

The Paradoxes of Moldovan Sports

An insight into the nature
of the Transnistrian conflict

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The Paradoxes of Moldovan Sports

An insight into the nature of the Transnistrian conflict

The military conflict in the early 1990s split Moldova into two; thus Transnistria, which was set up on the eastern bank of the Dniester river as a separate state, remains unrecognised by the international community to date. This breakaway province has grown stronger, as today it possesses almost all the internal attributes of statehood, including an effective political system, an army and its own currency. The memory of the 1992 conflict, in which around one thousand people were killed, is the founding myth of Transnistria, and hostility towards Moldova has been used by the political elite in Tiraspol as a foundation of the state ideology and a key propaganda tool.

The Transnistrian problem is usually seen as analogous to a few other separatist conflicts which broke out twenty years ago as a consequence of the fall of the Soviet empire and have not yet been resolved in a manner which would satisfy all the parties involved and also gain support from the major international actors. However, the Transnistrian conflict is clearly different in its nature from the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Nagorno-Karabakh. Relations between Moldova proper and this breakaway province cannot be described by simple definitions or seemingly obvious analogies.

Mutual relations in the area of sports, which in contemporary international contacts often not only reflect the true nature of political relations but sometimes even affect them, can be a valuable contribution to the analysis of this conflict's nature.

Why did the Transnistrian government, despite constant assertions of absolute sovereignty and the use of anti-Moldovan rhetoric, at the same time agree to Transnistrian athletes representing Moldova during the Olympics and in other international competitions? Why does it accept the presence of sports teams from both banks of the Dniester playing in the same lea-

gues? Why does Transnistria, despite being much smaller, predominate in many sports, especially football, the most popular game in Moldova? How is it that Sheriff Tiraspol, the flagship football club of the business and political circles controlling Transnistria, managed to win the Moldovan championship ten times in a row and now represents Moldova in the Champions League? How is it that the same club is the main source of players for Moldova's national team? Does sport really 'know no borders' or perhaps the border on the Dniester is different than seems at first sight?

The loneliness of the unrecognised

The independence of Transnistria has not been recognised by any country in the world, not even the Russian Federation, which (while using this breakaway province as a means to put pressure on Moldova) has been a *de facto* protector and banker of Transnistria for many years. This lack of recognition by the international community has closed the doors for Transnistria to membership in international sports federations under the aegis of the Olympic Movement and consequently to participation in sporting competitions held by them under Transnistria's own flag. This isolation extends to national teams, clubs and individual athletes alike. In the case of football, the ban on contacts between federations which are members of FIFA and those not belonging to this organisation extends also to friendly matches. This means that international activity is limited to meetings with amateur teams or those from quasi-states with a similar status¹. The international isolation of sporting competitors

¹ Following the example of such initiatives as the football federation, NF-Board, the members of which include teams from both *de facto* independent but internationally isolated states (Somaliland and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus) and provinces which are not even considering seriously becoming sovereign (like Scandinavian Lapland or Italian Padania).

affects even such well-established entities as for example Kosovo, which has been recognised by over eighty countries².

International isolation of sportspersons is usually one of the many costs quasi-states are willing to pay in their desire to strengthen their independence and convince the world that it is justified and irrevocable. Nagorno-Karabakh has cut off all links with the sports federations of Azerbaijan, as have Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the federations of Georgia, as a natural and indisputable consequence of the military conflicts of the early 1990s. As a result, no global sport federation recognises any of those three Southern Caucasian quasi-states³.

The breakaway territories in the Southern Caucasus initially pinned their hopes for breaking their isolation in sports on their patrons: Nagorno-Karabakh on Armenia; Abkhazia and South Ossetia on Russia. Given the uncompromising policy of international sport federations, these attempts were doomed to failure, in terms of both sports and propaganda.

² The recognition of Kosovo by the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) set a precedent, which however has been followed by a few small unions so far. In practice, UN membership is a necessary precondition for joining most international sport federations (although sometimes dependencies such as Puerto Rico, the Bermudas or Hong Kong are also admitted).

