

Democratizing Moldova's Eastern region of Transnistria

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Abstract

The Transnistrian authorities run an authoritarian, leftist, antireform, repressive regime, whose the key factor for existence is direct Russian political, financial, and military support. The enclave is considered by Russia to be a strategic stronghold in proximity to NATO and the volatile Balkan region. Moscow keeps in Moldova's eastern region its only permanent deployment of armed forces outside Russia's borders in Europe. The enclave is an entrepôt of arms trafficking and other criminal activities, as well as a source of permanent instability and therefore a pretext for Russia to interfere in Moldovan affairs. It also acts as leverage over interference in Ukraine, creating an unstable and dangerous "new Kaliningrad".

The objective of this paper is to propose actions for encouraging democratic change aimed at ending the current *status quo* and expediting the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, which endangers the eastern border of NATO and EU, as well as the stability of Moldova and Ukraine. Step-by-step democratization should weaken the power of the totalitarian Tiraspol regime and ultimately dismantle it. And finally, democratization is bound to contribute more effectively than any other means to eradicating trafficking and the roots of economic crime that endanger the security in the Black Sea region. If successfully implemented, Moldova could become a positive example for solving the conflicts in the Caucasus.

Ideally, the project should become a Euro-Atlantic joint effort of the US and EU; the US should consider acting as the leading force, in case the EU is slow in the initial stages. The US might want to rely on the support of EU members that are the strongest US allies (the Baltic States, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the UK). The project should not be put under the umbrella of an international organization (e.g., the UN or the OSCE, where Russia has a veto power).

The following measures to democratize the Tiraspol-controlled territories are recommended: providing access to information to the east bank of Moldova; encouraging NGO development and education projects, market economy/private sector development, and legal and humanitarian assistance; further democratization on Moldova's west bank of the Nistru to make it more attractive to residents of the east bank.

Risks and obstacles are considered, such as how to deal with Russia and local security forces that would oppose the democratic change; how more efficiently to deal with the central government of Moldova and local authorities; and how to raise funds for the project implementation.

Background information

Currently known as the Moldavian Transnistrian Republic (MTR), or Transnistria or Transdniestr, this breakaway entity from Moldova consists of a narrow strip of land (180 km/113 mi by 32 km/20 mi) nestled between the east bank of the Nistru (Dnestr in Russian) River and the border of Moldova with Ukraine on a small part of what used to be, between 1924 and 1940,

the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Transnistria is an internationally unrecognized entity proclaimed “independent” in Tiraspol on 2 September 1990. The separatist authorities in Tiraspol exert their rule over five Soviet-style districts—Camenca, Dubasari, Grigoriopol, Rabnita, and Slobozia—comprising a total population of 555,500 (2004 est.). Except for nine villages bordering the east bank of the river (Molovata Noua, Cocieri, Cosnita, Dorotcaia, Parata, Pohrebea, Roghi, Vasilevca, and Corjova), the area controlled by the Transnistrian authorities includes all of Moldova's land on the east bank of the Nistru¹. On the river's west bank, the self-proclaimed MTR controls the city of Tighina/Bender along with a few other suburban villages².

In the case of the breakaway political entity, the following conditions are not met, leading to the conclusion that the Tiraspol authorities run a totalitarian regime³. The control over government decisions about policy is not vested in elected officials; therefore, in the Tiraspol-controlled territories the checks and balances principle is not present. International organizations and Western democracies do not consider local elections by the Tiraspol leadership to be free and fair. Elected officials are not chosen and peacefully removed in frequent and fairly conducted elections; on the contrary, coercion is common and the self-styled president of the breakaway region, Igor Smirnov, has held office since 1991. The right to run for office is withheld from those who do not support secessionist policy of Tiraspol. Freedom of expression is suppressed. The Tiraspol authorities conduct an aggressive policy of linguistic cleansing, mainly against the Moldovan ethnic population. Alternative information and alternative sources of information do not exist or are prohibited or jammed. Local civil society groups are oppressed and/or controlled by Tiraspol's Soviet-style intelligence services⁴.

The key factor in the stalemate is the direct Russian political, financial, and military support⁵ that forces the Transnistrian region to play multiple roles in the area. The Tiraspol enclave is considered by Russia to be a strategic stronghold in proximity to NATO and the volatile Balkan region, where Moscow keeps its only permanent deployment of armed forces outside Russia's borders in Europe. It is an entrepôt of arms trafficking (and other criminal activities) between this internationally unrecognized entity and other volatile regions, including the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Russia's support plays another parallel but related role – it makes the region a source of permanent instability and therefore gives Russia a pretext to interfere through “mediation” in Moldovan affairs, which is seen by the Kremlin as Russia's backyard.

