



# **TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AT 25<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OF IMPASSE: CAUSES, OBSTACLES, AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

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## The challenge

The body of policy and academic research on frozen conflicts in post-Soviet regions, in this instance the Transnistrian conflict, in general does not strike as a very diverse one. In fact, it has revealed a very conformist and non-inquisitive approach by claiming the conflict trigger is related to inter-ethnic disagreements.<sup>1</sup> Even though over the last several years the political debate in the West shifted (at least in rhetoric) from a purely ethnic conflict explanation to a “political” conflict, the logical underpinning is still based on the ethnic confrontation assumption. The fact that most policy interventions, such as negotiations approaches and conflict-resolution projects, still involve “confidence-building” is a testament to this. The Russian aggression in Ukrainian Crimea and Donbas has done little to change this perception, surprisingly. For instance, an influential European think tank has recently mentioned that “the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas represent the first instance where Russia has actively instigated secessionist conflicts”<sup>2</sup>

However, there are objective explanations for the prevalence of this misleading approach and one should not strive to be extremely critical of Western scholars and analysts.

There are at least two reasons behind this choice of paradigm. First, the very initial framing and rhetoric of the Transnistrian conflict as an ethnic one was promoted by the Russian Federation through public discourse, political debate, and diplomatic dialogue. Russian authorities funded national and international events promoting this idea, created and supported English-language websites, encouraged its researchers to explore the ethnical underpinning in academic articles at home and abroad, and funded numerous publications.<sup>3</sup> These well-orchestrated actions were part of the Russia’s historical revisionist campaign in regard to Transnistrian region and the related conflict. In 2006 for instance, Russian authorities sponsored the publication and presentation of the so-called “The White Book of Transnistria”<sup>4</sup> Russia invested significant resources to change the historical facts and interpretation of the Transnistrian conflict, creating new convenient mythologies about it. Since then it orchestrated a few other historical revisionism campaigns, including on the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, on the 1945 “Great Victory”,<sup>5</sup> and on its aggression in Ukraine, basically creating alternative realities and using history as a political weapon. Historical revisionism is not a new tool of policy-making and has been long used by the Soviet Union’s intelligence agencies. The Moldovan authorities neither had the resources to counter this framing of the conflict, nor had the understanding that it is of key importance to implement these countering measures.

A second reason is related to banal human psychology. When we are offered a story that seems plausible, because it resonates with other similar cases and with our already existing perception of them – it is usually accepted. The collapse of the Soviet Union was preceded by inter-ethnic conflicts that led to the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia. The general intuitive feeling was at the time that the Soviet Empire’s collapse was driven by the desire of smaller nations for independence, and this had a powerful appeal. Thus, the logic of inter-ethnic tensions triggering Transnistrian conflict was not questioned much. Neither the West thought it being a priority to invest additional resources

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1 Even those studies that accurately identified the major conflict between the USSR leaders and Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) leadership (before MSSR declared its independence from the Soviet Union) still tend to opt for ethnic conflict explanation. The connection between these elites’ conflict and exploitation of Transnistrian conflict as a pressure tool on MSSR leaders to stay inside USSR, regardless of a plethora of related evidence, is not analytically pursued.

2 S. Fisher (ed.), “Not Frozen! The Unresolved Conflicts over Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Light of the Crisis Over Ukraine,” SWP Research Paper 9, September 2016, p.6 (see also p.9). See K. Buscher in the same volume for a hint towards the ethnic roots of the conflict (p.25)

3 Before US and EU had to face the “Russia Today” effect as well as the post-truth media practice that it encouraged, such arguments were skeptically met in discussions with the Moldovan officials and experts.

4 See “The White Book of Transnistria: An Impartial Story about War and Genocide,” Regnum.ru, 13 September 2006, <https://regnum.ru/news/704581.html>

5 J. Prus, “Russia’s Use of History as a Political Weapon,” Polish Institute of International Affairs, Policy Paper Nr. 12(114), May 2015, [https://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=19763](https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19763)

into understanding the specific nuances of the conflict, which made it considerably different from other, ethnic-based emerging conflicts.

For the academic and research community it has been difficult to dig deeper into the gist of the problem – due to the limited importance of the issue, there was limited funding for additional research in the early stages of Western interest regarding Moldova. At the later stages, the Russian framing of the conflict as being an inter-ethnic one has deeply embedded itself as the recognized and established narrative. As a result, it entered the political and academic debates as the most influential and common-sensical explanation. It created a new political mythology around the conflict, which is challenging and difficult to counter. Consequently, it was taken on board and applied by the Western actors and organizations that got involved into the conflict resolution process. At present, it brings considerable political costs for involved actors to challenge the ethnic conflict paradigm. Given that millions of Euros were spent on addressing the problem based on the ethnic conflict assumption, there is also a strong path-dependency dynamic at play. It will require an extremely strong political effort, courage, and commitment to leave that erroneous path, and instead embark on a road that starts from a more accurate assessment of the conflict causes.

