

Comment: In Search of a Solution

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It is in the interests of both Russia and the European Union to solve a problem knocking at both their doors.

Moldova is soon to become one of the European Union's newest neighbours. With the expected entry of Romania in 2007, the EU will share a long frontier with the poorest country in Europe, which suffers from an uneasy sense of identity and uncertain borders.

The unrecognised separatist region of Transdniestria has been out of the control of Moldova's capital, Chisinau, since 1992 and is essentially a mafia-run fiefdom which survives thanks only to criminal profits and support from certain circles in Russia and Ukraine - and the security presence of the 14th Russian Army.

The region is a prime location for money laundering and the production and illegal export of weapons. Firearms produced in and trafficked from Transdniestria are said to lack serial numbers, making them untraceable and therefore ideal for organised crime.

In the current situation, such activities can be conducted in and from Transdniestria very easily and with impunity, as international law enforcement bodies are not allowed there, and international governmental and non-governmental organisations are unable to operate normally within its borders.

As a result, it is difficult to provide training for officials or provide expertise on legislation, awareness-raising campaigns and witness protection programmes relating to trafficking issues when the authorities are not recognised internationally and are resistant to international pressure and intervention.

The civil war in Moldova was relatively mild by post-Soviet standards when you consider the Georgian civil war, the Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorny Karabakh, or the decade of implosion in Chechnya. But this does not make a long-term solution any easier to find.

A Russian attempt to break the deadlock, the so-called Kozak Memorandum of November 2003, foundered on two issues: the constitutional set-up of a reunited Moldovan state, and Russia's continued military presence in Transdniestria.

Russian officials admitted afterwards that their negotiator Dmitry Kozak - an adviser to President Vladimir Putin - failed to get the necessary buy-in to the plan from Washington and the EU via the existing OSCE negotiating mechanism.

However, the EU's new European Neighbourhood Policy - which is designed to improve stability and security in areas soon to border on the EU following its expansion - has raised expectations in Moldova.

The European Commission will shortly be publishing an Action Plan for the country, which should contain clear benchmarks for the country for development of democracy, rule of law and human rights. After an initial period when Chisinau got a relatively good bill of health on this score, the 2003 local elections and continuing state harassment of journalists and media indicate a worrying trend.

A regime of visa sanctions against the Transdniestrian leadership, imposed in early 2003 in frustration with

their failure to move the peace process forward, was intensified in July 2004 in reaction to Tiraspol's harassment of Moldovan-language schools.

Tensions also rose in the divided town of Tighina/Bendery in autumn 2004, when Transdniestrian militia seized control of a vital railway station.

The EU has a clear interest in helping to clean up the serious problems caused by poverty and endemic crime in Moldova, as both threaten to bring even greater problems with Romania's succession in perhaps fewer than three years' time.

And whether or not one believes Chisinau's claims that Transdniestrian arms are flowing to Caucasian rebels, it surely cannot be in Russia's long-term interests to allow the dispute to continue to fester.

At present, international actors are unwilling to invest resources in Moldova; the painful memory of last year's botched Kozak plan lingers.

What is needed is a joint EU-Russia effort to find a solution, in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy and also of Russian's 1999 commitment to withdraw its troops and equipment from Moldova, and specifically from Transdniestria.

The EU's designated new external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, has had some experience of the issue from her time as Chair-in-office of the OSCE in 2000.

Perhaps Brussels and Moscow will find the necessary time and energy to resolve this comparatively minor problem soon.

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