MOLDOVA/TRANSDNIESTER CONFLICT (1992 – PRESENT)

(media.maps.com, 2008)

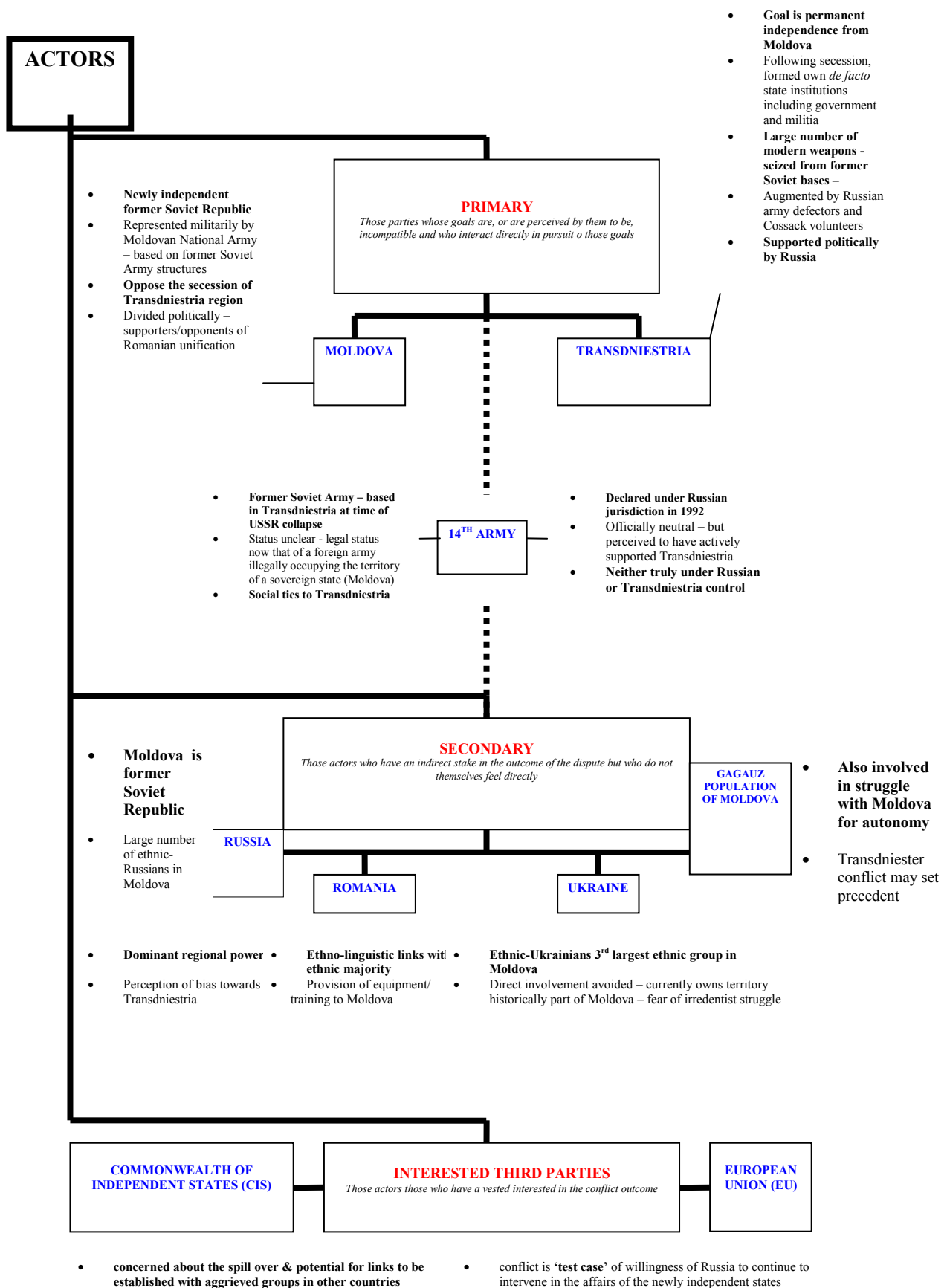**CONTENTS**

CONFLICT OVERVIEW

Moldova proclaimed its independence from the USSR on August 27th 1991. However prior to this, internal conflict had begun to emerge and between May and July 1992 a full-scale localised war took place between the Moldovan government and the secessionist Moldovan region of Transdniester. Heavy sporadic conflict continued until 1994 when a relative stabilisation of the situation began to take place. To date there has been no permanent resolution to what has become a 'frozen' conflict and the status quo when the ceasefire agreement was signed in July 1992 remains. The Moldovan regime currently has no effective control over the territory of Transdniester which now, with its own state institutions, though recognised by no other country, forms a *de facto* state. The border between the two territories continues to be patrolled by a peacekeeping force consisting of mainly Russian personnel.

ACTORS

See actors diagram on page 5.

ACTORS

PRIMARY
Those parties whose goals are, or are perceived by them to be, incompatible and who interact directly in pursuit o those goals

MOLDOVA

- **Newly independent former Soviet Republic**
- Represented militarily by Moldovan National Army – based on former Soviet Army structures
- **Oppose the secession of Transdniestria region**
- Divided politically – supporters/opponents of Romanian unification

TRANSDNIESTRIA

- **Goal is permanent independence from Moldova**
- Following secession, formed own *de facto* state institutions including government and militia
- **Large number of modern weapons - seized from former Soviet bases –**
- Augmented by Russian army defectors and Cossack volunteers
- **Supported politically by Russia**

14TH ARMY

- **Former Soviet Army – based in Transdniestria at time of USSR collapse**
- Status unclear - legal status now that of a foreign army illegally occupying the territory of a sovereign state (Moldova)
- **Social ties to Transdniestria**

- **Declared under Russian jurisdiction in 1992**
- Officially neutral – but perceived to have actively supported Transdniestria
