



Moldovan schools in Transdniestria:

An uphill battle against “linguistic-cleansing”

In the summer of 2004, 15-year old orphan Igor Dabija became something of a media celebrity. He shared his story with television audiences in Moldova, Romania, Ukraine and Russia, and an interview with him was much sought after by every major news agency. Despite this fleeting brush with fame, however, Igor and his friends in the Republican Orphanage in Bender, near Tiraspol, are not especially keen to see journalists and camera crews descending on their school again anytime soon.

**BY GOTTFRIED HANNE AND
CLAUS NEUKIRCH**

The Bender orphanage and its 320 wards ranging from 6 to 17 years old came under the international spotlight in late July last year, along with other schools in the country’s Transdniestrian region that conduct classes in the Romanian language using the Latin alphabet. In Bender and Rybnitsa, hundreds of schoolchildren and their teachers kept a protective vigil over their buildings. They had been horrified to learn how the Transdniestrian militia forcibly closed down the Moldovan lyceum in Tiraspol, and they wanted to make sure the scene was not repeated.

July 2004: Orphans in Bender return from their annual summer camp only to find their school shut down by Transdniestrian militia.

Photo: OSCE Mission to Moldova/Liliana Sorrentino

“I am here to defend my school because it holds the key to my future,” Igor told a television journalist. The boy, who was abandoned by his parents, added: “I don’t have anything else in life that is as precious to me.”

Although in the end Igor’s school was spared, his classmates and his teachers remain anxious about the likelihood of their having to come to the defence of their schools once again.

“This coming summer, we will all stay here at the orphanage and will not leave for our regular summer camps”, says Maria Ungereanu, director of the Bender orphanage.

William Hill, Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, is just as concerned. “Negotiations between educational experts from Moldova proper and from Transdniestria resumed in the spring, but so far we have not achieved a lasting solution to the school conflict,” the Ambassador said.

The plight of Moldovan schools in Transdniestria has figured prominently in the agenda of the OSCE Mission and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities since early 1993. The contentious issue is a lingering remnant of the armed conflict



OSCE MISSION TO MOLDOVA/KRISTIN FRANKLIN

Two girls take a gloomy look over the remains of their school in Tiraspol after it was raided by the Transdniestrian militia on 15 July 2004. Repair work lasted until February 2005.

The OSCE Mission to Moldova, based in the capital, Chisinau, was officially established in February 1993 and started operations the following April. It opened a branch office in the Transdniestrian administrative centre, Tiraspol, in February 1995 and an office in Bender in May 2003.



between Transdniestrian and Moldovan forces in 1992, which left several hundreds of human casualties and some 100,000 refugees in its wake.

Shortly after the pro-Moscow Transdniestrian authorities had firmly entrenched themselves in power, they reintroduced the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, in keeping with Soviet policy that considers Moldovan (essentially Romanian) in Cyrillic as a different language from Romanian.

CONSTANT INTIMIDATION

However, Moldovan schools in the cities of Bender, Tiraspol, Rybnitsa and Dubasari, as well as those in the villages of Corjova and Roghi (see map) have continued to offer instruction in the Latin script, in line with the Moldovan Ministry of Education curriculum. Undeterred by the local authorities' constant intimidation, teachers have been educating more than 4,000 children in their native language as best they can, using the Latin alphabet to which Moldova reverted in 1989.

The unstable situation has left Moldovan parents in a quandary. If they enrol their children in one of the schools that offer a Moldovan curriculum using the Latin script, they risk being threatened by the regional security service, and seeing their jobs put in jeopardy. Sending their children to one of the 33 Transdniestrian schools that teach in their native language in Cyrillic is, however, hardly an appealing alternative, as the schools follow an out-dated curriculum and use textbooks from the Soviet period.

Furthermore, nowhere in the world — even in Transnistria — are there institutes

of higher education that teach Romanian in Cyrillic. Bluntly put, the authorities' insistence on the Cyrillic script means that Moldovan children in Transnistria are deprived of their right to receive higher education in their mother tongue.

Caught in this no-win situation, many of the parents choose to enrol their children in one of the Russian-language schools, where the learning environment is free of harassment and educational methods are relatively up to date. Resorting to an even more drastic step, some families simply opt to uproot themselves from their home base and relocate to Moldova proper.

