

# Partition and Post-War Violence: Case Study of Moldova and Pridnestrovie

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## *Abstract*

Partition advocates argue that ethnic groups must be separated completely in order to prevent renewed violence but Moldova is an exception with its large “stay-behind” minority and a lack of renewed violence. This chapter uses Moldova to develop partition theory, presenting an institutionalist explanation that focuses on the interaction between state-building and minority collaboration in a post-war context. The chapter argues that strong state institutions create an incentive for ethnic minorities to collaborate with the state, regardless of minority preferences, and this helps maintain peace. The case of Moldova reinforces the importance of state-strength in avoiding inter-ethnic conflict renewal. Both Pridnestrovie/Transnistria and Moldova were a relatively strong state, which is unusual in a post-war, post-partition situation, and these relative strengths reduced the likelihood of conflict recurrence.

**Keywords:** Moldova, Transnistria, Pridnestrovie, Partition, Civil War, Conflict, Post-Soviet

Partition advocates argue that ethnic groups must be separated completely in order to prevent renewed violence. While cross-national evidence supports that theory, there are several puzzling examples of partitions that leave large “stay-behind” minorities but do not experience renewed violence. This empirical puzzle exists because the micro-theory of partition has not been developed. I begin to address this gap here through an examination of Moldova, case of partition with a large stay-behind minority that did not experience violence. I present an institutionalist explanation that focuses on the interaction between state-building and minority collaboration in a post-war context. I argue that strong state institutions create an incentive for ethnic minorities to collaborate with the state, regardless of minority preferences, and this helps maintain peace. However, preferences become important where institutions are weak and members of the ethnic minority have the opportunity to defect, which increases the likelihood of violence. I argue that neighboring states frequently exploit this situation, exacerbating the potential for violence.

The case of Moldova reinforces the importance of state-strength in avoiding inter-ethnic conflict renewal. Both Pridnestrovie and Moldova were relatively strong states, and I argue that this unusual situation in a post-war, post-partition state reduced the likelihood of conflict recurrence.

### **Moldova and Pridnestrovie: Ethnic War Termination**

The case of post-partition Moldova further confirms the importance of state-building to avoid ethnic civil war recurrence. Despite large stay-behind minorities located in both rump-Moldova and the newly created Pridnestrovie, Moldova has not experienced any post-war violence since its termination in 1992.

The Correlates of War project codes the Moldova-Pridnestrovie war as officially ending on July 21, 1992, when a peace agreement was signed between Boris Yeltsin, Russia's president, and Mircea Snegur, Moldova's president. A division of Russia's armed forces was given the right to keep the peace, much like in the case of Georgia-Abkhazia.

Pridnestrovie contained about 40% ethnic Romanians at the end of 1992 while Moldova contained about 30% ethnic Slavs. The war displaced over 100,000 people, possibly as high as 200,000, who fled mainly along ethnic lines, with ethnic Romanians fleeing to Moldova and ethnic Slavs fleeing to Pridnestrovie or beyond to Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> However, as soon as the war ended the vast majority of these refugees returned to their homes. Unlike other cases of post-partition with large minorities, such as Georgia-Abkhazia, there was no recurrence of violence.

When the war ended with the July ceasefire, there was an expectation that fighting would resume. As Time's correspondent<sup>2</sup> to the region wrote at the time, "there is serious doubt [the ceasefire] will hold." How is it that an ethnic civil war that ends in a partition with significant stay-behind minorities does not experience any renewal of violence?

Moldova and Pridnestrovie avoided violence, in part, because the strength of each state was relatively high at the end of the war, decreasing the opportunity for violence.

### **Moldova and Pridnestrovie: Early State Consolidation**

Two factors led to Moldova's relatively strong post-partition states. First, due to factors unique to Moldova's situation, Pridnestrovie authorities managed to secure territorial control *before the separatist war began*. As I will detail below, Pridnestrovian forces were able to consolidate control in 1989-1990 during

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<sup>1</sup> Based on various expert opinions in Moldova and backed by Facts on File World News Digest, September 3, 1992, "Moldova Said to Prepare For Union with Romania; Shaky Peace Imposed in Separatist Area." The Norwegian Refugee Council reports up to 51,000 internally displaced people and 80,000 refugees. Another report stated that at least 102,000 people were displaced during the conflict. See Nantoi, Oazu. 1999. Report on the Problem of Internally Displaced Persons in the Republic of Moldova. Chisinau. However, records from a survey conducted in 1999 on the displaced have been lost or misplaced, according to UNHCR and Oazu Nantoi.

<sup>2</sup> George J. Church, "Splinter, Splinter Little State. (Consequences of various self-determination movements)", *Time*, 1992, 36-39.



an interregnum when the Soviet forces were not active, yet Moldova was not independent. Thus, most of the territory never became contested and never shifted between one force and another. Second, the state security infrastructure in both territories was not severely affected by the war, leaving it capable of maintaining territorial control in the post-war period. State strength was maintained through the war because the war itself was relatively brief and geographically concentrated in only two urban regions of the country.

