

Moldova's Dilemmas in Democratizing and Reintegrating Transnistria

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Moldovan civil society actors have long been advocating the need to promote democratization in the break-away region of Transnistria as a means of resolving the fifteen years old ethno-political conflict.¹ In spring 2005 one might have thought that their voice would finally have been heard. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine brought to power the opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko, one of whose first foreign policy initiatives was to propose a comprehensive plan for settling the Transnistrian conflict. Democratization through the holding of free and fair elections to the new Transnistrian regional assembly under international monitoring was declared to be a key element of Yushchenko's plan.

After the December 2005 elections to the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet, which were held by the authorities of a non-recognized republic, despite strong international pressure to postpone the elections, the prospects of implementation of key provisions of Yushchenko's plan became rather grim. These prospects were further diminished after Ukraine finally agreed on the introduction of new customs rules for the passage of goods through the Transnistrian segment of the Moldo-Ukrainian border in early March 2006. This move, which was long advocated by Moldova and welcomed by the EU and the US, caused a very negative reaction in Transnistria and precipitated an economic retaliation against Moldova on the part of Russia, the Transnistrian regime's principal backer.²

Regardless of whether the Transnistrian conflict settlement negotiations will resume on the basis of Yushchenko's plan or not, the idea of democratization of the break-away region as a means of conflict resolution is likely to maintain its appeal. Given the recent political changes in the post-Soviet region that highlighted the importance of democratic legitimacy and political pluralism, the

¹ See, for example, "Appeal of Civil Society Representatives of the Republic of Moldova", *Jurnal de Chişinău*, no. 236, November 21, 2003; "Declaration of Representatives of Civil Society in the Republic of Moldova" in response to the letter published on 5 August by the US ambassador in *The Wall Street Journal, Jurnal de Chişinău*, no. 192, August 15, 2003.

² On the details of the ban introduced by Russian authorities on the import of Moldovan wine products into Russia, see Foreign Policy Association of Moldova, 'Ban on Moldovan Wines to Russia,' Press Digest on Transnistrian Conflict, Special Issue 16, April 6, 2006. At the time of this writing in early April 2006, the dispute over the ban has only started but experts agree that the negative consequences of the ban will be very significant for the Moldovan economy.

issue of democratization is likely to be on the agenda of any new conflict settlement initiative that might supersede Yushchenko's plan.³

This article starts with a discussion of the context in which the plan's emphasis on the need to democratize the Transnistrian region came about. It briefly describes the conflicting parties' strategies of selective acceptance of some of the plan's provisions. It then focuses on discussing challenges and dilemmas that those interested in the democratization of Transnistria will continue to face while trying to advocate democratization as a means for reaching a lasting solution to the conflict. It highlights four types of challenges: realistically assessing the effects and limits of sanctions against the Transnistrian regime; deciding on how best to deal with the current Transnistrian leadership; recognizing the potential of the Transnistrian opposition; holding the elections in an imperfect democratic environment and accepting the outcomes of these elections.

The history of the Transnistrian conflict dates back to the turbulent 1989-1992 period. Facing pressure from radical and nationalistic forces that managed to capture the national democratic movement in Moldova during that period, political and industrial leaders from the Slavic-dominated Transnistrian region opted to mobilize the region's population and to establish, with the political and military help of Russia, a separatist enclave on the left bank of the Nistru river.⁴ Since then, the conflict, which saw military escalation only in 1992 but continued to generate economic, social, and human rights problems for population on both banks of Nistru river throughout the entire post-communist period, remained frozen. Yushchenko's plan is only the latest of many initiatives proposed throughout the period to resolve this conflict.

Promises and Failures of Yushchenko's Plan

Both the December 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine and the March 2005 parliamentary elections in Moldova contributed to the creation of domestic and international environments that significantly strengthened the Moldovan government's bargaining power in negotiations over conflict settlement in Transnistria. The 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine not only highlighted the Transnistrian regime's problem of democratic legitimacy, which is one of the key issues consistently raised by the Moldovan side in any discussion about Transnistria⁵, but also created an extremely painful vulnerability for the Transnistrian authorities. The openness of the Ukrainian

³ The so called "Kozak Plan II", which is considered largely to be a modified version of the Kozak Memorandum proposed by the Russian mediators in 2003, had already surfaced in October 2005 but was rejected by the Moldovan side and got a critical appraisal from the OSCE. See, for example, "Transnistrian Conflict," *ADEPT E-journal*, No.60, Oct. 12-25, 2005.

⁴ For the Moldovan and Transnistrian sides' respective views on the history of the conflict, see Nantoi, O., "Transnistrian Conflict: What Could The European Union and the United States of America Do?" Institute of Public Policy, 2005 and N. V. Babilunga, Beril S. I. et al. (eds.), *Fenomen Pridnestrovja (RIO PGU, Tiraspol, 2nd Edition, 2003)*.

⁵ See more about this in O. Protsyk, "Federalism and Democracy in Moldova", 20(1) *Post-Soviet Affairs* (2005), 72-90.

border, the only external border that the Transnistrian authorities have access to, could no longer be taken for granted. The deterioration of relations between Russia, which is the main economic and political backer of the Transnistrian regime, and Ukraine both in the course of the Orange revolution events and afterwards further underscored the fragility of Transnistria's international status.

Although the parliamentary dominance of the communists, who controlled 71 out of 101 seats in the Moldovan parliament during the 2001-2005 parliamentary term, was reduced after the March 2005 parliamentary elections, the Moldovan voters returned the communist majority to the parliament. Factions in parliamentary opposition, partly due to the strength of the communists' popular mandate and partly due to the communists' skilful use of such selective incentives as offers of high positions in the executive and legislative branches of government, chose to break ranks and support the re-election of the communist leader Voronin as the country's president.⁶

The re-elected communist government was eager to stress its commitment to the task of Moldova's European integration, which marks a clear ideological shift from the initial pro-Russian orientation of the communists' foreign policy. Although analysts continue to dispute how genuine and credible this move is,⁷ putting emphasis on the task of European integration, as well as taking some concrete steps to reform government institutions and to democratize political life (both were initiated under very considerable pressure from the opposition), further strengthened the reputation and legitimacy of the communist government in the eyes of most of the key international actors in the region.

