Transnistrian Nation-Building: A Case of Effective Diversity Policies?

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Abstract

This article addresses the reasons why ethnic diversity has never posed a challenge to the stability of Transnistria (also called the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic), an unrecognized state that broke away from Moldova during the collapse of the Soviet Union. We analyze the major societal and political patterns relevant to ethnic relations in the region and focus on the structure, content, and effectiveness of Transnistrian legislation concerning ethnic and linguistic diversity along with the practices of its implementation. In our view, formal and informal ethnic divisions do not hinder the political stability of Transnistria. We conclude that the stability of ethnic relations in Transnistria in part results from a deliberate policy aimed at managing diversity. This policy provides for the dependence of the populace on the state apparatus achieved through a dense plethora of government-orchestrated activities as well as the reproduction of nonconflictual, eclectic, and thus socially acceptable national narratives inherited from the Soviet past.

Keywords: Transnistria; de facto states; regime of ethnicity; diversity policy; banal nationalism

Introduction

Transnistria (also called the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic, or TMR) is a polity, an unrecognized state that broke away from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (at that time part of the USSR) in 1990 and became de facto independent upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although it escalated into warfare from March to July 1992, this separatist conflict did not lead to ethnic cleansings or a mass population flight on ethnic grounds, unlike other similar affairs, and Transnistria remains an ethnically diverse entity (Kolstø 2006, 731; Protsyk 2005). In fact, Transnistria has proven to be a stable and viable polity and it is interesting to witness the role of ethnic heterogeneity in its developments.

Transnistria is a de facto state without an ethnic majority, and, unlike all other similar entities, it does not position itself as a polity created by and for a core ethnic nation. Following commonsense assumptions, one may expect that ethnopolitical turbulence, even if it did not threaten Transnistria's integrity and stability at large, would at least be part of the local political landscape. Yet grievances or tensions on ethnic or linguistic grounds have not manifested themselves (with a few minor exceptions), and this circumstance raises questions.

No doubt the Transnistrian authoritarian regime would be able to suppress political activities on ethnic grounds if they were to emerge. The major issue addressed in this article, based on an earlier study (Osipov and Vasilevich 2017), is the question of why rivalries or claims on ethnic or linguistic basis have not manifested themselves and do not figure among the challenges to Transnistria's stability. This theme may be also addressed as a part of a broader research agenda

formulated by Elise Giuliano and Dmitry Gorenburg (2012) with regard to Russia: why does ethnicity play a smaller role in post-Soviet politics than expected? The focus of this article is the question of whether there is such a thing as a diversity policy of the ruling elite playing an important role or if the ethnopolitical stability of Transnistria results from broader societal patterns. Do the official policies of Transnistria rest on techniques other than violence and direct coercion?

The Issue Addressed and Methodological Remarks

In our examination of the role of Transnistria's government's strategies and techniques of handling the region's multi-ethnicity, our intention is to separate strategies and measures taken by the ruling elite for managing ethnic diversity from broader societal factors that might inhibit ethnic strife. For this purpose, we provide a brief description of the Transnistrian normative framework pertinent to ethnic and linguistic issues, briefly outline its implementation, interpret the rationales of the local diversity policy, and assess its effectiveness and efficiency. The ultimate reasons for the smooth ethnic relations and for the general political, economic, and social viability of Transnistria would be too broad and complex a topic for a single article, so we limit ourselves here to placing the ethnicity- and language-related activities of the Transnistrian authorities in a broader political and societal context.

The very survival of Transnistrian independence is not surprising. Most separatist regimes that emerged in the post-Soviet space from the late 1980s to the early 1990s are alive to date, and the reasons for their viability are more or less well explained. Among these factors are internal support from the local population achieved through propaganda; strong defense capabilities vis-à-vis the relative military and economic weaknesses of the parent state; support of a strong patron state; and limited or inconsistent involvement of the international community (Caspersen 2011; Dunn and Bobick 2014; Kolstø 2006; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008; Osipov and Vasilevich 2017).

To interpret the official treatment of multi-ethnicity, we use three theoretical frameworks. They can be named "nation-building," "diversity policy" (or "diversity management"), and "regime of ethnicity." None of the three contradict each other; on the contrary, they partly overlap. Each has its own merits and deficiencies.

The notion of "nation-building" potentially offers the most comprehensive and broad approach. The term became a part of scholarly discourse in the early 1960s, and since then its meaning has been gradually changing (Budryte 2005; Connor 1972; 2004; Deutsch and Foltz 1966; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Kolstø 2000, 2014; Kuzio 2002; Rokkan 1975). In theory, the notion encompasses a wide range of practices which go far beyond the treatment of ethnic diversity per se. As Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese (2015, 373) put it, rephrasing Walker Connor, one may say that *nation-building* means "a process of conjoining the nation with the state." This implies the shaping of the given society in its entirety via measures aimed at general political and social institutions including disciplinary techniques, common narratives, and regimes of citizenship. Certainly, the definitions of boundaries and membership in the national community include activities targeting ethnic or cultural diversity (whether they mean its maintenance or, in contrast, its marginalization or elimination). The word *building*, however, means a process with a beginning and end, while diversity-related policies must exist notwithstanding any particular transformation.

