

# The Chicken or the Egg? Causes of the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict

Written by Jonathan C. Lima Matthews

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In 1992 civil conflict sparked between two competing groups in the state of Moldova. The two warring parties were the Moldovans who occupy the majority of the territory in Moldova, known historically as Bessarabia, and the Transnistrians who occupy the smaller eastern region of Moldova known as Transnistria. Conflict began in March of 1992, and “froze” in July of the same year (Sanchez, 2009). That is, both warring parties agreed upon a ceasefire, and the *de facto* state of Transnistria (see fig. 1) was born. Greater explanation as to the cause of the conflict will be given later in this paper, but in summary, the cause of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict can be put down to a series of political, social and economic variables. It was these factors that fomented tensions within Transnistria against wider Moldova, causing Transnistrians to resist the rule of Chisinau and secede.

Most commonly it is economic variables that are seen as the primary cause of ethnic conflict, with other more politically motivated factors cited as being much less important (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998). However, scholars such as Kaufman have demonstrated the importance of political variables in the causation of ethnic conflict (1996, p. 109). These two conflicting arguments — both being valid in part — necessitate the need for a critical examination of them. This project will use the Moldova-Transnistria conflict as a basis for measuring the importance of the competing variables in the initiation of this ethnic conflict.

The project contends that economic variables were a necessary but insufficient cause of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict. In the first section this paper will introduce and critically explore competing theories of ethnic conflict, with specific reference to the role of economic variables. The second section will briefly detail the context and background of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict in order to identify it as an ethnic conflict, and cite its relevance in this debate. The third section will critically evaluate this conflict, utilising the findings in section one and two. This paper will support these research aims by using a plethora of literature from academic journals. It will also utilise qualitative data sets from country reports by the think-tank, International Crisis Group; the Association for Participatory Democracy (“ADEPT”); and the CIA World Fact Book.

Collier and Hoeffler (1998 & 2004) tender some of the key arguments that place economic variables as the prime motivator of ethnic conflict. Utilising an economics approach, rather than a political science one, they argue that economic variables — factors that relate to ‘greed’ — have greater explanatory power in explaining the causes of ethnic conflict, over political and social variables that relate to ‘grievance’ (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998 & 2004; Cordell & Wolff, 2010, p. 32; Murshed & Tadjoeeddin, 2007, p. 1). Grievance focuses on political factors that fuel conflict such as relative deprivation, or ‘horizontal inequality’, which can be generally attributed to government and is therefore a political factor (Murshed & Tadjoeeddin, 2007, p. 1). The two key assumptions Collier and Hoeffler make about the cause of ethnic conflict is first that the two core objectives of rebellion are to capture the state or secede from it (1998, pp. 563-564). And second, the incentive for rebellion is based on a probable chance of victory, and the capacity of a new rebel government being able to reward its supporters (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998, p. 564). These two assumptions are relatively undisputable as they are the most likely reasons behind rebellion, however, they do not offer any explanation of possible social and political motivations for it.

In order to prove their assumptions, Collier and Hoeffler (1998) tested them against a large quantitative data set of

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civil wars finding: (1) civil war is mainly a phenomenon of low-income states (p. 568); (2) a presence of natural resources increases the likelihood of conflict (p. 571); (3) states with large populations are at a higher risk of civil war (p. 569); and (4) ethno-linguistic fractionalisation is not what damages societies (p. 570). In addition they found that a better educated, better earning populace, and a national economy with a good growth rate, significantly reduces the risk of inter-communal violence (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998, p. 571 & 2004, p. 588).

A primary issue with the findings of Collier and Hoeffler is that to a large extent, they ignore the significance of social and political variables as causes of ethnic conflict (1998, p. 571 & 2004, p. 588). It is difficult to ignore the significance of these variables being mutually important as economic factors in motivating ethnic conflict (Cordell & Wolff 2010, p. 35; Murshed & Tadjoeeddin, 2007, p. 15). This assertion is particularly salient when the most infamous contemporary ethnic conflicts are taken into consideration. Ethnic conflict in Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda can be drawn upon as examples of civil war onset by mutually important political, social and economic factors (Cordell & Wolff, 2010, p. 36).