- **Neither truly under Russian or Transdniestria control**

SECONDARY
Those actors who have an indirect stake in the outcome of the dispute but who do not themselves feel directly

RUSSIA

- **Moldova is former Soviet Republic**
- Large number of ethnic-Russians in Moldova

ROMANIA

- **Dominant regional power**
- Perception of bias towards Transdniestria

- **Ethno-linguistic links with ethnic majority**
- Provision of equipment/ training to Moldova

UKRAINE

- **Ethnic-Ukrainians 3rd largest ethnic group in Moldova**
- Direct involvement avoided – currently owns territory historically part of Moldova – fear of irredentist struggle

GAGAUZ POPULATION OF MOLDOVA

- **Also involved in struggle with Moldova for autonomy**
- Transdniester conflict may set precedent

INTERESTED THIRD PARTIES
Those actors those who have a vested interested in the conflict outcome

COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES (CIS)

EUROPEAN UNION (EU)

- **concerned about the spill over & potential for links to be established with aggrieved groups in other countries**

- conflict is **'test case'** of willingness of Russia to continue to intervene in the affairs of the newly independent states

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The tumultuous historical background to the creation of the state of Moldova (outlined in Appendix A) is significant for a number of reasons:

1. At various time historically both Romania and Russia have felt that they have a claim to the territory that now forms Moldova.

2. The history of modern Moldova and the Transdniester region are very different with each having been amalgamated into different states at different times. This has led to significant segments of their populations feeling links with external powers - Romania and Russia/Ukraine respectively.

3. Prior to its declaration of independence in 1991 Moldova had never existed as an independent state within its current borders

'TRANSPARENT' ISSUES

These are those issues which the actors in this conflict openly claimed their dispute concerned. In reality, however, the underlying causes of conflict were far more complex.

