

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

# NEWSLETTER

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## Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

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### News in Brief



On March 3rd, the Moldovan leadership signed the application for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union. "Today we have signed the application for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. It is addressed to Emanuel Macron, President of France, the country that now holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. We will submit the application in the coming days to Brussels. The Republic of Moldova must have a clear European path. We are ready to do everything possible to achieve this fundamental national goal. The citizens have chosen this European path, they see their future in the EU", said the head of state. "We know the steps we need to take and we are ready to work. Step by step, we will definitely go through all the stages", the head of state declared in a briefing after signing the historical document. The application was submitted on March 4th to Brussels.



The secessionist regime in Tiraspol stated on March 4th that the submission of Moldova's application for EU membership changes the details of the Transnistrian settlement and the relationship between Chisinau and Tiraspol and puts an end to the negotiation process between the parties. "We consider the submission by the Moldovan leadership of an application for EU membership to be a geopolitical decision that will lead to a change in international borders and spheres of influence in the region and a radical change in the circumstances of the final settlement of the Moldovan -Transnistrian relations" says a statement of the so-called Tiraspol diplomacy. The secessionist regime in Tiraspol said that the authorities want to transfer the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova to the supranational bodies in Brussels and "the transition to the final military-political and economic development of the territory of the Republic of Moldova by the West. In response, the Chisinau Reintegration Bureau replied that the Transnistrian region is a direct beneficiary of the many facilities and assistance programs offered by the European Union, and that these programs will increase in size and benefit for all the country's inhabitants.



The European Union announced on March 3rd that it will provide 20 million euros to the Republic of Moldova for managing the refugee crisis and providing immediate assistance to the Ukrainian citizens who have to leave their country. The announcement was made by European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, who was visiting Chisinau with the High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell. According to the European Union Delegation to the Republic of Moldova, 15 million euros will be provided to the Government of the Republic of Moldova for managing the flow of refugees, and five million will be provided in the form of humanitarian aid for Ukrainians who have found shelter in the Republic of Moldova.

## 30 years since the Dniester War, the first days of the invasion of Ukraine



Moldovan military during the Dniester War

As a bellicose déjà-vu, the Republic of Moldova has been witnessing for several days now a war that no one has imagined possible. Having gone through a similar experience, but on an incomparably smaller scale than what

is happening in Ukraine these days, the Republic of Moldova has rather quietly commemorated the 30th anniversary of the Dniester War, which killed more than 1,100 people, while thousands were wounded and disabled as a result of the

fightings officially started on 2 March 1992, which ended on 21 July 1992.

In fact, tensions have been smouldering since 1990. The USSR collapsed under its own weight and inability to manage a clay-footed colossus, but

▶ at the same time clinging to all the small satellites before falling into the abyss. This was also the case of the Republic of Moldova, one of the last former Soviet republics to break away from the Moscow Union Center in 1991.

Russia did not want the Republic of Moldova to go its own way as an independent state and in any case to unite with Romania. So, it pressed the most convenient push buttons - the ethnic and emotional ones, the ones related to language, traditions, and so on.

The pro-Russian forces stationed mainly on the left bank of the Dniester, in the so-called Transnistrian region, - established in 1924 by the Soviets, and whose mission was to serve as a bridgehead for the export of the Bolshevik Revolution to Romania and further to the Balkans - have activated.

These created challenges and inevitably came into conflict with Chisinau. With the help of an effective propaganda machine since Soviet times, the Tiraspol regime managed to create a psychosis among the civilian population about the same issues as an “imaginary Nazi invasion” of Romania, a state that did not even intervene in the conflict.

Nothing new under the sun, since today in the Republic of Moldova, Moscow uses the same slogans dating back to World War II.

The “myth of besieged citizenship” invented in tsarism, perpetuated after the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, maintained during the World War II, especially in Stalingrad, and continued in 1990 in Transnistria, is now being used in Ukraine, where Russia says it is conducting a “military de-Nazification operation”. So Moscow is now pursuing the same propaganda theme to motivate its brutal use of force.

The only difference is its readjustment according to times and circumstances. For more than a century, Russia has remained anchored in a logic of brutal violence and in a space that it wants to control at all costs, against the will of different peoples with whom it has come into contact throughout history in one way or another.

A logic of a “vital space” and its imaginary enemies that would be to blame for corruption and internal and external failures for which Russia is no longer a superpower today. The fact that Vladimir Putin lives today in a parallel reality is obvious, but this parallel reality was, as in the case of the Republic of Moldova 30 years ago in the Dniester War, as well as in the current war against Ukraine, a constant in the minds of the Kremlin leaders.

