

TRANSNISTRIA and the War in Ukraine – 31 YEARS OF ACTIVE SEPARATISM

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***Abstract:** The Transnistrian problem has become a global topic today, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, which disrupts the social and political peace in the Republic of Moldova and which cannot be solved even 31 years since the breakaway has been established in Transnistria, through war, together with the 14th Army. There are still pressures being made on Moldovan Romanians in Transnistria, through various non-democratic methods and with serious violations of human rights.*

***Keywords:** Transnistria, separatism, war, undemocratic, pressures, army.*

Introduction

It has already been 31 years since the Republic of Moldova was divided territorially by the establishment of an illegal, separatist regime in the Transnistrian area, which applies a policy contrary to the Constitution and Moldovan laws, aiming at de-nationalizing the territory of its own culture, at russification, manipulation of the population and spreading of Russian propaganda. Some historians address this problem by referring to the past, namely to a possible avoidance of separatism through the Union of the Republic of Moldova with Romania in 1991, when the third Grand National Assembly was organized in Chisinau, and which gave birth to the independent and sovereign state, united and indivisible Republic of Moldova. After the fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorial regime, the Union came very close, especially since thousands of people in Chisinau demanded this but, according to some sources, the Iliescu government would have refused this proposal. If the Union of the Republic of Moldova with Romania had been possible then, it would certainly not be a separatist zone today, nor would it be possible to use it as a destabilization tool by Moscow.

Today, we only have to identify tangible solutions for settling the Transnistrian conflict, on a diplomatic and peaceful path, in common with the United States of America, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. These three important actors cannot be avoided by the authorities in Chisinau, given the strong position they have in the world in terms of security, geopolitics, as well as the social-economic field. It is natural that we cannot forget the abhorrent attack organized at Moscow's directives in March 1992 on an independent and sovereign country, which had every right to decide its own fate and live freely. Freedom will surely come, and for this perseverance, love of country, and loyalty to one's own law, culture, language, and history are required.

The history of Transnistrian separatism

Separatism in Transnistria began to develop since the Soviet period, when between 1924-1930, the communist authorities in Moscow began to build an autonomous region of Transnistria, called the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova (ASSM) with the capital in Tiraspol, which was the capital of the Republic of Moldova and where large part of the population spoke a neolatine language (Russified Romanian). The Transnistrian territory was dominated by the Soviets, who had unlimited possibilities to rule the area and to de-nationalize it in all respects, forcing the inhabitants to obey Russian laws and speak Russian, without granting them rights to preserve their own national values.

The origin of the Transnistrian conflict has other connotations, namely, it comes to light with the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the political forces in Chisinau were fighting for independence, and the establishment of the Romanian language as the state language in the Republic of Moldova. A large part of the business and political leaders of Transnistria wanted to keep the Russian language on Transnistrian territory and remain under Soviet rule. Many of these criminal groups were supported by Moscow, in order to fight those who wanted freedom. These actions led to division and the emergence of many political conflicts, violent protests and later military actions.¹

The year 1990 was an important year for Kremlin-backed groups: instigating and exploiting the dissatisfaction of the Russian population with the loss of the dominant position of the Russian language and the fear of Moldova's reunification with Romania, the authorities of the new Transnistrian Republic, with the complicity of the Soviet armed forces, expanded their territory, resorting to violence. In 1992, they controlled almost the entire left bank of the Dniester River and the large industrial city Tighina/Bender on the right bank.²

On September 2, 1990, the "Transnistrian Moldovan Republic" (NSR) was proclaimed. On August 25, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of MR adopted the declaration of independence of the new Republic. On August 27, 1991 the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova adopted the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova, whose territory included the districts on the left bank of the Dniester. The Moldovan Parliament called on the Government of the USSR "to begin negotiations with the Moldovan Transnistrian Government on the illegal occupation of the Republic of Moldova and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Moldovan territory".³

The war in Transnistria, also known as the Russian-Moldovan War, began on March 2, 1992, when guards and Cossacks caused an incident in the town of Dubasari, by attacking the Moldovan police in the area who came to stop a conflict, which forced the police to shoot at a Cossack, who died on the spot.