¹ See attached maps.

² Dr. Andrei Brezianu & Vlad Spânu. *The Historical Dictionary of Moldova*. Scarecrow Press, Maryland, USA & London. Upcoming 2007.

³ Robert Dahl. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1989.

⁴ In the last 12 months, Russia and the Tiraspol regime have pushed hard to create a “democratic” façade of civil society in the eastern districts of Moldova, favoring the secessionism movement from Moldova and unification with Russia. “Russian organizations in Transnistria campaign for a second Kaliningrad. Vladimir Socor”, *The Eurasia Daily Monitor*. 11 August 2006.

⁵ In 2004, in the legal case “Ilascu and others versus Russia and Moldova,” a case examined by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, the judges concluded that the Russian 14th Army and other elements of the Russian government had contributed to the creation and continued existence of the Moldavian Transnistrian Republic. Similar conclusions were made by lawyers of the New York City Bar Association in their study of the Transnistrian conflict, which demonstrates that Russia's activities in Moldova violate international law: *Thawing a Frozen Conflict: Legal Aspects of the Separatist Crisis in Moldova*. The Association of the Bar of the City of New York. May 2006.

The Tiraspol regime, for the same reasons, also plays the role of a factor of inconvenience and leverage over Ukraine – i.e. an unstable and dangerous “new Kaliningrad”.

Another important element that preserves the status quo of the Tiraspol regime is the Ukrainian factor—the illicit trade that occurs over the Ukrainian border with the Tiraspol-controlled territories allows the separatist state to survive and has been profitable to some business groups in Ukraine.

About 30 percent of Moldova's industries and over 90 percent of its energy production are located on territory controlled by the Tiraspol authorities, whose policies have made evident that the conflict with the government in Chisinau is not essentially about ethnic and linguistic issues, but rather about political orientation and geopolitics.

The Tiraspol leadership is authoritarian, leftist, antireform and repressive. It is estimated that the combined forces of the unrecognized republic's ministries of state security, internal affairs and defense amount to 15-20 thousand personnel⁶. Furthermore, Tiraspol has no intention of negotiating seriously with Moldova to alter a *status quo* that is in the Transnistrian authorities' favor. Most of the key figures in the Tiraspol administration are Russian citizens, and it is widely believed that they were sent to Moldova by the Kremlin to organize a secessionist movement to prevent Moldova's independence and, later, autonomy from Russia. Igor Smirnov, a former military plant manager in Tiraspol who came to Moldova from Russia in November 1987, has been Transnistria's “president” since 1991. His government controls the mass media and oppresses civil society organizations and opposition political formations, while his sons run the unrecognized republic's main businesses through the Sherif Company, which is notorious for its corrupt, non-transparent business practices.

The east bank of the Nistru is populated by the same ethnic groups as the rest of Moldova, although the proportions are different: in the Tiraspol-controlled territories local Russians and Ukrainians, taken together, outnumber ethnic Moldovans⁷. Such a situation developed as a result of Russification and the influx of migrants from other parts of the USSR who came to work in the Moldovan eastern region's military plants and other heavy industries after WWII. Romanian-speaking Moldovans have only 88 schools where the language of education is Romanian in the inappropriate Cyrillic alphabet. Only eight schools use the Latin alphabet, and these only do so thanks to the intervention of international organizations and foreign governments.

A series of small-scale clashes occurred in late 1991 and early 1992, culminating with a short but violent armed conflict in which Russia's 14th Army sided with the government proclaimed in Tiraspol. In the wake of the 1992 cease-fire agreement signed by Russian President Yeltsin and Moldovan President Snegur⁸, negotiations were commenced and have been going on

⁶ Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transnistria, International Crisis Group, 157, 2004.

⁷ According to data from the census organized by Tiraspol authorities in 2004, ethnic Ukrainians make up 28.8 percent of Transnistria's population (a slight increase from 28 percent in 1989), Russians 38.3 percent (up from 24 percent in 1989), and Moldovans 31.9 percent (down from 40 percent in 1989); thus, if one believes the results of census, the increase of ethnic Russians was made at the expense of Moldovans who were forced to flee the region due to discrimination policies.