*Mădălin Necșuțu*

## ***We fought with the separatism in Transnistria fuelled and promoted by Moscow***



***F***ormer Defense Minister and Reserve General ***Ion Costăș*** spoke for the FES/APE foreign policy newsletter about the premises that led to the outbreak of the Dniester conflict in 1992, how Moldova organized the army to fight then with a combined force of the pro-Russian rebels, Cossack mercenaries, and the 14<sup>th</sup> Army of the late Soviet Union, which had not yet been disbanded. On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the outbreak of the conflict, started on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1992, General Ion Costăș believes that the Transnistrian conflict can only be resolved through the vigorous intervention of the major global players. We are inviting you to read some of the considerations and memories of General Ion Costăș about what happened then and what can be done today regarding this frozen conflict.

■ General Ion Costăș, what were the premises that led to the outbreak of the conflict on the Dniester and how did you organize the army to fight it?

■ It all started in the 1990's when I was Minister of Interior in 1990-1992. It started out pretty sad for us because we didn't have an Army then. We established the Army on 5 February 1992, through the decree of the President and Supreme Commander of the Army, Mircea Snegur. I was appointed then Minister of Defense and I organized this structure.

On February 23, I started looking for officers in the Republic of Moldova who had done military service in the former USSR and were in reserve at the time. I wanted to call them to duty and get all involved in the creation of the National Army. I did the same with the soldiers. I started looking for those who fought in the war in Afghanistan and had some experience. In addition, I had to clean up and fire those in the General Staff who had relations with the Russian Federation.

And it was extremely difficult. They were three- and four-star generals. I was a devotee and patriot of the Republic of Moldova and I wanted to defend it, establishing ourselves as the second Romanian state. We hoped we would quickly unite with the Motherland [Romania -n.red], but we were naive then. We were not prepared from this point of view to get involved in defending the dignity of this nation that we call Moldovans or Romanians.

For the first two years, I trained the Ministry of Interior, established a General Staff, and opened a Police Academy. The police were ready to fight separatism with guns in their hands.

#### ■ Who did you fight then, General Costas?

■ We fought separatism in the Transnistrian region, which was fuelled and promoted by Moscow. The Moscow separatism was headed then by Igor Smirnov and others. It was a whole group both from the Transnistrian region and from outside it. Also among

the Ministry of Interior staff in Chisinau there were some officers who were in fact separatists. They were also providing information to Tiraspol and Moscow, which I've realized quite late.

When I became Minister of Defense overnight, I told President Mircea Snegur that we, in this strip of land, do not have the necessary economy to build an army that can cope and defend the integrity of the Republic of Moldova.

I told him that this takes about 10 years and that 8-10% of GDP needs to be allocated to all these structures in order to create the necessary logistics. Starting with 1990-1991, the Russians began to transfer all logistics to Transnistria and Odessa. I'm talking about tanks and other weapons from Chisinau, Balti, and Cahul. That's how we ended up with nothing.

So I proposed to Mircea Snegur to do this with the troops from the Ministry of Interior. I convinced him to establish the Gendarmerie, which I called the Carabineer Forces, so that we don't use the same name as the structure in Romania. We initially wanted to name the Army as the National Guard and to include the reservists and others, and this structure to be part of the Ministry of Interior.

#### ■ How did you form the army then? Who responded to the call to arms?

■ The biggest problem then was that we had many traitors in the government and presidency. We weren't ready for war, but we recruited from the reservists. I called them and formed a few battalions.

We had few officers. I made a list of officers who were originally from the Republic of Moldova, but were in Moscow. I knew in which units and in which regions they were seconded. I sent word to come home and very few returned. There were very few of us who taught military training in schools.

That's how I formed the first national battalions. I also brought military from the air force that was stationed at Marculesti airport and formed a regiment from there. We then managed to stop the departure of 32 MIG-29 aircrafts to Russia.

#### *Involvement of the 14<sup>th</sup> USSR Army*

#### ■ What were the key moments that led to the outbreak of the conflict on the Dniester?

■ In those days it was 100% complicated, no one left the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. Those on the right bank of the Dniester moved to the left which was equipped with weapons. If we were to fight only the separatists, we would have defeated them, but when the 14<sup>th</sup> Army intervened, an organized structure and one of the strongest land armies of the Soviet Army based in the Odessa district, we were not able to cope.

I stopped them at the Dniester for a while, but they wanted to get to the Prut.

#### ■ Do you see a solution to the Transnistrian conflict today, and if so, what could it be?

■ It is difficult, the Ceasefire Agreement was prepared by the Russians. The Minister of Defense of the Republic of Moldova then was Creanga, after I and other people like Nicolae Chirtoaca had quit. They prepared that treaty, which said at the time that the Russian army should remain in Moldova.

Of the 14 republics that broke away from the USSR, none agreed to allow Russian troops on its territory. The only republic that agreed to allow Russia's regular army to stay on its territory was the Republic of Moldova.

The document was prepared by the Russians, and President Mircea Snegur flew to Moscow and signed that



Agreement with his counterpart, Boris Yeltsin. The Russians will not leave from here very easily. They are also in other countries of the regions such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Syria or Ukraine.

