

TRANSNISTRIA 2001: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

INTRODUCTION

BHHRG sent an observer to the Pridnestrovyan-Moldavian Republic (PMR), often known in the West as "Transnistria," for the presidential election on December 9th, 2001. BHHRG had observed the parliamentary election in Transnistria in December 2000, concluding that it met international standards and reflected a genuine expression of the Transnistrian electorate's will. BHHRG's representatives have been visiting the republic since 1991.

Over the course of a year since the last parliamentary elections, Transnistria's geopolitical situation has evidently undergone a review from "on high." In December 2000, the group of election observers from Russia enjoyed the status of an official delegation from the Russian State Duma. Though merely a formality, the status of the Russian observers in December 2000 represented a significant – if symbolic – gesture to the effect that the Transnistrians enjoyed Moscow's tacit blessing in choosing their own legislature. In December 2001, for the first time, the group of Russian observers no longer enjoyed the status of an official State Duma delegation. The change in status would appear to bode ill for the government in Tiraspol (the Transnistrian capital).

Although – since the September 11th terrorist attacks on America – relations between Moscow and Washington have visibly warmed, it has been difficult in many cases to see the areas in which Russia might try to strengthen its geopolitical hand in exchange for help to the United States in the "war on terrorism." However the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin may be exploiting the changed international climate to its advantage, it has not factored Transnistria's future into its plans. Since Transnistria relies heavily on Russia's goodwill for its continued existence as a de facto sovereign state, the question emerges as to whether Mr. Putin's government will lift a finger to prevent the sovereignty of the pro-Russian statelet from being undermined. Indeed, it must even be asked: is Moscow actively contributing to Transnistria's extinction?

GEOPOLITICS

Transnistria's geopolitical situation and its history are outlined in BHHRG's report of the parliamentary elections of 2000 (www.bhhr.org/transnistrian/contents.htm), which explains the historical justification for Transnistria's separation from the pro-Romanian nation-state of Moldova. After declaring independence on September 2nd, 1990 and fighting a war against Moldova that claimed over 1,000 lives in three months, Transnistria pursued a political model based on multi-ethnicity, in contrast to the Romanian mono-ethnic model of the post-Soviet Moldovan government in Kishinev (or Chisinau, in Romanian). Although the largest percentage of Transnistria's inhabitants consists of ethnic Moldovans, the majority of the Transnistrian population is non-Moldovan, mostly Russian and Ukrainian. The Transnistrian government has sought establishment of Russian and Ukrainian diplomatic representation on its territory, and plans are reputedly afoot to open a Russian consulate in Tiraspol in the near future. Many Transnistrian residents have already sought and been granted Russian citizenship.

Meanwhile, the government of Moldova has actively pursued reunification with Transnistria under the sovereign rule of Chisinau. The current Transnistrian government has expressed its intention to preserve its sovereignty, either as a state recognized separately from Moldova or else within a "common state." The "common state" would essentially be a country with more than one capital, each with equal political authority, inside the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Moldova (corresponding to the borders of the old Soviet Republic of Moldavia). In the recent past, the "common state" idea has been associated with the efforts of the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) to resolve the dispute over the separatist Caucasus republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, which borders the Republic of Armenia inside the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Chisinau has thus far resisted such overtures, and

negotiations under way over the past year between the governments of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, the OSCE and Transnistria have failed to produce mutual agreement concerning the fate of the Dnestr's left bank. The negotiation process deadlocked several months ago, and there has since been little progress toward change.

The main stumbling block until quite recently was the presence of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRV), a contingent of Russian troops constituting the remnants of the former Soviet 14th Army. Under the terms of the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit Declaration signed by former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Moscow agreed to remove its troops and military hardware from Transnistria by 2002. Russian President Vladimir Putin, after taking office, expressed his preparedness to continue the military withdrawal from Transnistria, and to adhere as closely as possible to the OSCE's Istanbul deadline. Tanks and other hardware have, accordingly, been moving north during Putin's tenure in the Kremlin.

