

## **TRANSNISTRIA – A “BRIDGE HEAD” OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION FOR ATTACKING UKRAINE**

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**Motto:**

*„Nobody should fantasize about the possibility to gain military superiority against Russia. We will never allow this to happen.”*

**Vladimir Putin**

**Abstract:**

*The breakaway republic - de facto state - of Transnistria has steadily been edging closer and closer to Russia, but the Kremlin does not seem all that enthusiastic.*

*The EU ought to take specific action to prevent Moldova from becoming the next victim of Russian aggression.*

*Transnistria could represent a Russian bridge head in the East of Europe.*

*There is a real chance that the breakaway region in the Eastern part of the country, the Transnistrian republic, might follow in the footsteps of Crimea and be accepted into the Russian Federation as a new federal subject.*

*The annexation of Crimea by force dramatically changes the security situation in the Black Sea region.*

*After the annexation of Crimea (March 2014) by the Russian Federation, UN observers are trying to figure out what is going on with Russian Federation troops on the Ukrainian border. As a result of the talks, the subject of Republic of Transnistria was also reached.*

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Fig. 1- Annexation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation (March 2014)

*The Russian Federation reserves the right to intervene anywhere on the territory of the former Soviet republics.*

*If the Russian Federation were to take over Transnistria, Ukraine would have Russian troops on three borders instead of two. That would mean that the Russians would then put their hands on Odessa and take what remains of southeast Ukraine. With the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation, the Dniester becomes a war line for the Russian Federation.*

*Transnistria has borders with Moldova and Ukraine and has no access to the Black Sea.*



Fig. 2 - Map of Transnistria, the breakaway republic and de facto state sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine, 2008<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/p%C3%A5l-kolst%C3%B8/transnistria-is-bridge-too-far-for-russia>, accessed on 05.11.2018.

*The Transnistrian region, the Donbas and Crimea, is the first line of the Russian front. If this line falls - militarily or politically – Putin’s “Iron Curtain” can get the Prut, the Danube Delta and the Romanian-Ukrainian border established in the Hague, but also South of Chernautzi and Hertza or Maramures Tisza.*

*The secret plan of the Russian Federation is to create a common frontier with the Republic of Moldova and Romania through the Odessa region.*

*The Russian Federation seeks to remove new portions of territory from the Kiev government (those that could make the land link between Donbas and Crimea; those concerning control of the Danube mouths, respectively the Dniester estuary area, the Bailey, the Snake Island).*



*Fig. 3 - Annexation of the Snake Island, Transnistria and Gagauzia by the Russian Federation<sup>2</sup>*

*The annexation of Crimea demonstrates that the Russian Federation will go as far as the West will allow it to go. Its obvious intention is to reconstitute the Soviet Union.*

*The Russian military units on the territory of the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria) could multiply and become a bridge head for attacking Ukraine.*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ziare.com/international/ucraina/generalul-constantin-degeratu-moscova-nu-crede-in-lacrimi-singurul-limbaj-inteles-e-cel-al-fortei-interviu-1356075>, accessed on 05.11.2018;



*Fig. 4 - Crimea as “bridgehead” to Transnistria for the destabilization of Ukraine<sup>3</sup>*

*The Russian Federation is in the middle of an offensive campaign, it has achieved some geopolitical objectives at the Black Sea (Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia), it may also target others (the mouths of the Danube, Snake Island) and may be tempted to test the viability of NATO’s Article 5.*

*In the Black Sea area, the Russian Federation reached a culmination of military dominance and is in a full-expansion process.*

**Keywords:** Russian Federation; Transnistria; Crimea; Bridgehead; mouths of the Danube; Snake Island; Eastern Europe

### **1. Crimea - setting a new precedent**

Until recently, relatively little was known about the Transnistrian conflict that has been undermining the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The waves of enlargement towards the East of NATO and the European Union drew attention to Transnistria, which has been seen as one of the “frozen conflict zones” in the post-Soviet area alongside Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno - Karabakh. However, the Transnistrian issue has not been perceived as a serious threat to Euro-Atlantic security because no outbreaks of large-scale hostilities or human casualties have been reported in the region since the 1990s. Beyond a few small incidents in the demilitarized zone, the 1992 ceasefire has been respected for more than two decades. This confirms the Transnistrian

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<sup>3</sup> [https://adevarul.ro/moldova/politica/expert-militar-transnistria-ar-putea-deveni-cap-pod-rusiei-atacare-ucrainei-1\\_5314284ac7b855ff56d204b3/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/moldova/politica/expert-militar-transnistria-ar-putea-deveni-cap-pod-rusiei-atacare-ucrainei-1_5314284ac7b855ff56d204b3/index.html), accessed on 05.11.2018.

