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THE PERSPECTIVES OF TRANSNISTRIA IN THE LIGHT OF RUSSIAN INVASION ON UKRAINE

Abstract:

The pro-Russian self-declared separatist state of Transnistria was formed in the years following the fragmentation of USSR, which set the new socio-political grounds of contemporary global geopolitics. Transnistrian conflict remained frozen for thirty years and acted as one of many Russian satellites in the region. In the light of ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war the importance of Transnistria may increase significantly and become a source of further tensions in Eastern Europe. While Transnistria is “de jure” considered as part of Moldova it “de facto” functions as independent country under the protection of Russian “peacekeeping” mission. The role of Transnistria in the conflict has yet to reveal itself but recent events show that the tensions are escalating and it is very likely that the country will be directly dragged in the war. The goal of this essay is to analyze the past geopolitical development of Transnistria and evaluate its potential role in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. After three decades the nature and importance of Transnistria is changing and it may prove to be one of the crucial subjects at defining the future of Eastern European geopolitics.

Key words:

Transnistria, Moldova, Russo-Ukrainian war, Russian geopolitical interests

INTRODUCTION

After the enormous socio-political transformations of the 20th century – which pulled the continent into two world wars, a long period of polarization during the cold war and political fragmentation of the socialist countries at the beginning of the 90s, Europe has entered new millennium as a relatively

peaceful continent with well-defined political borders and flourishing international relations. Integration of the »European core«, now stretching all the way from the Atlantic coasts to the large open plains of Eastern Europe, is (was?) a story of exemplary cooperation between countries and building of strong transnational organization that functions as one of the main political, economic and cultural powers of the world. European Union had its fundamentals laid in the years following the Second World War, when the western part of the continent united its efforts towards common goals. European Economic Community (EEC) also played a counterpart to the socialist regimes behind the iron curtain. The fall of communism in the eastern block drastically changed the political map of Europe and opened her eastern regions to the processes of European integration. In the years 2004-2007 eleven new countries entered (now called) European Union and North Atlantic treaty organization (NATO), which meant a complete break from the Russian orientation (Bufon, 2007). Although most of the Europe is now well integrated into the intereuropean organizations, the eastern and southeastern side of the continent still remains exempt from this process and functions as shatter belt where major geopolitical actors of the region try to establish their influences.

Beyond the borders of European Union lies a territory that is somehow trapped between the EU in the west and Russia in the east. It includes the east Slavic nations of Belarus and Ukraine together with romance Moldova. All these countries were once part of the Soviet Union together with Baltic countries (which successfully stepped on the path of European integration) and countries of Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Although Soviet Union is long gone, her main successor – Russia – considers these territories as her “courtyard” and wants to strengthen her geostrategic positions in the region. This is quite evident by examining the history of Russian interventions which cumulated to another full scale war on the European continent. Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is by far the largest epoch in the series of events that started in the years of the dissolution of the USSR and lead to numerous conflicts, military interventions, peacekeeping missions and formations of separatist states.

Crucial events of enforcements of Russian geopolitical influences in the region are listed below:

- Formation of Transnistria (1990) and Gagauzia on Moldavian territory
- Formation of Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia on Georgian territory
- Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh
- First Chechen war 1994-1996 and second Chechen war in 1999
- Other conflicts in northern Caucasus and Central Asia
- Annexation of Crimea and formation of separatist republics in the western Ukraine



Map 1: Areas of Russian influences nad control in eastern Europe and Caucasus. Source: Tafuro Ambrosetti, 2019.

The reasons behind Russian geopolitical stance in Eastern Europe are complex and result in the inheritance of Soviet Union and Tsarist Russian Empire. The Heartland of Eurasia has always been a sparse area that has seen the emergence of many statehoods, which developed into global powers. Since the 16th and 17th century, the heartland was in control of Russian states that developed from the Duchy of

Muscovy. The key to maintaining and defending this vast Eurasian landscape was in controlling the main geostrategic points such as mountainous areas of Carpathians, Caucasus and Asian highlands, together with the main lowlands that acted as access point to the heartland (Mackinder, 1906). The European part of Russia and neighboring countries is mostly flat and easy to traverse. German-Polish plains to the west and Moldavian plain to the south connect Russian areas of influence to the central Europe and the Balkans. Throughout the history they have often seen large armies marching to the east (Napoleonic wars, WWI and WWII) and west (Mongol invasion, WWI, WWII) (Meinig, 1956). Importance of this land somehow explains why Russia is so eager to retain her influence in the area and keep her ex satellites (from cold war era) to join European integration and western military alliances. Baltic States, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria along with parts of ex-Yugoslavia are now firmly in the western sphere of geopolitical organizations. The remaining countries – Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova on the other hand represent a “cordon sanitaire” between Russia and EU (Zupančič, 2021). Russia views every attempt of future shifts to the western alliances as direct attack on her geopolitical interests and national security.

The main goal of this essay is to interpret Russian geopolitics on the example of Transnistria in the light of recent Russian invasion on Ukraine. Although that Russian military operations have experienced quite some setbacks in the occurring war and the future of the conflict has yet to reveal itself, it is wise to consider the effects of the war on neighboring regions especially those which already act as potential “pawns” in the Russian ambitions to establish herself as main political power in eastern and south-eastern Europe and to fortify her geostrategic position in this region. Transnistria might not be the most common subject in international relations and media, but in the future it may become important conflict zone that will prove to be the cause of escalation of conflicts in Europe. In some way it resembles the situation in (prewar) pro-Russian republics of Luhansk and Donetsk in western Ukraine, with one major difference. Pro-Russian republics of Ukraine directly border Russian territories, while Transnistria is separated from

Russia with Ukrainian territories. If Russia accomplishes her goals in Ukrainian war and takes control of the Black sea coast, the geostratigical position of Transnistria will change drastically (Marhsall, 2016). It may yet have a role to play in the Ukrainian conflict and also a potential of becoming next target in Russian aggression. Nevertheless, Moldavia was a part of the USSR is not a member of EU or NATO and is one of the countries that Russia considers as her zone of influence.