It is always a bad time for a country to have a violent conflict on its territory, especially one with the direct, though covert involvement of a major regional power. From this perspective, Ukraine was much luckier than Moldova, as Western countries refused to accept at face value the story presented by the Russian Federation. This paper is going to argue and show that the mechanisms of conflicts in Ukraine and Moldova are strikingly similar and are both driven by the hybrid war dynamics. It is going to present the logical conclusion that the negotiation process, as well as any conceived solutions, should not be guided by ethnic conflict assumption.

Both were driven by Russia's efforts to portray its armed invasion as a domestic rebellion, employing measures that are widely referred today as hybrid warfare. In the Ukrainian case these measures were more refined and advanced. Moreover, Russia ran its hybrid operation in Ukraine much quicker than it did in Moldova, which was a testbed for this specific form of armed aggression. In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that if the West was more attentive and careful to Moldova's Transnistrian conflict dynamics, it would have been able to respond much more effectively to the Russian-led hybrid war in Ukraine. It was only due to the fact that the West was shaken by Russia's bold annexation of Crimea that it refused to blindly accept Russia's façade story for its intervention in Ukraine. Surprising as it is, though, the path-dependency as well as perceived bureaucratic and possible political costs, are preventing the West from accepting this conspicuous similarity between the Transnistrian conflict and Ukraine's armed invasion by the Russian Federation.

There are plenty of other serious repercussions that Moldova and its Western partners are facing, given they are treating a hybrid, proxy-run conflict as an ethnic one. These are going to be analyzed and discussed in the following chapters.



## Causes: Back to the Roots

The metaphor of treating a disease with the wrong therapy or antidote, due to erroneous diagnosis, is a popular one in political analysis. It is also a powerful one, given that the wrong treatment of a serious disease leads to the death of the patient. Another example, which is closer to social sciences, is the one of an unsuitable policy intervention following the failure to accurately identify the policy problem. This leads to a host of costs and issues. These include wasted resources that have been driving the intervention, the aggravation of the policy problem as it deteriorated given the lack of appropriate policy response, as well as the related opportunity costs. The opportunity costs involve the missed gains and opportunities of the scenario, in which a more suitable conflict resolution approach would have been taken.

Therefore, in the case of the Transnistrian conflict we are not just talking about illusory things, such as those implied by the question “what if?”. It is very illustrative, that in Moldova’s recent political debate some of the influential politicians raised the question of economic compensation from Russia for the occupation of Transnistria. This question is a very important and long-awaited one. The territory of the Republic of Moldova controlled by the Russian military, more frequently referred to as Transnistria, represents about 12 percent of its total surface. Prior to the collapse of the USSR, the territory in question also generated over 30 percent of Soviet Moldova’s industrial output and some 90 percent of its energy. After Moldova’s declaration of independence, due to the Russian military control over Transnistrian region of Moldova, many of the region’s lucrative industrial installations were consequently sold to Russian businesses, frequently having links to the Kremlin.

The economic factor has played a very important role in the emergence of the Transnistrian conflict, and the shaping of post-conflict negotiations. In fact, it was the major force behind the conflict, reflecting a key source of confrontation between the Soviet regional elites from Chisinau and Tiraspol. If we carefully look at local newspapers published in late 1980s – early 1990s, this story emerges with high clarity. Following the Gorbachev-launched “perestroika”, the Soviet regional elites based on the eastern bank of river Nistru, that were predominately directors of local industrial enterprises, viewed it as an opportunity to take over the local industrial base, by privatizing it. The policy of “perestroika” created the possibility for the privatization of many dysfunctional Soviet enterprises. There is overwhelming evidence of negotiations that the Transnistrian elites conducted with political elites in Chisinau on obtaining a special economic status for Transnistria with unrestricted control of local industry.

It is beyond the scope of this work to provide a detailed examination of this inter-elite conflict, which was reflected somewhere else.<sup>6</sup> However, an examination of the political dynamics preceding the violent conflict in eastern regions of Moldova indicates that there were three interwoven processes at play, all of which were triggered by Gorbachev’s “perestroika” policy. One of them was the resistance of a segment of the MSSR Communist Party elites and military-industrial complex nomenklatura to the “perestroika” element that aimed to give more financial and political independence to the MSSR leadership. The second factor, as already pointed out, was this nomenklatura’s aspiration to take over large Soviet factories, which they usually supervised – the growing independence of Chisinau elites from party bosses in Moscow would have curbed these aspirations. We should not ignore the fact that most party elites in Chisinau had also political obligations to the Moldovan population, which became more politically active and demanding. The industrial elites in Transnistria though, beside the fact that they were of Russian ethnicity and were reluctant to subordinate themselves to Moldovan elites in Chisinau, had less political obligations and were mostly focused on personal enrichment, through privatization of enterprises they managed as regional nomenklatura. Finally, a third factor was the growing concern in Moscow, and particularly among military and security circles, that MSSR, along with other union republics were likely to declare their independence.

<sup>6</sup> See D. Minzarari, S. Niculin and V. Soloviev, “Roľ Rossiiskoy Federatsii v uregulirovanii pridnestrovskogo konflikta. Chast’ pervaya: Upadok SSSR i zagovor tsentra”, Azi.md, 26 March 2007.

It was this third factor that was decisive in inciting, organizing, and channeling the reactionary energy of the MSSR factory directors from the Transnistrian region. In order to create leverage against the MSSR leadership, Soviet KGB bosses created the so-called “Interfront” movement. The action aimed to oppose the MSSR leadership’s perceived intention to secede from USSR.

There is considerable evidence to support this. As an example, in October 1993 the “Moscow News” published an interview with the former Chairman of the USSR KGB Vadim Bakatin. He accepted in that interview that at the end of 1980s the USSR KGB created and sustained the “Interfront” movement in various Soviet republics. In his later book “Getting rid of KGB” (Izbavlenie ot KGB) he noted that “international fronts in the obstinate union republics were created to instigate divisions among the society of these republics, separating them into two irreconcilable camps”. In his words, it was a common tactic of the Soviet KGB to create these obstacles in Soviet republics aspiring towards independence, so that their leadership could be blackmailed – “if you don’t continue to obey the ‘Centre’, you will get an Interfront movement that would challenge your republic’s borders and the legitimacy of the local authorities”.

It is important to recall the confession of the first Moldovan President Mircea Snegur, who at the time was the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the MSSR. He recalled that in early 1990s he met Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow, who was blackmailing him into keeping MSSR inside USSR, by signing the new Union’s Treaty. Gorbachev was accompanied by Anatolyi Lukyanov, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of USSR. Before meeting Snegur, the two of them talked with Igor Smornov, a factory leader from Transnistria who was propelled by USSR KGB into leading the local rebellion against the MSSR leadership. In response to Snegur’s refusal in signing the new treaty keeping MSSR within USSR borders, Gorbachev reportedly threatened Snegur – “Mircea, if you don’t sign it, you are going to have both a Transnistrian and a Gagauz republic on your territory”. Then, according to Snegur, he addressed Lukyanov to confirm his words, to which Lukyanov responded that “they already have one on the left bank of Nistru”<sup>7</sup>.

There was no coincidence in the fact that the MSSR Interfront, an entity that organized and controlled the Soviet factory directors against the MSSR leadership, had also led to the creation of the so-called Transnistrian Republic. The support of the KGB offered the reactionary factory directors the protection against legal prosecution. Their management position allowed them to mobilize the factory workers and organize them into strikes, in support of any agenda they wanted. It was unthinkable that factory workers at Soviet industry installations, many of which worked for the military-industrial complex of USSR, would go on strike without the encouragement of factory directors, who used the walkouts to put pressure on the MSSR leadership.

MSSR newspapers at that time provide plenty of evidence about the artificial nature of these strikes. The Interfront leaders manipulated the workers, exploiting their fears about the growing national movement in Moldova, and in particular about the draft Law on the Status of Moldovan Language. They provided erroneous interpretations of that law, claiming that Russian-speaking workers will lose their jobs and will be discriminated against, due to this Law. It is important to emphasize that this was happening already in the very initial stages, when only rough drafts of the Law were discussed in the Supreme Soviet of MSSR. The workers were manipulated by Interfront, who were using their fears to put pressure on the MSSR leadership.

The interest of Interfront leaders – getting economic independence for the left bank of Nistru (Transnistrian region) – coincided with the interests of the KGB, who was behind them. This political symbiosis is overlooked by researchers when they examine the roots of the Transnistrian conflict. The researchers tend to pick up what emerged on the surface, while not always digging into the gist of the matter and examining the very important nuances of the conflict. As they say, the devil is in the details. Besides, it has been a very common tactic of the Soviet secret agencies to instigate riots

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7 Ibid



or uprisings in third-world countries in order to overthrow pro-Western governments and install instead governments loyal to the USSR. A similar approach was taken in the case of the Transnistrian conflict but also in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, where the Russian special forces or Russian military-backed armed groups took control over administrative buildings in these regions. Following the takeover, control of such buildings was then handed over to local activists who claimed a “popular revolution” against legal authorities.

It is the presence of these three named factors that confuses researchers and policymakers – given their existence, it is easy to create a virtual reality, invoking just one of the factors or an event accompanying that one factor. For instance, the engineered nature of the protests as well as the installation of the protests’ leadership by the Soviet KGB were ignored. At the same time, the focus of the propaganda was accepted, which was based on the reasons invoked by the Soviet factory directors in the Transnistrian region – the discrimination against the Russian minorities. This false pretext was explored by Moscow. In order to distance itself from the creation of Transnistrian Republic, the Russian Federation authorities who inherited the issue from the USSR leadership, proclaimed and applied the ethnic origin of the conflict. With this narrative and reason in mind Russia vehemently pressures Moldova to accept the so-called Transnistrian Republic as the second party to the conflict and prefers to call itself a “mediator”.

Following intensive political and diplomatic campaigns, the Russian Federation managed to contaminate the Western public perception with the idea that Transnistrian conflict had purely ethnic roots. If this was true, it would have been impossible for the very large Russian-speaking minorities on the right bank of the Nistru, on the territory controlled today by the Republic of Moldova, to integrate into that post-Soviet republic’s life. The West has been supporting that version of the conflict, even though it is strikingly surprising how the same minority composition is safe living on the right bank of Nistru, while a minority group on the left bank claims it does not feel safe to live in Moldova and instead would like special arrangements.

Having examined the key causes of the Transnistrian conflict and having partially hinted towards the obstacles preventing its solution, it is time now to take a deeper look regarding the nature of these obstacles.

## Obstacles: The Wrong Approach

One of the key obstacles towards the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict, however counterintuitive this may sound to the reader, is the currently accepted conflict resolution format itself. The format was imposed on the Republic of Moldova by the Russian Federation. Emerging from a ceasefire ultimatum, as a result of direct Russian military intervention against Moldova, the format further strengthened and promoted an inter-ethnic view of the conflict. Given the orchestrated nature of both conflicts in Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the very similar scenarios used to incite and escalate them, it can be concluded that the conflicts are examples of what today is known under the “hybrid war” label.

Unlike Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova did not have any support from the West against the Russian military taking control over a chunk of its territory. Moldova was left alone to face the Russian military might and had to accept a “peacekeeping” mechanism dominated and controlled by Russia, as well as a Russia-controlled negotiating format. There are though many similarities between the Transnistrian conflict and the conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas that created the “popular republics”. Not only a similar mechanism was used in both cases by the Russian military to stage “popular” uprisings and provide them with support. The setup for the conflict resolution is of such nature that it is not conducive to resolving the conflict. Instead, it gives Russia all the leverages to block an imposed status quo, under which its military forces or supported militia groups control the territory of former Soviet republics (Ukraine and Moldova). This allows Russia to demand that a specific “solution” is put in place, which would allow the rebels that it supports to exercise significant control over the domestic and foreign policies of Ukraine and Moldova.

These similarities did not escape the eyes of the general observer, as many in the West referred to Ukraine’s Donbas as a “second Transnistria” and urged against the “transnistrianization” of the Ukraine’s conflict in its eastern regions.<sup>8</sup> What has escaped their attention, is that both conflicts (not only Ukraine’s) were artificially incited. This was done by presenting the international community a façade of popular dissatisfaction in separatist regions with the central authorities in Chisinau and Kyiv. This façade involved bringing to the streets groups of civilians, some of which were manipulated into believing that their security and well-being were threatened by the central authorities in Chisinau. It was a typical exploitation by Russia of democratic mechanisms to advance expansionist goals. Beside that façade though, there were trained military troops that under the cover of night, or under the disguise of local militia took over administrative buildings, police stations, military units, and other governmental facilities. They replaced local authorities with loyal activists, put them in charge of local administration bodies, and brought funding from Russia to support the work of these new administrations. In its substance, this is a typical foreign military occupation, under the façade of internal rebellion.

The only difference is that the Russian Federation used in Ukraine its special operations groups and security agencies that were inserted into Ukraine to force the Ukrainian authorities and law enforcement out of its conflict-affected eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. In the Transnistrian region of Moldova though, the Soviet Union authorities used the KGB and the Soviet troops, which were already stationed on MSSR territory. If we compare the blockade of military units in Crimea, or the capturing of police stations in eastern Ukraine, with similar instances in Transnistrian region of Moldova, we can again observe some striking similarities.<sup>9</sup> The military bases or police stations in Transnistrian region were surrounded by civilian groups (frequently dominated by women), who were organized by armed men that used them as shields to enter the state institutions and take over more arms. Often, these groups of civilians surrounding state institutions in MSSR’s case, were

8 Speech of the Luxembourg Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean Asselborn, at the Polish Institute of International Affairs “The EU and its neighbourhood: where do we go after Crimea?” 8 May 2014

9 See D. Minzarari, S. Niculin and V. Soloviev, “Rol’ Rossiiskoy Federatsii v uregulirovanii pridnestrovskogo konflikta. Chast’ vtoraya: Bor’ba elit i derzhavnye ambitsii”, Azi.md, 6 April 2007.



instrumentalized to justify the transfer of arms and munitions from Soviet military units<sup>10</sup> to pro-Russian rebels. The referred research, as well as the media coverage of that period reveals that even full Soviet military units with armored vehicles and weapons were “joining” the rebels, while their commanders claimed they cannot do anything.

There is much more vivid evidence of these tactics in Crimea, as modern technology and internet allows quick and quality data sharing. There are plenty of videos on Youtube and other social platforms showing detailed accounts of how Ukrainian military units in Crimea were blocked by pro-Russian civilians, behind whom armed men forced their way into the premises of these military installations<sup>11</sup>. The similarity of the two cases, as well as the strong indication that both operations were likely run in line with the same textbooks and operating procedures, is underlined by the involvement of the so-called Cossacks both in Moldova and in Ukraine. These are paramilitary structures operating with the blessing of Russian authorities and the support of the Russian Ministry of Defense across Russia and in a few of the post-Soviet countries. A thorough research of the Transnistrian conflict's roots would reveal considerable evidence of reservists sent by the Russian Ministry of Defense from Russia into Transnistria. They traveled across borders individually, not in groups, and were expected to report to the commanding structure erected by the Russian military in Transnistria.

Following the direct involvement of the Russian military in the conflict between Moldova and their proxy within the Transnistrian region, involving heavy strikes of reactive artillery and other heavy weapon systems, Moldova's leadership basically capitulated and had no other choice than to accept Russian conditions. This happened after numerous but failed efforts to secure support from the United Nations and influential Western players. It was after a series of heavy artillery strikes by the Russian military that the Moldovan President Snegur accepted the call of the Russian President B. Eltsin to sign on 21 July 1992 a ceasefire agreement “on the peaceful settlement of the conflict”, which also documented the fact that the Russian Federation accepted being one of the conflicting parties.

Unlike Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova had no external support, and found itself facing the Russian Federation alone. This situation conditioned the erection of a malfunctioning “peacekeeping” mechanism, that the Russian Federation repeatedly attempted to legitimize, trying both UN and OSCE frameworks. It managed to achieve this, though only in a partial way with the OSCE. This happened after Russia succeeded in convincing OSCE to accept as a working mechanism its imposed peacekeeping formula, which directly involved conflicting parties<sup>12</sup> in various OSCE discussions and conflict resolution initiatives. It is important to mention that one can find familiar elements of this “peacekeeping” mechanism in both Moldova and Ukraine. This is the so-called Joint Control Committee in the case of the Transnistrian conflict and the Joint Centre for Control and Coordination in the case of the conflict in the eastern regions of Ukraine.

Therefore, the main obstacle that was referred to earlier in the paper, represents the faulted mechanism that the Russian Federation installed to control the conflict resolution process. One cannot resolve the conflict unless this mechanism is replaced. However, Russia vehemently opposes its replacement by an effective one, because this would reduce its control over the negotiations process and would bring the talks into a framework of genuine negotiations. Because the current mechanisms shield Russia from the formalization of the fact that it is a direct party to the conflict, allowing it to avoid the resulting economic and political costs that it would have to bear, it can maintain the status quo at little expense to itself for an indefinite period of time.

It is diplomatically difficult and politically costly for the West to break up the established negotiations framework, where one of the parties to the conflict (Russia) is able to orchestrate stalemates through its proxy (the Tiraspol administration) at no cost. This is partially due to the dependency path that

<sup>10</sup> The commanders of the units were reportedly under the orders to act this way or were sympathetic to the rebels.

<sup>11</sup> D. Minzarari, “Conflict Technologies in Post-Soviet Area: The Challenges of Hybrid War Against Moldova,” *Revista de filosofie, sociologie și științe politice*, nr.2 (171), 2016, pp.35-55.

<sup>12</sup> This also violates the UN minimal peacekeeping standards of neutrality and impartiality of peacekeepers.



was mentioned earlier on. It also due to institutional resistance to change – reputable organizations such as OSCE and EU got involved in the Russia-conceived peace talks mechanism. It would take tremendous efforts to accept that these organizations legitimized a negotiations framework that, from the very beginning, was doomed to only advance Russian interests, at the expense of Moldova's sovereignty.

This negotiations framework also can only “solve” the conflict, by achieving the goal for which the Transnistrian conflict was conceived in the first place. That is, to keep the Republic of Moldova under the political and military control of the Russian Federation, with only an appearance of Moldova's independence. In other words, the goal of the Russian-conceived “conflict resolution mechanism” is to make Moldova a Russian satellite state, thus preventing it from integrating into EU structures. This would be a worst-case scenario for Moldova, but also for Moldova's partners, including EU and the United States.