issue as the only real “frozen conflict” among the territorial disputes that emerged in the post-soviet space in the 1990s. The Euro-Atlantic community hoped that a peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict would finally be reached because it was the shortest and least violent of the separatist conflicts in the post-soviet area. Nevertheless, the Russian-Georgian war and the Ukrainian crisis have dramatically changed Western perspectives on post-Soviet separatist conflicts, such as the so-called “frozen conflicts” in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Eastern Ukraine, and the dispute over Transnistria: the August 2008 war in Georgia showed that a dangerous thaw in the “frozen conflicts” was underway, while the 2014 Ukrainian crisis indicated that a new period of tension risks engulfing other areas in the post-Soviet space. These events have provided ample grounds for raising the Transnistrian question as a source of serious concern for the Euro-Atlantic community.

In the wake of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and the eruption of military hostilities in Eastern Ukraine, NATO officials expressed their concerns about the security risks in the breakaway region of Transnistria<sup>4</sup>.

Located at the Eastern border of the European Union and NATO, in the vicinity of the Ukrainian seaport of Odessa, the Transnistrian conflict resembles a time bomb ticking away, whose explosion might have serious effects on the stability of NATO’s Eastern flank. At the same time, there are serious worries that the ongoing crisis in Ukraine will result in a Transnistria-like scenario since there are noteworthy similarities between the Moldovan and Ukrainian cases.

This paper responds to the critical need to understand the Transnistrian question in the context of the recent turbulence in Ukraine. The research provides an analysis of the unsettled conflict in Transnistria from a geopolitical perspective. To this end, it explores the role that external actors play in the Transnistrian issue and, more specifically, the involvement of Russia. The paper argues that the Transnistrian conflict is not a matter of ethnicity associated with Moldovan domestic politics, but

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<sup>4</sup> General Philip Breedlove, “Concern about Transnistria - NATO Commander: We are concerned about risk of Russian intervention,” Teleradio Moldova, 23 March 2015, available at: <http://www.trm.md/en/politic/ingrijorare-privind-transnistria-comandant-natosuntem-preocupati-de-riscul-unei-interventii-ruse>, accessed on 05.11.2018;

rather a question of regional geopolitics. Russia's involvement in the Transnistrian issue is driven by geostrategic calculations consisting in preventing Moldova's Europeanization, if not "Euro-Atlantization", preserving its influence on the Western flank of the former soviet space and blocking any further Eastern enlargements of the EU and NATO.

## **2. Transnistria, a de facto state that officially does not exist**

Transnistria, the land beyond the Nistru River<sup>5</sup>, is a strip of land located in the Eastern part of the Republic of Moldova which borders Ukraine for 405 km. The territory of Transnistria covers an area of 4,163 km<sup>2</sup>, representing 12% of Moldova's total territory. The region is inhabited by half a million people, comprising just under 15% of the Moldovan Republic's population. Subdivided into five regions and eight cities, Transnistria includes the second and fourth largest cities of the Republic of Moldova, Tiraspol and Bender<sup>6</sup>. According to the Moldovan constitution, Transnistria - also known as the "Left Bank of the Nistru River" - is part of the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The reality is, however, that Moldovan authorities have no control over the region which has been functioning as a de facto state since the early 1990s. The loss of control over this region occurred in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union when a complex conflict emerged between the left and right banks of the Nistru River. Although the conflict in Transnistria had some ethnic and linguistic origins, it was not essentially rooted in these cleavages. Transnistria used to be home to a mixed Latin and Slavic population mostly committed to Orthodox Christianity. In 1989, the population of Transnistria was comprised of three major ethnic groups including 39.3% Moldovans, 28.3% Ukrainians and 25.5% Russians. At the same time, the overall ethnic composition of Moldova consisted of

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<sup>5</sup> Romanian/Moldovan place names are used in this paper. The Nistru River and Transnistria are preferred to Russian and Latin-Slavic hybrid terms such as Dnestr/ Dniestr or Pridnestrovie/Transdniestria;

<sup>6</sup> Also known as Tighina, the city is located on the right bank of the Nistru River in the buffer zone established at the end of the 1992 war in Transnistria. It is not part of the territorial unit of Transnistria as defined by the Moldovan central authorities, but the Transnistrian regime has de facto administrative control over the city.

64.5% Moldovans, 13.8% Ukrainians, 13% Russians, 3.5% Gagauz and 5.1% others<sup>7</sup>.

