

Toponymic notes on Transnistria

Introduction

Transnistria is a separatist territory in eastern Moldova, lying mostly to the east of the Dniester river. Majority Russian speaking, it has become a focus of international attention since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Its connection with Russia is long held, the eastern part of modern day Moldova being transferred to Russian administration in the late 18th century and remaining (mostly) under Russian and Soviet dominance until 1991. Today the demographic make-up of Transnistria is roughly one third each Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian, with small numbers of Gagauz and Bulgarians.

Transnistria is *de facto* an autonomous territory of Moldova, the central Moldovan authorities having no control there. The Transnistrian authorities consider it an independent state, though this is not recognised by any UN member state¹.

The area of the *de facto* autonomous unit includes some areas to the west of the Dniester, though these are considered separately in terms of the Moldovan authorities' view of the administrative divisions of the country².

Name

The name most commonly used in British English for this region is **Transnistria**, though Transdnistria and Transdnister Region, amongst other variants, may also be seen. Transnistria is actually also the Romanian/Moldovan language form, but it does seem to have evolved into the form also most frequently used in British English.

The official Romanian/Moldovan (see *Language*, below) language name for the administrative territorial unit itself (as opposed to the area of the breakaway territory) has varied over the years, but current Moldovan sources call it *Unitățile Administrativ-Teritoriale din Stânga Nistrului (UATSN)*, which translates approximately as "Administrative-Territorial Unit of the (Left) Bank of the Dniester", commonly referred to as *Stânga Nistrului*. The term *Stânga* is frequently seen as *Stînga* (see *Script*, below).

Geographical Names Policy

HMG recognises Transnistria as a sovereign part of Moldova and therefore the geographical names policy for Moldova applies also to Transnistria. This policy is to use the Romanian language names as used by official sources and authorities in Moldova. Cross-reference to Russian names, where these are significantly different, may in some cases be useful.

¹ Its self-designated appellation (in Moldovan) is Република Молдовеняскэ Нистрянэ (romanized Republica Moldovenească Nistreană), usually termed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic in English.

² The Moldovan authorities consider the autonomous region as the area to the east of the Dniester, and control some areas of Dubăsari district (Raionul Dubăsari) in this territory. Apart from these areas of Dubăsari, the Transnistrian authorities control all the land to the east of the Dniester, and additionally control the municipality of Bender and six surrounding villages on the west bank; these are considered by Moldova as a separate municipality (Bender and two villages) the other four villages being considered part of Căușeni district.

A significant, and somewhat anomalous, example is the town of Bender/Tighina, Tighina being the Romanian language name, with Bender being (contemporary) Russian. In this instance, the Russian name has now become widely used as a *de facto* 'Moldovan' name (i.e. the name used by Moldova).

Language

The 1994 constitution of the Republic of Moldova asserts that the country's official language is 'Moldovan'. There is some promotion of this language label amongst Moldovan nationalists, though in linguistic reality the language is the same as Romanian. There exist dictionaries and other purported proofs of the languages' distinctness, but these often do little more than to confirm that the notion of Moldovan as a separate language from Romanian is a fiction. (See more in *Moldovan: An Identity But Not A Language*, PCGN, 2005. Available: <http://www.pcg.org.uk/Moldovan.pdf>).

In 2003 the Moldovan parliament (Law number 546/12-19-2003) defined Moldovan and Romanian as designations of the same language and a constitutional court decree in 2013 ruled that the Declaration of Independence should take precedence over the Constitution and thus that the label 'Romanian should prevail over 'Moldovan'³.

Given the historical, political and cultural ties to Russia, the predominant language in Transnistria is Russian. The official languages according to the Transnistrian authorities are Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian.

Script

Moldova reverted from Cyrillic to the Roman script in 1989, whilst still being the Moldavian SSR.

The Romanian orthographical change of 1993 (simplistically an alteration of the use of a word-medial î to â, these phonemes being phonetically equivalent) was not adopted by Moldova until 2001. However, Moldovan orthography now also follows these rules (as manifest in the designation *Stânga Nistrului*, given above, though this is not entirely consistent on modern sources, and older documents will certainly still refer to *Stînga Nistrului*).

Moldovan is still mostly encountered written in Cyrillic script in Transnistria (as indicated in footnote 1). The correspondences between the two scripts can be seen in the table here: [Moldovan: table of correspondences](#).

For any further advice or information on the geographical names of Transnistria, please get in touch with PCGN: info@pcgn.org.uk.

³ *Curtea consideră că prevederea conținută în Declarația de Independență referitoare la limba română ca limbă de stat a Republicii Moldova prevalează asupra prevederii referitoare la limba moldovenească conținute în articolul 13 al Constituției.* [The Court considers that the provision contained in the Declaration of Independence referring to the Romanian language as the state language of the Republic of Moldova prevails over the provision referring to the Moldovan language contained in Article 13 of the Constitution, *PCGN translation*].