Resistance to/support for unification with Romania

The key question in Moldovan politics during early stages of independence concerned what form the future Moldavian-Romanian relationship would take. This was a highly controversial and polarising factor within Moldova. Although openly political discourse stopped short of proposing reunification and articulated only a desire for closer co-operation between the two states this issue underlined a broad range of political matters. In light of the lack of universal support, this issue gained real relevance principally as a result of the threat perceptions it generated in the ethnic minority population of Moldova. These people were already being discriminated against, as discussed below, and any unification with Romania was perceived by them to further increase their vulnerability.

Transdniester separatism

The secessionist conflict between Moldova and Transdniester is most commonly portrayed as a simple ethno-political conflict in which an ethnic-minority, concentrated in one geographical area, are facing discrimination from the state in which they live and consequently have resorted to violence in their struggle to combat perceived inequalities through the pursuit of regional independence or autonomy. However, the rationale behind the struggle for independence was far more complex than a simple ethnic divide. Political, economic and social factors all played key parts in the causation of this conflict.

CAUSATION

Structural causes of war/Incentives for violence

The issues of separatism and unification were the stated causes of this conflict however they do not explain why this conflict was expressed through violent not peaceful means. In order to determine this it is necessary to analyse the incentives for violence.

Ethnic, social and economic divisions

Moldovan administrative and political spheres are dominated by ethnic-Moldovans - largely as a result of the Soviet policy of *korenizatsia* which sought increased indigenization of government structures throughout the republics. Ethnic divisions are also evident on geographic lines, although this is by no means absolute. Ethnic Moldovans form the majority in areas to the west of the Dniester River (Moldova). In contrast, in Transdniester ethnic Russians form the majority. These ethnic divisions impact upon everyday life as a result of widespread differential social opportunities and systematic bias such as discrimination in the workplace, education and in access to, and dissemination of, Russian language information.

There are sharp disparities between the capital city of Chisinau and the rest of the country and the feminization of poverty appears to be worsening with women earning, on average, nearly one third less than men doing the same jobs. The Transdniester region is the most economically developed area of Moldova, specialising in secondary and tertiary industrial production whilst to the west of the Dniester River; most employment is within the primary sector. Moldova is heavily dependent upon Transdniester for economic support and energy supplies.[1]

Regime type, stability and legitimacy

The collapse of the USSR necessitated a complete re-evaluation of the existing system of governance. The new Moldovan political system was characterised by poor performance with a blurring of the distinction between regime and state culminating in a lack of legitimacy or trust on the part of the people. Within this context a fragmented and polarised elite monopolised political

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[1] 'In 1991 Transdniester accounted for 36 per cent of industrial production, 28 per cent of consumer goods and 87.7 per cent of the country's energy supplies.' (Arbatov *et al.* pg. 154)

control resulting in pluralism by default not design. Corruption permeates all state institutions and its existence is universally accepted.

Demographic trends

Since independence the demographic composition of the state has changed dramatically with a vast increase in the youth cohort and a ruralisation of the population. When this trend is considered in conjunction with the economic division of the population along geographic lines it is clear that the biggest internal migrations have been from the developed areas, largely concentrated in the Transdniester region, to the agricultural areas which prevail to the west of the Dniester River. As such, the non-uniform population and unemployment shifts have affected the two regions disproportionately.

Economic trends and governance

Between 1991 and 1994 the Moldovan economy was in significant decline with the GDP decreasing by an average of 20 per cent per year and exports constituting only ninety per cent of the value of the country's imports. In 1991 the national income was only at 1985 levels and by 1994 the industrial output was half of 1990.

As GDP declined so did per capita income levels. By 1994 Moldova was the poorest country in Europe with GNP per capita of approximately US$387, just 1.8 per cent of the European Union average.

In some regions unemployment is as high as 50 per cent with half of all unemployed persons being under the age of 24. Low pay and a lack of opportunities have led to mass migration and one-third of the workforce has to work abroad, most of them illegally in the EU.