There is a very powerful push on Moldovan authorities currently to go forward with the Russian way of solving the conflict, including the so-called “special status for the Transnistrian region” that found some backing among organizations like EU and OSCE. It should be avoided at all cost, since the result would be economic stagnation and separation of Moldova from the West through a political curtain – as Russia's satellite Moldova would have no other choice but to support Russia in its international affairs. Other consequences would be grave for the region, in particular for Ukraine and Romania. As Russia's satellite state Moldova would have to host Russian military bases, which due to the country's geographic position would become a critical element in Russia's military installations abroad. It would be able to threaten Ukraine from the West, including the very vulnerable region of Odessa. It would also create significant military and political discomfort for Romania, since Moldova would likely be used (among other things) for technical intelligence gathering covering the south-eastern flank of EU and NATO.

Another scenario is to continue maintaining the status quo, in which Russia's role as the party to the conflict is ignored and its operation behind its proxy – the Tiraspol administration – is accepted. This was the scenario that has been in place for the last 25 years, and we can see the outcome. It seriously affected the economic basis of Moldova and gravely undermined its chances to increase the country's economic welfare. While the reader may view this argument with a skeptical eye, we should consider the extremely high economic weight that the Transnistrian region had in the MSSR economy.

There are also a number of indirect effects, such as the inability of Moldova's authorities to take effective economic measures, given the political pressure they were exposed to from Russia over the past 25 years. Some of them were visible, such as the ban against Moldova's exports to Russia that escalated visibly in 2006. The impact of others, such as maintaining high prices for natural gas, imported from Russia, is less visible. Besides these though, there were many others, which were insulated from the public eye and which effect was tremendous. Consider the waves of criticism that civil society experts launched against different governments in Moldova, accusing them of inefficiency and lack of professionalism. Many of the decisions that looked suboptimal and poorly conceived to civil society experts, were in fact made under Russian pressure, as the alternatives were assessed as much more damaging.

Yet another consequence of the ongoing Transnistrian negotiations scenario is the establishment of informal barriers for Moldova's integration into European institutions. This approach has stolen decades of progress from Moldovan citizens. This process has both a pull and push effect, as not only it made it more difficult for the Moldovan political class to advance European integration. This situation has affected the regular citizen, who through years of disinformation and propaganda by Russian state-owned media, which has dominated Moldovan information space, came to accept the view of a hostile and malevolent West. It finally affected the Western countries and institutions – they viewed Moldova as a country with a territorial dispute involving the Russian Federation and which, therefore, was not ready to be integrated into EU. It is the unforeseen and non-obvious effects of the



conflict that are the most severe and that generated the most economic, political, and social costs for Moldova as a country and its citizens.

The only real and long-lasting solution to the Transnistrian conflict is to accept its hybrid and foreign-instigated nature and depart from the illusion of it being an inter-ethnic conflict. This would both genuinely preserve the territorial sovereignty and political independence of the Republic of Moldova, while effectively responding to the possible insecurities of some national minorities. The logic behind this statement is that the reintegration of the Transnistrian region into Moldova, while not being restrained and controlled in its domestic and foreign policies by the Russian Federation, would lead to an improvement of the economic situation and quicker integration into EU institutions. Moldova's membership in European institutions would be the best guarantee for its national minorities; that its government will develop and implement non-discriminatory and inclusive policies and practices.

This would be the most effective way to depart from the current stalemate, since in order to really solve the conflict Moldova would need to change the international perception of the conflict, the conflict-related negotiations format, as well as the conflict resolution implementation mechanism. However, Moldova cannot do it alone. Instead, Moldova's Western partners should be brought to the realization that all the funding they invest into maintaining the current format is the most inefficient investment possible. It does not even preserve stability, as many would like to claim – because the status quo would have remained in its current form regardless of Western funding to maintain it. In other words, if the West did not invest anything into the Russia-imposed negotiations format currently in place, we would still be in the same position as we are today.

It is a counterfactual statement, which is difficult to prove. However, if we accept the hybrid war scenario in the case of the Transnistrian conflict, for which there is plenty of evidence, then things become less complicated. The Transnistrian conflict becomes then not the outcome of a social process, but a tool and the means that Russia instigated and instrumentalized in order to achieve an outcome. The end goal is to be able to dictate the domestic and foreign policies of Moldova. Escalating the conflict would imply foreign occupation of Moldova by Russia, which would be too costly to do.

Now, let us imagine what could have been done if all the funding that the West had used to invest into the Russia-imposed negotiations format would have been directed to actually push for the installation of a proper conflict resolution framework. The cost of maintaining the Transnistrian conflict would have grown for Russia. Then, the Russian authorities would have thought twice before escalating the situation in Georgia in 2008 and before applying a similar approach to stop Ukraine from its European integration efforts. By resisting the Russian model of conflict resolution for Transnistria, and by raising the costs for supporting it, the West would have changed Russia's incentives. For instance, when it became too costly to support its influence in Afghanistan and Warsaw Pact countries, Moscow pulled out. Gorbachev did not pull out because he was a benign leader – evidence shows the Soviet leader used military blackmail to try to keep MSSR within the USSR. He ordered the withdrawal of the Russian military from Afghanistan and Warsaw Pact countries because their presence there was too costly and thus unsustainable.

