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PEOPLE'S PEACEMAKING PERSPECTIVES

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Transnistria

IT IS OVER TWENTY YEARS SINCE TRANSNISTRIA, a sliver of land on the east bank of the River Nistru, broke away from the rest of Moldova amidst the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Violent conflict ended with the ceasefire of 1992. There have been occasional clashes since, but no fatalities. Yet, the unresolved conflict has separated a generation of Moldovans and Transnistrians.

Transnistria has deep economic problems and little prospect of being recognised, even by Russia. Moldova has little hope of European Union (EU) membership while the status of Transnistria remains unresolved. The current impasse benefits the business interests of those who are close to ruling elites and suits some external players, but it harms the prospects for ordinary people on both sides of the divide.

Many of those consulted in the region recognise that the Moldovan-Transnistrian dispute is ultimately a strategic issue that will require agreement with outside parties in order to resolve it. They are looking for EU leadership to help find a solution.

Findings and recommendations in this Policy Brief and accompanying report were generated from consultations which, for the first time, brought together separate representative groups on either side of the divide. Reflecting the views of youth, women and business people, the report provides valuable non-elite perspectives on the situation and a range of concrete actions to improve the lives of ordinary people and build confidence and support for a resolution. These perspectives were reinforced by interviews with politicians and experts in Chisinau, Tiraspol and Berlin.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **Sustaining high-level EU engagement** and commitment to Moldova's alignment with the EU and resolution of the Transnistrian issue will drive forward progress.
- **Addressing economic aspects of the conflict** will help improve local people's lives and build confidence between Chisinau and Tiraspol.
- **Ensuring long-term support for social contact** across the divide will prevent the growing separation of the younger generation becoming an obstacle to resolution.
- **Providing unbiased research and information** on the consequences of stalemate and potential resolution will dispel fears and misperceptions on both sides of the divide.
- **Including Transnistria in Moldova's EU alignment process** will help ensure that this alleviates, rather than exacerbates the conflict.

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission's Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

"It is important that you asked us our opinion, projects should begin with the people."

Director of NGO, Tiraspol

Findings and Recommendations

1.

Sustaining high-level EU engagement and commitment to Moldova's alignment with the EU and resolution of the Transnistrian issue will drive forward progress.

Groups consulted on both sides of the river felt that external actors, in particular Russia, were key to unlocking the Transnistrian problem. Students in Chisinau thought the EU should press Russia more on resolution. These views echoed results of a survey in 2009 by New Age/CBS-AXA which revealed a majority on each side of the river (65% West Bank, 60% in Transnistria) thought that the EU and Russia were the players who could solve the problem.

"Politics in small countries is decided by big countries."

Participant, women's research group, Chisinau

Yet people on both banks expressed cynicism towards progress through high-level negotiations to date. These have taken place through the '5+2' format, comprising Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, plus US and EU. Russia has sponsored a parallel track of *ad hoc* bilateral Moldova-Transnistrian meetings. Responding to periodic calls to change the '5+2' format would, however, distract attention and effort from the ultimate goal of a settlement.

The German-Russian initiative in 2010, which put forward resolution of the Transnistrian issue as a potential area of joint EU-Russia collaboration on political and security issues, was perceived positively by all groups. Yet, as in the past, the initiative was *ad hoc* and loosely coordinated. The EU lacks a strategic and unified approach to the issue, and adequate staff resources in the External Action Service (EEAS) and EU Delegation to develop and implement this. Cooperation and buy-in to any process from neighbouring Ukraine will also be vital.

"The '5+2' was created to keep the conflict going."