The conflict was the expression of fundamental disagreement between local authorities in Transnistria and central government in Chisinau (the capital of Moldova) on the post-Soviet future of the Republic of Moldova. Russian-speaking and Russified elites in Transnistria disagreed with the steps taken by Chisinau who strived for the restoration of Romanian identity and closer cooperation, if not reunification with Romania. Unlike the Transnistrian region, the Western bank of the Nistru River used to have strong historical, political and cultural links with Romania. This territory, also known as Bessarabia (Basarabia in Romanian), was part of Greater Romania (România Mare in Romanian) prior to its Sovietization in 1940<sup>8</sup>.

On the eve of the Soviet collapse, Moldovan elites in Chisinau sought to restore the Romanian identity of Moldovans by proclaiming Romanian as the official state language and by replacing Cyrillic script with the Latin alphabet. These measures aimed to put an end to the Russification policy driven by Moscow during the Soviet period, which consisted in the spreading of the Russian language across Moldova's territory and replacing the Latin alphabet with the Cyrillic script. Local elites in Transnistria opposed Chisinau's initiatives, because they sought to maintain their union with Moscow in order to preserve their dominant position in Moldova's politics. During the Soviet period, Transnistria had become more urban, industrialized and “Russified” than the rest of the country and a local Russian-speaking and Russified elite soon dominated the state and the communist party structures<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles King, *The Moldovans - Romania, Russia and the Politics of Culture*, Stanford, California, Hoover International Press, 2000, p. 185;

<sup>8</sup> The Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was created on August 2, 1940 as the result of the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany on August 23, 1939. The treaty included a secret protocol that divided territories in Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland into German and Soviet spheres of influence anticipating the political and territorial rearrangements of these countries;

<sup>9</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly, “*Visit to Moldova by the Sub-Committee on Democratic Governance*,” March 2004, <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?CAT2=%20462&CAT1=-19&CAT0=2&COM=484&MOD=0&SMD=0&SSMD=0&STA=&ID=0&PAR=0&LNG=1>, accessed on 05.11.2018;

They had the support of the local Slavic population, who feared the loss of their language and cultural rights in a strictly Moldovan/Romanian nationalist state, despite the fact that Russian was given the status of “language of interethnic communication”<sup>10</sup>.

The real fear was, however, the loss of the high professional and social status that Russian ethnics had during the Soviet period when Russian was predominant in all social spheres and served as the common administrative and judicial language. The convergence of interests between Transnistria’s Russian speaking population and local elites led to the region’s secession from the Republic of Moldova and the declaration of its independence in 1990. Moldovan authorities lost complete control over the Transnistrian region in 1992, when political disagreement between the two banks of the Nistru River was translated into a brief military conflict. The armed conflict erupted when local clashes between central Moldovan forces and Transnistrian separatist forces escalated into a civil war on 2 March 1992, the day of the Republic of Moldova’s formal recognition as an independent state at the United Nations<sup>11</sup>.

With the support of the former 14th Soviet Army stationed in Moldova, the Transnistrian forces defeated the weak and embryonic Moldovan Army. The ceasefire reached by the parties on 21st July 1992 in Moscow put an end to the conflict, which had resulted in several hundred casualties and about 100,000 internally displaced persons and refugees. Transnistria’s separatist regime rejected Chisinau’s post-war proposals offering the region a special status within Moldova and the right to secede if Moldova changed its statehood (i.e. if it united with Romania). Instead, Transnistria managed to get all the attributes of its own statehood such as: a constitution; presidential, legislative, executive, and judicial organs; military and security apparatus; a postal system; currency, and so on. Since then, Tiraspol (the capital of the self-declared Transnistrian republic) has sought to build a “Transnistrian nation” by

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<sup>10</sup> “*Legea nr. 3465 cu privire la funcționarea limbilor vorbite pe teritoriul RSS Moldovenești*”, 1 September 1989, available at: <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=%20view&view=doc&lang=1&id=312813>, accessed on 05.11.2018;

<sup>11</sup> Armed clashes broke out on a limited scale between the Transnistrian separatist forces and the Moldovan police as early as November 1990 at Dubasari, on the left bank of the Nistru River.



means of various tools and symbols dating from the Soviet period, to create the perception of a different identity on the left bank of the Nistru River. Russian, Ukrainian and Moldovan were declared as official languages in the self-declared Transnistrian republic. In reality, Russian was preserved as the main language of public service with Cyrillic script for the Moldovan/Romanian language, in contrast with Moldova itself which switched back to the Latin script. In spite of these elements of statehood, the self-declared Transnistrian republic does not officially exist in the eyes of the international community. It is not recognized by any United Nations member state. Thus, Transnistria is missing a key prerequisite for statehood: international recognition. The only entities that have recognized the independence of Transnistria are Georgia's and Azerbaijan's breakaway regions, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. However, these are political entities with limited or no international recognition<sup>12</sup>.

