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IT'S ALWAYS RAINY IN TRANSNISTRIA:

5 Thoughts on What to Do
With the Black Hole of Europe



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BLACK SEA SECURITY FORUM

It's Always Rainy In Transnistria: 5 Thoughts on What to Do With the Black Hole of Europe

Kyiv, 2024

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BLACK SEA SECURITY FORUM

Black Sea Security Journal (2024)

«It's Always Rainy In Transnistria: 5 Thoughts on What to Do With the Black Hole of Europe» is the first edition of the Black Sea Security Journal, focusing on the frozen conflict in Transnistria, its influence on Moldova, Ukraine, and the Black Sea region. The Journal is a continuation of the panel discussion that took place during the first Black Sea Security Forum in 2024 in Odesa, Ukraine.

The authors of the articles present five possible scenarios that outline how the situation in Transnistria might evolve in the near future. Each scenario provides an analysis of potential political, economic, and security outcomes, offering a comprehensive look at frozen conflict. Aimed at experts and professionals in regional studies and security, this journal is an essential read for those who seek a deeper understanding of the historical roots and current dynamics shaping this 'black hole' in Europe.

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Published by Black Sea Security Forum, with the support of the Renaissance Foundation in Ukraine.

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200 copies

Kyiv, 2024

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FOREWORD

Dear friends,

In June 2024, we gathered more than 350 politicians, officials, experts, military and business representatives from more than 20 countries in Odessa for the first Black Sea Security Forum. For the first time since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the city of Odesa hosted such a high-level conference. Our mission is to create the platform that will help us to find collective solutions to the challenges the Black Sea region faces today and propose concrete actions for resolving the situation.

On behalf of Black Sea Security Forum, it is my pleasure to present to you the first edition of the Black Sea Journal. In the current issue, we are focused on the topic of Transnistria and its influence on the Black Sea region and its security. We have gathered the prominent authors from Ukraine, Moldova, Romania and the United States to look into 5 scenarios of how the situation in Transnistria might develop in the future and what consequences it can have.

Oleksii Goncharenko

Member of the Parliament of Ukraine
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FOR MOLDOVA, PEACEFUL REINTEGRATION OF THE TRANSNISTRIAN REGION IS THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

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Abstract

The article tackles the subject of the Transnistrian conflict in the Republic of Moldova and the attempts made by the Moldovan authorities to solve the conflict. The authors present Chişinău's position to advance with the reintegration agenda using only political, diplomatic, and economic instruments. In their view, the Transnistrian region can be reintegrated peacefully because specific features of the 1992 conflict and the situation afterward make this scenario realistic. The article also examines the continuous and ongoing dialogue that Chişinău is conducting within the existing negotiation formats with the separatist structures in Tiraspol, along with pertinent arguments in favor of peaceful reintegration being the only solution to the current situation.

Introduction

In recent years, the Transnistrian issue has become a widely debated topic in the community of experts in international relations and regional security. The name 'Transnistria' appears in reports, articles, and analytic materials of global media outlets and think tanks more often than before.

In the Republic of Moldova, we have initially seen this evolution with awe, and then with a bit of concern at times.

”

During years of often unsuccessful attempts to internationalize the subject, Chişinău has not always gotten used to explaining it to a truly international audience, beyond the narrow circle of experts and diplomats familiar with the issue.

Hence the concern we mentioned earlier: sometimes, we felt that some authors, be it academic scholars, think tank experts, or journalists, did not understand the essence – even when it came to plain facts, not interpretations. We felt there was a lack of understanding of a 'frozen conflict' that has attracted less attention over the years because it was more 'frozen' than others.

In this article, we have committed ourselves to addressing this deficiency of understanding and attempting to address it. We intend to shed light on some aspects of the Transnistrian issue and answer some of the most frequent questions we encounter: What is the Transnistrian region for the Republic of Moldova? Why do we insist on reintegrating it? Why is reintegration by peaceful means the only course of action we have taken? And probably the most difficult one: what do we do with the Russian military presence and influence?

The Transnistrian Region Is an Organic Part of the Republic of Moldova

During the years since the national authorities lost control over some cities, towns, and villages of the country, we have used several names for it: Eastern districts of the Republic of Moldova, the Transnistrian region, and the Left bank of the Dniester River. This may have occurred because the territory did not have a clear status within the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic during the Soviet era and, ironically, as a continuation of its changing and drifting identity over the past several centuries. It has been an area of Ottoman, Tatar, and Russian interests and, especially during the 16th and 17th centuries, a place of immigration for ethnic Romanians from the Principalities of Moldova, Wallachia, and Transylvania. In 1792, when the area became a part of the Russian Empire, the new administration found the Romanian-speaking population on a strip of 15-20 km to the east of the Dniester River, with towns and settlements like Dubăsari, Sucleia, Slobozia, and others. Naturally, during the 19th century, the ethnic Romanian population on both banks of the Dniester had numerous ties and strong relationships. When Bessarabia became a republic in 1917-1918, declared its independence, and then joined Romania, representatives of the left-bank Moldovans pleaded not to stand aside and be included in these processes. However, history seemed to have other plans, and in 1924, the Soviet Union established the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), with a declared goal to regain Bessarabia. The MASSR was larger than the current Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova, with a territory of 8.3 thousand sq. km, and the ethnic Romanians/Moldovans were not the first ethnic group numerically, as 45,5% of its population was Ukrainian¹, with the Moldovans making up 31,6%². Nevertheless, its territory of 3.7 thousand sq. km that the Soviet authorities included in the Moldovan SSR in 1940 had

¹ Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Wikipedia, link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moldavian_Autonomous_Soviet_Socialist_Republic

² Idem

a Romanian-speaking majority. It represented the historic strip of land with a compact Romanian population we mentioned. Since August 1940, the five districts of the Moldovan SSR situated on the left bank of Dniester were part of the republic without any autonomous or formally distinct status. Considering these findings, we perceive the Transnistrian region as an organic part of the Republic of Moldova. Despite the 34 years of the lack of effective control by central authorities³, social ties between the two banks of Dniester are strong, with surveys conducted in both areas showing that the population does not perceive each other as threatening. On the contrary, it has warm feelings for one another. Moreover, large parts of the population maintain family and social ties and relations, and mutual visits are frequent. Tens of thousands of people from the left bank work and live in the capital, Chişinău, and other cities and settlements along the Dniester, such as Rezina, Orhei, Criuleni, Căuşeni, etc. On top of this, over 90% of the approximately 350,000 people residing in the region hold the citizenship of the Republic of Moldova⁴, and many of them benefit from different forms of social assistance offered by Chişinău. We will return to these figures further.

For these and other reasons, the only course of action we can take towards the Transnistrian region is to consider it a part of our country and make every effort to reintegrate it into the Republic of Moldova peacefully.

Features of the Transnistrian Conflict Make Peaceful Settlement a Realistic Scenario

In clarifying our commitment to a peaceful reintegration, we feel the need to remind a few aspects of the events that led to the loss of control over the Transnistrian region by the Moldovan government.

First of all, the Transnistrian conflict was not ethnic. It is true that in 1989-1992, the region appeared to be more pro-Russian (and Soviet nostalgic) than the rest of the territory of the Republic of Moldova, but so was Gagauzia, where control of the constitutional authority was restored. Since 1989, the region has played a part in the efforts of Moscow to undermine and derail the movement for national rights and

³ The so-called "Moldovan Republic of Transnistria" has self-proclaimed its independence in 1990

⁴ Government of the Republic of Moldova. (2023, September 19). Peste 357 mii de locuitori din regiunea transnistreană sunt cetățeni ai Republicii Moldova [Over 357,000 residents of the Transnistrian region are citizens of the Republic of Moldova]. <https://gov.md/ro/content/peste-357-mii-de-locuitori-din-regiunea-transnistreana-sunt-cetateni-ai-republicii-moldova>

independence of the Republic of Moldova. But even if some people saw the further evolution of our country fundamentally differently, their disagreements were (geo) political rather than ethnocultural. The degree of strife and hatred between people never reached the likes of former Yugoslavia or Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts. Human connections were not severed; they continued before and after the brief armed conflict of 1992, including among people of different ethnic backgrounds. The Transnistrian region was a place where over 40% were Moldovan/Romanian, more than 30% were Ukrainian, and over 20% were Russian, with Bulgarians, Gagauzis, Poles, and Jews making up most of the rest⁵. People of all ethnicities and languages took part in the fighting in 1992 on both sides, Government forces and Tiraspol-based separatists. The conflict did cause some internally displaced people but far from the scale seen in Georgia or Azerbaijan/Armenia.

Although history should not be written with 'what if,' one must wonder what could have happened in 1992 if the former 14th Soviet (then Russian) Army hadn't been deployed in the Transnistrian region and hadn't provided weapons, ammunition, and all other forms of military assistance to the irregular armed formations that supported the secessionists. We feel compelled to return to the example of the Gagauz Autonomous Unit – after all, groups of Gagauzi people in Comrat declared the 'Gagauz Republic' on 19 August 1990 (before the so-called 'Transnistrian Moldovan Republic'). However, the Moldovan authorities did not let the situation degenerate into military conflict and, eventually, negotiated and implemented a peaceful settlement that maintained this Southern region within the constitutional framework of the country. The Gagauz region did not have any Soviet/Russian military forces permanently deployed in its territory.

The Transnistrian conflict remains the only 'frozen' conflict in the post-Soviet space where we have maintained peace since the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 1992. The Russian officials often say that this is an outcome of «one of the most successful peacekeeping operations in history» which, in their view, also includes Russian troops whose presence in our territory is considered illegal by the Moldovan authorities. Nevertheless, the real reason lies in the numerous ties that we, as a people, have on both banks of the Dniester, and, we would venture to say, in the predominantly artificial nature of the conflict. Moreover, the willingness of the authorities in Chisinau to engage in discussions has often contributed to the settlement of impending conflicts.

5 Meyer, G. (2005). Transnistria report: The legal aspects of the frozen conflict (Report No. 2005-09). Republic of Moldova National Bureau of Statistics. https://statistica.gov.md/publications/137/ro/Raport_Transnistria_Meyer_rom.pdf

We Have a Dialogue in Place with the Tiraspol Structures, and It Matters

After 1992, Chişinău has engaged in a dialogue with the unrecognized structures in Tiraspol. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has been involved as a mediator since the beginning, providing assistance and creating a setting for the discussions. After 2000, the dialogue took place in several formats: 5+2 (the most 'international' one, where Chişinău and Tiraspol are the sides, OSCE, Ukraine, and Russia act as mediators, and the United States of America and the European Union are observers), 1+1 (where the Deputy Prime Minister for reintegration, acting as chief negotiator of Chişinău, meets the chief negotiator from Tiraspol) and the working groups, in which experts from both banks of the Dniester River meet to solve administrative/technical issues in the interests of all citizens. We have maintained these formats through the years, and Chişinău has fulfilled its positive obligations to the citizens and its commitments to international partners.

It is true that after the start of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, the two countries found themselves in a state of war, thus making impossible any meeting in the 5+2 format. At the same time, meetings in the 1+1 and working group formats regularly take place. The Moldovan authorities believe that maintaining dialogue is essential for the peaceful settlement of the conflict.

The commitment to peaceful reintegration is paying off: since 2012, Chişinău has successfully involved the Left bank of Dniester River in talks with the European Union before signing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and the Association Agreement. After the region has been included in these agreements (with the rest of the national territory), trade with EU member countries has flourished. Today, more than two thirds of the commercial exchanges done by companies from the region are with partners from the EU⁶. Strengthening ties with the EU and suspending visas for Moldovan citizens have prompted rapid growth in the residents of the eastern districts who applied for Moldovan identity documents and are now citizens of the country. Almost all businesses from the region are registered with the Moldovan authorities, which legalized their activities, especially export operations.

⁶ Moldpres News Agency. (2024, May 9). Over 70% of the trade of companies on the left bank of the Dniester is solely with the European Union. <https://www.moldpres.md/news/2024/05/09/24003410>

The reasons why Chișinău prefers peaceful reintegration are also related to efforts to maintain domestic political stability in the Republic of Moldova. The country has a divided society. The pro-European sentiment is predominant, but a significant part of the population favors closer ties with Russia. This enables pro-Russian political parties and groups to engage in destabilizing actions on behalf of Moscow.

” *Employing large-scale disinformation, weaponization of strategic communication, and aggressive narratives, the pro-Russians try to hamper our efforts to achieve European integration and strive to tie our country to Russian-led structures like the Eurasian Economic Union*

At the moment, the socio-political situation in the country is stable but tense, and the pro-European government is doing everything it can to maintain order and not yield to pressure intended to derail us from our European path. Any observer who monitors the electronic and social media will periodically notice so-called ‘news’ or ‘insides’ that describe secret ‘plans’ of the Moldovan authorities (with the involvement of NATO, of course) to attack the Transnistrian region using military force and end the Russian military presence there. The purpose of this narrative is to instill fear and lack of trust in the authorities among ordinary citizens, thus making the government vulnerable. It is a vital tool in the hybrid war waged by Russia against our country. Chișinău has always denied having such intentions and is actively debunking strategic disinformation against our country.

Minimizing Russian Influence Will Bring Closer the Peaceful Reintegration of the Region

” *Chișinău’s approach to reintegration is based on the attempts to restore single national spaces in spheres like economy, finances, education, culture, and, eventually, law.*

We have positive obligations to our citizens, which is why not only 11% of the national territory that we do not control but also the people

residing in the region matter to us. In our view, they should continue to live there after the reintegration and enjoy all the rights and freedoms that our country offers to its citizens. Even among the 1,500 members of the Operational Group of Russian Forces, only about 100 are Russian officers from outside the region, while the others are locals. We have to consider these circumstances when we formulate plans for further reintegration.

Many hopes for successful reintegration lie within the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. Our country became a candidate along with Ukraine in 2022 and then started the official negotiations in 2024. We estimate the rise in the standards of life on the right bank of the Dniester River to function as a catalyst for further integration, winning over citizens from the Transnistrian region. This is already ongoing since at least 2014, and the average wages on the right bank have gradually surpassed more than twice the ones in the region. Now, we anticipate this process to take place much more quickly.

The Moldovan authorities have also taken unilateral measures to include businesses from the Transnistrian region in the single customs space of the country. Since the beginning of the current year, according to the new Customs Code, enterprises performing commercial operations must pay customs taxes in the state budget like all the other businesses in the country. The authorities will continue implementing economic and fiscal measures to bring the region under control.

Other measures to break the region's dependence on Russia include further strengthening the resilience in the energy market and energy generation. We want to ensure that Russia will not be able to impose its political will through pressure against our government using the energy weapon again. We have put in place swift measures to diversify the imports of gas and electricity, coupled with steps aimed at increasing internal generation power. These steps have allowed us to decouple the gas consumption of the right bank of the Dniester River from Gazprom. We are working to make sure the gas that reaches the left bank and generates much of the electricity consumption of the entire country will not be free anymore. Working with the market prices will break a vicious circle used by the Tiraspol structures to finance the regime that keeps our country divided.

Together with other measures, the current government is taking steps to modernize and strengthen our military forces and security sector. We are merely correcting an error from the past, where the military and security sector has been left with little financing for decades and has regressed to a condition where it could not perform its functions anymore. We must be ready to face any challenge, including when it comes to national defense and national security.

As we strengthen our position at the negotiations table, we are getting ready to ensure the demilitarization of the Transnistrian region and the country's

reintegration by peaceful means and with the full support of the international community. We want to remind you that the Russian Federation committed to withdraw all its forces from the Republic of Moldova in 1999 at the Istanbul OSCE Summit, and our country has asked the Russian side to keep that commitment, including at the UN level.

Moreover, the Moldovan authorities have made the peaceful and diplomatic course of action part of our national legislation. Article 110 of the Constitution states that Chişinău can offer autonomy to the settlements on the left bank of the Dniester River according to a special statute passed by organic law. Law 173/2005 clearly states that the Transnistrian settlement can be based on a peaceful solution only, excluding military actions or on the grounds of democratization and demilitarization of the Transnistrian region.

Peace Is the Only Option

We will continue to work to achieve a peaceful final settlement of the Transnistrian conflict and the full reintegration of the region in the Republic of Moldova. We are confident that this strategy corresponds to the will of the people in our country. All of our citizens, no matter their ethnicity, spoken language, and political preferences, desire peace. We see it in all surveys; we hear it in all of our discussions with the people. Our government respects the will of the people and will do everything in its power to avoid risking the lives of our military personnel and fellow citizens. This is why peaceful reintegration of the Transnistrian region is the only game in town. We will continue to defend this position because it is rooted deep in our way of life and our nature, and it is our way of doing things. We can only be successful if we continue to prove to the world that our commitment to peace is as strong as ever.

We count on the support of our neighboring countries – Ukraine and Romania – and the international community to achieve this goal. Solving the Transnistrian problem will make life easier for the entire region. However, we can solve it only peacefully. There is no other option.

Oleg Serebrian is a Moldovan writer, historian, politologist, diplomat, and government official. He holds a Bachelor's degree in history and law from the State Pedagogical University in Chişinău (1992) and a Master's degree in international relations from the European Institute in Nice (1993). He attended specialization programs in the National

School of Administration in Paris and at the universities of Edinburgh and Birmingham. In 1998, he earned his Ph.D. degree in political science. In 1998-1999, he was a spokesman for the Moldovan MFA. Between 2010 and 2015, he was the Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to France and UNESCO, and in 2015-2022, the Ambassador of Moldova to Germany. Since January 2022, he has held the office of Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration in the Government of the Republic of Moldova.

Dan Nicu is a Moldovan political scientist and public servant holding the position of senior consultant in the State Chancellery of the Republic of Moldova, Bureau for Reintegration Policies. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in political science from the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, Romania, and a Master's degree in political theory and analysis from the same university. Before joining the public service, he worked in mass media and think tanks/NGOs.

FORCIBLE REINTEGRATION OF MOLDOVA: POSSIBLE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE RAPID FALL OF THE TRANSNISTRIAN REGIME COULD HAVE

Sergiy Sydorenko

co-founder and editor of European Pravda

Abstract

There are probably no two international armed conflicts—whether «hot» or «frozen»—that are almost identical. Every war has its unique features, and attempts to draw parallels between two different conflicts often lead to incorrect conclusions, even when the aggressor state in both conflicts is the same.

The war against Ukraine and the long-standing Transnistrian conflict perfectly illustrate this point. Almost everything differs between the two, with the only common factor being that both Ukraine and Moldova have their territories occupied by Russia. However, for many, this similarity is sufficient.

From time to time, public calls are heard from Ukrainian opinion leaders for a military operation in Transnistria that would destroy the Russian military stationed there and force the separatist region to reintegrate, i.e., come under the control of Moldova's constitutional government. In their view, this would eliminate a source of instability on Ukraine's western border.

At the same time, Ukrainian international relations experts unanimously oppose this idea. They argue that it does not take into account the differences between Moldova and Ukraine. Moreover, if Kyiv actually decides to resolve the Transnistrian issue using the Ukrainian Armed Forces, it will have extremely negative consequences for Ukraine itself. In addition, instead of a stable pro-Western Moldova, we might achieve the opposite effect.

Moldova also opposes such a scenario, and without its consent, Ukraine could find itself in the role of an aggressor.

Still, this scenario cannot be completely ruled out. For instance, in the event of military provocations by Russian forces from Transnistria, Ukraine would have the right to respond without waiting for permission from Chişinău.

Furthermore, a military operation by Ukraine's Armed Forces is not the only option. There are also scenarios for the forced reunification of Moldova, which would not involve military action on its territory. Nevertheless, all these scenarios will have shocking consequences that must be recognized and considered.

This analysis is dedicated to the scenarios of forced reintegration of Transnistria into Moldova—those that do not result from agreements reached between the parties involved.

Important Details of the Conflict

Before proceeding to specific scenarios, it is necessary to recall the unique parameters of Transnistria, which will determine the consequences and the feasibility of a military scenario (one with the use of force).

Transnistria is a region located mainly on the left bank of the Dniester River. This is part of the internationally recognized territory of Moldova, which remains outside the control of the country's constitutional authorities. The «independence» of this territory is not recognized by any UN member state, not even Russia.

On the territory of Transnistria, the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRV), a component of the regular army of the Russian Federation, is stationed without the permission of Moldova.

International law recognizes that Transnistria is under the effective control of the Russian Federation. This status was first announced by the European Court of Human Rights in 2004¹ and since then repeatedly confirmed by other decisions of the ECHR and political bodies of the Council of Europe. In PACE decisions, Transnistria is also called a territory under Russian occupation². However, the European Union refrains from such specification.

The Transnistrian conflict has a number of unique features.

¹ ECHR Decision *Ilașcu and others v. Moldova and Russia* European Court of Human Rights, Application No. 48787/99

<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22appno%22%3A%2248787%2F99%22%2C%22itemid%22%3A%22001-61886%22%7D>.

² Recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the expulsion of Russia from the Council of Europe, March 15, 2022 <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29885/html>.

There is no strong sense of unity with the occupied territory in Moldovan society. Public opinion polls have never shown that the return of Transnistria is a priority for the citizens of Moldova, recently it is not even in the top 10 urgent problems of the country. Why so?

One of the key reasons is that Transnistria broke away from the control of Chişinău back during the Soviet Union era, in 1990. In 1991, when Moldova declared independence and the left-bank regions of the Dniester were legally incorporated into its territory, Transnistria was already de facto out of its control.

An additional reason for the lack of public demand for the reintegration of Transnistria into Moldova is the painful experience of 1992. At that time, Chişinău attempted to regain control of the region by force, but it faced the Russian army stationed there as its opponent. The short but bloody conflict claimed over 1,000 lives. Moldova lost that war. This experience makes any military scenario highly unfeasible.

Another characteristic of the conflict on the Dniester is that, from the beginning, it lacked a societal basis. There are no religious, national or any other differences between the residents of the right and left banks of Dniester. Before the war, Moldovans were the largest ethnic group in the Transnistrian region, with a slight majority over Russians and Ukrainians. There is also no historical basis for the region's «independence.»

It was a conflict of elites, a conflict over control and funding. The driving force behind it was the party leadership and heads of state enterprises in Tiraspol (including defense factories) – mostly people without Moldovan roots. The reasons for confrontation of Tiraspol with the rest of Moldova were artificially created using the Soviet disinformation machine and state-controlled media, which persists in Transnistria today.

Nevertheless, despite all efforts and over 30 years of «brainwashing,» no enmity has emerged between the left and right banks of the Dniester. People did not see, and still do not see, each other as enemies. As a result, residents of Chişinău can freely travel to Tiraspol, and vice versa. This is another unique feature of the Transnistrian conflict.

At the same time, there has been little rapprochement between the two banks

of the Dniester. The attitude of most people towards life and those on the opposite bank can rather be described as «indifference.» The vast majority of Transnistrian residents have obtained Moldovan citizenship, but they see it not as a form of self-identification, but as a tool (for example, for travel). All these details are crucial for understanding the potential reaction of people in the event of a military scenario.

Arguments in Favor of a Military Scenario

Calls for a military operation in Transnistria have been heard in the Ukrainian information space since the spring of 2022. Immediately after the Armed Forces of Ukraine pushed Russian troops back from the outskirts of Kyiv and other northern regions, voices emerged advocating for a new swift victory that could be achieved in Transnistria.

The scenario sounds simple and appealing. Since Russian troops of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRV) are stationed in Transnistria, they are proposed to be recognized as a legitimate military target. The Ukrainian Armed Forces have superior strength and a strong chance of victory in this local war.

Supporters of a military scenario in Transnistria believe that its implementation would lead to:

- the elimination of military threats on Ukraine's southwestern border and the need for Ukraine to maintain a small military presence in that area;
- access for the Ukrainian Armed Forces to ammunition depots in Transnistria for use in the war against Russia;
- the capture of Russian soldiers, which would increase the exchange pool for returning Ukrainian prisoners of war from Russia;
- an end to the long-standing instability in Moldova caused by the presence of the occupied territory, leading to a more pro-Western orientation for Moldova;

Looking ahead, the author of these lines considers these arguments to be flawed (more on this later).

However, they have many supporters. In particular, one of Ukraine's leading military journalists has advocated this scenario since spring 2022, Yuriy Butusov, editor of the publication «Censor.net.»³ He regularly renews this discussion⁴. Other opinion leaders also support the military scenario. One of the latest discussions was sparked in August 2024 by a tweet containing the map of Transnistria (and this way hinting at the issue), published by one of Ukraine's most well-known military volunteers, Taras Chmut, head of the «Come Back Alive» foundation⁵.

From a purely military point of view, this idea makes sense. The military strength of the Russian army and its proxies in Transnistria is limited and cannot be replenished due to the lack of supply routes from Russia. The region also lacks nomenclature of weapons OR modern weaponry, as well as contemporary electronic warfare and air defense systems.

The Russian army and their proxies in the occupied part of Moldova are armed with light armored vehicles, primarily APCs and BRDM-2s, anti-tank guns, and mortars. There is also some offensive weaponry, such as T-64 tanks (officially 18 units, but witnesses suggest that significantly fewer are operational) and a certain number of Grad multiple rocket launchers⁶. Nevertheless, the combat readiness of this equipment, as well as the effectiveness of personnel, is highly questionable.

It is also important to note that the potential defense of Transnistria would face a serious issue in terms of mobilizing manpower. Unlike the civil and financial management in Transnistria, which has a de facto high level of autonomy, Russia retains control over all relevant security structures in the region. Therefore, in a crisis situation, Russia would fully take over the management not only of the Operational Group of Russian Forces and Russian «peacekeepers» (up to 2,000 personnel) but also of the so-called Transnistrian army (around 5,000 personnel) and the so-called Ministry of State Security (over 3,000 personnel, according to estimates from Chişinău), among others.

³ Yuriy Butusov's Facebook post from April 2022 <https://www.facebook.com/butusov.yuriy/posts/pfbid07bf8h5noEq9uASvQYQwbDtYpmow4ihf8g8pujqoVQgThR2uA6HYC3FCxq7t8jMmhl>.

⁴ Yuriy Butusov's Facebook post from June 2023 <https://www.facebook.com/butusov.yuriy/posts/pfbidONP2RsmT72Sx9ytEfbU5fWGectDa55JCZt5q6wSVmzLMgGrM17rL8Tp5j1RSVCQwul>.

⁵ Taras Chmut's tweet from August 2024 <https://x.com/TarasChmut/status/1825105878871146746>.

⁶ Article «Is a Russian Attack on Ukraine from Transnistria Possible?» by Artem Filipenko and Serhiy Sydorenko <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2022/02/15/7134037/>.

However, this does not mean that Russia has up to 10,000 soldiers and officers ready to defend the «republic.» In fact, the majority of personnel in the Operational Group of Russian Forces are not military personnel from Russia but local Transnistrians; they make up 100% of the rank-and-file and sergeant staff and most of the lower officer ranks. Official Chişinău believes that there are only a few dozen military personnel deployed from Russia.

For many in this depressed region, serving in the Russian army is one of the few sources of income. They did not join the military to fight. The motivation for armed resistance in the event of an attack by a stronger opponent, such as the Ukrainian Armed Forces, would be extremely low.

Any attempts to carry out a general mobilization in Transnistria are doomed to failure. This step can only lead to a mass flight to the right bank of Transnistrians who do not want to fight. The administrative border of the region with the rest of Moldova runs over land in several extended sections, and effectively closing it is virtually impossible. (As a side note, the author of these lines has crossed this line illegally, from the point of view of Tiraspol, about a dozen times around Bender, near Dubăsari, and in the Grigoriopol-Doroţchia area.)

Does this mean that Transnistria would immediately capitulate in the event of a confrontation with the Ukrainian Armed Forces? No. The regular Russian officers and FSB representatives integrated into the security forces of Transnistria, as well as a certain number of ideological supporters of the «Russian world» among the rank-and-file, would still pose a threat. Therefore, there is a risk of urban combat in Tiraspol, Tighina, Bender, and Rîbniţa. While the Ukrainian Armed Forces would have a clear advantage, fighting in urban areas would almost inevitably result in casualties, including among the civilian population. This would further exacerbate the negative consequences of such a scenario.

Why Would A Military Scenario Harm Ukraine?

Military reasoning does not take into account the political realities and international consequences.

”*Transnistria is part of Moldova, so a preventive and unilateral military operation by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, from the perspective of international law, would be considered aggression by Ukraine against Moldova.*

The presence of Russian troops in the region does not change this (it's important to emphasize that this refers specifically to a preventive attack – in the case of provocations from the opponent, the Ukrainian Armed Forces would have the right to a military response).

In a situation where it is crucial for Ukraine to maintain the unity of global players regarding the unacceptability of Russian aggression, such a step would be very risky and would undoubtedly be used by Kyiv's opponents on the international stage.

Many in Ukraine expect that Moldova itself will ask Ukraine for a military operation to resolve the conflict and return Transnistria. However, this is a deeply flawed assumption.

First, there is a broad consensus in Moldova (both in society and among politicians) about the inadmissibility of a military scenario.

The parliament also holds powers in the defense sector, and approving such a decision would require more than 50% of political «suicides.» This is unrealistic.



Secondly, even if President Sandu were to commit political suicide and invite the Ukrainian Armed Forces into Moldova, she would not be able to do so under the Constitution.⁷

Lastly, and most importantly, if the Ukrainian Armed Forces were to carry out a military operation to eliminate Transnistria, the outcome could turn out to be the opposite of what is expected.

For Ukraine, it is important to have a pro-Western Moldova that is moving towards EU membership next to it (as Kyiv and Chişinău are informally united in a «package» for the EU, and any slowdown in Moldova will mean a slowdown for Ukraine as well). Nonetheless, a military operation by the Ukrainian Armed Forces would primarily strike at the pro-European government of Moldova, which is facing declining approval ratings ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024–2025.

⁷ Constitution of Moldova https://www.constcourt.md/public/files/file/Actele%20Curtii/acte_en/MDA_Constitution_EN.pdf.

President Sandu, lacking economic achievements, has built her campaign around the idea that her team has «maintained peace in the country.» Transferring the war onto Moldovan territory would undermine this narrative, linking the European vector to conflict and potentially bringing a pro-Russian government to power in 2025. This would run counter to Ukraine's interests.

For Ukraine, maintaining stability on its border is crucial. Nonetheless, uncontrolled reintegration could not only change the government in neighboring Moldova but also lead to prolonged instability, further plunging the country into an economic abyss. This would be exacerbated by a loss of trust in Ukraine and the West, as well as electoral shifts due to the reintegration of Transnistrian residents.

It's worth noting that most Ukrainian politicians today are well aware of these risks and are no longer inclined to support the invasion of Transnistria, as was the case in 2022.

Still, can we rule out the war in Transnistria? No. There is a theoretical possibility that Transnistria could provoke the Ukrainian Armed Forces. In that case, Ukraine's actions to suppress the military threat, including the occupation of the region, would be justified. But the negative consequences would remain unchanged.

Moreover, it seems that Kyiv does not rule out a limited operation to capture Russian military depots in the village of Cobasna.

Armament Composition: A Formula with Many Unknowns

In Transnistria, near the village of Cobasna, 2 km from the Ukrainian border, there are ammunition depots built during the Soviet Union. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Warsaw Pact countries - Germany, Poland, etc. - Soviet stocks from these countries were moved here, which is why the facility in Cobasna is often called «the largest ammunition warehouse in Eastern Europe», although it is impossible to verify the correctness of this statement.

In view of the ammunition starvation of the Armed Forces, the idea of a limited military operation to take control of the warehouses in Cobasna has considerable support, since it will have much less negative international

consequences for Ukraine, and also excludes the humanitarian consequences that the occupation of Tiraspol and possible street fighting with its defenders.

In Transnistria, near the village of Cobasna, located just 2 km from the Ukrainian border, there are ammunition depots built during the Soviet era. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Warsaw Pact states—such as Germany and Poland—Soviet stockpiles were moved here, which is why the site in Cobasna is often referred to as «the largest ammunition warehouse in Eastern Europe,» although it is impossible to verify the accuracy of this claim.

Given the ammunition shortage faced by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the idea of a limited military operation to take control of the depots in Cobasna has significant support. This approach would likely have far fewer negative international consequences for Ukraine and would also avoid the humanitarian implications that could arise from occupying Tiraspol and potential street battles with its defenders.

Nevertheless, the success of the operation in Cobasna is far from guaranteed.

Firstly, it is crucial to ensure that when the Armed Forces of Ukraine gain control over the warehouses, uncontrolled detonation of ammunition doesn't happen. It is impossible to rule out such sabotage by the Russians, who currently control these warehouses. Several sources in the Moldovan leadership believe that the Russians are preparing for a possible military scenario and have a plan to blow up the warehouses if they lose control over them.

Even if the Ukrainians manage to take the security of the warehouses by surprise, the Russians still have the option of detonating them remotely with

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Secondly, if Ukraine gains access to the warehouses in Cobasna, the contents may not meet the expectations. Neither Ukraine nor Moldova knows what and in what quantities is stored in Cobasna.

targeted missile strikes.

It is known for sure that the quantity of ammunition is significantly lower than the stocks from 30 years ago.

In 1999 (before Putin gained full power in the country), Russia agreed at the

Istanbul OSCE summit to withdraw weapons and troops from Transnistria and began to implement this promise, expert Artem Filipenko recalls⁸.

By 2003, Russia had exported 721 wagonloads of ammunition from Cobasna. On December 26-27, 2003, all the anti-aircraft missiles stored there since the Soviet era were removed via military transport aircraft Il-76. According to data reported to the OSCE at the time, there were 20,887 tons of ammunition stored in the warehouses of the Operational Group of Russian Forces in Tiraspol, out of an initial 42,000 tons, that is, about half.

Not everything was to be exported – a significant part of the ammunition in Cobasna was too old to be transported, and it was to be disposed of on-site. Still, it is unknown how much usable ammunition remains and which specific types. Nevertheless, it is clear that during the removal more than 20 years ago, the Russians prioritized the evacuation of the most valuable items.

The Gas Factor

The military elimination of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) is not the only scenario for forced or «chaotic» reintegration of Moldova, which could begin without reaching some agreements through negotiations. All of these scenarios share common negative consequences and risks, which are worth exploring in more detail. To explain them, it's necessary to understand at least the basic characteristics of the region's economy.

As mentioned earlier, separatism in Transnistria does not have a societal foundation and was artificially imposed by Soviet elites. An equally significant problem for the separatists is the inability of the region's economy to function independently.

Transnistria is a narrow strip of land without natural resources or a cohesive logistical system. Even with international recognition, Transnistria would likely have little chance of economic success. As an unrecognized entity with restricted international trade, it was inherently economically unsustainable.

Over the past 30 years, circumstances have only worsened due to the aging of the

⁸ Kret, Filipenko. «The Role and Impact of the Russian Military Contingent in the Transnistrian Region on the Course of the Russo-Ukrainian War.» <https://doi.org/10.33782/2708-4116.2024.2.267>.

region's population, the departure of young people from the unpromising region, the lack of modernization of production infrastructure, shifts in geostrategic conditions, rising energy costs, the aging of housing stock and existing infrastructure, etc. Given these factors, the persistence of the Transnistrian administration and the survival of its economy may seem miraculous. However, in reality, Russia played the role of «a magician» all this time.

Initially, Russia purchased Transnistrian products, including dual-use goods. Nevertheless, over time, this factor became less significant. After Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, its importance sharply declined, and today it can almost be disregarded altogether.

Russia also funded its contingent in Tiraspol, provided additional payments to Transnistrian pensioners, and so on. Nonetheless, even these financial injections have shown a long-term trend of decline.

In recent years, the key source of funding for Transnistria has been gas donations. «Gazprom» has supplied gas to the region free of charge for many years, formally attributing the debt to Moldova, which has never officially recognized this debt and certainly will not repay it.

A smaller portion of this «free» gas is sold by the Transnistrian authorities to household and commercial consumers, as well as to municipal enterprises in the region, with the revenue flowing into the separatist administration's budget. The price of gas for Transnistrians is lower than the market rate, creating a sense of well-being and social security in the region while also giving local businesses a competitive advantage.

However, the bulk of the gas from Russia is burned at the Moldavskaya GRES (Cuciurgan power station), a thermal power plant in the town of Dnestrovsk. Electricity from there is supplied to citizens and businesses in the region and «exported» to Chişinău. Transnistrian electricity makes up the lion's share of Moldova's energy balance.

The revenues from electricity and gas sales form the backbone of the Transnistrian budget, and the availability of gas, electricity, and heating at preferential rates is the foundation of social security in Transnistria.

In essence, **the existence of the separatist regime is sustained by Russian gas.** But let's face the truth: sooner or later, this source will disappear.

The End of Free Gas

It's important to remember that gas supply to Transnistria is delivered through Ukrainian territory, where the war is ongoing. What if one day military actions result in damage to the gas transmission system, making it impossible to supply gas to the Moldavskaya GRES (Cuciurgan power station)?

Several gas pipelines enter Moldova (including Transnistria) from Ukraine, which in normal circumstances guarantees reliable supply. Nonetheless, the separatist region receives exclusively gas from «Gazprom,» and since 2022, it has been supplied via only one route – through the Urengoy–Pomary–Uzhgorod pipeline with an entry point at Sudzha⁹.

Currently, the city of Sudzha in the Kursk region of Russia is under Ukraine's control. The Russian army is actively conducting airstrikes in the area, which significantly raises the risk of damage or destruction to the gas metering station. Nearby, in Ukraine's Sumy region, which also faces heavy shellings, there is a compressor station. If this station is damaged, gas transit will stop until repairs are made. In short, there is no guarantee of this route's reliability.

In addition to technical risks, there are organizational ones. At the end of 2024, the gas transit contract between «Gazprom» and «Naftogaz» expires. The Ukrainian company is determined not to enter into any new direct contracts with «Gazprom,» and no other supplier would agree to provide gas for free. Moreover, the possibility of a contract between «Naftogaz» and «Tiraspoltransgas» or other Transnistrian entities is highly unlikely. Moldova also excludes itself from acting as a guarantor in any new contract¹⁰.

The contract could be facilitated through intermediaries, but this would reduce the reliability of gas supply. The search for ways to ensure the delivery of «free» gas from «Gazprom» to Transnistria is ongoing—at the time of preparing this material, there have been no reports about the conclusion of such agreements. Eventually, Russia might decide to end this gas donation scheme altogether.

⁹ Russian Agency «Neftegaz» <https://neftegaz.ru/news/politics/836293-moldaviya-i-ukraina-dostigli-soglasheniya-o-tranzite-rossiyskogo-gaza-cherez-pridnestrove/>

¹⁰ Statement by the Minister of Energy of Moldova to Bloomberg Agency <https://archive.is/50lum>.

Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that on January 1, 2025, or later, the supply of free gas to Transnistria will end, and with it, the financial foundation of the separatist region may collapse.

If Moldova's reintegration is achieved by other means (whether through negotiations or the use of force), Gazprom's gas donations will also cease, as Russia will have no incentive to subsidize a territory over which it has lost control. The only question is when this will happen.

It is important to note that even in the event of an immediate and complete halt to gas supplies, the effects could be drawn out over time. The Moldavskaya GRES (Cuciurgan power station) can operate on coal, with enough reserves to last for 10 weeks of limited operation—supplying electricity only to Transnistria, with no export. A small amount of gas could be provided by the right-bank Moldova to maintain residential heating in Transnistria and prevent a humanitarian crisis. However, this would only be a temporary solution. During the winter, the challenge of providing free heating to Transnistria's outdated, energy-inefficient housing stock would become a serious issue for Moldova.

At the same time, revenue from electricity exports to Transnistria's budget would stop immediately. This scenario would have tectonic consequences and would likely lead to a humanitarian crisis in the region, resulting in the kind of «chaotic» reintegration of Moldova that was previously discussed.

However, these challenges are not insurmountable and could be significantly mitigated with Western financial assistance.

Gas Scenarios and Risks of Forced Reintegration

What will happen if gas subsidies stop?

If gas subsidies were to cease, the most likely scenario would involve Transnistria still being under the control of the de facto authorities in Tiraspol. This means that the region would not be occupied by Ukrainian Armed Forces nor undergoing a transfer of control to Chişinău through reintegration negotiations (in those cases, the processes would differ, though the challenges to be addressed would be similar).

The immediate consequence would be the collapse of the de facto administration's public budget. This collapse would be unfixable through any austerity measures because most revenue would disappear, while new expenses would arise from dealing with the emerging crises. The result would not only be the shutdown of many public services but also the cessation of pension and wage payments in the quasi-state sector, or large-scale money printing, which would lead to hyperinflation. As a result, many people would lose their means of subsistence.

The humanitarian crisis would be compounded by the energy resource shortage, and if the crisis starts in winter (or during the heating season), there would be additional problems with fuel for heating. This would create a severe social and economic disaster in the region.

In the 33 years since the collapse of the USSR, Transnistria has never really experienced the impact of global energy price increases that drive energy conservation. The Soviet-era housing stock in Transnistrian cities remains energy-inefficient (since gas has been free). This is significant because it means that meeting the heating needs at previous levels will most likely be impossible, and residents of Transnistria, especially those in apartment blocks, will face a cold winter (and probably not just one, as this issue will not be resolved instantly even after the reunification of Moldova).

One of the first consequences would be a rapid outflow of people from Transnistria, particularly among the youth and working-age citizens, which would further exacerbate the administrative and budgetary crisis. Moreover, it would be impossible to stop this flow by closing the region's «borders» (as previously mentioned, the administrative line between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova is “transparent” and virtually impossible to control entirely).

All of this would likely lead to a quick collapse of the regime, forcing it to negotiate with Chişinău for reunification. If the Moldovan authorities demonstrate flexibility (for example, agreeing to a broad amnesty and the retention of certain assets belonging to the «Sheriff» business group), this reunification could happen very rapidly.

Of course, the presence of Russian troops complicates this process, but it does not make it impossible. This is primarily due to the fact that there are very few

actual Russian soldiers in Transnistria, as opposed to local residents who joined the army for economic reasons. According to Chişinău, there are only about 70 personnel in the Operational Group of Russian Forces (ORGV). «The number of Russian officers is such that one airliner would be enough to evacuate them to Moscow,» shared one Moldovan official in conversation with the author. Thus, if an agreement is reached with the de facto authorities in Tiraspol, they can be left isolated and pressured to have Moscow agree to their evacuation. Therefore, even a chaotic, forced scenario could conclude with a negotiated agreement for Moldova's reintegration.

Serious challenges will arise regarding the reintegration of society and also in the humanitarian domain. For instance, there will be questions about what to do with the deposits of Transnistrians in local banks, which will obviously need to be liquidated or salvaged. Will Moldova take on such obligations, even if the sources of these funds were Russian money or corrupt rent? Or what to do about utility debts? There will be many such difficult questions, including those related to the scope of amnesty.

Nevertheless, none of these issues are insurmountable. On the contrary, there are ample grounds to expect that Moldova will not face a shortage of financial and expert resources to overcome the crisis, especially if this scenario unfolds soon. The scale of funding will be moderate for Western donors, given the small size and population of the region. Moreover, Western players will view Transnistria as a «testing ground.»

Looking ahead, there will be significantly larger and more complex problems to tackle in Ukraine following the expected de-occupation of its territories, including Crimea, which has been occupied for over ten years. Thus, the reintegration of Transnistria will allow the West to refine its approaches and theories before addressing the much larger issues in Ukraine. Furthermore, it could create a model of «exemplary reintegration,» enhancing the attractiveness of this scenario for residents of other occupied territories—such as those in Ukraine and Georgia.

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UKRAINES PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSNISTRIA: FROZEN CONFLICT – ANOTHER SECURITY THREAT

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Abstract

In recent years, if not longer, the Black Sea region¹ has emerged as a major geopolitical hotspot because of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its attempted annexation of Crimea. However, Russia's ambitions to dominate the region goes way back in history: with the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and with aggression against Moldova in 1990s, when Russia supported separatist movements in Transnistria, sparking one of the region's longest-running frozen conflicts.

The Transnistrian issue has long gone beyond Moldova's internal politics and has become an international issue that concerns Ukrainian security. This conflict poses a serious threat to regional stability, with Russia continuing to exploit it as a tool of influence. As Ukraine fights for its own freedom and sovereignty against one of the largest armies in the world, what should its strategy be toward Transnistria, and how can Ukraine assist Moldova in resolving this ongoing issue?

Ukraine Needs a Pro-European Moldova

Moldova is a country that Ukraine shares 1,222 km of border and European values and path towards EU membership with. It is also a country that knows from its personal experience what it means to live under Russian influence and have part of its territory occupied by the Kremlin.

In 2019, Ukraine amended its Constitution to solidify its Euro-Atlantic path as part of the nation's fundamental law². In October 2024, Moldova is set to have a referendum where the citizens are going to vote for or against the European integration of the country. In case of the positive outcome, the results of the

¹ In the context of the present article, the Black Sea region includes: Bulgaria and Romania – as well as Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.

² Law of Ukraine “On Amending the Constitution of Ukraine (Regarding the State's Strategic Course Towards Acquiring Full Membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization),” 2019, link: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/rada/show/2680-19#Text>

referendum shall amend the Constitution with no additional voting needed. This represents a significant step that would safeguard Moldova's commitment to its foreign policy direction.

After the decision on opening accession negotiations was made in 2023, it has become clear that in the foreseeable future (the optimistic scenario predicts from 10 to 15 years) both countries will become EU member states. While the countries are fulfilling *acquis communautaire*, one of the major security concerns arises – how will both of the countries be joining the European Union while still having some of the territories under occupation?

Even though both Ukraine and Moldova have some of their territories occupied by Russia, the ways of solving it are different. Moldova is a neutral state that doesn't possess the necessary resources and military power to restore its territorial integrity – therefore, such a scenario seems to be highly unlikely.

It may be heard from time to time that it is even acceptable that Moldova joins the European Union without Transnistria, using the German case as a reference³. However, from Ukraine's perspective, this is a naive and dangerous way of handling the situation.



For Ukraine, having a frozen conflict at its border is a major source of instability, as it always happens when there is a Russian military contingent and ammunition stocks at your border.

This is something that Ukraine cannot just let go, because this is going to be a constant threat for the security of the country.

Tanks or Treaties – That's the Question

Let's put diplomacy aside and have a clear and honest look at the situation in Transnistria. What is Transnistria? This is a quasi-state controlled by oligarchs and sponsored by Russia which remains a point of instability for Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania. This is a safe haven for smugglers, bandits, and fraudsters, this is the gray area that doesn't let the whole region develop. One of the key personalities here is Victor Gushan, who de-facto controls the region

³ The Kyiv Independent. (2023, September 21). EU ambassador: Moldova can join EU without Transnistria. <https://kyivindependent.com/eu-ambassador-moldova-can-join-eu-without-transnistria/>

and owns the majority of Transnistrian economic resources⁴. The oligarch owns significant assets, all the members of Transnistrian 'parliament' are affiliated with his company and what is more important – he is definitely not in favor of losing his power and influence.

One of the positive things in this situation is that Transnistria does not share the border with Russia and it is located between the countries that are on the same page in their fundamental values of territorial integrity and sovereignty – Moldova and Ukraine. This creates a window of opportunity to solve the issue before Moldova's accession to the EU. Moldova has already been taking advantage of the geographical location of Transnistria by putting more control over the goods that are being imported from the region, as well as establishing more rules for Tiraspol. For instance, in 2023 Moldovan parliament passed the law on considering 'separatism' a criminal offense⁵ and it is planning to restrict regulations further in the future.

Moldova's government has been stressing out that peaceful reintegration is the only possible way to address the Transnistrian issue, even though it has been often criticized for the absence of the clear roadmap for Moldova's reintegration before the country joins the EU. There is the diplomatic way to solve the Transnistrian issue, however, the part of it will always be reinventing the game rules with the oligarchs that are controlling the region. The good news is, it seems like the majority of pro-Russian forces in Tiraspol are not such because of ideology but because of money they are paid from the Kremlin, therefore, a more profitable deal might interest them.

Moldova offers Transnistria residents an alternative path: integration into a state that is steadily moving toward the EU. This means economic development, investments from Europe, and improved social standards, which Russia cannot offer. For many residents of Transnistria, this prospect looks attractive, as the pro-Russian regime does not provide economic stability, but only maintains a state of isolation and uncertainty. Thus, Moldova offers a kind of "carrot," the prospect of a better future through reintegration and European support.

4 Vlas, C. (2023, September 22). All quiet on the Moldovan front? The German Marshall Fund of the United States. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/all-quiet-moldovan-front>

5 Sydorenko, S. (2023, February 10). Why Moldova is so important in Russia's war against Ukraine. Eurointegration.com.ua. <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/articles/2023/02/10/7155891/>



However, diplomacy has to be always backed with force.

In February 2024, it has been reported by various media that the separatist regime in Transnistria was appealing

to Russia for ‘protection’⁶ raising Chişinău’s concerns that Russia might use the conflict to open the second front. The threat of a potential war with Russia—one that Moldova’s military would likely not withstand—has been a prominent narrative used by pro-Russian forces in Moldova to stoke fear.

After the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many experts and analysts would say that Moldova has a unique window of opportunity to restore control over its territory by military means with the help of Ukraine. While Ukraine, in fact, might have the necessary capacity, it will definitely not do anything unless Moldova’s government asks for it.

Since Ukraine has to be sure that Russian “peacekeepers” don’t pose any threat to its South-West border, the presence of Ukrainian troops on the border with Transnistria sends a powerful signal and puts pressure on the separatist regime. This is a clear sign that Ukraine will not tolerate any provocations from their side and is ready to protect its borders, should Russia decide to proceed with opening the second front in Transnistria. Such a military threat acts as a “stick” that forces them to seek diplomatic solutions, as it is difficult for them to ignore Ukraine’s military might.



Such a strategy, which combines military pressure with economic and political incentives, creates a balance between a tough stance and the possibility of a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Ukraine and Moldova can cooperate using this approach to achieve a common goal of a stable, peaceful, and European future for both countries.

Conclusion

Stability on the border with Moldova is a key condition for Ukraine’s own security and economic development. Resolving the Transnistria issue will remove the

⁶ Transnistria appeals to Russia for ‘protection’, reviving fears for Moldova breakaway region, The Guardian, 29 February 2024, link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/29/transnistria-moldova-breakaway-region-russia-protection-appeal>

threat of Russian military presence and subversive activities in the region, which will have a positive impact on Ukraine's overall security.

In addition, the successful reintegration of Transnistria into Moldova will be an important step towards a stable regional partnership that will contribute to the joint European integration process. For Ukraine, joining the EU together with Moldova means not only economic but also political support from Europe, which is crucial in the fight against Russian influence. Ukraine and Moldova should work closely to remove the threat posed by this frozen conflict and ensure stability on their borders. Ukraine is ready to support Moldova both militarily and diplomatically, helping it on its way to a European future.

Moldova must become a member of the EU together with Ukraine. For far too long, the countries have been under the constant threat from Russia and the frozen and hot spots it creates all over the region. Russia is the source of instability in the Black Sea region that brings chaos and destruction with it, Ukraine is the one that has the capacity and is ready to end this instability.

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ANNEXATION ALERT: WHAT CAN RUSSIA'S TAKEOVER MEAN FOR THE REGION?

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In February 2024, the de facto separatist government of the Transnistrian region officially appealed to Moscow to «take measures to protect Transnistria in the face of increasing pressure from Moldova.»¹ The threat of the Kremlin's official annexation of its proxy enclave has reared up again. The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR)² occupied Transnistria after the Transnistrian War between independent Moldova and Russian troops and Russian-backed separatists ended in a ceasefire. Former Soviet officials at all levels are in power in the PMR, including President Vadim Krasnoselsky, who was born in the USSR and is of Russian descent. Its armed forces were built on the structure and personnel of the 14th Guards Combined Arms Army.³ These former Soviet/Russian troops are supported by a 1,500-strong Russian regular army task force, which claims to be performing a peacekeeping mission.⁴ The Kremlin did not respond directly to the PMR's request, but the diplomatic overture threatened to unfreeze the «frozen» conflict.



This threat has persisted for decades and reached a new level of tension during Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin can use the TMR as a trump card to sow political discord and broadcast a slight military threat to Southeast Europe.

However, Russia did not act. For all the reasons why Russia could formally annex the enclave, it is constrained by practical limitations. Moscow may want to keep its powder dry. Given the current situation in the region, Russia is unlikely to annex within the next few years, but the likelihood of this happening is never out of the realm of possibility. If Moscow were to carry out such an operation,

1 Reuters, "Moldova: Breakaway Transnistria Asks Russia for 'Protection,'" Deutsche Welle, February 28, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/moldova-breakaway-transnistria-asks-russia-for-protection/a-68396033>.

2 PMR will be used to describe the de facto state occupying Moldovan territory. Transnistria will be used to describe the region known to Moldova as the Administrative-Territorial Units of the Left Bank of the Dniester.

3 Edward Ozhiganov, "The Republic of Moldova: Transdniester and the 14th Army," in *Managing Conflict in the Former Soviet Union: Russian and American Perspectives*, ed. Aleksei Arbatov and Aleksei Georgievich Arbatov (MIT Press, 1997), 179.

4 Cristian Delcea, "Agony of the Romanian Language in Transnistria," *Adevărul*, December 3, 2012, <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/europa/foto-agonia-limbii-romane-in-transnistria-1341489.html>.

it could become a political wound for Moldovan politics and diplomacy and disrupt European politics. In the long run, such an annexation, combined with other political failures of the West and military successes of Russia, could dramatically worsen the security situation in Eastern Europe.

Russia is unlikely to resort to such radical diplomatic efforts, as it does not have the means to benefit from the changes that would occur in the way Russia and the PMR present the situation. Russia has a great influence on the PMR due to historical, linguistic, and bureaucratic ties with the leadership of the latter. So why incite a reaction by calling it an annexation instead of leaving the PMR as a vassal?

Putin did not deviate from the conqueror's rhetoric, officially, though illegally, annexing Crimea in 2014. The Russian Duma voted to do the same to Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in 2022. Russia has secured territorial control over Crimea due to Ukraine's lack of rapid response, but Russian control over the occupied Ukrainian territories is incomplete, neither in terms of the borders of these areas nor in the context of the ongoing conventional war and partisan campaign.

All of these bold actions are based on different perspectives on risk. Crimea was the boldest seizure but the least contested occupation in physical terms until 2022. Eastern Ukraine was a more diplomatically bold claim, even when it was announced, as Russia lost significant ground in Kherson, along with other retreats during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in 2022. The Kremlin has yet to pass such legislation to politically swallow South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Georgian territory occupied since the 2008 war. All these occupied territories are either connected to Russia's internationally recognized borders or are in varying degrees of separation from Russia's borders.

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Annexing the PMR would tie Russia to an isolated breakaway state located where it had previously relied on Moldovan and Ukrainian acquiescence to supply.

Before even the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chişinău held up Russian troop rotations.⁵ Despite the likelihood that Moldova

would use force to resist Russian reinforcements from the air or sea, Kyiv would

⁵ Madalin Necsutu, "Moldova Defends Action, Blocking Russian Troop Rotation in Transnistria," Balkan Insight (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, July 22, 2022), <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/22/moldova-defends-action-blocking-russian-troop-rotation-in-transnistria/>

have no interest in allowing Russian troops safe passage. Russia's losses and military withdrawal from the Black Sea indicate that even such a bold idea as a riverine assault or sealift (already based on Transnistria's tiny access to the Black Sea via the Dniester River) is a tactical fantasy.⁶ At present, annexation would be a political decree from the Kremlin, which can only be carried out by isolated brigade-sized forces. Political aftershocks raise the risk. If the Kremlin is not confident they will succeed, it believes the threat is better than action. This is a dagger up Putin's sleeve, but is it too small if pulled out?

If rational constraints may make Russian annexation a rather futile maneuver, they do not diminish the geostrategic calculation. The annexation would be an effective political stratagem, so it cannot be dismissed.

Moldovan elections and the EU referendum are in October of this year, and

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Moscow sees the Transnistrian occupation to keep Moldova out of NATO and the EU.

Moscow will make an effort to sow chaos for Chişinău.⁷ I wrote in Europe's Edge that cyber and information operations are a clear and real threat, but exploiting this referendum, especially given the predicted pro-European outcome, as an excuse to «accept the invitation» from the PMR is an obvious tool of political warfare.⁸ It would shatter the celebration of Moldova's EU ascension path. Formal annexation would put an end to Chişinău's reintegration hopes, at least for it happening under peaceful circumstances while the current Russian regime reigns. Partnered with an aggressive influence campaign, the event would aim to weaken Moldovan President Sandu's pro-EU platform. Russian propaganda outlets claim that her pro-European political efforts led to the final termination of cooperation. While unlikely, it is worth considering that this could incite Chisinau to an armed response or simply defensive maneuvers, which Russia could then present as provocation and aggression. The Moldovan military's reconstruction efforts may be superior to the undermanned Russian/Transdnistriean forces, but diplomatic support will

⁶ Ellie Cook, "Last Russian Black Sea Fleet Patrol Ship Departs Crimea: Kyiv," Newsweek, July 15, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-war-last-black-sea-fleet-patrol-ship-departs-crimea-sevastopol-1925224>.

⁷ Alexander Tanas and Anastasiia Malenko, "Moldovan President Launches Campaign to Promote EU Referendum," ed. Sharon Singleton, March 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldovan-president-launches-campaign-promote-eu-referendum-2024-03-18/>

⁸ Michael C. DiCianna, "Required: NATO Cyber-Warriors for Moldova," Europe's Edge (Center for European Policy Analysis, July 2, 2024), Center for European Policy Analysis, <https://cepa.org/article/required-nato-cyber-warriors-for-moldova/>

evaporate overnight if Russia does not attack Moldova first.^{9 10}

In the wider region, there are two direct lines of political-military concern. Romania's geographical, political, and cultural proximity to Moldova means that the unrest in Moldova could reach Bucharest. Romania's NATO membership means that any meaningful change in Romania's security picture reflects a shift in NATO's security picture. In an immediate sense, a permanent political split in Moldova shakes up any future of Romanian-Moldovan political unity. Although the Greater Romanian model has fallen into relative unpopularity, and Transnistria was de facto excluded before, anything that hurts Moldova's political and economic future has some effect on Romania.¹¹ An even more complicated separatist crisis could delay negotiations with the EU and certainly hamper any distant prospects for NATO membership.

Less immediately, Moscow would be using the annexation to send a strong signal that it is not retrenching from Southeastern Europe. Official control of Transnistria, along with machinations in Serbia, would allow for the broadcasting of a Russian bridgehead. Unless there is a clear, strong, and appropriately immediate response from Western leadership, there could be lasting political effects. Pro-Russian, or at least Russian-tolerant, and anti-EU politicians would have a better case for arguing for a middle-way between Brussels and Moscow if the Russian flag is as close as it was in 1991. If Moldova and the West signal, even inadvertently, that these aftershocks would do foundational damage, Russia's calculation would change.

The sluggish or limp reaction of Western leaders may push Kyiv to consider the region as a point of penetration for Russian military and intelligence operations. In the past, Kyiv has been concerned about drones from the occupied territory of Moldova.¹² A Russian diplomatic coup that increases Kyiv's perception of the threat in the southwest could have devastating consequences. Any strategic distraction is a drain on Ukraine's resources. The threat of deployment or

⁹ Press Release: European Union in the Republic of Moldova, "EU Hands over First Batch of Modern Equipment to Moldovan Armed Forces," EUNEIGHBORSEAST, June 1, 2023, EU hands over first batch of modern equipment to Moldovan armed forces.

¹⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Moldova Service, "Defense Minister Says 90 Percent of Moldova's Military Equipment Is Outdated," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 21, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-military-defense-outdated-underfunded/32095231.html>.

¹¹ Paul Dragos Aligica, "Romania-Moldova Reunification: Three Scenarios," GIS Reports (Schaan, Liechtenstein: Geopolitical Intelligence Services, September 5, 2023), <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/romania-moldova-reunification/>

¹² Leo Chiu, "Kyiv Claims Russian Drones Flew over Moldova, Chişinău Denies," Kyiv Post, February 27, 2024, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/28702>.

positioning of Russian troops could force Kyiv to act. Ukrainian intervention, up to and including kinetic strikes on internally recognized Moldovan territory — even if technically permitted by international law — threatens to unnecessarily disrupt efforts to contain Russia.¹³ It would be perilous to assume that Moscow has not made such a connection.

The most aggressive information operatives today certainly have factored in the propaganda victories of taking charge of the long quasi-independent breakaway state. Russian political leaders and media would hold a triumph. It immediately suggests a return to Russian imperial preeminence: once just a peacekeeping force, it is reasserting itself as a true tsardom with another European conclave. This signals that Russia's annexation of Transnistria will be another point in Putin's campaign to «protect Russian speakers.»¹⁴ Although it is a lie, it's useful for domestic and international prongs of Russian propaganda. An easy seizure of Transnistria under this pretext would be another successful model for Moscow to follow when looking for future hotspots of Russophobic persecution: Finland, the Baltic states, or the Polish-Kaliningrad border. Policymakers must understand that a more permanent Russian tie to Transnistria would open the rest of Moldova to such accusations and interventions. Russia undoubtedly has plans for this in case Ukraine falls.

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Russia's ability to rely on a hypothetical annexation of Transnistria is currently limited by the continued existence of a free and independent Ukraine.

Russia's conventional military might is tied up in the East. The regime of international sanctions is depleting but not destroying

the Russian economy. Driven out of the Black Sea and hundreds of kilometers from Kyiv, Russia is far from the northern border of Moldova, further than it was in 2014 or 2021.

If Western commitment fails, this hypothetical Russia is much worse. A complete defeat of Ukraine, a partial defeat that would leave Russia in control of a large part of Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, or the creation of a Ukrainian state west of the Dnipro River are catastrophic scenarios. Russian annexation in Transnistria would compound this, and if that does not precede a Ukrainian collapse, it would highly likely follow. With Crimea secured by land and air and

¹³ Larry May, *War Crimes and Just War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Philip Dandolov, "Putin Is Not 'Protecting' Ethnic Russians in Ukraine or Elsewhere," *Geopolitical Monitor* (Geopolitical Monitor, October 23, 2023), <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/putin-is-not-protecting-ethnic-russians-in-ukraine-or-elsewhere/>.

Moldova formally bifurcated, Russia's Black Sea outlook would reverse. Even with limited naval shipbuilding capacity in the Black and Azov Seas, Russia could at least restore anti-air/area (A2AD) denial over the basins.¹⁵ Russia will have the opportunity to further split Georgia and regain control of the Black Sea, which it has not had since the Cold War.

The situation is not so much like a bomb about to explode as it is like an undetected gas leak. Here, the PMR's formal request for aid is the canary. For practical reasons, Russian annexation is unlikely in the near future, although these operational constraints and political considerations may change. The Moldovan October election is the next obvious flashpoint. The very fact that Transnistria is not an immediately fixable issue for the current Moldovan government and European leadership allows Russia to hold actions and still create tension. Putin's political inner circle may have prepared the grounds for the Duma to rush to declare the PMR a new region of the Russian Federation, and it is not known how many events could trigger this reaction.

The best solution the West can offer is effective ventilation of explosive gas. A unified display of support for Chişinău through the upcoming elections could demonstrate to the Kremlin that Moldova's EU trajectory is of vital interest to Europe. All kinds of aid can and should be rendered to avoid Russian interference. Strengthening the weight of the coordinated influence of the US and Europe here would be one of the stages of demonstrating that Western power and authority are superior to Russia's.

Other deterrent factors must be ready. US and EU sanctions should be set up against Russian, PMR/Transnistrian, and other officials, politicians, and corporate go-betweens who would involve themselves in such an annexation or even gestures towards annexation. Annexation should be the virtual end of Transnistria's exportation to Europe. Transnistria relies massively on exporting to Moldova and Romania.¹⁶ Since the economic partnership was such an important component of the peace talks, an effective conclusion to the peace talks should be an efficient outcome of the easy economic relations. Chişinău can punish Transnistria's de facto government by reducing exports to the EU.

15 Trusteddocks.com. "Novorossiysk Shiprepair Yard," 2024. <https://www.trusteddocks.com/shipyards/6501-novorossiysk-shiprepair-yard>

16 Alexandru Lesanu, "The Economic Prospects of the Transnistrian Peace Settlement after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (Georgetown University, April 4, 2023), <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/04/04/the-economic-prospects-of-the-transnistrian-peace-settlement-after-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

The signal will be that the benefits of Moldova's EU integration will no longer benefit Transnistria, as they did before.¹⁷

Current sanctions already reflect this approach, in diplomatic terms. Obviously, the United States, EU members, and their allies will never officially recognize Russia's annexation, but the message should be clear that Transnistria will receive the same sanctions regime that Russia is facing now. Joining the Russian Federation, even in an illegal act, should beget vastly more penalties than potential benefits.

