

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### Identity and Industrial Change on a Contested Borderland, Moldova and Secessionist Transnistria

#### Topic of Research

This research is concerned with cross-border ethnic relations and economic trends. It is a study into the relationship between ethnic and national identity formation and socio-economic development and its implications for resolving the stalemated Transnistrian<sup>1</sup> conflict. It is part of a wider doctoral project on the creation and transformation of identities during industrial and social change.

The Republic of Moldova is a newly independent, multi-ethnic country divided by unresolved secessionist conflict (1991-92), bifurcated Soviet-era industrial development, and opposing ideas of national and ethnic identity. According to scholars, the stalemated Transnistrian conflict is owing to Russian geo-political manipulation (Kaufman and Bowers 1998; Gribincea 1998), separate Soviet historical experiences (Kolstø and Malgin 1998), dissimilar levels of socio-economic development (Moşneaga and Alexei Tulbure 1998), and distinct nation-building processes (e.g. Troebst 2003, Solonari 2002) in the quarrelling regions of “Bessarabia” (or right-bank Moldova) and secessionist “Transnistria”. Literature points to Moldovans’ lack of common identity (e.g. Cash 2002; King 2000; Kolstø 2002; van Meurs 2003) and to a strong, “neo-Soviet” collective identity in Moldova’s heavily industrialized, breakaway region, Transnistria (e.g. O’Loughlin et al., Skvortsova 2002). “Transnistrians” are considered a success story in Soviet attempts to create *homo sovieticus*, while Bessarabians quarrel over their multiple ethnic and national identity options (as Moldovan, Romanian or pseudo-Soviet) (Skvortsova 2002). Some scholars understand this regional divergence in identity to be roughly congruent with an industrial-agricultural split in the country – russified, “internationalist” Transnistria being a showcase for Soviet industry, and “ethno-nationally awakened” Bessarabia for rural farming (King 2000; Mason 2006; Moşneaga & Tulbure 1998). My research takes up the scholarly assumption, implicit but undeveloped in these studies that different experiences of labor and economic development matter is people’s identity formation and social-group cohesion. The premise needs to be worked out and empirically examined at the grassroots level in view of not only the socialist past, but also in light of Moldova’s contemporary, shifting power relations and socio-economic landscape, increasingly penetrated by transnational, post-Fordist forms of capital (see World Bank-Moldova 2006), along with ever-present cross-border divergences and linkages.

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<sup>1</sup> See Stefan Troebst. ‘We are Transnistrians!’: Post-Soviet Identity Management in the Dniester Valley // *Ab Imperio*. 2003. Vol. 1. Pp. 437-466 for an explanation on the problematics of translating from Russian to English the word *Pridnestrov’e*. Throughout this report, I translate *Pridnestrov’e* as ‘Transnistria’, recognizing its limitations, but choosing the word for ease of read and not for any political reason.

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The study – at the crossroads of economic and political anthropology – examines titular Moldovan and Transnistrian identity in relation to economic change. It uses an ethnographic and multi-sited, comparative approach, concerned with history, to explore the wider research question: how do changing processes and representations of industrial modernization (e.g. transnational privatization) affect peoples’ ethnic/national social-group and self-identification, and in turn impact social relations and reintegration possibilities along an industrialized portion of the Moldovan-Transnistrian disputed border?

### **Methodology and Research Sites**

Being anthropological in nature, the project is based on extensive ethnographic field research conducted in the secessionist “Transnistrian Moldovan Republic” (*Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika*) and in right-bank Moldova between November 2004 and August 2006. My fieldwork sites were the twin cities of Rezina, Moldova (population 15,000) and Rybnitsa/Râbnîța, Transnistria (population 32,000)<sup>2</sup> along the northern, industrialized border-zone. The towns shared common Soviet industry until the 1991-92 armed breakaway of Transnistria from the Republic of Moldova. The multi-sited field research used a range of methods – from participant-observation on factory shop floors to structured interviews with Fortune-500, multinational-corporate directors and cross-border travel with migrants.

