



## Ethnic Peace and War: Identity Politics in Estonia and Moldova

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**ABSTRACT** – *This paper applies theories commonly used to explain ethnic conflict to two case studies in the former Soviet Union. Despite the historical and structural similarity of these cases, ethnic conflict was resolved peacefully in Estonia but violently in Moldova. This paper concludes that the current historical and structural theories of ethnic conflict have inadequate explanatory power. I suggest that history and structure are important variables in ethnic conflict only in as much as they influence identity relationships. It also seems that higher levels of ethnic xenophobia are associated with higher levels of stability and peace. The principle explanation of Estonia's peace in light of Moldova's war is the bipolar nature of identity in Estonia against the multipolar nature in Moldova. Cohesiveness and bipolarity allowed Estonia's groups to legitimately and cohesively challenge each other in international forums, whereas Moldova's elites used violence to rally the divergent groups and settle the conflict.*

**RÉSUMÉ** – *Cet article applique les théories communément utilisées pour expliquer les conflits ethniques à deux études de cas dans l'ancienne Union Soviétique. Malgré les ressemblances historiques et structurelles de ces deux cas, le conflit ethnique fut résolu de manière pacifique en Estonie alors qu'il le fut de manière violente dans le cas de la Moldavie. Cet article en conclut que les théories historiques et structurelles actuelles sont incomplètes pour expliquer les conflits ethniques. Je propose que l'histoire et la structure sont des variables importantes dans les conflits ethniques dans la mesure où ils influencent les relations d'identité. Il semble aussi que des niveaux supérieurs de xénophobie soient associés avec une plus grande stabilité et la paix. L'explication principale quant à la paix en Estonie en comparaison avec la guerre en Moldavie est la nature bipolaire de l'identité en Estonie en parallèle avec la nature multipolaire en Moldavie. La cohésion et la bipolarité ont permis aux groupes estoniens de légitimer et de se défier mutuellement dans des forums internationaux, alors que les élites moldaves faisaient appel à la violence pour rallier différents groupes et résoudre le conflit.*

### INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union released a horde of ethnic tension that produced both peaceful and violent conflict. During the post-socialist transition, those conflicts that have turned violent and those that have not illuminate gaps in the literature on ethnic nationalism. Predictions of violence predominated in the media after 1989, but time has rendered many of those

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hypotheses false. Shortly after the fall and fragmentation of the USSR the 25 million Russian speakers living in various successor states (with distinct ethnic histories) presented the potential for ethnic mobilization and violence among or against this ‘beached diaspora’ (King & Melvin, 1998, 1999-2000; Kolsto, 1993; Laitin, 1998, p.29). This paper will examine these theories of ethnic conflict in the context of post-Soviet transition in Moldova and Estonia.

The dissolution of the socialist bloc was followed by many peaceful conflicts<sup>2</sup>, perhaps best demonstrated by the bloodless ‘Velvet Revolution’ of Czechoslovakia. Not all transitions were peaceful, however. Ethnic and religious conflicts in post-soviet states claimed about 100,000 lives, primarily in: Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory in Azerbaijan claimed by Armenia; Abkhazia, where a separatist army fought for independence from Georgia; and, perhaps most well-known, in Chechnya, which is still part of Russia. These conflicts, together, claimed about 100,000 lives during the 1990s (Tishkov, 1999). I will concentrate my analysis on two countries that entered the post-socialist transition with comparable levels of ethnic tension: Estonia and Moldova. Their markedly different experiences with ethnic nationalism during the 1990s offers an intriguing comparison to test the limits of theories of ethnic conflict. Estonia peacefully and successfully navigated independence to enter the European Union (EU) in 2004 as what is often considered the most successful post-socialist economy (Kolsto, 2002; Zevelöv, 2001). In contrast, Moldova was dismembered by a civil war over the separation of the Trans-Dniester Republic, and it has shown very few signs of progress since its independence from the USSR. Because these two countries share the post-soviet experience in the context of ethnic diversity and tension, my goal in this analysis is to demonstrate why they have followed such different paths over the past decade.

This article will begin with a brief introduction to Estonia and Moldova by discussing respective history and demography. With this background, the current context of each conflict will be examined in order to establish distinct difference between the two. I will then consider the limits of economic determinants of violent conflict commonly advanced by liberal theorists. Finally, I will discuss the role various actors, resources and mobilization in Estonia and Moldova with the central argument that the nature of ethnic group formation played a decisive role in determining whether conflict was peaceful or violent in each country. Ethnic identity in Estonia was strongly split into a binary, oppositional identity and violent conflict was not necessary to establish the shared boundaries of identity. In Moldova, on the other hand, fragmented identities had their boundaries consolidated through the trials of violent conflict.