Director of policy think-tank, Chisinau

Finally, concerns were expressed in Chisinau that events in the Middle East and North Africa might divert EU resources and political attention away from its eastern borders to its southern neighbourhood. Regardless of funding decisions, it is important that momentum on Moldova's EU alignment and resolution of the conflict is not lost.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Signal continued commitment to Moldova's EU ambitions by renewing political and financial commitments to the Eastern Partnership countries, including Moldova, and through high-level visits and statements following the adoption of the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).
- Ensure that the emerging 'more for more' approach, whereby EU funding keeps step with progress on alignment, is applied in the Moldova context.
- Build on existing engagement and initiatives to develop a coherent strategy across Member States and EU institutions, and adequately resource the EAS and Delegation to help its implementation.
- Work with Russia to demonstrate that a resolution will not harm Russia's long-term interests and on a strategy for managing the wider economy in the event of a resolution, including the Transnistrian budget deficit.
- Begin work with Ukraine now to help prepare Ukraine's chairmanship of the OSCE in 2013 to ensure continuity in the peacebuilding process.

2.

Addressing economic aspects of the conflict will help improve people's lives and build confidence between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

Moldova is the poorest country in Europe so it is not surprising that there are particular concerns over the economic components and costs of a settlement. Yet some of the economic obstacles to a resolution cited by local people could be addressed in advance of a final settlement, potentially making such a resolution more achievable.

"The first thing we have to think about is our families ... how they can live well; we gain nothing by talking about a solution on Transnistria."

Participant in youth group discussion, Soldanesti, northern Moldova

For Transnistrians in particular, the prospect of reintegration with Moldova raises certain fears: would private business ownerships be recognised (particularly of former Moldovan state enterprises); would the large numbers of 'state' employees lose their jobs?

Businesses and residents on both banks of the river highlighted the daily difficulties faced in cross-river trade and travel, due to taxes, tariffs and bureaucracy. A particular concern was the lack of recognition of documents, particularly passports.

"It would be useful to find a way to have a valid passport."

Participant in research group, Transnistria



A women only seminar convened by the OSCE discusses issues affecting Moldova.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Work with Chisinau to help develop a strategy for a resolution which addresses Transnistrian concerns on:
 - the status of enterprises privatised by Transnistrian administration
 - job security of Transnistrian public sector workers
 - the position of Transnistrian military personnel, including programmes for reintegration into civilian society
- Work with Moldova and the Transnistrian administration to improve mutual recognition of official documents, such as marriage certificates and child custody decisions.
- Work with Chisinau to make Moldovan passport issuance clearer and easier for Transnistrians.
- Work with the Transnistrian administration to fully open crossings, including the EU-funded Gura Bicului bridge, and to cancel the 100 percent customs duty for goods brought in from the rest of Moldova.
- Work with Moldova and the Transnistrian administration to facilitate banking links across the Nistru and to the EU.

“Ten years ago people in Transnistria wanted integration [with Moldova] or recognition; now their concern is for the economy.”

Economist, Tiraspol

A Divided Economy

A theme running through all the research groups, on both sides of the River Nistru, was that ordinary people would be better off if the Transnistrian problem were resolved. Yet resolution was not their priority; the primary concern of those consulted was how to improve their poor economic situation and life chances.

Given the statistics, this is not surprising. Moldova remains the poorest country in Europe. Average monthly income is around 80 euros. Unemployment is high and an estimated 500,000 out of a working population of 1.2 million live abroad, either in the EU or in Russia.

All those consulted were concerned about economic conditions. Young people were worried about finding jobs, particularly those in Soldanesti, in the North of Moldova close to the Nistru, who compared their situation to that in Ribnitsa across the river in Transnistria. In Soviet times factories in Soldanesti supplied the heavy industry in Ribnitsa but those plants are now closed. Ribnitsa is probably the most prosperous city in Transnistria. Prices are cheaper than in Soldanesti, wages higher, employment prospects better. Students in Chisinau also remarked on the disparity, “They have factories and industries there; we need investment to match that.” Moldova has so far failed to become economically attractive to Transnistria.

Yet Transnistria has for many years run a budget deficit. In 2011 this is projected to be equivalent to 17 percent of GDP. In effect, Russia funds the gap, sometimes through direct subsidies. Furthermore, while there is comparative prosperity in the Transnistrian cities of Tiraspol, Bender and Ribnitsa, as in the rest of Moldova, the villages are poor. The economy relies on a very small number of large enterprises.

“Our leaders should win the Nobel prize for economics for managing an economy with such a large deficit.”

