Transnistria under Damocles' sword
A Soviet unfrozen conflict and the Ukraine conflict

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The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, better known as Transnistria, is a breakaway territory inside the Moldavia's borders, also considered as a *de facto* state. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in the emergence of "frozen conflict zones" in Eastern Europe, present in some of the 15 post-Soviet states.

Those areas include the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia inside Georgia. Transnistria is a strip of land which runs for around 1.000 km on the eastern bank of the Dniester River, bordering western with Moldavia and eastern with Ukraine.

Nowadays, the region has a population of approximately 500.000 people formed by many ethnical groups. According to the latest official national survey the population is composed by three main groups: Moldavians (39%), Ukrainians (28%) and Russians (25%)[1]. This makes this region a melting pot of different cultures and languages. Tiraspol is the capital and the main city, based on the autonomous separatist government ruled by the Russian language politician Vadim Krasnoselsky.

The separatist region between the two World Wars

Transnistria's history is bound up with Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. The region historically corresponds to the territory of Bessarabia, a strip of land that has always been disputed between several eastern European states.

Since the XX century, Moldavia was part of the Kingdom of Romania while most of the territory which today composed Transnistria was already an autonomous entity. In fact, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldavian ASSR), which included the territory of the separatist region, was created in 1924 as an autonomous Republic inside the Ukraine borders (Ukrainian SSR), part of the

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[1] Ianessa Barban, *The Transnistria conflict in the context of the Ukraine crisis,* NATO Defence College, Centre of Security Studies, 2016, pp. 2 ss.

emerging Soviet Union. Therefore, the current Transnistria became part of the Ukrainian Republic for almost 20 years, strengthening the links between the two populations and the Soviet culture.

According to the Soviet ideology, the new Republic would have spread Communist ideas into the closest Kingdom of Romania and perhaps the entire Balkans would be revolutionized. While the creation of ethnic-based autonomous republics was a general Soviet policy at that time, with the creation of the Moldavian ASSR Soviets also hoped to bolster their claim to all the Bessarabia.

Later, Bessarabia's lot changed during the WWII, when in 1940, moved away from Romania, it became part of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), one of the 15 republics composing the Soviet Union[2]. According to the Kremlin vision, Moldavians were finally united under the same flag with Chisinau being the capital of the new state. 90% of the territory was west of the Dniester River, while the remaining side including Tiraspol and part of the historical Transnistria, was east; the river has a strategic importance because still today marks the Transnistria border. After the dissolution of the Moldavian ASSR, the current Transnistria became part of Moldavia SSR while the eastern territories, approximately the 60% of the original state (corresponding to the present-day Balta region - Odesa Oblast), remained in the Ukraine SSR.

During the Cold War, as a way of regime propaganda, Soviet Union claimed that Russia and Moldova had century old relations. Geopolitically, Soviets wanted to secure their biggest port on the Black Sea, Odessa, which was located only 60 km far from Moldova RSS borders. Therefore, it was important and necessary to secure Moldavia as an integral part of the Union. Taking into account the economic policy of the Soviet Union, in 1965 Moldavia SSR was rated seventh among the fifteen union republics in terms of economic development. Curiously, Transnistria used to receive the 30% of the Russian investments in the country even if the region comprised only than 10% of the Moldova RSS.[3]

Russian became the first language in mass media, theatres, cultural places and university. Speaking Romanian in the country could mean to be *Moldo-Romanian* nationalist, getting serious problems with the Communist regime and the KGB. At that time, the only way to use and preserve the Romanian language was to link it with the folk culture.

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[2] In fact, Romania had to immediately cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina and the Soviet Union established the creation of the Moldavia SSR also including the Moldavian ASSR. As a result of the Barbarossa operation in 1941, the Moldavian SSR was occupied by the Nazi regime. Under the Nazis, the whole country suffered a period of Romanianisation and Transnistria became a centre of mass deportation of Romanian and Ukrainian Jews.

[3] This part of the country was still inhabited by a majority of Russians and Ukrainians (more than 50%), centred especially in the main city Tiraspol, while in all the country the Romanians were partially discriminated (the Latin alphabet in the country had been abolished in 1944). Igor Casu, *Moldova under the Soviet Communist Regime: History and Memory,* 2015, pp. 347-372.

The Soviet Union collapse, the declaration of independence and the civil war

In the 1980s, the election of Michail Gorbačëv as leader of the Soviet Union generated a significant juridical and political change, better known as Perestrojka. In Moldavia the use of Romanian language and the Latin alphabet were introduced again, generating the first problems with the Russian minority that perceived these decisions as an effort to their status and their culture.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the 25th of August 1991, just before Chisinau declared independence, a Declaration of Independence of the separatist region was adopted by the Supreme Soviet in Tiraspol. Later in Transnistria, the 97% of the population opted for the separation from Moldova on a regional referendum held on December 1991.

With the recognition of the Republic of Moldova by the United Nations following months of tensions, after the attack by the pro-Russian militias against a Moldovan police station in Dubasari, killing the officers inside, on March 1992 the civil war began.