The prospect of Transnistria (whose own standing army is many times the size of the Russian forces) taking up arms again to defend against a Moldovan attempt to force reunification on Chisinau's terms has loomed as a backdrop to the process of Russian military departure, which could naturally be interpreted as a threat to Transnistrian security. Yet the Tiraspol government has appeared rather calm about the Russian withdrawal lately. Perhaps this is because of a certainty that the Transnistrian mini-state would not be the only one to pay a heavy price in another bout of armed hostilities.

Moldova – by some estimates the poorest country in Europe – is clearly unprepared for war, even against a small secessionist army. Its population (once perhaps as large as 4 million) has shrunk by as much as half according to some reports, as vast numbers of young people – who would presumably make up a new Moldovan fighting force – have left the country to escape economic hardship and look for work. Ukraine (which borders Transnistria to the east) might face a difficult refugee crisis should fighting break out again between Tiraspol and Chisinau, since Transnistrian civilians would probably head for the Ukrainian border to escape. So Transnistria's foreign policy, stewarded by Foreign Minister Valery Litskai, looks set to preserve the geo-political – if not military – status quo for the time being, and the effective hand-over of ex-Soviet military hardware by Transnistria does not seem to be ringing alarm bells in Tiraspol the way it perhaps once did.

Transnistria has an economic incentive to cooperate with the Russian military withdrawal. It has a high external debt, although unlike Moldova – which owes most of its approximately \$2 billion in foreign debt to Western financial organizations like the IMF and World Bank – Transnistria's debt is almost entirely to Russia to which it owes over \$500 million to the Russian gas company Gazprom alone. According to Foreign Minister Litskai in an article in *The Moscow Times* entitled "A War of Letters," published on December 21st, 2001, Transnistria "privatized half of the Soviet 14th Army arsenal" in 1991. "Now we're paying off our debts by selling it back," says Litskai. This state of affairs appears preferable to that of Moldova proper, where the standard of living for ordinary people is noticeably lower than in Transnistria. In summer 2001, the Moldovan government used \$30 million worth of its much-needed hard currency reserves to pay off debts to Western lending institutions. In so doing, it postponed raising pensions, as the ruling Moldovan Party of Communists had promised to do before the elections of February 2001. Presumably, whatever the national security implications for the Transnistrians, using military hardware to satisfy an external debt is not by itself going to significantly damage the living standard of ordinary people east of the River Dniestr. In the words of Mr. Litskai, "Unlike poor Moldova, we have something to sell."

ZUBR

In 2000, a branch of a social-political organization known as "ZUBR" was formed. ZUBR is a Russian acronym that stands for "For a Union with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia." However, the word "Zubr" also means "Bison" in Russian, and the ZUBR organizations in Transnistria, Ukraine and Russia should not be confused with the "Zubr" youth organization in Belarus, named after the

Belarusian national symbol (the bison). Zubr in Belarus is opposed to incumbent Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and openly financed by the US Embassy in Minsk. ZUBR in Transnistria is pro-Russian and clearly a homegrown grouping that is largely business-oriented. In fact – ironically – ZUBR in Transnistria is much closer than Zubr in Belarus to the sort of grassroots social organizations associated with a traditional Western understanding of “civil society,” the establishment of which Western governments and media liberally proclaim to be one of the West’s primary goals in the ex-USSR.

In August 2000, BHHRG’s representative met with one of the leaders of ZUBR of Transnistria, Alexander Semeniuk, who described ZUBR as an organization promoting the “Russian Idea.” Referring to the ancient Russian “zemstvo” system of democratic communities within the Russian Empire, Semeniuk described the Russian conception of the foundation of states as “blood and earth.” He said that Moldova had been founded on this basis, but that not a single member of the current Moldovan government was even a Slav. In contrast, Transnistrian Speaker of Parliament Grigori Marakutsa (the No. 2 man Transnistria) is an ethnic Moldovan.