It was these "strong-arm" assimilation measures in Transnistria that led Rolf Ekeus, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, to call the region's education policy "nothing less than linguistic cleansing". Addressing the OSCE's Permanent Council in Vienna in October 2004, he called Transnistria's measures provocative, illegal and inhuman.

"The Transdniestrian policy of suppressing the State language of the Republic of Moldova is unacceptable not only because it violates the fundamental rights of ethnic Moldovans but also because it impedes the determining of a special status for Transnistria and the bringing about of a final conflict settlement in Moldova," Ambassador Ekeus said.

Since 1994, every summer without fail, the same uneasiness has set in and the same disputes have arisen over whether or not the schools are to be allowed to re-open in September. Also without fail, the OSCE Mission and the High Commissioner step



OSCE MISSION TO MOLDOVA/LILIANA SORRENTINO



OSCE MISSION TO MOLDOVA/GREG GOOK

1 September 2004: The first day of school is hardly cause for celebration at the Moldovan school in Rybnitsa. Parents and teachers gather on the banks of the Dniestr as pupils are still without a school building.

July 2004: Transnistrian militia try to stop pupils from entering the Bender orphanage but eventually they manage to sneak back into their rooms.

up their year-round mediation efforts.

In 2003, experts from the High Commissioner's office and the OSCE Mission to Moldova were able to broker a comprehensive breakthrough agreement according to which Moldovan schools in the six localities would be changed from public to private academic institutions, to be financed by the central Moldovan authorities. The intention was to enable schools to offer a Latin-script Moldovan curriculum.

The euphoria over the agreement turned out to be short-lived. Radical circles within the Transnistrian leadership refused to compromise, and the crisis escalated to new heights.

DEFUSING TENSION

On 15 July 2004, members of the Transnistrian militia stormed the Moldovan school in Tiraspol, destroying parts of the building, removing the furniture, textbooks and archives, and declaring the facilities and other school property confiscated. Transnistrian authorities also declared the Latin-script schools in Bender and Rybnitsa closed, disconnecting their

power, water and gas supplies. Finding themselves surrounded by regional forces, students and their parents and teachers took it upon themselves to guard their schools day and night.

To defuse the potentially explosive climate, members of the OSCE Mission, with some help from their colleagues in the Secretariat, took turns monitoring the schools in Bender and Rybnitsa from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week.

Under the watchful eyes and interference of Transnistrian security forces, they delivered food and drinking water to the besieged children in the orphanage, who managed to hold out for more than a month despite unbearably unhygienic conditions.

Meanwhile, the Mission continued to pursue talks with local authorities on the terms for the withdrawal of the militia and the reopening of the schools — to no avail, as the authorities adamantly refused to enter into any negotiations. On 29 July, Transnistrian militia also stormed the school in Rybnitsa.

As tension mounted, the international community stood fast and firm in its position that Transnistrian authorities should agree to some kind of compromise. Condemning the region's unilateral actions, participating States paid unwavering attention to the crisis. Delegations called on the Russian Federation and Ukraine to bring their influence to bear on the Transnistrian leadership.

Senior staff of the OSCE Mission and special representatives of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, the Russian Federation and Ukraine engaged in intensive shuttle diplomacy between the Moldovan Government and separatist authorities, pressing for a solution to the stalemate.

Finally, in late August, international pressure and the prospect of local upheavals started making an impact on Transnistrian

News update: 1 July 2005

Moldovan schools in Transnistria granted legal status

As the *OSCE Magazine* was about to go to press, the Moldovan schools in Tiraspol, Rybnitsa, Bender and Corjevo received the welcome news that they had been granted permanent registration by the Transnistrian authorities, a recognition of their legal status. The schools can now enter into contracts with local suppliers of water, electricity and other communal services.

Since February 2005, the OSCE Mission to Moldova has hosted nine rounds of negotiations between the Moldovan and Transnistrian educational authorities on the issue, with representatives from the Russian and Ukrainian embassies serving as mediators.

