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PRIDNESTROVIE

The “Frozen Conflict”

Dr. Francesco Napolitano

Abstract

This work is the result of a research made by the author in 2010, under the guide of Fabio Bettanin, professor of Eastern Studies at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. It focuses on Pridnestrovie, a small patch of land, legally belonging to the Moldavian Republic, located between the eastern bank of the Dniester River and the Moldovan border with Ukraine. Pridnestrovie, during the Soviet period hosted most of the industries located in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In the aftermath of perestroika and the collapse of the USSR, Pridnestrovie declared, with the support of Moscow, its independence from Chisinau.

Compared to the more well-known cases of separatism, such as that of Kosovo, the case of Pridnestrovie differs for various reasons. First of all, Pridnestrovie is located in Eastern Europe, where, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow's influence was predominant. This made the United States and Western Europe, relatively disinterested in the issue. Plus, media coverage of the Pridnestrovie case was scarce during the conflict and even more so in subsequent years. This has led to a general lack of interest on the part of Western public opinion. Only the eastward enlargement of the European Union and NATO, as well as concerns about crime with its ramifications in the region, have given rise to some interest in this area.

Aim of this work is to analyze the case of this reality, where solid economic interests aim to independence and Russia want to silence, either to give an example of his own strenght and ti discredits the legitimacy and opportunity of another solution managed hastily, as Kosovo was.

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Chapter1

Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Res'publika

The crisis of the USSR and the renewing policies of Gorbachev, perestroika and glasnost, had effects on the small Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova, too.

As a state, Moldova was established following the annexation of Romanian Bessarabia in implementation of the Von Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, in 1940.

Fig. 1 – Moldova and Pridnestrovie Republic

During the late Eighties, the majority ethnic Romanian population in Moldova gave rise to various nationalist revolts against Soviet power. The adoption, in 1989, of Moldavian (a variant of Romanian) as the official language, pushed the consistent Russian-speaking minority (about 37% of the population, made up of Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Jews).

To scare the Russian speakers was also the risk of reunification with Romania, repeatedly feared by Chisinau.

The marked nationalist policy of Chisinau then pushed the Russian speakers, led by the leader Igor Smirnov to proclaim the Moldavian Republic of Pridnestrovie (2 September 1990). The Russian name of the new republic was Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika, abbreviated PMR; the capital was placed in Tiraspol, but initially remained in the framework of the USSR).

The presence of the Soviet 14th Army in the region, with its huge military arsenals, complicated the matter, as Moscow's troops immediately sided in favor of Smirnov.

On August 25, 1991, Tiraspol declared its independence, in response to the growing nationalism and rapprochement with Romania by the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian republic. Two days later, on 27 August 1991, the parliament of Chisinau - in turn - proclaimed the independence of Moldova, whose borders would be the same as those of the former Soviet socialist republic and therefore also including the PMR.

Transnational executives, mostly executives of large state-owned industries across the Dniester, were worried about losing their source of power. Snagur, the first president of post-Soviet Moldova, asked for the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Moldovan soil, a request that was promptly ignored.

The armed conflict that ensued saw the Moldovan forces in serious difficulty, due to the support offered by the XIV Army to Russian speakers. Chisinau reluctantly had to accept a ceasefire (21 July 1992), which provided for the establishment of a security zone and the deployment of a Russian interposition force, the XIV Army with a different name, along the Dniestr river, on the border between Pridnestrovie and the rest of Moldova, which effectively guaranteed the survival of the secessionist regime.

Fig. 2 – Security Zone between Moldova and Ukraine

A Joint Control Commission was also created, which also included the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, as well as the parties involved, Russia and Ukraine.

Since then, to enter Pridnestrovie, there are three borders: the first, the one of the Moldavian Republic itself; the second, made up of the Russian interposition force, and the third, the official border of actual Pridnestrovie,

Now, it is certainly worth noting that Pridnestrovie proclaimed its independence before the parliament in Chisinau did. This is a rather important detail, as it could provide some sort of legitimacy for the Tiraspol regime.