Later, the police headquarters was attacked by guards and Cossacks, who took the police officers prisoners and disarmed them. It is important to note that this action was planned by the pro-Russian forces, in order to find a pretext for military action in the area. In reality, the true causes of the emergence of "frozen conflicts" must be sought in the complex processes that took place in the last years of the Soviet Union. It is absolutely obvious that the warheads on the territories of "rebel" republics were inspired, stimulated and used by the Centre, which was interested in maintaining effective control over all Union republics, using this instrument to counter their natural aspirations for sovereignty, freedom and national rebirth.⁴

2 March 1992 - plateau of Cosnita: this day has entered history as the day of the pro-separatist forces triggering the armed conflict in the eastern districts of the Republic of Moldova. Guards, Cossack mercenaries and representatives of the 14th Army stormed the national police headquarters in Dubasari. There were human casualties as a result of the clashes. The special-purpose police brigade came to the aid of their colleagues, the native population.⁵

Also on March 2, 1992, the Republic of Moldova became a full member of the United Nations (UN), and this fact deeply disgruntled the separatists who further destabilized the situation in Transnistria. By agreeing to become a part of the UN, the Republic of Moldova attaches great importance in promoting democracy and human rights, maintaining international peace and security, economic and social development, respecting the principles of international law and the rule of law. This policy was also valid for Transnistria, but the separatist authorities rejected the path of peace and continued to support

¹ Cornel Ciurea, Dominic Fean, *Conflictul Transnistrean după 20 de ani*, Raport al unui grup de experți internaționali, Editor: Centrul pentru Studii Europene (OSW), Chișinău, 2011, p. 7

² Ibidem, p. 7

³ https://www.wikiwand.com/ro/R%C4%83zboiul_din_Transnistria

⁴ Ion Stăvilă, Gheorghe Bălan, *Conflictul transnistrean: Eșecul reglementării unui conflict care poate fi soluționat*, Studii de Securitate și Apărare, Publicație științifică în Revista Militară, nr. 2 (4), Chișinău, 2010, p. 6

⁵ Valentina Ursu, *Râul de sânge*, Editura Basarabia, Chișinău, 1993, p. 9

mercenaries in the war. On March 3, 1992, the village of Cocieri was attacked, and the next day, the separatists entered the village of Cosnita, attacking several Moldovan policemen. Other localities followed, including Grigoriopol, Tighina, Bender and Tiraspol. On March 15, the Government of the Republic of Moldova appealed to the guards and Cossacks to lay down their weapons by March 17, 1992. Subsequently, on March 19, 1992, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova proposed a compromise, presenting the draft granting the status of a free economic zone to Transnistria and a modification of the territorial administration, but without success.⁶

The separatist authorities appealed to the people on the left side of the Dniester, then asked for support from the Russian Federation. In response, the Russian Foreign Minister made a press statement, urging the authorities in Chisinau to act in strict accordance with the provisions of international law, and to respect human rights and national minorities. On April 1, 1992, Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed a decree that placed the 14th Army and several military units deployed in Moldova under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation. This decree was an illegal act because, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the autonomous territories passed into the possession of the republics in whose territory they were and no one could send a foreign army into the area.⁷

Transnistrian separatism after 31 years of existence

For the Republic of Moldova, the year 2023 marked 31 years of active separatism in Transnistria, 31 years without concrete and viable solutions to resolve the "frozen" conflict. The 5+2 format is so far the only diplomatic negotiation platform aimed at finding a solution to the Transnistrian conflict between Moldova and the unrecognized state of Transnistria. Negotiations in the Transnistrian settlement process in the 5+2 format cannot take place since the start of the war in Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Under these conditions, the Chisinau authorities must continue discussions with Tiraspol in other existing formats, such as the 1+1 format, which means continuing the dialogue with the separatist authorities on the left of the Dniester in the common interest of all those who are on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, and the most important thing in this regard is the maintenance of peace and stability.⁸

