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MOLDOVA AND RUSSIA

What is the Background of Moscow's Meddling?

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Moldova: A Neglected Conflict?

The political crisis in the tiny country of Moldova, where the Communist Party of Soviet provenance was elected to power in April by a questioned balloting, continues. Its latest challenge was due on May 12: the Moldovan parliament faced the task of electing its speaker. The Moldovan Communists nominated Vladimir Voronin, party boss and holder of a presidency with an unresolved succession, for the post.

Moldova briefly gained global attention when street protests erupted in the aftermath of the April vote. But Moldova has only some four million citizens, and the events there were little understood outside Eastern Europe. Paradoxically, obscure Moldova and Pakistan, with a total population 40 times greater, provide warnings signs of equal global importance. They are threatened by different forms of totalitarianism: Moldova by the Putinist revival of Russian

imperialism, Pakistan by radical Islam as represented by the Taliban. Neo-Sovietism and Islamic extremism appear counterposed, in cases such as that of Chechnya. Yet as in the history of Hitlerian and Stalinist ideological networks prior to the German dictator's invasion of Russia in 1941, apparently irreconcilable differences and passionately hateful rhetoric have been paralleled by secret collaboration. The outcome of German-Soviet cooperation before 1941 will be discussed at some length here, for it defines Moldovan reality more than any other aspect of the past.

Both Moldova and Pakistan have been neglected alarmingly in major American media, which is hypnotized by president Barack Obama and his efforts to cope with the economic crisis that became serious last year. It has been stated openly and repetitively that America is now too preoccupied with its financial and credit problems to help curb the new Russian colonialism – which is indeed colonialism in that it is based in the manipulation of ethnic Russian and other Slav colonists in certain countries it has dominated – or to respond appropriately to the Islamist advance in South Asia. The Obama administration aspires to redefine U.S.-Russian relations in a benevolent direction, trusting in the benign goals of the Kremlin, at the same time as the new commander-in-chief of the U.S. seems paralyzed by the specter of Taliban expansionism. At both ends of the new Eurasian conflict zone, insecure democracies face aggressive pressure.

Moldavian chief Voronin aggravated tensions in the trans-Danubian lands when, earlier in May, his regime followed the last unreconstructed Communist dictatorship in Europe, the Belarus of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, in boycotting the Prague summit of the newborn “Eastern Partnership.” The European Union (EU) had also invited Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to the Czech capital. The Moldovan authorities clearly wish to avoid perceptions of alignment with Ukraine and Georgia, the main current targets of disfavor by Putin's cénacle. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov effectively accused the organizers of the Prague summit of organizing a new anti-Muscovite alliance, thus reviving the oldest charge in the annals of European diplomacy. Moldova and Voronin are temporarily the main pawns of Putin, who numerous informed observers suspect of planning a second attack on the independence of

Georgia before autumn of this year. But what is the background of Moldova's ambiguous existence, its service in dangerous international intrigues, and its risky internal state?

The History of Russia – Moldova Relations

The Ukrainian and Romanian ethnicities have been objects of Russian territorial ambitions for centuries. The Romanian-speaking area now known as Moldova, but long called Bessarabia, was shorn away in the early 19th century, by the tsarist power, from the Ottoman system of possessions and dependencies, which had dominated it for three hundred years.

The Russian imperial ruling class in Bessarabia distinguished itself by its primitivism and brutality, exemplified by the terrible reputation of the Bessarabian reactionaries in stirring violence against the local Jewish population, at the beginning of the 20th century. The infamous anti-Jewish pogrom of 1903, in the Moldovan capital of Chisinau (Kishinev), was blamed on Russo-Bessarabian incitement. Bessarabia has always been ethnically diverse, but Russian Jew-hatred in the province had been exceptionally violent, for various sociological reasons.

Following the collapse of tsarist rule, Bessarabia briefly enjoyed independence as a Moldavian Democratic Republic, before its unification with Romania in 1918. Nevertheless, the part of Bessarabia east of the Dniester River was proclaimed a Moldavian Soviet entity (under various titles), and shown as a separate component of the Soviet Union on maps in the 1920s-30s. According to Walter Kolarz, in his authoritative *Russia and Her Colonies* (Praeger, New York, 1952), the creation of early Soviet Moldavia was a reprisal for Romanian absorption of most of Bessarabia. While Soviet Russia was seemingly reconciled to loss of the empire's former Baltic and Finnish possessions, the persistence of voracious Russian interest in the Romanian culture area was openly advertised.