The biggest challenge that both Moldova and the West are facing in the case of the Transnistrian conflict, is to understand that twenty years away from now the situation is not likely to change, unless they invest efforts into departing from the current approach. Giving a “special status” to Transnistrian region, controlled by a Russian proxy, would only change the façade, but not the substance of the situation. The region will continue to be controlled by Russia, but then it would also have more ability to affect political decisions in Chisinau.

In this case Russia will slowly, in a matter of 2-3 elections cycles, replace the political elites in Chisinau with loyal politicians, would get the Moldova's parliament to officially accept a Russian military base, and would heavily militarize the country similar to Kaliningrad region and Crimea. The regional security implications and the potential for further conflict would grow tremendously.

Because then, the Russian Federation would have acquired more resources built up in Moldova and the cost for another escalation with the West would have been smaller. It is frequently the abundance of military resources and capabilities that increases the risk of a violent conflict to emerge. This would also embolden Russia in Ukraine, encouraging it to invest more resources and efforts into forcing a similar solution there. This is because Russia will come to the conclusion that this is feasible. By accepting a “special status” solution for Transnistrian region, imposed by Russia, the West would assist Moscow in finalizing its big dream of recovering its control over the former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe.

### Assessing possible solutions

The solution assessment for the Transnistrian conflict is not like guessing on the coffee grounds. It is a very technical and logical endeavor. Imagine you want to improve the situation and you would like to invest a certain amount of money into a respective course of action. If the situation were not to change much after ten or 20 years, then you would lose your investment. You would also acquire significant opportunity costs, because of the missed chances to make a better investment decision that would generate some profit – that is, improve the situation.

When thinking to continue with the current conflict resolution format and continue supporting the Russian scenario, Moldova’s partners in the West should not think it is the less costly way. This is a recipe for freezing an intermediate state of the conflict, which is not in equilibrium. It is a recipe for providing legitimization for the Russia’s faulty and illegal justification to station its military forces on the territory of an independent state. It is a recipe for encouraging Russia to pursue similar scenarios in other countries, like Ukraine – why would it not, if the West turned a blind eye to it and accepted this scenario in Moldova? This work is not a call for a confrontation with Russia – but a call for a more robust, creative, and pro-active engagement of Russia. It is also an attempt to compare and contrast the possible courses of action, in order to emphasize that the current path is actually the worst-case scenario, from a financial, political, regional security, and even ethical perspective. This will also have important repercussion in other instances of hybrid war that Russia is supporting – that of in Ukraine and Georgia.

In practical terms, there are only two types of solutions to the Transnistrian conflict and of similar ones in the post-Soviet area: one would preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, and the other would transform these three countries into Russia’s satellite-states. Accepting the Russian scenario of “a comprehensive political solution” may seem an easy way for many decision-makers in EU, but it would lead to the second solution, described earlier. If the goal is to implement the first solution, short of a military approach, the only presently feasible strategy is to make Russia’s support of separatist entities as costly as possible. Economic sanctions are very effective in this regard. They don’t give an immediate result in terms of Russia’s behavior since it would take time for the Russian elites to realize and psychologically accept the reality and burden of the costs’ involved. The sanctions, however, will steadily and surely diminish Russia’s de facto ability to support the separatist entities.

Some readers may point out the fact that sanctions place pressure on regular citizens to a greater extent than on the intended target: the separatist leadership. Such statements are very misleading. The separatist entities do not restrict the inhabitants in Transnistrian region from leaving, which actually is a process that has been going on for a while. Inhabitants with competitive job skills will continue to leave these regions in search of better opportunities. Sanctions will only accelerate this ongoing process, with many young and active people leaving the regions and acquiring more social



independence. They will more likely desire to change things for the better in the separatist regions, where their families will continue to live.

On the other hand, less resources coming from Russia will force the ruling elites in these regions to examine alternatives, even if they come conditionally, which will advance the conflict resolution process. The alternative to sanctions in this case is much worse: it is having generations of people living under authoritarian rule with no chance for political and economic development. Western support to the Russian solution and the consequent unconditional aid to these regions, would not bring economic development, but would extend the agonies of residents. Besides, as practice shows, most of foreign aid provided to authoritarian regimes does not reach people in need but ends up under the control of ruling elites. The key reason behind why these conflicts are known as “frozen” is that Russian aid and support has removed any incentive for the separatist ruling elites to negotiate in good faith a solution to the conflicts. It does not matter to these elites where the aid comes from. As long as they get control over it without any conditionality, they have no incentive to negotiate. The status quo suits them very well.

