



Transnistria

– Facing a geopolitical crossroads?

Prospects for regional reintegration and security guarantees for Moldova

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A policy report jointly published by the East European Council
and the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław

Warsaw / Wrocław
October 2023

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Edited by Adam Reichardt (New Eastern Europe)

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The Transnistrian issue yesterday and today: Centres of influence, economic mechanisms and security issues

Ernest Vardanean, international expert and political consultant
Anton Naichuk, Director of the East European Council

The Moldovan region of Transnistria, which has been outside the constitutional realm of the Republic of Moldova for 32 years, has all the attributes of state power, despite the status of being unrecognized. This includes the presence of three branches of power, law enforcement agencies, diplomatic departments, big business, state enterprises and public organizations which all determine the co-existence of various decision-making centres, centres of influence and areas of interest.

Between 1991 and 2011, when Igor Smirnov ruled Transnistria, there was an unspoken system of checks and balances in the region represented by the executive, legislative and law enforcement agencies with special security institutions and the 'Ministry of Justice' (the ministry of defence never played a significant role in the political configurations in Tiraspol, unlike, for example, other unrecognized countries in the post-Soviet space). The 'Supreme Council' and 'President' were not in opposition in the classical sense of the term, yet organizational and personal disagreements often arose between them.

The situation began to change in 2005 when, following the results of the 'parliamentary elections', the majority of seats in the 43-seat Supreme Council of Transnistria were received by deputies from the Renewal (*Obnovlenie*) movement, funded by the Sheriff company which in those years gained enormous economic weight and began to capitalize it into political influence. In June 2006 the Renewal movement was transformed into a political party, which marked a new stage – not so much for the 'reformers' themselves but for the Sheriff company which began to control one of the branches of power, ousting movements loyal to Igor Smirnov in the parliament.

In December 2005, following the results of the so-called elections, the young and very ambitious chairman of the Renewal, Yevgeny Shevchuk, who had previously worked in the tax authorities, was elected chairman of the 'Supreme Council'. Pretty soon, serious political contradictions emerged between him and Igor Smirnov.

Shevchuk, for instance, reasonably criticized the ineffective economic policy of the ministers appointed by Smirnov.

Yet the figure of the then 'Vice President' Alexander Korolyov, who came from the system of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, caused a special rejection of the Renewal and personally Shevchuk. In February 2007, Smirnov appointed him secretary of the Security Council, which angered the Sheriff company and decided that Korolyov could have too much leverage to the detriment of the firm's interests. In addition, the figure of Korolyov irritated the head of the 'Ministry of State Security' (MSS), Vladimir Antyufeev, who saw the secretary of the Security Council as his competitor for influencing Smirnov. This was based on the hostile attitude towards Korolyov, thus the positions of the MSS and Sheriff became closer. Although they were never openly hostile to each other, contrary to the popular opinion in Transnistria. According to our sources, in the late 2000s, the MSS and Sheriff co-existed perfectly: the Transnistrian special services lobbied for the interests of the company in Moscow, at the level of Russian special services, and in return the company provided the MSS with extensive material support.

Meanwhile, the contradictions between the Supreme Council of Transnistria and Smirnov reached its peak in the spring of 2009 when, at the initiative of Shevchuk, a number of deputies of the Renewal party issued an open letter (Initiative 16), in which they voiced a demand to abolish the post of Vice President to limit the powers of the president in favour of the Supreme Council. On April 15th 2009, the Supreme Council, in the first reading, adopted the draft law "On Amendments and Additions to the Constitution of Transdniestria", which caused a sharp rejection from Igor Smirnov.

The conflict between the two branches of power, unprecedented in the history of Transnistria developed further in July 2009, when Yevgeny Shevchuk resigned from the post as chairman of the Supreme Council, becoming an ordinary deputy. According to our information, such a sharp turn was due to the ultimatum that Smirnov delivered to the leadership of the Sheriff company. "Choose: either politics or business," Shevchuk said, and the decision was obvious: business is more important. In fact, Sheriff and Renewal handed over Shevchuk so as not to aggravate the situation. In November 2009, the confrontation between the Supreme Council and Smirnov ended in a compromise: the president limited the powers of Alexander Korolyov and Renewal released Shevchuk from the post of party chairman. In the summer of 2010, the party congress elected a new chairman – Anatoly Kaminsky.

Subsequent events showed that the 2009 crisis led to an imbalance in the former system of checks and balances. This political process took place in three main stages:

- 1) 2009-2011: A confrontation between Shevchuk and Smirnov with Shevchuk's departure and Korolyov's weakening. 'Presidential elections' in December 2011, in which Smirnov, having lost the support of Russia, suffered a crushing defeat, taking third place in the first round; in the

second round, Shevchuk defeated Kaminsky very confidently (almost 74% of the vote against less than 20%).

- 2) 2012-2016: Shevchuk did not forgive his former colleagues from Sheriff and Renewal for handing him over in 2009, and decided to apply a number of economic measures. In particular, he tried to force Sheriff to pay more in taxes. Under the slogan “Together with Russia against the oligarchs,” Shevchuk wanted to enlist the support of the population, which has always been wary of a monopoly company despite a number of benefits for pensioners and other categories of citizens. However, Shevchuk’s excessive ambition and his lack of competent management (it reached the point of absurdity when he appointed young women personally devoted to him with no experience as ‘ministers’) led to failures in his socio-economic policy and, as a result, also the great disappointment of the people which initially saw Shevchuk as an alternative. As a result of this disappointment, Shevchuk’s supporters lost devastatingly in the 2015 ‘parliamentary elections’, where the Renewal party won an overwhelming majority and Vadim Krasnoselsky, former Interior Minister under Smirnov, became the speaker. As a result, the whole of 2016 passed under the sign of an open confrontation between, on the one hand, Shevchuk and the law enforcement agencies controlled by him, and, on the other hand, the ‘Supreme Council’, which is, in fact, the Sheriff company. The defeat of Yevgeny Shevchuk in the ‘presidential elections’ in December 2016 became a matter of time, because his financial resources and those of his opponents were incomparable.
- 3) From 2017 to the present day: the victory of Krasnoselsky in December 2016 and his re-election for a second term in December 2021, as well as the crushing victory of the Renewal in the ‘parliamentary elections’ in 2020 (the number of deputy seats was reduced from 43 to 33, and 29 of them were occupied by Renewal) eventually led to the establishment of a complete, unshakable political monopoly by Sheriff. It dominates everything: in Tiraspol politics, there are no more figures like Igor Smirnov who, due to his age and political experience, could speak harshly with the firm; economic policy in the region is almost entirely dictated based on the interests of the monopolist, but with a traditionally large share of focus on ordinary citizens in order to prevent a social explosion.

