

**COMMUNISTS OF MOLDOVA AND THE
FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY'S ETHNO-
POLITICAL CONFLICTS**

Priit Järve
Senior Analyst

ECMI Brief # 3
March 2001

The European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) is a non-partisan institution founded in 1996 by the Governments of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the German State of Schleswig-Holstein. ECMI was established in Flensburg, at the heart of the Danish-German border region, in order to draw from the encouraging example of peaceful coexistence between minorities and majorities achieved here. ECMI's aim is to promote interdisciplinary research on issues related to minorities and majorities in a European perspective and to contribute to the improvement of inter-ethnic relations in those parts of Western and Eastern Europe where ethno-political tension and conflict prevail.

ECMI Briefs are written either by the staff of ECMI or by outside authors commissioned by the Centre. The opinions expressed in the *Briefs* do not necessarily reflect the views of ECMI.

ECMI Brief # 3
European Centre for Minority Issues
Director: Marc Weller
© ECMI 2001

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MINORITY ISSUES (ECMI)
Schiffbruecke 12 (Kompagnietor Building) D-24939 Flensburg Germany
☎ +49-(0)461-14 14 9-0 Fax +49-(0)461-14 14 9-19
e-mail: info@ecmi.de internet: <http://www.ecmi.de>

COMMUNISTS OF MOLDOVA AND THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY'S ETHNO-POLITICAL CONFLICTS

ECMI Brief # 3

Priit Järve
Senior Analyst

On 25 February 2001, the Party of the Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) received 49.9% of the votes (50.7% after the recount) at the parliamentary elections. This gives it an absolute majority of 71 seats out of 101. The OSCE has characterised the elections as free and fair. The success of the PCRM can be explained by the worsening economic situation in the country, a result of unsuccessful reform efforts in the economy.

During the election campaign the PCRM promised to achieve two major changes in Moldova if elected: to take the country into the Russia-Belarus Union and to give Russian the status of an official language. According to Mr Voronin, the leader of the PCRM, these questions will be decided through a special, nation-wide referendum.

Since 1992, the Republic of Moldova has been closely monitored and assisted by the international community (the OSCE Mission was established in 1993), mainly because of its ethnopolitical conflict in the separatist region of Transdniestria. Following the armed conflict in 1992, political relations between the government of Moldova and the Transdniestrian authorities have remained deadlocked. Moldova wants to maintain the unitary state ("a common state") in which Transdniestria would have a special status, while Transdniestria seeks recognition as an independent state. In 1994, a few years after ethnic tensions also escalated in the Southern part of the country, Moldova established "a national-territorial autonomous unit" for the Gagauz, a Turkish-speaking minority. This solution has been hailed as a success, though the relations of the government of Moldova and Gagauzia have not been without difficulties since.

Given these ethnopolitical tensions on the one hand, and the pre-election promises of the PCRM on the other, one has to ask how these promises, if fulfilled, would influence the ethnopolitical situation in Moldova. Would they ease the existing tensions or would they create new ones?

Joining the Russia-Belarus Union

Mr Voronin's justification for joining the Union is that "it is abnormal [that], when the whole of Europe is uniting [...] we, the former Soviet republics, are standing separately, awaiting donations from the West."¹ Indeed, not being fit to apply for EU membership because of its poor economic performance leaves Moldova with little choice. However, there are no firm guarantees that the majority of the population will vote for the union with Russia-Belarus at the referendum, even if Russia provides massive economic aid and, once again, restructures the Moldovan debts for natural gas and oil. At the same time, it is not certain at all that such assistance from Russia will easily materialise. Moreover, the mobilisation of ethnic Moldovans, who constitute more than 65% of the whole population, on ethnic and linguistic grounds for voting against the union at the referendum, cannot be excluded. Ethnic Moldovans have been contemplating the merger with the culturally identical Romania since 1991 and some 70,000 have already got Romanian citizenship. Therefore, the union with Russia and Belarus might be as unacceptable for them as the prospect of a union with Romania was to the Russian-speakers of Transnistria.

