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Current Trends in Transdniestria: Breathing New Life into the Settlement Process

Introduction

The Moldova-Transdniestria political settlement process exhibited signs of renewed life during 2016-2017, with significant agreements reached near the end of 2017. Both the German and the Austrian OSCE Chairmanships devoted particular attention to efforts at resolving the conflict between Chişinău and Tiraspol. This led to a number of contacts and meetings at various levels, including successful 5+2 negotiating sessions. At the Hamburg OSCE Ministerial Meeting, a relatively substantive statement was agreed, which reaffirmed the basic principles of the OSCE's approach to resolving the conflict and laid out real and promising commitments for future settlement efforts. Given the extreme difficulty in sustaining any significant contacts, negotiations, or co-operation between the sides since the resumption of the 5+2 negotiating process in 2011, the Hamburg statement and the level and kind of activity since late 2015 might be seen as relatively encouraging.

However, during this same period, deep and bitter political and economic crises beset both Moldova proper and its Transdniestrian region, and posed significant challenges and impediments to further forward movement on the political settlement process. Fallout from the “theft of the century” – the misappropriation of some one billion dollars from three Moldovan banks in November 2014 – continued to spark political battles and economic uncertainty. A relatively stable parliamentary majority and government was established in Chişinău in early 2016, but the domination of the coalition's leading party by the country's richest oligarch led to charges of state capture and growing popular disillusionment with the ostensibly pro-Western coalition. A dubious decision by the constitutional court to restore a directly elected presidency (discussed below) led to a bitter presidential campaign, fought along overtly geopolitical lines, and the victory of Igor Dodon, leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), on an avowedly pro-Russian platform.

Meanwhile the Transdniestrian region sank ever deeper into economic crisis and political turmoil. For much of the period covered by this contribution, Transdniestrian enterprises were allowed to continue to benefit from trade preferences granted by the EU during the run-up to and entry into force of the Moldova-EU Association Agreement. However, at some point in 2017, Transdniestria faced the establishment of full Moldovan control over the region's external trade, including control over the Transdniestrian segment of the border with Ukraine. Ongoing economic difficulties on the left bank

(Transnistria) led to the region's government and population becoming increasingly dependent on financial subsidies from Russia. Business and popular discontent with President Yevgeny Shevchuk produced an ongoing battle between Shevchuk and the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet and led to his defeat in the December 2016 elections by the head of the legislature, Vadim Krasnoselsky.

While Dodon and Krasnoselsky held a highly publicized meeting in Bendery soon after their respective elections and apparently struck up a decent personal relationship, it was not at all clear that they would be able to sufficiently overcome the political and economic turmoil on both sides of the Dniester/Nistru River to induce real progress in the political settlement process. Dodon and his Socialist Party are in opposition to the government of Pavel Filip in Chişinău, which takes a somewhat harder line towards Tiraspol. Meanwhile, economically stressed Transnistrian officials and elites remain extremely suspicious of Chişinău's ongoing attempts to assert real control over the border with Ukraine. The political and economic situations on both banks are extremely contentious, highly fluid, and ultimately disruptive of conflict resolution efforts.

Re-energizing the 5+2 Negotiations

As Germany prepared to assume the OSCE Chairmanship in late 2015, the political settlement process in Moldova, in general, and the 5+2 negotiations, in particular, were stagnant. Despite concerted efforts by the Serbian and Swiss Chairs, marked by the two-year tenure of a senior Serbian diplomat as Special Representative for the Transnistrian Settlement Process, the political crisis that erupted in Moldova following the November 2014 elections and revelation of the massive bank scandal fully absorbed the attention and energy of Chişinău's political elites and effectively impeded engagement with Tiraspol. Frequent changes of government in Chişinău and ongoing political struggles within and outside the government made it difficult, if not impossible, for Chişinău to formulate a consistent approach and to field a fully empowered interlocutor for its 5+2 counterparts.