### **3. Russia's role in the survival of Transnistrian statehood**

The Transnistrian de facto state would not have any existence without Russia's strong endorsement. According to a European Court for Human Rights document issued in 2004, *“Russia provided military, political and economic support to the separatist regime, thus enabling it to survive by strengthening itself and by acquiring a certain amount of autonomy vis-à-vis Moldova”*<sup>13</sup>.

Transnistria is a landlocked region with a low demographic potential and a lack of raw materials. The financial assistance received from Russia is fundamental for Transnistria's economy that would be sustainable only for two to three months without Russian economic aid<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence in the aftermath of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. Internationally, only Russia's Latin-American allies, Venezuela and Nicaragua have recognized South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence, apart from a few Pacific island states. No UN member state has recognized the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh;

<sup>13</sup> European Court of Human Rights, *“Case of Ilascu and others versus Moldova and Russia”*, Judgement issued on 8 July 2004, available at: <http://www.echr.coe.int/eng/press/2004/July/GrandChamberjudgmentIlascuandOthersvMoldovaandRussia.htm>, retrieved on 05.11.2018;

<sup>14</sup> Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms (CISR), *“Moldova's and Transnistria's Economies: From Conflict to Prospects of Peaceful Development. Foreign Trade: The*

Moscow officially refers to the assistance it provides to Transnistria as “humanitarian aid”. It essentially consists of a substantial financial contribution to the monthly pensions and salaries of Transnistria’s inhabitants. In addition, Moscow subsidizes Transnistria’s law enforcement agencies, notably the army and the Ministry of State Security (or KGB as it is known). Russia also fuels the local economy through significant gas subsidies. Transnistria pays nothing at all for the gas consumed, because Gazprom has a single contract with the Republic of Moldova<sup>15</sup>.

Finally, Moscow indirectly supports the Transnistrian economy through cash remittances from expatriate workers and Russian investments. Up to 80% of total cash remittances sent to Transnistria come from Russia, and Russian companies invest in local industrial plants inherited from the Soviet period. Russia plays the role of a defensive shield vis-à-vis the regime in Tiraspol by protecting Transnistrian statehood politically and diplomatically. Russia, as the key member of the “5+2” negotiating format (also including Republic of Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, US and European Union as observers), seeks to make sure that Tiraspol’s interests are well represented within the talks on the conflict. Moscow is also active when measures taken by Moldovan or Ukrainian governments appear to be detrimental to the interests of Transnistrian statehood, consequently undermining its fragile existence. Russian officials constantly criticize Moldovan and Ukrainian initiatives regarding the strength of controls at “the borders” with Transnistria, which has been known as the “black hole of Europe”<sup>16</sup>.

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*Source of Growth and Contradictions*”, 2007, available at: [http://www.cisr-md.org/pdf/2007 Transis Report rus 2en.pdf](http://www.cisr-md.org/pdf/2007%20Transis%20Report%20rus%20en.pdf), accessed on 05.11.2018;

<sup>15</sup> The Republic of Moldova consumes on average some 3 to 3.5 bcm of gas per year. While the territory under Chisinau’s control consumes only about 1 bcm per year, Transnistria uses at least two thirds of Gazprom’s annual deliveries to Moldova as a whole. Transnistria owes a debt approaching \$4 billion to Gazprom for past deliveries of gas. Currently Moldova owes a debt approaching \$5, 2 billion to Gazprom of which 89% is owed by Transnistria;

<sup>16</sup> In 2002, the European Parliament’s delegation to Moldova depicted Transnistria as a “black hole in Europe in which illegal trade in arms, the trafficking in human beings and the laundering of criminal finance was carried on”. European Parliament, “Ad hoc delegation to Moldova”, June 5-6, 2002, available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/->

While Chisinau and Kiev consider these measures as necessary for impeding on arms smuggling and other trafficking in the region, Russia sees them as a “blockade” against Transnistria and an attempt to change the format of the peace settlement process. Russia also provides Transnistria with a “security umbrella” through its significant military presence in the region, which consists of the Operational Group of Russian Forces and so-called Russian “peacekeepers.” The Operational Group of Russian forces (Operativnaya Grupa Rossiyskih Voysk in Russian) was established as the successor to the former 14th Army which was stationed in Moldova during the Soviet period. Russian “peacekeepers” are part of a Russian-Moldovan-Transnistrian tripartite peacekeeping force overseeing the implementation of 1992 ceasefire agreement. It is stationed in the demilitarized zone along the Nistru River under the authority of a Joint Control Commission (JCC). Russia’s troops theoretically conduct two distinct but practically overlapping missions in Transnistria: “peacekeeping” and guarding vast ammunition stockpiles left over from the Soviet era. When the Republic of Moldova proclaimed independence in 1991 about 45,951 tons of ammunitions were stockpiled in Transnistria, which was considered as one of the largest storage areas of armaments in Europe<sup>17</sup>.