### MOLDOVA AND ESTONIA: HISTORY AND DEMOGRAPHY

Historical differences between Estonia and Moldova are most important when examined in connection with their respective demographic compositions. The Estonian population of 1.35 million people is split into two major ethnic groups defined by language: those who speak Estonian made up approximately 70% of the population in 1989; and those who speak Russian and who formed approximately 30% of the 1989 population (EIU, 2004a).<sup>1</sup> Moldova has a larger total population of 4.3 million<sup>2</sup>, and although roughly 70% of the country belongs to the dominant ethnicity the other portion of the population (over 80% of whom speak Russian) is made up of

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that in this paper it will be assumed that society, by nature, is conflicted. Conflicts can be either peaceful or violent, and this paper will be trying to explain why and how *violent* conflict occurs.

<sup>1</sup> In line with other authors, I interchangeably refer to these Russian speakers as Slavs, Russophones, and ethnic Russians partly because that is often how they were labeled by the fifth line of their Soviet passports concerning ethnicity, and partly because during the recent flux of post-socialist society language has become the most defining feature of ethnicity. However, while doing this, I am fully aware that during such a period of intense social change there is most likely “a plasticity of identities as members of the diaspora reassess their sense of self in relation to new and markedly different situational contexts” (Smith & Wilson, 1997: 845).

<sup>2</sup> Including the Trans-Dniester region, in which approximately 700,000 people reside.

two distinct (but similar) ethnicities: Ukrainians who form about 14% of the total, and Russians who form about 13% (EIU, 2004b; Skvortsova, 2002)<sup>3</sup>. Though these are distinct groups, both are considered ethnically Slavic (as opposed to the ethnically Romanian Moldovans) and the Ukrainian group has been overwhelmingly Russified in culture and language (Kolsto & Melberg, 2002; K. Verdery, 1994; Zevelëv, 2001). In both countries, the Russophone populations are spatially concentrated in large urban areas like Tallinn and Chisinau and along the eastern borders (with Russia and Ukraine) of their respective countries (Zevelëv, 2001).

These demographic patterns are relatively recent, emerging largely over the last century following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which led to effective occupation of both Estonia and Moldova. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was made on behalf of Hitler and Stalin in 1939, and although officially a ‘non-aggression treaty’, the Pact included a protocol which made countries in eastern Europe available for military occupation by either the Soviets or the Nazis (and in some cases, both). The subsequent effects of the Pact considerably altered the ethnic composition of both Estonia and Moldova. In 1945, ethnic Estonians made up 95% of the inhabitants of modern day Estonia (EIU, 2004a). The current demographic composition of Estonia is a result of Stalin’s mass deportations from Russia to the Soviet Republics and the migration of Russians to newly-created Soviet industrial centres, spearheaded by Khrushchev and Brezhnev (Solonar & Bruter, 1994). A similar pattern of immigration occurred in Moldova, and although the pattern was similar the degree of change was much less significant. Close to one third of ethnic Russians in Moldova were residents or descendants of residents who lived there prior to 1940 (Solonar & Bruter, 1994). Contemporary Moldova emerged from the convergence of two regions that were joined in the 1940s. The merging of the tiny Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) with the formerly Romanian territories of Bukovina and Bessarabia constituted the new national republic of Moldavia (Dima, 2001; King, 2000). Much higher numbers of Ukrainians and Russians lived in the MASSR, while most Moldovans lived in Bessarabia (Dima, 2001; King, 2000).

### CONFLICT IN CONTEXT

The multiethnic USSR – state and empire – officially disintegrated in 1991 (White, 2001). Ethnic conflicts in Estonia and Moldova became salient with the gradual Soviet fragmentation of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite Soviet attempts to create a single united identity, “the Soviet Union was not a melting pot for old nations but an incubator for new ones” (Ronald Suny qtd. in King & Melvin, 1999-2000, p.117). As *perestroika* opened Soviet society, dominant ethnic groups in the federal republics seized the moment to demonstrate national unity, to gain power, and to achieve independence. In the Baltic Republics, nationalist leaders and groups mobilized around ethnicity to unite their societies in opposition to Soviet rule (Tishkov, 1997). Shortly after Baltic republics mobilized toward independence, many national groups emerged to “parade their ethnicity” as a means to claim a right to self-determination (Tishkov, 1992, p.375). Indeed, Estonia and Moldova were among the first to parade and proclaim their independence, doing so on consecutive Tuesdays (Estonia the 20<sup>th</sup> and Moldova the 27<sup>th</sup>) in late August, 1991 (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2004a, 2004b; White, 2001).