Therefore, it can now be argued that the main beneficiary of the confrontation which began in 2009 was the Sheriff company. It has become synonymous with the whole of Transnistria, which for the last 15-20 years has been called the “Sheriff Republic” by everyone. The company has no economic or political competitors left in the region. The once all-powerful head of the MGB, Vladimir Antyufeev, one of the key figures in the previous administration, left the region after Shevchuk’s victory and has not returned since then, settling in Moscow (for some time, in 2014, Antyufeev was Deputy Prime Minister of the illegal so-called ‘Donetsk people’s republic’).

Russia's influence in Transnistria did not disappear during this entire period, but it had decreased in proportion to the growth of Sheriff's influence. Despite the powerful lobbying of the interests of the company in Moscow – under Antyufeev and State Duma deputies like Leonid Kalashnikov, and economic advisers like Sergei Glazyev – Moscow has never officially perceived the company as a negotiating partner. Moreover, according to our information, Kremlin officials refused to speak with the management of “Sheriff” during attempts to set up a meeting more than ten years ago.

For the sake of objectivity, it must be said that all these years Russia tolerated the presence of the company only insofar as the political settlement of the conflict in the form of the reintegration into the Republic of Moldova was not in the interests of either Russia or Sheriff. As for the period from the moment Krasnoselsky came to the post of president, Moscow decided that they were satisfied with the formula: “We are talking with Krasnoselsky – which means Sheriff”.

However, the situation changed radically with the start of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. Today, economic ties between Tiraspol and Moscow are reduced to three main areas: natural gas supplies through the territory of Ukraine; the payment of pension supplements to Transnistrian pensioners in the amount of 150 roubles (less than \$10 since 2008) and the export of a number of categories of “Transnistrian” goods to Russia. According to the “Transnistrian” customs, at the end of 2022, the volume of exports from the region amounted to \$738 million, which is \$200 million less than in 2021. This is primarily due to interruptions in the work of the Moldovan Metallurgical Plant in February-April 2022, the autumn gas crisis and a reduction in electricity production at the Moldovan GRES power plant in November 2022. The main buyers of Transnistrian goods are, in addition to the Republic of Moldova itself, countries of the European Union with Romania in the top place. In 2022, they together accounted for 563 million dollars, or more than 75%. The volume of exports to Russia remains modest: \$86.6 million in 2021 and \$81.5 million in 2022 – seven times less than supplies to the Moldovan and European markets. The three main export commodities of Transnistria are metals, electricity and food.

In the autumn of 2022, the situation related to the supply of Russian gas to Moldova, including the Transnistrian region, became more complicated. In particular, since October 2022, Gazprom has reduced gas supplies to Moldova to 5.7 million cubic meters of already booked volumes, which is 30% less than the volume stipulated by the contract between “Gazprom” and “Moldovagaz”. In November, the volume of supplies was lower than planned by 50%, and for Transnistria it decreased by 40%. This turned out to be so tangible that a state of emergency in the economy was introduced in Transnistria.

Thus, despite the war against Ukraine and its accompanying economic, energy and logistic difficulties, Russia retains some influence on the situation in the Transnistrian region. In order to weaken or completely eliminate Russian levers, it is necessary

to provide alternative sources of gas supply not only to the Republic of Moldova, but also to Transnistria. However, in this matter, there remains a very acute problem of the gas debt of Transnistria, which Moscow is trying to shift onto the shoulders of Moldova. Export of goods from the left bank of the Dniester can be redirected to other markets, especially since Russia already occupies only 10% of “Transnistrian” exports. And the total amount of allowance payments to pensioners and financial assistance to Transnistrian agriculture and small business is so meagre that, if desired, this item of expenditure can be taken from Russia, which could lead to Russia losing yet another lever of influence in the region, but also the image of the “only breadwinner and saviour” in the eyes of the inhabitants of Transnistria.

As for other regional and international players, their role and influence in Transnistria is significantly lower than that of Russia, although they should not be underestimated. For example, the constitutional authorities of the Republic of Moldova control the export-import operations of economic agents from Transnistria through their mandatory registration with the customs authorities of Moldova. Depriving Transnistrian enterprises of the customs seal of Moldova can lead to a complete paralysis of trade, and then the entire economy. Before the war, Ukraine influenced the transit of Transnistrian goods to Russia and Russian goods to Transnistria. In addition, the business of the “Sheriff” company until February 2022 was entirely dependent on the ports of the Odesa region. The EU countries are the largest importers of Transnistrian goods, and any ban on their import into the EU could cause an irreparable blow to Tiraspol.

In regards to economic ties between Transnistria and the constitutional authorities of the Republic of Moldova, they are first of all indicated in the Moscow Memorandum signed on May 8th 1997 by the presidents of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistrian ‘leader’, as well as by the then OSCE Chairman from Denmark. The document, developed with the direct participation of the then Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov (which is why it is often called the ‘Primakov Memorandum’), provided for ‘a commitment to the agreements previously reached between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria’. This, in turn, means that the protocol agreement of February 7th 1996 remains in force, namely:

- Removal of the customs posts of Transnistria at the entrance to the Transnistrian region, with some authority for overseeing the export of goods outside the scope of customs control;
- Creation of joint customs posts on the border with Ukraine on the basis of an intergovernmental agreement, equipping them with modern means;
- Customs clearance of goods coming from Transnistria carried out from March 10th 1996 by the customs authorities of the Transnistria region with seals and stamps of “Republic of Moldova. Transnistria, Tiraspol Customs” in Moldovan and Russian languages with the right to customs clearance of all goods of Transnistria.

