

Challenging Russia to Fix a Frozen Feud

BERLIN – When Chancellor Angela Merkel had dinner last June outside Berlin with President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia, she surprised her guest by making a highly unusual proposal.

If Russia is interested in cooperating with Europe, especially on security issues, then it should contribute by helping to resolve the long-running conflict in Transnistria, said Mrs. Merkel, whose country has some of the closest political and economic ties with Russia.

Transnistria is a narrow swath of territory that legally is part of Moldova, a poor country bordering Romania. Since the early 1990s, with the support of Moscow, a nationalist, pro-Russian separatist movement in Transnistria has been trying to break away from Moldova.

Until Mrs. Merkel broached the issue with Russia, Europe had all but forgotten about this frozen conflict, even though it is on Europe's doorstep. Brussels left it largely up to the 56-member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to try to mediate, but to little avail.

Apart from more than 1,100 Russian troops based in Transnistria, the separatist movement has its own soldiers who speak Russian and whose uniforms bear insignias in Cyrillic – unlike the rest of Moldova, which has a Latin script and whose citizens speak Romanian.

There is also a heavily guarded crossing dividing Transnistria and Moldova proper that prevents free passage of people and goods between both parts of this country of 3.9 million.

Nor has the Moldovan government controlled its border with Ukraine to effectively monitor who enters and leaves the

country. That part of Moldova is patrolled by soldiers loyal to the self-styled "Transdnierster Moldovan Republic."

There, any opposition is quashed, and the media are highly censored, according to human rights organizations. The Romanian language is publicly banned, and teachers are arrested if caught teaching it. In its annual 2009 human rights report, the U.S. State Department documented cases of torture, abuse of prisoners, arbitrary arrest and human trafficking.

"There is no kind of freedom there whatsoever," said Ion Manole, director of Promo-LEX, a nongovernmental organization promoting democratic values that is based in Chisinau, the Moldovan capital. "There is no rule of law. There are no independent institutions to protect individuals," he added. "We don't want to raise our hopes, but surely it is the obligation of Europe to do something about what is, after all, one of the last frozen conflicts of the post-Cold War era. Maybe there is a chance with Mrs. Merkel," Mr. Manole said.

There is, for once, cautious optimism among some O.S.C.E. officials.

"Chancellor Merkel's initiative, by focusing high-level attention on the Transnistria conflict, can help achieve the first serious negotiations in years," said an O.S.C.E. official familiar with the process who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Negotiations will be hard on all sides, and a constructive spirit, willingness to compromise and persistence will be needed to reach a lasting settlement," the official added.

Mrs. Merkel's proposal is that Russia, along with Ukraine, Moldova, Transnistria, the O.S.C.E, the European Union and the United States, revive the so-called 5+2 talks. These talks were stopped four years ago by Russia and Transnistria. Moscow preferred bilateral negotiations in which it could wield

bigger influence.

Germany also wants Russia to eventually withdraw its troops from Transnistria so that Moldova can regain full control of the country. At the same time, Transnistria could be granted some degree of autonomy.

In return, Mrs. Merkel is offering Russia something it has long sought: the establishment of an E.U.-Russian Political and Security Committee where Europe and Russia would work closely together in civil and military crisis management operations. Russian diplomats have made it clear they see such a committee as a chance to influence Europe's security policy.

Since Mrs. Merkel's offer, Russia has not agreed to revive the 5+2 talks, let alone consider withdrawing its troops.

Vladimir Chizhov, the Russian ambassador to the European Union, said Moscow wanted to wait until the outcome of Moldova's parliamentary elections, which will take place next month, and the presidential election that will be held in December. With Moldova's governing four-party Alliance for European Integration beset by infighting, diplomats in Chisinau said the opposition and anti-Western Communist Party could benefit from such disarray.

As for the continuing presence of Russian soldiers, Mr. Chizhov said they were still in Transnistria "with one particular aim: to protect the huge stockpiles of munitions until they have been destroyed." Besides, the Transnistrian authorities "regard the Russian presence as a security guarantee," he added.

Despite the lack of any movement by Russia, Mrs. Merkel is trying to keep up the pressure. During her talks last week in Deauville, France, with Mr. Medvedev and Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, she again linked the new E.U.-Russian Political and Security Committee to resolving the conflict in Transnistria.

“This is a big step Chancellor Angela Merkel is taking,” said Kalman Mizsei, Europe’s special envoy to Moldova. “This is about resolving a conflict that is closest to Europe’s borders. The E.U. must now really become involved in ending this conflict,” he added.

Others see it more as a test case for Russia.

“If Russia is serious about wanting to become a constructive partner with Europe, then here is its chance to help end the conflict in Transnistria,” said the German legislator Michael Link, who is Europe spokesman for the Free Democrats, Mrs. Merkel’s coalition partner. “But Germany cannot do this alone. Mrs. Merkel must put this issue high onto the E.U. agenda, and soon. This is about the security of the region but also Europe’s ability to deal with a problem on its borders,” he added.

Maybe so. But it was Mrs. Merkel who chose to take the gamble with Russia and particularly with Mr. Medvedev. If, with full E.U. backing, Mrs. Merkel sticks to her conditions and succeeds, it could lead to much greater stability in this part of Europe, even to a more promising relationship between Brussels and Moscow, said Mr. Mizsei. Failure could damage Mrs. Merkel and Europe’s foreign policy ambitions.

Source: [New York Times](#)