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Tiny Transdnestr Seeks Its Place in the (Soviet) Sun

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A schoolgirl wearing a military-style uniform during a military parade for Transdnestr's Independence Day. **Gleb Garanich**

TIRASPOL, Moldova — Troops goose-step Soviet-style across the square saluting the VIP podium as martial music plays and loudspeakers broadcast voices exhorting citizens to greater efforts to build the homeland.

Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin gazes from a granite bust as a raucous wedding cavalcade zips down Tiraspol's main boulevard, the wind immodestly whipping up the dresses of bridesmaids standing in an open-top limousine whooping with glee.

Independence Day in Transdnestr, an unrecognized self-declared republic of half a million people in Moldova, is a bizarre mix of old Soviet ritual and post-Soviet abandon.

The territory, a ragged strip 50 kilometers at its widest part and about 220 kilometers from end to end running down Moldova's eastern border with Ukraine, has been cut off from mainstream Europe for most of the past 20 years.

With de facto independence from Chisinau, the Moldovan capital only 45 minutes away by car, Transdnestr has its own currency and police force.

It has mandatory military conscription and runs a tough border regime, deterring the casual traveler.

As international problems go, it is easy to ignore.

But the stalemate illustrates Moscow's continued influence in former Soviet republics and its capacity to hamper any drive to Western integration.

Moldova, a poor country of 3.5 million people, would struggle to gain acceptance into the European Union because of the territorial dispute simmering within its borders.

In 1992, the post-Soviet standoff erupted into a brief war that cost the lives of 860 people from Transdnestr and about 460 on the Moldovan side. The shadow of that conflict remains.

An unexpected election victory last year by 44-year-old lawyer Yevgeny Shevchuk, ousting a veteran leader 20 years in the post, raised hopes for an end to a two-decades-long "frozen conflict."

But sitting under a portrait of President Vladimir Putin and sporting a tie in Russian national colors, Shevchuk could have been reading from the script of predecessor Igor Smirnov as he spelled out a defiant message to the international community oddly at variance with his reforming image.

He said he would continue pressing for world recognition of Transdnestr, and he dismissed Western calls for a force of 1,200 Russian peacekeepers to be withdrawn from the territory.

"The idea that Russian forces are a threat is a myth created by the [Western] media. Political leaders want this in order to justify not finding a political settlement," he said, his cuff rising to reveal a watch emblazoned with "FSB Rossia," apparently a gift from Russia's Federal Security Service.

Soviet Nostalgia

State communism withered in the region along with the collapse of Soviet rule. But Smirnov officially kept nostalgia for the Soviet past to underpin national defiance after a war with Moldovan forces.

Soviet artifacts, erased elsewhere with the collapse of the old empire, have now become a quietly tolerated — if bizarre — part of the fabric of everyday life in Tiraspol.

A long "honor board" portraying medal-wearing town worthies going back decades resembles a prop from Soviet central casting.

Equally, patriotic voices echoing over loudspeakers across Suvorov Square, the focal point of Independence Day celebrations on Sept. 2, could have come straight from a Brezhnev-era audio archive.

Few among the young attach any importance to the Soviet throwbacks around them.

"It's the past. You should not take this too seriously," said Tatyana, a 35-year-old accountant.

The Russian-speaking region runs on subsidized Russian gas. Some observers put Transdnestr's gas debt at $3.5 billion, though this technically remains on Moldova's balance sheet.

Like Moldova itself, Transdnestr, 50 percent of whose product is sold to the European Union, is kept afloat economically by cash sent back home from about 50,000 Transdnestr residents working in factories abroad, chiefly in Russia.

But some simply leave for good to seek a future elsewhere. Transdnestr figures put the population now at 511,000, compared with 720,000 when the Soviet Union collapsed.

Svatoslav, a 22-year-old security guard with two children, will stay. He earns $400 per month but remains phlegmatic.

"That's not too bad, but you need $1,000 to live well," he said.

Nikolai, a 30-year-old engineer returning from the independence parade with his wife and 1-year-old son, said he and his wife get by on a joint income of $350 to $400 per month.

Big Players

Smirnov and an elite around him remain big players. His family is said to control the customs sector.