According to current official data, Russia’s military presence in Transnistria consists of some 1,500 troops of the Operational Group of Russian Forces, which are augmented by over 400 Russian peacekeeping forces<sup>18</sup>.

However, Moldovan sources claim that the force is much more considerable in size and could easily reach 10,000-12,000 if it were to add that number to the Transnistrian military and security forces<sup>19</sup>.

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intcoop/euro/pcc/ ubm/pcc\_meeting/reports/2002\_06\_06\_adhoc\_moldova\_en.pdf, accessed on 05.11.2018;

<sup>17</sup> Ceslav Ciobanu, *Frozen and forgotten states: Genesis, Political Economy and Prospects for Solution*, Virginia State University/US Institute of Peace, 2008;

<sup>18</sup> Regnum, “*Glavy MID Rossiya i Moldaviya obsudili situatsiu naUkraine i blokadu Pridnestroviya*”, 7 April 2014, available at: <http://regnum.ru/news/%20polit/1787931.html>, accessed on 05.11.2018;

<sup>19</sup> Dumitru Manzarari, “*Crimea Crisis Exposes Severe Deficiencies in Transnistria Negotiations Format*”, Eurasia Daily Monitor, vol.11, issue 67, 9 April 2014;

Officially Russia's support to Transnistria is related to the protection of Russians living in the breakaway region of Moldova. According to current estimates, 30.4% of Transnistria's population are ethnic Russians and about 150,000-200,000 residents hold Russian passports. Russia has been employing this argument since the 1990s, when Moscow first used it for justifying its implication in the Transnistrian conflict and unofficially backing the separatist forces against Chisinau. At that time, Russia's narrative consisted of the necessity to stop "the civil war" in Moldova and to "protect Russian population" in Transnistria. During the 1992 Transnistria war, Aleksandr Lebed, the commander of the former soviet 14th Army, accused Moldova of being a "fascist state" and denounced Moldovan authorities as "war criminals"<sup>20</sup>.

The reality is, however, much more complex and the situation on the ground differs from that depicted by Russia's official statements. Currently, Transnistria's mixed population also comprises 31.9% of Moldovans and 28.8% of Ukrainians, and the inhabitants are believed to have multiple citizenship including Moldovan, Ukrainian, Bulgarian and even Romanian. In fact, the involvement of Russia in the Transnistrian issue goes beyond the protection of Russians living in the region. Moscow's support to the breakaway region is also related to Russia's geostrategic and geopolitical interest vis-à-vis Moldova, Ukraine and the EuroAtlantic community.

#### **4. Transnistria as Russia's lever of influence vis-à-vis Moldova and Ukraine**

Unlike Georgia's two breakaway republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, so far Russia has not recognized the independence of Transnistria. Furthermore, Moscow remained cautious in the wake of the 2014 Crimea referendum, which coincidentally had the same percentage of pro-Russia votes as the 2006 Transnistria referendum that supported independence from Moldova and free association with Russia. In the aftermath of the Crimea referendum leading to Russia's annexation of

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<sup>20</sup> Anatolie Muntean and Nicolae Ciubotaru, *Războiul de pe Nistru*, Bucharest, Ager - Economistul, 2004, p.119.

Ukraine's region of Crimea, Tiraspol appealed to Russia to initiate the process of state recognition for Transnistria<sup>21</sup>.

However, Russia remains deaf to the requests of Transnistrian authorities, emphasizing its full support to the peaceful settlement of the conflict within the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. The reality is that Russia is not willing to recognize the independence of Transnistria because of geography and, notably geopolitics. If Transnistria shared a border with Russia, it would have taken the path of Georgia's secessionist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Unlike these territories, Russia cannot get to Transnistria without first going through Ukrainian territory or the Western bank of the Nistru River controlled by Chisinau, capital of an independent state that does not fall in with Russia's interests. While Russia's short and medium-term goals are to keep the status-quo in the conflict, Moscow's long term and final goal is the reintegration of Transnistria into the Republic of Moldova on a federal basis under its political and military guarantees. To this end, Moscow proposed several conflict settlement plans consisting of Moldova's federalization with Transnistria. One of the most recent and elaborate of Russia's proposals was the 2003 "Kozak Memorandum" which was drafted by Dmitri Kozak, the Russian president's representative. The essence of the document, officially entitled "Russian Draft Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the State Structure of a United State in Moldova," was the transformation of Moldova into an "asymmetric federation" with Transnistria. The Transnistrian region would have extensive autonomy over its own affairs, as well as the power of veto over constitutional amendments and the ratification of international treaties that might limit its autonomy. It stipulated that the new federal Moldovan state would be neutral and demilitarized. Yet, Moscow indicated that it would maintain a military presence in the region for twenty years to guarantee the implementation of this agreement. If signed, this document would have transformed the Republic of Moldova into a larger Transnistria under Russian political influence. For Russia, Transnistria has primarily an instrumental function