At the time of the declarations of independence, the USSR was still formally alive, as it was dissolved by the Supreme Soviet only on December 26, 1991. The Soviet constitution of 1977, in article 72, guaranteed the right of secession only to the federated republics, which was Moldavia, but not Pridnestrovie.

Thus, Tiraspol's declaration of independence was judged illegal and illegitimate by the Chisinau Soviet. Moreover, not even Moscow itself, the main protector of the Republic of Pridnestrovie, has never officially recognized it.

The armed clashes that took place in Pridnestrovie were therefore characterized by the presence of a single international actor heavily involved in the conflict and openly deployed, the USSR first and Russia later. The other major international players, such as the European countries and the United States, but also international organizations such as the UN, have maintained a decidedly low and far-flung profile. The intention not to hinder a government, that of Boris Yeltsin, engaged in the reform process of promotion and liberalization of the Russian market, just out of eighty years of Soviet statism.

Chapter 2

International Actors in Pridnestrovie crisis

Actors in Pridnestrovie crisis are basically three: Romania, Ukraine, Russia and Moldavia.

Romania nurtured hegemonic aims over Moldavia, focusing on the will of the Romanians of Chisinau to reunite with the motherland. This was one of the reasons given by the leaders of Tiraspol to justify the secession of Pridnestrovie. Indeed, some steps taken and some declarations issued by Bucharest hinted at a certain latent desire for annexation.

Ukraine, on the other hand, particularly interested in the issue both for its common borders with Pridnestrovie and for the presence of a sizeable Ukrainian minority in the region, proposed itself instead as a mediator between the parties in the conflict. Kiev urged the parties to find an immediate political solution, and denounced border violations by "unspecified" armed forces involved in the conflict, also forming a "cordon of protection" on the border with Moldova.

However, as we had occasion to mention, however, the main international player during the war was undoubtedly Russia. Gorbachev already used the independence desires of the leaders of Tiraspol to put pressure on the Soviet of Chisinau and keep Moldova united with the USSR. But once the Soviet Union was dissolved, the Kremlin decided that Pridnestrovie could still be useful, both for the economic and strategic importance of the region (where the largest military arsenal in Europe was located, containing the deadly Alazan missiles to warp. nuclear power, and on which, moreover, the Moldovan leaders made more than a thought to arm their nascent army) both for the pressure that Yeltsin could exert on the leaders of Chisinau through it.

In addition, Yeltsin, opposed by nationalist forces in internal politics, used the Pridnestrovie example to demonstrate to his opponents his commitment to the defense of Russian minorities scattered throughout the territories of the former USSR that ended up outside Russian jurisdiction. The same soldiers and officers of the XIV Army, stationed in Pridnestrovie, strongly linked to that land, on several occasions forced the hand of the Moscow government, urging a more interventionist policy.

Russia's interests and objectives in Pridnestrovie were illustrated during a seminar entitled "Perspectives for the solution of the Pridnestrovie conflict", which was held in Moscow on December 17, 1993, just over a year after the end of the armed clashes, and was organized by the Russian Association of Theory and Modeling of International Relations and attended by representatives of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Duma, the Military Staff, the Diplomatic Academy and the Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as the current President of the Russian Republic Medvedev. The Russian goals and interests listed on that occasion were:

- maintain its strategic position in Southeast Europe;
- defend, in Moldova, the interests of the Russian population and of representatives of other nationalities who consider Russia as their historical homeland;

- maintain commercial links with Pridnestrovie companies, some of which were particularly important in the military-industrial sector;
- settle the conflict in the interest of its internal stability and the consolidation of relations between Russia and other neighboring countries in which a Russian minority lives;
- establish more stable and predictable relations with Romania, and not allow the increase of its nationalistic influence on Moldova.

For its part, seemed that Moldavia was the weakest actor in the game. Even if Pridnestrovie is considered part of the Moldavian Republic (Article 110 of the Constitution), basically Moldavia has no jurisdiction over it. Since 1991, Moldovan authorities do not carry out any kind of systematic and formal control on the demarcation line with Pridnestrovie, because from a political point of view, placing customs and border posts on that border would be like officially recognizing its existence and legitimizing its independence.