### **Summary of Research Findings & Preliminary Conclusions**

Based on comparative, ethnographic field research on both river banks, the study proposes that new types of identities are being created by left and right-bank industries, which have bearing on grassroots conflict resolution. Analyzing trends in the region’s post-Soviet industrial development (e.g. EU versus Russian Federation FDI, factory privatization, lay-offs, em/migration), my research finds that heavy industry plays a key role in the manufacturing of two new social categories of identification, both absent in the Soviet era: “Romanian” (in right-bank, multinational industry) and “Transnistrian” (in left-bank, “state-regulated” private industry). The identities represent different, rival ways of life, grounded in dissimilar, altering power structures. Industry’s development of polarizing identities, however, does not seem to lead to inter-group discord, but negotiated communion on the contested borderland. This is because the nature of the new identities, as flexible, sometimes fleeting *categories* of identification, and not stable, bounded ethno-national-identity *groupings*. What is more, the categories “Romanian” and “Transnistrian” stand less for ethnicity and national identity, and more for labour, language and “localist” identifications, as people do not categorize and rank themselves primarily in ethno-national terms. In other words, I believe there is an entrenching of new categories of identification, but not necessarily a crystallization of permanent, fixed “Transnistrian” or “Romanian” ethno-national groups (*pace* Troebst 2003).<sup>3</sup> Evidence suggests that ordinary people

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<sup>2</sup> The urban sprawl of Rezina and Rybnitsa make them appear as one and the same city. Only the Nistru River and the Transnistrian check-point “border” separate the two visually linked cities.

<sup>3</sup> See Brubaker 2004: 12 on the distinction between ethnic categories and ethnic groups. When fixity or “groupness” around a Transnistrian category does exist, it acts to reproduce the existing power structure, making actors complicit in their own status subordination.

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are not united by intensely felt ethno-national solidarity. What solidarity exists in Transnistria and right-bank Moldova is based not on ethnicity, nationality or region – but on language, urban/rural and labor status, and shared socio-cultural values (see Chamberlain-Creangă, *Ab Imperio*, 4/2006) – common to both left and right-bank Moldova. This approach to identity is different from much literature on the Republic of Moldova, which makes “groupness” the starting point to studying ethnic/national identity and inter-group relations. Finding both difference *and* commonality in identity and cultural values on both river banks, I question the prevailing assumption that there is significant discontinuity (e.g. Troebst 2003) and animosity between the peoples, identities and regions of Transnistria and right-bank Moldova.<sup>4</sup> This is relevant to conflict resolution, which all too often begins with an assumption of difference, rather than likeness. It also suggests the likelihood of cross-border receptivity to “track two” (citizen) diplomacy and confidence building programs.

### **Suggestions for Future Research Agenda**

This project is concerned primarily with grassroots cultural and economic aspects of the Transnistrian conflict. I recently held an IREX Embassy Policy Specialist research post at the US Embassy Chişinău (July-September 2007), which involved analyzing important political aspects of conflict, complementing my socio-economic research. Work included analyzing political party formation, coalition-building, and electoral system change in left and right-bank Moldova.<sup>5</sup>

The common representation of secessionist Transnistria is that of a repressive, homogenous political space – known only for its long-standing authoritarian leader, “President” Igor Smirnov. However, three facts challenge this assumption of pure authoritarianism and homogeneity. Firstly, ten political parties currently exist in Transnistria (as of March 2008).<sup>6</sup> Secondly, a pro-business (some say “reformist” or “opposition”) party (*Obnovlenie*) controls “parliament,” not Smirnov. Evidence suggests a real power struggle between these two “clan” groups. Sources say the former’s (*Obnovlenie*’s) business interests may be open to reintegration. Thirdly, Euro-Atlantic democratization efforts (e.g. civil society and educational development) are increasingly penetrating the region, with segments of the population receptive to them.

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<sup>4</sup> This view challenges a number of Moldovan and Euro-American scholars, who corroborate the existence of a discrete Transnistrian people group (e.g. Kolstø and Malgin 1998; O’Loughlin et al. 1998; Skvortsova 2002). Even the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, one of the five mediators in the Transnistrian stalemate, believes ‘[...] there is a distinct feeling of “Transdnistriean” identity going beyond ethnic lines, justifying a special status for the area’ (OSCE 2006: 6).

<sup>5</sup> This was done through formal structured interviews with a handful of opposition political party leaders from Transnistria, supplemented by informal conversations with trusted interlocutors and business leaders from the region.

<sup>6</sup> Many parties sprang up around the time of the December 2005 parliamentary election – which I had the opportunity to observe during my PhD fieldwork. Although a number are ‘phantom parties’ (e.g. Just Republican Party, Patriotic Party), meant to steal votes from “reformist” party *Obnovlenie* (for example), I believe a party system is gradually developing in Transnistria.