The Transnistrian authorities, on the other hand, found themselves in a weaker international position at the end of the 2004-05 electoral cycles. The fresh democratic legitimacy of the Moldovan government was in stark contrast to the reputational problems of the Transnistrian elite, which is widely perceived as presiding over an authoritarian and externally controllable political regime. While the extent to which authoritarian practices and external control characterizes the functioning of the Transnistrian administration is open to interpretation, there is a basic agreement in international community (with the exception of Russia and some other post-Soviet republics) about non-democratic nature of the Transnistrian regime.

It was in this international context that Ukrainian President Yushchenko put forward his plan for settling the Transnistrian conflict. The plan reiterated the principles of sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova; it proposed that a special legal status be granted to the Transnistrian region within the Republic of Moldova; it provided for Transnistria's right to self determination only in the event that the Republic of Moldova loses its independence and

⁶ I. Botan, *Presidential Elections*, April 7, 2005. Available at <http://www.adept.md/en/comments/political/200504071/>

⁷ L. March, "Socialism with Unclear Characteristics: The Moldovan Communists in Government", *Demokratizatsiya* 12, no.1 (2004): 507-524.

sovereignty; and it proposed the creation of a common space incorporating legal, economic, social, customs and humanitarian issues. The plan envisaged early free and fair elections to the Transnistrian ‘supreme soviet’ under international monitoring before Moldova recognizes this body as the legitimate representative body of the region.

The settlement was to take place in three stages, each stage not exceeding six months in duration. In the first stage, the Moldovan parliament was to pass a law on the basic principles of settling the status of the Transnistrian region, on the basis of which Transnistria would adopt a new constitution. Then, in October-November 2005, free and fair elections to the ‘supreme soviet’ were to be organized under OSCE guidance. A parliamentary commission composed of Moldovan and Transnistrian deputies was then to prepare a draft law on the status of Transnistria, which had to be passed by the Moldovan parliament. The law entered into force upon the approval by the Moldovan parliament of an agreement on guarantees of compliance with the Law on the Special Legal Status of Transnistria. The agreement was to be prepared with the participation of the future guarantors – Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, possibly assisted by the US and the EU. Lastly, a Conciliation Committee, comprised of representatives of Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine, Russia, the OSCE and possibly the US and the EU, would have the task of settling all disputes arising from the implementation and/or interpretation of the provisions of the Law on the Status of Transnistria.⁸

The plan drafters were careful enough not to propose their version of answers to the most acute problems that stall the talks every time the negotiation process resumes. Those problems include the withdrawal of Russian troops from Moldovan territory, the delineation of competencies between the central and Transnistrian regional authorities, specific methods to ensure stability in the ‘Security Zone’ and security guarantees regarding Transnistria’s special status, and the establishment of legal controls on the Transnistrian segment of the Moldova-Ukraine border.

The plan for the Transnistrian conflict settlement became one of the first major foreign policy initiatives of Yushchenko’s government. The level of attention to developments in Moldova and the extent of involvement on the part of key Ukrainian decision makers in negotiations over the plan were very high. The early stages of the new Ukrainian government’s involvement in mediation efforts suggests that Ukraine was trying to develop an even-handed approach to dealing with both parties to the conflict. While the Yushchenko Plan favourably addresses all the major concerns of the Moldovan side (confirming the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and a unified legal space), the Ukrainian side also made conscious efforts to avoid alienating the Transnistrian authorities. Despite repeated calls on the part of the Moldovan government and international organizations to toughen border controls, Ukraine preferred to move very cautiously on the issue of revising border regime for the movement of goods from Transnistria. Another telling example of

⁸ The plan is available at http://www.ipp.md/files/Comentarii/Yushchenko_plan_eng14.doc, accessed 15 July 2005.

the Ukrainian approach is the fact that the top Transnistrian officials, banned from travelling to EU countries since 2003, continue to be frequent visitors to the Ukrainian capital.

Ukraine's engagement in active pursuit of the conflict settlement agenda has, however, diminished over time as domestic problems of the new leadership of Ukraine became more acute in the run-up to the March 2006 parliamentary elections. A number of moves made by the Ukrainian government during that period solicited strong criticism from some of the parties to the conflict. In January 2006, for example, Ukraine unilaterally decided to postpone the introduction of new custom rules, which Ukraine and Moldova agreed upon earlier and which, the Moldovan government claims, were received with approval by the EU and US who have the status of observers in the Transnistrian conflict settlement negotiations. The new rules allowed the passage of Transnistrian goods through the Ukrainian border only if they were accompanied by the proper Moldovan custom documentation. The Moldovan government criticized Ukraine's move and claimed it was not consistent with earlier agreements reached by the sides on this issue.

Another controversial move by the Ukrainian leadership was the signing of the January 2006 Putin-Yushchenko joint declaration on Transnistria. The declaration did not make any new proposals on conflict resolution but reiterated support for Yushchenko's plan and some of Russia's earlier propositions on conflict settlement and stressed their complementary nature. The declaration was strongly criticized by the Romanian government that accused the signatories of bypassing the official negotiation format and creating parallel negotiation lines.⁹ Romania's overall participation in efforts to find a solution to the Transnistrian conflict remains, however, rather limited due to the fact that it is excluded from the five-sided format of official negotiations. This format was initially negotiated (and strongly favoured by Russia) in 1997. The format included five parties to negotiations: Moldova, Transnistria, OSCE, Russia, and Ukraine. It was modified only in 2005 to include the US and EU as observers to the talks, thus producing a "5 plus 2" format.

A new dynamic to the Transnistrian conflict settlement process was introduced by the Ukraine's decision in the beginning of March 2006 to finally apply new custom rules introduction of which was postponed earlier this year. The sudden move, which was motivated by a number of the Ukrainian leadership's foreign and domestic political considerations, caused an extremely negative reaction of the Transnistrian authorities that accused the Moldovan and Ukrainian authorities in conspiring to introduce a 'blockade' of Transnistria. The dispute over customs rules provided the Transnistrian side with an opportunity to further question the utility of Yushchenko's Plan and Ukraine's overall ability to serve as an impartial mediator in the conflict.

⁹ Socor, V., "Putin-Yushchenko Joint Declaration on Moldova Criticized by Bucharest" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 3 (10), January 16, 2006.