During 2016, the German Special Representative, Ambassador Cord Meier-Klodt, made at least seven trips to the region. The efforts of the German Chairmanship and the OSCE Mission to Moldova prepared the ground, brokering meetings with representatives of the parties and co-ordinating an April visit of mediators to Chişinău and Tiraspol. The result was the resumption of the 5+2 talks with a two-day negotiating session in Berlin in early June, where Moldovan and Transnistrian representatives agreed to a set of actions in the areas of telecommunications, transportation, and education in

preparation for a conference of the participants in Bavaria in mid-July.¹ At the 5+2 meeting held in Berlin in June and the conference in Bad Reichenhall in July, the German Chairmanship promoted what it called a “results-based” approach to the settlement process, aimed at achieving “specific and attainable goals”.² While the presidential election campaigns on both sides of the Dniester/Nistru diverted considerable attention away from the Transdnestrian settlement process during the latter months of 2016, the German Chairmanship and the OSCE Mission to Moldova successfully maintained contacts between the sides, at the level of both chief negotiators and expert working groups.

Despite the ongoing political difficulties on both banks, the hard work of the Chairmanship and the Mission paid off at the Hamburg Ministerial Council. The Hamburg “Ministerial Statement on the Negotiations on the Transdnestrian Settlement Process in the ‘5+2’ Format” called for continuation of the political settlement negotiations in the existing format along the lines promoted by the Chairmanship during 2016, certainly a welcome result against a contentious geopolitical backdrop.³ However, perhaps even more important was the consensus achieved in the Ministerial Statement in support of the OSCE’s substantive approach to resolution of the Transdnestrian conflict since 1993:

a comprehensive, peaceful and sustainable settlement of the Transdnestrian conflict based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders with a special status for Transdnestria that fully guarantees the human, political, economic and social rights of its population[...]⁴

The explicit endorsement of Moldova’s territorial integrity and a special political status for Transdnestria is especially important, given developments and controversies over conflicts, separatist movements, and entities in the former USSR during the preceding decade, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia. The Hamburg statement was, thus, not just an exhortation to continue the

1 Cf. OSCE, *Renewed Transdnestrian settlement talks provide impetus for real progress in the coming weeks, says OSCE Special Representative*, Berlin, 3 June 2016, at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/244651>; and OSCE, *Bavaria conference reinforces German OSCE Chairmanship’s emphasis on an outcomes-based Transdnestrian settlement process*, Bad Reichenhall, 14 July 2016, at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/253901>. Cf. also *Protocol of the Official Meeting of the Permanent Conference for Political Questions in the Framework of the Negotiating Process on the Transdnestrian Settlement*, 2-3 June 2016, Berlin, at: <http://www.osce.org/moldova/244656>.

2 OSCE, *OSCE Special Representative for Transdnestrian Settlement underscores need for result-oriented dialogue*, Chisinau, 12 October 2016, at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/274101>.

3 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ministerial Council, Hamburg 2016, *Ministerial Statement on the Negotiations on the Transdnestrian Settlement Process in the “5+2” Format*, MC.DOC/2/16, 9 December 2016, at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/288181>.

4 Ibid.

political settlement process, but an explicit affirmation of a common overall goal, a relatively rare and welcome occurrence in recent OSCE conflict resolution efforts.

The Austrian 2017 OSCE Chairmanship picked up seamlessly where Germany had left off. Austria appointed a Special Representative for the conflict, Ambassador Wolf Dietrich Heim, who began consultations with participants in the process immediately. The Chairperson-in-Office, Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz, also made an early visit to the region on 3-4 February, where he indicated that the Moldova-Transdnistria process would be a priority and that Austria would continue the German approach of seeking concrete results from meetings and activities in the 5+2 format.⁵ Nearing the mid-point of its term, the Austrian Chairmanship was aiming to hold an informal conference in Bavaria on confidence-building measures, in particular seeking to promote and document progress on the so-called “package of eight”, a collection of specific, disputed practical issues between Chişinău and Tiraspol on which the sides had committed to seek movement forward in the Berlin Protocol and the Hamburg Ministerial Statement. The Austrians noted that a successful informal conference could set the stage for the next formal session of the 5+2 negotiations.⁶