³ The government of Abkhazia takes pride in its membership of the International Domino Federation and its right to host the world domino championships in 2011. Although this game is very popular in Abkhazia, it needs to be emphasised that not only is dominoes not an Olympic sport, but it is also unrecognised as a non-Olympic sport by the International Olympic Committee. Abkhazia's membership in the domino federation, which is dominated by Latin American countries, has been possible owing to lobbying from Venezuela (which is one of the five states to have recognised Abkhazia's independence). See: In Hosting Domino Championship, Abkhazia Hopes To Score Internationally, 19 October 2011, http://origin.rferl.org/content/dominoes_world_championships_abkhazia/24364717.html; M. Schwirtz, For Abkhazia, Recognition In Coming Piece by Piece, „The New York Times”, 8 September 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/09/world/europe/09abkhazia.html?pagewanted=all>

Football players (and other athletes) from Nagorno-Karabakh have not been able to put down roots in Armenia to anything like the same degree as politicians originating from the same province, who have dominated politics in Yerevan for more than ten years owing to clan ties. Although football club Karabakh was established in the mid 1990s (renamed later as Lernayin Artsakh) and was to represent Nagorno-Karabakh football in the Armenian league, the team had to be registered in Yerevan and play its home matches there because otherwise Armenia may have been excluded from FIFA/UEFA. This led to a deepening of Nagorno-Karabakh's isolation in football. To prevent this, the local government in 2009 decided to establish a separate Nagorno-Karabakh league, unaffiliated with any international organisations, and Lernayin Artsakh was moved to Stepanakert to play with amateur teams from Nagorno-Karabakh.

The government of South Ossetia had to resolve similar dilemmas. Immediately after becoming independent from Georgia, its strongest football club, Spartak Tskhinvali, started playing in the amateur league of North Ossetia, its sister republic, which is part of the Russian Federation. However, the team is formally registered in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, and cannot play matches on the southern slopes of the Caucasus that forms the border between the two republics. The Russian football federation, aware of FIFA's and UEFA's stance, has over recent years rejected numerous requests from South Ossetia and Abkhazia for allowing their teams or athletes to take part in any official sport competitions, including football matches (they are only allowed to participate in unofficial competitions and amateur tournaments). Although Moscow recognised the independence of the two separatist republics in August 2008, its stance on this issue remains unchanged.

Those countries which need to face the problem of separatism are also aware of the role sport plays in propaganda. A football club named Spartak Tskhinvali participates not only in the Russian league on North Ossetia but also in Georgia's premier league, except that the latter team is registered in Tbilisi (it was registered in Gori before the war of 2008). Its name serves to remind of the bonds between Georgia and its lost province. Similar in-

tentions also lie behind the participation of FC Gagra (and previously Dynamo Sukhumi also), a club in Tbilisi which formally represents refugees from Abkhazia. A similar role is also played by FK Qarabağ Ağdam, one of Azerbaijan's strongest teams. Contrary to what its name suggests, the club presently has little in common with Ağdam, a totally destroyed and deserted town on the frontier with Nagorno-Karabakh, which is controlled by Armenians. It operated for more than ten years in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, and now it plays home matches in Quzanlı, a place adjacent to the territories occupied by Armenians.

Independence à la carte

Unlike the case of the Southern Caucasian quasi-states (and the absolute majority of separatist entities around the world), the government of Transnistria has not chosen to break sporting ties with Moldova. Competitors and teams from the eastern bank of the Dniester are admitted to almost all Moldovan sport federations, taking part in internal Moldovan competitions according to established rules (fulfilment of qualification standards) and represent Moldova during international competitions, including the Olympics. Five of the thirty-one athletes who represented Moldova in the most recent Olympic Games (Beijing 2008) originated from Transnistria.

Transnistrian athletes must hold Moldovan passports as one of the formal conditions they are required to fulfil to be able to take part in international competitions. This is not unduly controversial however, since Moldovan passports are held by approximately 230,000 of the approximately 550,000 residents of Transnistria. Because it is impossible to travel abroad with passports issued by Transnistria, its residents also hold passports issued by Russia (approximately 120,000 people, including most of the establishment) and Ukraine (approximately 100,000 people).

