

TRANSNISTRIA – A CHALLENGE FOR ROMANIA

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Abstract. The severe crisis which has lately marked the Russian-Ukrainian relations brought up again the so-called *Transnistrian issue*. More and more analysts, politicians, but also mere citizens living in this region or in its vicinity ask themselves what is going to happen to Transnistria in the future, as well as to the other separatist regions from the former Soviet space. In what way the conflict in Ukraine and the geopolitical and geostrategic interests lying behind it will affect the neighbouring states and the entire Europe? Different scenarios have been worked out, amid fears of rapid spreading of the separatism fever, cleverly encouraged, more or less veiled, by some leaders. Even if the consensus is lacking, one thing is sure: we are witnesses and, with or without our will, participants to major and dramatic challenges on the world scene.

Keywords: Republic of Moldova, Russia, Romania, Nistru River, Tiraspol, Chişinău

What is Transnistria?

Narrowly, *Transnistria* (*Pridnestrovie*, in Russian language) designates today “all the territories and settlements of the Republic of Moldova on the east bank of Dniester/Nistru River”. Broadly, the historical and geographical term *Transnistria* usually means the territory between Dniester/Nistru and Bug Rivers, confined to the north by an imaginary line passing from Movilău (Mogilev) to Jmerinka, down on the Bug River to the Black Sea.

The historical sources unquestionably indicate that many Romanians have settled on Dniester/Nistru River left bank since ancient times, while the Moldavian rulers, including Ştefan cel Mare, offered their subjects land in this free zone, without any restraint. To 1400, the share of the Romanian/Moldavian population on both sides of the Dniester/Nistru was so high that it used to be considered a “*Romanian river*” (N. Iorga).

The Russian expansion reached the Dniester/Nistru River only in 1791 and 1793, long after the Romanian settlements had been founded and strengthened there. The first attempts to autonomously organize the territory on the Dniester/Nistru left side, claiming itself to be an enclave with attributes of statehood, date from the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution (October 1917)

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and the union of Bessarabia with Romania (March 1918). In 1924, mainly from political reasons, but also due to the large number of Romanians living on the left side of Dniester/Nistru, Moscow decided to establish a *Moldavian autonomous republic* there. On October 12, 1924, the *Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic* (MASSR) was set up, initially having an area of 7,516 km² and a population of 545,500 inhabitants.

MASSR was an autonomous republic incorporated into the Ukrainian SSR until the summer of 1940, when, following the ultimate communications of the government from Moscow, part of it joined Bessarabia and formed the *Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic* (MSSR), encompassed by the USSR this time. Concurrently, three counties of the historical Moldavia (Hotin in the north, Ismail and Cetatea Albă in the south) were abusively attached to Ukraine, from exclusively political reasons, and this way the territory of Bessarabia was curtailed and left without Black Sea coast.

During the Second World War, the region lying between Dniester/Nistru and Bug (conventionally named *Transnistria*) was under Romanian administration, as an autonomous entity organized in 13 counties, following a *German-Romanian Agreement* on security and economic exploitation of the territories between Dniester/Nistru and Bug (Transnistria) on one hand, and Bug and Dnieper/Nipru on the other hand (Bug-Nipru region), signed in Tighina, on August 30, 1941. At the time, with a population of approximately 1.2 million inhabitants, Transnistria had an area of about 44,000 km² and represented “the land lying between Nistru and Bug up to Nipru bank, and in the north up to Niomjâi and Rov Rivers, having the regime of a territory temporarily occupied”.

The term *Transnistria* is used today with its narrow sense, naming the so-called *Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR)*, self-proclaimed in September 1990, with a surface of 4,000 km² and a population of approximately 600,000 inhabitants. Nevertheless, TMR includes also some places on the right bank of Nistru River (like Tighina, for example), which have never belonged to Transnistria and pertain to the Republic of Moldova from the administrative point of view.

Stirring up the Transnistrian conflict

The eastern part of the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria) has preserved for a long time a so-called *frozen conflict* of the former Soviet space, as it was defined by the Council of Europe terminology; a controversial conflict, which, according to the experts, has no ethnic grounds at all, but exclusively political. In other words, a conflict staged in a region which used to be an outpost for the Russian interests in South-East Europe, reinvented by artisans from Kremlin and flared up in 1992, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the proclamation of independence of the young state Moldova.

The first official attempt to manifest the Transnistrian separatism occurred at the XIIIth session of Tiraspol city soviet, held on September 13, 1989, when the proposal to create an autonomous republic within MSSR was called upon.