Then there is the Sheriff network, owned by a mysterious former KGB official. Its tentacles reach into huge chunks of the private sector, from gas stations and supermarkets to a football team and stadium to the biggest brandy retailer, Kvint.

Big Russian money is evident. It appears to have been behind the transformation of an old Soviet hotel called Druzhba (Friendship) into the upscale Rossia.

A 2,000-euro bottle of Kvint on display in the lobby underscores its reputation as a weekend haunt for the region's well-heeled and well-connected.

In the hotel parking lot is a top-of-the-line SUV bearing South Ossetian license plates and the number 001. The leadership of the Russian-backed Georgian breakaway region, a kindred spirit of Transdnestr, is in town.

Western governments say Transdnestr has become a haven for smugglers of arms, cigarettes and other contraband.

Shevchuk vehemently denies this. He says the accusations are smear tactics started by Moldova's former leadership and pounced on by Western media.

After his election, Shevchuk moved his administration out of its old Soviet headquarters to a glass-and-marble building — unadorned by any Lenin monument — across town.

Transdnestr and Moldova, each of whose residents have kinsfolk in the other, have now agreed to re-establish full-scale rail links, a modest step. But there are still no direct phone links between Chisinau and Tiraspol, a town of 110,000.

International talks on the Transdnestr problem have resumed after a break of more than five years. But their mandate is to look only at improving transportation and travel links. The status of the republic itself does not even figure on the agenda.

A land unloved by the West and even, it seems, by its Russian patrons, Transdnestr seems doomed to limbo.

Russia has every reason to keep it alive, though, asserting itself as a regional gas supplier and hampering Moldovan efforts to align with the EU, which would mean yet another former Soviet republic escaping from Moscow's orbit.

So Russia provides Transdnestr with cheap gas and maintains troops there, while stopping short of diplomatic recognition, a move that would saddle Moscow with an economic and diplomatic liability it could do without.

Pro-Moscow Message

Shevchuk stoutly defended Moscow's role and that of its troop contingent.

"We are grateful for the presence of representatives of the Russian group of forces who carry out peacekeeping operations," he said.

Moldova's pro-Europe leadership, supported by the West, continues to press for reintegration of Transdnestr with limited autonomy. But it wants Russian forces out.

Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat will travel to Moscow on Sept. 12 for talks with Putin on Transdnestr.

Shevchuk was dismissive of Moldovan policy.

"I have the feeling that settling relations with Transdnestr does not represent a priority for Moldova," he said.

Citing the precedent of Kosovo, he said it was up to the international community to recognize Transdnestr.

"I'd like this to be in the tightest, quickest possible time frame," he said. "I hope this will can be found in the next five years."

On Independence Day, Shevchuk stood alongside his top defense official as the official denounced Moldova for turning to the West under the influence of the United States and the EU.

On the Streets

Shevchuk's views find an echo on the streets of Tiraspol, where grand Stalinist buildings

jostle with concrete and glass residential blocks, leading out to single-story wooden peasant-style houses dotting the outskirts. Memories of 1992 die hard.

"There are simply no perspectives for working with Moldova now. We just have to settle for developing slowly to become gradually stronger," said Nikolai, the engineer. "Even Russia doesn't look on us with pretty eyes. But without their support, we would have no future."

Valery, a 73-year-old Russian who has lived in Tiraspol since he was a young man, expressed skepticism that Transdnestr would ever be recognized and dismissed talk of joining Russia.

"I personally am in favor of a union [with Moldova], though first of all order needs to be restored there in Moldova. I don't see order there right now," Valery said.

David Kramer, a former U.S. negotiator in settlement talks, said that if Russian leaders decided it was time to solve the problem, they could withdraw forces, end subsidies and give the order to Tiraspol.

"They have no interest or incentive to do so, and I'd argue that as Moldova moves closer to the West, Moscow will dig in even more to try to block its deeper integration," he said. "So I am not optimistic that we'll see movement any time soon."

Another expert, Nicu Popescu, of the London-based European Council on Foreign Relations, said Shevchuk has to be given time after winning an election against powerful interests.

"He was not elected to reintegrate," Popescu said. "The hope is more that he is a kind of calculating, pragmatic person with whom you can make deals that are favorable for conflict settlement and also for the population. We can expect small steps but not a quick integration."

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