Sporting competitors, mainly football players, also capitalise on the issue of citizenship in a different context. Many of them, from Transnistria and

Moldova proper alike, accept Russian passports in order to facilitate playing in the rich Russian league (owing to this they do not have to compete for places in Russian teams under limitations set for foreigners). It was revealed in 2008 that over half of the key players in Moldova's national team, held Russian citizenship. Later, some of them decided against playing for Moldova's national team because they were afraid of being removed from the Russian league⁴.

The true reason behind the Transnistrian government's decision to keep sporting ties with Moldova is certainly not its attachment to the Olympic ideal. This is more an effect of the nature of the Transnistrian conflict and of the current interests of the local political and business elites.

What makes the Transnistrian conflict distinct from most other contemporary separatist movements (including all the aforementioned conflicts in the post-Soviet area) is its roots. What triggered the civil war there was not antagonism between different ethnic groups but enmity within the political elite. The independence of Moldova, and consequently the severance of many of its ties to Moscow, was perceived by the Sovietised *nomenklatura* in the largely industrial province that Transnistria was as a threat to its status (this little province accounted for 40% of Moldova's industrial production). The separatists skilfully played the ethnic card by fomenting fears of the allegedly imminent Romanisation of Moldova among the Russian-speaking population, who predominate in the eastern bank of the Dniester. The disputes over linguistic (the status of the Russian language) and cultural issues, even if initially they were used as a trigger to enable escalation of the conflict, were clearly less important than the political and business calculations.

⁴ Жосан и Гацкан не будут играть за сборную Молдовы!, 2 September 2008, <http://www.moldfootball.com/?index=news&news=3133>; Павел Чобану: Не следует давать гражданство всем игрокам национальной сборной подряд, 18 March 2010, <http://press.try.md/item.php?id=111539>

Actions taken by the Russian 14th Army, stationed on the eastern bank of the Dniester, which tipped the scales of victory in the conflict in favour of the separatists and later forced the ceasefire, were also important⁵.

Shortly before the outbreak of the military conflict, Moldovans – albeit a minority compared to the Slavic population – constituted the most numerous ethnic group in Transnistria, accounting for 40% of its population (other groups included Ukrainians – 28%, Russians – 25%, and Bulgarians – 4%). Although the Transnistrian government has taken actions aimed against the Romanian language (officially called Moldovan on both banks of the Dniester, but spelt in Cyrillic in Transnistria) by eliminating it from the education system except for elementary schools, this has not affected the level of support among Transnistrian Moldovans for the local ruling class, who present themselves as the guarantors of relative stability in both socio-economic and security terms. The sociological surveys available indicate that one in four residents of Transnistria is ready to support a form of reintegration with Moldova (21% for federation and 7% for autonomy)⁶. Interestingly, there is no ethnic correlation in this case (reintegration is more frequently supported by younger and better-educated people, who live in Russified cities and not in the ethnically Moldovan countryside). Similarly, more Russians lived at the time of the conflict (and live now) in Chisinau alone than in Transnistria as a whole, which by no means predetermined their support for Transnistrian separatism.

It is the lack of ethnic enmity which explains why the bonds between people on both sides of the Dniester have been reestablished so easily,

⁵ For more see: И. Косташ, Дни затмения: хроника необъявленной войны, Кишинев 2010; A. Eberhardt, Nierozwiążane konflikty na obszarze posowieckim – polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej, [in:] A.D. Rotfeld (ed.), Dokąd zmierza świat?, Warszawa 2008.

⁶ Е. Бобкова, Социальное и экономическое самочувствие населения двух берегов Днестра в условиях замороженного конфликта // Молдова – Приднестровье. Общими усилиями – к успешному будущему. Социальные аспекты, Кишинэу 2009, page 16.

concerning the movement of both people and goods. In the case of sporting relations, it is difficult even to say that they were ever broken off: military clashes in the spring of 1992 did not interrupt the league matches, which were being played at the same time. Although the conflict did prevent the final game of the season between Zimbru Chisinau and Tilișca Tiraspol, which would have been the championship decider, matches with the participation of Transnistrian teams were resumed by the autumn of the same year.

