

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Transnistria?



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Transnistria, a breakaway region in eastern Moldova, held its latest congress of ^{RE-0065} deputies in February, requesting Russian support against “increasing pressure from Moldova.” This convening of the Transnistrian congress was the first since 2006. During the 2006 session, a referendum to join the Russian Federation in the future while maintaining independence until that time was passed with 97 percent of the vote. Currently, no member of the United Nations, including Russia, recognizes Transnistria as an independent state. Some analysts predicted that Transnistria would use the most recent congress to reassert its independence and that Russia would formally recognize its sovereignty. This did not occur, but the downstream effects of concern over instability in Moldova continue to be felt. These effects include, for example, the closing of a Japanese factory in southern Moldova; due to stated reasons related to risk and logistics, the factory was relocated to a NATO country.

Russia will continue its attempts to pull any and all available threads of chaos in advance of Moldova’s fall 2024 presidential election and the EU referendum vote. In March, Moldovan intelligence cautioned about Russian plans to destabilize the country over the next two years. The United States and its partners and allies have key roles to play in countering this malign influence in the coming months, spanning sectors from security to energy. This support should include providing technical assistance to Chisinau in its continued efforts to reintegrate the population of Transnistria. Additionally, aid in the form of increased political risk insurance will help to counteract efforts to increase the appearance of instability and scare investors out of Moldova. (Companies’ losses across the globe, due to political risks, have increased dramatically since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022.) Most importantly, it is essential for the United States and its partners and allies to stand with this small, developing country by publicly shining a light on Russian aggression in Moldova.

Bringing attention to this aggression will complicate Russia’s attempts to use the frozen conflict in Transnistria to destabilize Moldova. It is notable that the February 2024 convening of the Transnistrian congress occurred on the eve of Russian president Vladimir Putin’s Address to the Federal Assembly (which is roughly equivalent to the United States’ State of the Union), during which he advocated that “a new equal and indivisible security framework must be created in Eurasia.” However,

Putin's speech did not directly mention Moldova or Transnistria, as many had RE-0065 predicted it might.

Putin might have used the address to recognize Transnistrian independence for several reasons. One such reason could be Moldova's energy independence from Russia, as discussed in the CSIS commentary "Winter is Coming for Moldova." It is almost certain that by December 2024 Russia will no longer be able to provide gas free of charge to Transnistria. This removes not only a previous leverage point for both Transnistria and Moldova but also an incentive for Russia to recognize Transnistria as a part of Moldova. At a minimum, Russian recognition of Transnistrian independence would aim to continue driving a wedge between Chisinau and Tiraspol. More critically, Russian recognition of Transnistrian independence would likely make Moldova's potential accession to the European Union more challenging. While the European Union has said that the Transnistrian issue will not affect Moldova's pathway to accession, it is hard to imagine a country becoming an EU member while dealing with a region that is attempting to join Russia and while Russian "peacekeepers" are stationed in its territory.

Transnistria has existed as a breakaway region since the 1992 conclusion of the war within Moldova. Russia's support for Transnistria in this war represents an early post-Soviet example of Russia attempting to maintain influence in a former satellite country by fomenting instability. Russian troops have been stationed in Moldova since 1992. These troops fall into two categories: "peacekeepers," who are tasked with patrolling the territory as a part of an agreement that ended the war, and other Russian forces (whose presence Moldova never agreed to) who are tasked with protecting a large Soviet-era weapons depot. As discussed in the "Kremlin Playbook Spotlight: Moldova," Moldovan leadership has asked Russia to uphold previous agreements to remove forces from Transnistria. Still, Russian leadership continues to assert that the forces will remain in place.

The presence of these forces and the weapons depot serve as continual threats to Moldova, a country with some of the weakest military capabilities globally. It is unlikely that the Russian troops in Transnistria (which number approximately 2,000) could mount a full-scale invasion of Moldova, especially without supplies and

reinforcements, given the unique logistical challenges inherent to Transnistria's location. Furthermore, the weapons depot poses a threat to all of Moldova, whether through the theft, sale, or mishandling of weapons or through the potential for small-scale terrorist or military actions. It is worth noting that in the event of the depot exploding (either intentionally or inadvertently), it would be one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history. These latent threats continue to contribute to the stalemate in negotiations between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

The interests of the leading Transnistrian oligarchs, the owners of the Sheriff Corporation, are economically aligned with the reopening of the Ukrainian border and the expansion of trade with the European Union. The Transnistrian government's decision to remain neutral regarding the war in Ukraine is demonstrative of just how much influence Sheriff has over Tiraspol, and the presence of Russian troops serves as a constant reminder to Transnistrian elites that Moscow can easily reach them. The interests of these oligarchs are not aligned with Transnistria's economic or broader reintegration with Moldova, especially given Moldova's current anti-corruption and rule-of-law trajectory, as discussed in the CSIS commentary "Moldova's Moment."