They won't leave the Republic of Moldova too easily. The only solution would be for the EU to put this issue on the table, as well as the United States. First of all, this Agreement should be recognized as null and void, while the provision relating to the stationing of Russian troops on the territory of the Republic of Moldova should be waived. Only in this way could the Russian army be withdrawn from the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

### **Pretext for Russian military presence in Transnistria**

■ **Is the Moldovan army ready today to face a combined attack by Russia and Transnistrian paramilitary forces?**

■ No, not in any case, not even the soldiers of the Russian Troops Task Force (GOTR) guarding the ammunition depots in Cobasna. They do not want to withdraw from there and use the pretext of guarding ammunition there. These are childish tricks that they [Russians] will leave. This won't happen until this is forced by international and global structures.

We cannot yet talk about replacing the current peacekeeping troops with an international mission under the auspices of the UN. This idea has long been circulated on many political, diplomatic and media channels, but Russia will not take this step. Moscow understands that with the departure of GOTR, Transnistria will disappear and become part of the Republic of Moldova.

■ **Is there any chance that Russia and the Republic of Moldova will reach a compromise on the destruction of old and dangerous weapons in Cobasna?**

■ No, there is no chance until this issue is raised by the EU, NATO and the United States. Those weapons will not be destroyed until then. The 20,000 tons of stored ammunition will not be destroyed, although it poses a huge danger to the area. Not only for the Republic of Moldova, but also for Ukraine. It would be a kind of atomic bomb blast in the event of such an accident. Those weapons are very old, from the times of the Second World War, and expired.

■ Thank you!

## **Editorial** **Transnistria -** **from a marginal issue** **to a matter of concern**

**Editorial by Lina Grâu, journalist Radio Free Europe, member of APE**



***The Transnistrian region as a source of instability and constant threat has been of least concern to the Moldovan citizens in the last two decades. However, the hallucinating war started by Russia in Ukraine and the refugee crisis with almost 150,000 Ukrainian refugees on Moldova's territory, which is about to overwhelm the capabilities of the country, seems to have reversed the ranking, the Transnistrian issue positioning itself among the top three concerns.***

The explosions that could be heard in Chisinau in the morning of February 24<sup>th</sup> made Russia's offensive in Donbas, Kyiv, Odessa and the big cities of Ukraine an immediate reality in the Republic of Moldova. And we have no way of verifying whether they were the echoes of the explosions in Odessa which is 200 km away from Chisinau, or military exercises in the breakaway region. That morning I received messages from a colleague in Tighina: "I heard explosions and bangs all night, like in 1992. I'm panicking."

The threats that in recent years were of concern only to experts, politicians and journalists, who used to discuss them in relatively narrow circles and at specialized conferences, have knocked on the each of us door.

The Tiraspol regime has cultivated tacit hostility towards Moldova, Romania and the West in general in the recent decades, idolizing the Russian soldier. In a climate of incisive, constant and ubiquitous propaganda, new generations of children grew up on the left bank of the Dniester who on May

9<sup>th</sup> played on the grounds and trenches of the Russian Troops Task Force, ate “military porridge” and learned in school and summer camps how to march in a column and assemble the Kalashnikov in order to get prepared to “defend the motherland”.

In addition to the 1,500 troops of the Russian Troops Task Force, there are numerous paramilitary formations in the Transnistrian region, including the so-called Transnistrian Army, special purpose units, the forces of the so-called Interior Ministry and so on. There are hundreds of military applications a year coordinated by Russian officers, sometimes three or four times a week. These military forces are equipped with tanks, armour and artillery systems, and in Cobasna there is a warehouse with 20,000 tons of Russian weapons and ammunition that no one knows what it actually contains - international experts have never been admitted there to do an independent stock assessment. Experts in Chisinau estimate the military contingent that Tiraspol can mobilize at between 10,000 and 40,000 people. It is a reality situated 45 kilometres distance from the capital of the Republic of Moldova, suggesting that the separatist region can become a threat at any time - both for Ukraine and for the right bank of the Dniester.

However, immediately after the outbreak of Russia’s war against Ukraine, a deafening silence has settled in Tiraspol - the regional press continued to write about everyday issues, while the separatist administration limited itself to periodically assuring, through messages broadcast by Vadim Krasnoselski, that “Transnistria is not and will not be a threat to its neighbours.” The militaristic rhetoric has completely disappeared from the Transnistrian press, the military applications of the Transnistrian contingent of the Dniester Peacekeeping Mission, announced for March 1<sup>st</sup>, have not started, and the region, which once vocally assumed the title of the “outpost

of the Russian world”, seems to be trying to get as little attention as possible.

The real concerns of the Tiraspol administration - an administration that is only a political interface of the Sheriff holding company that managed to turn separatism into a platform for smuggling and profitable business - were seen at the meeting of chief negotiators in Chisinau and Tiraspol on February 28<sup>th</sup>. Vitali Ignatiev was particularly concerned about the trade blockade and the flow of goods through Ukraine. And after the complete blockade by Ukraine on March 1<sup>st</sup> of the Transnistrian segment of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, all Transnistrian trade routes came exclusively through the Republic of Moldova. By the way, this may be an opportunity for Chisinau to block the smuggling schemes and establish transparent rules of the game. The trade in the Transnistrian region is currently 70 percent dependent on the Western markets, and under the conditions of the war waged by Russia in Ukraine, this percentage will definitely increase. Transnistrian enterprises registered as Moldovan economic agents benefit fully from trade preferences granted by the EU under the Association Agreement with the Republic of Moldova.