Thus the Transnistrian government's aggressive anti-Moldovan rhetoric is accompanied by a selective approach towards taking definite actions, due to calculations both economic and image-related. The separatists are interested in a compromise with Chisinau first of all in trade (all Transnistrian firms wanting to export their production must be registered in Moldova) and also in sports. Being part of Moldovan sport enables Transnistria to avoid isolation and also derive benefits in the area of propaganda; the successes of competitors who originate from Transnistria (although they formally represent Moldova and are financed from the Moldovan state budget) are presented by the Transnistrian government as proofs of the separatist republic's vitality and international recognition. The government in Tiraspol, like most autocratic regimes, spares no expense on sports, seeing it as a convenient platform for rivalry with Moldova, which is underinvested in this area. The government in Chisinau seems to accept this and does not engage itself in rivalry with the separatists, instead seeing sports as an important tool for counteracting the deepening of the country's division. Obviously, Moldova also derives sporting benefits, strictly speaking, since the best athletes from its breakaway region contribute to the country's strength in international competitions.

Transnistria's predominance in sports

Although the population of this separatist republic is six times smaller than that of Moldova proper, and Transnistrian athletes compete under the flag of Moldova and are members of Moldovan federations, Transnistria is by no means merely an exotic addition to Moldovan sports. On the contrary, Transnistrian sport clubs, which are backed financially by the separatist government and to an even greater extent by local big business, have gained very strong and often dominating influence. Since corruption is widespread in Moldovan sports, Transnistrian sports officials, using informal social and business connections, can usually count on favours from certain Moldovan sport federations.

A major contributor to this is the fact that almost all sports are strongly Russified and Sovietised in Moldova, marked by the predominance of sports officials who came to what was then Soviet Moldavia from other Soviet republics. In effect, not only have the ties between sports federations and rich Transnistrian clubs not weakened but they have even become stronger. Clubs from Moldova proper have protested on numerous occasions against such informal corruption-based connections resulting in discrimination in favour of Transnistrian sports. Allegations of unequal treatment have concerned such sports as boxing, athletics and football. It seems that corruption in Moldovan sports is just a small part of the much more serious phenomenon, namely links between local sports officials and organised crime, which separatist Transnistria, by its nature, remains a den of⁷.

⁷ In the middle of 2011, Moldova was shocked by two incidents which revealed links between sports and crime in this country. The head of Moldova's tennis federation and its only official sponsor was assassinated in June 2011 in Chisinau as a result of mafia wars. In turn, in September 2011, a former world champion in kickboxing shot dead a son-in-law of the former head of the organised crime section, who in turn was involved in the murder of a businessman who was known to have had links with criminal circles. See: Убийство Иона Стратулата – в центре внимания молдавской прессы, 20 September 2011, http://ru.publika.md/link_284751.html, Взрыв, в котором погиб Игорь Цуркан, организовал молдавский преступный авторитет «Господин»?, 7 July 2011, <http://kp.md/online/news/929178>

Transnistria's predominance in sports is most vivid in the case of football, the most popular and also the most financially lucrative sport in Moldova. Sheriff Tiraspol unquestionably dominated in Moldovan football for ten seasons in a row⁸, while in some seasons, as many as half of the clubs in Moldova's top league originated from the small province of Transnistria.

Characteristically, some clubs from Moldova proper have been bought by Transnistrian business representatives and then transferred to Transnistria. The most widely publicised example of this was the top-league football club Constructorul Chisinau, which after being moved to the capital city of Transnistria, in 2002 started playing in Moldova's top league as FC Tiraspol. As a result of financial links with the province's largest company, this team, though officially a competitor to Sheriff Tiraspol, became a source of stand-in players and easily obtained points in league games for the latter club.