In addition, then Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma in May 1997 issued a joint statement that “the provisions of the memorandum cannot contradict the generally accepted norms of international law, and will not be interpreted and applied in contradiction to existing international treaties, OSCE decisions, the joint statement of January 19th 1996 of the Presidents of the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, recognizing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.”

Meanwhile, the lack of international recognition does not prevent Transnistria from exporting capital offshore under “grey schemes”. More than 20 years ago, the author of these lines heard the story of a Tiraspol official that 90% of the export earnings of enterprises are exported abroad. In the second half of the 2000s, one unofficial document listed large enterprises in Transnistria (Moldovan Metallurgical Plant, Pribor, Moldavkabel, KVINT wine and cognac factory, Elektromash, Litmash, etc.) ‘assigned’ to various offshore or other foreign accounts in Cyprus, Gibraltar, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, the Cayman Islands, Ireland, etc. According to our information, operations related to the smuggling of goods and the export of funds from Transnistria to offshores were carried out not only with the connivance but also with the direct complicity of representatives of the Moldovan political elite. This was also reported in the press. Finally, money which was intended to pay for Russian gas has disappeared “in an unknown direction”.

After the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the main problem associated with Transnistria became the problem of security in general, and the security of military facilities in particular. Since the Transnistrian region is not controlled by the constitutional authorities of Moldova and, from the point of view of international law, is a “grey zone”, such problems as 1) the illegal military presence of Russia on the de jure territory of; 2) the protection of ammunition stocks in the village of Kolbasna; 3) the presence of illegal paramilitary units subordinate to the Transnistrian administration, come to the fore.

The illegal military presence of Russia in Transnistria is inextricably linked to the protection of a warehouse with approximately 21,000 tons of ammunition in Kolbasna. This village in the Rybnitsa region in the north of Transnistria is located only 2.5 kilometres from the border with Ukraine. The territory of the warehouse is 150 hectares. Ensuring the inviolability of ammunition has become, in fact, the main and only task of the Russian military in the region, most of which are actually residents of Transnistria itself with Russian passports. According to some reports, the warehouse is guarded by a total of 1,000 Russian soldiers plus a number of ‘peacekeepers’. The difficulty is that the Transnistrian military is also stationed along the perimeter of the territory. This serves as a convenient ploy for the Russian side: they allegedly do not have access to the warehouse, because it is ‘guarded by the Transnistrian army, which is not subordinate to Russia’.

The danger of this military facility lies not only in the huge number but also in the poor physical condition of the ammunition shells. Some batches of ammunition

have been there since the very creation of the warehouse (1940), so they can only be disposed of on the spot. A potential explosion at Kolbasna would cause a detonation of 10 to 20 kilotons, and the shock wave would destroy brick walls and reinforced concrete structures at a distance of 4.5 km. The main problem lies, however, not in the physical, but in the political sphere: any serious incident in the warehouse will turn into a huge problem for Moldova, even without its direct participation: the Transnistrian authorities are not subjects of international law and Chisinau will bear all responsibility.

After February 24th 2022, the main security challenge for Moldova was a potential escalation in the Transnistrian region and/or on its de facto border with Ukraine. At the same time, the main task for the political leadership of Moldova was and remains the prevention of hostilities, regardless of who initiates them. It is important that Ukraine also understands the seriousness of the consequences: “There are no circumstances under which Chisinau will give consent to the actions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on its territory. And the Russian-controlled Transnistria is the territory of Moldova... Therefore, for the entire civilized world, a preventive strike by the Armed Forces of Ukraine against Russians in Transnistria without the consent of Moldova will have only one characteristic: Ukrainian aggression against a neighboring state” reads an article published in the [European Truth](#).

On the other hand, the scenario of an armed provocation against Ukraine from the territory of Transnistria ‘performed’ by Russian troops stationed there seems unlikely at the moment, because, firstly, the balance of power is not in favour of the Russians and, secondly, the leadership of Transnistria will certainly be drawn into this adventure or will be forced to respond to it, which will shake its already vulnerable position. This is well understood in Moscow, but they do not abandon attempts to push a military provocation scenario with unpredictable consequences. For example, the incidents of April 25th 2022 of which the main intelligence directorate of the Ukrainian Defence Ministry stated that the attacks “were aimed at forcing the Transnistrian leadership to agree to the expansion of the presence of Russian troops”. However, on March 9th 2023, the Tiraspol administration, represented by the local ‘Ministry’ of State Security released into the public space a video “exposing a terrorist attack”, allegedly planned by the Security Service of Ukraine, but “timely suppressed” by the Transnistrian special service.

It is pointless to retell the content of the film, it is enough to emphasize its main message was that “the Security Service of Ukraine was preparing a terrorist attack against an official” whose name is not given. In addition, the authors of the “investigation” claim that the attackers were going to organize a terrorist attack in a crowded place, intending to use hexogen. The Ministry of State Security carried out operational filming and detention of the “terrorists”, but the prosecutor and the head of the investigative committee of Transnistria spoke on television. It was an obvious and typical fake.