This situation allowed the Tiraspol regime to continue its trade undisturbed. Pridnestrovie maintains the communist institutional structure inherited from the USSR (this can even be distinguished by the flag, where the hammer and sickle remain on a red background) presenting itself as a sort of presidential republic, where the president is also head of the forces. armed forces and prime minister of a government made up of 13 ministries.

Chapter 3

Pridnestrovie Today

At the time of writing, Pridnestrovie is considered the "black hole" of Europe and source and crossroads of all sorts of smuggling and illicit trafficking.

Its economy is founded on crime and illegality, for the benefit of a small ruling oligarchy that has solid links with the Russian mafia. Much of the illicit trafficking, facilitated by porous borders and complacent customs officials (in both Moldova and Ukraine), has Western Europe as its final destination, particularly criminal organizations.

Chisinau granted the Pridnestrovie militias its own customs stamps, so that even the goods leaving the eastern border were internationally recognized as goods of the Moldavian Republic. However, in September 2001, following the abuses committed by the Smirnov clique, the Moldovan government decided to replace all customs seals by disabling those delivered to Pridnestrovies, thus making the export of Tiraspol products very difficult.

The main source of income from Tiraspol's "alternative" economy is arms smuggling. In fact, in the territory there were and still are immense arsenals of arms of the Soviet army, now Russian.

These arsenals, as well as to arm Smirnov's militias and the XIV Army, were used to fuel the thriving black market in arms. Several factories, disguised as normal production units, actually produce weapons. And even the largest Pridnestrovie company, Sheriff, appears to be involved in these illegal activities.

From its part, Sheriff is not only chaired by Smirnov himself, but it has a turnover that is three times that of PMR. It owns service stations, a supermarket chain, a television channel, a publishing house, a construction company, a Mercedes Benz dealer, companies for the production of bread, telephony and alcohol, as well as the football team of the Pridnestrovie capital and its stadium, plus a five-star hotel.

The greatest concern, however, concerns the possible presence in Pridnestrovie of chemical, bacteriological and nuclear weapons, within the reach of any terrorist group (it is demonstrated that in the region there are subjects linked to various organizations such as Hamas, the Kurdish PKK, Hezbollah, the Gray Wolves and several others).

About seven radioactive isotope "Grad" missile devices have been sold to the Islamic republics of the former USSR, and recently some Alazan warheads disappeared from Tiraspol's arsenals, albeit monitored. In addition, some joint police operations (in which the security forces of Moldova, Ukraine and Romania participated) led to the arrest of some individuals engaged in trafficking in elements of plutonium, Cobalt and Cesium.

As for drugs, Transnistria is an intermediate stage in heroin trafficking, which from Afghanistan arrives in Tiraspol via the former Soviet Central Asian republics and then proceeds to Western Europe, passing through the Balkans (in particular Kosovo).

Flourishing is the market and the trafficking of prostitution, with girls from all over Eastern Europe directed towards the Western one, but equally important is the laundering of dirty money and the smuggling of alcohol, cigarettes, petroleum products (about 60% of diesel and petrol and 80% of the tobaccos arriving in Moldova are smuggled into Transnistria) and various other types of goods.

The smuggling mechanism, however, is quite simple: illegal products are imported, provided with a seal of legitimacy and then re-exported, and the main outlet for these illicit trafficking is the Ukrainian port of Odessa, whose authorities are often in league with the leader of Tiraspol.

Basically, all illicit trafficking and illegal activities in Transnistria are controlled by external criminal organizations, obviously in league with local authorities. Among these, there is Smirnov and his children. Other organizations are the Russian “Solncevo Brigade”, which engages in criminal businesses towards the Middle East, the Caucasus, Afghanistan and the Balkans and the Clan of Zemun (a city near Belgrade) whose boss is Milorad Lukovic, a former soldier of Arkan's infamous “Tigers”.

The Pridnestrovie inhabitants, however, show no prejudices or preferences in their relations, and in fact they also have relations with some Kosovar KLA extremists who have embarked on a criminal career. It is no mystery that Vladimir Antjufeev, an international fugitive, after committing war crimes in Latvia, took refuge in Tiraspol, where Smirnov chose him as minister.