Transnistrian clubs also predominate in other, less popular team sports. PGU Tiraspol has been the undisputed leader in Moldova's handball (eleven champion titles over the past thirteen years), and Dinamo Tiraspol is the most prize-winning volleyball club in Moldova. The powers are more evenly balanced in the case of rugby, which is popular on both banks of the Dniester. Interestingly, some Transnistrian rugby clubs participate in Moldovan and some in Ukrainian league games. This is possible owing to the open formula of Ukraine's rugby union championships.

⁸ FC Sheriff lost the championship of Moldova to Dacia Chisinau in the 2010/11 season. So far, Skonto Riga has been the only European club to have won more than ten championships in a row (champion of Latvia for fourteen seasons in 1991-2004). The Transnistrian team has thus beaten such 'nine-time champions' as Ukraine's Dynamo Kyiv (champion in 1993-2001) and Scotland's Celtic Glasgow (1966-1974) and Glasgow Rangers (1989-1997). This Transnistrian club has produced several surprises in the qualifying games of the Champions League by eliminating teams such as Slavia Prague and Dinamo Zagreb. It has managed to qualify two times in a row to the UEFA Europa League, winning against Dynamo Kyiv, for instance.

The Sheriff empire

The dominant position of Transnistria's Sheriff in Moldovan football is just a tiny section of this firm's activity, essential for understanding the nature of the political and business connections functioning in Transnistria. If Transnistria, given the scope and nature of its connections with Moldova proper, could be described as a 'state within a state', then the Sheriff company can be identified – without exaggeration – as another element of this Russian-style *matryoshka* doll, a 'state within a quasi-state', which Transnistria is.

Sheriff was established in 1993 by two relatively unknown former officers of the Transnistrian Interior Ministry (Viktor Gushan and Ilya Kazmaly). However, the company's true unofficial owners have been the main or even the sole beneficiaries of its success. Sheriff is in fact a business base for a significant part of the Transnistrian political elite. Close ties with the holding of Vladimir Smirnov, the elder son of the president of this separatist republic and at the same time the head of the Transnistrian customs service, have been an open secret for many years. The president's younger son, Oleg Smirnov, according to media reports, has also held managerial positions in Sheriff-controlled companies.

Over time, some cracks in the connections between the strengthening holding company and the Transnistrian president emerged. Sheriff created its own political representation, Renewal (Obnovleniye), which is becoming the strongest political party in Transnistria and is taking an unclear albeit generally competitive stance against Igor Smirnov. United Russia, the governing party in the Russian Federation, is an official partner of Renewal, which has been intensively used in the latter's campaign as a means of earning support among the Russophile population of Transnistria (Russia has also featured in the campaign of Renewal candidate, Parliament Speaker Anatoly Kaminsky, in the presidential elections scheduled for December 2011).

At present, Sheriff forms the backbone of Transnistria; this firm owns a chain of filling stations, supermarkets which predominate in the retail market and largest wholesale businesses. It also owns the only private TV station and is a monopoly providing cable TV services to most residents of Transnistria. Additionally, it owns the only mobile communication network, the largest publishing house, an advertising agency, a construction firm, food production plants and a distillery which manufactures Kvint brandies.

Capitalising on the favourable disposition towards it from a significant part of the Transnistrian elite for many years, this firm has monopolised the most profitable trade contracts (the import of petroleum products, spirits and cigarettes), and has been granted special customs and fiscal preferences. Very few experts in this region challenge the widely shared belief that Sheriff also earns fabulous amounts of money on wholly criminal activities, such as smuggling across the 400-km-long poorly protected border between Transnistria and Ukraine, which is not guarded by Moldovan border and customs services. The most frequently used trick is to bring goods from third countries to the Odessa port in Ukraine to import them to Transnistria (owing to which they are exempt from Ukrainian customs duty and sanitary requirements) and then smuggle them back to Ukraine. This explains the conclusion that could be reached on the basis of customs data that poultry consumption in Transnistria is dozens of times higher than elsewhere in the world.