Diversity policy, or *diversity management*, can be defined as policy deliberately aimed at shaping and regulating social relations, for which ethnic, cultural, or racial heterogeneity of the society is essential. The problem with the term is that it is too nebulous and lacks any uniform application; the scope and content of the notion remain a question mark. There is no single or commonly accepted understanding of what diversity management is about and no standard terminology (Marko 2008; Rechel 2009). From the scholarly perspective, the approach is still in

the making; in the practical domain, politicians and legal processionals do not necessarily address the regulation of diversity as a single and specific area of human activity. Decisions and practical measures which one conventionally calls "diversity management" may vary in purpose, scope, form, and content; the issues important to one country might be perceived as irrelevant to another one. Diversity management in individual countries may rest on different values and aspirations, which may include or exclude certain areas of social relations and public management.

The third perspective is called "regime of ethnicity"; the notion of regime was first employed with regard to ethnic policies by Şener Aktürk (2012, 10). It means systemic activities that "seek to maintain a particular and coherent relationship between ethnicity and nationality" or, more broadly, it defines modes of membership and representation. The concept remains under-developed: the menu of regime types that Aktürk offers does not cover the whole range of ethnic policies and the model still remains ill-equipped for handling informal practices or the side effects of certain measures. Nevertheless, we regard the approach based on the notion of "ethnicity regime" as the most relevant in the given context.

General Information about Transnistria

Geographically, Transnistria is a strip of land 200 kilometers long and about 20 kilometers wide located mainly on the left (eastern) bank of the river Nistru (in Romanian/Moldovan), or Dniester (in Russian). While in the eyes of the de facto government, Transnistria is a sovereign albeit still internationally unrecognized state, the Moldovan government and international community regard the Left Bank as an integral part of Moldova illegally captured by the separatist regime backed by Russia and an autonomous region with a special status. The population, according to the 2015 census carried out by the de facto government of Transnistria, constitutes approximately 475,000 people (Tyniaev 2017), compared to approximately 684,000 in 1989 (calculated on the basis of the 1989 census data; see Babilunga, Bomeshko, and Shornikov 2007, 87). The official population register provides similar data: by the end of 2016, the population was approximately 470,600 (Statisticheskii yezhegodnik 2017, 20).

Most experts characterize the Transnistrian political system as a centralized and authoritarian presidential republic with façade democratic attributes, a politically loyal and conformist electoral majority with the actual concentration of power in the hands of the security services and affiliated local financial-industrial groups—nowadays, one group, the holding *Sheriff* (Blakkisrud, Helge, and Kolstø 2011; Bobick 2011; Lisenco 2012, 43; Troebst 2004). Transnistria remains dependent in many respects on Russia's political and economic support.

The conflict around Transnistria broke out in 1989, during the period of overall liberalization in the USSR when the newly emerged Moldovan nationalist movement called for the de-Russification of the country and its future accession to Romania. Authorities in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic started the "nationalization" of the legislation and internal policies (Büscher 2008; Burian 2012; Järve 2008). Transnistria, a predominantly Russian-speaking region with the largest part of Moldova's industries employing basically non-Moldovan laborers, was totally alien to the new nationalist trends and demonstrated the fiercest resistance (Büscher 2008; Roper 2001; Tolkacheva 2004; Troebst 2003).

In September 1990, the Congress of All-Levels Peoples' Deputies of the Left Bank declared the foundation of the Transnistrian Republic independent of Moldova. Armed clashes sparked in the autumn of 1991; in March 1992, they escalated into full-fledged warfare that continued until July 1992. Police and armed forces loyal to the government of Moldova tried to reestablish control over the Left Bank but failed, partly because the Transnistrian leadership succeeded in mobilizing mass support and partly because of the interference of the Russian army stationed in the region (Burian 2012, 20–28; Mason 2009). The cease-fire agreement was drawn in July 1992; to date, it has been guaranteed by the tripartite peacekeeping force which is composed of troops of Russia,

Moldova, and Transnistria (Burian 2012, 20–28; Troebst 2003, 438–443). Since then, the process of peaceful settlement has continued and involved international mediators and observers such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and the European Union (Wolff 2011). At present, the peace process is generally at a standstill.

In 2015, 29.1 percent of the population were Russians, 28.6 percent Moldovans, and 22.4 percent Ukrainians, while around 14.0 percent did not specify their ethnicity. The others were mainly Bulgarians, Belarusians, the Gagauz, Germans, Roma, Tatars, and such, and 1.4 percent identified themselves as "Transnistrians" (Tyniaev 2017). The Statistical Yearbook (Statisticheskii yezhegodnik 2017, 19) issued by the de facto authorities of Transnistria, provides somewhat different figures. According to it, Russians (33.8 percent) are followed by Moldovans (33.2 percent), Ukrainians (26.7 percent), and other groups (6.3 percent). The major ethnic groups are spread over the entire territory more or less evenly, although ethnodemographic proportions vary from district to district and many localities have a definite ethnic majority (Transnistria—Ethnic Composition, n.d.).

What Does the Transnistria Diversity Policy Look Like?

Constitutional and Legislative Provisions Concerning Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity

In this subsection, we address the constitutional and legal norms explicitly designed to regulate issues pertinent to ethnicities and languages in Transnistria (for more, see Osipov and Vasilevich 2017). The Transnistrian official diversity policy rests on three ideological pillars: inclusive multinational statehood, equality of citizens, and respect for and recognition of all ethnic cultures and languages.