There are other limitations to the findings Collier and Hoeffler have elicited from their data sets (1998 & 2004). The authors offer no explanation for the distinction between ethnic and non-ethnic conflict in their chosen data sets, which is often a problem in this form of analysis (Collier and Hoeffler, 1998 & 2004; Horowitz, 2008, p. 309). The less ethnic conflict cases included in the data, the more obtuse Collier and Hoeffler's explanations of the causes of ethnic conflict become (Cordell & Wolff, 2010, pp. 35-36). Collier and Hoeffler's conclusions may have been far more convincing if they had considered making this distinction in the data, and omitted non-ethnic conflicts from their analysis (Horowitz, 2008, p. 310). Critics argue that not only does this quantitative method provide an inaccurate measure of the cause of ethnic conflict, but that qualitative analysis provides a greater accuracy of the influence and inter-play between economic and non-economic variables (Ballentine & Sherman, 2003, cited by Cordell & Wolff, 2010, p. 35).

Further, Collier and Hoeffler (1998 & 2004) see individual's merely as economic agents. This is evidenced by the fact that both Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler come from an economics background, and thus are prone to this epistemological position (Collier, 2010; Cordell & Wolff, 2010, p. 33; Hoeffler, 2011; Murshed & Tadjoeeddin, 2007, p. 3). Viewing participants of ethnic conflict in this way by in large disregards any grievances, resentment, and irreconcilable goals that rebels may harbour against their enemy. Furthermore, these grievance-motivated factors could, and should, be recognised by Collier and Hoeffler as legitimate causes of conflict, in tandem with the economic casual factors they outline. This will be made clearer with an explanation of a counter argument explaining other causes of the onset of ethnic conflict. Advocates of the 'Perestroika movement', which opposes the over-use of rational-choice theory in political science issues, such as conflict onset, also acknowledge the deficiency in solely utilizing quantitative methods (Monroe, 2005). This is specifically because rational-choice models can lose sight of the realities of real life in their often complex mathematical equations (Monroe, 2005).

Kaufman (1996), who utilised an empirical political science approach, presented his argument of the onset of ethnic conflict, harnessing the Moldova-Transnistria conflict as his case study. First he found that hostile masses, belligerent leaders, and inter-ethnic security dilemmas are necessary if an ethnic war is to result (Kaufman, 1996, p. 109). Second, he argues that grievances are pre-conditions for mass hostility, fuelled by variables such as the serious fear of extinction that in turn creates a security dilemma and ultimately transpiring into conflict (Kaufman, 1996, pp. 109 & 113). He defines a security dilemma in this context as a situation, whereby both actors define their needs in a way that cause the opposing actor to fear the threat of extinction (Kaufman, 1996, p. 109). Finally, Kaufman (1996, p. 113) sees minority status within a state as an important casual variable for ethnic conflict, particularly when it leads to marginalisation. Arguing cogently, and applying his assumptions to the context of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict, Kaufman demonstrated that political and social variables are as important to the explanation of ethnic conflict onset as economic arguments. Although Kaufman (1996) conducted a micro-level study, evidence detailed above of other past ethnic conflicts support his argument that variables other than economic ones are important for ethnic conflict onset (Cordell & Wolff, 2010, p. 36).

Although this section has been critical of the role of economic variables as a cause of ethnic conflict, it does not disregard them completely. Scholars of political science acknowledge their importance (Cordell & Wolff, 2010;

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Griffiths, 2009; Horowitz, 2000; Horowitz, 2008; Murshed & Tadjoeeddin, 2007). However, other variables that are politically and socially motivated have mutually significant roles in that onset also. Contextualising the Moldova-Transnistria conflict and critically evaluating it in the following sections will contextualise these arguments.

In order to cite the relevance of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict in this debate, a criterion of what constitutes an ethnic conflict must first be explained. First, the Transnistrians must fall into a category of ethnically motivated actors. Gurr and Harff (1994) advanced a typology of four groups of politically active ethnic groups that trigger ethnic conflict. The four politically active ethnic groups are: 'ethnonationalists', indigenous people/'peoples of the frontier', 'communal contenders' and 'ethnoclasses' (Gurr & Harff, 1999, p. 15). Ethnonationalists are an ethnic group that identifies with a homeland, whom have the intention to either seek greater autonomy from the "rump" state (the original territory), or establish an independent sovereign state by seceding from it (Gurr and Harff, 1994, pp. 15 & 26; Sambanis & Schulofer-Wohl, 2009, p. 99). The rebels of Transnistria firmly fall into the ethnonationalist definition. Second, in his definition of non-ethnic conflict, Carment argues that ethnicity can neither be a triggering factor nor be present in any stage of the ensuing conflict (1993, p. 149). The reverse of this is his definition of ethnic conflict (1993, p. 149). As Transnistrians fall into the category of an ethnonationalist group, the motivation for the Moldova-Transnistria conflict is clearly ethnically motivated in its nature (Sanchez, 2009, p. 157). The Conflict can thus be accurately defined as an ethnic conflict, placing its relevance in this debate.