The essay includes a short historical and geographical background of the formation of Transnistrian republic and past conflicts that have arose in the region. It also illustrates the international position of Transnistria and her status as pro-Russian separatist state with present active military personnel. Furthermore, we will evaluate Transnistrian geostratigical importance and her relations to Moldova, Romania, Ukraine and Russia. Throughout the assessment, we will observe the subject through the eyes of Russian geopolitics. Only that way we will be able to put Transnistria in the context of recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and analyze its influences on the region and potentials for future conflicts. Conclusions will help us determine the future relations between east-European political players and the role of this area in the years to follow.

GEO-HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF TRANSNISTRIA

Transnistria or Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic is an internationally unrecognized state, which is – in international relations – considered as “de jure” part of Moldova, although it “de facto” functions as independent country. The formations of contemporary Transnistrian state dates to the start of 90s when USSR experienced a great wave of demonstrations and national aspirations of her republics, which led to the democratization, fall of socialism and emergence of new national states. Transnistria could be considered as one of the territories, which wept at the dissolution of USSR and wanted to remain under Russian political protection. At least according to high concentration of Russian population that sparked a rebellion and formed a separatist state. Nevertheless,

Transnistrian flag is the only national flag that still depicts a hammer and a sickle – symbols of communism.

Along with Gagauzia, Transnistria is considered as one of two autonomous regions in Moldova. The states territory is quite peculiarly stretched in a thin stripe between Ukrainian border on the east and the river Dniester on the west, with small parts reaching over the river on the Moldavian side. Territory is landlocked (as well as whole Moldova) with a thin strip of Ukrainian land separating it from the Black sea. Its capital and largest city is Tiraspol located in southern part of the country (Zupančič, 2021). With the area of around 4.163 km² it is one of the smallest European states (Bufon, 2012). The population estimates quite differ from around 350.000 to 500.000 people. Population is ethnically quite heterogeneous, with around 29% Russians, 29% Moldavians, 23% Ukrainians and some other ethnic groups. Most of people of Transnistria have Moldavian passport but Russian, Ukrainian and Romanian passports are very common as well. The country has its own political structure and currency (Transnistrian ruble). Administratively the country is divided in five districts and two cities (Tiraspol and Bender) (Wikipedia, 2022).



Map 2: Transnistria in relation to the Moldova. Source: Pena-Ramos, 2018.



Picture 1: Transnistrian flag. Source: Wikipedia, 2022.



Picture 2: Transnistrian coat of arms. Source: Wikipedia, 2022.

To evaluate the geopolitical situation of Transnistria we must first understand how this separatist republic came to being. Formation of the state is very much connected to Russian strategic interests in the past. Many nations have used the policy of forced ethnical deportations and resettlement of those territories with titular nation, but Russia (in the tsarist and communist era) has brought this practice to another level. Many areas of strategic importance have been purposefully ethnically transformed to enforce Russian ethnical majority. Russian predecessors have used this tactic to form exclaves of Russian ethnicity throughout the parts of ex imperial and socialist Russia. Some ethnic groups (for example Tatars from Crimea, Ukrainians from vast regions of modern day Ukraine, Poles from areas of ex-polish territories etc.) were moved deep in harsh Russian interior or other republics, meanwhile Russian population was settled on those areas. Russian minorities today live in most of ex-USSR republics and act as a political leverage to enforce Russian interests under pretext of ensuring safety of the people. This also applies for large Russian minority in Moldova, which is mostly concentrated in Transnistria (Marshall, 2016).

In historical context area of modern day Moldova is closely connected to the region of Moldova in modern day Romania. Parts of modern Moldova were once called Bessarabia therefore the term will be used for the region between rivers Dniester and Prut, while Moldova will be used for the territory between Prut and the Carpathians. Until the beginning of the 19th century both regions belonged to the Ottoman Empire. In 1812 Russia took control of Bessarabia while Moldova (together with Wallachia) in time came to form the country of Romania. Despite some territorial shifts during the 19. century, territory of modern Moldova (Bessarabia) remained under Russian control until the end of World War I. Dniester river had long been established as a dividing frontier (not line) that separated Slavic population in the east from Romanians in the west. But during the 19th century Russia started to populate areas east of Dniester with (mainly) Russians and Ukrainians. Territory of Transnistria was not part of Bessarabian governorate at that time. Eberhardt

estimates that it was populated (in 1897) with approximately 180.000 Moldavians, 90.000 Ukrainians, 30.000 Jews and some other minorities (Eberhardt, 2003).

World War I brought major changes that saw the collapse of the three empires (Russian, German and Austrian) and creation of many new independent countries. The emergence of "Great Romania", which was enlarged with Transylvania, Banat, Bukovina and Besarabia (at that time also including Black sea coast that is today (as for now) part of Ukraine), put forward a large state with substantial national minorities. Most of modern day Moldova became part of Romania but the areas across the Dniester remained under the (newly formed) USSR. Soviet regime never acknowledged Romanian control of Bessarabia. In order to press the matter and radicalize national conflicts in Bessarabia, USSR decided to form an autonomous Moldavian region on the territory of Ukrainian SSR. In the 1924 Moldavian autonomous Soviet socialist republic was proclaimed on the land of Transnistria together with parts of modern day Ukraine. The ethnical composition of the autonomous republic at that time does not correspond to the contemporary territory of Transnistria but Soviet census from 1930 cites that the republic was inhabited by 277.500 (48.5%) Ukrainians, 172.600 (30.1%) Moldavians and around 48.000 (8.5%) both Poles and Russians. We can conclude that in absolute terms Moldavian population had shrunk for around 8.000 people in 27 years between 1897 and 1924 (Eberhardt, 2003).

The outburst of World War II in 1939 pulled Europe in another six years of terror and destruction. According to the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, signed by ministers of Nazi Germany and Soviet Union, USSR was free to take Bessarabia from Romania. That happened in the year 1940 when the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was formed from parts of Bessarabia (without the Black sea coast which was ceded to Ukrainian SSR) and Transnistrian part of Moldavian ASSR which was dissolved. Territory of Moldavian SSR roughly corresponds to the contemporary territory of Moldova. After the break of German-Soviet cooperation in 1941, Romania (on the side of Germany) reoccupied Bessarabia and put forward massive deportations of Ukrainians and Jews. But the collapse of

German military power and march of Red Army towards the west reestablished Soviet control over modern day Moldova which remained under USSR until 1990. After WW II USSR continued to settle Moldavian SSR with Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian population, in theory to compensate for the inter war losses, but geopolitical motives are hard to conceal. Slavic newcomers have mostly been settled east of the Dniester River on the lands that were to become Transnistria (Bufon, 2012). This area experienced strong russification, which led to the emergence of secession state after dissolution of Soviet Union.

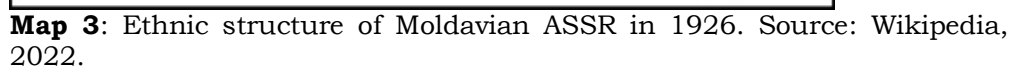
The tables bellow present the ethnical structure of Moldavian SSR in the socialist era according to the data that Eberhardt collected from Soviet population censuses. The figures apply to the whole territory of Moldova. Due to my lack of knowledge of Cyrillic alphabet and eastern Slavic languages I am unfortunately unable to analyze the data which would apply solely to the territory of Transnistria.

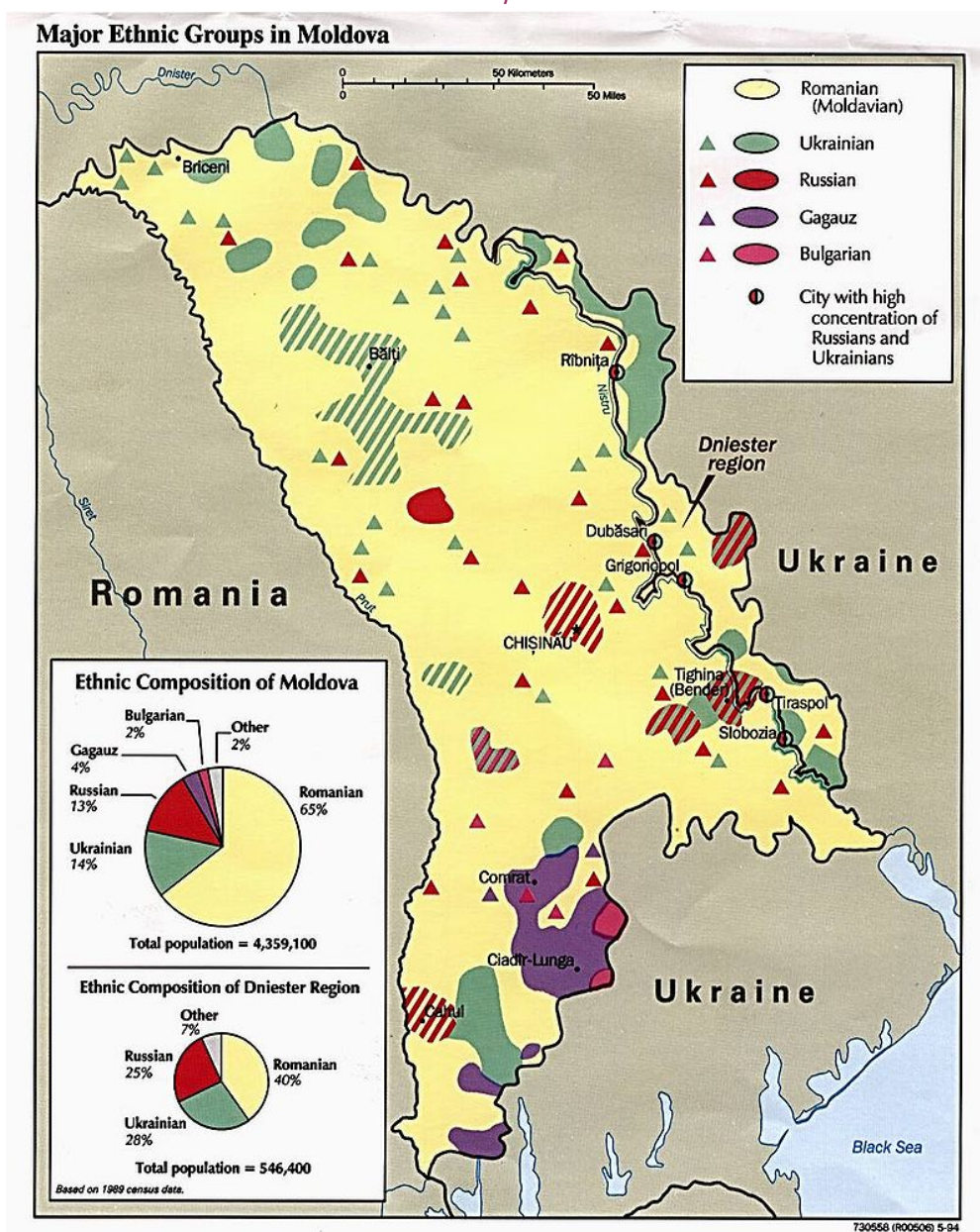
Table 1: Ethnic structure of Moldova in the socialist era

Ethnic group	1959		1970		1979		1989	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Moldavians	1.887.000	65,4	2.303.900	64,5	2.525.700	64,0	2.794.700	64,5
Ukrainians	421.000	14,6	506.600	14,2	560.700	14,2	600.400	13,8
Russians	293.000	10,2	414.000	11,6	505.700	12,8	562.100	13,0
Gagauzes	96.000	3,3	124.900	3,5	138.000	3,5	153.400	3,5
Bulgarians	62.000	2,1	73.800	2,1	80.600	2,0	88.400	2,0
Jews	96.000	3,3	98.100	2,7	80.100	2,0	65.700	1,5
Belarusians	6.000	0,2	10.300	0,3	13.900	0,4	19.600	0,5
Germans	3.800	0,1	9.400	0,3	11.400	0,3	7.300	0,2
Poles	4.800	0,2	4.900	0,2	5.000	0,1	4.700	0,1
Others	8.100	0,3	22.600	0,6	28.700	0,7	27.500	0,6
Total	2.884.000	100	3.568.900	100	3.949.800	100	4.335.400	100

Source: Eberhardt, 2003

If we put in account that in the year 1930 Russian population on the territory of contemporary Moldova was at 9,5% and Ukrainian at 8,5% we see that both Slavic groups grew in both absolute and relative terms. Areas east of the Dniester River were the ones that saw the biggest immigration of Russian and Ukrainian population. It is also important to mention that the population on the territory of modern Moldova almost doubled between 1930 and 1989.





Map 4 (right): Ethnic structure of Moldavian SSR in 1989. Source: Wikipedia, 2022.

During the 80s USSR experienced a wave of socio-political reforms that led to internal breakdown of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. This process is connected with Gorbachevs policies of perestroika and glasnost which brought political liberalization. One of its side effects was growth of

nationalist ideas throughout most of the soviet republics (Zupančič, 2013). The example of Moldova shows how decades of autocratic subordination of republics under state regime burst out at first signs of liberalization. The rise of pro-Romanian nationalism in Moldova brought major changes in cultural sphere of Moldovan society. Moldovan language became the only state language and Latin alphabet was reinstalled. Later, after declaration of independence, Romanian flag and coat of arms were accepted as well. Despite cultural shift towards Romanian influences, majority of Moldovans opted against full integration with Romania and expressed desire for an independent, sovereign state (Eberhardt, 2003). Changes in social and cultural orientation gave rise to national tensions between Moldovan majority and Slavic minorities concentrated along the Dniester River. Therefore, conditions for formation of separatist Transnistrian republic were laid.

On 23. of June 1990, independent and sovereign parliamentary republic of Moldova was proclaimed. Meanwhile referendum for the independence of Transnistria was, on 2. of September, followed by proclamation of Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In the southern part of Moldova Gagauzian population was preparing to cast its own autonomy referendum and populist front of Moldova reacted with formation of volunteer armed militias to stop it. Moldovan actions were soon followed by formation of pro-Russian volunteer militias in Transnistria. Tensions in Moldova were escalating and few outburst of violence occurred in the following months. When it began clear in the 1991 that USSR would not be able to survive, Pridnestrovian Moldavian SSR declared independence from the Soviet Union and abandoned its socialist ideology. The self-proclaimed country was renamed Pridnestrovian Moldavian republic. The following year saw an outburst of war between Moldova and Transnistria, which was sparked by the proclamation of Moldovan Defense Ministry to take control of (ex-soviet) 14th Guards Army that was mostly composed of personnel from Transnistrian territory. Fighting continued throughout the early 1992 when the 14th Guards Army entered the conflict on Transnistrian side. A ceasefire agreement was signed on 21. July 1992 and thus, one of many frozen conflicts on eastern European territory was created.

Since the 1992 Transnistrian war Moldova has no effective control over the territory of Transnistria, although it still considers it as “de jure” part of the country, together with international political community (Mackenzie, 2022). Russia acts as a peacekeeper between Moldova and Transnistria and as such enforces her influence in the area. Around 2000 Russian military personnel have remained in Transnistria to the present day in order to sustain the fragile peace.

At this point we will also present the demographic data of Transnistrian territory from 1989 onwards. Process of ethnical changes will help us understand the role of Transnistria in Russian relations to Moldova as well as Ukraine. As mentioned above – concentrations of Russian population in the adjacent countries are in the eyes of Russian geopolitics considered as potential factors of enforcement of Russian influences in the area.

Table 2: Ethnic structure of Transnistria after 1989

	1989		2004		2015	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Moldavians	240.000	39,9	177.150	31,9	135.950	28,6
Russians	153.300	25,5	168.270	30,3	138.330	29,1
Ukrainians	170.000	28,3	159.930	28,8	108.860	22,9
Others	38.500	6,4	49.980	9	26.620	5,6
Not specified	/	/	/	/	65.600	13,8
Total	601.660	100	555.347	100	475.373	100

Source (1989): Eberhardt, 2003.

Source (2004): государственная служба статистики министерства экономики пмр, 2006.

Source (2015): newspmr.com, 2017.