The “package of eight” and other issues under consideration in expert group contacts, 1+1 meetings, and sessions of the parties with the mediators and observers effectively include the full range of practical social, economic, and administrative questions that have separated and created bad blood between Chişinău and Tiraspol since the earliest days of the conflict, when the Transdnistrian region separated from Moldova and began to build its own institutions of de facto statehood. These practical bones of contention between the two banks include: (1) whether and how diplomas (and other documents) issued by Transdnistrian educational (and other) institutions should be recognized throughout Moldova and beyond; (2) whether vehicle license plates issued by Tiraspol should be recognized internationally; (3) how Transdnistrian telecommunications should be licensed and regulated; (4) how Tiraspol and Chişinău should co-operate to establish and enforce environmental standards for the Dniester/Nistru River basin; (5) how to handle criminal cases brought against officials of one side by institutions from the other side; (6) how to ensure operation of Latin-script schools under the jurisdiction of the Moldovan Ministry of Education in territory under the control of Transdnistrian authorities; (7) how to ensure farmers living on Moldovan territory access to sow and harvest on lands that they own but which are under Transdnistrian control; and (8) how to ensure freedom of movement of people, goods, and services between the two sides (already guaranteed in many joint declarations and agreements between the sides), particularly by

5 Cf. OSCE, *Transdnistrian Settlement Process a priority for Austrian Chairmanship in 2017*, 6 February 2017, at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/297981>.

6 Cf. *ibid.*

reopening the Gura Bîcului Bridge. The OSCE Mission to Moldova continues to work actively to foster contacts and activities by both sides on these specific issues. In May 2017, for example, the Mission brought together lawyers from human rights clubs on both banks to discuss issues relating to the provision and recognition of documents. In March, in collaboration with the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Mission organized a meeting on flood control and climate change in the Dniester/Nistru River basin.

These issues have seemed maddeningly complex and obscure to generations of mediators, who have frequently wondered how Moldovan and Transdnestrian representatives could be so stubborn and obtuse in failing to agree on what seem (at least to outsiders) to be obvious practical solutions. However, the disagreements on these questions do not arise from their substance, but from fear on both sides that even the smallest concession on any of these subordinate issues might weaken their position on the key questions of status and governmental competencies. These fears are augmented by deep distrust of governing elites on both sides, prompted and sustained by a long history of agreements and promises that have subsequently gone unfulfilled. For years, and at the present time, both Chişinău and Tiraspol have basically either refused to engage with one another on the key question of status, or have simply reverted to their maximalist positions: independence for Tiraspol or full application of Moldovan law and authority throughout the Transdnestrian region for Chişinău.

The June 2016 Berlin Protocol, the Hamburg Ministerial Statement, and the activity and statements of the Austrian Chairmanship to date reflect the laudable (and difficult) achievement of reinforcing and reiterating agreement among the mediators and observers on the fundamental approach that has guided OSCE efforts in the Transdnestrian political settlement process since 1992-1993. However, Chişinău and Tiraspol seem little closer than they were a decade ago to accepting and reflecting, in concrete discussions and agreements, the basic principles that Transdnestria remains an integral part of the Republic of Moldova, with a special political status that will guarantee the rights of the population of the region. The belief of recent OSCE Chairmanships that confidence-building measures and agreements on specific issues important to the well-being of the population will lead to engagement and progress on the status question, may well be correct. However, this approach has shown still limited results in practice.

Gagauzia

Another impediment to progress on the status issue has been the unwillingness of the Moldovan side, over much of the history of the political settlement negotiations, to offer more than limited autonomy to the Transdnestrian

trian region, while representatives of Tiraspol have generally pushed for some sort of loose confederation, if not outright independence for their region. Even if Transdnestrian negotiators were willing to entertain an offer of broad autonomy, the record of this sort of political arrangement within the Republic of Moldova itself, not to mention recent broader international practice, presents additional arguments against a settlement of this kind. The Law on the Special Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri), adopted in December 1994, afforded special limited political, economic, and cultural rights to the Turkic Orthodox population concentrated in several areas in the southern part of the country.⁷ Moldovan and Gagauz negotiators were relieved and proud when the agreement was reached but, unfortunately, the autonomy arrangement has never worked well. Gagauz leaders complained that Moldovan political elites in Chişinău insisted on obedience to Moldovan legislation as if Gagauzia were no different from any other Moldovan province. Issues such as language rights, usage, and instruction, and representation in national institutions were chronic sore points, and continuing difficulties over these questions cast offers of autonomy to Tiraspol in an extremely bad light.