In circumstances most extreme, NATO and the EU should have a formulation for providing aid to Chişinău if the annexation leads to political violence. Western planners should be prepared in the event of Russian/Transnistrian aggression or attempts to provoke a preemptive response from Moldova. If sanctions and legal support are the first response, military aid to Moldova should not be left without consideration. Chişinău is already working to modernize its military through EU-NATO efforts.^{18 19} These efforts have always been aimed at the conflict with Russia and the PMR troops, and therefore it would be unstrategic to evade these relations when they are most important.

Given the broader theater of military operations and full support for these specific countermeasures to be prepared and employed if necessary, it is worth considering that the best way to preserve Moldova's sovereignty and promote peaceful integration is to invest in a broader pushback against Russia from the Black Sea basins. While Russia will not be pushed out of the Black Sea without radical internal geopolitical changes, the war in Ukraine has thrown it further to the east than ever before in recent history. If 2014 was the zenith of Russian power in the Black Sea with the annexation of Crimea and the seemingly final occupation of Sevastopol, the situation has now become more complicated. The fortunes of the war there have drastically weakened its naval presence. Rebuilding a land bridge across Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia would help restore lost capacity if Russia achieves peace in Ukraine on its terms. Russia's interference in Georgian politics and attempted negotiations between

17 Galiya Ibragimova, "Is Moldova Ready to Pay the Price of Reintegrating Transnistria?," [carnegieendowment.org](https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/01/is-moldova-ready-to-pay-the-price-of-reintegrating-transnistria?lang=en) (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 24, 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/01/is-moldova-ready-to-pay-the-price-of-reintegrating-transnistria?lang=en>.

18 NATO Liaison Office in the Republic of Moldova, "Relations with the Republic of Moldova," NATO.int (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, May 26, 2023), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49727.htm.

19 Press Release: European Union in the Republic of Moldova.

Azerbaijan and Armenia suggest a commitment to the Eastern Black Sea and Northern Caucasus.

Moscow is setting on a project of long-term, long-range dominance in the Black Sea region. As this becomes feasible, the annexation of Transnistria will be an increasingly attractive prospect. Following that would certainly be a desire to reduce all of Moldova to a vassal state or another annexed region. The best way to protect Moldova from such a fate is, arguably, to obstruct and limit other Russian regional efforts. The security situation in the Black Sea region in the near future depends on whether Putin's plans for the region can be made unacceptable to Moscow.

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FROZEN CONFLICTS AS RUSSIA'S IMPERIAL, POST-IMPERIAL, AND NEO-IMPERIAL INSTRUMENT: THE CASE OF TRANSNISTRIA

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Abstract

A conundrum of abuse of international law regarding self-determination of peoples, quasi-imperial identities, and frozen conflicts, built to safeguard the complete and irreversible fall of the Soviet Empire, led to the black hole called Transnistria, the last Soviet relic in the world. The result of the instrument named frozen conflict created turbulences, motifs for intervention, and ultimately aggression in the whole Wider Black Sea Region, including in the only separatist region not bordering Russia. The prospects of European integration have brought Transnistria closer to reintegration with the Republic of Moldova, which is possible if Russia's military aggression in Ukraine stays away from its borders.

International Law: Self-determination Versus Separatism

Self-determination of peoples is a principle of the UN Charter¹ that refers to communities with deep cohesion, continuity, and strong identity, possibly discriminated by the empires where history brought them. It has origins in the Wilsonian principles for nationalities and was designed to free nations from Empires in the First World War. Then, it was used in decolonization during the Cold War, with the touch of the rivalry between liberal-democracy versus socialist-soviet grouping².



The principle of self-determination was not reserved for all communities and in any conditions for building states. There is no such principle, which Russia sometimes selectively refers to in its offensive interpretations: only nations can do this

¹ UN Charter, Article 1 (2) - Equal rights and self-determination of peoples, at [https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/purposes-and-principles-un-chapter-i-un-charter#:~:text=A-,Article%201%20\(2\)%20%2D%20Equal%20rights%20and%20self%2Ddet%20ermination,self%2Ddetermination%20of%20peoples%E2%80%9D](https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/purposes-and-principles-un-chapter-i-un-charter#:~:text=A-,Article%201%20(2)%20%2D%20Equal%20rights%20and%20self%2Ddet%20ermination,self%2Ddetermination%20of%20peoples%E2%80%9D)

² Hannum Hurst, *Autonomie, suveranitate și autodeterminare*, Editura Paideia, București, 1990.

That comes from the need to maintain viability and avoid the disintegration of national states³. Moreover, separatism was criticized, and international norms sanctioned the abuse of this principle or interpretations that go against some other crucial principles of the UN Charter, territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of states. In Europe, CSCE Helsinki Treaty (1975) banned the violent modification of borders, entering the basic *acquis* of today's rules-based order.

The only changes of borders after the Cold War in Europe intervened with the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, the last empires and multinational states constructed without the will of the nations included. We also noted the non-violent separation of Czechoslovakia and Serbia-Montenegro. Self-determination can no longer be applied to Europe, unless it applies to the peoples inside the Russian Federation, who do not understand why the Soviet Union's allied states had the right to independence and they did not, given that they share the same faith but were never asked if they wanted to join Russia and were objects of conquest, like other territories that broke free from Soviet control in 1991.

At the global scale, self-determination/separatism debates appeared and proliferated after the end of the Cold War based on the processes of late decolonization and the birth of new states detached from the metropolis. Moreover, there was the challenge of artificial borders between post-colonial states, «lines in the sand»⁴ inherited from the agreements between the former colonial empires, non-related to the communities, ethnicities, and people separated by such borders. Lastly, the attempts of states to dismantle their neighbors or former colonial territories were also the cause.

This is the case of Russia in the post-Soviet space, the case of frozen conflicts generated, which were used to create separatism and troubles in the new non-Slavic independent states⁵. Therefore, the abuse of international law and the self-determination principle imposed by Russia in combination with its meddling in the areas through military, soft power, educational, and informational means⁶, including via the policies unilaterally self-assumed for defending Russians, Russian speakers, and compatriots.

³ Iulian Chifu, Adriana Sauliuc, *Uses and Abuses in International Law. Sovereignty, self-determination and separatism*, ISPRI, Bucharest, 2019.

⁴ Barr James, *A Line in the Sand*, Simon and Schuster, 2011, London.

⁵ Greg Simons, Iulian Chifu, *The Changing Face of Warfare in the 21st Century*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017.

⁶ Iulian Chifu, Greg Simons, *Rethinking warfare in the 21-st Century. The influence and effects of the Politics, Information and Communication Mix*, 2023, Cambridge University Press, 2023

Frozen Conflicts for Safeguarding the Complete Dissolution of the Soviet Empire

Frozen conflicts are a particular case of separatist conflicts, in some cases with ethnic and religious overtones, such as Nagorno-Karabakh and, in part, Abkhazia, and several other places in Central Asia⁷. It is certainly not the case of Transnistria⁸ :

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*there is no inter-ethnic nuance here – the religious one cannot even be mentioned – once there are more Russians in Chişinău or Bălţi than in the separatist region on the left bank of the Nistru/Dnestr river.*⁹

Frozen conflicts are a special category of separatist conflicts because they contain elements of Russia's involvement and responsibility, from Stalin's

«maximum ethnic complication» to Putin's «defense of Russians everywhere.»¹⁰

Frozen conflicts define in principle a commonly accepted status «without peace, without war» or «no peace, no war.» They are characteristic of the post-Soviet space and presuppose a special intervention of Russia in the states of the former union republics within the USSR. Such a situation is often labeled as an ethnopolitical conflict attributed to a process of secession that ends with the establishment of de facto regimes within separatist entities, which are not recognized by the international community or the state to which they formally belong to¹¹.

Some conflicts have become long and unresolved, without peace agreement but only a ceasefire, in formulas involving «peacekeeping» formats with alleged

⁷ For a detailed description of artificially created borders, according to Stalin's policy of maximum ethnic complication, see Iulian Chifu, Narciz Bălăşoiu, Radu Arghir, *The East-West Black Sea – Caspian Sea Strategic Corridor*, ISPRI, Bucharest, 2014, pp.18-27.

⁸ Iulian Chifu, *Război diplomatic în umbra Kremlinului*, Loreley, Iaşi, 1997; Iulian Chifu, *Război diplomatic în Basarabia*, Paideia, Bucharest, 1999.

⁹ Iulian Chifu, *Spaţiul post sovietic: În căutarea Identităţii* (bilingual edition), Politeia SNSPA, Bucharest, 2005; Iulian Chifu, *Decizia de securitate în Republica Moldova*, Curtea Veche, Bucharest, 2009; Iulian Chifu, Oazu Nantoi, Oleksandr Sushko, „The Breakthrough Crisis” of a quick solution in Transnistria, a cognitive institutional approach of the crisis decision making, Curtea Veche, Bucharest, 2008; Oazu Nantoi, Iulian Chifu, *România şi Republica Moldova la confluenţa dosarului transnistrean Cooperarea societăţii civile*

¹⁰ Iulian Chifu, *Ameninţări şi conflicte în secolul 21*, RAO, Bucureşti, 2022, Volume 2 of the tetralogy *Reshaping Global Security and International Relations in the 21-st Century*.

¹¹ Ghia Nodia, „Europeanization and (Not) Resolving Secessionist Conflicts”, in *Journal of Politics and Minority Issues in Europe*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2004 in Mary Alice Clancy, John Nagle, *Frozen conflicts, Minority Self-Governance, Asymmetrical Autonomies – in search of a framework for conflict management and conflict resolution*, International Conflict Research Institute, University of Ulster, 2009, p.14, http://www.asef.org/images/docs/1276-6th_AER_Background_Paper_-_Dr_Clancy_and_Dr_Nagle.pdf.

«peacemakers» of three components: Russian troops – directly involved in most conflicts that they provoked and generated, separatist militias and para-troops, and those of the recognized sovereign national state in whose territory the conflict is taking place.

Then there is a format of eternal negotiation – meant more to preserve the conflict and allow the development of proto-states in quasi-unrecognized states – under the tutelage, protection, and military defense of Russia, with the presence of the OSCE – South Ossetia and Transnistria – or the UN – in the case of Abkhazia – the «two parties» – the legitimate state and the separatist entity – and many different mediators. It is the model replicated for Eastern Ukraine after 2014. Focusing on exogenous elements¹², such as Russian interference, may explain the petrification or sabotage of conflict resolution processes that can only be unblocked in favor of Russia when Putin wishes so.