Both Estonia and Moldova experienced severe ethnic tension soon after independence. In Estonia, the first manifestation of such tension took place when an estimated 6,000 ethnic Russian workers in Tallinn stormed the parliament complex on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1990, attempting to restore the flags and symbols of the USSR to the building. This event was carefully mitigated by the Estonian authorities who organized a mass force of unarmed citizens, the *Kodu Kaitse* (Home Guard), to restore order (“Estonia Casts Off”, 1990; “Estonia Guards”, 1990; “Estonians Rush”, 1990; “Pro-Moscow Workers”, 1990). The second nearly-violent conflict happened

<sup>3</sup>Approximately 5% of the population is Gagauz, Bulgarian, Jewish and ‘other’.

predominantly Russian northeastern towns of Narva and Sillamäe held referenda on becoming an autonomous region in mid-July 1993. These referenda passed overwhelmingly, and many feared an “echo [of the] similar developments in the Dniester region of Moldova two years [before]” (“Referendum Latest Sign”, 1993). Fortunately, the fears of a militant separatist battle, as had happened in the Dniester region of Moldova, did not materialize. Both sides in both events employed peaceful methods to prevent extreme violence from occurring, and there was not a single violent death as a result (Kolsto, 2002a).

In contrast to Estonia’s peaceful ethnic conflict, Moldova was plunged almost immediately into violent conflict with the declaration of Trans-Dniestrian autonomy on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 1990. When the state decided to make Moldovan the official language of the republic and change the flag to the Romanian tricolor, ethnic Russian workers (persuaded by their managers) held demonstrations against the proposed new law (King 2000; Skvortsova, 2002). The first serious hostilities broke out when Moldovan police officers attempted to disarm paramilitaries in Dubasari on December 13<sup>th</sup> 1991 (King, 2000). An eastern province of Moldova, Trans-Dniester was assisted by the Russian military to fight off Moldovan forces in the war of Transnistria to defend its unilateral declaration of independence.<sup>3</sup> The violence of this war left over 1,000 dead and produced over 130,000 internally displaced persons and refugees (King, 2000; Tishkov, 1999). Though minor clashes continued in 1992, the eventual defeat of the Moldovan army locked the conflict into a continuing stalemate (King, 2000).

### ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

Different levels of economic development are considered by liberal theorists to be key determinants of the likelihood of whether an ethnic conflict will be resolved with peace or violence. This argument holds that wealthier, better educated, more urbanized people are less likely to resolve conflict with violence.<sup>4</sup> In the cases of Moldova and Estonia this argument relies on a superficial and deterministic reading of the relationship between national wealth (see above) and ethnic conflict in each country. I will try to demonstrate several limits to the explanatory power of this liberal argument.

To evaluate the economic condition of each country at the time of independence from the USSR, each country’s percentages of industry and agriculture in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1990 as well as their declines in Net Material Product<sup>5</sup> (NMP) output between 1990-91 are shown below. In 1990, Estonia’s GDP was constituted 39.6% by industry and 15.6% by agriculture, and between 1990-91 its NMP declined by 9.3% in industry and 3.7% in agriculture. This reflects a much stronger economic position than Moldova, whose GDP was composed of 25.6% industry and 31% agriculture, matched by a fall of 21% in industry and 23.9% in agriculture. These figures demonstrate Estonia’s much more stable economic situation when the USSR collapsed (figures come from EIU, 1996a, 1996b; see also Zevelöv, 2001).

In addition to having a stronger economy, Estonia was more urbanized than Moldova. In Estonia, 71.2% of the population was living in urban areas in 1992, whereas only 45.6% of Moldovans lived in urban areas during the same year. Estonia also had more than double the

<sup>3</sup> Trans-Dniester, Transnistria, or the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (all referring to the same territory) is not recognized internationally and it considered by the Council of Europe to be a ‘frozen conflict’. See: <http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/Files/Events/2003-09-Frozen-conflicts/>.

<sup>4</sup>Essentially, this is the same argument that underscores liberalism where states are less likely to engage in war by being democratic and capitalist, since “liberal institutions increase the intelligence of states”. Urbanization and the proximity of diversity benefits democracy, while capitalism generates wealth. Together these things should produce a more stable global order in this theory (for a discussion of this see Hall, 1996, pp.15-21).