Russia’s economic support to the Transnistrian separatist region leadership has kept the conflict frozen and locked. The Russian military support, due to its costs, can also be considered to fuel the economic burden that Russia has to shoulder in propping up the separatist regimes. The military support is insufficient without economic aid. It would lead to a loss of legitimacy of the separatist ruling elites in the eyes of the local population and even to possible uprisings. These ruling elites would be highly unlikely to use force against crowds, as this would mark the end of their stay in power. Without a joint border with Russia, there is nowhere to go for them.

The expectation of popular dissatisfaction would instead push the Transnistrian region leaders, who have survived on Russian support, to examine alternative ways to provide for the residents. The easiest way for this would be for separatist leaders to stop blocking the negotiations process. Their risky alternative - to launch repressions against the unhappy popular masses - is not attractive at all for them. The policy options facing the West are to either trigger changes towards the integration of Transnistria back into Moldova, or to continue to fund and support Russia’s authoritarian proxies for decades. Moldova, due to its advantage of not having a direct border with Russia, is best positioned to succeed with achieving a breakthrough in the Transnistrian conflict. This would emerge as a result of the West’s additional pressure on separatist entities and on the Russian Federation.

What does it mean in practical terms? However politically discouraging it may sound, this means giving up the 5+2 negotiations format. It was doomed to fail from the very beginning, as it was built on a faulty foundation. It gave the aggressor in the conflict the comfortable role of peacekeeper, allowing the reduction of costs related to aggression. The departure from 5+2 has been, apparently, already initiated by the Moldovan authorities. They should be encouraged to stay on this course. A format, alternative to 5+2, would come through assisting Moldovan authorities’ efforts at the UN for the withdrawal of the Russian military forces from Moldova. As long as there are Russian soldiers on Moldovan soil, there will be no conflict resolution possible.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel in deciding what steps to take further. A combined set of measures is needed, involving targeted sanctions related to the Transnistrian conflict, addressing Russian businesses and officials involved in preserving the conflict in its current shape. An incentive package should be offered as well, to encourage taking the course of action that would lead to a real conflict resolution. This course of action should begin with the withdrawal of the Russian military and the demilitarization of the current peacekeeping format dominated by Russia, by replacing it with a civilian police force from third countries. Ideally it would be an EU-led post-conflict reconstruction mission, which would also help Moldova and its Transnistrian region advance on the path of EU integration. Given this will happen sooner or later, EU can be more effective and quicker in providing this support by starting it from the very beginning of its new conflict resolution approach. In order to achieve these goals, the West should help Moldova advance on the UN General Assembly agenda the

issue of Russian troops withdrawal from the Transnistrian region of Moldova and get a positive vote for it. It should also block and penalize Russian financial assistance to Transnistrian self-proclaimed authorities unless it comes through the Moldovan Government.

The Transnistrian conflict is a manifestation of a hybrid war and by treating it like one will generate cumulative pressure on Russia in addition to the one related to Ukraine. Doing this will also bring a quicker solution in Ukraine, because it will deplete at a faster rate the resources Russia has available to support hybrid conflicts in its foreign policy. Resources are scarce and therefore they tend to end, if one spends them quicker than one accumulates. It is a time-consuming exercise which requires patience. An extra advantage for the West, including the EU and US, is that by raising the costs for Russia's support of Transnistrian separatism, they will make it more difficult for Russia to support its foreign policy operations elsewhere, including Syria. They will, in this way, diminish the ability of the Russian Federation to act as a spoiler of Western diplomatic initiatives in other volatile areas around the globe.

The West should also resist the temptation to opt for what may (wrongly) look like easy solutions to the Transnistrian conflict. Many of those are promoted by the Russian Federation through bilateral diplomatic channels with individual countries,<sup>13</sup> or even by encouraging reputable think tanks to advance related ideas.<sup>14</sup> These approaches constitute clear and archetypal elements of a classic hybrid war.

*This paper was elaborated in the framework of the project: "Moldova reality check – Study visit to Moldova of the US Congressmen in 2017" and "Promoting Confidence Building Measures and Sector Cooperation between Moldova & Transnistrian region" financially supported by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation. The opinions expressed in the paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation or the Foreign Policy Association of Moldova.*

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13 Individual countries, even EU and NATO members, may be lured by the Russian Federation into supporting its ill-conceived plans, due to their temporary status, such as holding the Chairmanship of an international organization. These countries may be willing to show diplomatic progress to the international community, even if this is only verbal and has no substance. EU and NATO should be discouraging this irresponsible behavior of its individual members, as it may create challenges for the organizations, which consequent solution may be extremely costly.

14 More recently, in 2017, the International Crisis Group has repeatedly promoted the idea of avoiding a humanitarian crisis in separatist entities in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. It suggested that EU should take the burden of financing the separatist entities, to address the "entrapped" peoples' needs. While this rationale may sound very appealing on humanitarian grounds, it is totally misleading – the responsibility for potential humanitarian problems should be placed on the Russian Federation, who is artificially maintaining these entities.



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