Transnistria does not define itself as a nation-state in an ethnic sense (with reservations about the adjective *Moldovan* in the state's name). The 1996 Constitution of Transnistria (Konstitutsiya 1996; translation from Russian by the authors) refers to its "multinational people"; such references are also present in the legislation. The constitution also proclaims equal rights and freedoms for "all" without distinction based on sex, race, nationality, language, religion, social origin, beliefs, or personal and social status (Article 17) and prohibits "incitement to racial, national, and religious hatred" (Article 8). According to Article 43, "everyone has the right to preserve his national [ethnic] identity, just as no one can be forced to determine his or her national origin." Also, in accordance with paragraph 2 of the same article, "insulting the national [ethnic] dignity will be prosecuted." According to part 3 of Article 43 of the constitution, "everyone has the right to use his/her native language and to choose the language of communication." Article 12 grants equal status to Moldovan, Russian, and Ukrainian as the official languages.

All these constitutional provisions are replicated and partly developed in the sectoral legislation. The Transnistrian Criminal Code of 2002[1] sets up liability for "violation of the equality of citizens" on several grounds including race, ethnicity, and language (Article 133). The Code of Administrative Offences of 2014 envisages liability for "discrimination," that again means the violation of rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests (Article 5.60; the same provision was in Article 41-11 of the previous code of 2002), when such action (or inaction) does not contain the elements of a criminal offense. Also, Article 278 of the Criminal Code introduces responsibility for "actions aimed at inciting national, racial or religious hatred, humiliation of national dignity, and propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on the grounds of their religion, nationality or race." Transnistria also adopted the law "On Countering Extremist Activity," No. 261-Z-IV, of July 27, 2007, for which as well as for other post-Soviet acts of this kind the Russian anti-extremist law of 2002 served as a blueprint (Verkhovsky 2016, 61–72).

The law "On the Passport of a Citizen of Transnistrian Moldovan Republic," No.104-Z-III, of March 5, 2002 stipulates that a passport (meaning, a Soviet-style domestic ID) can contain, per the holder's choice, an entry on "nationality" (ethnicity) in accordance with the nationality of the holder's parents. If the parents are of different nationalities, then the holder may choose either,

but the record cannot be changed in the future. In fact, this represents a slightly changed provision of the Soviet passport system (Stepanov 2010, 214).

The law "On Languages in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic" of September 8, 1992, amended in 2007, guarantees "linguistic sovereignty of the citizen," (Article 1) which means inter alia "natural and legally equal right of free choice of the language of communication and its use in all spheres of life." According to Article 3 (1), all languages have equal legal status and are provided with the same degree of state protection and support. The status of "official language" is granted to Moldovan, Russian, and Ukrainian (Article 3 (2)); these languages are also acknowledged as the "languages of interethnic communication" (Article 5). National or local authorities are entitled to prioritize one of them as a means of official communication in a certain locality or arrange a local referendum on this issue (Article 3 (3)). The law also allows the usage of the language of the numerical majority within a certain locality (for example, during elections and referenda), or granting the status of the means of interethnic communication to a language other than the three official ones.

The language law proclaims the general equality of the three major languages in official use. The general rule set up in several articles of the language law is that each institution or enterprise decides which official language will be its means of internal communication and paperwork (Articles 9, 10, 19–25); official bodies, the judiciary, and law enforcement establish their linguistic regimes under the approval of the Transnistrian government or local authorities. All are entitled to use any language in public, including official meetings, and translation is to be provided, but the law imposes no obligations in this regard. Article 26 proclaims the free choice of language for training and education, and the use of the three major languages in the educational system is guaranteed "in the interests of ethnic groups, compactly populating a particular area." In theory, citizens have the right to choose the language they use when dealing with government agencies (Osipov and Vasilevich 2017).

A specific feature of Transnistria is that the Moldovan language is recognized only on the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet. Noteworthy in that regard is a resolution adopted by the Supreme Soviet of Transnistria in March 1991, that stresses the ideological underpinnings of the Transnistrian cultural and language policies; it declares "the protection of the identity of Moldovan people, its language and culture" presumably in opposition to "Romanization" (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2012, 9). Article 6 of the law on languages states that "the written form of expression for the Moldovan language in all possible cases is its *original* Cyrillic alphabet," while "an *imposition* of the Latin script entails liability under the law" (our italics). The ban on the public use of the Moldovan language with Latin script is backed with Article 5.28 of the Transnistrian Code of Administrative Offenses of 2014 ("failure to comply with legal requirements of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic concerning languages"), which establishes the penalty of a pecuniary fine of 50 times the officially established minimum wage. The previous code, the Transnistrian Code of Administrative Offenses of 2002, also contained this provision in Article 200-3.

The law "On Mass Media," No. 263-Z-III, of April 11, 2003, establishes no restrictions on the use languages, but sets the requirement that the languages of media outlets must be set up in their registration documents. Moreover, the law prohibits defamation on the grounds of language or ethnicity.

According to Article 7 of the law "On Education," No. 294-Z-III, of June 27, 2003, "freedom of choice of the language of instruction is provided by the establishment of necessary number of relevant educational institutions, classes and groups, and the creation of the necessary conditions for their functioning." Along with this, the law envisages that "in educational institutions of all legal forms and all forms of property, students learn a second official language of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic other than the language of instruction along with the language of instruction, if it is one of the official languages of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. If the language of instruction is not one of the official languages of the Transnistrian Moldovan

Republic, the students are required to learn one of the official languages of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic." Thus, under the legislation on languages and education, the study of languages other than the official ones is not officially guaranteed (Osipov et al. 2014, 177–178; Osipov and Vasilevich 2017, 10–11).

