

**Language as a Causation of the Moldova/Trans-Dniester  
Conflict (1992 – present)**

The secessionist conflict between Moldova and Trans Dniester is most commonly portrayed as a simple ethno-political conflict in which an ethnic-minority, concentrated in one geographical area, are facing discrimination from the state in which they live and consequently have resorted to violence in their struggle to combat perceived inequalities through the pursuit of regional independence or autonomy. However, the rationale behind the struggle for independence was far more complex than a simple ethnic divide. Political, economic and social factors all played key parts in the causation of this conflict.

The issues of separatism and unification were the stated causes of this conflict however they do not explain why this conflict was expressed through violent not peaceful means. In order to determine this, it is necessary to analyse the incentives for violence. Moldovan administrative and political spheres are dominated by Ethnic-Moldovans - largely as a result of the Soviet policy of *korenizatsia* which sought increased indigenization of government structures throughout the republics. Ethnic divisions are also evident on geographic lines, although this is by no means absolute.

The collapse of the USSR necessitated a complete re-evaluation of the existing system of governance. The new Moldovan political system was characterised by poor performance with a blurring of the distinction between regime and state culminating in a lack of legitimacy or trust on the part of the people. Within this context a fragmented and polarised elite monopolised political control resulting in pluralism by default not design. Corruption permeates all state institutions and its existence is universally accepted.

Since independence, the demographic composition of the state has changed dramatically with a vast increase in the youth cohort and a ruralisation of the population. When this trend is considered in conjunction with the economic division of the population along geographic lines it is clear that the biggest internal migrations have been from the developed areas, largely concentrated in the Trans Dniester region, to the agricultural areas which prevail to the west of the Dniester River. As such, the non-uniform population and unemployment shifts have affected the two regions disproportionately.

Between 1991 and 1994 the Moldovan economy was in significant decline with the GDP decreasing by an average of 20 per cent per year and exports constituting only ninety per cent of the value of the country's imports. In 1991 the national income was only at 1985 levels and by 1994 the industrial output was half of 1990. As GDP declined so did per capita income levels. By 1994 Moldova was the poorest country in Europe with GNP per capita of approximately US\$387, just 1.8 per cent of the European Union average. In some regions unemployment is as high as 50 per cent with half of all unemployed persons being under the age of 24. Low pay and a lack of opportunities have led to mass migration and one-third of the workforce has to work abroad, most of them illegally in the EU.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union there was an intense effort to build distinct Moldovan national identity which, when combined with the rapid socio-political change following the collapse of the Soviet order, created an atmosphere of uncertainty. Within this context, non-violent action, such as strikes and rallies, carried out by and on behalf of the Trans Dniester people between 1989 and 1991 posed a serious challenge to the constitutional order of Moldova. These challenges were particularly acute in Moldova where the newly-established political system lacked any history of success on which legitimacy could be founded. The absence of any effective authorities capable of resolving disputes peacefully resulted in the rapid escalation of tensions. Legitimacy was further undermined by splits within the Moldovan regime. These crises of legitimacy mirrored the stages in the escalation of tensions and the use of force. As each crisis occurred, the intensity and frequency of violence increased culminating finally in March 1992 in the outbreak of war.

Language status held a special importance for Moldovans. During Soviet rule, although legally no official language was named, Russian became the effective language of the republic and use of Moldovan declined. Russian was maintained as the language of inter-ethnic communication. This was interpreted by Moldovans to mean that their native language would remain subordinate to Russian as was the case for much of the Soviet era. For the Russian speaking population, the laws indicated that they were to become second class citizens. By this time, the failure of the Moldavian Supreme Soviet to resolve the problem of language had made this issue the line of division around which the issues of separatism and unification would be fought. Language, however, was only a manifestation of the deeper rooted struggles for power and identity with the new Moldovan state.

Brown argues that “the proximate causes of many internal conflicts are the decisions and actions of domestic elites” and that “power struggles” between competing elites “are clearly the most common” form of internal elite driven conflicts (Brown, 2001, pp 17 – 19). Brown highlights twelve Underlying Causes common to countries experiencing violent internal conflict, dividing them into four categories of influences: structural, political, economic/social and cultural/perceptual. Brown further argues that these factors can act as catalysts or proximate causes for the evolution from non-violent internal conflict to war. With regards to the Moldova conflict, much of Brown’s argument is highly applicable. A weak state characterised by exclusionary political and social institutions, economic decline and cultural discrimination provided the context within which legislative changes such as the new language laws, which within a more stable country may not have triggered widespread violence, were sufficient to bring about a national war.

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