The holding company added sports to its business activity in 1997 by establishing the FC Sheriff Tiraspol sport club. Soon thereafter, the most cutting-edge sporting facility within a radius of hundreds of kilometres, comprising a stadium with 15,500 seats for the audience, eight training pitches, a residential complex for football players, a five-star hotel and a modern football school for children and young people, was built for around US\$200 million in the western outskirts of Tiraspol. Sheriff's stadium was for many years the only stadium in Moldova where Moldovan national team's matches were allowed to be played by UEFA due to the terrible condition the republican stadium in Chisinau was in.

The fact that the Moldovan national team, up to half of which consisted of Transnistrian players, played at the stadium in Transnistria has obviously been used for propaganda purposes by the government of the break-away province, which was boasting about not only the strength of local football but also of the modern infrastructure. At the same time, Transnistrian regime had to accept what it saw as unfavourable conditions set by UEFA, such as displaying the flag and playing the national anthem of Moldova. Although tickets to the matches usually contained elements of Transnistrian symbols, their price had to be stated in Moldovan lei (and not Transnistrian roubles), and the text on them had to be typed in Romanian (Moldovan) using the Latin (and not Cyrillic) alphabet.

The separatist government attempted to demonstrate its independence by refusing representatives of the Moldovan government who wished to see football games from entering Transnistria. The biggest scandal took place in 2003, when the Moldovan president Vladimir Voronin, having ostensibly stressed that Moldova had authority over Transnistria, was refused entry to Transnistria on the following day. The first senior state official from Moldova to have been admitted to Sheriff's stadium was Prime Minister Vlad Filat, who was cheering on Transnistria's Sheriff Tiraspol during the match with Switzerland's FC Basel in 2010. The match provided the opportunity for the Moldovan prime minister to meet with Transnistria's president, Igor Smirnov. A deal on reintroducing the Chisinau-Tiraspol-Odessa railway connection for passengers was struck during this meeting. Within the next few months, Moldova's pro-European government coalition of liberal parties, as part of its policy of encouraging Transnistria to start a dialogue, adopted regulations which facilitated entry to the Ukrainian market for representatives of Transnistrian business circles.

Is Moldova being ‘Transnistrianised’?

The strong position Transnistria (especially Sheriff) has managed to build in Moldovan sports and the social ills this entails may be used as an illustration of the threats the preservation of the *status quo* could bring about, and also of those which could intensify in the case of a possible reintegration of Moldova.

Moldova and the European Union, being its neighbour, are obviously interested in resolving this conflict, which has been deadlocked for twenty years and which has impeded the country’s internal transformation. However, a solution which would guarantee broad autonomy to Transnistria within a united Moldova and thus enable the preservation of the existing political and business model on the eastern bank of the Dniester while at the same time involving Transnistria in the decision-making process across the country as a whole would be a cure worse than the disease. This could lead to a ‘Transnistrianisation’ of the weak Moldovan statehood, analogous to the ‘Transnistrianisation’ of sports which is currently taking place in Moldova.

This threat is not merely hypothetical. Russia, the most important player in this region, wants the conflict to be settled in a way which would make it possible to convert Russian influences on the eastern bank of the Dniester into a lasting strategic control over Moldova as a whole (a significant element of which would serve to thwart any deepening of this country’s integration with the European Union). The Russian concept presented in November 2003 (the so-called Kozak Memorandum), which was rejected by Moldova as a result of clear hints from the EU, as well as similar initiatives presented later, contained a proposal to guarantee a privileged position to Transnistria within a federalised Moldova. Currently, Russia is also lobbying for a similar solution as part of consultations on Transnistria with Germany, initiated by President Dmitri Medvedev and Chancellor Angela Merkel in Meseberg in June 2010. Moscow wants its co-operation with Germany on Transnistria to lead to the establishment of a common EU-Russian decision-making mechanism concern-

ing security issues. At the same time, this co-operation will be used to increase pressure on Chisinau and thus convince the Moldovan government to accept the Russian proposals for resolving the conflict. If Moldova rejects these proposals, as is highly likely, it will be held responsible for sabotaging the peace process and thus for continuation of the conflict. In addition to the obvious adverse impact on Moldova's international image, this situation could also generate internal political costs. In the opinion of most residents of Moldova proper (78%) and Transnistria (56%), the unregulated status of this breakaway territory is not beneficial to either party in this conflict (obviously, each of the parties understands 'conflict resolution' in a different way). According to some respondents, the continuation of the present situation is beneficial only to Transnistria (this is the opinion of 21% of the residents on the eastern and 8% on the western bank of the Dniester). Very few people on both sides of the river believe that the continuation of the present situation is in the interests of Moldova proper⁹.