As the table shows, total population of Transnistria decreased by around 125.000 people between 1989–2015. The decrease applies to all three main ethnic groups but we have to consider the 65.600 people who hasn't declared their ethnicity in 2015 census. In both absolute and relative terms Moldavian population experienced the largest decrease. Ukrainian population also decreased from around 28% in 1989 to 23% in 2015. Russian population on the other hand increased its size in relative terms from 25,5% in 1989 to 29% in 2015. Presented data shows that Russian factor strengthened its position and, in 2015, accounted for the largest ethnic group in Transnistria. Less than a third of population considers

themselves as ethnically Moldovan, with more than 60% declaring east Slavic ethnicity (Russians and Ukrainians).

POLITICAL STATUS OF TRANSNISTRIA

Pridniestrovian Moldavian republic remains one of many internationally unrecognized countries of the world. Her political and international status hasn't changed much since the war of 1992. While Transnistrian government has effective control on its proclaimed territory, only three other political entities recognize Transnistria as independent country. Namely, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Arstakh, which are all located in the south Caucasus region and are also considered as internationally unrecognized or partly recognized countries. The first two are, by international law, considered as parts of Georgia but act as independent republics under Russian protection. Arstakh on the other hand is considered as part of Azerbaijan but is controlled by pro-Armenian forces. The 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh showed how frozen conflicts may spark into a full scale war (Marshall, 2021). All four separatist states mutually recognize their sovereignty; South Ossetia and Abkhazia are also recognized by five UN members, with Russia being their strategic guardian (Gaiser, 2010). Both regions share a similar geopolitical position with Transnistria. They were formed after Russian war with Georgia in 2008. Russian forces secured position in both republics and gave Russia a chance to form military bases in the South Caucasus region (Zupančič, 2021). The Georgian situation demonstrates how Russian geopolitical ambitions function and reminds us that similar conflicts may spark in other Russian backed areas such as Transnistria.

Transnistria is a presidential republic with great executive power of a president (who is elected every five years). The Supreme Council acts as legislative body and is composed of 43 members, also elected every five years. Elections in Transnistria are often considered unfair with many electoral incidents happening in the past. Most of the international political bodies do not consider Transnistrian elections as legit, due to the fact that the country is not internationally

recognized (Gaiser, 2010). This also raises a question about Moldovan elections. Transnistria is considered as part of Moldovan territory and despite no efficient control of Moldovan government in the region, many Moldovan citizens live on the territory of Transnistria. In 2021 Moldovan parliamentary elections, there were attempts to open polling stations on some areas under Transnistrian control, in order to secure electoral right of Moldovan citizens. In the end decision was made to keep all polling stations on the west side of Dniester River in order to secure fair elections (Duffy, 2021).

Since 1992 there were some attempts to resolve or at least normalize relations between Moldova and Transnistria. In the year 1997 a “Memorandum on the principles of normalization of the relations between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria” was signed by Moldovan and Transnistrian presidents but its effects were limited. At the beginning of new millennium (2003), a proposition was made by Russian diplomats to form an asymmetric federation with Transnistria being a minority part. Transnistrian delegation signed the document but the Moldovan side refused to, due to Transnistrian demand that for the next twenty years Russian forces would act as a guarantee for the intended federation. The year 2006 brought a referendum in favour of independence from Moldova and free association with Russia, which was supported by 97% of population of Transnistria (Gaiser, 2010). International community refused to recognize the results of referendum. All future negotiations brought no further advance in normalization of affairs between both political entities.

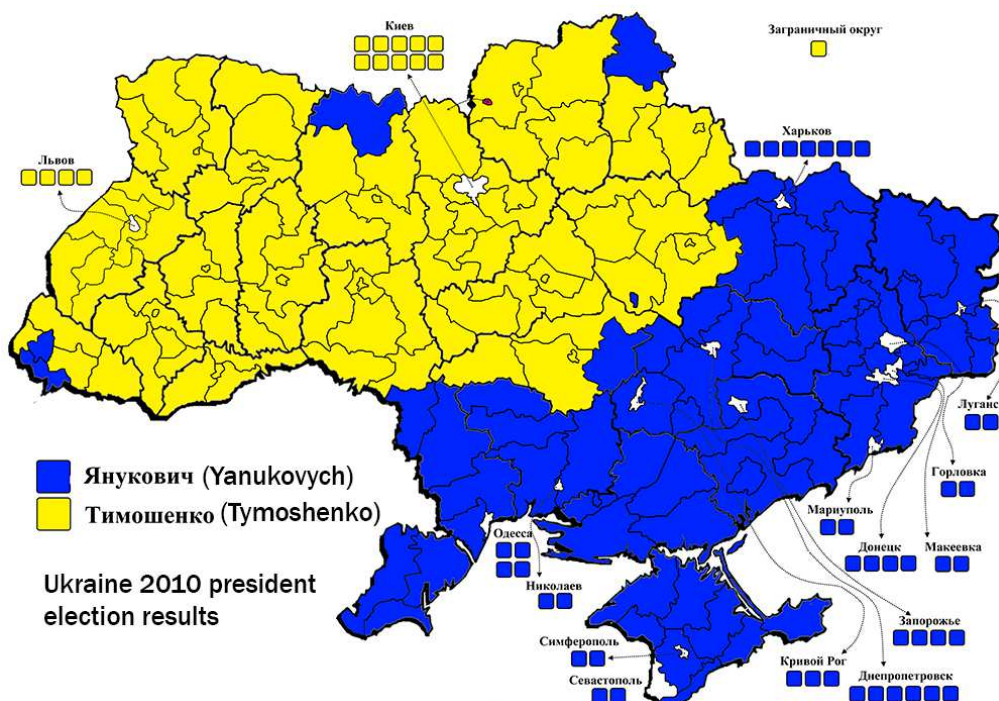
ESCALATION OF RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