Pointing out that Moldova was currently under the ecclesiastical authority of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Semeniuk informed BHHRG that the Chisinau authorities had been gradually moving toward bringing Moldova under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Patriarch. This, he claimed, was alarming to many Transnistrians, the majority of whom favored remaining under the Russian Patriarch. Furthermore, he said that current Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin had – since being elected head of state – broken his pre-election promise to seek entry to the Russia-Belarus Union. In fact, although Voronin had promoted himself prior to his rise to power as a Russophile Communist who viewed the post-Soviet Moldovan national flag as “fascist,” he had – since taking office – transformed into something of a Moldovan nationalist. Although Voronin is a distinctly Russian name, Vladimir Voronin is actually ethnically Moldovan, and his family name had apparently once been Romanian before being changed from Romanian to Russian in Soviet times. It is heavily rumored in Moldova that Voronin’s original family name was “Cioară,” meaning “crow” in Romanian. The word for “crow” in Russia is “vorona,” and therefore “Voronin” is thought to be a Russified derivation of “Cioară.”

Semeniuk said that ZUBR’s aim was to ensure that Transnistria remained within Russian civilization even if Moldova went its own way. The implication: Moldova – not Transnistria – was the real “separatist” state. On December 10th, Russia’s NTV television station quoted Transnistrian President Igor Smirnov as saying: “[I]t was not we who legally broke away from the republic and the Union. It was Moldova that broke away. Therefore we now have two states: the Pridnestovyan-Moldavian Republic and the Republic of Moldova.”

Although ZUBR, at the time of BHHRG’s meeting in August, had not decided which candidate to support for president of Transnistria, Semeniuk said that ZUBR favored the current foreign policy of Tiraspol. Ultimately, ZUBR threw its support behind the incumbent, Igor Smirnov, and staged a free concert for youth on the Friday before polling day in support of Mr. Smirnov’s re-election. The concert was well-attended. While it is difficult to gauge the popularity of an organization such as ZUBR as a whole, BHHRG’s representative noticed that its members seemed highly motivated and professional.

THE CANDIDATES AND THE ISSUES

Competing in the election were three candidates: incumbent President Igor Smirnov, who, before becoming leader of Transnistria at the end of 1990, was director of the Electromash Plant in Tiraspol (1987-90); Tom Zenovich, former Mayor of the City of Bender, Transnistria’s second largest city, located in the only part of Transnistria west of the River Dnestr; and Alexander Radchenko, Chairman of the People’s Power Party and First Deputy Chairman of the “Power to the People! For Social Justice!” Movement.

BHHRG's representative held interviews with both candidates opposed to Mr. Smirnov. The complaints of Mr. Zenovich and Mr. Radchenko were remarkably similar in most respects. Both candidates, while acknowledging that the standard of living was higher in Transnistria than in Moldova proper, asserted that Transnistrians were tired of living "on a reservation." The key issue of difference with Mr. Smirnov appeared to be that of Transnistria's relationship with Moldova. Mr. Zenovich and Mr. Radchenko both advocated some form of "federative" state within the current internationally recognized borders of Moldova. Mr. Smirnov, however, had repeatedly advocated a continuation of the halted negotiation process on the basis of the "common state," but apparently ruled out a "federative" relationship.

Mr. Radchenko told BHHRG that already-existing constitutional guarantees would prevent Transnistria from finding itself at the mercy of Chisinau – economically, socially or politically. He said that Transnistria would not have to be shouldered with Chisinau's external debt or have its enterprises and economic resources put at the disposal of Moldovan politicians on the other side of the Dnestr. Instead, Transnistria would be guaranteed self-government and management of its own economic affairs within the new federation. Mr. Radchenko also said that, although Moldova's foreign debt was currently estimated at \$2 billion, its per capita debt was in fact considerably lower than Transnistria's, which he said stood at around \$824 million. Moldova's population, he claimed, was 3.5 million, as opposed to the 650,000 or so in Transnistria. Mr. Zenovich's debt figures were \$1.5 billion and \$900 million, respectively.

Ex-Bender Mayor Zenovich, whose city witnessed the brunt of the fighting in the war with Moldova almost a decade ago, complained that he had been forced to give up his seat as mayor when he decided to run for president. He described his occupation as "unemployed" in the biography on his political program posters, accused Mr. Smirnov of spreading a rumor that he (Zenovich) was a "Jew," and said he feared for his personal safety after the election. Mr. Zenovich enjoyed the support of the Bender faction of a movement known as "Yedinstvo" (Unity) of Transnistria (see www.bhhrq.org/transnistrian/contents.htm), which, in the parliamentary elections a year previously, had opposed the parliamentary forces allied with President Smirnov. Unity of Transnistria had recently split into two wings – a Tiraspol faction and a Bender faction – and the Tiraspol faction had allied with Mr. Smirnov.