Chapter 4

Pridnestrovie, the Frozen Conflict

The only international organization involved in the attempts to resolve the frozen conflict in Transnistria was the CSCE (later OSCE). However, it must be found that the efforts made by the organization have not been successful, firstly because of its structure and composition and secondly because of the poor coercive capacity it has.

The negotiation process initiated by the OSCE unequivocally ruled out the possibility of recognizing the independence of the PMR, and this provoked strong resentment in the ruling oligarchy of Tiraspol.

One year after the ceasefire, that started on 25 April 1993, the CSCE sent a mission with the aim of facilitating the achievement of a complete and lasting political solution to the conflict. The mission, according to the basis of the 1993 CSCE annual report, planned to facilitate the establishment of a political climate conducive to dialogue and negotiations; collect and provide information on the political and military situation; investigate specific incidents; encourage negotiations and withdrawal of Russian troops

The mission was initially supposed to last six months, but the deadline was extended several times. In fact, since its start, the CSCE mission had coordination problems with the JCC, and there was even no agreed freedom of movement of correspondents in the security area. Only on 20 July 1994 there was an agreement reached that allowed CSCE envoys to travel freely in the area, and investigate specific incidents and attend JCC meetings.

Paradoxically, the agreement reached on 20 July 1994 between the parties and the CSCE mission called even for the withdrawal of the Russian armed forces within three years. This was the source of a large internal debate in Moscow, which even resulted in a political crisis. General Lebed, in fact, who commanded the XIV Army, opposed this withdrawal, even threatening to "twist someone's neck", if necessary, during a speech to the Duma.

In reality, the opposition to the withdrawal of troops from Moldova was just a pretext to foster their own political rise, the basis of which was strong nationalism. Once the political struggle for the 1996 presidential election ended, with Yeltsin reconfirmed as president (and with Lebed's support), the issue of troop withdrawal waned. In any case, the 1994 agreement was not respected and, at the end of the three years foreseen for the withdrawal, the Russian troops remained in their quarters in Transnistria, albeit in reduced ranks.

On May 8, 1997, the better known Moscow Memorandum was signed by the parties. With it the covenants undertook to renounce the use of force to assert their reasons (Article 1), to continue efforts to forge lasting relationships and to proceed immediately with the definition of those relationships and the status of Pridnestrovie, including distribution and delegation skills (Articles 2 to 5). Russia and Ukraine vouched for a definitive solution (Article 6), and signed a Joint Declaration which excluded the possibility of interpreting the Memorandum in a way contrary to OSCE principles or in

such a way as to question the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Moldova (Article 11).

The Memorandum basically provided for the opening of borders, the adoption of a common currency, the harmonization of laws and the withdrawal of Russian troops, but here too the good intentions signed in Moscow remained a dead letter: Chisinau recorded a political victory with the implementation of a political-administrative reform that granted a special status to the Turks of the Gaugatia, while the Pridnestrovie case was forgotten.

On March 20, 1998, the Odessa Agreement was signed by both parties and the so-called "Guarantors", a ten-point document that reconfirmed the principles and commitments made with the Moscow Memorandum. The wake of various meetings, agreements and memoranda, which began under the auspices of the OSCE, continued with the Kiev Meeting of 16 July 1999.

Here too good resolutions were wasted for the resolution of the conflict, but the realities were different and spoke of a conflict that can now be defined as "frozen": a real miniature cold war between Chisinau and Tiraspol, with little prospect of a solution in the short term, given the non-definitive withdrawal of Russian troops and the uncertain and fluctuating Moldovan policy towards the conflict.

Chapter 5

Later developments

As we have seen, during the Nineties and despite Moldova's accession to NATO's Partnership for Peace program and the signing of an economic cooperation agreement with the EU, the West completely disinterested the case of Pridnestrovie.

European countries, and so the US, found a certain lack of direct interest in the region and focused their attention on the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Even the American ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright, returning from a series of visits to Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, declared that Russia had the resources, interests and leadership necessary to resolve its own problems.

The future US secretary of state then added that the people of those regions were happy that Moscow was involved.

