

END NOTE

IS FEDERALIZATION THE RIGHT OPTION FOR MOLDOVA?

By Taras Kuzio

Since the election of a Communist majority to the Moldovan parliament in February 2001 and the subsequent election two months later by the same parliament of Moldovan Communist Party (CPM) Chairman Vladimir Voronin as president, the Moldovan authorities have made a number of conciliatory steps toward Russia. One reason for this reorientation toward Russia is ideological; the CPM, like all Communist Parties throughout the CIS, gravitates toward Russia in its foreign-policy orientation. In 2001, Voronin and Russian President Vladimir Putin met eight times and in November 2001 signed the long-delayed Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation.

The CPM initially supported the idea of joining the Russia-Belarus Union, but then backed off due to domestic opposition and Moldova's geographical separation from Belarus and Russia. The same geographical problem has hindered Moldova's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union where it, like Ukraine, currently has only "observer" status.

Although the CPM has naturally adopted a pro-Russian orientation, this has failed to expedite a solution to the long-standing problem of Moldova's breakaway Transdniester region. The Transdniester has been a de facto independent state since 1992

when its paramilitary forces, together with the Russian 14th Army, won a short and violent separatist campaign. Although Russia is believed to have subsidized the separatist enclave over a long time period, Putin has claimed that he has been unable to persuade Transdniester separatist leaders to renounce its unrecognized independence and acknowledge Moldovan sovereignty. Russian military academies have long trained cadets from the Transdniester forces. Most members of the Transdniester leadership hold Russian citizenship, but that problem will be overcome if, as Voronin proposed last month, Moldova's citizenship law is amended to allow dual citizenship.

In an interview in "Rossiiskaya gazeta" in December 2001, Voronin said Moldova had three main problems -- the Transdniester, corruption, and poverty. Voronin has constantly argued that the first two are closely interlinked, because, he claims, the Transdniester is an economic "black hole" and its leadership presides over a wide range of criminal activities, including the export of military equipment through Odesa with the connivance of corrupt Ukrainian officials. Viktor Alksnis, a former member of the Russian State Duma commission on the Transdniester, calculated that the enclave's leadership turns a blind eye to international crime estimated at \$3-4 billion annually. Voronin has asked European states to refuse to give visas to Transdniester leaders who travel with Russian passports using visas issued in Moscow.

On 9 July 2002, Moldovan newspapers published the draft of a document drawn up by Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE to create a federal Moldovan state in which autonomous territories (including the Transdniester) would be allowed their own legislatures and constitutions. In reality, this and subsequent drafts go further than a federation and create a virtual confederation of two states.

Such a confederation of two equal states is the solution the

Transdniester authorities have been proposing to the conflict since late 1992. Failing this, they threatened to declare independence from Moldova. Russia also began lobbying the idea of supporting confederal "common states" for Moldova-Transdniester and Georgia-Abkhazia after 1996, when Yevgenii Primakov became Russia's foreign minister. In April 1997, Primakov backed a memorandum signed by Moldova and Transdniester that said that they would "build their relations within the framework of a common state."

The February 2003 draft plan for Moldova prepared by Voronin goes further in making concessions to the Transdniester. It calls for a new constitution to be jointly drawn up by Moldova, Transdniester, Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE transforming Moldova into a federation. Voronin urged the Transdniester to be a "co-author of a new constitution." This would be then subject to a referendum throughout Moldova. Russian would be upgraded to an "official language" (i.e., de facto second state language). Common parliamentary and presidential elections would then be held no later than February 2005 to a common all-Moldovan parliament that would then elect a new president to coincide with the end of Voronin's term in office.

Since last summer, Transdniester leader Igor Smirnov has sent delegations to several rounds of preliminary talks on the successive draft proposals, while at the same time insisting that the region's "independence" be recognized as a precondition for embarking on formal negotiations for a confederation of two equal states.

Russia and the Transdniester leaders have a shared interest in preserving the status quo. Agreement on a federal or confederal state would ensure that the Transdniester leadership remains in place, despite Voronin's personal animosity towards Smirnov. And it would permit Russia to maintain its military presence in the Transdniester. The February draft does not envisage the removal of the 2,500 Russian "peacekeepers" in the Transdniester, even though

Moldova is officially a neutral state. The December 1999 OSCE agreement under which Russian forces should have left Moldova by December 2002 was never fulfilled, and the OSCE subsequently extended it for another year. If Moldova is converted into a federation and the "peacekeepers" are transformed into a permanent base, Russia could again miss the new 2003 OSCE deadline. Russia is therefore pushing the idea of its 2,500 troops remaining permanently as "guarantors" of the Transdnister settlement under an OSCE mandate.

Not surprisingly, the draft proposals have encountered opposition from Moldova's center-right parties that do not believe federalization would help to reintegrate the country. Those parties continue to insist Moldova should be a unitary state with limited regional self-government. Public opinion is on their side. A late 2002 poll by the CIVIC center for analysis and sociological studies that was commissioned by the Institute for Public Policies and conducted in right-bank Moldova, found that 76 percent of Moldovans do not support federalization. Only 8 percent back a federation and 2 percent a confederation. As in Ukraine, where federalization was also unpopular when touted by "centrists" in the 1990s, federations are perceived by the public in Moldova as unstable states prone to disintegration, a view that has been substantiated by the disintegration in the 1990s of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

Dr. Taras Kuzio is a resident fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto.