There’s a new “Sheriff” in Town: Corruption and Captive Markets in Transnistria

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Abstract

Crime and corruption have plagued Transnistria since its initial declaration of independence in 1990. Transnistria has all of the requisite symbolic and institutional aspects of statehood but lacks international recognition. Transnistria’s economy, like the state itself, exists outside of any normative regulatory or juridical framework. Long viewed a black spot on the political map of Europe, the region’s economy has played a central role in illicit transactions throughout the post-Soviet period. This paper explores the issue of corruption in Transnistria through the lens of a single company, Sheriff. As a holding company that controls the vast majority of the region’s profitable enterprises, Sheriff is the most visible economic entity in the region (its businesses include supermarkets, gas stations, internet, telecommunications, textile production, broadcast and cable television, auto sales, publishing, cognac production, light manufacturing, publishing, and advertising). Sheriff has turned Transnistria’s liminality into a means of generating immense profits and rents due to its close relationship to the state. Yet Sheriff serves as a crucial buffer between residents who face an otherwise bleak material existence, offering both charity and other modern conveniences to residents. Sheriff has, in the words of one informant, brought a “civilized” consumer experience to the region. This paper examines the wider political context that gave rise to Sheriff (i.e., its murky rise to its monopoly position), its position as a facilitator of illicit economic transactions, and how Sheriff, through its provisioning of goods and services, displaces, masks, and ultimately disarms allegations of corruption both inside and outside of the region.
Introduction

Moldova experienced a brief but bloody conflict in 1992 over a strip of land located east of the Dniester River. The resulting conflict left the newly independent Republic of Moldova with a recognized government in Chisinau and an unrecognized one in Tiraspol, Moldova’s second-largest city. The latter, commonly referred to as Transnistria (alternatively, Transdniester or Pridnestrov in Russian), has been a de facto state since 1990, when inhabitants of this strip of land first declared their independence in the form of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR), a territory residents hoped at the time would remain part of the Soviet Union. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the PMSSR would become the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), also known as Transnistria. More than two decades later, the PMR is an international orphan, unrecognized as a state and sustained largely by economic and political support from the Russian Federation.

Because of its ill-defined political status, neither a recognized state nor a functioning part of the Republic of Moldova, economic activity in the PMR has remained, for much of the past two decades, illicit and unregulated. Such economic activity is criminal from the perspective of outsiders, profitable for well-connected investors from Russia or Ukraine, and simply “ours” for residents. Individuals occupying high positions within the state with both personal and political goals in mind have redirected the PMR’s economic flows. Though one might argue that redistribution is essentially what states do, this paper chronicles how the PMR economy serves to mask and ultimately much of the extractive and corrupt practices occurring in the region. Due to this masking process, itself largely a result of the region’s unresolved political status, questions of corruption and about the demise of the region’s once booming economy are displaced and instead are seen as a result of the external forces and actors.

The larger project of which this paper is only a part is an ethnographic investigation of sovereignty and state building in the PMR. Specifically, this project looks at how non-recognition modifies our understanding of what constitutes a state and legitimate political authority in the 21st century. Given the centrality of sovereignty as a recognized claim, the PMR’s non-recognition clarifies and problematizes many of the fundamental organizing principles of modern political authority. As an unacknowledged subject of international law, the PMR is both sovereign and not, a demarcated space with real effects, institutions and pretenses to statehood (including, but not limited to, a military, borders, police, customs service, tripartite government, and currency) but which lies in a political blind spot.

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1 Transnistria is literally across or beyond the Nistru river (Romanian), while the literal translation of the Russian Pridnestrov means at or near the Dniester (Russian). Though subtle, these toponyms are politically charged because of the languages they index and the perspectives they embody. The politically neutral labels of left and right-bank Moldova are occasionally used throughout. In this paper I use the term PMR when describing the government of left-bank Moldova.
2 The first declaration occurred in 1990 in the context of the Soviet Union. The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) was originally conceived of as new Soviet republic separate from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.
3 The Republic of Moldova does not recognize the privatizations that have occurred in the PMR.
4 For more on how economic and cultural fields can also generate nationalism, see Verdery 1993.
Given its lack of recognition, the PMR is forced to perform its “stateness” despite its extensive and durable institutional and very real phenomenological existence. The PMR exemplifies a new type of sovereignty that exists largely for its own constituents and is not vetted or authorized by the wider system of states. In the context of non-recognition, residents act as if the PMR is a recognized state. Sovereignty and statehood are acted out and acknowledged in a variety of settings, yet this sovereignty is never decisively established. When one thinks about sovereignty in Transnistria, a recurring structure emerges whereby sovereignty is performed as ritual (Turner 1967). This performative sovereignty requires involvement, acting out, but by its very nature it can never be decisively established. The PMR’s failure to “be” sovereign as opposed to performing it leads to an incomplete and unending teleology, since the state cannot be associated with any recognized existence. This failure generates effects that cannot be conjured away — the state does not formally exist yet its effects remain. Though Transnistria emerged from a unique set of historical processes, its blurred existence in our peripheral political vision reveals its unique heuristic value insofar as Transnistria elucidates the increasingly contingent, even desperate, character of liberal-democratic sovereignty in an era of unfettered finance capital, opaque state-corporate alliances, militarized borders, and popular alienation. These processes operate relatively transparently in Transnistria, whereas elsewhere, particularly in the West, elites go to even greater lengths to mask the “performative” dimension of their sovereignty.

This paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I give some necessary background about the PMR’s emergence as a de facto state along with an overview of economic development in the region from the postwar World War II period to the present. Part two chronicles the emergence of the Sheriff holding company, an economic entity that has monopolized much of the PMR economy. In the third part, I address the issue of corruption in the context of Sheriff. Specifically, I look at how residents speak of Sheriff, its role in their lives, and how Sheriff has profited due to the peculiarities of the region. I conclude with some thoughts about the recent (December 2011) regime change that saw the departure of the PMR’s first president, Igor Smirnov (1991-2011), and the inauguration of his successor.

I. Background

The issue of separatism in Moldova relates to geopolitical issues described alternately as “post-communist transitions,” “democratization,” “ethnic conflict,” or simply “transition.” Transnistria, like other areas that experienced violence with the disappearance of Soviet power, tells a story of a peripheral region’s rebellion against the collapse of certainties that arose as a result of the cumulative material, social, and cultural effects of Soviet state. Soviet development transformed a region that had undergone a brutal Romanian occupation during the Second World War into an area brimming with productive factories and collective farms. The region had a significant multi-ethnic population that predated the region’s incorporation into Imperial Russia in the early 19th century. Economic productivity and a strong identification with the Soviet state differentiated Transnistria from the rest of Moldova, though both were part of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). As Soviet

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5 One informant, in response to a question about whether or not the PMR was a sovereign state, told me to literally go and touch the border if I did not believe that the PMR was a state.
6 Other examples of performative sovereignty include Kosovo, along with Eurasia’s other unrecognized states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh.
7 For a discussion of a similar situation in the Russian Caucasus, see Derluguian 1999 and 2005.
8 This identification with the Soviet project was expressed primarily as a support for internationalism and through Soviet economic development in which the industrial workplace was central to social life.
power faltered in the late 1980s, left-bank residents organized in opposition to Moldovan nationalism. Their actions, and Moldova’s responses to them, nudged the region down a path of separation and war.

The PMR’s de facto sovereignty took shape after left-bank residents fought a short, undeclared war with Moldova in 1992. During the violent stage of the conflict, in the summer of 1992, the former 14th Soviet Army assisted the PMR. Despite the Russian Federation’s official position of neutrality in the conflict, many soldiers and officers of the 14th Army were sympathetic to the separatist cause and looked the other way as PMR forces took materiel from the 14th Army depots. During the summer of 1992, an estimated 1000 lives were lost before a ceasefire was declared in late July. Russia’s military presence effectively ended the violence, yet it did not resolve the issue of the PMR’s independence or the Russian military presence in the region. Negotiations are ongoing between PMR authorities and Moldova. In addition to conflict parties (the PMR and Moldova), talks are mediated by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Russia, and Ukraine, with the United States and the European Union (EU) serving as observers. Attempts to reach a permanent solution have failed, and the conflict remains “frozen” to this day.

Armed conflict with Moldova allowed the PMR elite to consolidate their position in the region. Given that the region’s factories were the initial loci of political organization, many of those active in the initial state-building project were factory directors. With the end of armed conflict in 1992, idea of the state as the protector of the narod (people) became the central tenet in the political discourse of an increasingly militarized society. Even today, contradictory political positions are equated with being a traitor to the memory of those who died in the conflict. The PMR’s unrecognized status allowed for the emergence of a siege mentality, which enabled PMR state-builders to elaborate a clear-cut concept of the enemy (Schmitt 2007) — enemies are those who seek to liquidate PMR statehood: the Republic of Moldova, Romania, the West, and NATO. By creating a state ideology based on Soviet multinationalism juxtaposed alongside the image of a region besieged by hostile forces, elites were able to elaborate upon an already existing local identity separate and distinct from Moldova. After armed conflict, living together in a single state was seen as impossible. The PMR elite has, through referendums, a national narrative of victimization, and a cult of those killed, created a system in which disengagement from Moldova became the basis for a separate polity that has developed its own dynamics after more than twenty years of separation.

Transnistria’s distinctiveness vis-à-vis Moldova is a direct result of the region’s development after World War II. Soviet development produced demographic changes as migrants from other regions of the Soviet Union arrived to work in the region. In 1936, Russians constituted 14 percent of the totally population in raions (districts) along the Dniester River. By 1989, however, Russians made up a quarter of the population, though Moldovans still formed a plurality in 1989 (Moldovans today are

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9 It should be noted that despite its vocal support for the PMR and its role as a peacekeeper, the Russian Federation recognized Moldova’s sovereignty over the region and has consistently stipulated that any final settlement be based on the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.
10 Estimates of total casualties range from a few hundred to over a thousand, with the majority of them from the PMR; a commonly accepted range is between 600 and 1200 dead, with thousands more wounded. In a single battle that took place in Bender (June 19–21 1992), the PMR suffered 203 casualties and over a thousand wounded. In this battle Moldova had approximately 77 casualties. A full accounting of casualties in the conflict is difficult;
11 Many Moldovans in Transnistria identify with the PMR state. Official state historiography stresses that Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Russians fought against Moldovan fascism.
concentrated in villages along the Dniester River). The rural population was nearly sixty percent Moldovan, while the urban population was only a quarter Moldovan (King 2000: 183). Like most of the Soviet Union, Transnistria’s urban areas were culturally and linguistically Russified. Residents saw themselves in the cultural context of the Soviet Union and later Russia (Kolstø and Malgin 1998: 107). Even today, more than two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, individuals identify with Soviet internationalism and narrate their biographies in terms of when they arrived in the region and fondly recount Soviet prosperity.

The lines between the economy (the distribution of wealth and resources) and politics (relations, assumptions, and contests relating to power and authority) began to blur with the onset of perestroika and independence movements. As a part of the Soviet military complex, left-bank Moldova’s economy tended to be seen in the Union-wide and later CIS context instead of the Moldovan one. The demise of the Soviet Union threatened to upend the region’s preeminent economic position. Left-bank workers “reacted strongly against the disruption of economic ties among the various regions of the USSR that occurred in the late 1980s/early 1990s as the constituent republics became more independent” (Kolstø and Malgin 1998: 107).

The rise of nationalism in Moldova and the 1989 Language Law passed by the MSSR Supreme Soviet making Moldovan the sole official language of the MSSR edged Transnistria down the path of separation. Left-bank residents resented the fact that they contributed disproportionately to the MSSR, receiving less than 20% back from the center. In 1990, Transnistria accounted for 40% of the GDP of Soviet Moldova while it only had 15.2% of the population and, territorially, only 12.4% of the country. During fieldwork, I encountered this sentiment from left-bank residents who recalled the region’s productivity vis-à-vis right-bank Moldova (despite the region’s current economic troubles). “They [Moldovans] think that Chisinau built Tiraspol.” Statements like this metonymically linked the two competing capital cities in Moldova but reversed their valence insofar as the now unrecognized capital disproportionately contributed to the MSSR budget. These perceived economic differences underscore a host of other issues.

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12 Estimates of the region’s population range from official figures of more than half a million (555,000) inhabitants to unofficial estimates of less than four hundred thousand (370,000); Moldovans (31.9%), Russians (30.3%), and Ukrainians (28.8%) constitute the most populous nationalities. See Preliminary Results Announced of the Transnistrian Census "ОГЛАШЕНЫ ПРЕДВАРИТЕЛЬНЫЕ ИТОГИ ПРИДНЕСТРОВСКОЙ ПЕРЕПИСИ НАСЕЛЕНИЯ" http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol37-09-05.htm and “Genocide – Transnistria?” Геноцид по – приднестровски? In Man and His Rights, Человек и его права. No. 37(84). http://dnestrnews.info/n37-84/597-genocid-po-pridnestrovski.html Accessed November 8, 2010.

13 Reminiscences typically can be divided into economic (recollections of full employment, social equality, and adequate pay) and political themes (absence of nationalism, a strong state, pride at living in a superpower).

14 “Already in the 1980s there developed a dynamic that would culminate in full-scale war by 1992: Every move in Chisinau that pulled the republic farther away from Moscow was met by a countermove in Transnistria that drew the region itself farther away from Chisinau. It was a dynamic replicated in several Soviet republics at the time. While central elites in the capital were arguing for greater control over local resources and the revival of indigenous languages, they were also initiating a policy of centralization within their own republics, attempting to gain control over local party and state institutions that might see Moscow – rather than the republican capitals – as the legitimate locus of authority. These centralization policies prompted their own movements for autonomy and independence within the republic. Although national symbols were the mobilizational tools wielded by political elites, the key issues were not symbols and national myths but rather real problems of political and economic control.” (King 2000: 185).

Economic prosperity served as the initial means of differentiating left-bank Moldova (the PMR) from right-bank Moldova. Transnistria’s earliest efforts at political organizing were tied to the region’s enterprises; factory managers were among the first to oppose steps toward political centralization by Chisinau. The economic potential of an independent Transnistria was a powerful motivating factor for residents. To preserve this economic distinction, the state retained control over factories and other economic enterprises to highlight differences vis-à-vis Moldova.

Initially, in the early 1990s, PMR state institutions sheltered the region from privatization and shock therapy by subsidizing inefficient industries. This gave residents hope that the region was immune to the precipitous economic decline that characterized much of the post-Soviet space (Popov 2007: 37-39). Many believed that the economy would help fulfill the region’s political desires, with international recognition to follow quickly. To secure the longterm support of the Russian Federation, PMR authorities facilitated investment in strategic infrastructure by Russian oligarchs. Russian ownership in energy-intensive industries such as steel and power generation offered a means of profit for all. Direct economic subsidies and cheap natural gas gave PMR authorities a means to finance government expenditures (residents pay for natural gas but the PMR never pays Russia for it). For Russian investors, owning assets in the PMR offers a means of redirecting Russian subsidies back into private hands; the investment is both patriotic and profitable. Holding PMR assets allow Russian oligarchs launder these energy subsidies while supporting Russian citizens abroad.\(^16\) In terms of local capital accumulation, PMR authorities have allowed a single holding company, Sheriff, to capture most if not all of the PMR economy.

The PMR’s aging population only adds to this dependency driven development. Pensioners constitute an ever-increasing percentage of the population: of an estimated 370,000 residents, more than 150,000 are pensioners.\(^17\) In addition to their meagre pension provided by the PMR state, they receive additional Russian “humanitarian aid” ($15 per month) along with other discounts (e.g., Sheriff’s senior discount program described below). Officials from the Moldovan Ministry of Reintegration classify pension supplements, dobavki, as Russian support for separatism, since people receive material benefits channeled through the PMR state.\(^18\) The pension receipts highlight what part of the pension comes from the PMR, and what comes from Russia. This reminder of where the extra money comes from is an incentive not to change - on more than one occasion pensioners remarked what might happen should the situation change.\(^19\)

\(^{16}\) Transnistria’s population travels internationally with “foreign” passports. 2004 census gives a Transnistrian population of 550,000 (from 600,000 in 1989, though some claim it is now closer to 400,000. Moldovan passport holders make up between 200-300,000 (estimates range from 100,000 from Transnistrian officials to 400,000 by Moldovan officials. The Moldovan Ministry of Reintegration has issued 360,000 passports. Moldovan passports have been free for Transnistrian residents since 2006. Estimates of Russian passport holders range from a high of 140,000 to 100,000 from the Moldovan Ministry of Reintegration. The vast majority of ruling elites hold Russian passports (often multiple). Estimates of Ukrainian passport holders range from a high of 90,000 to a more likely number between 70-80,000. These data are from AAASS roundtable on frozen conflicts from November 14th, 2009. Thanks to Lyndon Allin for this data.

\(^{17}\) Pensions in the PMR range from $37 to $89, slightly more than in Moldova. For more on pensions, see Chamberlain-Creanga and Allin 2010: 337).

\(^{18}\) Russia gives this aid to all pensioners living in the PMR regardless of what foreign passport they hold.

\(^{19}\) Russia provides a yearly aid to Transnistria, with figures ranging from 30 million to over 200 million dollars. Though a small, visible portion of this aid is earmarked for vulnerable sections of the population (mostly to pensioners and orphans), the vast majority is earmarked for “supporting Transnistrian industry, its national currency, and the solvency of its state pension fund.” “Transnistria will receive from Russia more financial assistance.” http://politicom.moldova.org/news/transnistria-will-receive-from-russia-more-financial-assistance-200879-eng.html
Living in Transnistria confers other benefits. Utilities are cheaper in Transnistria, which pays non-market rates for electricity, gas, and communal tariffs. Cheap natural gas subsidizes consumer goods like bread making, while the unregulated border with Ukraine keeps Sheriff’s network of supermarkets stocked with cheap imported foodstuffs. In this situation, change is seen as threatening due to residents’ already precarious existence, since change may be measured in simple economic terms. Charity and social benefits are indirectly politicized insofar as receiving any category of benefits requires Transnistrian citizenship. Russian citizenship offers benefits and is easily obtained (as is Moldovan and Ukrainian). For a price Russian passport holders can get registered (прописано) in Russia, which allows them to receive an additional pension from the Russian Federation. The supply of natural gas from Russia indirectly finances the PMR, since the region does not pay Gazprom for gas that residents themselves pay gas. The government accepts payment, but the debt continues to grow. Far from being unrecognized or non-existent in a de jure form, this state/polity performs its disbursement duties and is real to residents. The PMR state provides the subsidies, economic benefits, and the ideological framework required for a coherent, if contradictory, existence. In light of the significant external subsidies, the PMR is more aptly seen as a dependent state that proclaims its independence and performing its sovereignty to its citizens.

The PMR has successfully linked political questions to a series of simple economic questions that portray reintegration as a bad economic decision. One elderly woman explained that life was better in Transnistria, since gasoline was less expensive than in Ukraine and Moldova. Knowing that she did not own a car, I asked her how she even knew the prices. She replied that the prices are shown each day on state television. Having no refineries, it might seem odd that gas is cheaper in the Transnistria than in Odessa, which boasts significant refineries. Considering the fact that taxes typically constitute half of fuel prices, keeping gas prices low (and publicizing this fact) creates an implicit basis for comparison. Economic superiority becomes an apparent fact of life through the selective monetization this and other similar price differences highlighted by the media.

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20 In 2009, Transnistrians paid $0.08 per cubic meter of gas and $0.04 per 1kWh of electric power. In Moldova electric power is three times more expensive, gas - four times. As the tariffs are several times lower than the price on the Russian gas supplied to Transnistria, the PMR is not able to pay completely for gas supplied by the Gazprom. As a result, the debt reached $2 billion. Gazprom cannot apply any sanctions, as the PMR is not recognized and for the reason that the transit gas main goes through Transnistria westwards (its disconnection may result in the violation of the Russian concern's commitments to foreign partners). For more on this, see Chamberlain-Creanga and Allin 2010; Bruce and Yafima 2009.

21 Footnote about how Ukraine allows its products to pass into TN but now TN’s exports are regulated by

22 On one local marshrut in Tiraspol advertised the sale of Russian internal passports.

23 This project of creating political subjectivities through economic processes lies at the heart of European integration and the EU. Peebles (1997: 590) argues that EU law enshrines the rights of commodities rather than people, with people primarily gaining rights only by demonstrating that they embody exchange value and thus are personified commodities. “The EU treaties codify Marx's discovery about a previously hidden aspect of capitalist society, namely that "the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other" ... Humans only fall within the scheme of EU law insofar as they are bearers of either the commodity labor power or the commodity money.”

24 Pensioners make up a disproportionate part of the PMR population (the PMR's total population is between 370,000 and 520,000). Estimates vary, but approximately 35% to 40% of the PMR’s population are pensioners.
The economic policy of the PMR leadership has been dictated by the need to maintain the support of the workers’ organizations. The people, the holders of sovereignty in the PMR, must remain convinced that the state protects them. Debilitating economic reforms occurred earlier in Moldova, which quickly became Europe’s poorest country. Any such reform policy in Transnistria would have led to the closure of unprofitable enterprises and mass lay-offs. These reforms occurred only after the Russian financial crisis in 1998, when local capital began to be consolidated via privatization. Before then, privatization was not an option for PMR authorities — only after an economic crisis could social guarantees be abrogated.

II. Local Capital Accumulation: Sheriff

Political disengagement has been profitable to a few local businesses. The isolationist policies of authorities have allowed a local holding company, Sheriff, to forge an unchallenged monopoly on the region’s economy. Sheriff was founded by two state security officers who started a business initially masked as a charity to support the families of other policemen. In the 1990s, they began taking over the booming cigarette smuggling business. At that time locals made money smuggling cigarettes from Ukraine to Transnistria and onward to Europe. Gradually Sheriff took over other informal businesses that generated significant income (cigarettes, liquor, and frozen chicken legs, among other things). In the words of one resident, Sheriff was untouchable: “Nobody could touch them because they had significant contacts with the police and military, as well as with the MGB.” Sheriff took over the niche opportunities that allowed residents to make money in the aftermath of the war. Like many successful economic entities in the former Soviet Union, who actually stands behind Sheriff remains a mystery; its two owners are well-known figures, but it is unclear what control they exercise. Some residents believe that members of the President’s family are silent partners, while others say that Sheriff is simply the economic arm of the “power ministries.”

Sheriff’s dominance can be traced to a 1996 contract it concluded with PMR authorities on “mutual cooperation.” This arrangement created the preconditions for monopolizing trade in the region. President Igor Smirnov “recommended” that the state rent the largest (and most profitable) state food stores to Sheriff. At the time, these stores were stocked with local products and patronized because of their prices, selection, and locations. They were Soviet-style stores, with separate counters for each department, but they functioned. Gradually, they were closed and replaced by western-style Sheriff supermarkets. For closing its competition, Sheriff was rumored to have paid a half-million dollars up front and monthly financial aid to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Sheriff’s monopoly was not built upon ingenuity or hard work, but upon connections, that most valuable commodity in the former Soviet Union.

25 Smuggling was prevalent (and profitable) in both left and right-bank Moldova.
26 Vladimir, mid-50s, employed in transportation and logistics. Russian-speaking resident of Tiraspol, born and raised in left-bank Moldova.
27 The MGB stands for the Ministry of State Security. It is the PMR equivalent of the FSB/KGB.
28 These numbers should not be seen as exact figures. But given the times, they should be seen for what they are: extremely large sums of money paid to fundamentally alter the fundamental dynamics of market processes in the region. Figures cited in Krasnaya Zvezda, December 7, 2001. ‘Republic of Sheriff’ Orest Kollontai.
29 For more on the importance of informal connections and institutions in the post-Soviet period, see Ledevena 1998 and 2006.
Sheriff’s businesses grew to cover a wide variety of industries and include a network of supermarkets, gas stations, and Moldova’s most successful football club, which boasts a massive training complex and stadium outside the city. Sheriff controls a large regional bank in addition to owning the sole telephone (fixed and mobile) and Internet service provider in the region. Other businesses include textiles, broadcast television, cable/satellite television, auto sales, publishing, cognac production, bread making, meat/poultry production, milk production, aquaculture, second-hand clothing, light manufacturing, and a local advertising firm.

Sheriff has its own customs broker and logistics company that serves as an intermediary for other small businesses. One informant told me of a friend who was looking to import kegs of beer to sell during the hot summer months. After formalizing the details of his business plan, he scheduled a meeting with Sheriff. He was directed to the office of an executive who explained how business would proceed: Sheriff would import the beer trucks through their own customs yard, and he would be responsible for paying a fixed fee per truck. Sheriff would handle the documents, logistics, and conveyance to and from the customs yard. He would not be paying the state customs yard, but rather Sheriff for the privilege of conducting business. The terms of the deal were not negotiable, and it was made clear to him that there would be consequences if he proceeded without Sheriff. Whether you run a small market or kiosk, you purchase your inventory at one of Sheriff’s wholesale depots. Sheriff makes sure that wholesale prices on certain goods remain high for their competitors to ensure that people continue to patronize their supermarkets.

Figure 1. Photo of a typical Sheriff supermarket in Tiraspol, PMR. Source: Photo by Author.

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30 Just as PMR exports to Europe go there with Moldovan customs stamps, when Sheriff plays in the European Champions League, they play under the Moldovan flag. When the Moldovan international team plays a home match, they play it in Tiraspol at Sheriff stadium, since it is the only FIFA approved stadium in Moldova.
Sheriff supermarkets are known for their creative expiration dates. Friends warned me to avoid dairy products, explaining that they would buy expired stock, change the expiration dates, and sell it as fresh. Since Moldovan imports were prohibitively taxed at 100%, Sheriff had no competition and could dictate the terms of sale, since no alternative suppliers could exist in the region. Sheriff is also known for its harsh treatment of workers, and due to the precarious economic situation they have an unlimited reserve of labor in the region. In the alcohol section, all wine and liquor (except wine from Moldova) lack customs stamps. Cigarettes sold in Sheriff also bear no customs stamps. Often, western-branded products found in Sheriff are counterfeit. One foreign researcher visiting Tiraspol purchased a counterfeit Colgate toothbrush that resulted in bleeding gums and Old Spice deodorant that left a rash. The emergence of the region as a sop for imported gray-market foodstuffs has decimated local food producers, as their products are now unprofitable. Despite having some of the most productive agricultural land in Moldova, the region imports a disproportionate amount of its food. As the first western-style supermarket in the region, Sheriff’s consumerist offerings index civility. On more than one occasion, residents remarked to me about how they felt like a human being when shopping at Sheriff, because they did not have to ask a sales attendant for each and every item they wished to purchase. Consistency and chain, the bane of consumerism in the America, indexes progress itself. Shopping as civilization.

Sheriff makes life difficult for small businesses. One small business owner I interviewed had $500 worth of cigarettes confiscated simply because they had Ukrainian customs stamps (the cigarettes were purchased locally). A recent law (rumored to have been passed at the behest of Sheriff) made the sale of Ukrainian cigarettes illegal. This rule forced smokers to purchase contraband tobacco products supplied, of course, by Sheriff. Consequently, cigarettes with Ukrainian customs stamps increased in value, since they were seen as unadulterated. Demand swelled, and customs officials on the PMR's eastern border with Ukraine were directed to intercept shipments. It was common knowledge that border guards themselves preferred Ukrainian cigarettes. Once it was clear that this regulation was not being effectively enforced, Sheriff put its own employees on the border to monitor the situation. The border, the physical limit of the state’s coercive powers, was policed by those serving not a state institution that held a monopoly on violence, but a quasi-state institution that held a monopoly on trade. Despite Sheriff’s best efforts, smokers can still find Ukrainian cigarettes. The cigarettes for sale in Sheriff supermarkets look almost exactly like the Ukrainian brands previously available. The packaging is the same, though some have fake duty-free stickers: duty free Philippines, Dubai, and, perhaps most curiously, “North Africa.”

If one works in a business owned by Sheriff, one can choose to receive one’s salary through a local debit card, Raduga (rainbow), which allows one to receive a 3% discount at Sheriff and other Sheriff-controlled stores. With the Raduga card you can access the local network of ATMs that operate only in the PMR and dispense Transnistrian rubles. Having no competition, Sheriff uses its monopoly to take a cut at every step of the process, ensuring that pensioners spend the majority of their monthly disbursement at its stores by targeting them for discount programs that other retailers cannot afford. Sheriff gives pensioners a seven percent discount on the first thousand Transnistrian

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31 Though some might see this as the inherent competition in capitalism, the significant political and legislative power possessed by Sheriff insulates them from any potential competition. The situation is much more akin to a state-supported monopoly. The PMR is small enough and the cost barrier associated with establishing a market presence high enough to limit competition. Challenging Sheriff simply is not feasible given their cozy relationship with PMR authorities.

32 Pensioners with a Sheriff discount card receive a 3% discount on the first 1,000 Transnistrian rubles spent each month. This works out to be approximately $3 per month.
rubles they spend in their stores each month (at the current exchange rates, this equals approximately $7 per month). It is not uncommon to see pensioners standing in line, discount cards in hand, waiting to purchase a single loaf of bread. Sheriff doesn’t let pensioners linger, as the discount cards are not valid in the morning or evening rush periods. Through the Raduga card, Sheriff offers incentives to ensure that its employees patronize its other businesses. Its business holdings are so entrenched and its privatization of telecommunications so wide that it profits every time someone speaks on a phone or uses the Internet. Charity is profitable: due to its charitable programs for seniors, Sheriff pays a much lower effective tax rate than its competitors.

Sheriff has created a diffuse economic structure that blurs the line between business and politics. On paper, it is a holding company, a company that owns other companies’ outstanding stock. Yet in reality, Sheriff is a company that has profited from close relations to the state. Its low tax burden, its widely publicized charity programs for pensioners, and its ubiquitous corporate logo (an old Western-style sheriff’s badge) lend it an aura of invincibility within the region. Sheriff’s name and logo perhaps best exemplify how in the PMR the law functions at the level of representation. Those charged with enforcing the law represent only themselves and their own interests, not the interests of the state or any abstract notion of justice. For Sheriff, the law is but an icon, a corporate logo, a brand that both alludes to what is lacking in the PMR (the law as an objective tool of justice) yet ubiquitous at the symbolic level. Locals readily accept the Sheriff supermarket chain as “ours,” settled custom in the region.\[33\]

\[33\] The concept of *nashe* denotes something that is considered to be ours or local. It is opposed to the foreign. As an adjective, *nashe* can be applied to consumer goods, ideas, formal/informal institutions, accepted social standards, currencies, food products, etc. It is important to note the policing mechanism implicit in this idea: that which is not ours is foreign and often threatening by definition. This is perhaps all the more important in a place like the PMR.
Figure 2. Sheriff Stadium at night. Constructed in 2002 at an estimated cost of $200 million, the main stadium can seat over 13,000. The stadium complex occupies more than 40 hectares and consists of the main stadium plus five other fields, numerous training fields, a covered arena for winter use, a soccer academy to develop local talent, and residences for players. Many of the Moldovan national team’s matches are played here.

Source: Photo by Author.

Figure 3. Billboard advertising FC Sheriff, Sheriff’s football team. FC Sheriff plays in the Divizia Națională, the top division in Moldovan football. In addition to being a seven-time winner of the Moldovan Cup, FC Sheriff regularly plays in the UEFA Champions League, Europa League, and other tournaments such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Cup.

Source: Photo by Author.
III. Corruption, Crime, and the State

In both the consolidation of the PMR’s sovereignty and the emergence of Sheriff, one notices two deft acts of substitution with wide resonance in the region. As a set of state institutions, the PMR can lay claim to two key victories. On the one hand, with Russian support, the PMR successfully repelled Moldovan aggression, eliminated its primary sovereign competition and negated, at least initially, the potentially deleterious effects a Moldovan national state might have had on the region – (or, it should be noted, on the members of the Transnistrian elite). On the other hand, by internally consolidating their power and eliminating (or supplanting) a visible criminal element, the PMR’s authorities disarmed the externally generated discourse of criminality and corruption. Sheriff’s position today is an indirect result of eliminating competition both in the licit and illicit economies. Intimately linked with the state project (insofar as it is both a symptom and a product of the PMR’s unique position), Sheriff has transformed the absence of law (i.e., the popular discourse of Transnistria as a “black hole”) into a symbolic excess of it insofar as Sheriff substitutes consumerism and charity for crime (Bobick 2011). This substitution is neither virtual nor discursive but real - Sheriff’s economic monopoly could only be realized in tandem with the political processes described above. Yet when measured against the social and economic decay left by the collapse of the Soviet state, the consumerist offerings of Sheriff point to the (real or imagined) economic prowess of the PMR itself. The fact that Sheriff is local only serves to insulate it from criticism.

Sheriff is largely immune to allegations of corruption because of its unchallenged symbolic and economic position in the region. The range of products and services its businesses provide, along with its charitable programs and social benefits, create a series of positive identifications for residents. In marketing terminology, it has positive brand equity. As one of the few successful local economic entities to emerge in the post-Soviet period, Sheriff’s murky origins and questionable business practices are overlooked. To add some ethnographic depth to the phenomena described above, I offer a few selective anecdotes gathered over the course of field research.

In anticipation of the twentieth anniversary of PMR statehood (September 2nd, 2010), a new memorial wing was added to a local history museum located in the center of Tiraspol, the PMR capital. The museum itself abuts the memorial complex “Glory” in the center of Tiraspol. Much like the Great Patriotic War memorials common in towns and cities across the former Soviet Union, the “Glory” memorial boasts an eternal flame, a WWII era tank, a monument to the war in Afghanistan, and a series of plaques listing the names of those who died during the conflict in 1992. Symbolically and practically, the “Glory” memorial is ground zero for memorials, rituals, and performances of PMR statehood. The museum’s new wing consists of three rooms with display cases containing political memorabilia (flags, banners, placards), photographs documenting the PMR independence movement, evidence of PMR statehood in the form of books and pamphlets written about Transnistria, quotes from strike leaders (“At the international level, the question of the political status of Transnistria is unresolved, therefore we are not going to resign”), along with a display of locally-produced commodities. In the room showcasing these local products, mostly brandies, cognac, and sports memorabilia from FC Sheriff, I noticed a handful of Sheriff brand products prominently displayed. The elderly babushka serving as my minder (the museum had no

34 In September 2010 when I was in the region, I noticed some fresh graffiti on the wall of a convenience store that read, in Russian, “F*ck Sheriff!” When I went back to photograph it hours later, it was already painted over by the property owner, though the faint outlines of the letters were visible.

35 It is worth noting that this flame is actually burning. A common problem in provincial cities across the former Soviet Union is the maintenance of these memorial sites and the lack of funding for the gas.
other visitors that day) approached me when she saw me stop at the Sheriff display. I asked her, jokingly, whether this was Sheriff’s museum. Though my intent was to ask whether Sheriff financed this expansion, this ambiguous query elicited a spontaneous, heartfelt praise of Sheriff: “Thank god, that there is Sheriff - without them, who knows what life would be like.” She went on to list a litany of products and discount programs, along with customer service, that the chain offered. For her, the fact that Sheriff can visibly provide a variety of hitherto unavailable consumer goods, while discounting them for the elderly, positions them beyond criticism — Sheriff gives back to the community.

Figure 4. Customer service card distributed at Sheriff supermarkets. The text reads “Commercial network “Sheriff” - We are open for dialogue! We offer you the chance to take part in a survey.”

Source: Photo by Lyndon Allin

One reason why Sheriff exists beyond any discourse of corruption is due to the fact that corruption has permeated what remains of the social contract and is accepted as a fact of life in the PMR. This implicitly divides those who benefit from corruption from those who simply deal with it (Nazpary cite, Humphrey). Though Humphrey develops the concept of the dispossessed to describe post-Soviet subjects deprived of security, financial or otherwise, in the PMR political subjects are doubly dispossessed, living both as post-Soviet subjects (itself an liminal existence) without the benefit of living in a recognized state or citizenship. Given the general unsettledness of life in the PMR, a consumer friendly conglomerate whose logo purports to provide precisely what, from the perspective of outsiders, the PMR is lacking, is it any wonder why it is largely seen as a positive presence by residents?

While Sheriff may be built upon a web of intrigue and questionable business practices, it is viewed as a positive force in the community. For example, the FC Sheriff football club has, in addition to its multiple stadiums and practice fields, a football academy where youths from Moldova and beyond can train. Sheriff’s massive stadium complex is visible as one enters Tiraspol from the direction of Chisinau; its looming presence, along with the fact that FC Sheriff attracts foreign players (FC Sheriff usually has players from South America and Africa, in addition to Moldovan, Ukrainian, and Russian players) was a point of pride for locals, who cited Sheriff’s outsized football ambitions as an example of the company “doing something.” While other corrupt individuals steal and consume
luxury goods, the notion of Sheriff giving back to the community is reinforced every time one passes its stadium, shops in one of its supermarkets, or receives a discount in one of its stores.

Ostensibly to protect its privileged economic position, Sheriff created multiple political parties in the region. One of its parties, Obnovlenie, Renewal, has a majority in the PMR Supreme Soviet (Sheriff also finances a local clone of Mironov’s A Just Russia party). Each of these parties has its own newspaper, youth wing, and creates its own PR materials, alluding to its well-financed operation. Vis-à-vis other poorer political parties (currently there are ten political parties in the PMR), Obnovlenie gains the support of the electorate by materially providing for its constituents. For residents of districts represented by Obnovlenie deputies, the year is a steady stream of gifts: gift bags of flour, rice, cooking oil, sugar, and other dry goods before election day; calendars, cards, and other trinkets (magnets, posters, notepads) on major holidays; and periodic maintenance work (painting, replacing light bulbs, fixing benches) in communal areas before elections. Each deputy has an office where they regularly receive constituents, and for these Sheriff deputies (nobody refers to them by their party affiliation) there is typically a warehouse located nearby or on-site that offers a steady source of products for those in need. Though most informants spoke of this as a positive aspect, some saw this very open merging of economic with political interests more conspiratorially. One informant, an elderly man active in the PMR independence movement, meticulously saved all of the Sheriff holiday cards and gave them to me for my research. He hoped to expose Sheriff’s purchase of the electorate, even going so far as to give details of the “secret” location of Sheriff’s warehouse that they used to “purchase” the electorate. Among other informants who were pensioners, he was the outlier. Typically, when the subject of Sheriff came up during interviews, residents overwhelming spoke of its positive aspects. Those less inclined to see Sheriff as a positive force would consciously refuse its conveniences and purchase their goods elsewhere, at the bazaar or during day trips to Chisinau where multinational supermarket chains operated.

Though corruption and illicit dealings were prominent features of life in the PMR, they were rarely discussed as a problem or as an issue to be rectified. During my time in the region, the details of embezzlement and corruption were known right down to the individuals involved and the amount of money stolen. These details functioned not as revelations to be shouted from the rooftops, but as the basis for local knowledge. Such revelations hark back to the writings of Canetti, who argued that secrecy lies at the heart of power. The PMR’s power as a state is largely performative, albeit performances backed by a longstanding Russian military presence in the region. Taussig expands upon Canetti’s dictum through his notion of the public secret, “that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated” (1999: 5). The circulation of the public secret creates social subjects who know what not to know, who understand the details but are unable to articulate them publicly. In the PMR it is not that people are unable, but that there is no sense in articulating these details, since nothing will change and most want to avoid trouble for themselves and their families. On numerous occasions I was reminded of the Russian proverb, “the less you know, the better you sleep.”

Though undertaken by individuals corruption was masked by state institutions; it was typically spoken of as a phenomenon of persons or of individuals operation within predetermined networks. Given the region’s history outlined above, criticism of the state was seen as pointless, given the two decades-long incumbency of Igor Smirnov (1990-2010), though much has changed since the December 2011 Presidential election (more on this below). The idea of corruption as operating according to a logic that supersedes individuals was an important way of distancing the individual from the phenomenon itself. This is particularly important in Moldova and in the PMR because
corruption is practiced both according to the logic of money (i.e., the standard privatization of state positions) as well as social/kinship ties. These kin ties remain an important means of getting things done in both Moldova and the PMR; the Romanian term for this protection exerted by kinship or friendship is cumătrie, куматрия in Russian. These kin ties stretch across institutions and serve as an informal network protecting those in it. Though in most forms cumătrie is benign, the fact that it now facilitates corruption and protects members of a network gives it a sense of immutability. This is particularly important because of the turn to biology and biological metaphors to legitimate kin - it is not social; it is immutable, part of one’s existence and organism. Both the pursuit of profit and pre-existing kin relationships render the larger phenomenon of corruption, in the words of one informant, part of “our mentality.” In his words, corruption existed in the past and would continue long into the future. His thoughts were echoed by informants of all ages, though the younger generation saw it as an impediment to creating a meaningful existence for themselves in the region.

The phenomenon of Sheriff and the wider issue of corruption in the PMR exist in a way that challenges the accepted idea that corruption is a phenomenon that can be documented, categorized, typologized, and analyzed separately from the wider society in which it exists. Corruption is, like culture was to anthropology, both everywhere and nowhere. In Transnistria, and in the post-Soviet world more broadly, corruption is both a symptom and a phenomenon of the wider “transition” to capitalism that is operating alongside the PMR’s ongoing metamorphosis from unrecognized state to something else. Corruption is structural and personal, a condition of one’s existence as a subject and a means to exist.

The PMR state and its unending yet ultimately futile attempts to achieve international recognition frame the population’s anxiety about economic/material issues in political terms. I found it odd that during the course of fieldwork my regular informants, even those in positions of power, would speak of corruption but refuse all individual agency to confront it: the problem was structural, and individuals cannot change the social structure. Though this refusal of agency might be explained as reflecting a lack of connections in any social/kin networks on their part, I came to believe that the majority of residents genuinely did not want to criticize the state openly. Beginning with its original idealistic mandate to uphold Soviet internationalism and preserve the economic benefits of communism without the corruption of the party, this idea of the PMR as a state creates a powerful distortion insofar as many of the norms that underpin the concept of corruption (i.e., corruption as a lack of good governance, transparency, democracy, equality) remain in competition with locally-generated ideals and hopes that build upon the very real achievements of the Soviet Union. Anchoring its raison d'être in Soviet categories and terms generates nostalgia and goodwill for a people whose ability to imagine a better future is suspended — all is deferred pending international recognition of the PMR. Though residents live amidst its decaying economic infrastructure and freely acknowledge that the Soviet Union will never return, there are enough small, symbolic gestures to the Soviet past that make life tolerable. Lenin still stands tall, the state has three state languages, each with their own orthography, and, most importantly, the sovetskii narod is alive and well, invoked, celebrated, and ceaselessly cited by PMR leaders. To question the PMR or its leaders directly or indirectly would create the conditions for its demise. For one, it would rhetorically confirm what external enemies have been saying: that the PMR is a morally bankrupt, corrupt project masquerading as a state in order to enrich a select few by impoverishing the masses. Secondly, and more importantly, by acknowledging corruption and “voting” it out, residents

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36 This informant, Viktor, was Russian, in his early 40s and a resident of Tiraspol with kin ties in the Russian Federation.
inadvertently creating the conditions for realizing their worst fears insofar as real change forces
acknowledgement — a symbolic and real accounting, of sorts. It was easier before, under the
leadership of Smirnov and the largesse of Moscow, easier to simply pretend that all is well.

Conclusion

The December 2011 Presidential elections were the most competitive ever in the history of the
PMR. Having presided over the PMR since its founding more than two decades ago, the incumbent,
President Igor Smirnov, lost the support of Moscow and subsequently failed to make it into the
second round of voting. Given the prominent symbolic, material, and geopolitical presence of the
Russian Federation both as patron, sponsor, and peacemaker, the loss of Russia’s favor cannot be
underestimated. In the run-up to voting, PMR and Russian media were inundated with news reports
detailing the illicit gains of Smirnov’s family and chronicling their alleged embezzlement of Russian
aid. The content of the news reports themselves did not surprise residents — most have long since
accepted the corruption of the ruling elite. Talk on the street and in Internet forums centered on
what would happen if Smirnov loses. The second-round runoff pitted a young “reformer,” Evgenii
Shevchuk, formerly the speaker of the PMR Supreme Soviet and a protégé of Sheriff’s political
machine against the current speaker, Anatoly Kaminski, head of Sheriff’s Obnovlenie faction and the
favored candidate of the Kremlin. Shevchuk easily won the second round of voting with more than
seventy percent of the vote. After inauguration, he quickly set about cleaning and righting the ship
of state through a flurry of dismissals, appointments, and executive orders.

Though Shevchuk has a similar background to Sheriff’s founders insofar as he was a policeman and
quickly rose through the ranks of the Interior Ministry. Shevchuk has cultivated an image of himself
as a technocrat and was the favored candidate of the West because he is young and highly educated
(he boasts five diplomas from Russian and Ukrainian universities). He is viewed both in European
capitals and in Washington as a potential partner — most outside of the PMR have no idea that he
too was a policeman.