Historically, the OSCE Mission to Moldova has attempted to assist Chişinău and Comrat in making their autonomy agreement work better, both for its own sake and for the positive effect this might have on the Transdnestrian conflict resolution process. In recent years, the Mission has stressed efforts to improve Moldova's performance with respect to national minority rights, and has facilitated the involvement of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) in Moldova, both to improve the status of national and ethnic minorities in general and to assist with issues of particular concern in Gagauzia. Most recently, the Office of the HCNM helped the Moldovan Bureau of Inter-ethnic Relations develop and adopt a ten year Strategy for Consolidation of Inter-ethnic Relations, based on *The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, which the HCNM had published in 2012.⁸

Continuing discontent in Gagauzia over minority, language, and economic issues has made the region susceptible to external influence and meddling. The region is heavily Russian-speaking, and Moscow has attempted to use pro-Russian sentiment in the region to counter Moldova's movement towards the West, and the EU in particular. In the context of Moldova's signing and ratification of an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), Gagauz authorities held a highly publicized referendum in February 2014 in which over ninety percent of those voting favoured closer ties with the CIS

7 Cf. The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, *The Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri)*, at: <http://www.regione.taa.it/biblioteca/minoranze/gagauziaen.pdf>.

8 Cf. OSCE, *Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities pledges to continue supporting integration in Moldova*, 23 February 2017, at: <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/301441>.

than with the EU.⁹ In March 2015, Irina Vlah, who defected from the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) to the PSRM, and was widely considered sympathetic to Moscow, won election as *Bashkan* (Governor) of Gagauzia. The November-December 2016 legislative elections in Gagauzia, held under somewhat improved conditions, followed the same pattern, if less pronounced, but the results were overshadowed by the Moldovan and Transdniestrian presidential elections.

Moldova's Constitutional and Political Crises

The Transdniestrian political settlement process was also impeded and overshadowed by a continuing political crisis in Moldova proper. Political realignments; infighting over corruption, and responsibility for the 2014 “theft of the century”, in particular; and popular protests over the country’s geopolitical orientation have created instability and several changes of government in Chişinău. The Filip government, sworn in late one evening in January 2016 and dominated by Vladimir Plahotniuc’s Democratic Party (PDM), managed to survive massive protests led by activists from both the left and right. Despite the presence of protest camps in front of both the government and parliament buildings for much of the winter, the Filip government succeeded in holding onto power and engaging in some key rebuilding tasks, such as reaching a new agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), managing the fallout of the banking scandal, and dealing with the requirements of the relationship with the EU.

One of the major structural political issues facing the country was the election of a successor to President Nicolae Timofti, whose term expired in late 2015. According to constitutional amendments adopted in July 2000, the president was to be elected by a supermajority of three-fifths in the parliament. No candidate or party could command such a majority in the Moldovan parliament in early 2016, and the constitutional court stepped in, ruling in March 2016 that the 2000 amendment was invalid and reinstating election of the president by popular vote, the method prescribed in the Moldovan constitution’s original redaction. While the constitutional court’s ruling reflected what all public opinion polls seemed to show was the popular will, the action bypassed existing legal and political processes, solving a practical problem, but not necessarily strengthening the legitimacy of the country’s political institutions or the rule of law.

The actual elections in October-November 2016 reflected the deep geopolitical division of the country into almost equal size pro-Western and pro-Russian camps. Socialist Party leader, Igor Dodon, ran on an explicitly anti-

9 Cf. *Gagauzia Voters Reject Closer EU Ties For Moldova*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 February 2014, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-gagauz-referendum-counting/25251251.html>.

EU, pro-Russia and pro-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) platform. In the second round on 13 November, Dodon garnered 52 per cent of the vote, against 48 per cent for Maia Sandu, candidate of the pro-EU, pro-West Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS). While Dodon has not, since his inauguration, advocated breaking the relationship with the EU, his first foreign visit was to Moscow, and he has made clear his desire to reorient the country's geopolitical affiliations. However, the powers of the president of Moldova are limited, and Dodon's Socialist Party is a minority in opposition in parliament, which has the real power to alter Moldova's foreign policy course. Parliamentary elections are due in Moldova by late 2018, so in the coming months – irrespective of the fate of the current government – the country is likely to remain bitterly divided politically, with all that implies for progress on any major issue, including the Transdnistrian dossier.