However, with Council Regulation n ° 99/2000 of December 29, 1999, the European Community initiated the TACIS program, aiming to favoring the transition towards a market economy and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, in the partners from Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The program, which was to have been developed from 2000 to 2006, obviously involved Moldova and was aimed to supporting institutional, legal and administrative reforms; support for the private sector; give assistance for economic development; furnish support to mitigate the social effects of the transition from a planned to a market economy; develop infrastructural networks; protect the environment and its optimal management; develop a rural economy.

This was certainly a first step towards greater European support for Moldova, aiming to stabilizing the region and providing greater "appeal" to the Chisinau regime, given the prospect of an EU border approaching this "hot zone" in the progress of the negotiations for the accession of Romania to the EU.

Meanwhile, on 18-19 November 1999, the sixth OSCE summit was held in Istanbul, and among the decisions taken, at the urging of the European countries, there was the obligation for Russia to withdraw its troops and armaments unconditionally. from the Moldovan territory by the end of 2002 (in compliance with the Treaty on the reduction of conventional armaments in Europe). Once again, however, as noted in the OSCE annual report, the authorities in Tiraspol remained obstructive, while Moscow failed to comply with the obligation to withdraw.

In February 2003, the European Union and the United States imposed restrictions on the entry into their territories on the top executives of Tiraspol, renewing the ban in 2009 until February 2010 for 19 executives including Smirnov and children.

The European interest could be motivated by the anticipated enlargement of the Union to the east and by the need for security in neighboring regions, as well as by the prospect of

entering a new market with still untapped potential and by the desire to limit illicit traffic passing through the area. and destined for western cities.

In support of this thesis came the words expressed by the then Secretary of State Colin Powell, according to which Moscow should have respected the agreements made in Istanbul and withdraw its troops from Transnistria by 31 December 2003.

The failure of the Russians to withdraw it was defined by Powell as "a step backwards" and a "deplorable" attitude, while the United States proposed sending an international peacekeeping force to divide the warring factions, as happened in Kosovo.

The veracity of this thesis could be confirmed by the reduced interest in Eastern Europe shown by the Obama administration, oriented towards Central Asia and willing to obtain Russian support in Afghanistan and Iran, where the decisive game was being played on the delicate issue of Iranian nuclear power.

Independence of Kosovo, arrived in February 2008, clearly gave force to the demands of Tiraspol, which immediately proceeded to recognize the regime of Pristina, while Chisinau, while affirming that the case of Kosovo has its "uniqueness", was well looked to be recognized as an independent state. Russia, of course, drew the necessary consequences from the recognition, and in his last interview as president, Vladimir Putin pointed out how international recognition of Kosovo could give rise to a kind of domino effect, and deliberately cited the case of Pridnestrovie.

Chapter 6

Future of Pridnestrovie

Summarizing what has been said so far, the fact that emerges with greater force is the fact that there is a clear lack of willingness to reach a shared solution, as there are no ethnic reasons and hatreds at the origin of the dispute. The considerations of an ethnic and nationalistic matrix from time to time brought up by the leaders of the two sides seem and are completely spurious.

Plus, the war between Ukraine and Russia, started after the Euromaidan in 2013 and still on its own, moved the interest of the EU and US from the small Pridnestrovie Republic towards bigger international issues, as the support of a potential partner willing to enter into the NATO as Ukraine is.

The truth is that in Pridnestroviethere are considerable economic interests, both legitimate and illegal, for the satisfaction of which the current status quo seems ideal. Each party, Chisinau as well as Tiraspol and Moscow, has an interest in keeping the conflict in a frozen state.

The population is disillusioned, apathetic, resigned to this condition and it is unlikely that some form of subversion will start from below. On the other hand, official reunification with Moldova does not appear very attractive, given the conditions of widespread poverty both on this side and on the other side of the Dniester. On the contrary.

Currently the border between Transnistria and Moldova is particularly porous and crossed by numerous smuggling traffics. With a possible reunification, these activities would at least diminish, if not completely cease, depriving the local population of an important source of livelihood. Tiraspol leaders, in the event of reunification, would see an increase in the chances of losing the power they currently hold and their often illegal activities would risk being compromised.

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