The term “frozen” can be justified if the parties involved agree not to dispute the de facto regime installed after the ceasefire agreement, although they do not formally recognize it¹³. A common feature of frozen conflicts revolves around the position of the actors, in strict connection with their stated goal – independence versus territorial integrity¹⁴. Frozen conflicts belong to the large family defined by the concept of “protracted conflicts” of Edward Azar. He considered the prolonged violent struggles to exist between private groups of basic human needs, such as security, recognition, acceptance, equal access to political institutions, and integration into the economy, due to different communal affiliations¹⁵.

In our paper on Europe’s borders¹⁶, we succeed to demonstrate the programmatic way in which Russia premeditated frozen conflicts specifically to avoid the complete breakdown of the Soviet Empire, linking republics in the former conflict zone to Russia during its weak period, trying to rebuild itself. The Soviet Union was in another form after regaining confidence in the prices of energy resources and economic dependencies and production chains maintained from the Soviet period. Russia behaved pragmatically, avoiding new territorial losses, blocking

¹² M. Kerr, *Imposing Power-Sharing: Conflict and Coexistence in Northern Ireland and Lebanon*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2005 in Mary Alice Clancy, John Nagle, *Op. cit.*, p.15.

¹³ Ghia Nodia, *Op.cit.*

¹⁴ Carolina Chavez Fregoso, Nikola Zivkovic, *Western Sahara: A Frozen Conflict*, *Journal of Regional Security* (2012), 7:2, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, p. 2.

¹⁵ Edward E. Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory & Cases*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1990, pp.7-11.

¹⁶ Iulian Chifu, Simona Țuțuianu, *Torn Between East and West: Europe's Border States*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017.

the total disintegration of the Soviet empire, and avoiding any alienation of the newly independent republics.

The Wider Black Sea Region Between Wars: Cold War to Russian War of Aggression in Ukraine

The relevant element highlighted by Azar is the reflection of economic dependencies or customer relations, deliberately cultivated by a certain state, which, once consolidated, generate the historical conditions for fuelling future prolonged conflicts¹⁷, Russian and Soviet chains of supplies and production, in that case. Transnistria was the place where industry developed together with dramatic change of population and relocation of Russian nationals in Soviet and post-Soviet times alike.

Russia's responsibility¹⁸ comes from the old Stalin's policies of changing borders and breaking ethnic groups to achieve the maximum ethnic complication¹⁹ that would grant the survival of the Soviet Union. Then, independent Russia teased those groups to break from the new independent states, creating the frozen conflicts that it controlled, and the independent states altogether. Russian troops were present as peacekeepers²⁰. The opposite side effect has spread to the Russian Federation: republics and autonomous entities that never had the opportunity to decide whether to be part of the Soviet Empire or the Russian Federation have also wanted to secede.

The frozen conflict was an instrument of choice used by Russia to control the post-Soviet space and destabilize when needed the Wider Black Sea Region by igniting them. It was also used together with economic dependencies²¹, especially energy and gas, to prevent the new independent states from moving closer to the EU and NATO. There were instruments of constraint, sanction, and punishment. When colored revolutions and pro-European Maidan emerged, new instruments were added to the shadow-frozen conflicts in Ukraine – Kerch,

¹⁷ Edward E. Azar, Op.cit.

¹⁸ Iulian Chifu, Simona Țuțuianu, Op. cit.

¹⁹ For a detailed description of artificially created borders, according to Stalin's policy of maximum ethnic complication, see Iulian Chifu, Narciz Bălășoiu, Radu Arghir, Op. cit, pp.18-27.

²⁰ Iulian Chifu, Oazu Nantoi, Oleksandr Sushko, Societal Security in the trilateral Region Romania-Ukraine-Republic of Moldova/Securitate societală în regiunea trilaterală România-Ucraina-Republica Moldova, bilingual edition, Curtea Veche, București, 2008.

²¹ Iulian Chifu, Adriana Sauliuc, Bogdan Nedea, Energy security strategies in the wider Black Sea region, Ediția a doua, Editura Institutului de Științe politice și Relații Internaționale al Academiei Române, București, 2011.

Crimea, Azov Sea, Donbas, and the so-called Novorossiia, ethnic Russians living in the Eastern regions: separatism, annexation, military aggression.

Identity Conflicts in the Republic of Moldova. Transnistria and the Russian Post-imperial Identity

The frozen conflicts and pro-Russian secessionist regions played the role of the ties that kept the newly independent states attached to the «body» of the Russian Federation. Soviet nostalgia has been constantly fueled in the separatist regions to maintain or enhance the impression of a guarantor of security and well-being. The Russian military presence, as well as economic and energy dependence, played a role. The former Soviet states shared decades of industrial chains and jointly produced products, the presence of ethnic Russians, and their key positions in the economy, especially in the trade area and at the forefront of politics in the newly independent states²².

So, divergences and maximum ethnic complications were not enough in Transnistria, as they didn't work completely in the other frozen conflicts. Russia used the russification of non-Slavic republics and self-assumed a role to protect Russians – citizens of Russia, ethnic Russians, Russian Speakers – no juridical definition in international law – and Compatriots – designating former inhabitants of the Soviet Union and their successors to melt inside the politics of independent states. The policy combined the status of the Russian Language as a quasi-official state language to a «language of inter-ethnic communication.»²³. Soft power, culture, and economy played the hybrid warfare instrument. The leitmotif of the «Soviet people» presupposed a hard core of Russian «essence» transcended in the post-soviet states as a mark of post-imperial instrument²⁴.

It is certainly the case of Transnistria²⁵ and the Republic of Moldova. But because we didn't have an ethnic conflict there, the identity conflict was related

²² Igor Munteanu, Romanița Berghia, Iulian Chifu ș.a., "Insecurity Challenges in the Republic of Moldova", in *Moldova on the way to democracy and stability*, Editura Cartier, 2005.

²³ Iulian Chifu, "Identity and multiculturalism: Diversity and societal cohesion" in *From misunderstanding towards openness and collaboration in multicultural societies*, Editura Pontos, 2005, Chișinău-Belfast-Tallin.

²⁴ UNHCR analysis of Bohdan Nahaylo, *Population displacement in the former Soviet Union*, *Refugees Magazine* Issue 98, 1 December 1994, <http://www.unhcr.org/3b540eae4.html>

²⁵ Iulian Chifu, *Basarabia sub ocupație sovietică*, Politeia-SNSPA, Bucharest, 2004, 424 p, ISBN 973-86287-8-4.

first to the clash between Soviet identity and Romanian identity,²⁶ then between Moldovan and Romanian identity (a reminiscence of Soviet times ideology of separate nations, created by Stalin), and finally a clash between a neo-imperial Russian identity facing a Romanian (also called Moldavian) one²⁷. Transnistria is the last place of survival in a landlocked Soviet separatist oasis of former military and Soviet Russian nomenclature, defended by the Russian army, which has been transformed into a peacekeeping force. The demand of official authorities and the UNGA resolution²⁸ on the retreat of Russian troops from the territory of the Republic of Moldova was disregarded by Russia.

Transnistria and the Republic of Moldova European Integration. Political Disturbance and Economic Lifeline

The European Union's policies – the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership, association agreements, free trade, and visa liberalization – have undergone enormous changes. First, it was transformative power and democratization. Then, the EU's normative power and soft power, its attraction to the prosperity and security model changed the situation in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. They have formed an association trio and aim to join the EU, becoming candidates in 2023 and starting accession negotiations in May 2024.

The trade shifted dramatically in Transnistria because of the access to the common market. After the annexation of Crimea, trade with the EU (and specifically with Romania) became twice as important as that with Russia (and Ukraine), and after the full-scale war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine, the level of trade with Russia dropped to one digit. It is about prices, perspectives, and attraction and also about the pragmatic need to have revenues and diminishing transfers of funds from Russia and blockages in trade via Ukraine due to the war.

Transnistria opened pragmatic discussions with Chișinău and accepted the existing interdependence and the need to register companies, cars, and citizens

26 Iulian Chifu, "Conflicts, Conflicts of Identity. Religious Conflicts. Characteristics and Specificities", in Iulian Chifu, Oana Popescu, Bogdan Nedea, Religion and Conflict radicalisation and violence in the Wider Black Sea Region, ISPRI, Bucharest, 2012.

27 Iulian Chifu, "Identități postcomuniste în Republica Moldova", in Sfera Politicii, Vol. XIX, Nr. 11 (165), noiembrie 2011, ISSN 1221-6720, pp. 77 – 86.

28 UNGA Resolution 72/282. Complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova, adopted by the General Assembly on 22 June 2018, at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1632767?ln=en&v=pdf#files>

according to the laws of the Republic of Moldova. The biggest part of those living in Transnistria restored their Republic of Moldova citizenship and documents to benefit from the rights brought by this path and the European policies. But the Russian instruments, including military, representatives of all three intelligence services – GRU, SVR, FSB – still functioned in the region and blocked the natural evolution towards integration with the state.

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Practically, citizens and companies are integrated into the legal framework of the state, and the exceptions and special statuses gradually disappear, with the payment of taxes to Chişinău and dues to the budget.

For any external trip, trade contract, or business credibility, one needed the Chişinău support and accepted the state laws in exchange. Only small

businesses and services inside the region were still outside the legislative framework of the Republic of Moldova. And Chişinău lacks the control of its full territory.

Another important factor was the dependence on cheap Russian gas in the regional budget. The shutdown of the transit via Ukraine for private firms, on December 31, 2024, due to the end of the Russian-Ukrainian-EU contract, can result in problems for both Chişinău and Tiraspol: Transnistria will lose any alternative source of income for electric energy produced in Cuciurgan electric plant on gas, and the Republic of Moldova will lose a source of cheap energy. The Republic of Moldova proved to be a loyal partner and consulted the matter, trying to find alternatives and offset the economic minimum needs of its citizens from the region.

A Neo-imperial Instrument of Choice: Alternative Scenarios for Transnistria

So, now, Transnistria has several choices:

- The war to make Russia reach the borders of the Republic of Moldova and take them onboard, paying for their needs and running the region.
- Russia to pay the difference in pensions and salaries and grant subsidies to the regional authorities to survive. We will have a continuous form of political structure in Tiraspol, dependent on Russia. Transnistria is not self-sustainable.

- If Russia does not support Transnistria in any way, then with the help of Ukraine, the neo-imperial instrument that has been in Russia's hands until now will fall and reintegrate into the Republic of Moldova, trying to adapt to the costs, realities, and rules of that country after the separatist evolution. It will mean huge turbulence in the state aiming to join the European Union, and the Republic of Moldova will need solid assistance from Romania and the EU²⁹.

So, the main conclusion is that the development of Russia's war in Ukraine is fundamental to the future of the Transnistrian conflict through non-violent means. Moreover, Europe and its soft power played an important role in the natural reintegration of the banks of the Dniester River by assisting the Republic of Moldova. Thus, Europeanization led to a gradual creeping reintegration, but only the war created the prospect of completing this process.

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²⁹ Iulian Chifu, Narciz Bălășoiu, *Prospective studies of the Wider Black Sea Region. Scenarios for its future in times of high international turbulence.*, ISPRI, Bucharest, 2018.