With Shevchuk’s inauguration the question of corruption returned full circle to the region. Having
campaigned against entrenched interests, his election as a president game him the reins of a state
that resembled a pyramid scheme that the previous regime treated as its personal piggy bank. Amidst
the bureaucratic housecleaning that occurs between any administrations, all the more intensive and
widespread because the previous administration ruled for more than two decades, the fears of many
were realized. Shevchuk’s campaign was based on the theme of “changes,” whereas Smirnov’s
campaign message was straightforward: rodina ne prodaetsya - the homeland is not for sale! The irony
of the incumbent’s rhetoric was not lost on residents. Residents were largely accustomed to the theft
and graft of Smirnov - everybody knew that his younger son Oleg and his daughter-in-law Marina
ran the regional branch of Gazprombank, the chosen conduit for Russian aid to the region, while his
elder son Vladimir ran the PMR Customs service. Yet while Smirnov remained in power these were
not seen as fully negative; corruption under Smirnov was not seen as a problem because he always
secured financial assistance from Russia. This aid is vital both to enriching the PMR elite and, more
importantly, maintaining the idea that life in the PMR is better than life in Moldova: the pension
supplements, Sheriff discounts, cheaper gas & utilities, etc. Yet when Smirnov fell out of favor, the
Russian Federation suspended aid to the PMR, and upon the election of Shevchuk further delayed

37 Currently, both of Igor Smirnov’s sons are wanted by authorities in Russia and remain wanted on an INTERPOL
international arrest warrant.
any resumption of aid until a full audit could be conducted. It remains unknown whether or not Russia will provide subsequent aid to the PMR.

Previously, elections were a time of affirming and performing the PMR’s sovereignty. This crisis of authority has sparked a crisis at a deeper symbolic level insofar as President Smirnov was the public face of the PMR. Criticism of his leadership and as a person was equated with criticism of the PMR as a state. Given the uncertainty over Russia’s continued support of the region and its leadership, many residents have, for the first time, begun to think about a future in which the PMR might not achieve independence and recognition. Yet what happens should the PMR’s tenuous existence as a de facto polity end?

Shortly after his inauguration Shevchuk discovered that more than ninety percent of the PMR’s foreign currency reserves had disappeared, transferred out of the country after Shevchuk’s electoral victory. Currently, the country’s foreign currency reserves hold less $49,000 (previously hard currency reserves were approximately $10 million). The PMR’s gold reserves, previously valued at $30 million in December 2011 had dropped by $4 million dollars as of January 2012 (Interfax, March 2, 2012). Transition, the smooth functioning of “democracy,” was evidently profitable for certain individuals. As stories trickled out of former officials purchasing villas abroad on the Mediterranean coast and in South America, Shevchuk quickly issued a series of executive decisions that appeared to be the first steps to dismantling the dependency-driven economy that developed under Smirnov. He cancelled the 100% import duty on Moldovan goods ostensibly to support free trade between the regions, and promised to revisit the privatizations that occurred under President Smirnov. Recently, Shevchuk even spoke of introducing the Russian ruble as a second official currency in the PMR, further undermining PMR claims to statehood. At first glance, the obvious beneficiaries of these orders would be the residents themselves, who could now purchase freely from channels not controlled by Sheriff. Yet because of the prominent anti-corruption rhetoric and the full accounting demanded by the new administration, the precarious economic situation of the state was now made clear. Though before it was known but not acknowledged, it now could not be ignored.

The uncertainty brought about by this change was reflected in a widespread anxiety for residents. Many wrote in forums and in the media of how now there had to be a full accounting. Some argued that the demise of Smirnov was detrimental because it would now allow a new group to occupy the state administration and steal even more; with Smirnov, they knew what they were getting. The illicit dealings of Smirnov’s clan were well known, and as long as he stayed in power certain irregularities were largely covered, partially because of Smirnov’s ability to secure Russian aid. Important for the purpose of this paper is the fact that corruption existed by was insulated by the façade of the state: its practitioners were the initial state builders, and the economic complement to this state system gave them something. Though Sheriff still exists and is the dominant economic entity in the region, its role will undoubtedly diminish as cheaper, better quality Moldovan products appear in the region. Just as President Smirnov relished his unofficial role as the “father” of the Transnistrian people, Sheriff relished its role as the material purveyor of goods in the region. In light of its murky relationship vis-à-vis those purporting to uphold the law, it will similarly suffer a loss of brand equity when faced with competition.

A new existential malaise has once again descended upon the region. Political question of independence and recognition, once the driving force of local political discourse, have been displaced by fundamental economic questions. Austerity, once the purview of the developed Euro-Atlantic economies, has silently usurped the terms of politics in the PMR. Pensioners are left now to
fret about pensions that may not be paid, and residents now are left to wonder how to deal with the phenomenon of corruption that existed but was previously not acknowledged. These interrelated issues of accounting and accountability will become more prominent as international pressure mounts on Russia to “solve” the Transnistrian conflict. Astutely aware that the precedent of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is untenable for the PMR, one wonders whether residents will come to reject the political façade that gave birth to phenomena like Sheriff. For Sheriff, like the PMR state itself, has provided an array of means to displace, mask and disarm claims that it ultimately acts in contradiction of the will and interests of the people. The larger structure of the PMR’s performative sovereignty can be likened to a conceptual shell that was periodically filled up. The state served as the dramaturgical backdrop while the cast was drawn from the ranks of residents who believed in the state. They participated, active or passively, because they believed it was in their interests, financially or morally, to do so. Yet as the institutional and financial backing for this performativity crumbles, it is worth remembering that performatively can never be fully institutionalized; it only works here and now. As residents are once again left to wonder when their subsidies will be restored, one wonders whether they will be less and less inclined to view a phenomenon like Sheriff as a positive aspect of life in the region.

One recent article in a local opposition newspaper, “Genocide – Transnistria?” was written by Ivan Mikhailovich Fedorov, a ninety-four year old veteran of the Great Patriotic War. The article begins with an overview of the genocide of Native Americans, achieved through guns, germs, and alcohol. The man who brought peace to Transnistria, General Lebed, proclaimed in 1992 that Moldova had conducted “genocide against its own people.” This genocide, a “monster with many heads,” continues unabated through poverty, hopelessness, unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling, and a lack of spirituality. The PMR, Fedorov writes, is “probably the only state in the world whose government looks at the death of its own people with absolute indifference.” In the words of the author, the main weapon to combat this genocide is the one’s love of their land, the place where they were born and raised. This same weapon is also a curse. Having failed to build a “little Switzerland,” people are left with a choice: to live in ignorance or to see the truth of the state system. Residents object to being seen as ignorant about the affairs of their country, but discerning the truth from the fictions propagated by the state may be asking too much. To acknowledge complicity would be to implicate the self in the process.

Having experienced the demise of a superpower, the audacious hopes of a young state, and the collapse of its ideals, residents today are left with frustration, apathy, and cynicism. In the face of a mass media that posits the PMR as heaven on earth, the disjuncture between the mediated world and the real world becomes too much to bear. Long accustomed to serving as the literal and performative base of a profitable system, the people are now left with more questions instead of answers. Though one might say a brighter, more democratic future awaits, many would say that that life was better before these problems were brought to light.

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