Moldova's Follow-Up Actions on the Yushchenko Initiative

Despite the fact that the publication of the Yushchenko Plan caused a wave of domestic criticism of a general philosophy and specific details of the initiative¹⁰, the Moldovan government moved fast to start the process of implementation of some of the key provisions of the plan. This was done, however, in a way that might be considered as excessively unilateral and self-serving. On 10 June 2005, with a vote of 96 deputies out of a total of 101, the Moldovan parliament passed a declaration endorsing the plan proposed by Yushchenko. The declaration was followed by two appeals passed by the parliament on the same date that called for the demilitarization of the Transnistrian zone and withdrawal of the Russian military contingent and ammunition and appealed to the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU for assistance in democratizing the breakaway region.¹¹ The cross-partisan support that this new conflict settlement plan enjoyed in the parliament is testament to the fact that a high degree of consensus, however temporal it might be, has emerged with regard to Transnistria policy among the Moldovan elite.

The Moldovan elite's willingness to use the Yushchenko Plan to advance its own vision of conflict settlement was also confirmed by the passage in the first and second reading in a one-day session on 22 July 2005 of the Law on the Basic Provisions of the Special Legal Status of Settlements on the Left Bank of Nistru (Transnistria). The law establishes a special autonomous territorial unit – Transnistria. It grants legislative and representative powers to the regional 'supreme soviet', which is to be elected under the supervision of the international electoral commission created under the auspices of the OSCE. The law also requires that elections should follow the Moldovan legislation and be monitored by the Council of Europe.

The law does not include any details on the distribution of powers and competencies between the national centre and the autonomous unit. It only includes clauses that establish the supremacy of national legislative acts and require that regional legislation to be in accordance with Moldovan laws. The law also states that detailed provisions regarding the status of Transnistria will be elaborated in an organic law drafted jointly by the Moldovan and Transnistrian representatives and passed by the Moldovan parliament after the formation of a new system of government in Transnistria. Finally, the law does not include any clauses that could serve as the basis for a system

¹⁰ See Nantoi, O., "Transnistrian Conflict: What Could The European Union and the United States of America Do?" Nantoi, O. *The Ukrainian Plan and the Moldovan Law. Institute for Public Policy*, 2005.

¹¹ The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, *Decision on the Ukrainian Initiative Concerning the Settlement of the Transdnistriean Conflict and Measures for Democratisation and Demilitarisation of the Transdnistriean Zone* (August 1, 2005). Available at <http://www.parlament.md/lawarchive/decisions/117-XVI-10.06.2005/en.html>

of international guarantees of Transnistria's special status; the law only envisages the creation of a system of internal guarantees of such a status.

Given the unilateral nature of the decisions regarding the law, its content, which could have been substantially different if the Transnistrians had had the means to influence the drafting process, is not unexpected. What has to be explained is the willingness of the Moldovan side to agree with the central component of the Yushchenko Plan, which calls for the holding of regional elections in Transnistria in the near future. The current internal situation in Transnistria suggests that if such elections were to be held in a foreseeable future the odds of the current Transnistrian leadership winning the elections are very high. Both the Moldovan and Transnistrian decision makers are aware of this.

The explanation for the Moldovan side's acceptance of the Yushchenko Plan's clause concerning the Transnistrian regional elections lies in the details of the documents that the Moldovan parliament passed in June and July 2005. The Moldovan side's acceptance of the plan's provision about the elections in Transnistria is highly conditional. Both the above-cited June 2005 appeals and July 2005 Law on the Basic Provisions attach conditions to what will constitute free and fair elections in Transnistria.

The parliament's June appeal on the criteria of democratization demands liquidation of the Transnistrian Ministry of State Security, reformation of the judicial branch, the release of political prisoners, the removal of barriers to the normal activity of Moldovan political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and mass media, that the elections be held under the exclusive aegis of an international electoral committee authorized by the OSCE, that participation in the electoral process should proceed only on the basis of Moldovan citizenship and that monitoring of democratic standards by the international electoral committee should commence at least five months prior to the date of elections. The appeal also states that international involvement in the monitoring of democratic standards and the organization of the democratic process "cannot bring about any consequences regarding the recognition of this [Transnistrian] entity under the international law".¹²

The appeal on the principles and conditions of demilitarization asks, among other things, for the withdrawal of Russian troops and weapons, and for the transformation of peacekeeping operations conducted by the Russian contingent on the basis of the 1992 Moldovan-Russian Agreement into an international mechanism of military and civil observers under the auspices of the OSCE. The July 2005 Law on the Basic Provisions extends the logic of the appeals by requiring

¹² *Ibid.*, Appeal of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova on the Criteria of Democratisation of the Transdnestrian Zone of the Republic of Moldova.

that elections be conducted in accordance with Moldovan laws and only after the conditions specified in the parliamentary appeals regarding democratization and demilitarization are met.

Although the initial timeline for achieving specific conflict settlement objectives envisioned by the Yushchenko Plan had not been adhered to, the Moldovan side, as of early spring 2006, continued to insist that conceptual foundations of the Yushchenko Plan and laws and resolutions passed by the Moldovan parliament in the fulfilment of this plan in summer 2005 form the basis of the Moldovan government's approach to negotiations about the Transnistrian conflict settlement. Implications of this position of the Moldovan authorities for the dynamics of the negotiation process as well as these authorities' ability to sustain such an approach to conflict settlement are discussed under the section on dilemmas of democratization later in this paper.

Transnistrian Authorities' Response to Yushchenko Plan: The December 2005 Elections to the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet

Reacting to Yushchenko's initiative on conflict settlement was one of many challenges that the Transnistrian authorities had to address in dealing with the new Ukraine. On several occasions in spring and early summer of 2005 they chose to give statements that could be interpreted as a tentative endorsement of the Yushchenko Plan. Their reaction became more critical after the unilateral legislative moves of the Moldovan parliament, the disintegration of the Orange coalition in Ukraine, and, most recently, after the introduction of new customs rules on the Transnistrian segment of the Moldo-Ukrainian border.

The December 2005 elections to the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet, the region's legislative body, was an important milestone in the process of the Transnistrian leadership's articulation of a new strategy for conflict settlement negotiation. The elections were part of an established electoral cycle in Transnistria, according to which legislative elections take place every five years in the last month of the year. The Transnistrian authorities claimed that postponing elections would violate the constitution and thus could not be acceptable for the region. The OSCE and some other international actors, on the other hand, strongly urged the Transnistrian authorities to postpone the elections in order to allow enough time for establishing an international mission to supervise the elections. The Transnistrian authorities refused to make such a move and instead invited the international community to monitor the December 2005 elections, which were run by the local electoral commission.