How Far Does the Implementation Go?

The implementation practices differ to a large extent from legal norms. Equality and non-discrimination are not among the issues on the public agenda. The respective provisions of the Criminal Code are not used. The TMR Plenipotentiary on Human Rights (Ombudsman) in practice does not deal with issues of discrimination on ethnic or linguistic grounds, in language policies, language use, or cultural rights.

In fact, the Russian language dominates the entire public life in Transnistria (Hammarberg 2013, 35; Comai and Venturi 2015); however, the two other official languages also occupy certain niches. Russian is the only language of the public administration and the dominant language in education, media, and culture; the scope of the two other official languages is gradually shrinking, in part because the number of speakers is declining (Hammarberg 2013, 36). Other languages play minor roles in the public domain and in turn are neglected by public authorities. At the same time, official statements, educational literature, and cultural events sponsored by public authorities are arranged in a way that articulates and demonstrates the multi-ethnic and multicultural character of the Transnistrian society.

Officially, governmental action aimed at the use and development of the Moldovan and Ukrainian languages in Transnistria is based on so-called target programs (Osipov and Vasilevich 2017, 13–15). Noteworthy in this regard is the law "On Approval of the State Target Program 'The Development of Education in the Moldovan language in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic' for the period of 2005–2009," No. 533-Z-III, of February 10, 2005. A similar state program aimed at the Ukrainian language was in force in the same period. They both envisaged governmental support for the publication of books and periodicals in these two languages, primarily materials for the school system. The program for the Moldovan language (hereafter we refer to the language used in Transnistria as "Moldovan" because of its official name and the Cyrillic script) was extended to 2012 and by the end of 2012 the government elaborated new joint target measures for both languages within the state target program "Textbook" for 2013–2015. The program was not renewed for 2016, while on July 4, 2016 a new state target program for 2017–2021 was adopted, which was largely based on Russian management practices in the sphere of secondary education (Programma 'Uchebnik' 2016). Despite its long-term operational consistency, the program has been constantly suffering from lack of sufficient budget financing. For example, in 2015, only 35 percent of the promised funds were received, whereas the nonrenewal of the program for 2016 is explained through the receipt of significant humanitarian aid from Russia which covered the needs of textbooks for the Transnistrian schools with Russian as the language of instruction ("V 2015 godu GCP 'Uchebnik'" 2015).

According to the official data, in the academic year of 2011–2012, there were 166 public schools providing primary and secondary education; of these, 115 used Russian as the language of instruction, 34 used Moldovan, 12 used Russian and Moldovan (which implies separate language classes), 2 used Ukrainian, and 3 used Russian and Ukrainian (Statistichskii yezhegodnik 2012, 58). In the academic year of 2015–2016 there were 159 schools in total; of these, 115 used Russian as the language of instruction, 26 used Moldovan, 3 used Ukrainian, 14 used Russian and Moldovan, and 1 used Russian and Ukrainian (Analiticheskaia informatsiia, n.d.) These figures also include two all-republican lyceums run respectively in Ukrainian and Moldovan (Perechen podvedomstvennykh, n.d.).

Accordingly, in the academic year 2011–2012, of 46,100 students, 37,600 were taught in Russian (81.6 percent), 4,700 in Moldovan (10.2 percent), and 500 in Ukrainian (1.1 percent), while the rest were pupils of the bi-lingual schools (Statisticheskii yezhegodnik 2012, 58). In 2017–2018, according to the TMR Ministry of Education (n.d.c.), there were 40,909 pupils studying in Russian (90.7 percent), 3,721 in Moldovan (8.3 percent) and 456 in Ukrainian (1.0 percent). Interestingly, the State Service of Statistics collects data about the pupils' ethnicities; in 2015, there were officially 14,803 Moldovans, 12,017 Ukrainians, 14,645 Russians, 1,126 Bulgarians, 628 Gagauzians and 1,068 "others" (Osnovnye pokazateli deiatelnosti, 2016).

In addition to the language of instruction, all pupils are obliged to study a second official language. About one-third of the schools teach Ukrainian and two-thirds teach Moldovan as the second language (Analiticheskaia informatsiia, n.d.) The usage of languages in higher education in Transnistria also demonstrates the dominant role of the Russian language.

Transnistria has no special official bodies in charge of ethnocultural policy. There is no commission or other unit within the Supreme Soviet (the parliament) that would focus on ethnic relations. Transnistria has dozens of ethnicity-based civil society organizations. A common scheme comprises a republican civil society organization (such as the Union of Russian Communities, the Union of Moldovans, or the Union of Ukrainians), each of which is composed of a few locals for each nationality, thus serving as an umbrella organization. All civil society organizations demonstrate loyalty to the Transnistrian official leadership. They all cooperate with the authorities and in turn receive support in the form of discounted or free rent of premises and sometimes sponsorship for individual events (Osipov and Vasilevich 2017, 15–16).

Transnistria has no special mechanisms for the representation of ethnic or linguistic groups in the state power structure. High-ranking members of three major ethnic umbrella civil society organizations participate in the work of the Public Chamber of Transnistria, an advisory body composed of appointed civil society representatives, as its full members or experts along with representatives of other organizations or professional groups. In June 2016, two members of Russian ethnic nongovernmental organizations and two from Moldovan organizations are members of the Public Chamber. However, this body has no commission or working group on ethnic issues, and ethnicity- or language-related affairs are not on the Public Chamber's agenda according to its working plans and reports. Special consultative bodies on ethnic issues at the local level ceased operations in the early 2000s, but ethnic civil society organizations are still members of advisory councils under several executive bodies.

