

Over the River and into Utopia

Squeezed between the Dniester River and the Ukraine, Transnistria isn't recognised by any of the world's governments. Yet it has its own flag, currency, a capital and a Supreme Soviet with full powers. Welcome to the last of the Soviet socialist republics.

by Danilo Elia

A couple of tourists emerge from the hostel in Tiraspol. They might be Dutch, or German. Timoti rubs his hands with glee, since this is his *bisniz*: sightseers roaming the Soviet amusement park that is Transnistria. "If tourists are happy gawking at hammers and sickles, statues of Lenin and the House of Soviets, why not take advantage of it?" he says.

You won't find it on a map, its capital city isn't listed among Europe's capitals and its flag doesn't fly outside the UN headquarters. The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, or Transnistria for short, is a breakaway territory, formed from the fragments of the USSR when it collapsed. It is, in effect, the last Soviet socialist republic in existence, a strip of land 400 kilometres long, squeezed between the Dniester River and the Ukraine.

It's officially part of Moldova, yet on the road from Chişinău to Tiraspol, the last Moldovan soldier sits in a rusty sentry box several kilometres before the river border. The bridge over the Dniester is garrisoned by the tanks of Russia's 14th Guards Army, which has been peacekeeping since a 1992 ceasefire. And in the midst of potato fields as fertile as the banks of the Nile, there sits a border crossing that should not exist.

Transnistria has dropped out of history. Back when the Soviet empire started losing its first pieces, Tiraspol proclaimed its independ-



ence as the 16th Soviet republic. Gorbachev had other things on his mind at the time, and the decree annulling the secession got lost in the tangles of red tape in Moscow. A few months later, while millions of people from Murmansk to Vladivostok surveyed the ruins of the empire in a daze, Transnistria hoisted its red-and-green flag with the Soviet emblem.

It took another year for Moldova, an infant republic itself, to realise that it was missing a part and try to take it back through force. The Red Army, which had never left the region, sided with the 330,000 Russians living on the other side of the river. A few shots were fired, a few lives were lost, but the situation remained as it is today.

Timoti doesn't just manage the hostel; he also takes tourists on sightseeing tours of the



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☒ A bust of Lenin outside the Palace of the Soviets in Tiraspol, the capital of Transnistria, the last soviet socialist republic, yet to be recognised by any government in the world.

☒ Officers in Transnistria. According to western police sources Transnistria is a crossroads for illegal trafficking.

small city centre that include “a visit to the House of Soviets, the Lenin monument and the Great Patriotic War memorial.” Tiraspol is a provincial town with pretensions of being a capital: the picture gallery which displays photos of local heroes (cosmonauts, *nomenklatura* notables and Red Army generals) is immaculate, the billboards have been replaced with Soviet-era effigies while the square once used for military parades nowadays sees nothing more than an old UAZ rattling across it from time to time.

In his bestseller *Siberian Education*, which is set here in Transnistria, native son Nicolai Linin (now a naturalised Italian) describes a country run by gangs that fall into one of two categories: common criminals or honest criminals. Besides Linin’s novel, there have been

countless reports from Western police alleging that Transnistria is a crossroads for illegal trafficking, ranging from drugs to heavy weaponry, which has earned the country the nickname of ‘Europe’s black hole’ in the Western media. “Not true,” Timoti swears. “It’s just the sensationalism of the foreign press. They come here for one day, hole up in their hotels and make it all up.”

A basic tomato and cheese pizza at Andy’s Pizza in the centrally located 25 October Street costs at least 70 Transnistrian roubles [just under €5], and you’d better spend all you have before you leave the country, since no currency exchange outlet will take them.

Anton works at the central bank where they print all the colourful bills used to pay salaries here, and as Monopoly money in the rest of the world. “I love my country”, Anton says. “It’s unique, you know. We’re actually in Moldova, and we can come and go there whenever and however we please. But we’re also Russian. Yet when those who’ve headed over to Russia to find jobs come back here, it smells different, it smell of home.” His enthusiasm is rather uncommon here in Transnistria, but Anton has a good job, unlike most of his compatriots. “People do a lot of waiting around here”, he admits. “We’re all waiting, for things to get better, for our country to become a normal country. But we’re optimistic, since we all voted for Shevchuk”.

Yevgeny Shevchuk – the former president of the Supreme Soviet, considered a reformer – won the 2011 presidential elections with a 75% majority, putting an end to the uninterrupted 20-year reign of Igor Smirnov, a die-hard Soviet throwback with Brezhnevian eyebrows. Shevchuk represents many people’s hopes for change. “The communist era is finally history, and we’re becoming a post-Soviet state, twenty years later than the other former USSR republics”, says Anton. What he



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doesn't say is that it is not yet clear whether this change of president will make any difference, or what kind of difference at that.

Shevchuk is a young technocrat who has forced the old *nomenklatura* into retirement, yet he does not support Moldova's EU leanings and looks east instead. During the last Russian presidential elections, he invited all registered Transnistrian voters to choose Vladimir Putin, "to strengthen Transnistria's ties to Great Russia."

In the late afternoon's lengthening shadows, the centre of Tiraspol starts to look like a De Chirico painting. "Yeah, it's pretty dead at night. For nightlife you have to go to Chişinău",

says Dima, and he should know: his band plays plenty of gigs in town, but they prefer playing in Moldova. "There isn't a lot for young people to do around here. And they don't have much of a future here either."

Dima (stage name Daniel) plays heavy metal and, at 29, has pretty clear ideas about Transnistria: "This whole story about independence is one big mess. It's just a game the pols in Moscow and Chişinău play. We young people couldn't care less. What is Transnistria? The foreign newspapers call it 'the country that doesn't exist', and you know what? They're right, it doesn't. It's just a fantasy dreamed up by the politicians, and we're all trapped in it."

It's evening now and Timoti's tourists are back. They've had a special treat: a full-blown parade for Victory Day, to celebrate the 68th anniversary of the Red Army's defeat of the Nazis. Under sunny skies, veterans dripping with medals, accompanied by young pioneers, placed wreaths before the eternal flame, as red flags flapped in the spring breeze. "They've had their 'Back in the USSR' day," jokes Timoti, "and now we're going to top it off with a few rounds of vodka. Tomorrow, they go back to the twenty-first century."

For most people around here, though, there's no return ticket out of the Transnistrian utopia. **E**