In 1939 the Stalin-Hitler pact was announced. The brusque turn by each of the dictators – Hitler temporarily abandoning his anti-Bolshevism and Stalin his antifascism – benefited the pair in differing ways. Stalin admired and deferred to Hitler, who enjoyed major Russian economic and even clandestine political support in the Nazi assault on the West – the Soviet-

controlled Communist parties in France and Britain contributed significantly to “anti-war” opinion in both countries. The sabotage of French Communist unions helped drive the country to surrender to the Germans, while in Britain leading Communist agitators and propagandists were interned by the authorities as subversives.

The Soviets suffered more negative political consequences from the pact than did Hitler; no Nazis or their sympathizers broke with Berlin over the pact, but thousands, and perhaps millions of Communists in the West – many of them Jewish – left the Stalinist movement. The Communist Party of Poland, a major participant in the Communist International, had already been dissolved in 1938, in anticipation of the pact and its provision for the division of Poland between its two enemies. But the conditions of the alliance also called for the Russian reconquest of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and the Stalinist despoliation of the greater area of historical Bessarabia, renamed the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, from Romanian sovereignty. The lost Romanian lands were recaptured during the second world war, once Hitler relieved himself of his inveiglement with Stalin and the Romanians joined the Germans in the assault on the Soviet Union. But with the end of the war, the Moldavian S.S.R. was returned to Russian rule.

The effects of Russian control over their Romanian-speaking captives were little grasped outside the region. As described by Kolarz, the pre-1940 Moldavian Soviet entity had few Romanian speakers; its population was 48.5 percent Ukrainian, with Russians and Yiddish-speaking Jews each accounting for 8.5 percent. The “republic” had a population of half a million, including only 600 Communists, almost none of them Romanian-speaking. The alienation of Romanians from Bolshevism was deep-seated, partly reflecting suspicion of Soviet support among Hungarian and Bulgarian revolutionaries, both identified with national enemies of Romania. It continued at the end of the second world war, when the Romanian Communists, designated as Soviet puppet governors of all Romania, were so structurally weak that they absorbed cadres from the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael, or Iron Guard.

Kolarz observed that with the emergence of Communist Romania the existence of a Moldavian S.S.R. no longer made sense, except for the demographic contradiction between dominant Slavs and subordinated Romanians inside the latter “republic.” Nevertheless, Soviet Moldavia after 1940-45 had a clear Romanian majority, as Moldova does today, with Romanian-speakers now accounting for 80 percent. Under these conditions, Romanian culture in Soviet Moldavia was Slavized, with the proclamation of a Moldavian language separate from Romanian and written with a modified version of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet. Jews occupied an unfortunate and uncomfortable place between the two communities, Latin and Slav: at times the Soviets favored Jewish participation in the republic’s political elite, but at the price of Russification and systematic undercounting of Yiddish speakers.

Muslims: A New Russian Scapegoat?

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova obtained its independence in 1991, which Russia preempted in 1990 by the creation of Transnistria, a “new” puppet regime on the other side of the Dniester, occupying the same territory designated as Soviet Moldavia in the 1920s, with the exception of the Balta area now incorporated in Ukraine.

But the illegitimate birth of Transnistria followed a Soviet strategy, in the Balkans and on the southern frontier of the USSR, that assumed an innovative direction in the 1980s. Paraphrasing my book *The Two Faces of Islam* (2002), Russian policy began to encourage ethnic differentiation, followed by partition, as control slipped in certain Soviet republics, as well as in the former Yugoslavia. The first and apparent trial example of this came in Bulgaria in 1984 when the large Turkish minority (today accounting for 10 percent of the overall population of seven million), as well as indigenous Bulgarian Muslims, were subjected to compulsory Slavization of names and suppression of other markers of identity. Some 300,000 Bulgarian Muslims fled to Turkey. Viewed with surprise and confusion at the time, the Bulgarian anti-Muslim campaign was later seen by some analysts, myself included, as a Moscow-coordinated plan for the identification of a new internal and external enemy to be used for political unification inside the nations under Communist rule.

Russian statecraft had always been based on rallying the masses against a foe with both internal and external representations, the menace of which was always exaggerated. Historically, Jews and Catholics had been identified as such enemies. But as the Soviet empire began to disintegrate it was obvious that harassing the Jews had proved disastrous for Russian relations with America, and that the Catholic church was a serious adversary that could inflict significant harm on Russian rule – witness the outcome in Poland after the rise of Solidarity. Indigenous Muslims seemed to be the ideal, new scapegoat for the Slav powers, whether in the form of Bulgarian Muslims, Azeris, Chechens and other Caucasian Muslims, or, later, Bosnians and Albanians. And indeed, the repression of the Bulgarian Muslims was followed in 1988 by the violent separation of the Karabakh Mountain region, inhabited by Armenians and known to them as Artsakh, from Azerbaijan, following an anti-Armenian pogrom in the Azeri town of Sumgait in 1988. A similar massacre erupted in Baku in 1990.