However, none of the representatives of the leadership of Transnistria explained, and could not explain, why Ukraine needed to eliminate someone from the Tiraspol elite, if the situation in the left bank is under the control of the head of the Sheriff company, Viktor Gushan, who gave western diplomats guarantees (according to our information) that Transnistria would not participate in any military adventures, primarily on the side of Russia. Thus, despite some difficulties, Tiraspol remains neutral. An indirect confirmation of this is Krasnoselsky's speech on local television immediately after the film. The Tiraspol leader in a very conciliatory tone constantly emphasized that Transnistria is a peaceful land, no one needs war, and Ukrainian refugees found peace and goodwill there. In fact, Krasnoselsky's appeal shaded the negative from "exposing the organizers of the terrorist attack", and the media effect conceived by the security forces was greatly blurred. We have no doubt that the appearance of the "president" of Transnistria on television was Sheriff's response to the Russian provocative narrative directed against Ukraine.

Here it should be noted that the power structures of Transnistria and, first of all, the MSS are under a strong influence of Russian agents and the fake story about the "preparation of a terrorist attack on the order of the Ukrainian Security Service" was an obvious order of the Russian special services who do not abandon their attempts to draw Transnistria, and thus Moldova, into a military conflict over Ukraine. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ukraine denied its involvement and called it a provocation by Russia, which "seeks to undermine the situation in the territory that is actually occupied by it".

A similar goal is pursued by the stuffing made in the Russian media and telegram channels at the end of February about alleged movement of Ukrainian troops towards the Transnistrian section of the border with Moldova in order to "attack Russian troops" or "capture an ammunition stock". Despite denials from Kyiv and Chisinau, Russia, as a "reaction" to its own fakes, condemned "the actions of Ukraine". The situation turned out to be so serious that it required the intervention of the US administration. On the one hand, the Americans, following the leadership of Ukraine and Moldova, denied the information about the military preparations of Ukraine in the Transnistrian direction, but at the same time emphasized that there is no military threat to Moldova from Russia either. At the same time, the US is confident that Moscow is conducting a hybrid attack against Chisinau in the information sphere and in domestic politics through the hands of the opposition.

"In the spirit of our partnership with Moldova, I can share our own information, including from intelligence sources, about Russia's attempts to destabilize Moldova," said John Kirby, strategic communications coordinator at the White House National Security Council. "In particular, Russian individuals, some of whom are currently linked to Russian intelligence, are seeking to stage and use the protests in Moldova as a basis for fomenting an artificial uprising against the Moldovan government." Regarding Ukraine's alleged preparation of a strike on Transnistria, [an American official said](#) that "these allegations are unfounded, false, and they can cause groundless alarm."

Thus, the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistrian region, no matter how surprising it may seem, are united by a common task: to prevent being drawn into the war against Ukraine according to the Russian scenario. Meanwhile, the presence of the Russian military and Russian peacekeepers, as well as a significant amount of dangerous ammunition, remains the most important risk factor for the region and serves as a convenient pretext for Russia to accuse Ukraine of preparing terrorist attacks, sabotage, etc.

This aspect, as well as all of the above, allows us to draw the main conclusion: Russia is the main destabilizing factor both for Moldova as a whole and for the Transnistrian region specifically. Firstly, its goals and objectives contradict the desire of the actual leadership of the left bank represented by the Sheriff company to maintain balance and neutrality. Secondly, Moscow endangers the lives of civilians, including, according to some sources, 260,000 citizens of the Russian Federation. That is a paradoxical situation being created: Russia declares that it intends to protect its citizens in Transnistria either from the Moldovan (and Romanian) threat, or from the Ukrainian threat, for which it conducts sabotage and escalates the situation while in reality risking the lives of its own compatriots. Thirdly, the real, not declarative, policy of Russia never had anything to do with the restoration of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, and after February 24th 2022, its actions took on the character of a hybrid war and information sabotage.

At the current stage, Russia, having suffered heavy losses on the Ukrainian front, does not give up its attempts to open a second front against Ukraine, despite the obvious difficulties with supply and logistics. In the hypothetical Transnistrian operation, Russia will bet mainly not on the success of military clashes with the Armed Forces of Ukraine, but on the creation of maximum chaos by proxy (mixing of the Russian military, the Transnistrian army, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the Moldovan army, the possible involvement of Romania and other NATO countries), pursuing the main goal – to pull Ukrainian troops from Donbas and South if possible. In a political sense, this possible scenario will be used by Russia as a confirmation of its main mythology about the “oppression of Russians / Russian speakers” and, from its point of view, will serve as an excuse for further escalation, now in the Moldovan direction.

In the end, we come to the conclusion that Russia, having unleashed aggression against Ukraine, made a huge strategic mistake, destroying with its own hands the set of levers of influence that it had been building for decades. The inevitable weakening of its role in the region, or even a complete withdrawal from Moldova, opens a wide window of opportunity for Chisinau and Kyiv, which must be realized.

Conclusions and recommendations

The leadership of Ukraine is recommended to build a policy in the Transnistrian direction, based on the following:

- Transnistria is an internationally recognized territory of the Republic of Moldova, therefore any steps in this direction should be made in agreement with the official leadership of Moldova and with its participation;
- For more than 30 years, Transnistria has remained a bargaining chip in the geopolitical game of Russia in this region of Europe (“the independence of Transnistria should not be recognized, but the integrity of Moldova should be undermined in every possible way); over the years, pro-Russian, anti-Moldovan and anti-Western propaganda and the “harmonization of legislation with Russia” have turned the region into a mini copy of Russia, and its inhabitants into hostages, with all the ensuing consequences;
- The population of Transnistria over these 30 years has been manipulated to fear Moldova, Romania, NATO and, in recent years, Ukraine. But this does not mean that the entire population of the region is unequivocally opposed to Chisinau, Kyiv and the West. It is necessary to work with the inhabitants of Transnistria now, attracting Western partners to implement various programs and projects of an informational, educational, social and humanitarian nature; they need to be shown development prospects after peaceful reintegration with Moldova;
- It should be understood that the “non-alternativeness” of the pro-Russian course of Transnistria is a bluff and a stamp of Russian propaganda. The presence in the region of a huge number of citizens of Moldova and Ukraine, a fairly significant number of citizens of Romania and Bulgaria is a weighty argument in favour of “cultivating” the European vector of development of the Transnistrian region, especially since, as we already know, the lion’s share of exports of goods from the region falls precisely on Moldova and EU countries.
- Transnistria de facto receives free Russian gas, but this is nothing more than a trap for Moldova, since the huge gas debt of the left bank is a lever of pressure over Chisinau. This means that Russia will take punitive measures against Moldova, up to cutting off the gas supply, if Chisinau, with the support of Ukraine and Western partners, begins to pursue a course of reintegration. Yet, Moldova has already actually refused to import Russian gas in the fall of 2022, leaving it only for Transnistria, so this leverage may not work, moreover, in this case, there will be a problem for gas supply to the left bank.
- The Russian pension supplement (less than 10 USD per person per month) is scanty from a financial point of view, but its propaganda effect is great. More than 140,000 pensioners live in Transnistria; thus, \$1.4 million is

spent monthly on this allowance, and less than \$17 million is received per year. If desired, Moldova, with the support of Western partners, could easily cover this item of expenditure in order to deprive Russia of this propaganda tool.

The **main conclusion** of this discussion shows that the inevitable military defeat of Russia in Ukraine will open wide opportunities for the peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian issue, while respecting the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova and without the destructive influence of Russia. Ukraine should support Moldova's demand for the full and unconditional withdrawal of all Russian military personnel who are not permanent residents of Transnistria; on the export or disposal of all Russian military equipment; and the removal or disposal of ammunition from the warehouse in Kolbasna. In addition, Ukraine should support the proposal of Moldova and Western countries to change the current format of the peacekeeping operation (Russia, Moldova, Transnistria) to the format of international civilian observers with a UN or OSCE mandate, with the subsequent withdrawal of all Russian peacekeepers (professional officers) who are not permanent residents of Transnistria.

The result of the political process of peaceful reintegration of the Republic of Moldova should be the granting of a special status to Transnistria, the development of a political and legal mechanism for social, political, and economic guarantees for the population of the region, as well as the creation of a Reintegration Fund with the financial participation of Ukraine and Western partners to ensure post-conflict sustainable development of the integral Republic of Moldova.

On a regional scale, the end result of the political process will be the elimination of the factor of instability, which is now Transnistria with the Russian military illegally stationed there. The inevitable and irreversible withdrawal of Russia from the region guarantees its further peaceful development, the consolidation of the European course of Moldova and Ukraine, socio-economic growth and other benefits.

”Transnistria“: prospects for reintegration or threats of escalation

Ernest Vardanean, international expert and political consultant

The armed invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022 caused great difficulties for the unrecognized “Transnistria”, which is internationally recognized as a part of the Republic of Moldova. There have also been very serious and currently insurmountable obstacles to achieving a sustainable political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, due to the fact that the Russian Federation and Ukraine are guarantor and mediator countries, in accordance with the Agreement on Peacekeeping and Security Guarantees between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria dated 5 July 1995.

The closure of all checkpoints on the Transnistrian section of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border by Ukraine on 28 February 2022 led to the complete rupture of railway and road links between Ukraine and the Transnistrian region. As a result of the outbreak of war, the flow of goods from Odesa and other regions of Ukraine to Moldova was sharply reduced and the closure of the Transnistrian section of the border led to the fact that export-import operations continued through the territory of Moldova proper, bypassing Transnistria, and this turned the region from a profitable transit point into traffic jam.

Correspondingly, the influence of the Transnistrian administration as a de facto political player decreased, which during the previous 30 years, with more or less success depending on the regional situation, maneuvered between Russia and Ukraine, between Ukraine and Moldova, and even between Russia and the European Union. It should be noted that the EU continues to be the main market for goods from the region – more than a third of total exports. At the same time, only 10% of Transnistrian goods are supplied to the countries of the Eurasian Union, including Russia¹.

The position of the leadership of Ukraine as a whole and the Odesa regional administration in particular has always been of vital importance. Before the war, the lion's share of the flow of goods in and through Transnistria passed through the territory of the Odesa region, or rather through the ports of Odesa and Chernomorsk, for the Transnistrian administration and large business, represented primarily by the “Sheriff” group of companies.

It is safe to consider the leadership of Transnistria and Sheriff more loyal to Ukraine than to Russia, despite the widely publicized slogans about “Transnistria’s choice to be together with Russia”. The head of the Sheriff group of companies, Viktor Gushan, even has Ukrainian citizenship and owns a luxury estate in Ukraine.² Journalistic investigations have shown that both the “president of Transnistria” Vadim Krasnoselsky³ and other leaders of the Transnistrian administration have Ukrainian passports.⁴ This is despite the fact that Krasnoselsky, Vitaly Ignatiev, the “foreign minister” of Transnistria and other persons also have Russian citizenship. At the same time, there is information that Krasnoselsky’s wife, Svetlana, has Romanian citizenship⁵, which looks very curious against the backdrop of many years of propaganda by the Transnistrian authorities on the topic of the “Romanian threat” or “threat of Romanianization”.

On the other hand, the excessively close ties between the Tiraspol elite and Kyiv, especially after Vadim Krasnoselsky came to power following the presidential “elections” in December 2016 and was re-elected for a second five-year term in December 2021, aroused Moscow’s fears of disloyalty of the Transnistrian leadership.⁶ A good example can be seen in the first days after the start of Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine. Already on 26 February 2022, Krasnoselsky made an appeal, commenting on the reports that appeared in the Ukrainian information space about the preparation of some kind of armed provocation from the territory of Transnistria against Ukraine: “We have never had any plans of an aggressive nature towards our neighbors, we never have, and we never will,” the Transnistrian leader said.⁷

In early March 2022, announcements of a “rally in support of Russia’s actions” appeared in Transnistrian groups on social networks, the organizers of which remained unknown. The Transnistrian leadership, represented by the “ministry” of internal affairs, immediately condemned this action and called its organizers provocateurs. The rally nevertheless took place, but with the participation of a small number of citizens and was not covered in the local media. The Tiraspol leadership rightly regarded this manifestation as an attempt to discredit Transnistria both in the eyes of Russia (given that the local authorities in every possible way prevented the pro-Russian action) and in the eyes of Ukraine, which could regard this as support for Russia’s military aggression. In those days, the Ukrainian media constantly circulated reports about the upcoming “opening of a second front in “Transnistria,” so the pro-Russian rally only added fuel to the fire.