While, under ideal circumstances, Mr. Radchenko's vision for Transnistria's future would probably suit most of the unrecognized republic's inhabitants, many Transnistrians may have perceived it as mere wishful thinking when the time came to vote. A large delegation of observers to the Transnistrian presidential election was from a region of Moldova known as Gagauzia. The Gagauzians, Turkic-speaking Christians whose nominally autonomous area is located in the south of Moldova, complained that they had made the mistake of relying on Moldovan constitutional guarantees for their self-government some seven years before. The institutions of increased autonomy they had managed to build over subsequent years, they claimed, had recently been rolled back practically in one fell swoop by the current Moldovan parliament. "We were deceived," claimed Ivan Burgudji, Gagauzia's representative in Transnistria. "[W]e lost the independence and sovereignty we had gained with such hardship." At a press conference for international observers the day after the election, Gagauzian delegation chief Ivan Topal warned Transnistrians not to trust overtures for the inclusion of their republic in a federative state with Chisinau. Judging by the current economic state of Gagauzia, the Gagauzians' cautions could not be dismissed outright as unmeritorious.

On the economic front, given a choice between debt to the IMF/World Bank and debt to Russia, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Transnistrians may prefer debt to Russia, particularly when such debt can be satisfied by the sale of resources (military) that Transnistria already has. Moldova reportedly has little if anything left to sell to satisfy its debt. Voronin's Party of Communists had, prior to their overwhelming election in February 2001, promised not to put up Moldova's remaining viable industries – wine and tobacco – for privatization in accordance with Western financial organizations' demands. After coming to power, Voronin's "Communists" soon gave indications they were prepared to proceed with such sales. They also took out much-

needed hard currency reserves to satisfy Western debt instead of using it to increase the pathetically low Moldovan pensions. In Transnistria, by contrast, not only are pensions paid in full and on time, but Mr. Radchenko admitted to BHHRG that they were higher than in Moldova proper. Mr. Zenovich even went so far as to tell BHHRG that Transnistria's pensioners "have a good life."

With respect to the pre-electoral campaign period, it was immediately evident that the various candidates' political programs were readily available to the public. Their posters were visible in windows and on walls in many places in the main cities of Tiraspol and Bender. Each candidate was allotted two hours on state television to put forward their programs to the public, and a couple of days before election day, BHHRG's representative watched an appearance by candidate Radchenko for over an hour. Mr. Radchenko complained that, although all candidates made use of the full two hours afforded them, in practice the process was unequal because President Smirnov appeared on television and other mass media much more frequently by virtue of his office as head of state. Although this complaint may generate natural sympathy, it would be hard to imagine any Western head of state – whether US President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, or any other leader – refraining from appearing on television in connection with official duties for the sake of giving equal news coverage to opponent candidates during an election. It was therefore practically impossible for an outside observer to conclude that in Transnistria the incumbent was intentionally precluding his opponents from acquiring visibility simply by appearing more frequently on television news.

POLLING DAY

BHHRG's observer visited ten polling stations in the cities of Tiraspol and Bender. All polling stations visited were clean, well appointed and orderly. Election commission workers appeared well versed in the Transnistrian electoral code and in their respective responsibilities. All answered questions readily and never appeared to be concealing information. Ballot boxes were properly sealed, secrecy of the ballot was observed, and voters could easily resolve any problems in understanding the process.

Opposition candidates Radchenko and Zenovich alleged to BHHRG's representative that falsification of the vote would occur. Mr. Radchenko seemed particularly concerned about use of the mobile ballot box (used for ill or incapacitated people confined to their homes on polling day) to secretly stuff ballots in favor of the incumbent. BHHRG's observer made a special point of speaking to observers for all candidates in each polling station visited, and all said that the mobile ballot box had never been out of sight of the observers. In several cases, BHHRG was informed that the mobile ballot box was currently in use (and therefore not in the polling station) but also that observers for opposition candidates were accompanying it. None alleged any malfeasance.