The Political-Economic Crisis on the Left Bank

Meanwhile, Transdnistria may be even more troubled than Moldova proper. The left bank's economy has never really recovered from the effects of the 2008-2009 global economic crisis, along with periodic sanctions and other restrictive actions taken in ongoing disputes between Chişinău and Tiraspol. Over recent years, government revenues have fallen short of expenditures by as much as 30 to 40 per cent. The region's economy, and the payment of benefits to pensioners, in particular, has been consistently supported by cash subsidies from the Russian Federation. These cash infusions are in addition to, and not instead of, the traditional subsidies afforded by Moscow to Transdnistria, such as the de facto provision of natural gas for free, an important prop over the years for many left bank enterprises. Indeed, for a considerable time, the authorities in Tiraspol were able to collect payment from the population for natural gas and use these payments against the government budget, rather than paying their bills with the suppliers, Moldovagaz and Gazprom.

Prospects for Transdnistria's economic revival are complicated by both the implementation of Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU and fallout from Ukraine's conflict with Russia over Crimea and Donbas. Since the confrontation and crisis in March 2006, which led to the five-year suspension of the 5+2 talks, most Transdnistrian enterprises have registered with the Moldovan economic authorities, while not fully integrating into the Moldovan legal and economic system, as part of an arrangement that allows them to conduct foreign trade. During negotiation and implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), a key part of the Association Agreement, the EU afforded Transdnistrian enterprises autonomous trade preferences, which gave these businesses the benefits of the DCFTA without forcing them to integrate fully into Moldova structures. These prefer-

ences were to end on 1 January 2016, with full implementation of the DCFTA, which Transdnistrians resisted, fearing loss of revenue and perhaps even control of their firms once fully subject to Moldovan law. The process of transition was subject to negotiation during 2016-2017, with some encouraging signs but the ultimate outcome is still unclear.

Meanwhile, fallout from the conflict between Ukraine and Russia also threatened significant consequences for Transdnistria during 2017. Despite the often bitter exchanges and bad relations between Moscow and Kyiv after the seizure of Crimea and outbreak of war in the Donbas, the effects of this conflict on the Transdnistrian political settlement process have been surprisingly few and limited in scope. Perhaps this was also due, in part, to the political and economic crisis in Moldova itself and the resultant stagnation in the 5+2 process. However, in early 2017, Ukraine and Moldova reached agreement on a measure long coveted by Chişinău: the establishment of joint Moldovan-Ukrainian customs posts on the Transdnistrian segment of Ukraine's border with Moldova. The first joint post was due to be established at the major crossing point of Cuciurgan, on the main highway to Odessa, sometime in May 2017. Should such posts actually be established and work effectively, Transdnistrian exports and imports would be subject to full inspection and control by Moldovan authorities for the first time, a development that Tiraspol has vigorously resisted since gaining *de facto* independence in 1992. Such measures, depending on how they are implemented, could have a disruptive effect on the 5+2 process, as similar measures did in 2006.

Meanwhile, within Transdnistria, political battles grew in intensity after the election of independent presidential candidate, Yevgeny Shevchuk, in 2011. Increasingly at odds with a Supreme Soviet, dominated by the region's commercial giant, the Sheriff conglomerate, Shevchuk also lost popular support due to the mounting economic difficulties in the region and resultant hardship faced by the population. Although Moscow remained ostensibly neutral during the 2016 election contest, there were fairly clear signs that the Kremlin was more favourably disposed to the challenger, the head of the Transdnistrian legislature, Vadim Krasnoselsky. Shevchuk proved so unpopular with both the Transdnistrian population at large and with business and political elites that he garnered only 28 per cent of the vote, while Krasnoselsky polled over 62 per cent.

Moscow encountered an unexpected and pleasant dilemma with the almost simultaneous victories of the pro-Russian candidates on both banks in Dodon and Krasnoselsky. The emergence of a head of state in Chişinău who openly proclaims his affinity for Russia and asserts that the Transdnistrian conflict could be resolved in one or two years, provided the Kremlin an incentive for sustaining its position that Transdnistria is a part of Moldova, rather than treating the left bank as it did Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. Yet the exacerbation of the political situation in Moldova and the economic condition of the left bank, combined with the loss of easy, direct ac-

cess after the Ukraine crisis all raise fears that the situation on both banks of the Dniester/Nistru could change quickly and abruptly.¹⁰

Dodon and Krasnoselsky seemed to establish a decent relationship, as the two newly elected leaders met at the historic fortress in Bendery/Tighina in early January 2017. However, relatively little has come of this initial encounter in concrete terms, as important figures and groups in both Chişinău and Tiraspol remain wary of the other side and reluctant to make bold or far-reaching moves. In particular, a number of officials associated with the Transdnestrian portfolio in the Filip government remain resistant to offering significant concessions on many of the practical issues in the “package of eight”.

