

'Moscow's legacy – highly explosive' from Die Zeit (2 December 1994)

Caption: On 2 December 1994, on the eve of the CSCE Conference in Budapest, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit analyses the economic and political situation in Moldova and Transnistria, regions of the former Soviet Union.

Source: Die Zeit. 02.12.1994, n° 49. Hamburg. "Moskaus Erbe - hochexplosiv", auteur:Schmidt-Häuser, Christian , p. 4.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

This week, the CSCE Summit in Budapest is to review the situation in areas of conflict in the former Soviet Union, including Moldova and Transnistria

Moscow's legacy — highly explosive

Dubossary/Tiraspol

One type of bread, square, pallid, barely edible. A queue snaking round the pillars in the town's biggest grocery store. Tired, careworn people, prematurely wrinkled, dressed in post-war clothes. The only sales assistant has in front of her a hand-written list, spotted with grease, of all those entitled to make purchases in the central district. As each person reaches the front of the queue, they give their number. The woman behind the counter crosses each day off: one loaf for two people. A soldier in camouflage uniform packs six loaves for Russia's 'peace-keeping forces' into a bulging briefcase. 'Next ... You're not on the list, comrade, not on mine. Next ...'

Outside the door stands a medium-sized tanker from which a plastic pipe leads through a hole in the window to a milk churn in the shop. The assistant, in what used to be a white overall, runs in and out turning the tanker tap on and off. In between, she uses a litre measure to serve milk from the churn into preserving jars, which her customers, anxiously pushing forward, have brought with them. Anyone who hadn't expected the rare delivery can buy a sheet of plastic, shape it into a bag and tie it closed with the milk inside it, in the hope of getting it home in one piece.

This is easier these days, because there are hardly any cars around, even on the potholed main square. Petrol and spare parts are in short supply. For the handyman the open-air market opposite offers the insides of old steam radios, half a dozen metal combs and two rusty axes. There are no hammers or sickles in this stone-age communism, only ones made out of concrete — and there are plenty of those, outside factories and at crossroads, symbols of the power of workers and farmers.

The kolkhoz market in the centre has textiles from Turkey, apples, nuts, a kebab stall and dozens of hungrily sniffing dogs. The meat shop is locked up. The fish shop is open. The refrigerated counter contains a single glass jar of peas. 'When will there be fish?' The assistant replies: 'There won't be any.' 'What is your average wage?' 'I don't have one, I haven't got anything to sell.' The only customer chips in, 'It says in today's newspaper that our average pay is exactly 1 400 times lower than what a Toyota worker earns.'

Science fiction? A vision of the Soviet Union on its hundredth birthday — if it had survived until 2017? A lost Atlantis of those nostalgic for the old-style communism?

Not at all. It's all happening now, and it's in Europe. This workers' paradise beyond Toyota is called Dubossary. A town of 40 000 inhabitants, it is part of the last outpost of western late communism, the self-proclaimed Dniester Republic. The region has barely 700 000 inhabitants, over 50 % of them Russians and Ukrainians who hold sway over the 40 % Moldovans of Romanian descent. It extends north on the far side of the River Dniester and is therefore known as Transnistria. It almost sounds like where Dracula came from, and with the State nighthawks that come out after the evening curfew it is actually not all that dissimilar.

This narrow strip of land, a red rag to all its neighbours, lies east of Romania, wedged in between the CIS Republic of Moldova, from which Transnistria seceded after bloody fighting that led to hundreds of deaths, and the CIS Republic of Ukraine, which stands in the pro-putschists' way to Russia, to Ruts koy and to revenge against Yeltsin. The Russian President has now signed a treaty promising Moldova that Moscow will withdraw the 14th Russian Army from Transnistria by October 1997. And it is on this army alone, on its pay, its goods and its weapons, its very presence that the Stalinist remnant on the Dniester lives under 'President' Igor Smirnov — the hard man of the north, who once operated in Siberia for the KGB, the Party and the armaments industry.

Five years after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe the CSCE review conference is to be held this

week in Budapest. It will work hard to create the impression that everything is ship-shape in the post-communist world (except for Yugoslavia, which is a special case). Yet in Moldova and Transnistria Europe's old configurations and new paradoxes come face to face in a microcosm that is in grave danger of collapse.

The first of the two republics, Moldova (formerly Bessarabia), which Stalin separated from Romania and intended to become socialism's 'orchard', lies to the west of the Dniester and, having no raw materials or energy, is wholly reliant on the World Bank and the IMF. They have given Moldova a fixed currency, the leu, but this gift is likely to lead to dangerous social tensions, because it comes with rigorous monetarist strings attached.

The second republic, separatist Transnistria, which Stalin divided from Ukraine after the war and added to Moldova as an industrial zone, lies to the east of the Dniester and is determined to keep Soviet power alive, without an ideology and without Russia itself, if necessary. It has a coupon currency in three languages containing eight printing errors, because the typesetters far away in Moscow made mistakes in the Romanian and Ukrainian. The currency is so weak that in Transnistria people cherish the rouble as well as Lenin. Kiosk-keepers are happy to swap a 100 rouble note (worth a few pence) for four of the cheap local notes. They haven't had Russian newspapers for a long time: nobody can afford them in this socialist mock-republic.