Transnistria did not contribute to the victory of Mr Voronin's party. Instead, it boycotted the parliamentary elections because the programmes of all competing parties supported Moldova's territorial integrity, and thus, from a Transnistrian point of view, were evidently not supporting the Transnistrian claim for independence. However, this does not mean that the relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol should become worse. It has already been noted that the pro-Russian stance of the PCRM could help improve relations between Chisinau and authorities in the Transnistrian region and thereby ease separatists' concerns about possible discrimination against Russian-speakers.² Indeed, the initiative of the PCRM may even please the leaders of Transnistria, which have already attempted, though unsuccessfully, to join the Russia-Belarus Union. Therefore, Transnistria could very likely support the idea of joining Russia and Belarus. Whether it will trade its support to this idea for the recognition of its autonomy, or some other power-sharing arrangement, remains to be seen.

¹ See <http://gazeta.ru/2001/03/03/n983628300.shtml>

² Ron Synovitz, "Communist Party wins election", *RFE/RL Newslines*, 26 February 2001, see at: <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2001/02/26022001115222.asp>

As opposed to Transnistria, the Gagauz participated in the last elections. The autonomous district of Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri) gave the strongest support of all counties of Moldova to Mr Voronin's party – 80.57% of the votes were cast for the communists.³ The reason may be the support which the communist faction of the previous parliament gave to Gagauzia in its disputes with the Moldovan government. Therefore, it looks fairly probable that Gagauzia will support the idea of joining the Union. It might be indicative of possible future actions that when Moldova was getting more independent from Moscow and introduced Moldovan (Romanian) as the state language in 1989, the Gagauz “reactive nationalists” wanted Gagauzia to stay in the Soviet Union as an autonomous republic. Currently, the Gagauz are promoting the idea of the federalisation of Moldova. After a recent visit to Moscow and referring to Russia's support, Mr Mihail Kendighelean, chairman of the Popular Assembly of the Gagauzia, stressed that a federation between Moldova, Transnistria, and Gagauzia is the only viable option.⁴ As Gagauzia has entered into various relations with the linguistically close Turkey, and as Bulgaria has supported the Bulgarian minority in southern Moldova politically, these countries may hold their own views on the possible fate of their ethnic brethren.

However, last but not least, it is not clear how Russia might react to Moldova's aspirations to enter the Union. The political elite of Russia might not feel comfortable about admitting an unreformed communist state. The economic elite of Russia might also be reluctant to use Russian resources to help Moldova out of its present economic misery. Such reluctance was already evident in the case of Belarus. On the other hand, in the context of NATO enlargement, Russia might be tempted to use Moldova as a military out-post in South-eastern Europe. Again, in the case of Belarus, military considerations were not at the bottom of Russia's priority list. Russia still has a military presence in the region, as 2000 of its troops are stationed in Transnistria, not forgetting large amounts of military hardware, to be withdrawn in the near future according to the OSCE 1999 Summit in Istanbul.

³ See the results of the elections at <http://www.ifes.md>

⁴ See Natal'ia Prikhodko, “Gagauzia sotrudnichaet s Pridnes 2001, http://www.ng.ru/printed/cis/2001-01-18/5_gagauziya.html

Nezavisimaia gazeta, 18 January

Russian as an official language

The plan to introduce Russian as the official language may please the leaders of Transdnistria and Gagauzia alike. Transdnistria has already established Russian as one of the official languages (the other two being Moldovan [Romanian] and Ukrainian). While no ethnic group constitutes an absolute majority in Transdnistria (in 1989, Moldovans made up 40%, Ukrainians 28% and Russians 25% of the population), Russian is the dominant language. Thus, the Transdnistrian authorities can only welcome the establishment of Russian as the second official language in Moldova. The Gagauz authorities could take the same positive attitude towards the referendum, as Russian is already one of the official languages of Gagauzia alongside with Gagauz and Moldovan (Romanian), and ethnic Gagauz know Russian much better than Moldovan (Romanian).

Russia will most naturally welcome the upgrading of the status of Russian, as it recently did in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Again, although in practice Russian is used widely in different spheres of life in Moldova, including the civil service, giving it an official status might be problematic for ethnic Moldovans (65% of the population) for reasons of political and cultural symbolism.

The PCRM has several options how to go about the referendums. It might be important to hold the referendum on Russian as an official language before the referendum on joining the Union, but it may appear better to hold them together. Moreover, one cannot exclude that the Russia-Belarus Union may consider the official status of Russian as a precondition for membership.

Conclusion

The plans of the communists of Moldova to take their country to the Russia-Belarus Union and to give Russian the status of an official language, if carried out, may contribute to the resolution of existing ethnopolitical conflicts in Moldova. However, the same plans might lead Moldova towards a federation, trigger ethnic mobilisation of the titular nation and create new dimensions of ethnopolitical tension in Moldovan society.