With regard to the “Transnistrian demands for recognition of its independence”, published on March 4<sup>th</sup>, when the Chisinau leadership signed the application for EU membership, it seems to be rather a reverence to the Moscow protectors in the event the Russian troops encircle Ukraine occupying Odessa and the Black Sea coast and thus bridging the Transnistrian separatist region with the help of GOTR troops and paramilitary formations in the region. Tiraspol did not go beyond the statement of their so-called foreign office, while the text appears to be almost identical with other similar steps taken after Russia’s recognition of the separatist regions of Georgia,

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we well as after the annexation of Crimea. Interestingly, Tiraspol kept silent when Russia recognized, ten days earlier, the independence of the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk republics.

However, the gesture seemed to suggest the scenario already used in the Donbas: a request for recognition of independence that could be followed by an appeal to Russia to support “compatriots threatened by the pro-Western leadership in Chisinau.” Ukraine has reacted almost immediately - the Cuchiurgan railway bridge situated on the Ukrainian territory in the direction of the Transnistrian region was blown up. Thus, Ukraine has ensured that tanks and armoured vehicles, but especially ammunition from Cobasna as well as vital fuels for Russian heavy machinery, will not be able to reach the Odessa region by rail, the fastest way to transport them. For the Sheriff, however, this bridge has been one of the vital arteries for smuggling flows, a veritable “silk road.”

In conclusion, Ukraine is currently the shield protecting the Republic of Moldova not only from the violence and destruction of the war started by the Kremlin, but also from the Russian tanks in Tiraspol. As long as Odessa resists the offensive, the Sheriff’s bosses will show confusion, caution, and worry about the future of their own business and smuggling schemes rather than a desire to visit Chisinau in a Russian tank tower.

And once the acute phase of the current crisis is over, Chisinau should quickly develop transparent rules of the game for Tiraspol, which will attract the region and its economic agents to the legal space of the Republic of Moldova, once the main smuggling channels are lost.

The least we can offer Ukraine in return is to work to protect the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens who have knocked on our door for help.

# The war in Ukraine has found Moldova unprepared

Igor Munteanu, political analyst, IDIS „Viitorul”



**T**he political expert of IDIS “Viitorul”, Igor Munteanu, has offered us a complete perspective of the Transnistrian conflict, from its beginnings from three decades ago to the present. He contextualized both domestically and internationally what the conflict on the Dniester meant from its active to freezing phase. We have talked about the role of Moscow and how the Russian Federation has acted over the years, but also about the position and vision of the Moldovan authorities regarding the conflict. Last but not least, we have discussed about the current situation in Ukraine, after the Russian invasion, and what the Republic of Moldova should do in this troubled regional context. Read the interview below:

■ It has been 30 years since the Dniester War. How do you see in retrospect its consequences?

■ If we refer to the days of 1-2 March 1992, the main military operations have practically begun to take place by capturing a number of Moldovan

policemen in the Dubasari police station. Effective troops belonging to the 14<sup>th</sup> USSR Army and the insurgent militia were also deployed.

Chronologically, all this did not happen chaotically, but was rather an exemplary measure of punishment of the Moldovan elites who were trying to implement their own project of independence. Until then, the [Moscow] Union Center, which was struggling to maintain its influence and authority, had exemplary punished the former union republics. In Baku, the Union Center drowned the elites in a bloodbath in 1989-1990. Then bloody elements took place in Lithuania in 1990, with the declaration of independence. It was Gorbachev himself who ordered the intervention of military units stationed in that Baltic republic. This was followed by Georgia and Armenia, where there were also bloody events.

In the Republic of Moldova, this war conventionally started long before March 1-2, which, in economic terms meant the detachment of 50-60 percent of the industrial potential of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. The most industrialized part of the country was located on the left bank of the Dniester and, no doubt, the economic consequences were as severe as the socio-psychological ones, because the detachment also meant a strong shock for the entire population that participated in that war.

To this day, many people are accustomed to using terms that



can describe this war. For some people who lost their relatives, it was a personal and family drama. For those who watched it from distance, even though there were few of them, it meant a simple conflict between the elites.

I believe that the value of the 1992 events can only be understood in the context of the USSR and the attempts of the national elites to build a new trajectory through which the Republic of Moldova obviously had to receive its confirmation. It was somewhat symbolic that on the day the Dubasari police forces were attacked, Mircea Snegur, the then President of the Republic of Moldova, was seeking recognition of the Republic of Moldova in New York at the UN. Exactly when the delegation of the Republic of Moldova was holding its plea for recognition of the Republic of Moldova, the Union Center counterattacked by trying to block the path of the state independence.

