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Putin Says Moldova's Transdnestr Region Should Decide Own Fate

By Anna Dolgov

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The city of Rybnitsa in northern Transdnestr.

The population of Moldova's self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic should be allowed to decide its own fate, President Vladimir Putin said Thursday, the day after the region's parliament appealed to Russia, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to recognize its independence.

"People have their own vision of how to build their future and fate, and it is nothing but a demonstration of democracy if we allow these people to do as they wish," Putin said during his annual call-in show, adding that Transdnestr is home to a large Russian population.

On Wednesday, Transdnestr's parliament appealed to Putin and both houses of the Russian parliament, as well as the UN and OSCE, to recognize its independence, citing a 2006 referendum in the separatist region over joining Russia.

Some 97 percent of voters in Transdnestr, a breakaway strip of land on Moldova's eastern border with Ukraine with a population of about half a million people, cast ballots for the right to join Russia in that referendum, which was not recognized by the international community.

Moldova's Prime Minister Iurie Leanca condemned Wednesday's appeal as "one-sided and counterproductive," saying the breakaway region's capital Tiraspol “ignores the reality that Transdnestr is a part of Moldova."

Following Russia's annexation of the Crimea region last month, the scenario of Moscow taking Transdnestr, where it has had peacekeeping troops ever since a separatist war two decades ago, has begun to seem more likely, with Tiraspol requesting last month to be included in Russian legislation drafted to facilitate Crimea's annexation.

But Russian officials have been cautious about the possibility, and the head of the Duma committee in charge of relations with former Soviet states, Leonid Slutsky, said Wednesday that "this question is more complicated than the Crimea case."

"Even if we were to accept, hypothetically, that Transdnestr is regarded as a future subject of the Russian Federation, then immediately a huge number of logistical problems emerge, starting with the lack of a shared border and air communication. And that is just one aspect of the problem," he said.

Russia brought in troops to impose a truce in the fighting between Transdnestr and Moldova in 1992 and the region has remained an unrecognized Russian-speaking state ever since. Talks between Transdnestr, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, together with the U.S. and the European Union as observers — known as the 5+2 talks — have so far failed to yield a solution to the issue.

Putin said Thursday that those talks should be stepped up.

U.S. Senator John McCain, known for his outspoken criticism of Russia, visited the Moldovan capital Chisinau on Thursday, where he met with Leanca to discuss bilateral trade relations, Transdnestr and other issues. McCain promised that the U.S. would provide the country with political and financial support to help it develop and enact reforms, Interfax reported, citing a statement by the Moldovan government.

Transdnestr, whose flag still features the Soviet hammer and sickle, became a hotbed of arms smuggling and drug and human trafficking in the 1990s, but crime has reportedly receded since then.

Also see:

Transdnestr Asks to be Included in Annexation Legislation

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