It is important to mention that the interests of the Russian Federation in the Transnistrian region have a considerable role in the evolution of the conflict. First of all, Russian interests are geostrategic. The Russian side considers its presence on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, including military, as a possibility to exercise influence in the Balkan area. Second, Russia's interests are political in nature. The withdrawal of military troops could be considered as a concession to the West and would deprive Russia of certain levers of influence in the given area. Consequently, the geostrategic and political interests that Russia has in the Transnistrian region explain the political, economic and military support given by this country to the Tiraspol regime.⁹

By obtaining independence in the Republic of Moldova, the National Liberation Movement achieved its primary goal on the right bank of the Dniester, but not in Transnistria, a component part of the Republic of Moldova, remaining a serious and unresolved problem.¹⁰

For 31 years, the most problematic issue for the government in Chisinau has been called Transnistria. The most interesting thing is that according to a survey carried out in 2006, the solution of the Transnistrian issue is only in fifth place (4.5%) in terms of public interest. The Transnistrian problem is a

⁶ https://www.wikiwand.com/ro/Cronologia_conflictului_din_Transnistria

⁷ <https://dreptmd.wordpress.com/referate/constructie-europeana/conflictul-transnistrean-si-republica-moldova/>

⁸ https://www.ipn.md/ro/negocierile-in-formatul-52-sunt-blocate-dialogul-trebuie-7965_1095222.html

⁹ Constantin Solomon, Artur Gumeniuc, *Conflictul transnistrean și procesul de negocieri în formatul 5+2*, Articol publicat în Revista Moldoscopie (Probleme de analiză politică), nr. 3 (XLII), Chișinău, 2008, p. 17

¹⁰ Anatol Țăranu, *Aspecte ale istoriei începutului conflictului transnistrean*, Articol publicat în Revista de istorie a Moldovei, p. 149

difficult task, especially since, in reality, the Republic of Moldova has never had effective control over its part.¹¹

During all these 31 years of separatism, the Tiraspol authorities carried out a series of reforms in education with the aim of denationalizing the young generation, changing their own history, and imposing a false history of manipulation and "brainwashing". Also, the Romanian language was practically prohibited in all educational units, except for one high school, which was the "Lucian Blaga" Theoretical High School in the municipality of Tiraspol. This institution faced a series of problems, for example, in August 2021, the separatist regime suspended the activity of the institution for at least 3 months on the grounds that the election of the director was not done according to internal regulations. Of course, this was just a pretext to close the last school that still kept the true values and transmitted the historical truth to the students studying in the high school. Over time, there have been many proposals to resolve the Transnistrian conflict, one of the solutions being the 3 D Strategy, an apparently easy concept in theory but very difficult to put into practice. This strategy meant following three actions (words) starting with the letter D, such as: 1. Democratization; 2. Decriminalization; 3. Demilitarization.¹²

Another proposal that endangered the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova was the Kozak Plan, invoked by the Kremlin and named after its initiator, Dmitri Kozak (former deputy prime minister of the Russian Federation). This plan was proposed in 2003 and aimed at a definitive settlement of the conflict between the authorities in Chisinau and Tiraspol, through the federalization of the Republic of Moldova, and the Russian army had to be stationed in the area for 20 years, from 2003 until 2023. In this regard, massive protests were organized in Chisinau in which the citizens declared very clearly that they were against the Kozak Plan. Fortunately, at the last moment the government in Chisinau rejected the project, on the grounds that it was unconstitutional.¹³

It is certain that the population protesting in the streets played an essential role in rejecting the plan, especially since many citizens realized that it was a trap in which Russia wanted to pull the Republic of Moldova, the "Annexation in Law". On June 9, 1992, in Helsinki, the presidents of Moldova, Romania and the Russian Federation signed an agreement on the termination of the military operation, and on June 21 of the same year, in Moscow, Mircea Snegur, the president of the Republic of Moldova together with the president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, in the presence of Igor Smirnov, the leader of the separatists from Transnistria, signed the agreement to end the war definitively.¹⁴