Ukrainian territory has long been included in Russian political structure. The Ukrainian and Belarusian borderlands were seen as a main battleground between the regional powers of Central and Eastern Europe throughout the history. After the demise of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of 18. Century, Russia took control of most of the modern day Ukraine except for the region of Galicia which was under Austrian control (Davies, 2013). The break of Empires at the

end of WWI created vacuum in the eastern part of Europe, which was soon filled with the emergence of new national states. Ukrainians also fought for creation of independent country but were eventually defeated by Polish armies from the west and Bolsheviks from the east. Eastern part of the country became Ukrainian SSR of USSR, while the western part was ceded to Poland after the end of Polish-Soviet war in 1922 (Davies, 2015). During WWII Ukrainian territories were transformed into battlegrounds after German invasion on USSR in 1941. The advance of Red Army in the second part of the war reclaimed Ukrainian lands together with much of Central and Eastern Europe (Keegan, 2005). Reconfiguration of Polish borders after the war gave eastern borderlands to Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian SSRs thus territory of Ukraine was mostly defined (Davies, 2013). Khrushchev's decision to transfer territory of Crimea from Russian SSR to Ukrainian SSR proved to be source of great Russian-Ukrainian tensions after the fall of Soviet Union. Crimean peninsula was in the past mainly settled by Crimean Tatars and Russians. Transfers of Tatar population to Russian interior was yet another example of Russian ethno-political aspirations (Naimark, 2001). Ukrainian territory was an important part of USSR. Ukrainian SSR was third largest and second most populous republic of Soviet Union. The fall of superpower at the start of 90s dissolved the state into 15 independent nations thus Ukraine finally achieved her independence.

Russia, as the main figure of USSR, took on her predecessor inheritance together with the role of a major global political power. While most of USRRs ex satellites and even some countries that were part of USSR (Baltic States) stepped on the road of European integration, Ukraine (together with Belarus and Moldova) remained under Russian influences. Geostrategical position of Ukraine along with her vast resources is without doubt of great significance. Russia tried to block every attempt of closer cooperation between Ukraine and the EU and NATO. One of the main subjects of Russian influence in Ukraine is large Russian community that lives in the country, mainly in the eastern parts. Results of Ukrainian elections quite well demonstrate the polarization of Ukrainian

population that is more or less divided on the pro-EU west and pro-Russian east.



Map 5: Results of 2010 Ukrainian presidential elections. Source: Morales, 2014.

Due to the great complexity of Ukrainian demographics and political preferences, it is hard to determine Ukrainian-Russian relations. Tensions have always been high and while Ukraine was slowly moving towards the western orientation, Russia tried to stop that with any means possible (Amborsseti, 2019). Orange revolution of 2004 saw great demonstrations and protests against the results of presidential elections. The election of pro-western president Yushchenko marked a great victory for supporters of closer cooperation with the west. In the last decade tensions between countries escalated in armed conflicts, which started in 2014 with Russian advance on Crimean peninsula. Since the fall of USSR Russia kept control over some military and naval facilities in Crimea, the largest one being in Sevastopol. Pro-Russian unrest on Crimea in 2014 gave Russia and excuse to occupy the peninsula under the prefix of securing Russian population. Military operation soon

led to annexations of Crimea, which is, since then, under efficient Russian control (Zupančič, 2021).

Simultaneously another armed conflict was sparked in the eastern part of Ukraine where fighting erupt between Ukrainian armies and pro-Russian separatist in self-declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Though Russia officially denied involvement of her armies in the conflict, it is clear that her support of separatist was crucial in securing the area under control of self-declared republics. Since the 2015 ceasefire, fighting has never truly stopped and relations between Ukrainians and Russians strongly deteriorated. Throughout the 2010s Russia strengthened her military positions along the Ukrainian border especially in the last two years. In the months preceding Russian invasion on Ukraine, Russia has accused Ukrainian government of rusophobia and repression of Russian population in Ukraine. Yet again we see the pattern of Russian supposed protection of her minorities in neighboring countries as an excuse for a military operation.

RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

The 2022 invasion was sparked by false flag operation, which proved to be just one of many in the ongoing war. Russia accused Ukraine of bombing one of its border facility while Ukraine denied her involvement. On the same day (21. February) Russia recognized the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and ordered her troops to enter their territory. Three days later, a full-scale invasion was launched on the Ukrainian territory across the Russian-Ukrainian border as well as from the territory of Belarus and from Crimea. Europe once again experienced war on its continent though Russian authorities still refer to the invasion as “special military operation” not war. Russian forces reached furthest in the south and east portion of Ukraine while the north arm of invasion (which also reached the capital of Kiev) was eventually pushed back by Ukrainian armies. Land invasion was supported with air raids, which targeted most of the main Ukrainian cities. One of the main goals of Russian invasion is the control of Black sea coast, which has long been a subject of

Russian geopolitical appetites. Ukraine already lost access to the Sea of Azov along with a portion of Black sea coast. We can expect further Russian advance along the coast towards the port of Odessa, which is quite close to the Transnistria – the main interest of our essay.