Supplementary voter lists were used in the Transnistrian election. As a rule, BHHRG has opposes the use of such lists, designed to accommodate those who have recently moved or who are unable to vote in the precinct in which they are registered on polling day, since it is almost impossible to verify the names and addresses handwritten on them. However, in contrast to many elections BHHRG has observed, in which the percentage of voters on the supplementary list is a very large part of the total number of registered voters, the number of supplementary voters in Transnistria on December 9th was small. By far the largest number of supplementary list voters was at Polling Station No. 232 in Tiraspol, where, at about 5:30 p.m., 149 people had voted on the supplementary list out of a total of 2,311 (6.4%).

The only domestic observer to register any complaints was a representative of Alexander Radchenko in Polling Station No. 237 in Tiraspol. She claimed the hall in which the polling station was located was too narrow for orderly voting, and that in some cases large crowds of voters had obstructed her view of the ballot box. She said that when she had attempted to approach the tables at which voters were registering their identity documents to receive ballots, election commission workers had recommended that she keep her distance because her

proximity could be perceived as “political agitation.” The other observers present did not make similar comments. In Polling Station No. 248 in Tiraspol, observers for all three candidates claimed that election commission workers had issued a ballot to a 17-year-old, knowing of his minority. However, they also claimed that the ballot was ultimately invalidated.

BHHRG’s representative observed the count in Polling Station No. 248, and was struck by the orderliness and efficiency with which the process was carried out. In a presidential election, the count should naturally proceed more quickly than in parliamentary elections involving several parties, where a “proportional representation” system is in effect. However, BHHRG has observed presidential elections where the vote count was interminably slow because of requirements imposed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe. Sometimes counts have proceeded until the early hours of the morning, so that even domestic observers begin to become so exhausted that their powers of perception are seriously diminished. In Transnistria on December 9th, the count proceeded in a very efficient and open fashion. The election commission chairman held up ballots where voter intent was ambiguous, and took a vote when necessary. Ballots were counted and separated properly. No objections were voiced.

In summary, no serious criticisms could reasonably have been raised by outside observers concerning the electoral process in Transnistria on December 9th, 2001. It is interesting to note that the representative of the OSCE mission in Moldova told the press in Chisinau that the presidential election in Transnistria could not be regarded as “free and fair,” especially considering that the OSCE sent no observers to the Transnistrian election whatsoever. According to a report by the ITAR-TASS news agency, the OSCE inexplicably “kept watching the Dnestr situation” and, using an “analysis of incoming data,” concluded that the candidates “did not enjoy equal conditions.” The OSCE was apparently content to confine its duties to analyzing mysterious, unspecified “incoming data” from Transnistria without bothering to view the process first-hand.

The final published results of the poll were as follows:

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| Igor Nikolaevich Smirnov: | 81.85% |
| Tom Markovich Zenovich: | 4.68% |
| Alexander Grigorievich Radchenko: | 4.65% |

CONCLUSION

The Transnistrian presidential election of December 9th, 2001, appeared to be marked by a high level of organization and civic responsibility – at least compared to other elections BHHRG has observed in the ex-USSR. Election workers not only understood their duties, but appeared to want to fulfill them to the highest possible standard. Intimidation or fear was not perceptible in the election climate, and, on the basis of what was observed, the Transnistrian electorate’s will was satisfied.

The government of Moldova loudly condemned the election, and Moldovan television even broadcast a news report claiming that Transnistrian voters had been coerced – at gunpoint – to go to the polls and to vote a certain way. BHHRG’s observer saw no evidence of this. Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin characterized the Transnistrian government as “criminal” and “illegitimate.” The governments of Ukraine and Russia announced soon after December 9th that they did not recognize the legitimacy of Transnistria as a sovereign entity separate from Moldova and the Belarusian leadership made a similar statement.