Transnistria in the context of the war in Ukraine

It is obvious that Transnistria cannot be forgotten, even during the war in Ukraine, but must be carefully monitored to avoid military conflicts in the area and take care of the safety of the population. With the war in Ukraine, the tension has also increased in the Republic of Moldova, some believing that the same situation could happen in Transnistria, and several residents even left their own homes, going to other countries or settling in Chisinau. For the Republic of Moldova, the situation with Transnistrian separatism is complicated, and an important step to ensure social-political stability is to strengthen the state's security by establishing sustainable relations with international bodies, the countries of the European Union, the United States of America, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. One thing is clear, the tactic by which Russia tore Moldova in two in 1992 is being applied today in Ukraine, perhaps even more harshly.

In December 2022, representatives of the Government of the Republic of Moldova announced that the Chisinau authorities intended to develop a new plan for the reintegration of the Transnistrian region into

¹¹ Dan Dungaciu, *Cine suntem noi? Cronici de la Est de Vest*, Editura Cartier, Chişinău, 2009, p. 278

¹² Dan Dungaciu, *Basarabia e România?* Editura Cartier, Chişinău, 2011, p. 97

¹³ Vladimir Zencenco, *Transnistria între Moldova, Ucraina și Rusia*, Editura Neverland, Bucureşti, 2022, p. 194

¹⁴ Ion Coşaş, *Transnistria 1989-1992: Cronica unui război „nedeclarat”*, Editura RAO, Bucureşti, 2012, p. 478

the Republic of Moldova, and the role of Romania and the European Union should increase in the negotiation process.¹⁵

For many years, Transnistria has been a "black hole" of Europe, as stated in a European Parliament report in 2002, where human rights and freedom of the press are violated. It is clear that the war that is taking place in Ukraine today forces the competent institutions of the Republic of Moldova to rethink new border security tools and invest in the innovation of protection systems against external threats. Since the war in Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, several provocative actions have been organized in Transnistria, in various forms, which tried to destabilize the area and, according to some experts, provoke violent actions among the population. The authorities in the Russian Federation were trying to blame others and not themselves, with various unfriendly and outlandish statements, such as: "A strike on Transnistria would be a strike on Russia". The illegal presence of the troops of the Russian Federation on the territory of Transnistria, as well as of a paramilitary contingent of the so-called separatist force structures, is a destabilizing factor for the Republic of Moldova, officials from the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Moldova have stated numerous times. Of course, we can't just stick to official statements, concrete solutions must be sought with the involvement of capable people. However, the war in Ukraine was a reason to persevere even more in order to resolve the Transnistrian conflict, to see things better and to be more cautious. It is natural for the Republic of Moldova to continue to demand the withdrawal of Russian military forces from its territory, which have been staying illegally for 31 years.

Against the background of the war in Ukraine, the current government has adopted some important decisions to strengthen the national army, and more and more people from Transnistria are applying for Moldovan passports as a means of survival.¹⁶

Conclusion

Our duty, of civilized and democratic states, is to respect every people and their sovereignty, to avoid conflicts that may lead to the separation of territories or the emergence of separatist areas. The world can only progress through unity and solidarity, through the preservation of moral and cultural values, through respect for human rights and the search for political, diplomatic and economic consensus. The Transnistrian problem is a lesson that we must learn and that can strengthen us even more against those who want regress and division. We are glad that, today, business people and more and more ordinary citizens from across the Dniester have begun to appreciate the prospects and benefits arising from Moldova's proximity to the European Union and would not like to lose the opportunities with which they have already become accustomed. This would mean that the Transnistrian problem can also be solved by citizens living in the area who would advocate democratization and Europeanization. I believe that promoting measures to strengthen confidence and security, simultaneously with supporting the population, stimulating the development of enterprises and promoting exports from the Transnistrian region, carrying out some social-cultural-economic projects, with the support of international organizations, would be a viable solution to strengthen those two banks of the Dniester.

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¹⁵ <https://revista22.ro/opinii/ileana-racheru/reintegrarea-transnistriei-o-oportunitate-ce-nu-trebuie-ratata-de-chisinau-i>

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