On June 2, 1990, a “congress” of the Transnistrian region organized in Parcani (Slobozia district) decided to set up the “Coordinating Council of the Transnistrian Region”, chaired by Igor Smirnov, the director of producing military equipments factory Electromaş, who had arrived from Russia to Tiraspol in November 1987. This way, the first parallel power structures were created within MSSR, which were no longer subordinated to the legislation and central authorities from Chişinău, but to the Law of USSR on the basis of local self-administration and management. On September 2, 1990, the “founding congress of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian SSR (PMSSR)” was held in Tiraspol.

Russian military presence in Transnistria – the main obstacle to conflict resolution

The deployment by Moscow of important armed forces, weapons and military equipment to the Transnistrian region has a long history and it is connected to the strategic objectives of USSR/Russian Federation towards southern and central Europe. At the end of the Second World War, the Soviet 46th Army, whose troops had passed through Romania to Vienna, was withdrawn in the Odessa Military District, and most of its units were concentrated in Transnistria. Later on, it was turned into 14th Army, with approximately 3,000 officers and tens of thousands of soldiers and local reservists, and it was one of the elite corps of the Soviet Army during the Cold War. Among others, it consisted of 59th Guards Motor Rifle Division, designed to be a spearhead in South-East Europe, to Greece and Italy, in case of a conflict with NATO.

Transnistria became “one of the most Sovietized regions within the Union”, and a number of the core Soviet defense production and heavy industry was concentrated in this area, as a *reward* for its unconditional loyalty to the USSR: 4/5 of its population used to work in industry, construction and services.

After the proclamation of Moldova’s independence, on August 27, 1991, the role of the Russian army in the Transnistrian region could be divided into two phases: the direct assistance provided to the separatists during the war on Nistru River in 1992, and the subsequent actions, like keeping the weaponry deposits in Transnistria. The transformation of the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova into a de facto separatist enclave, which claims to be a union republic established under the right of self-determination of the “Transnistrian people”, was carried out in several stages.

Following the increasing demands of Chişinău for the withdrawal of the Russian armed forces from the Moldovan territory, and the stipulation of

neutrality by the new Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, the Moldovan-Russian Agreement on the legal status, way and terms of the Russian military units' withdrawal was signed by the prime ministers in Moscow, on October 1994. Russia pledged to withdraw its troops within three years since the entry into force of the agreement, but it put conditions from the outset, such as the fulfillment of internal procedures (approval by the State Duma) and synchronization to the political settlement of the conflict, as well as a special status for Transnistria.

Moscow renamed the 14th Army the "Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova" (OGRF), in an obvious attempt to change the image of Soviet military forces in the region. Even if the contingents of OGRF significantly reduced in the late 1990s, reaching about 2,500 officers and soldiers, Russia preserved its mentality of a leading power.

Despite Russia's promises and commitments undertaken within several agreements and understandings, and disregarding the repeated demands submitted by the authorities from Chişinău, the Russian troops remained stationed in the Transnistrian separatist region, strengthening the so-called Transnistrian Moldovan Republic and making its reintegration within the Republic of Moldova extremely difficult. Moscow continued to invoke new excuses for keeping its military forces and weapons in the eastern part of Moldova. Not even the resolutions of the OSCE Istanbul Summit (November, 1999), which clearly stipulated the decision of the international community on the withdrawal by 2002, a decision accepted by Russia at that time, were more successful. Similarly, the weaponry deposits from the Soviet past, controlled by the 14th Army and later by OGRF, served to directly support the separatist regime from Tiraspol, or as a source of financing through the selling of military equipment by Russians and Transnistrians in common on the international market.

The involvement of the Russian troops on the separatists' side in 1992, as well as their strong opposition to the reintegration of the Moldovan state have obviously hindered the process of conflict resolution and have impeded the proper fulfillment of the OSCE mandate in the Republic of Moldova.

Preparing for armed confrontations

Following the failure of the 1991 August Coup in Moscow and the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Moldova, the separatists' hysteria against Chişinău and the "imminent union" with Romania escalated again. As a result, military and paramilitary units (popular militia, republican guard, "Nistru" battalion, detachments of volunteers) have been created in order to "defend" PMSSR. The outburst of the separatist conflict in Transnistria, mostly achieved by the military and nationalist circles from Moscow, needed a much

stronger “fuel” than the threat of the collapse of USSR (which anyway followed its inexorable course towards dissolution) to mobilize the people in the region. This “fuel” had not to be invented, but brought again to the fore as the major threat: Moldova’s (re)union with Romania. The immediate effects were the phobic aversion toward Romania and exacerbated hatred against Romanian language and identity symbols, which had been cultivated on the left bank of Nistru River over seven decades (except during the Romanian administration), and in the Sovietized Bessarabia almost five decades.