Is There a Way to Assess TMR Diversity Policies?

If by "diversity policy" one means a systemic, targeted treatment of ethnic categories of the population by public organizations and the related robust system of institutions, then this category would be highly questionable in regard to Transnistria. Here, it is appropriate to recall the notions of instrumental and symbolic policies as well as the distinction between them.

The former are viewed as activities having "resource effects" and the latter have "interpretative" ones (Schneider and Ingram 2008, 207). *Symbolic politics* can be defined as a sphere where publicly relevant narratives and meanings are produced, while *instrumental politics* are actions resulting in the enforcement of concrete strategies and decisions (Osipov 2012, 427). There is no clear division between the two areas: rhetoric can be open to different interpretations, while actions may have a symbolic meaning or may not necessarily follow the related rhetoric (Birkland 2005). Although symbolic policies do not have a direct substantive effect, by creating and imposing meanings and interpretations, as well as forming and channelling public claims and expectations, they indirectly shape political action (Edelman 1971, 7–45).

According to Aktürk's typology (2012, 11–13), Transnistria has a multi-ethnic regime. None of the major ethnic groups is excluded from the public domain, and all groups enjoy symbolic recognition. Beyond this, there is no room for applying such notions as consociationalism or

power sharing with regard to the balance of power or access to resources for ethnic or linguistic categories. Definitely, there are no mechanisms for group autonomy, representation, or even intergroup coalition building.

Moreover, the official rhetoric has changed, and over the last 15 years the official authorities to a lesser extent emphasize multinationality or multi-ethnicity by referring to the existence of different communities with their specific needs and interests. While, in the 1990s, there was a clear emphasis on the protection of "genuine" Moldovan identity, later on in the 2000s, when official Chişinău reaffirmed its commitment to secure Moldovan nationhood separate from Romania, the Transnistrian authorities muted the previous agenda and pushed a separate Transnistrian "national identity" to the forefront (Dembinska and Danero Iglesias 2013).

There are equal rights provisions in Transnistrian constitution and the branch legislation, but they bear primarily symbolic meaning and are not enforced by the authorities or employed by the populace. The answer to the question of whether the nonimplementation is a cause or outcome of meager public demand is beyond the scope of this article. The same question concerns the unequal usage and functioning of languages despite their legislative protection and the equal status of the major three.

There are public institutions that employ and promote languages other than Russian (which is in fact the dominant language) in education, cultural production, and mass media. One can say that, in this area, the system primarily performs the function of symbolic representation while the instrumental performance lags far behind. However, ethnic and linguistic pluralism (given that, in Transnistria, as elsewhere in Eurasia, language is perceived as an attribute of ethnicity) is institutionalized through public organizations and resources allocated by the government; it directly involves a large segment of the population, as clients and employees and cannot be regarded as merely window dressing or imitation.

In total, the diversity policy of Transnistria can be referred as primarily symbolic and inconsistent in terms of the gaps between the "talk" and "action" of the government (Brunsson 1989). Most of the arrangements in this framework do not have any direct or substantive impact on the daily lives of most inhabitants except for the requirement to take lessons in Moldovan or Ukrainian at school. Another important characteristic is the significant degree of informality, given those rules or patterns that are "created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels" (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 725).

The scenarios and content of communication between public authorities and ethnicity-based civic organizations have a minimal degree of formal institutionalization and take place in a shadow. Regularly, associations of the major three ethnicities make public statements and other gestures in support of the acting government; it is not clear whether it is an outcome of pressure or a trade-off (Protsyk 2012, 179). The same concerns the recruitment and promotion of ethnic activists within the governmental institutions and vice versa—the participation of public officials in ethnic associations.

Official ethnic statistics in Transnistria are very limited in scope and content and there is very little information about the social dynamics of ethnic groups and possible ethnic disparities. There have been some numerical data and anecdotal evidence about the underrepresentation of ethnic Moldovans in government and businesses. Yet one cannot say that there is an obvious exclusion of Moldovans and the disproportions can have different interpretations. In part, the explanation could be that Moldovans are a primarily rural population with lesser social and professional opportunities (Protsyk 2009, 11; Protsyk 2012, 178; King 1999, 183).

To sum up, we can say that there is a gap between the symbolic and instrumental components of diversity policies and a poor implementation of the formal norms.

Is Multi-ethnicity a Source of Problems?

One may legitimately assume that in Transnistria popular attitude to the government and the very the statehood must be different and quite often critical. The implementation of the laws on

languages, education, and culture lags far behind the official promises and is alternately random and selective; the entire population, including the proportion of non-Russian ethnicities, experiences homogenizing policies. Supposedly, critical attitudes might correlate with ethnic affiliation because people belonging to different ethnic and linguistic categories benefit from public policies to unequal degrees.