No agreement was reached on this issue and the international community did not recognize the December 2005 elections as it did not recognize all previous elections in Transnistria. At the time of the elections, the Transnistrian president Smirnov stated that no other elections to the

regional assembly would be possible in the foreseeable future. As of the beginning of 2006, however, neither of sides involved in the official format of negotiations, with the exception of Transnistria, was willing to discard the idea of internationally monitored elections to Transnistria's parliament. If the plans for new elections remain on the agenda, the extent of international involvement in running such elections is likely to become a controversial issue due to the differences in political positions of the sides involved in the talks.

The December 2005 elections saw 173 candidates competing in 43 single-member districts for seats to the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet. Although the state of political party development in the region is embryonic¹³, candidates supported by two proto-type political parties, the so-called civic political movements "Republic" and "Renewal," dominated the elections. The "Republic" movement was closely associated with president Smirnov and included many representatives of the executive government agencies and security apparatus. The "Renewal" movement included local politicians and entrepreneurs loyal to the Smirnov's regime but campaigning under slogans of renewal and modernization. Ties to the region's largest private company "Sheriff," which enjoys a monopoly in several branches of the Transnistrian economy, rather than some sort of a coherent ideological profile characterised candidates associated with the "Renewal".

With the officially reported turnout rate slightly exceeding 50% (the Transnistrians authorities claim that the complete list of voters includes 410 058 persons), the representatives of these two movements captured more than 30 out of the 43 seats. The "Renewal" movement received the largest share of seats in parliament. Since there was no fixed membership in movements at the time of the December 2005 elections, analysts could provide only estimates of how many seats each of the movements won. According to these estimates, the "Renewal" movement gained between 19 and 29 seats while the "Republic" received between 13 -14 mandates. Evgeniy Shevchuk, one of the leaders of the "Renewal" movement and the vice-speaker of the Transnistrian parliament during the 2000-2005 legislative term, was elected as the new speaker of parliament.

The leaders of two movements were quick to signal their policy intentions with regard to the key political issue that the region faces. Immediately after the elections they held a joint press conference at which they stressed the unity of their positions with regards to the question of the status of Transnistria. Representatives of both movements reiterated their determination to seek sovereignty and to secure international recognition of Transnistria.

¹³ One of the Transnistrian sources reported that, as of the end of 2005, only two parties were officially registered in Transnistria. Both had a word "communist" in their title and differed primarily in terms of their oppositional/pro-government stand vis-à-vis the Transnistrian authorities. See Andrei Safonov "Parlamentskie Vybory 2005 goda," unpublished manuscript, 2005.

Dilemmas of Democratization in Transnistria

In trying to bring about further democratic changes in Transnistria, whose leadership is interested in maintaining the region's semi-authoritarian political system, Moldovan decision makers, as well as the international actors that are involved in the conflict settlement efforts, face a number of major challenges. Below, the four types of challenge are reviewed: realistically assessing the effects and limits of sanctions against the Transnistrian regime; deciding on how best to deal with the current Transnistrian leadership; recognizing the potential of the Transnistrian opposition; holding the elections in an imperfect democratic environment and accepting the outcomes of these elections.

*The effects and limits of sanctions against the Transnistrian regime*¹⁴

The large body of international literature on political and economic sanctions does not provide simple answers on how effective sanctions are for inducing behavioral change of those against whom sanctions are applied. One issue that has to be more debated in the Moldovan government circles and in the international community is the limits of the effectiveness of sanctions against the Transnistrian regime. The essence of the Moldova's current position on this issue is to intensify all types of international pressure on the Transnistrian authorities in order to make the latter change their recalcitrant position on issues of the statehood for Transnistria, reintegration into Moldova, and the region's democratization.

The fact of the matter, however, is that the repertoire of available sanctions – by these I mean various types of restrictions and prohibitions that can be applied against the Transnistrian elite – is quite limited and might be largely exhausted by now. The EU maintains a travel ban on senior Transnistrian officials, the EU border monitoring mission aimed at curbing the traffic in arms, drugs, and human beings as well as in commercial contraband has been in place on the Transnistrian segment of the Moldo-Ukrainian border since December 2005, new customs rules at the same segment of the border have been enforced since March 2006. All these measures were strongly advocated by the Moldovan side for a long time and the last two types of measures have been agreed upon with Moldova's EU and Ukrainian partners only very recently.

Although it is too early to judge about the overall impact of these measures, there are various reasons to doubt their effectiveness in terms of inducing the Transnistrian elites' cooperation on issues of conflict settlement. While identifying individual cases of illegal cross-border activities, the EU border monitoring mission reports suggest that the scope of these illegal activities is smaller than was initially expected on the basis of the Moldovan government allegations about the criminal

¹⁴ In preparing this section of the paper I benefited from the insights offered by Gottfried Hanne.

nature of the Transnistrian regime.¹⁵ The introduction of new customs rules forced some of the Transnistrian economic agents to register with the Moldovan authorities but, at the same time, this policy move backfired in terms of the ban on the sales of Moldovan wines on the Russian market.¹⁶ There are also very few reasons for Moldova to expect that the EU and Ukraine will move to introduce in the foreseeable future any drastic sanctions such as restrictions on the legitimate Transnistrian exports or an outright economic blockade of Transnistria.

The effectiveness of sanctions becomes even more problematic if we accept one dominant thesis in Moldova's policy making circles, which states that the main source of opposition to conflict resolution and country reintegration is not the separatist regime but the position of Russia. In this interpretation, Russia is not a mediator but a party to the conflict that directly controls the Transnistrian authorities and is opposed to terms of reintegration acceptable to Moldova. Relying on any forms of direct confrontation with Russia or attempting to apply concerted international pressure to force Russia to change its position did not prove to be effective in the past and is even less likely to succeed now when Russia's international presence has become much stronger. As the recent Russian ban on Moldovan wines pointedly illustrated, small Moldova is inherently more vulnerable in any sanction-based confrontation that directly or indirectly involves Russia.