Experts are confident that the Tiraspol leadership (de facto, the Sheriff company) managed to keep the situation under control since they do not need a war, but quite the contrary, they need peace in Ukraine. “Every day Transnistria is ruled by the Sheriff corporation and its two co-owners. They don’t need a war. What they want is peace in Ukraine. Their own piece of the privatized border, well-established trade flows, smuggling, free Russian gas and electricity that they sell to us [the Republic of Moldova],” said former Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration Alexandru Flenchia.⁸

There are other signals that the Sheriff company has chosen the path of non-intervention in the war. My sources in Chisinau, who are trustworthy, told me that in 2022, a meeting was held on the territory of Romania between the president of the Sheriff group of companies, Victor Gushan, and representatives of Western governments (names and countries were not named). At this meeting, Gushan gave assurances that the leadership of the unrecognized Transnistria would not, under any circumstances and in any form, allow the participation of the region's security forces, as well as the Russian contingent, in military operations or other actions of a forceful nature against Ukraine on the side of Russia. My sources also said that Gushan is paying additional monthly "allowances" to the commander of the Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria, Colonel Dmitry Zelenkov, as a financial guarantee that Russian troops stationed in the Transnistrian region will not participate in any actions against Ukraine.⁹

Speaking about security issues in the Transnistrian region, it is necessary to highlight in detail the incident that occurred on 25 April 2022 in Tiraspol. On that day, three unidentified persons drove up in a car to the building of the "ministry of state security" in the center of the city, each pulled out a hand-held anti-tank grenade launcher and fired a shot from a distance of about 40-50 meters, after which they immediately disappeared. The most powerful was the third shot, which knocked out the entrance door to the MSS building and the windows on the upper floors. In addition, windows in nearby residential buildings were shattered by the blast. No one was hurt in the incident.

This incident raised many questions. I immediately drew attention to the fact that it took place on 25 April, on Monday, the day after Orthodox Easter, when not a single state institution, not a single educational institution, and even some shops are open. The malefactors could not help knowing this, since they decided to choose the "MSS" as a target. Thus, they fired at an empty building – then the question arises about the purpose of the attack: to sow panic, cause chaos, carry out an act of intimidation?

The next day, on 26 April 2022, a new incident occurred: in the village of Mayak, Grigoriopol region, the Transnistrian radio and television center (Mayak) was fired upon. According to some reports, it was an attack by drones. According to others, it was an explosion as a result of a sabotage attack. After these two incidents, the Transnistrian authorities introduced a "red level of terrorist threat", transferred all educational institutions to online mode, canceled festive events scheduled for May 9th, and set up checkpoints at the entrance to all cities of the left bank. By the way, the "red level" remains active.

A very important aspect is the extremely contradictory reactions of the Transnistrian administration, the leadership of Moldova, the General Staff of Ukraine and the Russian Foreign Ministry. Tiraspol blamed some "sabotage group" which arrived from the territory of Ukraine, but did not directly point to the political or military leadership of Ukraine as the organizer or beneficiary of this attack. Moldovan President

Maia Sandu said that the attacks were organized by “forces within the region”, that is, she did not point to any external forces. The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine noted that Russia could resort to provocations in Transnistria in order to blame Ukraine for this, while the Russian Foreign Ministry did not comment on the incident itself, emphasizing only that Russia respects the territorial integrity of Moldova and stands only for a peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict.¹⁰

Based on the analysis of open information, as well as on the basis of my conversations with sources in the diplomatic corps in Chisinau, I came to the conclusion that the reaction of Sandu is the closest to the truth. Her words about some “forces within the region” describe the situation more accurately, namely: pro-Russian groups in Transnistria, whose state and especially security structures are riddled with Russian agents, decided to organize a sabotage attack in order to cast a shadow on Ukraine.

Anyone who lives or has lived in Tiraspol (including the author of this text) knows perfectly well that it is impossible to approach or drive up to the MSS building without being noticed. The center of the city, all exits from it are hung with surveillance cameras, and the section of the border with Ukraine, as we already know, was closed on 28 February. How could saboteurs disappear without a trace from the small territory of Transnistria? If they are allegedly from Ukraine, then where and how could they hide? If in the direction of Chisinau, then they would immediately be detained by the law enforcement agencies of Moldova, since there is interaction between the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the two banks in matters of catching and extraditing criminals.

This means that the saboteurs could “lay low” only in Transnistria itself, and if they have not yet been found (at the moment there is no information about this), then we can confidently say that they are under the auspices of the Transnistrian security forces, which, as I already noted, is full of Russian agents. The logical question of why Tiraspol did not complete the investigation of the incidents, but preferred to hide the ends in the water, should be answered, given the military-political situation in the spring-summer of 2022:

- the Russian army was still strong;
- Russia then still controlled Kherson – the nearest to “Transnistria” large city of Ukraine under occupation;
- regular rocket attacks on the entire territory of Ukraine continued.

Therefore, Tiraspol could not and did not want to publish the results of the investigation, which could lead to the Russian trail. In addition, the appearance of officially confirmed information about the involvement of Russia or pro-Russian forces in the incidents in Tiraspol and Mayak would have caused condemnation from Moldova, Ukraine and Western countries. Therefore, in this situation, both the Transnistrian administration and the official leadership in Chisinau preferred to remain silent in order to prevent an escalation, the purpose of which was the incidents.