One may expect cleavages, grievances or claim making on ethnocultural grounds but, in fact, this does not take place. There have been no signs of local separatism in favor of joining mainland Moldova or Ukraine, even at the inception of the Transnistrian independence, although the demographic and geographic composition of Transnistria in theory favored such motions. There is no evidence of mass emigration of ethnic Ukrainians and Moldovans on ethnic grounds, and the ethnic proportions of the population generally remain intact. We note that the references to the data of the 1989 population census made in the literature are often incorrect, since most authors disregard the fact that the current de facto border of Transnistria does not coincide with the previous administrative borders of Soviet districts. In this regard, some references to the share of ethnic Moldovans in Transnistria as 38 percent or 40 percent (Kolstø 2006, 731) are not accurate either; on the Left Bank it was lower and basically has not changed to date.

Transnistria can be characterized as an "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler 2013), "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way 2002), and a "hybrid regime" (Protsyk 2012), which repeatedly proves its high degree of legitimacy. For example, in the referendum held on September 17, 2006, 96.61 percent of Transnistrian voters rejected integration with Moldova while 98.07 percent approved independence and a possible future integration into Russia; the turnout was 78.55 percent (Database and Search Engine for Direct Democracy. n.d.a.; Database and Search Engine for Direct Democracy. n.d.b.). All local ethnicities vote alike at numerous referenda and elections and therefore in fact equally approve of local diversity policies. Sociological surveys repeatedly demonstrate that there are no big differences in attitudes to major political issues between the three major ethnicities (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2014; O'Loughlin, Toal, and Chamberlain-Creangă 2013). Manifestations of ethnic and religious enmity occur, but they are very few; for example, the Jewish community used to report several anti-Semitic incidents (Osipov and Vasilevich 2017, 12).

Perhaps, the only visible problem of ethnic relations and language policy in Transnistria is the issue of the so-called Moldovan language schools using the Latin alphabet. A specific feature of Transnistria is that the Moldovan language is recognized only on the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet, but, in 1989, Moldovan lawmakers switched the Moldovan language to the Latin script. In the early 1990s, the administrations of several schools on the Left Bank and the parents of their students chose to conduct the educational process in the Moldovan language based on the Latin alphabet. These schools were cut off from public funding (thus rendering them private institutions in a legal vacuum) and experienced pressure up to police checks, fines, eviction from the premises, cessation of water, electricity, and sewage supplies, and direct threats. Therefore, by the mid-1990s they found themselves on the verge of closure and unable to operate normally (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2012). At this time, most of these schools came under the jurisdiction of the Moldovan Ministry of Education, and some were forced to move to territory controlled by the authorities of Moldova (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2012, 13–14). Later on, the official pressure of Transnistrian authorities decreased but never ended, and most Latin-script schools continue to function.

In the academic year 2012–2013, there were eight Latin-script schools, with 1,244 pupils (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2012, 10–13); there were also 4,688 students in public schools of the TMR where the language of instruction was Moldovan with Cyrillic graphics (Hammarberg 2013, 37). In the academic year 2017–2018, the number of Latin-script schools remained eight, providing education for more than 1,000 pupils (Cojocari 2018).

The Effects of General Political and Social Conditions

The first explanation of the Transnistrian ethnopolitical stability lying on the surface is the effectiveness of the violence and coercive power of Transnistria de facto statehood. This argument, although correct, can be hardly considered sufficient.

The Transnistrian regime has definitely been authoritarian and repressive from its very outset, and multiple restrictions of civil and political rights, particularly freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and the right to association, are well documented (Hammarberg 2013; Postica 2012; Protsyk 2009; Troebst 2004; Zubco 2016). Although ethnocultural issues are not welcomed by the ruling elite, they are not taboo and can be raised and discussed in public. For example, even a former chair of the Transnistrian parliament, Grigorii Marakutsa, was explicitly complaining about the extinction of the Moldovan language in Transnistria at the inaugural ceremony of the newly elected President Shevchuk (Dniesterpost 2011). There are also numerous opportunities for deputies of the parliament and major ethnic nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that do not belong to political opposition and those represented in the Public Chamber, to raise ethnocultural issues outside of political contexts. However, this does not happen. Then one should not exaggerate the repressive capacity of the Transnistrian regime. It has not been able to fully suppress and close down the so-called Latin-script Moldovan schools, and this case clearly demonstrates that resistance is feasible. There is no doubt that the Transnistrian authorities would be able to cope with any tensions on ethnic grounds, but the puzzling circumstance here is that said tensions (except for the fight over the Latin-script schools) have taken place at all over the years.

Another explanation rests on the view that the region is deeply Russified culturally and linguistically; in fact, the majority rule of the Russian and Russified population marginalizes and diminishes diversity. To a high degree, such an explanation would be correct, but it is also simplistic. Indeed, the Transnistrian authorities portray their statehood as an outpost of Russia and a part of the "Russian World" in cultural terms. There are also many indicators that, in both public and private spheres, the Transnistrian society is to a high degree linguistically and culturally homogeneous. However, the dominance of the Russian language and Soviet (or post-Soviet) pop culture based on Russian in many parts of the former Soviet Union, particularly in such countries as Ukraine, Belarus, or Kazakhstan (Pavlenko 2008), does not predetermine popular ethnic affiliations or attitudes toward national statehood. Besides, ethnic and linguistic pluralism in Transnistria is not imitative since it has stable institutional and financial underpinnings and involves a sizeable segment of the population. Symbolically, Transnistria is an entity with an explicit ethnic—Moldovan, rather than Russian—foundation.