<sup>5</sup>Very roughly this is the socialist economy’s equivalent of Gross Domestic Product. However, NMP “does not include most services, these not being considered ‘material product’” (LaVigne, 1991, p.14).

proportion of university graduates as Moldova at the time of independence (EIU, 2004a, 2004b).<sup>6</sup> These comparisons of the economic, urbanization, and educational levels between Moldova and Estonia as they exited socialism are brief, but they offer the general difference. On all three levels, Estonia was much more advanced than Moldova.

The differences in national levels of social and economic development between Estonia and Moldova appear to affirm the liberal argument and its corollary that physical combatants in ethnic conflicts are poorer, come from more rural areas, and are less educated than the average society (Laitin, 1998). However, the sociological composition of dead separatist combatants in the Moldovan Trans-Dniester civil war contradicts this argument. At least 52.8% of the dead came from urban areas, while at least 36.8% came from villages (10.5% of the data is missing) (Kolsto, 2002). Furthermore, levels of educational attainment among dead combatants corresponded almost “almost exactly to the share of highly educated people in the Moldovan population as a whole” (Kolsto, 2002, p.258). In the case of Moldova, at least, this data demonstrates that economic determinants cannot be the sole explanation of violent conflict. It is necessary to move beyond this limited framework and examine the processes of group formation and resource mobilization in both Moldova and Estonia.

### ACTORS, RESOURCES AND MOBILIZATION

The history of ethnic conflict in Estonia and Moldova has been influenced by the relative involvement of each country in international organizations. Whereas Estonia joined the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN) in mid-September 1991, Moldova did not join these organizations until the end of January and beginning of March 1992 (Neukirch, 2002). Both organizations rapidly responded when tensions rose in Estonia, but neither group became involved in the affairs of Moldova until after the major battles of the civil war had ended (Neukirch, 2002). The involvement of the OSCE, UN and numerous NGOs in Estonia gave both groups legal means to contest their claims, and channeled ethnic conflict towards peaceful resolution.

It has been suggested that the negative example of violent ethnic conflict in the Dnistrion region of Moldova dissuaded Russian speakers in Estonia from resorting to armed violence (Neukrich, 2002, p.241). This argument, however, neglects the fact that Dniestrions would have been aware of major ethnic conflicts stemming from the breakup of the USSR in Azerbaijan in January 1990, Tajikistan in February 1990, or Uzbekistan later that year among the others that preceded the Trans-Dniester civil war. Since *these* conflicts did not affect the course of violent action in Trans-Dniestria, it would be unwise to place much emphasis on the deterrence power of other violent conflict (Kolsto, 1993, p.204; Tishkov, 1991, p.619).

The nature of ethnic conflict in Estonia and Moldova was influenced by Russia’s actions with respect to the Russian minority in each country. Russia’s strategic interest in promoting Baltic independence to facilitate its own exit from the USSR and its geopolitical interest in Moldova contributed to the resources it provided to Russian-speaking groups within each country. Most importantly, the presence of the Soviet (later Russian) Fourteenth Army in the Dneister region acted as “the joker in the game,” providing arms, heavy weaponry, trained soldiers, and even its top generals to the Dniestrian independence forces (Neukrich, 2002; King, 2000; Kolsto, 2002, p.269). Since the conscripts of this army were recruited from within the Trans-Dniester region of Moldova, the army’s sympathies lay with the Dniester separatists.

Russian leaders like Boris Yeltsin offered support to the Estonian independence movements and discouraged the separation of the Narva metropole (where Russian-speakers were

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<sup>6</sup>That these are different years only furthers this argument. Estonia’s number of students involved in higher education rose on average between 1990 and 2002 at an average rate of over 3,200 per year. Extrapolating from this, I would assume that there were around 40,000 post-secondary students in Estonia in 1995 (EIU, 2004: Estonia).

concentrated) in order to oppose and weaken the central Soviet authorities (Neukirch, 2002). Coupled with Estonia's successful border control that blocked the entrance of Russian nationalists from the motherland, and the fortuitous location of 7,000 Soviet (Russian) troops away from the northeastern region, this policy mitigated Russian involvement in Estonia (Neukrich, 2002). Russia assumed a disinterested stance during Estonia's separation and only grew interested after international organizations had become involved. In contrast, Russia was keen on keeping Moldova within its sphere of influence (Neukrich, 2002). Moscow's official policy supported Moldovan independence, but its unofficial policy, as conveyed by Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi's visit to the Dniester leadership in Tiraspol, "encouraged the Dniester leadership to take a firm stance" in protecting the diaspora's interests (Neukrich, 2002, p.236). This ambiguity resulted in calculations by both the Moldovan and Dniestrian authorities that gave both sides hope of winning the civil war, thereby strengthening their readiness to engage in violence (Neukrich, 2002).