At the Transnistrian 'border', which for the Moldovans does not exist, 'peace-keeping forces' stand guard after the bloodshed in 1992: one Russian officer and one soldier each from the western and eastern banks of the Dniester. Pennants in UN blue flutter over their barracks. The CSCE mission, whose seven representatives commute between the Moldovan capital Chisinau (Kishinev in Russian) and the Transnistrian centre of Tiraspol, is delighted with the cooperation they are getting from the Russian officers. 'They are correct and professional. And they are getting only very minor logistical support from the 14th Army,' says the Canadian head of delegation Philip Hahn. Quite a few officers come from nearby Odessa and are of Jewish descent. The force has been cut this month from 1 200 to 500 men. The basic mandate of the CSCE mission is to reunite Transnistria and Moldova (even though they never belonged together before Stalin), and to that end first of all to press for reforms, secondly to bring about the withdrawal of the 14th Army, thirdly to man the peace zones and fourthly to promote reconciliation. What is currently the most explosive issue is outside this mandate, and won't be mentioned in Budapest either. It is the old munitions and arms depots in the north of Transnistria, which are among the biggest in Europe.

The Commander of the 14th Army, General Alexander Lebed, who is using his own television channel (Arm-TV) and *Soldier of the Fatherland* newspaper to try to portray himself as the saviour of Russia, accuses the separatist leaders, whom he now refers to as 'gun-runners and bandits for Smirnov und Co.', of wanting to loot the depots and sell the munitions off around the Balkans and all over Europe in order to survive economically. Half of what he says is true and half is just an attempt to put off the withdrawal and dissolution of the 14th Army, in order to keep himself in pole position as proconsul of the empire.

The CSCE Conference would do well to keep a closer eye on these two republics in one state in the south-west of the CIS: one the hospitable farming country of Moldova hoping to enjoy a western lifestyle with the help of the International Monetary Fund, and the other the inhospitable industrial ruin that is Transnistria, which hopes to resurrect itself using the armaments left behind by proletarian internationalism.

Transnistrians living by the Dniester now have their own 'inland' postage stamps. They have to have two passports: without a Transnistrian one they won't get any bread, and without a Moldovan one they won't get a visa.

The fact is that there isn't a state in the CIS or anywhere in the world that recognises Transnistria. Nevertheless, it has 24 ministries and state committees, its own court and a State Prosecutor by the name of Boris Lutschik. Because of the increasing incidence of robberies and murders, he is currently looking for an officially approved hangman: 'What sort of a State would we be without a hangman?'

However, not all of Transnistria's leaders want an eye for an eye. In the grandiose parliament and government building, the door with the number 516 picked out in gold bears the title 'Secretary of State'. This is not just anyone, but — as in the USA, so in Transnistria — the Foreign Minister. Vladimir Litskay is a historian and Spanish interpreter who studied at Lumumba University and spent two years in Cuba, and was probably always in the KGB's pocket. Yet this verbose man with the fertile imagination counts as one of Tiraspol's 'liberals'. He is the chief ideologist of CIS II, the 'Commonwealth of Unrecognised States'. Litskay claims that 'Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Karabakh, the Crimea and the Knin Serbs need a common post-Soviet model.'

'What's going to happen to Transnistria's weapons mountains?' — 'The weapons used to belong to the south-west front against Turkey, a member of NATO. The front in Bulgaria and Romania no longer exists, but all the equipment is still here in Transnistria: artillery shells, mines, all sorts of rockets. Until Lebed has got rid of it all he won't become a senior general in Moscow. That's why he now thinks that we're the bad guys. President Smirnov's decree says that the weapons depots are in the possession of the Russian army on foreign territory. If the army withdraws, the weapons belong to us. We will look after them for Russia. Moldova has already sold off a whole squadron of 32 MIG-29s to South Yemen and Cyprus for only 300 million dollars. That's ridiculously cheap — they could have got a billion for them.'

Over a month ago Russia and Moldova agreed on the withdrawal of the 14th Army, together with all their weapons, within three years. Until then the 14th Army — even if it is only stationed in Transnistria — has legal status in the State of Moldova, which is recognised by 134 countries. It did not have this status before. For the soldiers, who will make every effort to drag out the withdrawal, it is some consolation, but not for General Lebed. He fears for his power base and for his role as the defender of 25 million Russians 'just over the border' and as the noble guardian of Russia's weapons.

His spokesman, Colonel Mikhail Bergmann, bombards visitors to the gleaming headquarters in Tiraspol with papers that are supposed to be evidence of the Transnistrian leadership's arms dealing. They include a seized document bearing President Smirnov's signature, listing deliveries of Kalashnikovs and hand-grenades from Bulgaria to a value of 1.6 million dollars. Beneath the letterhead of a firm in the Hamburg area is a contract with Transnistria for the establishment of a joint small business. Its managers and directors include no lesser persons than President Smirnov, Parliament President Mazaktsa and their deputies — so that they can be invited abroad and thus obtain visas.

Colonel Bergmann triumphantly holds up identification cards belonging to leading military officers who have western names in other papers and are evidently involved in some rather murky business, including in Germany. 'The idiots in Moscow don't understand what will happen if the army leaves but the weapons stay here, because transporting them through Ukraine and Belarus is too expensive or too dangerous. They will all end up in the Balkans and will do far more damage than ever Chernobyl did.'

It is clear that Bergman's documents have come from the military security service. But it is also clear that Smirnov is trying to get into the weapons depots, with barely disguised anti-crime decrees giving his 'legal protection bodies' unrestricted access to 'any premises of any firm'. Lebed now has the support of the Commander-in-Chief of the ground troops, General Semyonov: 'It is impossible to withdraw the army altogether. We have to keep a military base to protect the Russian population.'

In order to weaken this argument even before the CSCE conference begins, Moldova's Parliament President Lucinschi announced at the beginning of the week in Moscow that Moldova was prepared — in return for appropriate guarantees from the world community — to dissolve its new army and demilitarise the country, if the people of Transnistria really feared that their safety would be threatened once the 14th Army has left.

As always, Russia's President Yeltsin, the 14th Army and the old communists in Transnistria are sticking together — they have already got a lot out of Moldova. But nothing is certain in this particular area of conflict.

Christian Schmidt Häuser