

A Maze of Muck and Murder

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David Greenslade currently teaches at UWIC (University of Wales Institute, Cardiff). He recently returned from teaching in Oman. His book *Ibtisam Al Habsi and her Zanzibar Court*, a biography of an Arab traveller poet, will be published in Cairo next year.

In April 2009 when protesters in Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, surrounded government buildings in protest against fraudulent elections, they were sprayed with human sewage. The literal, non-ironic shit came from inside the parliament building.

Moldova is classified as the poorest country in Europe, poorer even than Albania. Its politics are controlled by an unreconstructed Communist Party, and apart from food and drink the country still imports almost everything it needs either from Russia or from a schismatic part of its own country called Transnistria, controlled by Russia. Young people in Moldova hate Russia; they hate the communists and hate their poverty. They plead for reunification with Europe via their immediate neighbour Romania.

Historically, after many years of changing hands between regional princes of varying allegiance and nationality, at times Russian, at times Romanian, the Soviets took the territory by force in 1940, along with the Baltic States, implementing secret protocols of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 1939. In 1941, the Romanians, who sided with the Axis Powers, returned. During the post-War Yalta carve-up of east European territories, Churchill and Roosevelt conceded Moldova to the Soviets. The Soviets warped the region into a convenient food basket, while moulding Transnistria into a closely controlled, cordoned and tyrannical industrial hub. As Transnistria alone industrialised, its local population was also heavily Sovietised. In 1991, Moldova became an independent republic. Today the resentful and abandoned victims of Russification in Transnistria want the region to secede from the country they are stranded in.

The historical language of Moldova is Romanian, and thousands

of Moldovan young people attend university in Romania every year. Currently there are around one million Moldovans either with or applying for Romanian passports. But Russia still has military forces illegally occupying the criminally exotic Transnistrian strip, a splinter of land along a long, narrow river valley bordering Ukraine. Those under occupation here are denied Moldovan passports, but aren't exactly clamouring for the secessionist passports forced on them by a malignant, ethnically elite civil service. They are residents of what is called a "Frozen Conflict Zone", a split pseudo-state in good old-fashioned Iron Curtain style.

When Moldovan students in Romania tried returning to their own country at the time of the Easter 2009 protests, instead of allowing them back in, Ministry of National Security agents and police closed the borders and physically beat them back. Broadcasting and internet services were blocked. Students attempted resistance via Twitter. "Romanian forces" were promptly blamed for encouraging unrest while Russian special forces worked hard to suppress news of it from spreading within their splintered enclave.

At the time of the effluent spritzer, Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin — with his second term about to end — had just positioned himself to become Speaker of Parliament. Voronin seemed to be modelling himself on Vladimir Putin and his seamless move from serving as Russian President to becoming Russian Prime Minister.

Transnistria is not a quaint Douglas Fairbanks Ruritania. If anything, it is even more opaque, lawless and brutal than the Moldovan state it is legally part of. Following post-Soviet independence, Transnistrian border-zone towns and villages witnessed grotesque political violence between well-supplied Russian troops and poorly-armed Moldovan police. Today this



badly-devised and culturally-enslaved political entity joins the orphan archipelago of South Ossetia in Georgia and Nagorno-Krabakh (another post-Soviet stateless nation jammed between Armenia and Azerbaijan).

Industrialised Transnistria is the source of all kinds of lethal black market hardware from handguns and grenades to missiles and grenade launchers. Fuel, drugs and poisonous, environmental waste are other illicit commodities. Transnistria is also a notorious centre for the kidnap, smuggling and sexual enslavement of women. Within Transnistria voting in Moldova's elections is illegal (an edict which is itself unlawful). Political prisoners have been imprisoned, tortured and sentenced to death, until some releases were secured thanks to international intervention.

Young Moldovans want none of this. They naturally gravitate to universities in the European Union, mainly Romania and Italy. Handheld camera and mobile phone footage smuggled to Bucharest and broadcast on the internet showed Moldovan youngsters waving EU flags while being attacked by security forces and police.

The Republic of Moldova claims many of the same historic figures as Romania. Stephen the Great, a sixteenth-century monarch, still revered for the (UNESCO-protected) monasteries that he built, is regarded as a monumental ruler of both states. Moldovans claim the nineteenth-century Byronic Mihai Eminescu as their national poet — he is also the national poet of Romania. In Romania the poet's face appears on national currency while in Transnistria the five ruble paper note (a pseudo-currency) features the Kvint spirits distillery. This distillery is part of the Sherrif corporate empire, once owned by former KGB officer Igor Smirnov. At one time Smirnov, a Russian citizen, was both president of Transnistria and owner of Sheriff. But these ownerships are now dispersed among relatives and associates, while Smirnov has remained in full political control since 1990. Sheriff more or less dominates the entire economy of Transnistria owning almost everything from power stations to football teams, car dealerships, bakeries and corner shops. One more shared literary jewel is Ion Creanga, a writer often compared with Mark Twain, born in Romania but revered, studied and widely read in Moldova.

Transnistria, however, appears to be a particularly post-Soviet unlicensed wild dog that nobody wants to claim; and like UN observers, neither Moldovan nor Romanian heroes are welcome

there. Homosexuals, Jews, Baptists, Methodists, Jehovah Witnesses and journalists are also on the black list. There are more. Try and educate your children through the Latin alphabet in Transnistria as in the rest of Moldova (and Romania) and parents can lose their jobs. Schools that do not follow the secessionist syllabus are closed, teachers arrested. The Cyrillic alphabet is compulsory, and the curriculum from primary to university is a pre-Glasnost reminder of central rule, central planning and all things murky, secret, unaccountable, oppressive and not exactly jolly. Farmers have to pay a road bribe to carry their few goods from one district to the next.