⁸ The agreement on "Principles of a Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Transnistria Region of Moldova" signed on 21 July 1992.

inconclusively between Moldova's authorities and the self-appointed Tiraspol authorities in a series of attempts to settle the conflict.

In 1997, the unrecognized republic applied for membership in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and, later on, for full-scale integration into the CIS political and military structures. A nonbinding referendum on MTR's joining the Russia-Belarus union was held between April and June 1998, with over 66 percent of the ballots supporting the union. However, like the province of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea (isolated from Russia by Lithuania and Poland), the east-bank separatist region has no common borders with either Belarus or the Russian Federation. On 17 September 2006, the Tiraspol regime organized another referendum that approved the region's secession from Moldova and set the goal of joining Russia in a Soviet-style 97% vote. The referendum was considered to be non-democratic and illegitimate and was not recognized by any state or international organization.

Promising new developments took place in 2005 through the involvement of Western players in addressing security concerns related to the existence of the Tiraspol regime. In October, the United States and the European Union became observers in the heretofore inefficient negotiations, whose parties comprise Russia, Ukraine, OSCE, Moldova, and the Transnistrian authorities, thus forming a new "five plus two" format. In December, the EU Border Assistance Mission for the Ukraine-Moldova border was launched, aiming at suppressing the traffic in arms, drugs, and human beings, as well as regular commercial contraband, for which the unrecognized political entity is considered to be both a source and a transit route.

Geographical factors. Moldova's districts lying east of the Nistru can be viewed as a territory composed by three distinctive geographical units:

1. Nine East-bank localities under the control of the Chisinau central government.
2. Tighina/Bender and a few surrounding villages on the West-bank of the Nistru controlled by the Tiraspol administration.
3. The rest of the territory of Transnistria on the East bank controlled by Tiraspol.

Thus, the separatist region is divided into two large parts that are separated by the area of the nine localities controlled by Chisinau, situated in the central part of the self-styled MTR in the Dubasari district. Tiraspol authorities, in order to prevent this territorial crack, seized the agricultural land belonging to farmers of these nine localities that border the far eastern boundaries of Moldova and the border with Ukraine, thus controlling the Tiraspol-Rabnita highway and the land to its east.

Implications of democratic change for Moldova and for regional security

Objectives. Encouraging democratic change should by all means be aimed at changing the current *status quo* and expediting the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, thus eliminating the danger of that the secessionist territory of Moldova will become a Kaliningrad-2 type region controlled by Russia and sitting on the eastern border of NATO and the EU and in the western backyard of Ukraine. Since there has been little to no progress within the current "5+2" negotiation format, nor there is progress in the withdrawal of the Russian Federation's troops and munitions from Moldova's eastern region in accordance with Russia's previous international

commitments⁹ and the multiple requests of the Moldovan and Western governments and international organizations, a new, serious democratization project, in conjunction with changing the existing peacekeeping format to a multinational format, has the chance to become the most efficient tool to unfreeze the conflict. Step-by-step democratization should weaken the power of the totalitarian Tiraspol regime and ultimately dismantle it through democratic means, as occurred in the case of post-Milosevic Serbia and Montenegro. And finally, democratization is bound to contribute more effectively than any other means to eradicating trafficking and the roots of economic crime, which endanger the security of the Black Sea region, including countries immediately neighboring Moldova – Ukraine and Romania. The timing: Moldova could become a positive example for solving the conflicts in the Caucasus.

The outcome of the democratization of the region will be to ensure a free flow of information and freedom of speech; the implementation of international human rights standards; and the promotion of the rule of law. Free and fair elections are possible only when these conditions exist, as well as when Russian troops, which act as a psychological and military shield for the Transnistrian regime, are withdrawn.

Steps to be taken

Ideally, the project should become a Euro-Atlantic joint effort in which the US and EU are the two main supporters. But the US must consider acting as a leading force, in case the EU will be slow in the initial stages of the project (due to the lack of a common EU-Russia policy within the EU). Alternatively and/or in parallel, the US should consider relying on the support of EU individual members (i.e. the strongest European allies of the US, which are also Moldova's friends: the Baltic States, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, as well as the UK and the Netherlands). Thus, Western governments, the EU, and the Moldovan government, in cooperation with NGOs from participating countries, will be the main actors in this project. The project will be not put under the umbrella of an international organization (the UN or the OSCE, where Russia has veto power).