The rapid decline in the economy led to a sharp deterioration in living standards and a widening in terms of both relative and absolute poverty of the gap, not only between Moldova and other former Soviet countries, but also between different domestic geographic and social sectors. An awareness of this gap and the sense of grievance it creates within Moldovan population provides a strong incentive for political change.

MID TERM CAUSES OF CONFLICT

Challenges to state legitimacy and the search for a new national identity

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union there was an intense effort to build distinct Moldovan national identity which, when combined with the rapid socio-political change following the collapse of the Soviet order, created an atmosphere of uncertainty. Within this context, non-violent action, such as strikes and rallies, carried out by and on behalf of the Transdniester people between 1989 and 1991 posed a serious challenge to the constitutional order of Moldova. These challenges were particularly acute in Moldova where the newly-established political system lacked any history of success on which legitimacy could be founded. The absence of any effective authorities capable of resolving disputes peacefully resulted in the rapid escalation of tensions. Legitimacy was further undermined by splits within the Moldovan regime. These crises of legitimacy mirrored the stages in the escalation of tensions and the use of force. As each crisis occurred, the intensity and frequency of violence increased culminating finally in March 1992 in the outbreak of war.

Politicisation of ethnic, social and economic divisions

Whilst there are clear divisions within Moldovan society examples of deep integration can also be seen. There is a high degree of intermarriage between the major national groups and substantial integration in business spheres. Language laws and resultant discrimination in educational opportunities have led to significant integration within the education system. Consequently, ethnicity does not appear to have an intrinsic potential to lead to violent conflict within the context of the Moldovan state. Rather it was the politicisation of ethnicity that gave this factor such significance in the conflict causation process. In their search for power, the political elites in both Moldova and Transdniester hit upon extremely attractive slogans that proved to be effective mobilisation tools and considered the flare-up of interethnic conflict advantageous to their own advancement to the highest posts in the leadership.

Proximate causes of conflict

Language status held a special importance for Moldovans. During Soviet rule, although legally no official language was named, Russian became the effective language of the republic and use of

Moldovan declined. Under Gorbachev, *demokatizatsiya* led to demands outside the Russian Federation for de-russification and the strengthening of the official role and status of titular republican language. In September 1989 Moldova adopted new language laws which decreed that all official business was to be conducted in Moldovan and written in the Latin script and that anyone holding an official position must be able to speak Moldovan, although Russian was to remain the language of inter-ethnic communication. These laws gave the status of a state language to the majority ethnos but meant that 97 per cent of non-ethnic Moldovan persons unable to the official language of the state. The laws met with little support from either ethnic-Moldovans or member of the ethnic-minorities. The inclusion of the clause in which Russian was maintained as the language of inter-ethnic communication was interpreted by Moldovans to mean that their native language would remain subordinate to Russian as was the case for much of the Soviet era. For the Russian speaking population, the laws indicated that they were to become second class citizens. By this time, the failure of the Moldavian Supreme Soviet to resolve the problem of language had made this issue the line of division around which the issues of separatism and unification would be fought. Language, however, was only a manifestation of the deeper rooted struggles for power and identity with the new Moldovan state.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

The long and mid-term causation of the Moldovan Conflict would appear to strongly support the work of Azar who argues that protracted social conflicts begin with several groups simultaneously pursuing their needs and interests, thus manufacturing four pre-requisites of conflict: communal content, deprivation of needs, state weakness, and international linkages. Re-prioritizing Azar's four pre-conditions of conflict, this theory suggests that conflict is derived principally from state weakness. When the state is unable to control its people and territory, it will often manipulate and entrench group divisions to maintain control through a "divide and rule" approach and so fail to meet the needs of its entire people (Azar, 1990, pp 7-10).