This suggests that facilitating internal change in Transnistria can be the most productive way to affect Russia's position on the issue of Transnistria's reintegration in Moldova. The current Moldovan approach to dealing with the Transnistrian elite is, however, highly problematic in terms of facilitating internal change in Transnistria's attitude towards the idea of country reintegration. Moldova's consolidated stand manifested in the consensus formed around the Transnistria-related legislative documents passed by the Moldovan parliament in summer 2005 can be summarized as a hard line approach to dealing with the Transnistrian elite. The key propositions of this approach stress the importance of applying sanctions and avoiding discussions of detailed provisions and commitments on issues of the Transnistrian region's future status and guarantees. In the specific circumstances of the Transnistrian conflict, policies based on these propositions strengthen the positions of the most radical part of the Transnistrian elite and weaken the positions of the moderates.

Such a situation calls for exploration of alternative approaches and strategies for establishing a dialogue with the Transnistrian society. These strategies should give a clear perspective of advantages and benefits of reintegration for that part of the ruling elite that is potentially more open

¹⁵ It should be acknowledged that the EU border monitoring mission does not have capacity to monitor the entire volume of cross-border traffic in goods so the mission reports might underestimate the intensity of illegal border activities.

¹⁶ According to one estimate, proceeds from these sales amounted to at least twenty percent of Moldova's entire exports in the previous years.

to a constructive engagement with the Moldovan side. It also calls for the modification of requests that the Moldovan authorities make to their European, American and the Ukrainian partners. As it has already been done in the case of the EU engagement with Belarus, the emphasis in calls for assistance should be shifted from advocating negative sanctions to pooling necessary resources to ensure the access of Transnistrians to pluralistic information through the electronic media broadcasting either from inside or outside of the region, to intensify ties with the few genuine civil society organizations and human rights groups in Transnistria, and to support the process of emancipation of new societal actors in the region.

Negotiating with the Ruling Elite

In terms of approaches to deal with the current Transnistrian leadership, the choice lies between strategies aimed at achieving some sort of a pact with the ruling elite and efforts to marginalize and sideline its top representatives. The literature on ‘pacting’ (the term usually refers to a structured bargaining that produces agreement about the terms of transition) has been heavily influenced by successful democratic transition in Southern Europe.¹⁷ This literature suggests that there are multiple beneficial effects that the fact of reaching an agreement with the ruling elite can have on the process of democratic transition: it reduces opposition to regime change, increases cooperation between representatives of old and alternative elites, and provides political stability for the construction of a new order. On the other hand, some authors who have analyzed the democratic transition in Eastern Europe point to the fact that ‘pacting’ that tended to demobilize publics has often resulted in a stagnated transition and the continuation of an authoritarian rule.¹⁸ Thus the removal of the ruling elite might be a precondition for a speedy transition.

Choosing between these two alternative strategies of dealing with the ruling elite involves estimating preferences and resources of this group. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was no ambiguity concerning where the preferences of a closely-knit Transnistrian elite lay. If a menu of options available to the Transnistrian elite at the beginning of the 1990s is described as consisting of the three options - the acceptance of existing political practices in a newly independent state of Moldova, seeking changes within the parameters of the existing state, or opting for succession, - there was significant convergence among the ruling elite in terms of preferring the third option.¹⁹

¹⁷ G. O’Donnell, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, Vol. 1–4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); J. Higley (eds.), *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Juan J. Linz, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ V. Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Post-communist Experience”, 55 *World Politics* (2003): 167.

¹⁹ On preferences of minority leaders, see V. Bunce, “Status Quo, Reformist or Secessionist Politics: Explaining Minority Behaviour in Multinational States”, (NCEEER Working Paper, July 2004). Available at <http://www.nceer.org/Working%20Papers/paperpdfs/bunce071304.pdf>.

This was due to a number of factors, which have been extensively analyzed in the literature.²⁰ For more than a decade the Transnistrian leadership has invested heavily in preserving the current status quo, which amounts to the *de facto* independence of the Transnistrian region.²¹ However, even prior to the events of the ‘Orange Revolution’, the Transnistrian leadership had to wonder how sustainable this status quo was. There was no evidence that the international community was likely to be forthcoming with recognition of Transnistrian independence, quite the contrary – there was increasing pressure from Western governments to participate in negotiations with Moldova. The economic situation in Transnistria – while in certain respects better than in Moldova – was far from being stable and sound and its further vulnerability was magnified by the Moldovan authorities’ ability to impose sanctions on Transnistrian external trade. The young and skilled continued to emigrate due to the region’s uncertain political and economic prospects.

Despite the defiant independence rhetoric—used extensively for both international and domestic consumption—and despite rather successful efforts to build functioning state institutions and to manage a new identity construction,²² the Transnistrian leadership never discarded the option of a common state. The failed Kozak Memorandum is a very important document in this respect. It reveals valuable information about the nature of the Transnistrian leadership’s preferences with regard to the terms of a possible conflict settlement. The Transnistrian elite was ready to sign the memorandum, which provided for the creation of a common state on terms that were closer to a federal rather than confederal model and it was only the last minute refusal by Moldovan President Voronin to sign the memorandum that took the deal off the table. The issue of a common state and the optimal forms of constitutional design for such a state has also remained a very important topic in the debates in academic and policy circles in Transnistria.²³

The refusal of the Moldovan government to discuss the status of the Transnistrian region prior to democratization could be especially threatening to the current regional elite. The reliance on negative sanctions and the use of antagonistic rhetoric by the Moldovans tends to alienate even those members of the elite that were perceived to be more constructively oriented towards Moldova. Recent calls for another referendum on Transnistria’s independence by the new speaker of the Transnistrian parliament Evgeniy Shevchuk illustrate this tendency.

²⁰ For a review of the origins of preferences for succession, see P. Kolstø, “National Integration and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Societies: The Cases of Estonian and Moldova”, *The Slavonic and East European Review* (2002); S. Troebst, “The ‘Transdnestrian Moldovan Republic’: From Conflict-Driven State-Building to State-Driven Nation-Building”, 2 *EYMI* (2002/2003): 5-30.

²¹ For the discussion of the Transnistria leadership’s efforts to cultivate regional support for status quo see ICG Europe Report, *Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transnistria*, International Crisis Group, 157, 2004.

²² S. Troebst, “The ‘Transdnestrian Moldovan Republic’: From Conflict-Driven State-Building to State-Driven Nation-Building”, 2 *EYMI* (2002/2003): 5-30.

²³ N. V. Babilunga, “Kak nam Postroit’ i Obustroit’ Obschchee Gosudarstvo?” in N. V. Babilunga et al. (eds.), *Fenomen Pridnestrovja* (Tiraspol: RIO PGU, 2nd Edition, 2003): 248-263.