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<sup>21</sup> Rosbalt, "Pridnestroviye vsled za Krym xochet voyti v sostav Rossiyi", 18 March 2014, available at: <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2014/03/18/1245241.html>, accessed on 05.11.2018.

since it enables Moscow to keep a lever of influence over the domestic and more importantly, foreign policy of Moldova. Transnistria is the Republic of Moldova's Achilles heel; it prevents it from moving closer to the West. The Republic of Moldova will not get EU membership as long as the conflict over Transnistria continues without a political solution. As a signatory country of the Association agreement with the EU, the Republic of Moldova strives for the acquisition of European Union membership. Instead, Transnistria could be helpful in bringing the Republic of Moldova back into the Russian sphere of influence. Moscow's first political objective is to install a Russian-friendly political regime in Chisinau. The end-goal is to engage Moldova in Russian led integrationist structures such as the Eurasian Union, which is nothing more than the restoration of ancient forms of integration in the post-Soviet area under Russia's authority. In this sense, it is not by chance that Moscow appointed Russia's deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin as special representative on Transnistria. A former ambassador to NATO, Mr Rogozin has been known as a Russian nationalist who strongly supports the idea of a Eurasian union that resembles former Soviet or Russian empires. In addition, Transnistria plays a significant role in Russia's current policy towards Ukraine. One will notice that Transnistria is closely related to Ukraine both geographically and historically. Located in the vicinity of the south-western part of Ukraine, Transnistria was a component of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic that the Soviets created within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924. With the creation of the Moldavian ASSR, the Soviets hoped that the new republic would spread communist ideas into neighbouring Moldova/Bessarabia in order to "get it back" from Romania. Today the geographic position of Moldova's breakaway region shows Transnistria as a thorn in Ukraine's side, which can be used by Russia in destabilizing Ukraine and reshaping Ukrainian statehood in its own interests. The implication of Transnistrian elements in the 2014 Ukrainian crisis asserts Transnistria as a serious challenge to the territorial integrity of Ukraine. For instance, the Transnistrian "siloviki" (military-security establishment representatives) played an important role in the Russian annexation of Crimea, the eruption of military hostilities in Eastern Ukraine and the creation of the separatist Donetsk People's Republic. The involvement of many Transnistrian figures in recent

Ukrainian events gives reason to believe that Ukraine is at risk of ending up with a Transnistria-type scenario. In addition, Transnistria can be used as a platform for pursuing separatist actions into other Ukrainian areas such as the south-western region of Odessa. Located 80 km away from Transnistria, Ukraine's last remaining and crucial seaport of Odessa has already been the target of several attempts at destabilization since the eruption of military hostilities in Eastern Ukraine. According to Ukrainian sources, Transnistrian elements were involved in the clashes that erupted between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian forces in Odessa during the 2014 May incidents. This led to suspicions that Russia may have tried to destabilize, if not gain control over the Ukrainian seaport of Odessa, an operation in which Transnistria would have played a significant role.

#### **5. Transnistria, a Russian bridgehead in Eastern Europe**

Transnistria plays a critical role in defending Russia's geopolitical interests in several European sub-regions. First, Transnistria provides Russia with a tool of influence over the South-Western flank of the former Soviet space, which includes Moldova and Ukraine. The Moldovan breakaway region denies accession of these countries to the Euro-Atlantic community, preventing any further enlargement of NATO and the EU to the East. Second, Transnistria is a component part of Russia's long-term strategy towards the wider Black sea region. According to some NATO member states leaders, the strategy aims to transform the Black sea into a “Russian lake”<sup>22</sup>.