The following measures toward democratizing the Tiraspol-controlled territories are recommended:

1. The US organizes a needs-assessment mission. This is the first step, which will evaluate real needs, identify resources, assess risks, and propose solutions.
2. Access to information. The West needs to win the battle over the minds and souls of the residents of the breakaway Nistru districts, thus disconnecting them from Smirnov and his entourage through launching projects to support the development of free media in local society and allowing access for the region's citizens to Moldovan and international media. Also, Moldova should consider communicating directly, on a regular basis, with its citizens east of Nistru (possibly with technical support for such communications from the U.S. and the EU); supporting independent broadcasters, and giving free access to existing distribution networks for non-government publications; and providing technical support to overcome the Transnistrian authorities' current jamming of West Bank broadcasts to the Tiraspol-controlled districts; and

⁹ 1999 OSCE Summit in Istanbul

international round-tables for journalists. This strategy should be implemented through broadcasts in all languages spoken in the region, including Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and possibly other languages spoken in the region, such as Gagauz and Yiddish. Additionally, Western governments, NGOs, and independent experts could use Russian and international media to make Russian citizens aware of the extent of Russian assistance to the Tiraspol regime and the cost of such assistance to Russian taxpayers.

3. NGO development and education. The creation of an independent and vital civil society should be fostered, targeting members of the younger generation, mainly the thousands of students at Moldovan, Romanian and Ukrainian universities, the Nistru's east-bank Romanian-language schools, and the most open-minded students at Tiraspol University. These means can be considered: supporting NGOs working in west-bank Moldova and in the east-bank districts under Tiraspol control that envisage or favor unification (or, at least, not actively promoting a secessionist policy); promoting contacts at the level of NGOs; promoting visitor exchange programs in the West for young citizens living in the Nistru's east-bank districts; providing scholarships; and creating information-assistance centers on the west bank along the Nistru River, as well as in the nine localities on the east bank, designed to provide services to local residents. Besides, political parties from the west bank of the Nistru should be encouraged to establish direct contacts with the population of the east bank, and engage them in the political activities.

4. Market economy/private sector development. Donors and the government of Moldova should sponsor projects to aid east-bank localities and institutions subordinated to the central government in Chisinau – e.g., projects supporting private sector development, building infrastructure (roads, libraries, bridges, etc.), and equipping existing schools and hospitals. As a result, these entities will serve as attractive models for entities controlled by Tiraspol and encourage them to choose reunification with the rest of Moldova. In addition, projects on the development of small businesses in Tiraspol-controlled localities should be encouraged. Another measure will be to press Russia to end economic sanctions against Moldova, from which the breakaway region is exempted, as well as supporting projects that are aimed at diversification of Moldova's export markets. Private-sector projects on the west bank of the Nistru that employ people from the east bank should be encouraged, thus building trust and relations at this level as well.

5. Legal assistance. Donors and the government of Moldova should support NGOs in Moldova that provide legal representation to farmers who live in areas outside the reach and control of the Tiraspol authorities and are prevented from working on their private fields in their original homelands east of the Nistru by the separatist militia that illegally established checkpoints¹⁰. Interested parties must press the Tiraspol regime to close down the illegally installed checkpoints so that farmers have access to their own plots of land on the east bank of the river. Another measure will be to press Ukraine to align itself with the EU and U.S. in banning the travel of the Tiraspol leadership.

¹⁰ Example: Promo-Lex NGO of Moldova filed a case with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg to which more than 1,300 people are already party; this case will attempt to force the return of farmland to Moldovan farmers, affecting approximately 5,000 landowners and their families.

6. Humanitarian assistance. Interested parties should provide humanitarian assistance and winter supplies to residents of Moldova and the east bank localities subordinated to Chisinau, thus sending a signal that the West cares, as well as favors the reunification of the Nistru's east-bank districts with the rest of Moldova.