Businessperson, Tiraspol

The conflict divide hinders trade and business development. Professional women in Chisinau described the difficulties in cross-river business: the non-recognition of Transnistria and bureaucracy on both sides of the river create problems in effecting payments and transport of goods. Young business people in Tiraspol echoed this, adding concerns about red tape, lack of training opportunities and lack of access to reasonably priced investment funds and overseas markets.

Businesses on both sides of the river need support to prepare for exports to the EU; large and small enterprises need loans to expand and access to EU markets. Groups on both banks identified support for business start-ups as a particular requirement. Transnistrians need access to EU finance, especially for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), though to date no mechanism has been established to enable this.

With an ongoing alignment process, a sizeable assistance programme, and as the key export market for both economies, the EU has a pivotal role to play. By addressing the economic symptoms of the conflict, the EU could help build the conditions necessary for its resolution.

3.

Ensuring long-term support for social contact across the divide will prevent the growing separation of the younger generation becoming an obstacle to resolution.

"As a first step, we should respect each other, respecting each other's different cultures."

Participant in youth group discussion, Transnistria

A generation of young Transnistrians and Moldovans are growing up with little or no contact with their peers on the other side of the river. Few young people have crossed the river, and unlike the older generations, they have no shared experience from Soviet times. A new generation of Transnistrians has been brought up to think of the rest of Moldova as a separate country with a different culture. Older participants pointed to this difference between the generations, saying that unlike the younger generation...

"...we find there is common understanding between us [and our counterparts in Chisinau]. We have experience of the Soviet Union: we know what it means to live and work together."

Women's group, Tiraspol

Yet those consulted in the research also highlighted the need, and desire, for increased social and cultural contact across the communities and with their neighbours in the EU and to the East. The risk is that without this, the continued divergence of young people and solidification of a sense of separate identity could constitute an additional barrier to a resolution.

"Our young people should meet and be friends; one day they may be ministers."

University student, Chisinau

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support the creation of cross-river networks for youth, building on OSCE and British Embassy projects in areas such as sport, plus joint music programmes and performances.
- Support technical training (in legislation or engaging with the media, for example) for young parliamentarians/youth wings of political parties.
- Support dialogue and networks between specific groups of young people, such as women and entrepreneurs, drawn from both banks of the Nistru, building on the 'Transnistrian Dialogues' project.
- Support the creation of joint programming for TV, radio, written and online media and social websites on local youth issues, building on the experience of Radio Liberty in Bender and Publika TV in the South.

4.

Providing unbiased research and information on the consequences of stalemate and potential resolution will dispel fears and misperceptions on both sides of the divide.

In consultations on both sides of the Nistru there was a clear lack of information and research about the economic and social consequences of the current stalemate, and the potential costs and benefits of a resolution. This was as true for international actors as it was for Moldovans and Transnistrians.

On both sides of the river, stereotypes colour perceptions of the other side and these are reinforced by myths and rhetoric.

"It is not a conflict zone, not a war zone: no-one is walking around with Kalashnikovs: we are human too!"

Young Transnistrian

Fears about language issues are particularly widespread, with Transnistrians fearing the marginalisation of Russian and imposition of Romanian as the sole official language under any settlement.

"I cannot see how my grandmother will manage if she has to speak to her doctor in Romanian."

Young Transnistrian

The capacity of local civil society and thinktanks to provide a grass-roots perspective and an independent voice has been depleted, particularly in Chisinau where many analysts took up official positions following the 2009 election.

5.

Including Transnistria in Moldova's EU alignment process will help ensure that this alleviates, rather than exacerbates the conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Commission a detailed analysis of the peace dividend, including the economic and political benefits on offer from the EU and a cost/benefit analysis for businesses of resolution options.
- Strengthen the capacity of local civil society and think-tanks to contribute to deeper analysis of the conflict, including through provision of international expertise on technical issues and conflict resolution.
- Support joint research projects in Transnistria and the rest of Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and Romania and stimulate think-tank work in Russia on the benefits to Russia of a resolution.
- Support work on both banks to engage public debate on the tangible benefits to ordinary people of resolution and support the civil society consultative process on Moldova's Transnistria strategy.
- Support programmes to increase public tolerance on language issues and history on both sides of the Nistru.
- Work with media in Transnistria and the rest of Moldova to publicise confidence-building successes, provide more cross-divide coverage and help dispel myths.