Moldova argues that it fought to protect the country's territorial integrity, while the secessionist regime in Tiraspol, supported by the Kremlin, accused Chisinau of military aggression and persecution of the "Transnistrian people and state", basically the Russian minority. Moldovan troops responded by attacking the pro-Russian rebel forces on the left bank of the Dniester River and, in the first phase of the conflict, defeated them. However, Russian soldiers from the USSR's 14th Army tipped the balance of the conflict against the new Moldovan Army. Moldova suffered a military defeat, and the conditions of peace were dictated by Moscow in the text of a ceasefire agreement on the 21st of July 1992. The document placed the full autonomy of Transnistria within the Moldovan Republic, but the separatists declared themselves independent again without complying with the agreements.

After the end of the war, a military contingent of around 1.300 Russian soldiers settled down in the separatist region, with the task of enforcing the 1992 agreements. Russian peacekeepers always supported Transnistrian separatist, posing a permanent threat for Moldova stability and integrity. For Chisinau the presence of Russian peacekeepers 30 years after the end of the civil war represents a clear violation of the international law while according the Kremlin these troops are peacekeepers needed to guarantee Transnistria's special status and to secure the Russian minority.

While internationally recognized as part of Moldova, the Russian-backed breakaway territory has been under the control of separatist authorities since 1992, turning into an increasingly unstable area after the war broke out in the nearby Ukraine (February 2022).

The Moldovan Government reaction vis-à-vis the Ukraine invasion

Thirty years after the civil war, with European Union aspirations and with an economy dependent on both the West and Russia, Moldova is today Ukraine's most fragile neighbour and is looking at the war with great concern. Unlike the closest and culturally similar Romania, a European Union country and NATO member, Chisinau fears to be a tiny neutral nation without strong security guarantees.

Moldova's government has condemned Russia's war in Ukraine and sought the European Union's support in handling the influx of refugees coming across its borders, considering the small population of the country, only 2,6 million people. Nowadays, Chisinau is hosting more than 87.000 refugees while more than 500.000 left Ukraine crossing its borders[4].

Maia Sandu, the current Moldavian president, declared military neutrality since the start of the Russia's Ukrainian invasion on the 24th of February, hoping to avoid any political mistakes that could jeopardise the country. Even if strict neutrality is enshrined in its constitution, and most in the government is against membership in military alliances, the recent developments may change Chisinau's political approach.

Although if from the Kremlin's geopolitical point of view Moldova should be part of a buffer zone between Moscow and the European Union, the decisions taken in the latest months prove that there are closer links between Chisinau and the Union. Lastly, Moldova's decision to officially apply for membership of the European Union, on the 3rd of March along with Georgia and Ukraine, and the speech of Maia Sandu at the European Parliament on the 18th of May, calling on EU countries to rally behind her country's European aspirations, confirm this trend.

"We chose European integration as our model of development. The danger and uncertainty of the war next door showed us that we must defend our choice and make firm steps towards our chosen path," President Sandu told, following the application of the EU membership.

While the government is trying to secure its borders, the situation in Transnistria could wreck these plans. At the end of April few explosions hit governmental buildings in the region, caused by pro-war forces according to the Moldova sources, amid fears that the war in Ukraine was starting to spread beyond its borders. By contrast, the separatist regime in Tiraspol has blamed both Ukraine and Moldova, increasing the tensions around Chisinau. These explosions are raising concerns that Putin might use false-flag attacks as a pretext to invade the country to protect Russians in the area. The 9th of May President Sandu

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[4]   UNHCR, Operational data portal, *Ukraine refugee situation,* verified on July 2022, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine.

declared that the country was not in danger, despite other explosions in Transnistria and by mid-July no solid proof emerged regarding false-flag concerns.

Russia's presence in Transnistria worries now more than ever the Moldova government, considering that Kyiv intelligence services suppose that Moscow wants to use the breakaway region and its 1.300 troops as a support to attack Ukraine eastern and finally capture Odesa region.

Upcoming developments of the war and possible expansion into Transnistria

After failing to seize Kyiv and northern Ukraine in the first two months of the war, Russia now seems to focus on expanding the separatist regions in south-eastern Ukraine, apparently striving for a complete conquest of southern Ukraine, where Russian speakers are a prevalent majority that allegedly needs Moscow's "protection". According to hypotheses voiced several times, the military strategy of the Russian forces may be the creation of a land corridor between the Donbass region and Transnistria, seizing the southern part of Ukraine by occupying the major ports and cities. Basically, it would landlock Ukraine, depriving the country of essential routes for its agricultural exports (roughly 7% of global wheat exports) and impoverishing it.

The current Russian blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports may cause a global food crisis with repercussion all over the world, while direct Russian-Ukrainian negotiations to open a mine-free maritime corridor have failed and possibly Turkey could achieve this agreement. In the meantime, some wheat is exported by land routes to the EU, clearly a mitigating measure.

If Russian troops, after completing the occupation of the whole Donbass, would redeploy to Nikolaev in order to mount an assault on Odesa, this would have major repercussions on Moldova's security, especially if the port city would fall, because no one could guarantee the security of the country.

A possible solution for the Transnistria problem may be seen in the framework of a peace between Moscow and Kyiv. It will be an unprecedented opportunity to resolve these "unfrozen conflict zones" and to avoid that in the future Transnistria could become a new Crimea, permanently undermining the stability and the future prospects of Moldova.

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