Ukraine, which has its own internal secessionist problems fomented by Russia, such as in Crimea, is reluctant to incorporate this disastrously separate region. And while Russia may want to, there is no contiguous border. The territory is so impoverished and corrupt, it has been described as Europe's black hole. The spraying of human slurry just begs the obvious conceit of an anus. The truth is that it simply suits some people to have a territory lawless enough for large-scale smuggling – especially weapons smuggling – from interior regions, via the Ukraine down towards Odessa on the Black Sea and beyond. Weapons from the T Zone have appeared in Balkan and in African conflicts. Criminal instability in Transnistria keeps the rest of Moldova so unsettled that it cannot produce coherent political opposition. If young Moldovans don't like it, the authorities spray them with toilet discharge.

Another reason why Transnistria has to remain a frozen conflict zone is that the main manufacturing monopolies are controlled by oligarchs who spend their fortunes further east. These oligarchs have stuffed Transnistria with puppet councillors so corrupt they make their Moldovan counterparts look like folk dancers.

It's well documented how during the 1990s Russian military agitators armed ethnic bands in eastern Moldova in order to routinely assassinate troublesome dissidents. The pipe bomb is a particular Transnistrian favourite both among criminal gangs and shadowy political militia. Random and bloody detonations at churches, synagogues, town meetings and on public transport have been recorded by Amnesty International, Freedom House, the UN Refugee Agency, Human Rights Watch, the European Court of Human Rights and rogue, individual blogs.

Enter a third Vladimir, Vladimir Antyufeyev. This Vladimir is banned from travel in the EU, indicted in Latvia for attempting a coup and within Moldova for freeing assassins charged with

murder. Vladimir Antyufeyev is Minister of State Security in Transnistria. He is from Novosibirsk, Siberia and has pledged to keep Transnistria for Russia.

A few hundred students armed with mobile phones and Twitter passwords aren't likely to dislodge this lot.

Vladimir Antyufeyev was placed in Moldova by Viktor Alksnis, also known in Russian as "the Black Colonel", a term normally used to refer to members of the Greek junta of 1967-79. When Russia saw how yet another former puppet state would gravitate towards the West, it intervened. Moldova is the westernmost European territory of the former Soviet Union, and Alksnis was a particularly reactionary opponent of the break up of empire. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall he indulged in dirty deeds throughout the region and has been declared (like his stooge Antyufeyev) *persona non grata* in Latvia, Lithuania and in Ukraine. Back home he is among the founders of Soyuz and OMON, both groups well-known for atrocious political violence. One of his political promises is free vodka on every street corner. Alksnis has found a home in Transnistria where his gangs eat away at the Moldovan body politic.

Transnistria just gets nastier the closer you look. Though it's not easy to look with tear gas and excrement in your eyes, Moldovan thugs merely spray human slurry from the presidential palace. Transnistrian security forces on the other hand routinely perpetrate extortion and torture on farmers, school teachers, priests, shopkeepers, editors and members of the political opposition.

Why is any of this of interest to anyone in the European Union? Moldova and the Bukovina region of modern Ukraine were long considered culturally and linguistically part of Romania. The poet Paul Celan is described as being of Romanian origin, but his Bukovina birthplace Cernautz is today located in western Ukraine. Celan's Jewish parents were both killed in Transnistrian death camps during the Axis period; but Moldova doesn't claim Celan as one of its own, unlike Mihai Eminescu. Neither does it claim Dan Pagis, another Romanian poet who survived the concentration camps. But Romania is in the European Union, and many Moldovan citizens are also Romanian passport holders just as Celan's and Pagis' exterminated families were. By today a quarter of Moldova's total population of four million has documented Romanian nationality.

In April 2009 when Moldovans tried sending text messages

against elections that were manifestly corrupt, they were sprayed with the muck and toilet paper of their own politicians. I was in Bukovina in Romania at the time of this disgusting event, visiting the homes of Mihai Eminescu and Ion Creanga, national poet and memoirist of both Moldova and of Romania. A pilgrimage to sites associated with Paul Celan and Dan Pagis would be more difficult. The “black milk” of Celan’s harrowing “Death Fugue” is still being drunk by the citizens of Moldova, forced onto them by a government very much in the criminal Nazi, Soviet, Mafia totalitarian mould. While Romantic era freedom writer Mihai Eminescu describes his homeland as “Sweet Romania” and Ion Creanga’s *Memories of Boyhood* is formative literature of both states – the dogma of terror perpetuated in Transnistria is closer to the paradox of Celan and Pagis.

Since this essay was written, Moldova has secured a very fragile coalition government, calling itself the Alliance for European Integration. On 25 September, 2009, this coalition approved a programme called European Integration: Freedom, Democracy, Prosperity. While the Communist Party expects the Alliance to collapse within one year and Vladimir Voronin return to power, signs are that the coalition will hold. The situation in Transnistria, meanwhile, remains chronically dysfunctional with cases of the deceased and those in clinical mental hospitals registered as having voting rights. Russia shows no signs of removing its troops.