### Pre-war Secession

Much has been written about Moldova's separatist war and its consequences. What is less known about this separatist struggle, however, is that the war itself was *not waged by Tiraspol to gain independence*, but rather *waged by Chişinău to regain lost territory*. Tiraspol, in 1992, was defending its de facto independent status. International Crisis Group, for example, reports that, "The 14th Army [i.e., Russia] intervened in the fighting there on 20 June. While this helped to establish a cease-fire, it also secured Transdniestria's de facto independence." I argue that Pridnestrovie had obtained de facto independence long before 1992.<sup>3</sup>

The federal states comprising the Soviet Union began seeking increased autonomy in the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup> As Moldova gained control over its legislature in 1989, pressing for increased use of Romanian language and the possibility of joining neighboring Romania, authorities in the Slavic-dominated Pridnestrovian region began uniting behind a movement to remain within the Soviet Union<sup>5</sup> Regional "workers' councils" in the eastern territory of Moldova were dominated by ethnic Slavs, who readily identified with authorities in Moscow, not the increasingly nationalist authorities in Chişinău. The adoption of a language law in 1989, which promoted Romanian to the status of official language, was a focal point of protests throughout the eastern region, uniting non-Romanian speakers to resist Moldovan independence efforts. The most important of these was the Unified Council of Working Collectives (*Ob'edinennyye Sovet Trudovykh Kollektivov*), formed August 11, 1989 from several workers collectives in the eastern region of Moldova.

<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group. 2003. *Moldova: no quick fix*. Brussels: ICG.

<sup>4</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> The territory of Pridnestrovie had been an autonomous region within the Soviet Union during the inter-war period, during which the rest of Moldova had been part of Romania; thus the idea was not completely novel. Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000).

When Moldova declared its sovereignty in June 1990, officials in Tiraspol responded with their declaration of independence from Moldova, forming the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) as a constituent part of the Soviet Union on September 2 of the same year (Associated Press 1990). PMSSR parliamentary elections were organized on November 25, 1990 and Igor Smirnov was elected president of PMSSR by parliament on November 29. By this point the separatist authorities had already formed military detachments by stealing arms from local Soviet weapons depots.<sup>6</sup> In May, 1991 a PMSSR Ministry of Interior and prosecutor's office were formed and parliament issued an order for all policemen on PMSSR territory to obey authorities. Municipality after municipality and region after region throughout the eastern territory pledged allegiance to the new authorities in Tiraspol over the following year.<sup>7</sup> When Moldova declared independence from the Soviet Union on August 27, 1991, PMSSR ordered all Soviet military units to obey PMSSR jurisdiction, which was largely followed. Many of the factories in that region had predominantly Russian-speaking workers while management teams were subordinate to Moscow; this further encouraged the workers' collectives to side with Tiraspol authorities rather than subordinate themselves to Chişinău.

Several regions in the center of the nascent PMSSR, however, were dominated by ethnic Romanians and refused to submit to Tiraspol's new authorities. Those regions were coopted through a combination of intimidation and force, with several police stations, courts, and state prosecutors' offices surrounded by militia loyal to Tiraspol, forcing pro-Moldovan authorities to leave the territory or switch allegiance.<sup>8</sup>

In any other country, such blatantly provocative actions by separatist challengers would result in military action from central authorities to subdue them. However, Moldova was not yet independent and Chişinău therefore did not control an army or state-wide interior ministry troops. Rather, interior ministry troops and the army were controlled by Moscow, and Moldova's police forces were controlled at the municipal and district level. As such, Chişinău did not have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and had no means with which

<sup>6</sup> Charles King, *Foreign Policy* 97, 1994, 106-121.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with authorities in Pridnestrovie today claim this was entirely voluntary, based on fears of Moldova uniting with Romania, as well as a desire to remain within the socialist framework of the USSR. It is, of course, impossible to gauge the degree to which these municipalities joined voluntarily or were forced by an emerging militia.

<sup>8</sup> There were reports of police stations being surrounded by PMSSR security forces, as well as the publication of names of Moldovan police who refused to pledge loyalty to PMSSR (Trudovoi Tiraspol, November 27, 1991). Vladimir Socor, "Creeping Putsch in Eastern Moldova", *RFE/RL Research Report*, 8-13, 1992.



to prevent Tiraspol from establishing parallel state structures. Chişinău could have appealed to Moscow to send in its forces – in fact it rejected such an offer from Moscow (New York Times 1990) – but the newly elected legislature was more concerned with its own intentions to separate from the Soviet Union and therefore was reluctant to bring additional Soviet troops on to its territory.<sup>9</sup>

This is not to suggest Moldova made no attempts prior to the war's onset. Evidence of Pridnestrovia's territorial control was evident already on November 2, 1990, when Chişinău dispatched Moldovan police to the town of Dubossary on the east side of the River Prut. As they attempted to cross the bridge, gun-shot fire began, resulting in at least three deaths.<sup>10</sup> Soon after, Pridnestrovia began institutionalizing its own militia, the Republican Guard. Only in a few small regions was control still contested by the start of 1992, and it was in those two regions that actual violence began. Moldova began forming its own army only in spring 1992<sup>11</sup> According to key actors involved in the events, it was only after this inchoate military began to form that more decisive military actions were taken by Chişinău against the separatist Pridnestrovia authorities (Personal Interview, Viorel Cibotaru, August 4, 2008).