It is important to note that along the physical war, large war of media, diplomacy and opinions is being fought in the background. Wars in the 21th century are often strongly influenced by the factors of international stance towards the conflict and medias influences on the people's opinions. Following the invasion, harsh sanctions were declared towards Russia by the western countries and most of the international community condemns Russian actions and agitates towards peace. Situation in Russia itself is quite complex as most of the media is controlled by the state an functions as propaganda to justify the invasion. Many Russians protest against the invasion but police forces uses all means necessary to silence the opposition. Ukrainian government (with support of the west) reports of many hostilities and violation of Genoa Convention by Russian forces which Russia strongly denies and considers it a western or Ukrainian propaganda. One of the most controversial chapters of the war is alleged mass murder of Ukrainian population in the town of Bucha, which at this point still remains to be investigated. As mentioned above, many false flag operations were launched to accuse the other side (mostly Ukrainian) of war crimes or provocations. One of the recent ones happened on 25th of April on the territory of Transnistria. The fact that this essay began to form weeks before that incident proves that its main subject is worth to put in consideration and that Transnistria may yet have a role to play in the ongoing conflict.

Due to the reasons mentioned above we will not further analyze the conflict as it is hard to form an objective conclusion at this point. There are many ongoing information and misinformation that are yet to be interpreted after the war comes to the end and a complete research is made. Instead we will focus on the potential role of Transnistria in the Russian-Ukrainian war as well as potential conflict zone after the war comes to the end. The results of the war will, in any way, change geopolitical situation in the region and Transnistria

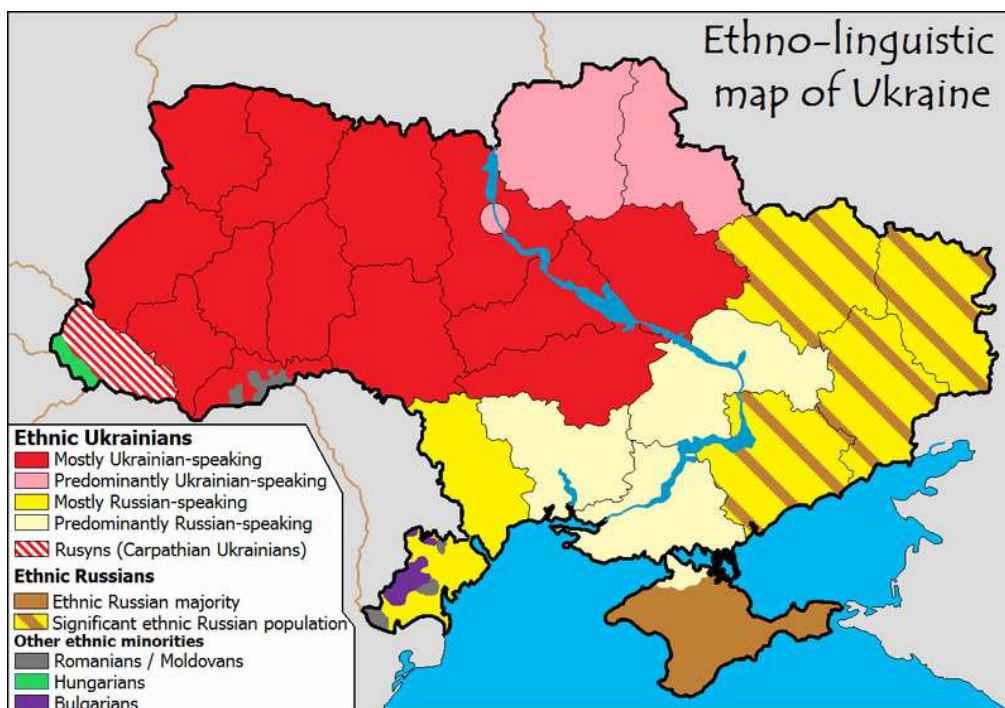
may be an important factor in future of the eastern-European relations.



ROLE OF TRANSNISTRIA IN RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

Now that we have examined the nature of Russo-Ukrainian relations and the status of Transnistria, we can put both subjects together and see how they are connected. As we have seen on the map above, Russian forces are advancing along the Black sea coast towards the port of Odesa, close to the Transnistrian territory. One of the main Russian goals in this invasion might be to cut Ukrainian territory from the access to the sea and create a landlocked Ukraine, which would of course strongly weaken Ukrainian positions and give Russia control over large portions of – strategically important –

Black sea coast. Nevertheless, one of Russia's historical goals was to secure the access to the warm sea. The map above shows ethno-linguistic distribution on the Ukrainian territory. It is evident that territories east of Transnistria are ethnically mixed with large concentrations of Russian population or Ukrainians that speak Russian.



Map 7: Ethno-linguistic map of Ukraine. Source: Morales, 2014.

Russian geostratigical ambitions most likely include the whole territory of Ukraine but at this point it is hard to believe that Russia would be able to annex (or establish control) over the whole country. Efforts will probably be put into securing positions on the areas with large numbers of Russian population in the western and southern part of the country. If Russia achieves this goal the new political borders between Russia and Moldova may be formed. That way Transnistria, which is already mainly supplied by Russia, would get direct access to the Russian territory and political position of pro-Russian separatist in the state would largely increase. Of course at this point this are only speculations. We will discuss

few of many potential political scenarios in Transnistria but first let us examine Russian military presence in the country.

As mentioned in the chapter 2. Russian military personnel is active on the territory of Transnistria since the war of 1992. Many propositions have been made and treaties signed to prepare the removal of Russia's troops from the area. Large convoys of military equipment have left to Russia throughout the years and Russian military personnel was limited to around 1500 soldiers. Russia insist that remaining forces serve as peacekeepers to maintain the 1992 ceasefire (Gaiser, 2010). Moldova on the other hand considers Russian involvement as a foreign military occupation illegally deployed on the territory of the state (Gribincea, 2006). In 2008 NATO made a resolution in which Russia was urged to remove its military presence from the territory of Moldova. The Russian state controlled media and opinion control that was described above is also active on the territory of Transnistria. Authorities claim the "monopoly on truth" and punish every action of criticism against Russian involvement in the country (Deschide, 2018).