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Democratizing Moldova's eastern region of Transnistria has become the new Euro-Atlantic strategy for ending the status quo and settling the Transnistrian conflict. This is a shift from an earlier, sole preoccupation with disarmament, demilitarization and peacekeeping. Along with formal diplomacy, (inter)governmental organizations are now channeling resources to encourage access to information, NGO and educational development, market economy growth, and humanitarian and legal assistance to weaken authoritarian control in Transnistria. While important efforts, very little attention has been given to the state of "domestic" politics *within* Transnistria, and the ways in which Transnistrian internal politics can be harnessed for democratic change and Moldovan reunification. Political pluralism is considered key to post-socialist democracy-building. More attention needs to be paid to the gradual emergence of a multi-party political system in Transnistria. The involvement of business/political elites and ordinary people in the political process needs to be considered. Studying how every-day people come to understand and enact political pluralism is important for future reintegration efforts.

For future research, I would like to examine the role of Transnistrian political parties and elections as sources of division, unity and reform within Transnistria, as well as between left and right-bank Moldova. More specifically, the project would examine how party system development (including changes in the electoral process) in Transnistria intersects with political economy concerns (e.g. federal budget, Russian Federation FDI), and what bearing this has on conflict settlement options. As a social-cultural anthropologist, I am especially interested in how social actors understand political pluralism and constitute civic culture in a society transitioning from authoritarian, one-party rule to a multi-party system? How do persons learn to participate and to choose?

Such a project can potentially contribute to the growing anthropological study of post-socialist democracy making (e.g. other studies by Greenberg 2006 on Serbia, Lupu forthcoming on Romania). The starting point would be a real contest for political power is beginning to develop in Transnistria. Based on this, my hypothesis would be that political outcomes in Transnistria (e.g. ideological character of parliament, reintegration initiatives) have as much to do with socio-economic change, "culture" (norms, values and changing social structures) and even grassroots actors (constituents-in-making), as they do with elites and their institutional arrangements (different from Moser 2001, e.g.). The research topic is timely, given that parliamentary elections in right and left-bank Moldova are approaching in 2009. The study can either add to my PhD dissertation or entail a new, complementary project.

### **Recommendations for the US Policy Community**

(1) *Closely monitor political party development and electoral system change within Transnistria.* US Embassy Chişinău officials and government representatives should continue to make contact with reform-minded political party leaders in Transnistria. Engagement is crucial. The US Government should support efforts towards party formation and political pluralism. However, the goal should be not just quantity (of parties), but also quality. Many parties do not yet market themselves as "a party," just as many ordinary people in Transnistria do not yet distinguish between political parties. Alterations in the electoral system could change this.

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Parliamentary election is currently based on a single-member district (SMD) electoral system. It is likely to change to a proportional representation (PR) system or (my prediction) to a mixed system, which will have a significant impact on the internal politics and civic culture of Transnistria. A PR or mixed system will require parties to have more partisan platforms than before. However, a PR system, usually considered good for the evolution of a multi-party system, could disadvantage reformist parties, namely the Transnistrian opposition, which does not have a clearly articulated party platform vis-a-vis “President” Smirnov’s party. As such, electoral system changes may impact possibilities for conflict resolution, as evidence suggests the “opposition” is more open to reintegration with Moldova than Smirnov’s party. The Moldovan branch of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) could play a positive role – directly or indirectly with local leaders – in helping opposition parties work out winning platforms.

(2) *Encourage cooperation between left and right-bank political parties.* Moldovan political parties, especially with counterparts on the left-bank, should devise forums for leaders and members from both river banks to meet. Support should be given to Moldovan parliamentary efforts to set up a commission for special dialogue between left and right-bank MPs.

(3) *Promote the development of “civic culture” within Transnistria.* The current strategy of supporting democratization within Transnistria focuses on the development of civil society. However, at the grassroots level, the “civic” needs just as much development as the “civil”. Democracy is based on the ideal of “citizen participation”. However, in societies transitioning from one-party, authoritarian systems to political pluralism, persons must learn to participate and to choose. Democracy and political pluralism requires a civic culture based on ideas of “choice” and “self”, which have different meanings in different social contexts. Based on my 2004-06 fieldwork, I found that many ordinary people in Transnistria make political choices through collective, unanimous voting in their workplaces. Others are either apathetic, or do not know the whereabouts of correct voting district (*okrug*) polling stations, or simply vote for the wealthiest (read: individual, not party) candidate promising the best district development projects. Moreover, more thought needs to be given to how (cross-border) ethnic, class/status and urban/rural factors impinge on political participation. Fostering stronger individual, and in particular “minority” (ethnic Moldovan), participation in the political process could be facilitated through cooperation between political party members from right and left-bank Moldova. NDI and IRI could also play a role with local actors.