In contrast, Brown argues that "the proximate causes of many internal conflicts are the decisions and actions of domestic elites" and that "power struggles" between competing elites "are clearly the most common" form of internal elite driven conflicts (Brown, 2001, pp 17 – 19). Brown highlights twelve Underlying Causes common to countries experiencing violent internal conflict, dividing them into four categories of influences: structural, political, economic/social and cultural/perceptual. Brown further argues that these factors can act as catalysts or proximate causes for the evolution from non-violent internal conflict to war. With regards to the Moldova conflict, much of Brown's argument is highly applicable. A weak state characterised by exclusionary political and social institutions, economic decline and cultural discrimination provided the context within which legislative changes such as the new language laws, which within a more stable country may not have triggered widespread violence, were sufficient to bring about a national war.

Similarly, Jabri's (1996) application of Giddens notion of *'structuration'* to conflict would suggest that conflicts arising from state weakness and the manipulation of ethnic divisions will tend to become weaker and more ethnically disharmonious as a result of the violence, thus increasingly the likelihood of a future conflict. This certainly would appear to be the case in Moldova. During the course of the conflict issues have proliferated and specific disputes over matters such as state language have broadened to include conflict over inequalities in all aspects of life. Positions have also polarised. For example, ethnicity was used principally as an effective mobilisation tool, around which deeper rooted struggles for power could be enacted. As time progressed, state institutions evolved in order to reflect society. These mirror current divisions have become entrenched in society. Consequently, change has become increasingly difficult as the ethnic, linguistic and

cultural links many felt at the start of the war have gradually been eroded and replaced by new links in terms of geography and shared experiences of conflict. Jabri's approach would therefore seem to offer an incisive explanation for why previous conflict is the best predictor of future conflict. As such, it not only explains the reason for a failure to resolve the conflict but also claims that the conflict is likely to become 'hot' again, should a resolution never be found.

PAST PEACE-MAKING EFFORTS

Attempts were made by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to initiate a diplomatic offensive in order to resolve the crisis. In the Istanbul agreements it was agreed that a 'Mixed Commission' of observers from each of these 4 countries would observe the disengagement of forces from the conflict zone, secure the neutrality of the 14th Army and develop measures to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid to districts in need, ensuring that conditions were created to expedite the return of refugees.

During 1991 and 1992 the activities of international organisations were viewed by Moldovan authorities as being a means of gaining political capital that would enable them to solve the problems of Transdniester by force. Despite this, a number of external organisations did become involved in the search for a peaceful settlement to this conflict and have since been engaged in Track One and Track Two diplomacy. A request was made by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Romania that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) facilitate conflict resolution through mediation and human rights monitoring and a greater role for the UN in the political settlement process, including a fact finding mission to the region, was welcomed.

The International Federation of Human Rights sent a delegation to Moldova which raised the question of turning Moldova into a federation of three republics and, in mid 1992, a visit by a UN Secretariat delegation reached agreement that UN experts and observers would participate in the verification of compliance with the cease fire conditions and in settling any disputes that might arise.

A Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) visit was followed by a report stating that they would send observers to Moldova, if requested by the Moldovan government, and recommended the granting of special status to the left bank districts allowing them to decide their own fate if Moldova were to reunite with Romania and the establishment of a permanent mission in Chisnau with a mandate to help establish an enduring peace in Transdniester.

ROLE OF PEACEKEEPING FORCES

The UN has had no involvement with the military peace-keeping operation in Moldova despite becoming involved in similar operations elsewhere within the post-soviet space such as in Georgia through the UNOMIG operation where the conflict bore similarities in terms of causation and manifestations to that of Moldova. A key reason for the UN lack of involvement would appear to be presence of Russian troops on Moldovan territory and a general unwillingness to encroach in Russia's sphere of influence. However the fact that Russia, a secondary actor in this conflict, now provides the largest contingent of troops in the CIS peacekeeping force would appear to undermine the neutrality of the force as a whole and perhaps point to the reasons why the conflict remains 'frozen' more than a decade after the cessation of hostilities. In light of this, the Moldovan conflict would provide a significant example of where an independent UN led force could have achieved successes where national or regional forces could not.