Although the provision of external resources and support can help to explain the different levels of conflict in Estonia and Moldova, the simple availability of resources can neither prevent nor cause a war *alone*. For these resources to have effect, there must be groups willing to use them. The combination of history, demographics, and economics created such groups in Estonia and Moldova and I will argue that Anthony Marx offers a helpful framework to understand group formation and mobilization of resource. Marx has argued that group formation takes place through mobilization against a common 'other' (Marx, 1998, p.3). His case study of South Africa demonstrates that the apartheid state developed as a means to unite the British and Boer colonists who had just fought a massive war in order to build a power-sharing and assimilating system between them by oppressing the diverse black population. Internal strife united disjointed and formerly opposed groups against an equally disjointed common enemy – violence polarized society.

Ethnic identity in Estonia had much more political salience than it did in Moldova, a condition that can be tentatively traced to the adoption of very different citizenship policies following independence. Estonia passed restrictive citizenship and language laws, while Moldova's laws were lauded by international observers for their inclusiveness. Estonia limited citizenship to those people who had been citizens of the independent state before it was incorporated into the USSR and their descendants, and long residency requirements often excluded resident Russians who sought citizenship (Brubaker, 1992; Park, 1994; Smith & Wilson, 1997; Vetik, 1993; Visek, 1997). These policies effectively barred roughly 330,000 ethnic Russians (approximately 30% of the resident population) from gaining citizenship: there were few Russians in the republic before 1940, and the concentration of Russians in the northeastern urban areas (where they constituted as much as 95% of the population) meant that few had learned the Estonian language (Ponarin, 2000). Moldova's citizenship law, on the other hand, was hailed as "one of the most liberal in Eastern Europe" when citizenship was granted to everyone who was resident in the republic before June 23, 1990 (King, 2000, p.169; Skvortsova, 2002).

As a consequence of this history, Estonia developed into a society of ethnic binaries, with two groups opposed and split over the languages they spoke. The influx of ethnic Russians after World War II who filled newly created industrial and political occupations constituted a cohesive and privileged group, which, stripped of its power by independence, had no need to construct or solidify its identity. The development of an ethnic binary has the effect, according to Weber, of "condition[ing] a mutual repulsion and disdain but allow[ing] each ethnic community to consider its own honor as the highest one" (Weber, 1958 [1946], p.189). This has been made evident in Estonia, for example, through a linguistic experiment in which it was demonstrated that social respect for Russophones speaking Estonian was greatly diminished among participants in the study (Ponarin, 2000, p.1539). This study demonstrated a condition of ethnic xenophobia that is only reinforced by the lack of miscegenist marriages: only 8.8% of Estonians in 1989 had married

across ethnic groups (Kolsto & Melberg, 2002). This mutual disdain between Estonians and Russians has consolidated opposing ethnically based identities in Estonia through group isolation and xenophobia.

In contrast to Estonia's ethnic binary, in Moldova identities fall into four categories. The Moldovan identity was split between those who favored an independent Moldova and those urging reunification with Romania (Pan-Romanists). Those who identified as Russian-speaking were split between ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians (Skvortsova, 2002; K. Verdery, 1994). Moldova is a borderland nation, and as such its ethnic identities were especially fragmented (King, 2000; see also Laitin, 1998; Muntenau, 2002; Skvortsova, 2002; Smith *et al*, 1998). The fragile cross of Moldovan ethnicity left little group agency for the slow progress and negotiation that was employed by groups in Estonia through international mediation. Ethnic violence constituted the "tipping point" of identity formation in Moldova, whereas the pre-existing "conglomerate identities" in Estonia needed no such fulcrum (Laitin, 1998, pp.21-4). Once the threshold of violence was crossed, the Moldovan conflict rooted itself; heroes and martyrs emerged, negative enemy images were reinforced, and groups were solidified in opposition to one another (Kolsto, 2002). From this perspective, the categorical ethnic divisions in Estonia mitigated the possibility of violent conflict, and unclear ethnic boundaries may have escalated the Moldovan civil war.

In this paper I have argued that conflict in Estonia and Moldova must be studied from the perspective of group formation and resource mobilization. This requires a departure from more traditional understandings of the source of violent conflict in order to embrace a sociological approach to the study of identity. I have used empirical data, where possible, to illustrate my arguments, but this subject requires further research into the axes of Moldovan and Estonian identities and how these relate to a disposition to engage in conflict. If studying conflict is to inform efforts to create peace, understanding the nature of identity and group formation will be an important area for continued thinking and research.

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