(4) *Support common media outlets.* Starting in November 2007, the right-bank, pro-government TV station, NIT, will be rebroadcast by a local TV station in Transnistria. Promoting other similar ventures – including the movement of newspapers in a range of language across river banks – will foster left-bank access to information, as well as advance cross-border understanding, mutual respect, and the break down of existing stereotypes.

(5) *Make use of the dynamic, cross-regional movement of persons and ideas.* There is often an assumption of isolation and stagnation of persons in Transnistria. It is assumed that people in the region have little access to outside information and rarely travel beyond its confines. My research found otherwise. I discovered dynamic travel to/from the left and right-bank, and a regular exchange of information. For example, many young persons move to the capital Chişinău for university education, middle-aged adults migrate abroad to work (ethnic Moldovans westwards and eastwards, while ethnic Russians/Ukrainians usually eastwards), and others travel weekly, or even daily, to the right-bank for commercial trading, work-business or educational reasons. In all cases, persons bring back to Transnistria ideas, knowledge and information learned through travel. More thought needs to be put into harnessing this for democratic change within Transnistria. Perhaps involving university students from Transnistria, studying in right-bank Moldova, in citizen participation projects (e.g. through IREX Moldova initiatives) is a good start.

(6) *Build links with business elites in Transnistria.* Many factory managers/owners and business leaders in Transnistria are also political leaders. Evidence suggests that some have a vested, albeit economic interest in reunification. They would like to regularize their business activities (e.g. through registration with Moldovan commercial authorities) and gain access to international markets by way of Moldova. Providing Transnistrian businessmen with opportunities for travel/job exchanges in America or the European Union could help convince other business actors to do the same. Moreover, one should also bear in mind that tensions may exist between the profit-maximizing goals of foreign-owned (read: Russian Federation) joint-stock companies and the Tiraspol regime, which could be exploited to gain leverage over Smirnov in conflict resolution.

(7) *Increase economic development in right-bank Moldova.* Right-bank Moldova must be economically attractive to Transnistria for reintegration to happen. Right now it is not. More thought needs to be given to devising policies that can bolster right-bank Moldovan economic legitimacy. My research found that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), especially from Western Europe, is already playing a positive role in molding multi-cultural social relations in right-bank Moldova. US and inter-governmental (e.g. World Bank, IMF) policymakers can help Moldova better liberalize its economy and thus attract Euro-Atlantic FDI into the country, which can make right-bank Moldova more attractive to Transnistria.

(8) *Question a “Transnistrian identity” as an obstacle to re-unification.* Some scholars and practitioners consider a “Transnistrian identity” an obstacle to reintegration. However, my research finds that it is not a fixed, durable national/regional identity. There are large numbers of persons who have not yet integrated the identity, namely rural ethnic Moldovans. Those who are the most loyally “Transnistrian” are either (a) some of the first to emigrate with economic downturn (e.g. factory layoffs or salary reductions), or (b) likely to migrate in the future. I believe em/migration has an impact on long-term fidelity to the Transnistrian state, though rarely discussed by practitioners. Bearing migration in mind, I do not consider a “Transnistrian

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identity” to be a real obstacle to reunification. As such, I do not think policymakers should make its alleged existence the starting point of policy-making.

The bigger obstacle, which should attract more attention, is ensuring preferred Russian speakers in Transnistria they will have language rights in a unified Moldova. This starts with increased Moldovan government confidence-building measures to ensure language privileges among its own Russian-speaking population. People’s fear of a loss of Russian language rights is what Transnistrian politicians frequently play on to encourage division. It is my belief that the Transnistrian “state” gains its legitimacy from those who inhabit its space by acting as a symbolic guarantor of (Russian) language rights and a particular way of life (e.g. a non-liberal economic life-world). The implication of this for reintegration is that if another entity – like the Moldovan state – can become a guarantor of Russian speaking rights, for example, then people in Transnistria could arguably be convinced to change their allegiance.