We can say that the war in Transnistria is not over yet, because there are all the structures that Moscow mobilized at that time, which built its separation path from the rest of the Republic of Moldova.

### **Precedential value**

#### ■ **Did the Transnistrian conflict set a precedent for what followed in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014?**

■ In fact, long before 2008, armed conflicts took place in Georgia between the rebel regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the Tbilisi authorities. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the former first president of the Georgian state, tried in a way to unite under the control

of the national centre the separatist regions where the conservation tendencies of the USSR were very strong. And then, just before 2008, there were small wars of attrition that triggered a process of isolating Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia. Some 240,000 Georgians had to flee their homes in Abkhazia before 1993.

Obviously, we can say that in several segments or areas of the former Soviet Union, wars and military conflicts have really created a certain line of instability. On the one hand, the breakaway movements from the USSR have attracted the use of military units of the former USSR in order to prevent or delay their separation.

In the case of Ukraine, after the Euromaidan, the main area of conflict was the one related to Kiev's attempt to sign an association agreement, which the Russian Federation considered a defiance of its own economic interests. For example, President Putin's economic adviser made some very vocal statements at the time, in late 2013, when he said that if Ukrainians did not take into account Russia's fundamental economic interests, there would be a permanent conflict or Russia will have to intervene.

It is exactly the rhetoric we are having today, in 2022, in the Moscow-Kyiv relationship. It is exactly the rhetoric used in 2013, when Moscow was trying to use President Yanukovich's weaknesses to block the signing of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement. In November 2013, in Kyiv, an event took place in which Ukraine should have signed the Association Agreement in the presence of the EU Foreign Ministers. Therefore, the whole series of actions at that

time should have somehow created a public event for Ukraine to be the first country to sign the Association Agreement.

President Yanukovich refused to sign it in November 2013. This was followed by a large-scale civil disobedience action that culminated in President Viktor Yanukovich's flight from Kyiv and the advancement of states such as the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, ahead of Ukraine, which succeeded in signing the visa liberalization agreement with the EU on 27 April 2014, and the Association Agreement on 27 June 2014.

This meant a redistribution of roles within the Eastern Partnership, more specifically, the advancement of the Republic of Moldova on the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war by the separatist regions of Donbas and Lugansk against the national unity of Ukraine.

#### ■ **Are there statespersons in the Republic of Moldova today capable of resolving the Transnistrian conflict? Do you think there is a strategic vision on the resolution of this conflict in Chisinau?**

■ Very few political forces in the Republic of Moldova today have any opinion or vision regarding the Transnistrian conflict. For the most part, they copy the elements of the current status quo which is based on a number of factors. First of all, everyone says the regulation can take place, but only peacefully. The second element on which there is a consensus is the evacuation of Russian troops as a precondition for the restoration of control over the Transnistrian region. And the third element on which there is some

► consensus is that following the first two elements, there should be a certain special status for the eastern districts of the Republic of Moldova.

However, there is a big difference between this approach with the elements in this sequence and the model promoted by Moscow. For the Russian Federation, the Transnistrian settlement would mean, first of all, the legitimacy of the Tiraspol regime with all the sovereignty elements that they have recently self-confirmed.

In the case of Ukraine, all these elements were included in the Minsk Agreement. The Minsk agreements contain elements that we generically call 'transnistriation', meaning acceptance of Tiraspol as interlocutor, acceptance of elections before the demilitarization of the region, and loss of certain essential state powers over some regions to have the right to blockade national policies through some local autonomy.

We, the civil society, have been proposing since 2017 a document called the "The Red Lines of Transnistria", which we presented to the Bureau of Reintegration. The document contains a series of preparatory actions. These steps would in a way mean creating the necessary conditions for the reintegration policy to remain only on paper or not to remain captive to the games of other actors or the 5 + 2 format.

Personally, I believe that the Transnistrian regulation could only advance if there were certain instruments of coercion on Transnistrian actions. Premises for engagement with the citizens of the Republic of Moldova in this

region should be created, with an opportunity to condition the functioning of the economy in this region by a process of liberalization of public space, demilitarization of the region and decriminalization of the economy in the region.

■ **Can the current peacekeeping mission on the Dniester still be put under the auspices of the UN today? Can we still talk about the destruction of Russian weapons in Cobasna?**

■ The use of ammunition from Cobasna is promoted in the decision that could bring the Russian Federation closer to the Republic of Moldova. There is also an initiative by the head of state, Maia Sandu, who has set up a working group to speed up this process. In the last 20 years, there have been two somewhat competitive initiatives. On the one hand, it was the OSCE initiative to bring a special facility for the destruction of ammunition in Transnistria, but there was no political will. Thus, this shock-absorbing facility from the destruction of ammunition has been removed from the Republic of Moldova.

With regard to the first part of the question, we have to admit that the current peacekeeping format with participation of three components in the mission is a very strange format that does not fit in any way into the standards of the international organizations.