There are real divisions in terms of economic interests, political views, and outlook on the future status of Transnistria among the region's elite groups. These divisions are well recognized by the Moldovan authorities but so far little has been done to use these divisions to enhance the prospects of reintegration. Obviously, it is difficult to do given the intense domestic and Russian pressure on the individual members of the Transnistrian elite to maintain unity on key political issues.²⁴ Yet the absence of detailed provisions on the future status of the region as well as the Moldovan demands to dismantle the Transnistrian institutions prior to agreeing on the terms of reintegration increases the level of uncertainty over the potential outcomes of transition. This helps the Transnistrian leadership to consolidate the elite and to intensify its opposition to the proposed terms of transition and to the design and procedures of the electoral process envisioned by the Yushchenko Plan.

The regional elite controls very substantial resources to do so. Its security apparatus is large and capable. In one estimate, the combined forces of the ministries of state security, internal affairs and defense amount to 15-20,000 permanent staff personnel, which is a quite formidable force for a region with a population of about 670,000 inhabitants.²⁵ Together with employees of many other government institutions and pensioners (whose allowances are far higher in Transnistria than they would be in Moldova), they constitute a group whose clientalistic ties to the unrecognized Transnistrian state are especially strong. The region's leadership has a firm control of the major media outlets and educational institutions. The regime can also rely on a substantial grassroots support, in the form of various NGOs and citizens' associations, both from those that trace their roots to the initial stage of the conflict (e.g., Committee of Defenders of Transnistria) and those that were organized more recently.²⁶

Recognizing the potential of the Transnistrian opposition

Since the start of the Transnistrian conflict the Moldovan government and civil society has spent a lot of time and effort trying, not without a success, to delegitimise and isolate the current Transnistrian regime on the international scene. Over the years of the conflict, however, the Moldovans became, to a significant extent, the victims of their own propaganda. By focusing the international community's attention exclusively on repressive and non-democratic features of the Transnistrian regime, the Moldovan political and civil society actors started to perceive political

²⁴ Having learnt from their experience in the break-away region of Abkhazia where intra-elite competition threatened the prospects of maintaining status-quo in relations between Georgia and Abkhazia, the envoys from the Russian presidential administration were quick to appear on the scene when intra-elite conflict in Transnistria led to the introduction in the Transnistrian parliament in May 2005 of a constitutional reform draft intended to limit the powers of president and increase the powers of the parliament.

²⁵ ICG Europe Report, *Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transnistria*, International Crisis Group, 157, 2004.

²⁶ O. Protsyk, "Federalism and Democracy", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 20, no.1 (2005): 72-90.

processes in the region increasingly only through the prism of these claims. Such a focus led to a certain degree of under-appreciation of the complexity of the political situation in Transnistria which is characterized both by the existence of a genuine popular support for the idea of Transnistrian independence and by the presence of a persistent and open opposition to the current Transnistrian leadership. This opposition can be called as a non-systemic opposition since it is not integrated into the power relations in the region and operates largely outside the generally accepted parameters of political discourse.

While not unified and not very visible during the December 2005 parliamentary elections, this opposition has credible democratic convictions, is much more susceptible to ideas of normalization of relations with Chisinau, and can become an important ally in efforts aimed at constructing a unified state. Given the immaturity of the party system in the region, this opposition is not concentrated in political parties but is organized around non-governmental organizations and human rights groups. The centrist opposition publishes a weekly “Novaia Gazeta” while the most prominent leftist group issues a newspaper “Chelovek I ego prava.” The Transnistrian ruling regime allows some degree of pluralism in areas which do not directly threaten its existence, such as the printed media, but prevents the opposition from acquiring control of the electronic media, which can provide a more effective means of reaching a mass audience. These opposition groups also have rich experience of political campaigning. In various political configurations they took part in a number of previous major electoral campaigns in Transnistria, such as the 1995 local government elections and the 2001 presidential elections.

This opposition has been more persistent in criticizing president Smirnov’s policies than, for example, the “Renewal” political movement, which could be considered as having performed some of the functions of the official opposition to the Transnistrian executive government prior to the December 2005 Transnistrian parliamentary elections. Although businesses that back the “Renewal” movement potentially have a lot to gain from the settlement of the conflict on the principles of a unified state they are unlikely to question the Transnistrian executive leadership’s course on achieving independence, as long as this leadership controls the formidable security apparatus and administrative regulatory instruments. Despite hopes held prior to the December 2005 elections by some analysts and decision makers in Chisinau that “Renewal” would initiate a revision of the Transnistrian approach to conflict settlement, the first moves of the newly elected parliament indicate that these hopes are not likely to materialize.

Although members of opposition groups and their organizations and publication outlets, unlike politicians and businesses associated with the “Renewal” movement, are systematically harassed by the security apparatus, courts, and government-controlled NGOs, they continue to harshly criticize the ruling elite. By doing so they perform a critically important function – they

break the monopoly of the current regime on articulating a vision of the future of the Transnistrian region. Their means of doing so, however, is quite limited. They lack domestic resources not because their ideas do not resonate with some segments of population but because the fear of the Transnistrian authorities' retaliation pushes away potential domestic supporters and sponsors. The level of their support from the international community is very limited and cannot be compared to support received, for example, by the Belarusian opposition. Due to the lack of means to organize the campaign, some opposition figures chose to abstain, for example, from active participation in the December 2005 parliamentary elections. Thus an important opportunity was foregone to gain some additional electoral experience that could have better prepared the opposition for a new round of electoral competition that might take place under international supervision.

The opposition does not get a meaningful support from Chisinau either. The view that the Transnistrian non-governmental organizations are ineffective and entirely controlled by Smirnov's regime seems to represent one dominant position in Chisinau. Another widespread view is that more active engagement with the opposition or selective targeted support of individual opposition figures will give the Transnistrian authorities grounds for attacking the opposition. This view, however, seems to discount the fact that irrespective of whether a dialogue between the Moldovan side and the Transnistrian opposition takes place or not, the latter has already been branded by the Transnistrian authorities as Moldova's agents, traitors, and a "fifth column." Overall, the Moldovan position during the last Transnistrian parliamentary elections amounted to the passive watching of the "Renewal" movement's political moves in the hope that the latter would challenge Smirnov's regime authority.

