

Click to read: NATO Defence College Research Paper No 23, October 2005 - 'From a Weak State to a Reunified Moldova: New Opportunities to Resolve the Transdniestria Conflict' – a synopsis

The Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUAM) summit held in April 2005 presented a new plan to resolve the Transdniestria conflict. Essentially this called for the inclusion of the EU and US in the conflict mediation team alongside the present membership of OSCE, Russia and Ukraine. Unfortunately, due to lack of prior coordination of the plan with the members by the Ukrainian President, only partial implementation was possible. Despite this, the security situation in Moldova has improved and there is an active interest by the EU, NATO and the US in solving Moldova's political, economic and security problems. The paper explores future options for the Transdniestria problem in greater detail through a look at the past, explains why the Transdniestria problem matters and proposes means of achieving a widely beneficial solution.

The region around Transdniestria is changing and their leaders are recognising that fact. The EU has increased its cooperation with Moldova and developed two mechanisms for engagement - the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the EU-Moldova Action Plan. The Georgian 'Rose Revolution' in 2003 and the anti-secessionist, pro-sovereignty approaches as well as attempts to develop an action plan within NATO's PfP programme were not lost on the Moldavians.

A further change was the Ukraine's Orange Revolution when its leaders interest in solving border control issues with Transdniestria. There is wide recognition that the role of OSCE has declined, whilst the influence of the EU, NATO and the US is rising and slowly undermining Russian suzerainty in the area. This has increased Moldovan confidence. Lastly, Russian diplomacy has been destabilising in its attempts to bully Moldova into accepting its preferred solution to the conflict as well as its meddling in the Ukraine elections. In 2001 Moldova sought to solve the conflict through increased cooperation with Russia. Subsequently, a federalisation concept was considered but gained little support from the OSCE, the EU and the US. In 2004 Moldova turned to the West and EU integration became a priority. They deliberately distanced themselves from Russia and improved ties with Rumania. More recently they have been searching for new negotiating options and one Moldovan proposal is to demilitarise, decriminalise and democratise Transdniestria and eventually unify it with Moldova. Over this short period Moldova has experienced a complete about-turn in strategic orientation and continues to have sour relations with Moscow whilst the ENP Action Plan has become a top priority.

Transdniestria represents a general security threat not least because it is controlled by a small group of Russian nationals who run a criminal economy. There is uncontrolled production and illegal sales of armaments; smuggling of various commodities mainly from East to West; and a complete lack of international control of Transdniestria security forces. There are 3 major hurdles to be overcome to achieve a unified Moldova. There is an absence of adequate controls over the Transdniestria sector of the Ukraine-Moldova border. A prerequisite for

security and political leaders in Moldova is the withdrawal of Russian forces from Transdnistria. Lastly is the problem of Moldova's weaknesses as a state and the time required to overcome them.

The author notes that the circumstances for resolving the Transdnistria conflict have improved. To facilitate the possibilities for resolution, there is a need to isolate Transdnistria from the other three 'frozen' conflicts in the region that would also lower Moscow's anxieties concerning its diminished influence. Other near-term measures would be to build upon the EU border monitoring presence recently agreed and to replace the Russian troops in Transdnistria with a transparent EU-Russian force. The main long-term measure is that the EU, NATO and the US should pursue the democratisation of greater Moldova whilst the Moldavians should seek genuine domestic reform.