"The agreement reached on 1 July on a set of school statutes acceptable to both sides hopefully brings a long-awaited solution to the conflict over the existence of these Moldovan institutions in the Transnistrian region," said Kristin Franklin, Human Dimension Officer in the OSCE Mission to Moldova.

Negotiations between the Moldovan and Transnistrian educational authorities will resume in September to resolve issues concerning a common curriculum for disputed subjects, and applications for licences and accreditations. Regardless of the results of these talks, however, the schools are expected to open at the start of the academic year.

authorities. They agreed to register the schools under a private status, valid for one year, which would enable them to follow a Moldovan curriculum using the Latin script. Four of the six schools began the new academic year as planned, on 1 September 2004, with the Rybnitsa school following suit in October.

For the Tiraspol school's more than 500 children, however, the transition was to take considerably longer. Over five months, they had to travel long distances to attend schools in neighbouring villages while their building was undergoing repairs. The school finally reopened on 7 February 2005.

As the dramatic events of summer 2004 approach their one-year anniversary, pupils and students are happily immersed in learn-

ing in their native tongue using the Latin script. But beneath the semblance of normality, an unsettling calm prevails. The school in Rybnitsa operates on the premises of a kindergarten of a local factory, since the municipality refuses to return the confiscated school building. The future of all six schools hangs in the balance, at the mercy of the local authorities' potential sanctions, including an interruption of public services.

Igor Dabija and the region's 4,200 affected pupils who call Transdniestria their home want nothing more in the world than to continue being educated in their native language in the Latin script. But come summer, they may have to stand guard over their schools again. If they have to, they should not be left on their own.

Gottfried Hanne (right) is a Political Officer and Claus Neukirch is Spokesperson in the OSCE Mission to Moldova, which currently comprises 11 international staff members.



OSCE MISSION TO MOLDOVA/VICTOR MUNTEANU

School children: Innocent victims of a political conflict

Moldovans comprise the largest national group (34 per cent) in the region controlled by the authorities in Tiraspol, but Ukrainians (29 per cent) and Russians (28 per cent) together make up a "Slavic majority". Traditionally, Bender as well as the industrialized cities on the left bank of the Dniestr river have always had stronger links with their old Soviet roots than have Chisinau and other localities on the right bank.

The events in the summer of 2004 revolved around 4,000 students in six Moldovan schools teaching Romanian in the Latin script. Another 33 schools in the Transdniestrian region conduct their teaching in Moldovan (Romanian) using the Cyrillic script.

In fact, the schoolchildren are innocent victims of a larger conflict between the central government in Chisinau and the Transdniestrian authorities in Tiraspol which goes back to the beginning of Moldova's process of emancipation from the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

The following key developments form the backdrop:

1989. Protest movements strongly in favour of the preservation of the Soviet Union and of "socialist values" start surfacing in the Transdniestrian region's predominantly non-Moldovan cities.

23 June 1990. Moldova issues declaration of sovereignty: Moldovan legislation is declared to be superior to Soviet Union legislation.

2 September 1990. A Congress of Transdniestrian Peoples' Deputies declares the independence of the "Transdniestrian Moldovan Socialist Soviet Republic" from Moldova.

27 August 1991. Moldova declares its independence from the Soviet Union. In the following weeks and months, Transdniestrian paramilitary formations progressively take over previously Moldovan public institutions such as police stations, administrative bodies, schools, radio stations and newspapers.

2 March 1992. Developments build up into a violent conflict after Transdniestrian forces and Moldovan police clash in Dubasari.

19 June 1992. A large-scale military battle ensues, involving the use of heavy arms. The sought-after prize: control of the city of Tighina/Bender, situated on the right side of the Dniester but claimed by Transdniestrian authorities.

21 June 1992. Moldovan units are driven out from Tighina/Bender.

21 July 1992. A ceasefire agreement is signed in Moscow.

The present. Today, historical, ethnic and religious factors do not present any serious risk of conflict between the populations on the left and right banks of the Dniestr. The economic interests of the elite have become the major force behind the country's continued division, with Transdniestrian authorities ensuring maintenance of the status quo by driving out individuals and institutions that they perceive as representing Chisinau's concerns.

To find out more about the work of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, including its lead role in the negotiation of a lasting political settlement of the Transdniestrian conflict, please visit www.osce.org/moldova



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