The issue of the Russian troop presence in Moldova is also likely to continue to fester and to energize more right wing and nationalist opposition on the right bank to settling the Transdnestrian conflict with any significant concessions to either Tiraspol or Moscow. Russia has been more active recently in exercising both its peacekeeping forces and troops from the Operative Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), activities which quickly provoked strong protests from Chişinău. Moscow’s position that peacekeeping forces need to remain present until a full political settlement is reached remains unchanged. Meanwhile, Dodon, as leader of the PSRM and a candidate for the presidency, criticized the presence of NATO troops in the country for a joint exercise with Moldovan forces in the spring of 2016.¹¹ More recently, as President, Dodon criticized the participation of Moldovan troops in a NATO exercise in Romania as “inappropriate.”¹² The deep geopolitical divide in Europe in mid-2017 seems likely to keep frozen the issue of the withdrawal of Russian military forces from Moldova, and their effect on prospects for a Transdnestrian settlement.

Moldova as a Captured State?

Meanwhile, Moldova’s own political prospects complicate and impede hopes for progress on the Transdnestrian front. Corruption remains a contentious issue on the right bank, particularly the increasing domination of Moldovan politics and government by the country’s richest man and de facto leader of the PDM, Vladimir Plahotniuc. A number of other pro-Western parties and elements of Moldovan civil society have been extremely critical of European

10 Cf. Sergey Markedonov, *Russia faces another Transnistrian dilemma*, Russia Direct, 16 December 2016, at: <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/russia-faces-another-transnistrian-dilemma>.

11 Cf. *U.S. Troops In Moldova For Joint Military Exercises*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 May 2016, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-us-troops-joint-military-exercises/27712788.html>.

12 Ana Maria Touma, *Moldova’s President Bars Military from NATO Exercise*, Balkan Insight, 27 April 2017, at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/moldova-s-president-bars-military-from-nato-exercise-04-27-2017>.

and North American states that have chosen to work with what they characterize as an oligarch or Plahotniuc-dominated government. Such critics point especially to judicial and law enforcement institutions in Moldova as lacking independence and constituting, in essence, an obstacle to real reform. Suspicions have often been voiced in the press in both Moldova and abroad that Plahotniuc and Dodon, while ostensibly opponents, are effectively collaborating in ensuring the continuing dominance of their political parties and preventing real political and economic reform in Moldova. Such suspicions have recently received added fuel in the form of collaboration between the PDM and PSRM in endorsing a proposed reform that would provide for the election of at least half of Moldova's legislators in single mandate districts, a change which critics charge will only make the system even more vulnerable to corruption.

Moldova itself faces a rocky political future, in which both the structure and the orientation of the political system could undergo significant and unpredictable change. This is likely to make it exceptionally difficult for even the external actors with the best intentions to promote significant, positive change in the country. Although this is not inevitable, the ongoing political disarray in Moldova is also likely to frustrate many of the efforts of the mediators and observers in the Transdniestrian political settlement process. The fact that the mediators and observers continue to agree on a common broad conceptual approach and vision for a solution – a unified Moldova with a special political status for its Transdniestrian region – remains a beacon of light in an otherwise cloudy landscape.

Addendum

Short before this article was scheduled to go to press, Moldovan and Transdniestrian negotiators made a breakthrough in the political settlement talks, reaching agreement to open the Gura-Bîcului Bridge in mid-November 2017. Agreements were also signed in late November on operation of the Latin script schools, access for Moldovan farmers to farmlands in the Transdniestrian Dubăsari region, recognition of diplomas issued in Transdniestria, and licensing of Transdniestrian telecommunications. These accomplishments were recognized in a successful 5+2 meeting on November 27-28, at which the participants pledged to continue the current approach and looked forward to further progress in 2018. The Vienna OSCE Ministerial Council adopted a statement on Moldova-Transdniestria reaffirming the Hamburg consensus.¹³ These significant achievements were the result of years of a patient, consist-

13 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ministerial Council, Vienna 2017, *Ministerial Statement on the Negotiations on the Transdniestrian Settlement Process in the "5+2" Format*, MC.DOC/1/17, 8 December 2017, p. 1, available at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/361586>.

ent OSCE approach, but elevated hopes remain tempered by continuing political discord and elections looming in Moldova in 2018.