The Planned Fragmentation of the Newly Independent States

In April 2009, the Russian chess champion and liberal activist Garry Kasparov, who is half-Armenian, blamed the former KGB for the bloodshed in Baku. As reported in *The New York Times* of April 26, 2009, Kasparov declared, “The KGB was behind the Armenian pogroms in Baku. The KGB set nations against each other. We should never give in to these provocations.” Perspicacious commentators have suggested the same – that interethnic violence in post-Communist countries is always managed from above, including the various terrorist atrocities ascribed to Chechens but, according to many Russian liberals, planned and carried out by the Russian security organs. Still, we may say today, 20 years after the outbreak of the Armenian-Azeri conflict, that while a new Islamophobia was the early ideological pretext for this work, the more significant objective was to leave potentially-independent states fragmented.

This gambit produced its worst effects in the former Yugoslavia. That country, because of its “liberal Communist” reputation, was considered by foreigners the most appropriate laboratory for free-market transformation in the 1990s, but it instead became the scene of ghastly bloodshed as Serbian aggressors, enabled by Russia, carved out sections of newly-independent

Croatia (unsuccessfully) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (creating a mafia-run “Serb Republic” that was unfortunately made permanent by the Dayton Accords of 1995). Georgia was similarly victimized by the sudden launch of “autonomist” adventures in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and a newly independent Kosovo presently faces a persistent attempt to carve out a “Serbian Republic” in its north. In a paradoxical discourse that is handily accepted by gullible and morally spineless media and political leaders worldwide, Russia insolently equates its Abkhaz and South Ossetian puppets with the Kosovars, while the real parallel with Kosovo is to be found in Russia’s prey, Georgia. Legitimate claims for national independence are answered by Russia and its pan-Slavic ally, Serbia, with imposition of partition.

But Russian strategy in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) and Transnistria also exactly reproduced the strategy employed when the bogus Soviet Moldavia was created in the 1920s – to retaliate against Azeri and Moldavian claims to freedom by the fabrication of competing puppet states. In Transnistria, which went to war against Moldova from 1990 to 1992, Islam was not involved – the contenders were both Orthodox Christian in their religious legacies. Similarly, when Russia invaded Georgia last year, the Islamic excuse was absent, and both sides were Christian, although the Russian Orthodox and Georgian Orthodox churches have long been at odds.

Moldova: A Two-Edged Weapon in Putin’s Hand?

Where does this leave Moldova? Submitted anew to Muscovite dependency, the country is susceptible to use as a two-edged weapon, against both Romania and Ukraine. Moldova is so impoverished that trafficking in Moldovan women for prostitution in the West is a major economic phenomenon. The Bucharest government is now a member of the European Union, while Ukraine, criminally rebuffed by NATO last year, went to the Prague summit seeking to follow in Romania’s footsteps. Geographically separated from Russia, Moldova can be used to retard the integration of Romania into the European system, as well as to obstruct the approach to Europe of Ukraine. Either way, the Moldovans have become orphans of history, alienated from the Romanian ethnic family by outside pressure, in the last remaining geographical artifact of the evil embrace of Hitler and Stalin,.

Each of the post-Communist atrocities enumerated here – Bulgarian sanctions against Muslims, the Armenian-Azeri war, the split of Transnistria from Moldova, terror against the Caucasian Muslims, the horrors of former Yugoslavia, and the assault on Georgia – has been reported by global media as sudden, unexpected shocks. But Kasparov spoke correctly, saying, “genocide does not just appear out of nowhere... the authorities are the source.” Each chapter in this latter-day history of provocation and mass murder has the unmistakable appearance of a cold manoeuvre plotted out in Moscow for application by Russia’s allies and agents.

Putin clearly seeks to reintegrate the so-called “near abroad” of independent countries, beginning with those under dictatorial or ideological rule such as Belarus, Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzia, into a revived Soviet empire. If Georgia is the probable next victim, the ultimate prize must be Ukraine, Moldova’s main eastern neighbor – leaving aside the scraps of Transnistria, which may only survive as long as needed in Russian tactical considerations. Moscow has insistently agitated for the partition of Ukraine’s east from the body of the country, given its large ethnic Russian population.

In sum, while Pakistan may be the world’s most dangerous place right now, Moldova, with Kosovo, could produce the most aggravated problems in southeast Europe. Somewhere in hell, the shades of Stalin and Hitler must be cackling with glee, as the evil to which they committed themselves in 1940 continues to bear poisoned fruit. Were the West not consumed with healing the self-inflicted wounds of its heedless greed, we should try to raise our voices for a resolution of the Moldovan question in favor of Romania, to which the territory rightly belongs, and the final liquidation of its progenitor, the Hitler-Stalin pact.

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