In the view of the Transnistrian opposition leaders, some of the long-standing policies of the Moldovan government, even directly hurt the opposition's ability to mobilize support for democratic change. For example, the Moldovan government's insistence that all contacts by international non-governmental organizations are done through Chisinau-based organizations and Chisinau-determined channels limits the number of international contacts and events that the opposition could have used for propagating the ideas of liberal democracy and for building trust in western practices and institutions.

The forthcoming presidential elections in Transnistria, which are scheduled for December 2006, can become an important test of willingness and ability of the Transnistrian opposition to challenge the current regime. The 1995 Transnistrian constitution was changed in 2000 to allow Smirnov to run for another term. The constitutional provision about the age limit (65 years) was also changed at that time in order to allow the incumbent president, who turns 65 in October 2006, to take part in elections. Smirnov's genuine popularity among some segments of population and his

semi-authoritarian control of state apparatus make Smirnov's chances of winning the elections, if he runs, much higher than that of opposition

The opposition is not likely to win elections but its active participation in the campaign is important since electoral process provides a lot of opportunities for making alternative views on conflict settlement and the future of the Transnistrian region heard. Breaking Smirnov's regime monopoly on public discourse is a critical task both for the Transnistrian opposition and international community and the potential impact that opposition's energetic participation in the next round of electoral competition might have on the successful accomplishment of this task should not be underestimated.

Holding Elections and Accepting Election Outcomes

The last set of challenges relates to the prospects of holding internationally monitored elections to representative assembly. Such elections, which were envisioned in the Yushchenko Plan, are also likely under future versions of settlement plan. The list of conditions of democratization that the Moldovan parliament insisted must be met prior to the conduct of such elections was specified in the 10 June 2005 appeal. This list, which could better be described as a list of demands aimed at dismantling the authoritarian regime,²⁷ was further elaborated in a joint memorandum of Moldovan civil society organizations.²⁸ It is highly unlikely that all those conditions can be met in the foreseeable future. A choice has to be made on whether or not to hold the elections in an environment where only partial liberalization has taken place and only some of the demands advanced by the Moldovan side have been met.

As the recent wave of so-called 'coloured' revolutions in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan reveals, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes exhibit the greatest weaknesses and vulnerabilities at the time of elections. It suggests that small openings and opportunities, which become available due to the partial loss of control by the authoritarian regime during the electoral period, could be exploited by the regime opponents to bring about democratic change. The ability to exploit such opportunities, of course, depends on how the regime's opposition evolves.

Transnistrian leadership tries to present to the outside world a picture of a united region mobilized around its leadership. The lack of leadership turnover —President Smirnov has been in power unchangeably since the beginning of the self-proclaimed republic — is a fact that does not sit well with democratic principles. This fact, however, is not considered by the regime proponents to

²⁷ For the distinction between liberalization and democratization, see Juan J. Linz, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

²⁸ Moldova Azi, "Memorandum on Supporting Effective Democratisation in Transnistria", (July 27, 2005). Available at <http://www.azi.md/tribune?ID=35269>

be evidence of authoritarian tendencies in the evolution of the Transnistrian regime; it is explained as the logical response to the numerous hostile external pressures on Transnistrian statehood.²⁹

As it was argued earlier, there has always been a significant opposition to Smirnov's rule, despite the regime's repressions and elaborate attempts to manufacture ideological unity. Some evidence suggests that even groups that are currently loyal to the regime might defect when opportunity arises. Although the constitutional reform initiated in May 2005 by a group of deputies that are associated with the "Renewal" movement did not materialize, the very fact of such initiative suggests that the continuing dominance of president Smirnov's inner circle should not be taken for granted. The May 2005 constitutional reform draft envisaged increasing the powers of parliament over the formation of the cabinet of ministers and the constitutional court, the possible introduction of the post of prime minister, and changes to the procedures for the adoption of constitutional laws, which will no longer require the signature of the president of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. Even the analytical report compiled by the official Transnistrian news agency 'Olvia-Press' acknowledged the initiative as an attempt to weaken the powers of the presidency and as a direct attack against the local "guarantor of stability", Transnistrian President Smirnov.³⁰

Tensions can also be detected in the Transnistrian business community. Local enterprises suffer from the difficulties of conducting business in an environment of political conflict and economic sanctions. One strategy of Transnistrian enterprises for dealing with Moldova's withdrawal of customs stamps, for example, was selling stakes to or forming joint ventures with foreign investors who are already active on the right bank of the Nistru river, which is where most of Moldova's territory lies and where the Moldovan central government has full control.³¹ Political conflict not only reduces profits, it also prolongs the uncertainty about the legalization of capital for Transnistrian businessmen. The region's economic actors are potentially a very strong constituency in favour of political rapprochement and economic reintegration. The Transnistrian political leadership is aware of this and the possible defection of the business elite has a high priority on its list of concerns.³²

Given such an internal situation in Transnistria and given the fact that elections provide an opportunity to exploit weaknesses of authoritarian regimes, one might wonder whether the Moldovan government's insistence on postponing internationally monitored elections to a new regional assembly in Transnistria until *all* conditions specified in the June 2005 Moldovan parliament's appeal are fulfilled is an optimal strategy.

²⁹ O. Protsyk, "Federalism and Democracy", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 20, no.1 (2005): 72-90.

³⁰ Olvia-Press, "*Reforma Semnadsati*", (August, 8 2005). Available at <http://www.olvia.idknet.com>.

³¹ G. Selari, "Transnistria Economy: Regional Dimension", *Democracy and Governing in Moldova E-Journal* Vol. 55, (July 4-29, 2005). Available at www.e-democracy.com

³² See quotes from the interview with President Smirnov in Olvia-Press, "*Reforma Semnadsati*", (August 8, 2005). Available at www.olvia.idknet.com

A somewhat related challenge that Moldovan authorities and international actors are likely to face has to do with recognizing and accepting the outcomes of the prospective elections, whatever those outcomes might be. A return of the pro-Smirnov majority to the regional parliament could be one possible outcome, even if conditions for free and fair elections are largely met. As was mentioned earlier, significant segments of the population have depended on Smirnov's regime to provide them with salaries, pensions, and various subsidized services. Smirnov's support is not only limited to groups of direct clients. The regime was able to guarantee some minimal living standards in what the majority of population believes was a very hostile external environment. Although one has to treat survey results derived within an authoritarian setting with a degree of suspicion, the survey figures seem to paint a picture that the Transnistrian authorities might perceive as comforting. In one study conducted in 2000, for example, it was reported that although the Transnistrians found their economic situation in general to be poor, they still believed it was much better than on the other side of the river.³³