This format was negotiated in the circumstances in which the Russian Federation agreed with the Republic of Moldova, at the presidential level Yeltsin-Snegur. In line with the ceasefire, this format had to be a short-term transition. However, for 30 years already,

Russia has not accepted to change that format. One reason for that is that this peacekeeping format gives it the advantage of dominating the leadership of the Joint Control Commission (JCC). By doing so, it can de facto control everything in the security zone.

It should be mentioned that the attempts of the Moldovan authorities to look for an alternative format have been uncertain and insufficiently articulated. Moreover, if the international organizations had been involved in this process, they would have certainly identified responses to the crisis. There would have been a peacekeeping mission under the auspices of the UN or the OSCE, but for this change of format there should have been sufficient efforts of diplomacy in the Republic of Moldova, which did not happen.

I believe that the main obstacle in this process has been the fear of elites in the sphere of diplomacy, but also among politicians, of going against the Moscow's will, which sees in the trilateral peacekeeping mission a format which fulfilled its mission. Everywhere, where possible, Moscow is emphasizing that the peacekeeping mission in the Republic of Moldova is its special merit.

### **Continuous problems**

■ **The recent visit of the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko has again created a diplomatic incident, Chisinau being disturbed by the Moscow initiative announced only in Tiraspol that it will increase its consular staff there. How do you assess this episode?**

■ I believe that this is part of the mistakes made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, because the latter



accepted this visit in a regional context that should not encourage high-level visits by any officials. However, it accepted it in the hope that the Russian vice foreign minister Andrei Rudenko will complete the preparation of the intergovernmental meeting that the Republic of Moldova needs, because, at the moment, we have many unresolved issues related to the train transport, the trade blocked due to the lack of authorizations for carriers, etc. We have also trade problems because certain Moldovan products are not accepted on the Russian market, etc.

The Russian side exploited these vulnerabilities, but sought to make its own agenda. And that means maintaining control over security actions in the secessionist region. Chisinau has made a mistake allowing the Russian official to travel to Tiraspol as it had no interest in supporting or facilitating such a visit to Tiraspol.

As we could see from the foreign office's press release, the main dissatisfaction was related to Moscow's promise to strengthen the consular presence. This has been an issue of dispute in the last 10-15 years between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation, the Moldovan side asking Moscow to suspend its consular activities.

This means a quasi-recognition of Tiraspol but the embassy of the Russian Federation does not find it appropriate to comply. Instead, it camouflages its consular presence in a format that combines permanently delegated diplomats with an institution to facilitate the granting of Russian citizenship to the population on the left side of the Dniester.

I believe the Republic of Moldova is also vulnerable due to a lack

of clarity on how to manage its relationship with Tiraspol. The key to all vulnerabilities is a unified policy in this regard.

Chisinau does not know what to do and is obliged to follow the advice of foreign partners to cooperate for small-steps or para-diplomatic policies. On the other hand, there are certain formats favouring high-level agreements between the economic oligarchic groups in this region and what is left of Vlad Plahotniuc's oligarchic structure.

Under these circumstances, Chisinau has not found a model that would suggest exactly the best possible strategy in the worst-case scenario. We are very dependent on what is going to happen next in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and some politicians in Chisinau probably believe that the solution on that dimension could suggest further answers to the ongoing conflict between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

### **Barbaric war**

■ **What do you think about the application for the EU membership recently signed by the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, after Russia attacked Ukraine? Is it a symbolic gesture or we are witnessing a wave of enlargement under the EU extraordinary conditions?**

■ I think we could speak about a wave of EU enlargement if it were a normal situation in which there would not be such an unexpected war for most of us. A war that the vast majority of military, political or economic analysts were denying, because they did not think it was possible. And what we are witnessing now is an aggressive war on the territory of Ukraine that has

electrified the West. Circumstances have been created for more unity on the Union, creating also certain responsibility for what is happening in Ukraine.

Basically, there is no normal person who does not take an attitude towards the barbarity with which this war is being waged. In the last few days of this war of aggression, we have witnessed bombings of civilian cities, the use of tanks and missiles banned by the international conventions. I am referring here to thermobaric missile systems used in Ukraine.

So Ukraine fully deserves to receive this special status and the steps taken by the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky deserve admiration. This would be, symbolically speaking, an encouragement for the Ukrainians who are currently fighting and I would say they are giving their lives not only for Ukraine but for the whole Europe, because the expansionist plans of the Russian Federation do not only target Lugansk and Donbas. I said it from the very first day of the debates in the Republic of Moldova that the Russian Federation aims at a much wider space that goes beyond the borders of the former USSR.

The ultimatum presented by President Putin and his diplomats at the end of last year spoke of a return to the situation before 1997, to the wave of integration that encompassed the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe. The revenge of the Russian Federation is much greater than it seems.

So now it is a matter of encouraging Ukrainians to feel that they have something to fight for. The head of the EC, Ursula von der Leyen, ►

► said that “Ukraine is one of us”.