In light of the lack of UN involvement, the OSCE established a wide-ranging mandate in 1993 to facilitate the achievement of a lasting political settlement of the conflict, gather information on the military situation in the region, encourage de-militarisation, and provide advice and expertise on human and minority rights as well as democratic transformation. Further to this, it is responsible for the facilitation of the repatriation of refugees and the provision of a definition of special status for the Transdniestrian region. Finally, that OSCE initiate a visible presence in the region.

Within the constraints of this mandate security in the conflict zone was to be provided by military observers and limited peacekeeping contingents from all three sides co-ordinated by a Trilateral Control Commission. Control posts were to be manned by Russian observers under the auspices of CIS peacekeeping troops.

KEY RELIEF, HUMANITARIAN AND PEACE-BUILDING ORGANISATIONS

Reflecting its status as a long term, and relatively low intensity conflict, international assistance to Moldova is focused primarily on development rather than relief operations with development assistance being received from a wide range of sources.

The UN maintains a significant presence with several agencies operating in Moldova. The largest of these are UNDP who have a large portfolio of projects predominantly dealing with institution building, quality of governance and human rights, UNHCR, providing assistance to those people displaced by the conflict and small numbers of refugees from other conflicts residing in Moldova, and UNICEF who work on education, health and orphanages.

The World Bank has provided significant international financial support to finance a broad range of projects such as structural adjustment support, private sector development in the agriculture and enterprise sectors and strengthening the economic and financial management of the energy sector.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has invested US$370 million in developing the physical and telecommunications infrastructure in Moldova. The European Union provides targeted funds in relation to Food Security and humanitarian assistance.

The two largest bilateral donors to Moldova are the United States and the Netherlands although smaller amounts are also given by other European nations as well as Turkey, who provides aid to the Gaugauzia region, and Japan. British aid supports the objectives of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) through the funding of social protection reform, civil society development and enhancing sustainable rural livelihoods.

MOST PROMISING ELEMENTS OF THE PEACE-BUILDING MISSION

Peace building projects within Moldova have achieved positive results in three main areas: preventing the escalation of conflict, mitigating the effects of the conflict on the affected population thus increasing their capacity to resist the impact of further conflict cycles, and the creation of an enabling environment for positive conflict management.

Preventing Conflict Escalation

A key focus of the work of development agencies aimed at preventing the escalation of conflict has been on enhancing democratic governance. Significant emphasis has been placed by the UNDP on programmes designed to strengthen state institutions in an attempt to ensure both legitimacy and a monopoly of violence and consequently enhance the ability of the state to mitigate or manage conflict through pacific, rather than violent, means.

Social security reform has also been a development priority and the subsequent reduction in absolute and relative poverty levels has begun to both reduce a key source of grievance amongst the population and the impact of further conflict upon them.

Mitigating the effects of the conflict on the population and increasing capacities to resist the impact of further conflict

In accord with the well-documented links with conflict, poverty reduction was a key focus of development work within Moldova with a significant number of projects being undertaken in this area, primarily focused upon facilitating change at state level. In an attempt to reverse the tendency of groups within conflict situations to retreat and become self-contained rather than seeking to bridge community divides, programmes were also directed at the promotion of social inclusion and cohesion.

Creating an Enabling Environment for Positive Conflict Management

In order to achieve this goal, agencies within Moldova invested heavily in the promotion of cross-cutting institutions such as women's groups which bridged traditional or conflict induced ethnic, political or social divides. Significant work in also undertaken in the area of justice and human

rights protection aimed at strengthening the capacity of the government and civil society to fight corruption.[2]

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[2] UNDP Moldova Democratic Governance Programmes

CO-ORDINATION BETWEEN PEACE-KEEPERS AND LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL PEACE-BUILDING WORKERS

The OSCE is at the centre of peace-building co-ordination. With the European Network for Civil Peace Networks, intensive conflict resolution programmes have been initiated. These programmes have involved peace-building initiatives with the Moldovan Ministry of Integration and international peace-building and transformative conflict programmes within Transdniester. The regional political union, GUUAM, incorporating Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova has initiated a seven point plan for a long term resolution to the conflict. The proposal involves democratic elections under the aegis of the European Union, the OSCE, United States and Russia and ultimately the replacement of Russian peacekeepers by international observers.