On September 6, 1991, all the enterprises and factories, institutions, KGB structures, militia, prosecutors etc. on the Transnistrian territory passed under the “jurisdiction of PMSSR”, except the military units belonging to the USSR’s armed forces. Also, all the military commissariats in the region passed under Tiraspol’s control and the Military Commissariat of PMSSR was created.

In the spring of 1992, besides the Soviet troops which have been deployed in Transnistria since 1990 (approximately 3,000 officers and over 12,000 temporary or on contract military staff, having a huge arsenal of weapons and ammunition), the separatists also relied on “auxiliary” forces which had been concentrated meantime: the “Transnistrian guard” consisting of 8,000 officers, reservists and soldiers; 5,000 interior troops; 4,000 armed workers forming the “self-defense detachments”; over 3,000 Cossaks and mercenaries brought from Russia and Ukraine “to help”; more than 300 prisoners released from Russian prisons provided they would support the separatist enclaves; 200 volunteers from Comrat (Găgăuzia). The weapons used by the Transnistrian military and paramilitary structures came mostly from the deposits of the Russian 14th Army. Obviously, the separatists had a disproportionately higher military potential compared to Moldovan forces from the right bank, which would have dramatic consequences for Moldovans during the further violent confrontations.

Attempts to mediation. Romania in the “quadripartite mechanism”

At the beginning of 1992, armed clashes were triggered between the Russian speaker separatists from the Transnistrian region and the emerging institutional structures of the new independent state Republic of Moldova, which had become a full member of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) on January 30, 1992. Accidentally or not, the starting of the armed confrontation coincided with Moldova’s admission, by unanimous approval, as a member state of the United Nations, on March 2, 1992.

The outbreak of the military violence sensitized the international community, which shortly after became of the opinion that the neighbouring states of the Republic of Moldova (Romania, Ukraine, and Russian Federation) could contribute in a greater extent to finding a peaceful solution to the so-called

“Transnistrian conflict”. During a quadripartite meeting organized on March 23, 1992, in the framework of the CSCE meeting in Helsinki, the foreign ministers of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Romania and Moldova agreed to create a “quadripartite mechanism for political consultations”, designed to monitor the developments in the conflict zone and to facilitate the dialogue between sides for a peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian problem.

On April 17, 1992, the four foreign ministers met again in Chişinău to approve the status of the Joint Commission, which has already started its activity in the field. Further meetings in the framework of the quadripartite mechanism were also held in Lisbon, at foreign ministers level (May 23, 1992, on the occasion of the CSCE conference), and Istanbul, at the highest level (June 25, 1992, during the meeting of Heads of State and Government of the countries in the Black Sea region), while the Russian 14th Army had already involved in the conflict on the separatists’ side, and the weapons had prevailed against the negotiations.

The quadripartite negotiations mechanism has gradually reduced its activity until it completely ceased to operate, as the 14th Army got directly engaged in the conflict. More and more insistently, Russia expressed its strong opposition to Romania’s presence in the negotiation mechanism, usually through statements of the separatist leaders from Tiraspol, but also of some of the Russian commanders of the 14th Army or even Ukrainian politicians. For example, on the occasion of a meeting in Istanbul, the separatist leader from Tiraspol, arrogating himself attributes of a head of state, showed his surprise that he was not invited to the talks. In particular, he was discontent by the presence of Romania in the quadripartite mechanism.

Moscow’s “romantic” attitude toward the Transnistrian crisis had ended, as Ghenadi Burbulis, one of the influential members of the Russian government at the time, said as early as June 25, 1992. He stressed: “It is now necessary to combine the negotiations with a strong and open economic pressure”. The “strong and open economic pressure” had only one target: the political power from Chişinău. Russia openly initiated actions against Moldova between Nistru and Prut.

Russian forces fighting on the separatists’ side and the internationalization of the conflict

On May 19, 1992, the minister of defense of the Russian Federation, Pavel Grachev, gave the order to the 14th Army to prepare to directly involve in the conflict on the separatists’ side. Grachev’s instructions to General I. Netkaciiov, then commander of the 14th Army, stated: “Since Transnistria is Russian land and the situation worsened there, we must defend it by all means. Therefore, you are required:

1. To complete all the military units of the 14th Army stationed on Transnistria’s territory from the reserves for mobilization;

2. To fully prepare for combat all the military units;
3. To unblock all the military units”¹.

The same day, General I. Netkaciiov began to equip the Transnistrian “guards” with tanks, armored vehicles, mortars, and other weapons and ammunition. At 18.00, the 14th Army left the barracks and rapidly occupied all the districts and towns on Nistru left bank.