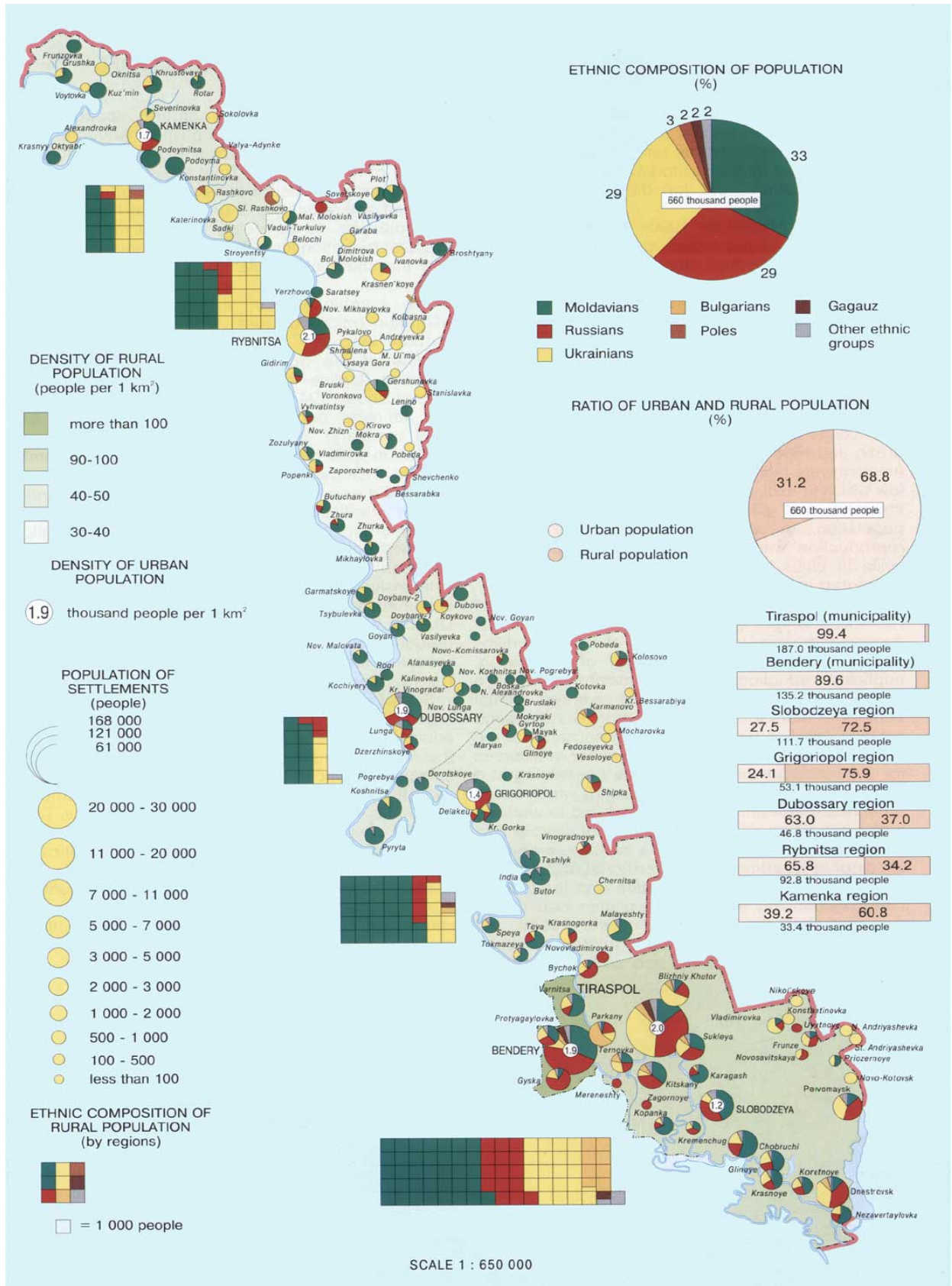
7. Further democratization on Moldova's west bank of the Nistru. Moldova's own progress is crucial in making it an attractive center for residents of the east bank to join. The success of the Baltic States' governmental relations with their Russian ethnic groups demonstrated that economic development, prospects for European integration, and participation in political life could help avoid clashes and promote minority integration. Official Chisinau should be strongly encouraged to make progress on economic reforms, independent media, rule of law and other liberties.