'Go Russia!'

The schizophrenic nature of Moldovan-Transnistrian relations – the hostility towards Moldova fomented over two decades by the government in Tiraspol on the one hand, and the broad scope of social and economic ties between the two banks of the Dniester on the other (together with the widespread awareness that the *status quo* helps neither side) – is giving rise to ambivalent stances among residents of the two banks of the Dniester regarding their perceptions of one another. Contacts in the area of sports, especially the most popular, football, serve as a good illustration of this.

⁹ This survey was conducted in 2009. However, nothing has happened to indicate that these results are no longer valid. It is more likely that the trend has gained strength. Е. Бобкова, Модели развития Молдовы и Приднестровья в постконфликтный период, http://www.ipp.md/public/files/Proiecte/blacksee/rus/_Bobcova_-_rus.pdf

Since Transnistrian clubs predominate in the Moldovan league and Transnistrian football players are present in Moldova's national team, residents of this breakaway territory accept the existence of the common sporting space. They are proud of the successes of Transnistrian athletes and at the same time tend to look down on the west-bank Moldovans, seeing them as poor relations, a more backward region, unable to achieve any success, whether in the sporting or socio-political field. This critical stance does not necessarily mean, and usually does not indicate, hostility towards Moldova. It is significant that most residents of Transnistria lived in what was formerly Soviet Moldavia – some of them have friends and families on the opposite bank, some study or work there, and some hold Moldovan passports. Although most of the tickets to matches played by the Moldovan national football team in Tiraspol were distributed among residents of Transnistria – mainly young people, who have grown up in this breakaway province – this did not provoke any hostile reactions towards Moldova, even during such symbolic moments as the playing of the Moldovan national anthem (although people who are more interested in politics than sports less readily accept Moldovan state symbols). Since no comprehensive sociological surveys are available, it is worth citing individual examples. A remark made by a resident of Tiraspol on the main Moldovan online football portal seems quite characteristic: "I'm always happy when the Moldovan national team wins (this is the country where I was born and which I am a citizen of), but I wouldn't be able to cheer them on, sing the national anthem and chant 'Mol-do-va' with full devotion, even though I am an active football fan... This is what the Russian national team is for."¹⁰

In fact, despite this lack of hostility, residents of Transnistria are rather moderately attached to Moldova. Their warm feelings, in both sporting and other areas of life, are usually reserved for Russia. Sometimes, during Moldovan league games, fans of Transnistrian clubs would chant 'Russia, Russia', 'Go Russia' or 'Russia-empire', which is their way of teasing fans

¹⁰ <http://www.moldfootball.com/?index=news&news=7288>

of the teams from Moldova proper. When the Under-21 national teams of Moldova and Russia were playing a match in November 2009 at the stadium in Tiraspol, the Moldovan team could not count on receiving support from the spectators, since most of them were either behaving passively or supporting the Russians. One of the explanations for the low interest in this match was that a game played by the national teams of Russia and Slovenia, which attracted incomparably more interest and raised much stronger emotions in Transnistria, was broadcast on TV on the same day.

This attachment which the residents of Transnistria have to Russia is not surprising; both the ethnic factor and the official ideology in this breakaway territory contribute to this ('Together with Russia' is the title of the book written by Transnistria's president, Smirnov, and also the name of the bloc created by his political competitor, the Renewal party, as well as a slogan frequently used during mass events held here). Moscow is also successfully upholding its position in the region. The methods for strengthening Russia's soft power in Transnistria include offering humanitarian and technical aid reaching tens of US millions dollars annually. Each pensioner in Transnistria receives a monthly benefit of US\$15 from Russia; and envelope with money is delivered directly to each of them, skipping the official budget. Moscow also offers support to small business and farmers in Transnistria. In turn, the younger generation is influenced by being handed Russian school textbooks, which not only help Transnistrian children learn to read and write but are also forging their identity within the Russian cultural and political space ("Vladimir Putin, my president/prime minister").