In this context, we must recall the scandalous statement of the Deputy Commander of the Central Military District of Russia, Major General Rustam Minnekayev. On 22 April, he said that control over the south of Ukraine would give Russian troops “one more outlet to Transnistria, where there are facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population”.¹¹ These words are not so much scandalous as absurd, since the “oppression of the Russian-speaking population” in Russian-speaking Transnistria is nonsense.

Nevertheless, the general’s demarche provoked a strong reaction in Chisinau. Thus, the Bureau for Reintegration in the Government of the Republic of Moldova called the statement “unacceptable and unfounded”, as well as leading to “growth of tension and distrust in society”.¹² The Ambassador of the Russian Federation, Oleg Vasnetsov, was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova, to whom “deep concern was expressed about the statements made by the Russian official”.¹³ Characteristically, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov neither confirmed nor denied what General Minnekaev said, adding “we still do not comment on issues related to the (special operation)”, although usually in Moscow they react very nervously to any kind of reports and statements if they do not comply with its policies.

At this stage, I do not see any prospects for resuming the negotiation process for a political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. The main reason is, of course, the aggression of the Russian Federation (one formal guarantor of the settlement in Transnistria) against Ukraine (another formal guarantor), which makes their interaction absolutely unrealistic. At the same time, the US and the EU, which in 2005 received the formal status of observers in the negotiation process but actually have a much greater influence on the process, do not reject interaction with Russia on the Transnistrian issue. In the same way, the US and France do not reject dialogue with Russia on the Karabakh issue within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, while Russia itself at the foreign ministry level has repeatedly, but unreasonably stated that the US and France “in the heat of Russophobia refused to have a dialogue with Russia”, that American and French diplomats refuted. Thus, the 5+2 negotiation format can be considered not working today.¹⁴

At the same time, one cannot discount the probability of reaching a certain agreement between the parties (Chisinau and Tiraspol) with guarantees from Ukraine, the EU and the US. Using the OSCE as a traditional negotiating platform in this situation is not a particularly realistic scenario, given the veto power that Russia, like any other OSCE member state, can use to block processes that are unfavorable to itself.

Therefore, the only way to achieve any acceptable formula for resolving the Transnistrian issue is to organize, under the auspices of Western countries, a constructive, confidential and open dialogue between the official leadership of the Republic of Moldova and the Tiraspol administration with the participation of the head of the Sheriff group of companies, which is one way or another true, but shadow leader of

the Transnistrian region. The fact that Viktor Gushan has reached the aforementioned agreement with Western countries and stability has been maintained in Transnistria for already a year is quite convincing evidence that the shadow leader of the region, in the presence of trusting relationships and reliable guarantees, can ensure at least a stable dialogue between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

The two main risk factors for such negotiations are:

- 1) **Sheriff's material and financial assets** located in Transnistria or tied to the region are both weighty and controversial in terms of checking for gray schemes in accordance with international standards and norms. According to experts dealing with the Transnistrian issue, Sheriff's business can flourish only in the conditions of the gray zone, that is, in the absence of direct control from the national legislation of the Republic of Moldova and international law. Accordingly, the reintegration of "Transnistria" into the Republic of Moldova will put an end to the "gray zone" and undermine the basis of Sheriff's business. Based on this, it can be assumed that the company is not particularly interested in settling the Transnistrian issue.
- 1) But this is only at first glance. Firstly, the regional situation and, in particular, the probable military defeat of Russia in Ukraine may lead to its complete withdrawal from Transnistria and the reformatting of the settlement process itself. In other words, if there is no Russia over Transnistria, then the main obstacle to settlement will also disappear. Thus, Sheriff will simply have no choice. Secondly, the Sheriff group of companies has assets in EU countries, in particular in Germany¹⁵ and we are talking only about what was described in the media. At the moment there is no complete information about the company's assets in Western countries. Accordingly, the "price of the issue" in future negotiations under the auspices of the West could be the preservation of the firm's assets in European countries.
- 1) **Russia's opposition.** Even under the condition of Russia's military defeat in Ukraine and/or its withdrawal from the Transnistrian region, one cannot underestimate the degree of its influence, including through the press, loyal politicians, and public organizations. In addition, the legislative and governance systems in Transnistria are harmonized with Russia; educational institutions work on programs similar to those in Russia and with its support. The Transnistrian region continues to receive de facto free Russian gas and pensioners receive a pension supplement from Russia¹⁶. Finally, according to various sources, between 180,000 and 260,000 Russian citizens live in the region, and it is their "protection from the Nazis" that can become the same pretext for intervention, as in the case of Ukraine, the "protection of the Russian people, the Russian world" became the pretext.

Stopping the risks of subversive activities on the part of Russia is the business of professionals in this area, and as for the gas and socio-economic component, the Western countries can provide the population of Transnistria (the actual number of people living there does not exceed 300,000) alternative sources of energy and compensation for those financial flows that have so far been provided by Russia. This gesture on the part of Western countries, in addition to a purely humanitarian nature, will also be of a pragmatic nature: not to give Russia any reason to accuse the leadership of Moldova, Ukraine and Western countries of “oppression of the Russian-speaking population”, of “violating the rights of Russian citizens”, etc.

The main success factor of the above settlement option is to prevent Russian intervention and for this, in turn, it is necessary to replace its role as the main socio-economic and energy guarantor of the population of the Transnistrian region.

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Foreign policy conditions for the reintegration of "Transnistria": The Ukrainian factor and security guarantees for Moldova

Anton Naichuk, Director of the East European Council

Ukraine acts as an outpost for deterring and countering Russian military aggression in Europe, and the main focus of the international community is aimed at supporting the military potential and economic stability of the Ukrainian state. At the moment, the final victory is today's priority, but it should be understood that even the achievement of Ukrainian goals of entering the territorial framework of 1991 is not the final stage of strong security guarantees for Eastern Europe. In addition to the full integration of Ukraine into NATO, an important element in stopping the escalation of the Russian military threat in all its displays, is the elimination of various spheres of its influence in the region. In this case, the preservation of the Russian military contingent on the territory of Moldova's "Transnistria" region threatens to maintain a constant risk that can provoke a destabilizing processes within Moldova, as well as holding back the country from further economic and political rapprochement with the EU.