The history of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict can be traced back to Romanian rule in Moldova (Ciscel, 2008, p. 379). During Romanian rule over Moldova the influence of the Romanian language and culture facilitated the creation of a strong pro-Romanian identity within the larger area of Moldova, traditionally known as Bessarabia (Ciscel, 2008, p. 379; Cojocaru, 2006, p. 263). The Romanian's failure to annexe Transnistria meant that this cultural and lingual influence that reached Bessarabia never spread to Transnistria (Ciscel, 2008, p. 379). This failure to create a pro-Romanian identity in Transnistria left a vacuum that the Soviets filled centuries later (Kaufman, 1996, p. 121). The War of Romanian Unification (1941-1944) facilitated a deep seated resentment by the Transnistrians towards the Bessarabians, when the latter crossed the Dneestr river – the natural border between Moldova and Transnistria – to fight Transnistrians and claim the land as Romanian, albeit unsuccessfully (Cojocaru, 2006, p. 264). Eventual Russian presence in Moldova during the Soviet era saw the creation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (Cojocaru, 2006, p. 261).

The investment of industry in Transnistria by the USSR facilitated prosperity for the Transnistrians, which created a pro-Russia stance by them (Kaufman, 1996, p. 121). Panici (2003, p. 42) claims the Transnistrians were the most 'Sovietised' people in the Soviet empire, largely because of these benefits conferred upon them by the USSR. It is because the Bessarabians did not receive the same benefits as the Transnistrians under Soviet rule, that their allegiance continued to remain with Romania, whom they benefited from historically (Panici, 2003, p. 40). The dissolution of the Soviet empire in 1991 saw the birth of the Republic of Moldova and the election of Mircea Snegur, a member of the Popular Front Party, which resented Soviet rule (Panici, 2003, p. 41). The strong pro-Romanian identity embedded in the Bessarabians – of whom Snegur was one – eventually manifested itself into a change in language law which recognised Moldovan – a language virtually identical to Romanian – as the official language of Moldova in 1989 (ADEPT, 2011; Kaufman, 1996, p. 123; King, 1999, p. 97). The Russophone community, composed of Russian speaking Moldovans and ethnic Russians, viewed this change in language law as discriminatory (Ciscel, 2008, p. 383). The new law marginalised them economically by prohibiting them to conduct business in Russian, for many of which was their only language; politically by disallowing political involvement in Moldovan government; and socially by marginalising them from participation in greater Moldovan society (Ciscel, 2008, p. 380; Panici, 2003, pp. 39 & 46). The involvement of the Transnistrian media evoked fear in Transnistrians that Moldova was to unite with Romania, which could have resulted in further marginalisation (Cojocaru, 2006, p. 264). This spurred on the creation of the *de facto* separatist state of Transnistria in 1991 by the Transnistrian people with the aid of the Russian 14<sup>th</sup> army (Cojocaru, 2006, p. 264; Sanchez, 2009, p. 157). The Moldova-Transnistria conflict ensued in 1992 from spring until June of the same year (Cojocaru, 2006, p. 261).

