

## Moldova-Transdnistria

The year 2006 opened with several positive developments in Transdnistria, and little overt conflict. However, a customs dispute between Transdnistria and the neighboring Ukraine, combined with Western criticism of both Russian peacekeepers and the policies of the separatist region, created significant tensions as the year progressed. While Russian leaders have linked Transdnistria's situation to precedents being set in other separatist conflicts in the wider region, including Kosovo, the involvement of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and European Union (EU) in managing this frozen conflict indicates its complexity.

Geographically isolated from Moldova by the Dnestr River, and historically and linguistically tied to Ukraine and Russia, Transdnistria declared its independence from Moldova in September 1990. Transdnistrian independence was annulled by Gorbachev later in the year. But the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by full-scale conflict between Dniestrian militias (acting with some support from the Russian Army) and the Moldovan government. Fighting raged throughout early 1992. By July, Moldovan President Mircea Snegur and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed an agreement that mandated a complete ceasefire, Russian recognition of Moldova's territorial integrity and a provision for Dniestrian independence should Moldova join Romania. The agreement also established a 225-km-long security zone along the Dnepr River, which was to be patrolled by a joint CIS peacekeeping force made up of Russian, Transdnistrian, and Moldovan units.

Operations of the joint peacekeeping force have been overseen by the Joint Control Commission (JCC), composed of Russian, Moldovan, Transdnistrian, Ukrainian, and OSCE representatives. Since September 2005, the JCC has also included US and EU representatives as observers. In addition to monitoring the activities of the peacekeeping force, the JCC is responsible for overseeing the return of internally displaced persons and refugees, and for brokering confidence-building measures. January 2006 brought the first meeting of the new "5+2" JCC arrangement, with US and EU participation. Moldovan officials were positive about the new arrangement, but JCC-sponsored negotiations broke down in March, ostensibly as a result of a new Ukrainian customs regime requiring that goods passing into Transdnistria be cleared by Moldovan officials. Ukraine implemented the new rules as a response to alleged black-market trade in Transdnistria and to comply with European standards. Since December 2005, a 120-strong EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine has assisted in the implementation of these standards.<sup>1</sup> As the new customs regulations dramatically cut the number of goods entering Transdnistria from Ukraine, the Dniestrian leadership claimed that Ukraine was mounting an economic blockade against the region.

When the Ukrainian customs regime came into effect, Transdnistria suspended its participation in negotiations and publicly requested that Russia send more troops to the region. At present, Russia has approximately 400 peacekeepers in the mission. While Russia did not contribute additional troops, Moscow did send

200 tons of humanitarian assistance to Transdnistria in late March 2006.

Western political pressure on the Russian peacekeeping force increased significantly during 2006. In January, the new chairman-in-office of the OSCE, Belgian foreign minister Karel De Gucht, stated that his priority would be the resolution of the so-called frozen conflicts in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. In a break with the neutral stance of the OSCE, De Gucht called for the replacement of Russian peacekeepers with international forces. Simultaneously, the United States and NATO used the occasion of a June OSCE conference on the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty to voice their displeasure with the continued presence of Russian troops in Transdnistria.

While Russia has maintained its presence in the region, in March it instituted a severe ban on Moldovan goods, including wine, which had been Moldova's primary export to Russia.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, both President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly supported a Transdnistrian referendum on independence, which was held on September 18 and received 97 percent support within the breakaway republic.

#### Joint Control Commission (JCC) Peacekeeping Force

• Authorization date	21 July 1992
• Start date	July 1992
• Head of mission	Major-General Boris Sergeyev (Russia)
• Strength as of 30 September 2006	Troops: 1,199

At the close of 2006, the Russian government had not officially granted recognition to Transdnistria as independent from Moldova, despite a statement from the Russian parliament's lower house supporting September's referendum. A joint Russian-Moldovan communiqué of mid-November referred to the need for a "special, well-guaranteed status" for Transdnistria that respected Moldova's territorial integrity. The year ended with an easing of tensions, as Russia ended its trade ban with Moldova. But in December, the Transdnistrian leader was re-elected for a five-year-term, repeating his commitment to independence.

#### Note

1. This mission, involving 69 EU and around 50 local staff, was originally requested by the Ukrainian and Moldovan governments in a letter of July 2005. It has a two-year mandate that may be extended, and is primarily involved in training Ukrainian and Moldovan officials.

2. The ban was not linked to Transdnistria, but to health and quality issues.