The next also widely spread explanation rests on the idea that Transnistria and its political system rest on an already deeply embedded regional identity (Babilunga, Bomeshko, and Shornikov 2007, 142–143; Kolstø 2006, 731; Kolstø and Malgin 1998; Troebst 2004). A few authors also point out that the population's self-perception and self-representation remain basically Soviet and rest on the Soviet nostalgia (Munteanu and Munteanu 2007, 57–58; Tolkacheva 2004, 87–88). We believe that such approaches build on shaky assumptions.

The case of Transnistria differs from other post-Soviet conflicts by the absence of tensions and popular conflictual narratives before 1989 (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Chamberlain-Creangă 2013). Prior to the conflict of 1990–1992, there had been no evidence of a Left Bank "identity" or even an idea of the Transnistrian region (Cojocaru 2006, 262). Specific regional identity-based claims were not the main factor which determined the emergence of the conflict and even the notions of "Transnistria" and "Transnistrian people" did not exist until the conflict erupted (Sofransky 2002). The mass mobilization of activists around the major industrial enterprises and not along ethnic lines or regional affiliations in 1990–1992 is relatively well studied and described (Mason 2009).

The approach in question implies that collective "identity" is something that is inevitably translated into human behavior and this looks highly questionable in itself (Brubaker and Cooper

2000). One can assume that the local elites and population en masse wish for all Transnistrian ethnicities to sideline their ethnic affiliations in favor of regional Transnistrian "identity," but there is no credible proof of this. What one can only witness is the official rhetoric of Transnistrian patriotism (Bobick 2011), a wide usage of Soviet and Russian imperial symbols and the related mass conformism of the populace.

The listed explanations are correct, but not sufficient; besides, there are other circumstances which can be added to the list but are rarely mentioned in the given context. In most Eurasian states, the population demonstrates conformism and, in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian environments where political competition is absent or restricted, vote for the incumbents. These societies can be described as basically depoliticized in the meaning that people prefer individual strategies of survival to collective action (Brown 2003). Besides, the institutional framework of neo-patrimonial relations (see Erdmann and Engel 2007; Fisun 2012; Hale 2007) also serves as a stabilizing force. In the case of Transnistria, most inhabitants of the region are employees in the public sector or directly dependent on the government or affiliated corporations in another way (Bobick 2011). This also explains the common conformism and opportunism. The system of patronage and clientele networks ensures that potential spokespersons of ethnic communities are incorporated into the officialdom, either directly or indirectly through controlled nongovernmental organizations and advisory bodies (such as Public Chambers).

Second, all post-Soviet polities are partly based on flexible informal mechanisms of governance (Polese and Morris 2015). This opens up multiple opportunities for social adaptation to the given circumstances, since formal rules can be circumvented, renegotiated, reinterpreted in different ways, or ignored (Polese 2011, 40).

Is There a Room for Diversity Policy?

How can one assess and measure the impact of deliberate strategies and techniques of governance aimed at ethnic diversity in Transnistria beyond the general stabilizing factors? The answer can be found if diversity policies are understood widely as the entirety of official discourses and practical activities somehow concerning multilingualism and multi-ethnicity. Assuming this, one can notice that Transnistria has built up a system of recurrent symbolic, discursive, and organizational practices which effectively shape and channel public mindsets and behavior in regard to the region's ethnic and linguistic pluralism.

At first glance, the official approach to ethnic diversity in Transnistria, as in most other post-Soviet polities, looks inconsistent. However, it turns out that the system's effectiveness is achieved in part because of its eclecticism and flexibility. One should approach its functioning in three areas: the production of narratives, elite mobility, and daily life. In all three, the system's efficacy can be hardly grasped if one perceives ethnicities or "identities" as entities and agencies rather than practices of social categorization and adaptation to categorizations.

As Elizabeth Dunn and Michael S. Bobick conclude, unity and cohesion of such statehoods as Transnistria are basically secured not through suppression but rather through dominant discourses and the framing of debates (2014, 409). What at first glance looks inconsistent functions as an all-embracing approach acknowledging and accommodating a variety of views and expectations, including wishes to maintain and revive the Moldovan culture, fears of a new violent confrontation, negative expectations of any changes leading to discrimination, Soviet nostalgia, desires not to be cut off from Russia, and so forth. Notably, the mainstream narrative of Transnistria—as is the Soviet Union in its last years (when ethnic issues became a part of public debates)—is a non-conflictual one. Unlike discourse based on the notions of "minority" and "nondiscrimination," it does not imply or generate images of dominant and subordinate groups. The symbolic adversary is placed outside the given society and, in the case of Transnistria, this is Romania with its imagined expansion (King 1999, 2003).

Part and parcel of this dominant narrative in Transnistria is a "siege mentality," or the image of a "besieged fortress" (Caspersen 2011, 85). The conflict around Transnistria from its very outset was aggravated on both banks of the Dniester with a popular mythology of Romania as the hostile "other" (Cojocaru 2006, 264). The local historic narratives in Transnistria emphasize Romania's role as an ally of Nazi Germany and the occupying force that committed crimes against civilians during World War II. In other words, while one can talk about skepticism toward closer relations or ultimate unification with Romania on the Right Bank, on the Left Bank it escalates to an elite and popular phobia fueled with official propaganda.