However, the greatest support which Transnistria receives from Russia is natural gas supplies, which have been received free of charge by the separatist government for years. Gazprom has charged this debt for gas, which has already exceeded US\$2.6 billion, to Moldova, arguing that recognises the country's territorial integrity¹¹. Thus, by supporting the

¹¹ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1425267.html>

separatists, Moscow has gained a tool for influencing Chisinau and also potentially Tiraspol (should the Transnistrian government choose to conduct a policy contrary to the Kremlin's strategy).

A positive perception of Russia predominates among residents on both banks of the Dniester. According to polls, more than half of residents of Moldova proper believe that Russia should be the main strategic partner for Chisinau, while the European Union was indicated by one in three respondents¹². A typical opinion is illustrated by the remarks the written by a football fan from Chisinau on an online discussion forum showing the grading of positive feelings for Russian, Transnistrian and strictly Moldovan sports: "I like Russia's Spartak [Moscow], which my father has also supported for years, but when Spartak was playing with Sheriff [Tiraspol], I was cheering Sheriff on at the top of my voice at the stadium! This is a Moldovan team, and nothing can be more important! Though I would Like Dacia [Chisinau] to be the champion of Moldova."¹³

Additionally, pan-Romanian tendencies can be observed among some Moldovans, especially young and better-educated people. To cite one more remark, which illustrates the complexity of the choices Moldovans have to make: "I am a fan of Zimbru [Chisinau]. I hate Sheriff [Tiraspol] as an opponent but I also respect this club for its good structure and playing policy. I don't understand those who are so eager to support [Romania's] Steaua [Bucharest] (I support it myself when it is playing with someone else, but I think that supporting an opponent of a Moldovan teams is a syndrome of dementia) – if you do this, you are not cheering the team on, you become totally Romanian. I'm completely sure that if Moldova's national team was playing a match with Romanians, you would support them. The likes of you are also in Tiraspol, except that they support Russia."¹⁴ These opinions are illustration of a country in transition, which

¹² Barometer of Public Opinion - May 2010, Institute for Public Policy, <http://www.ipp.md/libview.php?l=en&idc=156&id=552>

¹³ <http://www.moldfootball.com/index.php?index=news&news=5339>

¹⁴ <http://www.moldfootball.com/index.php?index=news&news=5339>

Moldova is today. This country has a weak identity, is lost between the East and the West, between Moscow and Bucharest, and, moreover, is split along the Dniester.

■ ■ ■

Although sporting contacts are just a tiny fragment of social relations, they can be used as an example reflecting the complexity of the Transnistrian conflict. The fact that the separatists, who otherwise foment hostility towards the government in Chisinau, have agreed to keep a common all-Moldovan sporting space (and also links in other selected areas) is not a manifestation of their attachment to Olympic spirit, but above all an effect of their political calculations and business interests. This is possible owing to the special backgrounds of the conflict itself, which is different from the vast majority of contemporary territorial disputes originating from ethnic tensions.

The way the common sporting space is functioning in practice is at the same time a case study which reveals the tendency for the Transnistrian model to expand to Moldova proper. This process is augmented by the present, hybrid status of Transnistria, which allows the separatists to benefit from their selective co-operation with Chisinau. However, this threat would become much more serious if Moldova was reintegrated on the basis of the federalisation principle proposed by Russia, which would lead to the entrenchment of the present system in Transnistria and the participation of the Transnistrian *nomenklatura* in the government of Moldova. In which case, residents of Chisinau would begin to associate the Tiraspol-based Sheriff not only with a very good football team but also with a powerful business and political alliance capable of ruthlessly capitalising on the weaknesses of Moldovan statehood.

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Centre for Eastern Studies

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