In order to critically evaluate the Moldova-Transnistria conflict to understand its onset, this paper will first address the economic causes of its onset. Arguably the single largest economic causal variable of the Conflict was the 1989 change in language law, under the Mircea Snegur administration (Cojocaru, 2006, p. 266). A cursory glance gives

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the impression that the language law was just a grievance factor, however, the Law did contain economic consequences for Transnistrians. Primarily it prohibited those who spoke only Russian – the majority of Transnistrians at around two-thirds – from conducting, or participating in business unless they were willing to learn Moldovan (Cisnel, 2008, p. 391; Panici, 2003, pp. 39). In addition, as only Russian speakers, they would no longer be eligible for jobs in public office as they had been accustomed to under Soviet rule (Cisnel, 2008, p. 380; Cojocar, 2006, p. 264; Panici, 2003, p. 40). Of course, because of firm resistance from Transnistrians to wider-Moldova, the Transnistrians chose not to accept this law and learn Moldovan, and so suffered from economic marginalisation (Panici, 2003, pp. 39). From an economics perspective this was the chief causal variable of the Conflict (Cisnel, 2008, p. 375). There is, however, a distinct lack of other economic causal variables. Collier and Hoeffler (1998) who cite greed factors as the preponderant motivator of ethnic conflict do not seem to have much relevance within the explanation of the onset of ethnic conflict in Moldova. Their argument that ethnic conflict is generally the preserve of economically under-developed states does stand in this case (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998, p. 568; Carment, 1993, p. 144). But their findings that natural resource presence is a likely factor of war, or that ethno-linguistic fractionalisation is unimportant certainly do not stand in the context of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998, pp. 570-571). The former assertion by Collier and Hoeffler is especially weak in this case when it is considered that a large proportion of the Moldovan economy relies on remittances, a weak agriculture sector, and has a distinct lack of any natural resources (CIA World Fact Book, 2011; Gaugas, 2004, p. 343). In many cases, specifically with regard to oil and natural gas, it imports heavily and either exports nothing – such as with oil – or with the natural gas, exports very little (CIA World Fact Book, 2011). This paper argues that the primary economic causal variable – the 1989 language law – was also the launch platform for equally important political and social causal factors of the Conflict.

As a result of the 1989 language law, there were two salient social and political factors that contributed to the onset of conflict in Moldova as explained above. Respectively they were: the prohibition of Transnistrian involvement from public office and social marginalisation from greater Moldovan society (Cisnel, 2008, p. 380; Panici, 2003, pp. 39 & 46). It was only possible, however, for these causal variables to have the impact they did by being mobilised by ethnic entrepreneurs (Kaufman, 1996, p. 109). In Stuart Kaufman's findings of the onset of conflict in Moldova, utilising qualitative data, he found a process had to happen for this conflict, and indeed others to take place (1998, p. 109). He argued that ethnic entrepreneurs or belligerent leaders, had to stoke mass hostility by using ethnic symbols and/or the aforementioned ethnically defined grievances caused by the 1989 language law (Kaufmann, 1998, p. 109). In turn the hostile masses pledge their support to those ethnic entrepreneurs, persuaded by their arguments (Kaufmann, 1998, p. 109). In the case of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict, the lead ethnic entrepreneur was, and remains today as the leader of Transnistria, Igor Smirnov (ICG, 2006; Sanchez, 2009, p. 159). Finally, a security dilemma is created which reciprocates conflict, as was the case for the onset of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict (Kaufmann, 1998, p. 113).

The cause of ethnic conflict is widely disputed. Scholars from two different fields of study – economics and political science – argue using different methods thus acquiring differing outcomes. Both contain weaknesses in their methods: economics favours a broader quantitative approach which tends to generalise and ignore other causal factors, whilst political science favours a narrower approach of empirical study and the application of theory which sometimes fails to see the 'bigger picture'. This study of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict has sought to critically evaluate the benefits and disadvantages of both competing fields in the explanation of the onset of ethnic conflict in Moldova. It has found that to insist economic variables are the chief cause of ethnic conflict, as Collier and Hoeffler (1998) have done, is flawed due to data issues and the ignoring of other important factors. The project does not, however, dismiss the salience of economic variables in ethnic conflict onset. Instead, by critically analysing the competing political science arguments, and applying them to the Moldova-Transnistria conflict it has found that economic, political and social variables were mutually important in the onset of the Conflict. In sum: economic variables were a necessary but insufficient cause of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict.

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Jonathan is a Commissioning Editor at e-IR. He earned his BA in International Relations from the University of Portsmouth. In the summer Jonathan will be interning in the office of the Chairwoman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, in Washington, D.C. In 2013 Jonathan will pursue the MA Brazil in Global Perspective at King's College London. His interests lie in ethno politics, ethnic conflict, democracy, conflict management, and Brazilian/UK/US foreign and domestic affairs.