In the month before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian intelligence stated that it has evidence of planned false flag operation on the territory of Transnistria, which is meant to justify the invasion. Russia denied those claims, as well as in similar situation in Donbas month later. The April of 2022 saw an increased Russian activity in Transnistria. Ukrainian Deputy Defense minister stated that Russia is increasing its military presence at the Transnistrian-Ukrainian border. And finally we arrive to the incidents that started on 25th of April and may lead to the spread of military activity on the territory of Moldova. Until now, the official stance of Transnistrian authorities is to maintain its neutrality in the ongoing conflict but that may change in the months to come. At this point it is uncertain who is responsible for the attacks on the Ministry of State Security and radio antennas near Tiraspol. Russia claims that attack was made by Ukrainian terrorist activity while Ukraine and Moldova consider it an act of Russian provocation and destabilization of situation in Transnistria (Francis, Ilyushina, 2022).

Russian motives to spread the war to Transnistria may be connected with the plan to completely occupy the Ukrainian Black sea coast, where the large port of Odessa presents a major obstacle. Occupation of the city would probably prove to be very difficult but having a strategic ground just 100 km from the city (on the area that is internationally considered as part of Moldova) could be crucial for supplies and to form a ring around the port (Marshall, 2016). If Russia succeeds in the occupation of southern Ukraine, Transnistria may as well become part of its territory, which is one of the goals of pro-Russian separatist since the formation of the country in 1990. That would, of course, provoke the reaction of international community and may lead to escalation of conflicts on the European continent (Peter, 2022).

If Transnistria is brought into the conflict the Moldovan authorities would most likely call for aid to defend a part of its territory. Moldova remains one of European countries that is not a member of EU or NATO but it has close ties with Romania due to strong cultural, economic and, in some way, political relations (Bufon, 2011). Romania may act as a defender of Moldovan sovereignty and support her “cultural sister” in the clash with Russia. As a member of both EU and NATO, Romania has stronger geopolitical positions than Moldova, and her involvement in the conflict may lead to what would seem to become World War III. Again it is important to note that “futuristics” is not the goal of this essay but it is worth to put in consideration that escalation of the conflicts may lead to the “domino effect” which would again reconfigure the geopolitical positions of Eastern Europe, the whole continent and the world as such.

Quite opposite scenario could reveal itself in the event of deterioration of Russian positions in the Ukrainian conflict. Russian invasion is experiencing quite some setbacks and strength of Russian armies seems weaker than it was initially considered. If Ukrainian forces manage to stop the Russian advance, reclaim some of the lost lands and exhaust Russian military reserves, Moldova could take the opportunity and reclaim Transnistria to itself. This would mean that after 30 years Moldova would yet again establish its control over the separatist area and could reintegrate it in its administrative

system. Liberation from Russian geopolitical grasp could also open the way of Moldovan integration into European international organization and even lead to her acceptance into NATO, which would act as a guardian of future Russian retaliations.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict represents one of the major geopolitical episodes of this century. At this point, it is hard to predict its epilogue and the consequences it will have on global distribution of political power. The world has shown great support towards Ukraine and Russia is quite isolated in her struggles to establish her future geopolitical positions in Eastern Europe. All previous attempts were made on lower scale and with weaker international response. Past Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine were only an overture in Russian geostrategic ambitions. In the decades following the fall of USSR, Russia was enforcing her power to establish control over the countries of ex-USSR and form Russian satellites in Europe and Transcaucasia. Transnistria is one of such satellites, which acted as a source of destabilization in the region and as a blockade in potential Moldovan euro-integration.

After thirty years of slumber, the frozen conflict of Transnistria seems to be put forward in international relations once again. It gives Russia an important strategic ground in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict which is slowly getting closer to the territory of our interest. Transnistria was one of the points of Russian control which was farthest away from the integral Russian territory. With the advancement towards Crimea in 2014 and along the Black sea coast in 2022, its importance grew significantly. Until now, western alliances did not consider Transnistria as one of the major threats to European stability but things may change if the Ukrainian war spreads towards the territory of Moldova. As for now (30.4.2022) Moldova, together with EU and NATO, is not giving official statements about potential escalation of conflicts in Transnistria but without doubts this Russian satellite is

attracting the eyes of main political actors and is being carefully observed in order to stop the outburst of war on the Moldovan territory.

The bombings on the territory of Transnistria (24th of April), for which until now no one has claimed responsibility, show the vulnerability of frozen conflicts and how they can escalate into armed conflicts in no time. Russia has many reasons to spread the Ukrainian conflict on the territory of Moldova. Transnistria could act as a strategic ground from where Russia could secure her positions in southern Ukraine, encircle the port of Odessa and cut of the supply lines to the city. Moldovan national security very much relies on the outcome of the war and the country could become (in event of Russian victory) the next target in Russian geopolitical expansion. In this essay we have debated three different possibilities of the potential Transnistrian role in this conflict.

1. Ukrainian conflict could spread in Transnistria and further destabilize the region

2. After Ukrainian conflict Transnistria may become the next target of Russian aggression

3. After Ukrainian conflict Moldova could use the opportunity to reintegrate Transnistria

Scenarios very much relay on the results of Russo-Ukrainian war. In any way, Transnistria may have an important role in future European geopolitics and is worth putting in consideration at evaluating the geostrategical positions in Eastern Europe.

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