Russian military presence in Transnistria follows the logic of encirclement of the Black sea region. Third, Transnistria is one of Russia's three European bridgeheads alongside Kaliningrad to the North and Crimea to the South that are located in vicinity of the Euro-Atlantic community. In this way, Russia holds three exclaves along the Black Sea - Baltic isthmus that allows Moscow to keep an eye on European regional and extra-regional issues. These considerations explain Russia's refusal to withdraw its troops from Transnistria as well as the weapons stored in

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<sup>22</sup> Traian Băsescu, former Romanian president, Liliana Ruse, “*Marea Neagră-lac rusesc*”. 9 AM News, 17 September 2005, available at: <http://www.9am.ro/stiri-revista-presei/Politica/18651/Marea-Neagra-lac-rusesc.html>, accessed on 05.11.2018;

the region, despite the repeated requests made by Moldovan authorities and the international community. At the 1999 Istanbul OSCE Summit, Russia underwrote an obligation to withdraw its forces and ammunition from Transnistria by the end of 2002. Although Russia removed small quantities of ammunition from Transnistria, over 20,000 tons of ammunitions remain stored in the depots there<sup>23</sup>.

Russia refuses to withdraw its troops from Transnistria, linking the military withdrawal to the political settlement of the conflict. Moscow is using delaying tactics in the hope that Chisinau will accept the legalization of Russian military presence on the Republic of Moldova's territory. This became clear in the "Kozak Memorandum," which, if it had been signed, would have sanctioned the presence of Russian troops on Moldova's territory until 2020<sup>24</sup>.

Since the US announcement that an interceptor missile system would be deployed in Romania, Transnistria has acquired new geostrategic significance for Russia. Russian officials warned of the deployment of a radar system of the "Voronesh" type in Transnistria, which may be based in Tiraspol. There have also been unverified claims that Moscow might put Iskander missiles in Transnistria, but this could be just a Russian tactical movement made in order to dissuade the US from proceeding with the deployment of the missile system in Eastern Europe. Moscow has already used this ploy, when it tried to dissuade the US from deploying the missile system in Central Europe and notably in Poland and the Czech Republic. At that time, Russia threatened to deploy Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad, the Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> According to the OSCE Mission to Moldova, of a total of 42,000 tons of ammunitions stored in Transnistria, 1,153 tons (3%) were transported back to Russia in 2001, 2,405 tons (6%) in 2002 and 16,573 tons (39%) in 2003;

<sup>24</sup> Mihai Gribincea, Moldovan diplomat (Moldova's current Ambassador to Belgium and NATO), *"Russian troops in Transnistria- a threat to the national security of the Republic of Moldova"*, Moldova.org, 5 December 2006, available at: <http://www.moldova.org/-russian-troops-in-transnistria-a-threat-to-the-security-of-the-repub-lic-of-moldova-20998-eng>, accessed on 05.11.2018.

<sup>25</sup> Vladimir Socor, *"Russia warns of missile forward-deployment in Kaliningrad region"*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol.4, Issue 131, 6 July 2007, available at: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=32850&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=32850&no_cache=1), accessed on 05.11.2018;



### ***Conclusions and recommendations***

The Transnistrian issue is not a purely intra-state conflict, since it has a significant external dimension. Russia as a third player has been highly involved in the Transnistrian issue since the emergence of the conflict in the 1990s. Russia's involvement has been driven by geostrategic calculations which consist of restoring its sphere of influence on the Western flank of the former Soviet Union and preventing the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic community to the East. The preservation of former Soviet republics in the Russian orbit has been Moscow's obsession since the collapse of the Soviet Union, that Russian leaders consider the “*greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century*”<sup>26</sup>.

This explains Russia's support to the separatist movements in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's implosion and its direct or indirect involvement in the military hostilities in the breakaway regions of Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan in the 1990s. Coincidentally or not, the armed conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh erupted in the same period of time and within the very countries that refused to join Russia's new ‘integrationist’ structures, preferring rapprochement with the West. Russia has been playing the “ethnic card” in the post-Soviet republics in order to keep control over the main foreign policy choices of central governments and prevent them from making “unfriendly” decisions that might alter Moscow's interests. The closer the former Soviet republics get to the Euro-Atlantic community, the harder Russia plays this card. The preservation of “frozen conflicts” inside these countries allows Russia to undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the newly independent states; to harm their political, social and economic development; and to maintain a source of tension inside their societies and their environments. These considerations explain the difficulty in solving the unsettled conflict in Transnistria. Within this context, the following scenarios may be drawn regarding the future of Transnistria's breakaway region and those of the Republic of Moldova itself. The most

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<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 25 April 2005;

unlikely scenario is the recognition of Transnistria's independence by Russia. An independent Transnistria is not in keeping with Russia's geostrategic interests. Moreover, it would be difficult to handle the independence of Transnistria seeing that the Moldovan region does not share a common border with Russia. However, this scenario may happen only if Russia succeeds in getting control over the southern regions of Ukraine, and notably the port of Odessa in order to implement new secessionist projects in the region, such as "Novorossiia" (literally, New Russia)<sup>27</sup>.