On the contrary, numerous official statements and several legal provisions declare Transnistria as a hearth and a guarantor of the "genuine" Moldovan identity and the Moldovan language based on its "original" Cyrillic script. Noteworthy in this respect is a clear parallel between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria. Moldova's official nationalism rests on the so-called doctrine of Moldovenism, which implies the existence of Moldovan national identity is separate from the Romanian nation, and which is enshrined in Moldova's Constitution and legislation (Ţîcu 2016, 55–57). One may say that Transnistria defends the doctrine of Moldovenism in an even more radical and grotesque version than Moldova itself (Munteanu and Munteanu 2007, 57).

The local diversity policies are thus affected by the phobias of Moldovan nationalism allegedly backed by Romanian involvement, praise to the Soviet "internationalism" and "people's friendship," and loyalty to a combination of selected historic myths which include the "genuine" Moldovan identity, the Soviet victory in World War II, and the Russia/Soviet "civilizing" mission in the region. On top of this, the system of propaganda, education, and collective rituals is combined with common narrative of the regional "nationhood."

The official narrative offers answers to all potential questions and contains no overt contradictions; it shall be therefore regarded as coherent rather than fragmented. Symbolically, it prevents internal cleavages and conflicts and in the given circumstances leaves no room for alternative explanatory schemes. Thus, one can talk about the effective hegemonic strategy (Gramsci 1971) of the local elite (Osipov et al. 2014).

Institutionally, the Transnistrian system of governance does not in principle obstruct upward mobility of people belonging to different ethnicities; even if the statistic representation of different groups in the local elite was disproportionate, non-Russians serve as role models. Emblematic cases are the former chairs of the Transnistrian parliament Grigorii Marakutsa and Mikhail Burla, who publicly positioned themselves as Moldovan and Romanian respectively, or Vladimir Bodnar, a former deputy chair of the parliament and leading activist of Transnistrian Ukrainians. Concurrently, public institutions are basically not divided along ethnic lines and ethnicity-based civil society organizations are dependent on the government. Therefore, the system does not create an institutional basis for the construction and articulation of separate ethnic interests and demands.

In its daily life, the populace gets messages which discourage any activities contravening the publicly accepted agendas and, on the contrary, create incentives to participate in the mainstream institutions and practices. The Transnistria authorities managed to create and maintain local "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995) as an institutional and discursive routine which binds all the region's inhabitants. According to the estimates of Moldovan human rights organization Promo-Lex, around 6,000 cultural events were arranged in 2015 alone by public authorities of Transnistria and affiliated organizations (Zubco 2016, 14). Most of these events are either professional concerts or mass celebrations of Transnistria's alleged unity with Russia or commemorations of certain historic events significant in the light of Transnistrian national ideology. Taking into account the well-functioning educational system and mass media orchestrated by the government, one can conclude that the Transnistrian rulers managed to create and master the "infrastructural power" (Mann 1984) of daily routines, rituals, and narratives that glue together the diverse population of the region.

The last point is that the origins of Transnistrian diversity policy can be easily derived from the Soviet nationalities policy of the late 1980s. It also strived to produce consent in the society

through sophisticated means (Annus 2015, 602) along with coercion. It also combined "crypto-nationalism" (Ikhlov 2014) or acknowledgment of ethnonational statehood with rhetoric of "internationalism" and civil equality; symbolic recognition of linguistic and cultural pluralism does not entail respective practical measures. References to multi-ethnicity are not followed by the institutionalization of ethnic communities; cooperation between official authorities and ethnicity-based nongovernmental organizations in fact does not envisage any independent role of the latter but rather compliance with the agendas imposed by the authorities. The legislation related to language and ethnicity remains declarative, vaguely formulated, and open to inter-pretation; its implementation is done on an ad hoc basis and often depends on informal practices and mechanisms.

Conclusion

The Transnistrian experience of nation-building can be assessed as a success story; it has managed to prevent cleavages and conflicts on ethnic grounds and provide for the governability of its multi-ethnic population. Within this nation-building framework, one can single out a segment of practices which can be delineated and identified as diversity policy. The Transnistrian diversity policy can be described as predominantly symbolic production, or the production of meanings (Bourdieu 1993, 37) being aimed at the creation of Transnistria's image as a cohesive multi-ethnic state. In practical terms, it combined culturally and linguistically homogenizing policies for the society at large with the maintenance of cultural and educational institutions serving speakers of languages other than Russian.

Multi-ethnicity has been institutionalized in Transnistria in a way that contributes to effective infrastructural power, provides for hegemonic discourse, and secures the cooptation of potential ethnic spokespersons. An advantage of the Transnistrian model is its flexibility, eclecticism, and combination of formal and informal institutional settings.

The Transnistrian case can be hardly considered exceptional; most post-Soviet countries demonstrate similar features in their policies targeting their multi-ethnicity and multilingualism. These are: the eclectic and inconsistent character of the official narratives; "systemic hypocrisy," or the gap between official "talk" and "action" (Brunsson 1989); and the combination of informal and formal institutions that provide multiple opportunities for people's adaptation to existing political and economic realities (Osipov et al. 2014).

From a broader geographical perspective, there is also no need to expect diversity policies to be based on a coherent strategy and include institutionalization of ethnic groups as collective agents. On the contrary, a loose system that, on the one hand, aims at generating eclectic narratives and, on the other, provides multiple opportunities for individual adjustment to the established "regime of ethnicity" may create more stable systems of governance.

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Note

1 Here and below the laws of Transnistria are cited from the legal information database available at the official website of the TMR President: http://president.gospmr.org/pravovye-akty/zakoni/; translation from Russian are of the authors.

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