The participation of the Russian forces to the violent confrontations in Transnistria against the legal structures of the Republic of Moldova, resulted in many casualties among the peaceful population (over 1,000 dead and wounded), and in a large number of refugees (nearly 17,000, of which about 13,000 children), who left their homes and moved to Nistru right bank to save their lives.

The President Mircea Snegur informed the USA President George Bush about these tragic events through a letter sent on June 10, 1992: “Following a careful analysis of the causes... we are firmly convinced that the main obstacle to settle this conflict is the presence of the Russian armed forces on the territory of my country. Moreover... we are convinced that certain political forces from Russia turned this contingent into an instrument for flagrantly interfering with the domestic affairs of the Republic of Moldova”.

In fact, the USA was a constant supporter of the sovereignty and independence of Moldova, and frequently intervened to defend the interests of Chişinău in its disproportionate confrontation with Moscow. In the context of the debates engaged in the American Congress over the bill regarding “Freedom for Russia and emerging Eurasian democracies and Decision on supporting free markets”, on June 24, 1992, the Senator Larry Pressler introduced an amendment drawing Moscow’s attention to its responsibility for expanding violence in the former Soviet space, with special reference to the war on Nistru River.

In the afternoon of June 19, the separatist forces launched a massive attack against the police station in Tighina/Bender, destroying this way any attempt for peaceful understanding. Amid strong emotions caused by the threat of new offensive attacks with the support of the 14th Army from the left bank, during the night of June 19/20, 1992, Chişinău ordered the intervention of a battalion of the Ministry of Defense, with armored equipment, to defend the bridge from Tiraspol and to help the police in Bender, overwhelmed by separatists.

Publications as well as radio and television channels from countries like the Great Britain, France and USA have promptly informed the public about “a significant change in Russian policy”, as the Russian tanks crossed the Nistru River and “practically, Moldova was at war”. “For the first time after the dissolution of the Soviet Union” – *Washington Post* newspaper said – “the Russian army was involved in the war in another former Soviet republic. It supported the ethnic separatists”.

¹ M. Snegur, *Memorii*, vol. 2, Chişinău, p. 540.

Yet, Chişinău did not have any other options but to discuss with Moscow to cease the armed confrontations. Consequently, on June 23, 1992, “the fire was ceased by all positions”, at least for the moment. However, the separatists, as well the Russian nationalist circles were of a different opinion. More often, the representatives of the Russian nationalist military forces continued to directly encourage the separatists’ actions, ignoring or defying the efforts and the legitimate demands of the USA or other states and international organizations to stop intervening in the armed clashes on Nistru.

The military confrontation ended on July 21, 1992 with the signing in Moscow of the Agreement on Principles of the Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Transnistrian Zone of the Republic of Moldova, by the Moldovan and Russian Presidents, Mircea Snegur and Boris Yeltsin. The document marked an essential step towards the Transnistrian conflict settlement. Later on, Moscow constantly invoked different reasons for noncompliance of its own commitments, such as “the army’s status, the procedure and terms for the phased withdrawal”, even if it undertook these responsibilities before international organizations, like for example the OSCE, at 1999 Istanbul Summit.

As time passed, the real intentions of the separatists and their allies came out more clearly: the Russian 14th Army changed its name, but its objectives remained the same; Transnistria developed separately from the right bank Moldova, systematically violating its incumbent obligations; the measures for military disengagement were unilateral over the years (from Chişinău side), while Transnistria took advantage each time, with the consent and under the protection of Moscow, to gain new positions and to strengthen militarily.

Later, assessing Russia's involvement in the 1992 war, the Decision in Case of Ilaşcu (July 2004) of the European Court of Human Rights of the Council of Europe (ECHR) stated: “In 1991-92, during clashes with the Moldovan security forces, a number of military units of the USSR, and later of the Russian Federation, went over with their ammunition to the side of the Transdnestrian separatists, and numerous items of the 14th Army's military equipment fell into separatist hands... The 14th Army troops chose not to oppose the separatists who had come to help themselves from the Army's stores; on the contrary, in many cases they helped the separatists equip themselves by handing over weapons and by opening up the ammunition stores to them... The Court accordingly considers it to be established beyond a reasonable doubt that large numbers of Russian nationals went to Transdnestria to fight in the ranks of the Transdnestrian separatists against the Moldovan forces... The Transdnestrian separatists had been able to arm themselves with weapons belonging to the 14th Army and with the 14th Army's complicity”².