But if the standard of electoral conduct is any indication of a government’s democratic legitimacy, Transnistria is as legitimate – if not more so – as any post-Soviet state. Few can deny that,

whatever complaints other states may have about the existence of Transnistria, the standard of living east of the Dnestr River is higher than that in Moldova proper

The Western push to resolve the “conflict” between Moldova and Transnistria (“conflict” being a peculiar term in this context since there has been no fighting in Moldova for almost a decade) will obviously continue to the detriment of Transnistrian sovereignty, and will continue to cause problems for Transnistria’s geopolitical situation regardless of its domestic level of democracy. Western media, adding fuel to the fire, often features accusations that Transnistria is a source of “contraband” and “smuggling,” but any state that is unrecognized by the “international community,” but which must attempt to sell the goods it produces to support its economy, is bound to come under attack for anything it tries to export, regardless of the degree of actual criminality involved. Transnistria is able to produce for export, a fact largely due to its policy of refusing to sell off its industrial resources at bargain-basement prices. After the election, in a meeting with foreign observers (40 in all from 10 different states, including such pro-Western countries as Poland and Romania), President Smirnov explained that Transnistria – unlike Moldova – had pursued a policy of economic protectionism that had left most of its enterprises still productive. Sadly, as everywhere in the ex-USSR, any attempts at economic protectionism or other nationalism attract serious ire from the West.

Furthermore, although the OSCE kept its distance for the election itself, it was not averse to intervening in the domestic affairs of Transnistria in other ways. On November 16th, OSCE Mission member Gottfried Hanne sent a letter to Transnistrian Central Election Commission Chairman Piotr Denisenko, chastising the government in Tiraspol for violating the laws of Transnistria. When the Transnistrian security services confiscated several thousand copies of Alexander Radchenko’s party political newspaper, *Glaz Naroda*, as the papers were being transported across the Moldovan-Transnistrian border, the OSCE complained to Mr. Denisenko that Tiraspol had violated both the electoral legislation of Transnistria and the Law of Transnistria “On the Status of a People’s Deputy of the Supreme Council.” The newspapers had been printed outside the republic (in Moldova) and were evidently not registered with the relevant Transnistrian agencies regulating the press in accordance with prevailing legislation. Regardless of the merits of Mr. Radchenko’s case, if the OSCE does not recognize Transnistria as anything other than a subject of Moldovan law, it is rather strange for the OSCE to base its protest on Transnistria’s domestic laws.

Even leaving aside Western opposition to the Tiraspol government, Transnistria can evidently no longer rely on the support of Moscow as confidently as it once could. The December 21st article from *The Moscow Times* quotes Konstantin Zatulin, Director of the Commonwealth of Independent States Institute, as saying: “In Tiraspol, the belief is that news about the region is controlled personally by the head of the Russian presidential administration, Alexander Voloshin.” A couple of weeks before the Transnistrian election a program on one of Russia’s state television channels, RTR, depicted Transnistria as a state mired in corruption and portrayed its leaders as gun-running thugs who regularly assassinate opponents. “A report like that couldn’t have been shown on RTR without approval from the top,” Zatulin is quoted as saying. Indeed, apart from the RTR program, a journalist from the “Vremya” version of the *Moskovskye Novosti* Russian newspaper told BHHRG’s representative of a widespread suspicion that Mr. Voloshin had financed Mr. Zenovich’s campaign. Strangely, most Transnistrians apparently discount the possibility that President Putin has any knowledge of destructive meddling in their internal affairs, such as that alleged to be perpetrated by Voloshin. The attitude is faintly reminiscent of the Stalin era, when many Soviet citizens refused to believe that Comrade Stalin could have had any knowledge of state-sponsored famines or purges.

Either Mr. Putin knows of his chief of staff’s intrigues against the Transnistrian regime and is unable or unwilling to try to stop them, or else Mr. Putin does not know what his closest confidantes are doing. Whatever the case, Transnistria will face a formidable task in preserving its sovereignty, standard of living and way of life in the months and years ahead. Tiraspol, a city defended by the legendary Russian General Alexander Suvorov in the Russo-Turkish war of the

18th century, could find itself at the mercy not only of Western organizations such as NATO, the EU and the IMF, but also of a Russian big brother suddenly utterly indifferent to its fate.