Ukraine has already warned the leadership of Moldova about the plans and possible actions of the Russian side aimed at overthrowing the constitutional order and drawing Transnistria into hostilities against the Ukrainian side. Official Chisinau should be aware of all kinds of risks when planning its policy in the Transnistrian direction. After all, the scenario of an "explosion" of the situation in Moldova will always remain on the table of the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation. It is important to understand that destabilizing actions can be of a different nature depending on the circumstances. In the event of defeats on the southern front, the Russians may try again at any cost to activate the Transnistria option to divert Ukrainian troops, or carry out a terrorist attack on the ammunition depots in Kolbasna, realizing that in the event of the loss of southern Ukraine and Crimea, they will lose all positions in Moldova.

In any case, the complete security of the Moldovan state and further integration into the EU will be possible only if the Transnistrian issue is settled. Despite the blocking of all negotiation initiatives and other circumstances, in modern realities, optimal

conditions may arise for achieving a seemingly improbable goal. Transnistria can be integrated on mutually beneficial terms and several factors can speed up this process.

Foreign policy conditions

1) Successes of Ukraine in the southern direction

Even before the liberation of Kherson, in the ranks of the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation were abstract declarations on the desire to occupy the Odesa region and make a land corridor to Transnistria. After an effective operation to oust the Russian occupiers from Kherson, the prospects for an attack by the Russian army in the Odesa direction have significantly decreased, but in the near future, they can confidently slide to zero. In the event of a breakthrough by Ukrainian troops of the echeloned defense in the south, the complete liberation of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions and access to the borders of the Crimean Peninsula, all Russian plans to capture Odesa and the corridor to Transnistria will turn out to be completely unrealistic. The only possibility for the Russian side is to hit the infrastructure of the city until Ukraine can strengthen its air defense system with the support of the allies.

2) Strengthening air defense in the south of Ukraine

In connection with the intensification of the bombing of the Odessa and Mykolaiv port infrastructure, Ukraine will raise the issue of the need to supply additional air defense systems to NATO countries. The critical important point is to secure the south of the country from constant air attacks so that the level of destruction of missiles reaches 100%, as we see in the example of Kyiv. What could be additional interest for Moldova here? Even if the Russian Federation wants to raise the “degree of confrontation” and draw Moldova into hostilities by delivering strikes from the Black Sea on Moldovan territory, improved air defense system on Ukrainian territory can become an effective deterrent.

3) The constructive position of the EU and the US

The approach of Western partners should be based on the principle that “the settlement of the Transnistrian issue is an important opportunity for strengthening regional stability, and not crossing a ‘red line’ in confrontation with the Russian Federation”. Everyone understands the conduct of the US and other key representatives of NATO in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian war is based on the position that “the war should not go beyond Ukrainian territory, not go into a stage of direct conflict between Russia and the alliance, and nuclear escalation is not allowed”. Such a “hands-tied” approach by the allies forced them to postpone the adoption of many important decisions regarding the supply of a certain range of weapons. But what has the practice shown? The delivery of HIMARS did not provoke Russia into a nuclear escalation, nor did the liberation by Ukrainian forces of temporary occupied

territories, or the creation of a tank coalition, the supply of long-range missiles by France and Britain, or the upcoming transfer of F-16 fighters.

The Russian side had no other option than to “accept” these circumstances, since the Kremlin itself does not want a direct confrontation with NATO and is afraid to use nuclear weapons, since this will alienate even loyal countries from them. Due to the lack of real military capabilities to keep Transnistria, the Russian Federation will not be able to fully resist the loss of political influence over the enclave. If there is an understanding in the EU and the US that the peaceful reintegration of Transnistria is a chance to reduce Russian influence without the threat of uncontrolled escalation, the issue can be technically resolved.

Domestic political conditions

1) Readiness of Chisinau

First, the resolution requires the willingness of Chisinau to seize the opportunity, to form potential frames for the resumption of the negotiation process and compromise conditions for the reintegration of Transnistria.

2) Readiness of Tiraspol

Representatives of Transnistria must realize that even a nominative presence on the political agenda under the influence of the Russian Federation carries a constant threat. Direct support for the war is a direct path to complete political zeroing. An attempt to “sit on two chairs” not only reduces the time frame of the existing window of opportunity, but could continue to lead to total isolation, especially after the further loss of positions by the Russian Federation (especially on the battlefield).

Conclusions

After the events in Ukraine, no one is interested in the escalation of the situation and the arrival of the war in their own home. In this regard, the military reintegration of Transnistria does not look like an attractive scenario, even if the entire operation would take a matter of days with Ukrainian support. The priority is peaceful reintegration based on political will and economic expediency of both parties, with the support and guarantees of international partners. The prerequisites for such a scenario will be created in case of successful implementation of the above factors and if the “window of opportunity” will be open. In the information space, at the diplomatic and political level, they are constantly discussing the format of security guarantees for Ukraine, but a constructive approach would be to provide guarantees for Moldova, if the country is ready to take decisive political steps in the reintegration of Transnistria. These guarantees should include both military-political and energy components. In any case, Ukraine’s victory in the war will be a historic chance for Moldova, which the country needs to take advantage of.



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Contact information:

Warsaw, Grojecka 208

www.eec.com

easteuropcouncil@gmail.com



THE JAN NOWAK-JEZIORAŃSKI COLLEGE OF EASTERN EUROPE

(Kolegium Europy Wschodniej im. Jana Nowaka-Jeziorańskiego we Wrocławiu)

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Contact information

ul. Zamkowa 2
55-330 Wojnowice, POLAND
www.kew.org.pl
office@kew.org.pl

Transnistria

– Facing a geopolitical crossroads?

Prospects for regional reintegration and security guarantees for Moldova