² ECHR, Case of Ilaşcu and Others v. Moldova and Russia, Strasbourg, 8 July 2004, available at [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-61886#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-61886%22\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-61886#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-61886%22]}).

Following the Moldovan-Russian-Transnistrian armed confrontations in 1992, the Transnistrian conflict came to the attention of the international organizations active in the field of crisis management and post-conflict situations, firstly the CSCE / OSCE. A year after the end of military confrontation, amid the lack of progress in negotiations dominated by Russia and Ukraine (after Romania was eliminated from the originally quadripartite mechanism), the OSCE established a long-term Mission to Moldova, located in Chişinău³, and opened an office in Tiraspol⁴.

The main objective of the OSCE Mission to Moldova was to mediate the negotiation process between the two sides directly involved (Chişinău and Tiraspol), as well as between them and the countries that have assumed the role of guarantor of the conflict settlement (Russian Federation and Ukraine). For many years, the negotiations were carried out in “2+3” format (Chişinău, Tiraspol, respectively, OSCE, Russia and Ukraine). From autumn 2005, the European Union and the USA have joined the negotiation process as observers, thus creating the “5+2” format.

From the outset, the OSCE Mission to Moldova faced many obstructions to achieving its goals, especially from Russia and Transnistrian separatists, who opposed the internationalization of the conflict and OSCE involvement in the settlement process. The Mission experienced different types of blockages, from delays or repeated postponements, under various pretexts, of the direct dialogue and contacts between the sides, to unilateral and often brutal measures, like the discretionary refusal to accept visits by international representatives within the Transnistrian territory, returning them from *border* (internal dividing line, artificially established by the separatists within the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Moldova), temporary arrest or intimidation of foreign or Moldovan officials entered Transnistria, periodically declaring OSCE representatives *persona non grata* on the Transnistrian territory, blockages of trains loaded with weapons and ammunition to be transferred to Russia, isolation and shortages of water and electricity of the Romanian-language schools, preventing the Moldovan peasants from some villages to transport or to sell their harvest etc.

Conclusions

The interethnic situation has been peaceful in Transnistria since the summer of 1992, a further proof that 1992 war was artificially caused.

Nevertheless, the Russian-speaking population – a minority in the Republic of Moldova, but the majority in Transnistria – uninterruptedly continued to push

³ It started its activity in April, 1993.

⁴ In February, 1995.

for separation, and for the creation of a state-enclave affiliated to Russian interests. Availing themselves of the presence of about 13,000 Russian peacekeeping troops, the separatists abusively expanded their administrative authority over the city of Tighina/Bender on the right bank to the detriment of the central authorities in Chişinău. In 2006, the separatist administration organized a referendum (this was illegal, illegitimate, and unrecognized by the international community), whose outcome was known before, due to the population's manipulation: approximately 97% of the voters chose the "independence and voluntary annexation to Russia". In fact, this was a contradiction, as someone cannot be "independent" and "annexed" to another state at the same time. There is a noticeable difference from the Kosovo precedent, and even from Crimea. However, despite the norms and principles of the international law, the separatist administration from Tiraspol didn't hesitate to invoke the case of Crimea, and to demand Transnistria's annexation to Russia based on the 2006 referendum. "We consider ourselves a part of the Russian world. We do not differentiate from Russians and from the Russian civilization", has Nina Ştanski, the "ministry of foreign affairs" of Transnistria declared. But she intentionally ignored the fact that only a part of the approximately 500,000 inhabitants of the region are ethnic Russians, with or without Russian citizenship, while the vast majority are of other ethnicities, firstly Romanian and Ukrainian, and they should enjoy equal rights in terms of access to their cultural values.

Flaring up the separatist passions in the eastern region of Moldova (Transnistria) again, stimulated more or less obvious by the Russian Federation, involves unquestionable risks. "We are in the middle of a so-called *protracted conflict*, meaning territorial disputes which Russia could inflame again", CNN reporters travelling to the region noted. In his turn, the Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the situation in Transnistria is "one of the most intricate legacies after the dissolution of USSR". We say there is one more reason for balance and rationality to prevail, and for the policymakers to judge more lucidly the tragic experiences of the past military violence. The Transnistrian region was annexed to Bessarabia by Russia itself, and today it is a part of the Republic of Moldova, a UN member state, recognized by the entire international community. Furthermore, any likely "breakup" of Transnistria from Moldova should be logically and necessarily followed by the latter's reunification with its old territories of the north and south, which have been deliberately taken away.