This expression must probably be put in the “frame” by journalists. For the first time I’m seeing an official speaking so deeply, so responsibly towards Ukraine, and of course if there is a window of opportunity, it must be used now.

On the other hand, the polls show an unprecedented mobilization with 90 percent of Europeans being in solidarity with the Ukrainian people and those who are currently fighting. There is no such thing expected by the Ukrainian ideologists in Russia that one part of Ukraine would support the Russian Federation because it is economically more convenient or because it is suffocated by too much expansion. Here the calculations of the Russian Federation don’t match the reality, just as the military plans don’t.

Moscow’s plans for Ukraine and its capital Kyiv to capitulate in two days of fighting are far from reality. At the moment, Ukraine is going through a very complicated military and political situation, but certainly the resilience and the ability to organize of ordinary citizens, who feel attached and have reasons to believe that the army can defend them, are very strong.

### **Threats for the Republic of Moldova**

■ We know the authorities are concerned that the citizens of the Republic of Moldova don’t panic and I would like to discuss with you an even more important issue which is the danger coming from the Transnistrian separatist region.

■ The danger is not just strictly military. Of course, there is this

military contingent, which amounts to almost 20,000 troops, and I am referring here to the Russian Troops Task Force (GOTR), the so-called peacekeepers, plus the army and special services of Transnistria. But also other people who are financed, and the Republic of Moldova has tolerated this unconstitutional military presence for 30 years.

Another dimension of this insecurity is that Transnistria can control the functioning of the energy system that the Republic of Moldova is dependent. And that’s another hassle. This war in Ukraine has found us unprepared. We have not started to make full use of the capacity of the Iasi-Chisinau gas pipeline and this must be resolved as soon as possible through the use of the principle related to the electricity market. You know that a law has been passed obliging the suppliers and distributors to use 30 per cent of one source and 70 percent of the other. The same must and will apply for the natural gas. But for that we need to make some amendments to the law and be as open as possible to the market in the region.

Under normal circumstances, you have to wait for three years for the southern Isaccea-Chisinau connection network to be functional. But we are not under normal conditions and everything needs to be accelerated. Not all procedures need to follow the traditional format of these contracts.

We need these electricity sources faster and for that we have to turn to traders who can provide electricity in another regime. Like Ukraine obtained gas reverse flow from Slovakia a year and a half ago. We have to get the same thing.

The third dimension is related to groups that may endanger critical infrastructure in the Republic of Moldova. That is diversionist or saboteur groups that jeopardise the functioning of public services in cities and others. They are a reflection of plans to attack the civilian population. So these threats must be taken into account because we are close to a great war.

The special services are probably doing their job, but the citizens are still anxious and need to be informed. That would be the worst strategy - to pretend that things are not happening and that we are thousands of miles away from Ukraine and that everything is just a movie. This is not true and the war is real. The threats coming from all areas that the Russian military is preparing to attack are real, and we must develop these resilience capabilities by the eleventh hour if we are determined to do so.

The fourth dimension we can talk about is a more advanced relationship with Romania in the field of defense and security. Many people are stuck with the idea that Romania is part of NATO and that respectively we cannot collaborate on these sensitive sectors. But other countries have found a way to do it. For example, Poland began to form an alliance with Britain, and Ukraine with Poland. Turkey and Azerbaijan have signed a joint defense agreement, despite Turkey being part of NATO.

Therefore, we need to be more creative and identify the elements that can ensure that the citizens of the Republic of Moldova are not left out.

■ Thank you!

## Expert Opinion

# Rationality with the irrational world

**Veaceslav Berbeca, political analyst, IDIS "Viitorul"**

**M**arch 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the beginning of the conflict on the Dniester which had significant social, economic and political consequences for the Republic of Moldova. The armed conflict and its consequences have had and continue to have negative repercussions on the development of the Moldovan state, which are underestimated by the public at large, whose attention is broadly focused on other issues.

The conflict caused from the outside has aimed at controlling the destiny of the Republic of Moldova. The fact that it is not yet resolved - only the peaceful settlement - is an enormous obstacle to the development of the Moldovan state. The scenario the Kremlin insists upon cannot be accepted, because it would mean establishing a political control through the Transnistrian leaders over the Republic of Moldova.

Generally characterized as a geopolitical dispute, which was instigated and supported from the outside in order to get control over the newly created state, the opinion of most experts is that the Transnistrian conflict is easy to be resolved, as opposed to the ethnic conflicts in the ex-Soviet space in the 1990s. The lack of ethnic and religious divisions has facilitated communication between the two banks of the Dniester, establishing a viable platform for resolving the dispute.

The peacekeeping instruments developed under the agreement on the "principles of peaceful settlement of the armed conflict in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova" of 21 July 1992 - the Joint Control Commission and the so-called "peacekeeping forces" – have contributed to observing the ceasefire regime. However, they proved to be ineffective in terms of demilitarizing the

Security Zone and ensuring the necessary conditions for the free movement of goods, services and people between the two banks of the Dniester.