The important conclusion to draw from this section, however, is that the regime itself had established control over most of Pridnestrovia before the start of the ethnic civil war. This is significant as part of the explanation for why violence did not recur despite the presence of large stay-behind minorities.

### Isolated war

The second reason why we do not see a recurrence of violence is because the war itself was short and isolated, leaving the structures of government power in Pridnestrovia and Moldova almost entirely intact. In spring 1992, the heaviest period of the conflict broke out, but even this was isolated to two urban centers, Bendery and Dubossary. Fighting was fierce, but remained isolated. The damage,

<sup>9</sup> Negotiations between Chisinau and Comrat, capital of a separate secessionist struggle in Moldova's south did result in the deployment of 500-800 Soviet Interior Ministry troops. See *The Advertiser*, October 30, 1990, "New nationalist push erupts in the USSR"; Official Kremlin Int'l News Broadcast October 30, 1990, "Correspondent Report"; TASS, November 2, 1990, Friday "Urgent – Emergency Imposed in 3 Moldavian Cities"; *The New York Times*, November 4, 1990 "EVOLUTION IN EUROPE; Moldavia Rejects Army's Aid in Ethnic Unrest".

<sup>10</sup> James Carney, "In Moldavia, what's yours is mine. (Moldavians march for sovereignty)", *Time*, November 12, 1990, 46.

<sup>11</sup> The army was formally established September 3, 1991, but this was only a presidential declaration (*ukaz*). The Ministry of Defense was only established in February of the following year. Pavel Creanga, *Ia Khochu Rasskazat' (Vspominanie s Ostryim Syuzhetom)* (Chişinău: Presa, 1998), 118.

therefore, to the security apparatus of the state was minimal and did not impact the vast majority of the territory under Moldovan and Pridnestrovie control.

With territorial control secured as the war ended, the opportunities for shifting territorial control over to Moldova were significantly diminished. First, the Moldovan state was able to monopolize the use of force on its rump territory, preventing illegal armed formations from attempting to destabilize Pridnestrovie. According to the then-head of the Moldovan Secret Service, Moldova did try to destabilize Pridnestrovie, but this initial attempt failed as the men were arrested by Pridnestrovia security forces (the so-called Ilascu affair). Realizing their inability to penetrate Pridnestrovie easily, and the complicated consequences of such actions, the government discontinued such approaches (Interview, Plugaru, August 23, 2008). Second, with a strong state, stay-behind minorities collaborated with state authorities on each side, regardless of their individual preferences.

If Moldova had wanted to retake territory, it would have meant certain warfare, and warfare with Russia. In addition, one of the key differences between Moldova's peace with Pridnestrovie and violence in other post-partition countries, like Georgia, is the role of Russia. Russia's armed forces more clearly favored Pridnestrovie during and after the ethnic civil war, whereas in Georgia, Russia's armed forces were ambivalent, at times supporting Abkhazia and at times Georgia. This ambivalence was compounded by Abkhazia's ambivalent position towards territorial control in lower Gal.

Moldova's situation stands in stark contrast to Abkhazia, where the war itself devastated the Abkhaz state, where security force personnel were weak, and where armed insurgents interfered with Abkhaz state-building efforts, preventing them from securing effective control over lower Gal in the years preceding the ceasefire.

## Conclusion

Pridnestrovie had a large stay-behind minority during their post-war, post-partition period, but experienced no violence. The first conclusion to draw from this case is that the theory of the ethnic security dilemma (Kaufmann 1996) is incorrect: Pridnestrovie's ethnic Romanian minority remained peaceful and collaborated with the state showing that ethnic identities, despite ethnic war, do not deterministically lead to renewed conflict when minorities remain within a state controlled by the "enemy" ethnic group. The critical factor, I argued, was the state's ability to maintain territorial control, which allows it to induce minority collaboration, usually through threats of retaliation for non-collaboration.

I also argued that two unique factors surrounding Pridnestrovie's secession – (i) its state consolidation prior to the war and (ii) the limited and geographically



concentrated nature of the war – allowed it to emerge from the war and partition in a relatively strong position. The security apparatus and state institutions were strong, encouraging minority civilian collaboration, and making any attempts to destabilize the country militarily difficult. If Moldova had sought to reclaim territories dominated by ethnic kin Romanians, it would have meant certain warfare with Pridnestrovie and Russia; the Moldovan state was not prepared to engage in such direct military confrontation. These results are helpful because they more clearly identify the causes of peace and violence in post-partition environments.

From a policy perspective, while partitions that leave sizeable stay-behind minorities are more dangerous statistically, it is nevertheless possible to leave stay-behind minorities after partition and maintain peace, but state-strength is critical to that outcome, and state-building requires enormous international efforts that are still being worked out today.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See U.N.'s Peace building Commission on July 22, 2009

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