The level of support for the current Transnistrian leadership might vary between the main ethnic groups in the region. One of the recurrent topics in Moldova's accusations against Smirnov's regime is the fate of ethnic Moldovans in Transnistria. The declarative internationalism of the Transnistrian regime cannot hide the fact that there are a number of problems with the situation of ethnic Moldovans in the region. There are ethnic Moldovan prisoners in Transnistrian correction facilities who could be considered to be political prisoners; the educational system continues to use the Soviet-era Cyrillic script for the Romanian language although Moldova switched to the Latin script in 1989 – this situation disadvantages the Moldovan youth that seek educational and job opportunities either in the rest of Moldova or in Romania; although no hard data is available, Moldovan analysts believe that ethnic Moldovans continue to be underrepresented in the Transnistrian government, business, and educational institutions.

Even if the level of discontent with Smirnov's regime is higher among ethnic Moldovans, it does not imply the automatic defeat of the current leadership in free and fair elections. The potential electoral clout of ethnic Moldovans is not that high. According to the 1989 census, Moldovans constituted about 39.9% of the population in Transnistria, Ukrainians 28.3% and Russians 25.5%.³⁴ The Transnistrian authorities claim that the 1989 census figures are not accurate because they included populations from a large number of right bank settlements, which were a part of the left

³³ V. Kolossov, "A Small State vs. a Self-Proclaimed Republic: Nation-Building, Territorial Identities and Prospects of Conflict Resolution", in S. Bianchini (eds.), *From the Adriatic to the Caucasus: The Dynamics of (De) Stabilization* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2001) cited in S. Troebst, "The 'Transdnestrian Moldovan Republic': From Conflict-Driven State-Building to State-Driven Nation-Building", 2 *EYMI* (2002/2003): 5-30.

The perception of differences in the quality of life between Transnistria and rest of Moldova might have substantially changed more recently, given the stabilization and moderate improvement of economy under the Communists' rule.

³⁴ Goskomstat, *Itogi Vsesoiuznoi Perepisi Naseleniia 1989 Goda [Results of All-Union Census of 1989]* (Moscow: Gosstatizdat, 1990).

bank administrative districts at the time of the 1989 census, but that has remained under the control of the Moldovan central government since 1990. The official numbers that are used by the Transnistrian authorities since 1998 are: Moldovans 33.8%, Ukrainians 28.8 % and Russians 28.7%³⁵ Furthermore, there is no evidence to contradict the possibility that regional solidarity might play an important role in the electoral behaviour of Transnistria's ethnic Moldovans.

An alternative outcome of the elections could be that an anti-Smirnov mobilization will take place and the regional assembly will be dominated by the opposition to Smirnov's regime. There is no reason, however, to believe that such mobilization will imply that the new regional parliament will be any more willing than Smirnov's regime to accept the country's reintegration on Chisinau's terms. Even those Transnistrian democratic opposition leaders who are the staunchest opponents of the current leadership highly value the autonomy gains made by the secessionist movement and attach a great symbolic significance to such events as, for example, the Transnistrian forces' resistance against the Moldovan army's attempts to gain control over the right bank city of Bendery (Tighina) in 1992, a battle that incurred some of the heaviest casualties in the course of the conflict.³⁶

Despite Transnistria's sinister image in the Western media, the region is not a gangsters' land where no rules and norms apply. The Transnistrian regime succeeded in building workable institutions that provide for its citizens a sense of normalcy and rule of law. For example, there is a constitutional court that routinely makes judgments on matters pertaining to the implementation of the 1995 Transnistrian constitution, with the court's rulings often going against the wishes of parliament and, sometimes, of the president.³⁷ While this particular institution tries to perform some functions typical to Western democracies, there are other government institutions (for example, heavily subsidized systems of health care and education) that cater to citizen's needs articulated on the basis of the norms of the peculiar Soviet understanding of democracy. For many citizens of Transnistria, who also happen to be former Soviet citizens, the concept of democracy is based not on the ideas of political competition and separation of powers but on the egalitarian ideas of social justice and fairness.

The point of these examples is that, for very significant numbers of Transnistrians, their regional institutions are democratically legitimate government bodies and not simply the facades of repressive and irresponsible authoritarian rulers, as a reading of some of the Western press might

³⁵ B. G. Bomeshko, "Pridnestrovje: Gody Sozidaniya", in N. V. Babilunga et al. (eds.), *Fenomen Pridnestrovja* (Tiraspol: RIO PGU, 2nd Edition, 2003): 94-122.

³⁶ S. Troebst, "The 'Transdnestrian Moldovan Republic': From Conflict-Driven State-Building to State-Driven Nation-Building", 2 *EYMI* (2002/2003): 5-30.

³⁷ See, for example, Transnistrian justice minister's interview on conflict between the parliament and the ministry: Andrei Mospanov, Olvia-Press, "*Ministr Yustitsii Podverg Kritike Poslednie Initsiativy Verkhovnogo Soveta*", (April 4, 2005). Available at www.olvia.idknet.com

suggest. The wholesale dismantling of these institutions might be unacceptable for whoever represents Transnistria after the regional elections. All this means that negotiating with the new democratic representatives of Transnistria will require a lot of patience, respect for their values and institutions, and a willingness to find a workable compromise. The challenge will be to design political institutions of a common state in such a way that permits genuine power-sharing but also includes provisions that encourage cooperation and safeguard against institutional deadlock and confrontation.

Conclusion

Prospects of reaching an agreement between the Moldovan and Transnistrian sides remain highly uncertain. The idea of reintegration, however, continues to have a strong appeal. The Transnistrian conflict in many respects provides more hope for a successful settlement on the basis of reintegration than any other major ethno political conflict on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Such fundamental characteristics of the Transnistrian conflict as the absence of the deeply entrenched animosity among major ethnic groups, the stabilizing effects of geographic proximity to the EU and strong incentives for economic cooperation across the current political divide favourably distinguish the Transnistrian situation from the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh. These fundamentals, as well as the great promise of improving economic, social, and political fortunes of people on both sides of the Nistru river that the idea of the country's reintegration contains, should make domestic actors and international mediators keep trying to find a lasting solution for the Transnistrian problem.