### **Russia's refusals**

At the same time, despite the efforts made, including by the international community, the Russian Federation could not be persuaded to withdraw from the territory of the Republic of Moldova the Russian military formations that succeeded the former 14<sup>th</sup> Army. The Russian authorities have refused to abide by the commitments made at the OSCE Summit in Istanbul in November 1999, as well as at the Summit of States Parties to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (FACE), to withdraw its troops and ammunition from the territory of the Republic of Moldova by the end of 2002. The militarization of this region through the Russian Troops Task Force poses a threat to the state security.

Over the years, several projects have been developed for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict - the OSCE, the civil society of the Republic of Moldova or the Yushchenko Plan, etc. Mention should particularly be made of the "Memorandum on the Basis for the Normalization of Relations between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria" signed on 8 May 1997 in



Moscow, whose defining element is the so-called "common state" concept, which meant that Chisinau and Tiraspol build relations on the basis of legal equality, establishing the principle of "parity of the parties". Another one is the "Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the Unified State Structure" of November 2003, known as the "Kozak Memorandum", which provided for the creation of a federation whose subjects were endowed with extremely broad prerogatives, including the right to veto, which is an option to block decision-making on important issues in the federal institutions. This document also provided for the deployment on the territory of the future federation, on the basis of a Moldovan-Russian bilateral agreement, of "peacekeeping stabilizing forces" that would not exceed 2,000 people. This document is broadly based on the principles of the 1997 Memorandum.

### **The "Kozak Memorandum" and succeeding blockades**

The refusal of the Moldovan authorities to sign the "Kozak Memorandum" meant stopping the negotiations on identifying the status of the Transnistrian region. Given that Moscow does not accept a



different approach to the settlement of the dispute and insists on the principles enshrined in the “Kozak Memorandum”, the conflict resolution scenarios got into a deadlock. Recently, the idea of offering a “special status” to the Transnistrian region has been discussed on various occasions, but Chisinau has not yet come up with a clear vision and a well-defined concept of this status. The idea is that, whatever the organizational structure, the functionality of the state after a possible regulation is what’s important for the Republic of Moldova. The problem is not only the principle of veto, which would paralyze the activity of the state, but also the very dangerous influence of regional criminal networks on the functioning of the Moldovan authorities and institutions.

The most important achievement of the Moldovan authorities in July 1992, when the agreement on the “principles of peaceful settlement of the armed conflict in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova” was signed in Moscow on 12 July 1992, was the development of instruments for peaceful resolution of the Transnistrian conflict and non-admission of its thawing. The negotiation process carried out on several dialogue platforms (sectoral working groups, 1 + 1, 5 + 2) has managed to mitigate the consequences of several crises caused by the Tiraspol authorities. Although some instruments are criticized for their inefficiency, their positive effect is that they have provided useful communication channels in the current circumstances.

Given the tense situation in the region followed by military escalation by the

Russian Federation, these channels of communication are important in order to maintain political dialogue and avoid possible crises in the region. The appointment of Oleg Serebrian, a career diplomat, as Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration is welcome, including the fact that he is a very good connoisseur of the Eastern European region. We understand that some important processes cannot be controlled by the Moldovan authorities, but the re-establishment of communication platforms, including with the Transnistrian region’s political representative Vitali Ignatiev, has an important role to play in making the parties’ intentions known and developing dialogue tools.

In this context, it should be mentioned the meeting from February 15<sup>th</sup> with the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Andrei Rudenko, and the Ambassador with Special Missions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Vitalii Treapitsin. During this working meeting in the Republic of Moldova, the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian, reiterated his firm commitment to move towards a peaceful and lasting settlement of the Transnistrian issue. It should be reminded that Andrei Rudenko had a following meeting with the Tiraspol leader, Vadim Krasnoselki, on February 16<sup>th</sup>, a few days before the start of the military intervention in Ukraine, where he spoke about initiation of a comprehensive political settlement. We can assume that this initiative may have some connections with Moscow’s latest actions to gain political control over the republics of the former USSR.

Recent events in the region show the fragility of the negotiation process in the context of the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. This military invasion marks a deep rift in international relations, as it violates international law by using armed forces to impose political control and break Ukraine’s independence. A possible strengthening of the Kremlin’s influence over the Ukrainian state with the installation of a puppet regime in Kyiv could mean the imposition of a regulation model based on the principles of the “Kozak Memorandum” in the Republic of Moldova and the transformation of the state into a Kremlin satellite. Moldova’s future depends on the resistance of the Ukrainians and the reaction of the international community to the armed intervention of the Russian Federation.

In this context, it should be mentioned the exemplary reaction of the Moldovan authorities in the context of regional events. On the one hand, they have taken several measures to effectively manage the flow of refugees from Ukraine, for which they enjoy the respect and appreciation of Western states. On the other hand, they have started intense discussions with the parties in the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition in order not to avoid the tensioning of the situation at local and regional levels. And the messages from the authorities can only be: deescalating tensions, ending the fightings, and resolving the conflict peacefully in Ukraine.

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