Co-ordination Issues

In the case of Moldova a number of barriers exist which limit effective co-ordination. In times of conflict, the access of development and humanitarian agencies to affected populations is often severely limited. Within Transdniester 'state' authorities sought to deliberately limit the ability of development workers to reach those in need through highly restrictive travel policies and laws governing their work. Access problems were further compounded by the fact that large areas of Moldova i.e. Transdniester, were completely beyond the control of the government and that non-state actors such as Transdniester are not signatories to international human rights treaties and therefore can act to a large degree with impunity. Under such circumstances peacekeeping forces could have done much to assist the work of humanitarian agencies. However, in this case the largely Russian peacekeeping force was universally seen as displaying bias towards Transdniester and as such hindered, rather than helped, the long-term prospects for building peace.

In addition, military priorities were widely criticised for being driven by issues and timescales external to the conflict itself resulting in a clear division between civilian and military functions in terms of the overall timeframe of an operation. Where many civilian organisations had been operational in Moldova for several years, military peacekeepers were rotated into and out of the operational theatre at regular intervals. Whilst this may have advantages in terms of troop morale this rotation has the consequence of a necessitating a constant 'reinventing of the wheel' creating fluctuations within the knowledge base of any given unit at a particular time and leading to conflict between military and civilian organisations over what can or can not feasibly be achieved within a

given timescale. In light of this, the role of the peacekeepers remained limited to simply keeping the two belligerents apart rather than evolving into a more positive, proactive peace-building role in conjunction with development agencies, who often appear to be working against rather than alongside the military.

The Moldovan situation clearly illustrates that there is a need to balance national or humanitarian interests where these may diverge. In this case national agendas, particularly those of Russia, have dominated international ones. Factors such as the mandate, force levels and the length of any intervention are no longer based upon the needs of the affected state. Instead they are used as political bargaining tools and watered down in order to gain domestic or international support to the extent that the operation can no longer be carried out effectively.

Historical Context

- **1797-92 and 1806-12:** Incorporation of territory that now forms much of Moldova into Russian Empire following Russo-Turkish Wars
- **1917**: Proclamation of independence by Bessarabian People's Democratic movement (areas to the west of the Transdniester River)/Romanian occupation of Bessarabia
- **1918**: Formal union between Bessarabia and Romania
- **1922**: Transdniester becomes administrative region within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic
- **1924**: Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic created
- **1940**: Occupation of Bessarabia by Russian forces/Law passed formally creating the Moldavian SSR which included Transdniester
- **1941**: Re-incorporation of Bessarabia into Romania
- **1944**: Bessarabia re-conquered by Russia
- **1947**: Paris Treaty recognised 1940 Soviet-Romanian frontier
- **1990**: Communist regime ousted by nationalists/Declaration of Moldovan sovereignty
- **1991**: Declaration of Moldovan independence from the Soviet Union /Declaration of Moldovan independence from the Soviet Union

Evolution of the Conflict

- **1989 – 1990:** The emergence of the conflict against the background of general social and economic destabilisation
- **November 1990 - September 1991:** Transition from non-violent to violent ethnic political action
- **December 1991:** Transition to recurrent violent interaction in ethnically mixed urban and rural areas
- **March-July 1992:** Transition to a full-scale localised war in the form of organised and sustained inter-ethnic violence
- **Mid 1992 onwards:** The relative stabilisation of the situation and the search for a settlement

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