The most likely scenario is the preservation of the status-quo in the Republic of Moldova, which seems to be the most convenient outcome for Russia and Western actors as well. Keeping the current situation unaltered is the least of the worst-case scenarios for Russia, which seeks to prevent the Republic of Moldova from getting closer to the European Union and the Euro-Atlantic community. At the same time, this looks like being the most realistic option for Western actors whose primary interests are to prevent the return of Moldova to Russia's sphere of influence. The best scenario for Russia consists of the "transnistriazation" of the Republic of Moldova. This process means the federalization of the Republic of Moldova with Transnistria under Russian terms. This may happen in two different ways. The peaceful route to Moldova's transnistriazation could take place if a pro-Russian government is re-elected in Chisineu. The leftist political forces have always been favourable to Russia's plans for Moldova's federalization. The violent way of Moldova's "transnistriazation" is the destabilization of the country by Russia, through a sort of hybrid strategy involving the pursuit of provocative actions coming from the left bank of the Nistru River: an economic blockade, gas shortages and the use of the "ethnic card" in other areas of Moldova. The best scenario for the West is the Europeanization of the Republic of Moldova. This does not mean EU membership for the Republic of Moldova, because that would be

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<sup>27</sup> On 17 April 2014 Russia's president Vladimir Putin stated that the Ukrainian territories of Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolayv and Odessa were historically part of Novorossiia. Adrian S. Basora, Alexander Fisher, *"Putin's Greater Novorossiia - The Dismemberment of Ukraine"*, FPRI, May 2015, available at: <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2014/05/putins-greater-novorossiia-dismemberment-ukraine>, accessed on 05.11.2018.

unrealistic at the moment. Instead, Chisinau could strengthen its partnership with the EU in order to pursue the democratic path and economic development of the right bank of the Nistru River in order to become more attractive to Transnistria's population. A poor Moldovan society and corrupt governance will never be attractive for its inhabitants. Finally, the gradual reintegration of the Republic of Moldova could open the door to the country's institutional accession to the European Union and even to the Euro-Atlantic community.

### ***Recommendations for NATO***

Currently, NATO plays no role in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict which has been challenging the security and the stability of Eastern Europe since the 1990s. It would be difficult to envisage direct participation of NATO at the “5+2” format negotiations on the conflict in Transnistria, because of the sensitivities of Transnistrian and Russian authorities. However, NATO cannot ignore the existence of the “frozen conflict” in Transnistria, which acquires new meaning in the context of the Ukrainian crisis and risks challenging the stability of the Alliance's Eastern flank. In this regard, it would be necessary to constitute a “Transnistria Contact Group” inside NATO to regularly bring together Moldovan and Ukrainian representatives as well as US and EU participants at the negotiations on the settlement of the conflict. The main mission of this group would consist of sharing and discussing accurate information in order to regularly evaluate the situation in the Transnistrian region. NATO could also contribute to the organization of joint Moldovan and Ukrainian military training, in order to increase Moldovan-Ukrainian interoperability and build confidence between the two sides. A strong Ukrainian-Moldovan dialogue based on trust, cooperation and friendship is crucial for finding possible solutions to the Transnistrian issue. At the same time, NATO has to continue its efforts in assisting and supporting Moldovan authorities in reforming the defense, security and intelligence sectors of the country. The organization of joint training and the delivery of high quality military education to Moldovan officers are crucial to strengthening the defense and security capabilities of the Republic of Moldova. However, NATO should not ignore the Moldovan population whose majority still feels certain reluctance towards the Alliance. The reserved attitude of the

majority of Moldovans towards NATO is inherited from the Cold War era and it is still influenced by Soviet time stereotypes. The perception of NATO from the Moldovan society's perspective has changed little since the collapse of the Soviet Union, due to a lack of public debate and accurate information on the Euro-Atlantic Community. With rare exceptions, the political parties have avoided publicly supporting a stronger partnership between Moldova and NATO, and have avoided initiating debates on this subject too. This attitude can be attributed to the fear of provoking Russia, which has clearly expressed its negative vision about NATO's waves of enlargement eastwards.

The Republic of Moldova does not pursue the accession to NATO, because of its state of neutrality; but Russia is also against the possibility of deepening cooperation with the Alliance.

To conclude, many Moldovans do not understand the benefits of the Moldova-NATO enhanced cooperation because most of them lack the proper knowledge on NATO.

By consequence, it is recommended to increase NATO's public diplomacy and strategic communication efforts in order to gain the hearts and the minds of the Moldovans. NATO's core message should be based on the idea that the Alliance is not only a military organization but also a support to the cause of peace, stability and development of its member states and partner countries.



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