Expressions of support for Russia by former Soviet states provide domestic propaganda value for the Kremlin. The Transnistrian congress, for instance, followed the Georgian region of Abkhazia, which declared its desire to join the Union State of Russia and Belarus in February 2024. Abkhazia is home to another post-Soviet frozen conflict that Russia has sought to keep frozen since the fall of the Soviet Union. But even before the most recent Transnistrian congress, senior Russian leaders were already warning Moldova to not allow Russian citizens within their borders "to become victims of another Western adventure" and calling Moldova the "next Ukraine." In early March, Transnistrian leadership warned without evidence of groups from Moldova planning to commit terrorism within Transnistria. Later in March, a video purporting to show a drone attack on a military base in Transnistria was released. The Moldovan government responded quickly, discrediting the reports and calling the incident "an attempt to provoke fear and panic in the region."

This rhetoric is directed not only toward domestic Russian audiences, but also toward people within Transnistria. Access to media, including websites, has historically been

limited in Transnistria, which perpetuates an isolationist and pro-Russia mentality. In March, the Moldovan government issued a statement reassuring the public that the congress was simply Kremlin propaganda and that there was nothing to worry about. However, as discussed in “Moldova’s Sisyphian Security Struggle,” past Kremlin messaging has telegraphed future aggression.

There were also likely economic motivations for the most recent congress, as it follows Transnistrian displeasure over recent economic steps taken by Chisinau. It is worth noting that the convening of the congress in 2006 was also precipitated by Transnistrian authorities’ displeasure over 2005 Moldovan and Ukrainian customs reforms. The economic situation in Transnistria has grown increasingly worse since the start of the war in Ukraine, when Ukraine closed its borders with Transnistria. This closed avenues for both legal and illegal trade from Transnistria to flow eastward, making Moldova the only avenue for the flow of Transnistrian goods. The Moldovan government has capitalized on this change by pursuing the economic reintegration of Transnistria, including tightening customs checks. And as of January 2024, all Moldovan businesses, including those based in Transnistria, are required to pay import and export taxes. Furthermore, Tiraspol is dependent on Chisinau to negotiate with the European Union for the environmental exemptions needed to export goods from their manufacturing plants.

Transnistrian leaders have labeled the recent economic measures as aggression from Moldova and responded with economic measures of their own. Given this, it is likely that the Transnistrian congress which took place earlier this year and Russia’s support of Transnistrian leadership requests may also serve the purpose of placing Transnistria in a more favorable position for economic negotiations. But even a more favorable negotiating position will not be enough for Tiraspol if the spigot of free Russian gas is turned off this December. If Transnistria no longer receives subsidized Russian gas, there will likely be massive and swift bankruptcies of Transnistrian businesses. If this occurs, unemployed Transnistrian citizens will likely seek support from Chisinau. This would create an additional flow of refugees for which Chisinau should begin to prepare soon, in partnership with the government of Tiraspol and Transnistrian civil society wherever possible. By preparing now, humanitarian

assistance can be structured in ways that ensure the response would continue to deepen the reintegration of the Transnistrian populus with that of Moldova.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has supported the freezing of similar conflicts in other post-Soviet states. If an effective model can be found in Moldova, it may present an opportunity to leverage these lessons learned to thaw similar stalemates in other post-Soviet states, further loosening Russia's grip. Holistic reintegration is key to removing not only the current foothold, but also potential future Russian claims to Moldovan territory via Transnistria.

The political and cultural reintegration required for Transnistria will be a long process for the Moldovan government, but one worth committing to. These steps will serve as an important foundation in the likely scenario that eventual peace talks between Russia and Ukraine will create a window for Moldova to negotiate the removal of Russian troops from Transnistria, perhaps being replaced by an EU mission. But the removal of these troops and the safe processing of the weapons stockpile are alone not enough to reintegrate Transnistria. The economic integration of Transnistria already underway is a strong step and represents a continuation of the incredible reforms, modernization, and progress afoot in Moldova. And Moldova remaining on this trajectory is an important element to ensuring a free, open, and stable Eastern Europe that serves the interests of free people everywhere.

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