Making Istanbul a reality: Moldova, Russia, and withdrawal from Transdniestria

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Introduction
In late November 2001, the Operative Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) in the Transdniestrian region of the Republic of Moldova loaded onto waiting rail cars the last few dozen units of its heavy military equipment subject to the limitations set by the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE). This trainload of armaments, largely heavy artillery, was inspected and counted by local military officials and representatives of the OSCE Mission to Moldova. Duly certified, the train was then dispatched from the railhead at Stariy Khutor to Moscow, thereby meeting with more than a month to spare the first of two deadlines set for withdrawal of Russian arms and troops from the Transdniestrian region by the November 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit. Successful achievement of the first benchmark of this important OSCE political commitment was duly noted and welcomed by the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Bucharest on December 3-4, 2001.2

The successful withdrawal or elimination of the OGRF's CFE Treaty-Limited Equipment (TLE) from Transdniestria, the left-bank separatist region in Moldova, is a significant step toward post-conflict demilitarization and stabilization of the region, and an important political achievement for all of the parties involved. Moldova made a major advance toward its ultimate goal of strengthening its independence and sovereignty. Russia made progress toward building normal relations with this small neighboring former republic of the Soviet Union. Local Transdniestrian authorities demonstrated their willingness, albeit grudging at times, to observe general European norms and agreements. Ukraine's cooperation assisted in enhancing stability along its southwestern border. Last but not least, the OSCE demonstrated expanded institutional capabilities for arms control, demilitarization, and post-conflict rehabilitation. OSCE credibility was also bolstered by the successful fulfillment of the first elements of an ambitious, difficult set of political commitments.

The 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit decisions on Moldova, in particular on the withdrawal of Russian troops and arms, culminated a political and diplomatic process of at least seven years duration by the time they were adopted. The Istanbul decisions did not constitute new substantive commitments on the part of the Russian Federation and other OSCE participating states. Instead, with respect to the Russian withdrawal from Moldova, the Istanbul Summit adopted formal deadlines and provided for the expansion of OSCE operational authority in order to

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2 Decision No. 2, Statements by the Ministerial Council (MC(9).DEC/2), section (2), available at www.osce.org/docs.
facilitate implementation of long-stalemated commitments. \(^3\) To understand the process of implementing the OSCE Istanbul decisions on Moldova, one must therefore first comprehend these decisions as the result of a decade of developments in Moldovan-Russian relations and political processes among OSCE participating states during and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

**History of the conflict**

The push for withdrawal of Russian military forces from the region along the Dniestr River arose as part of the process of dissolution of the Soviet Union and demands by the various peoples in the Soviet Union to exercise their right to self-determination. The Republic of Moldova proclaimed its independence on 27 August 1991, shortly after the failure of the abortive coup in Moscow against Gorbachev. However, the push for independence in Moldova emerged earlier, during the period of perestroika in the mid- and late 1980s. Much of the present-day Republic of Moldova, the territory of Bessarabia located between the Prut and Dniestr Rivers, was first joined to the Russian Empire in 1812. After the First World War and the Russian Revolution, the territory joined Romania in 1918. As provided under the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the Soviet Union seized Bessarabia from Romania in 1940, lost it from 1941-1944 to Romanian forces fighting with the Axis, and regained it, making the territory a part of the Moldavian SSR in 1944. As in the Baltic states, the loosening of control from Moscow with the advent of perestroika produced calls for reversal of the results of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, specifically separation from the Soviet Union and restoration of elements of the Romanian language and culture suppressed for half a century.

Even before Moldova achieved independence, the resurgence and growing power of the ethnic Moldovan/Romanian majority of the population provoked resistance from the pro-Moscow, primarily Slavic minority population, especially groups situated on the left or east bank of the Dniester River, in so-called Transdniestr (Pridnestrovie in Russian, Transnistria in Romanian/Moldovan). The budding Transdniestrian resistance received considerable support in the late 1980s from some senior officials in Moscow who desired to counter pro-independence and pro-Romanian elements gaining ascendency in Chisinau. At first seeking little more than a separate free economic zone within the Moldovan Republic, local Transdniestrian leaders increasingly saw their positions and livelihood threatened by the Moldovan nationalist movement, especially by the terms of the 31 August 1989 language law, which proclaimed Moldovan (Romanian) in Latin script as the state language, and required all employees of state enterprises to pass a written examination in that language by 1994. Transdniestrian representatives walked out of the last Moldavian SSR Supreme Soviet in 1990, and on 2 September 1990 proclaimed their own independent state, the Pridniestrovskata Moldavskata Respublika (PMR — Transdniestrian Moldovan

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\(^3\) Istanbul Summit Declaration, SUM/DOC/2/99, 19 November 1999, paragraph 19.

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