The majority of people on both sides of the river favour joining the EU (72 percent in Moldova, 63 percent in Transnistria [New Age/CBS-AXA survey, 2009]). Business people aspire to greater understanding of, and access to, EU markets, while young people look for educational opportunities and improved language skills resulting from greater EU integration.

Many also recognise that in moving towards a resolution, both sides could learn from European experience of multi-lingual states, and of Germany's re-unification experience, for example. However, during the participatory research, Transnistrians in particular, identified a lack of information about the EU as problematic for future business, cultural and social development.

"Russia is very active here ... we do see the EU, but rarely."

Journalist, Tiraspol

As Moldova moves further along the path towards Association (and potentially Accession) with the EU, the government will need to tackle a whole range of economic and political measures associated with alignment. The EU needs to ensure that this process serves to alleviate, rather than exacerbate the conflict. For instance, in order to resolve the issue of inspections of enterprises required as part of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), Transnistria's involvement in negotiations will be vital.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Work with Moldova to include Transnistria in areas where Moldova is aligning with EU norms, and particularly to involve the Transnistrian administration in the negotiations on the DCFTA and Visa Liberalisation.
- Maintain the EU's Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM), which is helping to regularise trade by Transnistrian companies and limit illegal smuggling.
- Establish EU Information Centres on both banks of the river and make information about the EU and the benefits of integration accessible to the wider public.
- Bring Transnistrian higher education establishments into the European Higher Education Area (Bologna process) and promote student exchanges between Moldova, Transnistria and the rest of Europe.
- Support foreign language teaching in Transnistria (particular demand is expressed for English, German and French).
- Continue to fund programmes providing training on EU markets for businesses and support joint Moldovan-Transnistrian trade missions to the EU and its Member States.

"We must put aside our personal ambitions; we must look for a constructive dialogue."

Researcher, Chisinau



Transnistria is a self-declared republic with *de facto* independence and Tiraspol as its administrative capital. No other country recognises Transnistria's independence and Moldova, whose capital is Chisinau, continues to claim sovereignty over the territory. This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Saferworld and Conciliation Resources take no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid.

References and Acknowledgements

The findings in this policy brief were drawn from a wider report entitled *Routes Across the Nistru* conducted by Saferworld under the People's Peacemaking Perspectives project. For full details of the project and the report on which it is based please visit: www.saferworld.org.uk/PPP

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Methodology

In order to gauge the perspectives of the people affected by the conflict, Saferworld convened six separate group consultations: three in Transnistria and three in the rest of Moldova. Two were comprised of women only (one on either side of the divide), while the others involved youth and business people. The number of participants ranged between 8 and 40.

All the meetings were held in the major cities of Chisinau and Tiraspol, with the exception of one youth consultation held in the small town of Soldanesti. This town was selected to provide potentially contrasting perspectives to those in Chisinau. It was also chosen because of its proximity to the Transnistrian town of Ribnitsa on the other side of the river Nistru, because the inhabitants were likely to be more closely affected by the conflict divide.

Consultations were structured to encourage maximum engagement from participants and were conducted in the language which participants felt most comfortable. The main themes for discussion were: whether separation of Transnistria from Moldova was a key concern, what problems stemmed from this separation, and how these problems could be addressed. At the end of each session the moderator summarised the ideas proposed, to allow for 'real time' amendments and additions. Ideas and proposals from the consultations were subsequently approved and validated in discussions with representatives drawn from each of the consultation groups, and with officials and specialists in both Chisinau and Tiraspol. These ideas were also discussed with international experts in London and Berlin.

The cover picture shows a driver from Transnistria buying fresh watermelons from Moldovan farmers on the Chisinau-Dubasari highway. It was kindly provided by

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