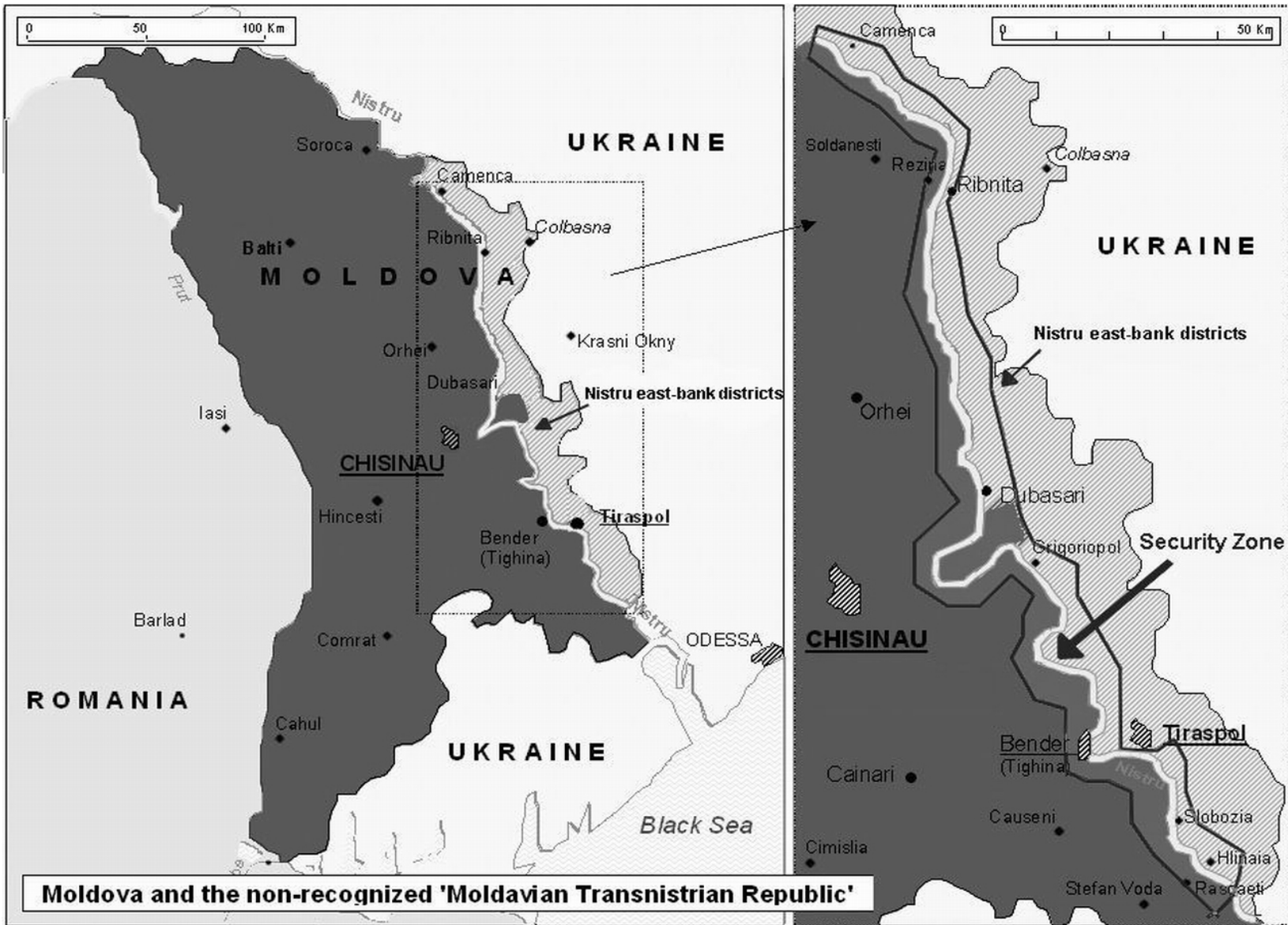
Risks and obstacles

1. Russia and local security forces of the Tiraspol regime will be the main obstacles attempting to stop projects on democratic change. The overcoming of this most important impediment must be considered in every action taken by the West in this project. Fortunately, the MTR is a much less closed society than it used to be under the USSR, and therefore, if consistent actions are taken under a well-thought-out strategy, the totalitarian regime in Tiraspol will collapse. The local leadership has something to gain, therefore, if they hand over the power democratically: the West and Moldova can offer them immunity from prosecution and provide them some attractive future prospects that may soften their stance.

2. The central government of Moldova and local government bodies could be partners in the democratization project, but there are two concerns that need to be considered by the West: (a) their inefficiency due to Moldova's limited institutional capacity; and (b) their lack of political will. An important solution would be to assist in strengthening Moldovan institutions. As for the second concern, the West should exercise more pressure on Moldova for implementing an effective reform of Teleradio Moldova and allow the development of independent broadcasters, in part to encourage a public diplomacy strategy vis-à-vis Moldova's eastern districts.

3. Lack of financing is a further impediment. International donors can assist through setting up a democratization fund, which might bear an attractive name on both banks of the Nistru, e.g., something like *The International Fund for Moldova's Territorial and Political Unification*. The Moldovan government needs also to allocate special funds for projects to pursue democratic change in the Nistru's east bank districts currently under the control of the Tiraspol totalitarian regime.





Moldova and the non-recognized 'Moldavian Transnistrian Republic'