideology adequately describes this conflict. "[W]hat lies at the bottom of the left bank's resistance to Chişinău domination is a vague but nevertheless tangible common identity of most of its population. This identity cuts across ethnic divisions and owes more to history and geography than to ideology." Stuart Kaufman and Stephen Bowers agree that the conflict is not in every way ethnic, but point out that "ethnic Russians were the leading force in Tiraspol's secessionist movement, while ethnic Moldovan nationalists were the driving force in attempts to suppress them." In the final essay, William Crowther argues that broad-based agreement on key reform issues cuts across ethnic lines, helping ensure the triumph of moderate political forces. There is substantial popular support, he finds, "for constructing a model of majority/minority relations sufficiently agreeable to all parties to ensure a stable political community."

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For all of their problems, it should be pointed out that most Moldovans are comfortable with their independent existence and believe that their tiny country is better off on its own, and not as part of another country.[19] Overall, it can be argued that Moldova "boasts a rare degree of tension-free interethnic coexistence," and that Moldovans have displayed considerable tolerance for the diversity that is theirs.[20]

(18 September 1997)

NOTES

1. Algimantas Prazauskas, "Foreign Policies of the Western Littoral States," in Roman Szporluk, ed., *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), p. 169.
2. Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Autopsy of an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 37.
3. William Crowther, "Moldova after Independence," *Current History*, October 1994, p. 346.
4. Vladimir Socor, "Moldavia Builds a New State," *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 3 January 1992, pp. 42–45.
5. Vladimir Socor, "Moldova's 'Dniester' Ulcer," *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1 January 1993, pp. 15–16.
6. Rudolf Mark, "Moldova: Progress Amid Crisis," *Transition: 1994 in Review*, Vol. II, p. 59.
7. Dan Ionescu, *OMRI Daily Digest*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 23 January 1996; The Jamestown Foundation, *Monitor*, Vol. II, No. 18, 26 January 1996.
8. The Jamestown Foundation, *Monitor*, Vol. II, No. 31, 14 February 1996.
9. *OMRI Daily Digest*, Vol. 118, No. 2, 18 June 1996; The Jamestown Foundation, *Fortnight in Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 26 July 1996.
10. *OMRI Daily Digest,* Vol. 16, No. 2, 23 January 1997.
11. Cited in Paul Hockenos, "Where the Mighty Have Fallen, Modest Moldova Stands Tall," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 December 1996, p. 6.
12. The Jamestown Foundation, *Monitor*, Vol. II, No. 189, 10 October 1996.
13. The Jamestown Foundation, *The Fortnight in Review*, Vol. I, No. 11, 6 December 1996.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Julie Mostov, "Trading Priorities: Transdniestria and the Moldovan Economy," *ACE Analysis of Current Events*, Vol. 9, No. 7, July 1997, p. 3. See also The Jamestown Foundation, *Monitor*, Vol. III, No. 91, 8 May 1997.
16. The Jamestown Foundation, *Monitor,* Vol. III, No. 108, 3 June 1997. Some Romanian politicians expressed concerns. Teodor Melescanu, deputy chairman of the Party of Social Democracy, worried that the treaty did not adequately protect Romanian minority rights in Ukraine. Some nationalists called it treasonous. See *RFE/RL Newsline*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 5 May 1997.
17. Mostov, "Trading Priorities," p. 11.
18. According to Moldovan Minister of Privatization Ceslau Ciobanu, cited in The Jamestown Foundation, *Monitor*, Vol. II, No. 95, 16 May 1996. See also, *ibid.*, p. 11.
19. Hockenos, "Where the Mighty Have Fallen," p. 6.
20. The Jamestown Foundation, *The Fortnight in Review,* Vol. I, No. 11, 6 December 1996.

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