



New Europe Center  
Kyiv, Ukraine

# Policy Brief

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New Europe Center, 2018

## THE TRAPS OF TRANSNISTRIAN SETTLEMENT:

### HOW DO WE AVOID THEM?

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With the conflict in Ukraine, the focus on the breakaway region of Transnistria was not central; however, at the same time, international attention toward the region was maintained due to the war in Ukraine. The self-proclaimed republic is yet another instrument of the Russian policy in the region, which has been continuously used since the beginning of Russian aggression in Ukraine. The most recent example is the Transnistrian KGB operative who organized an attack on the office of Hungarian diaspora in Ukraine meaning to further destabilize complicated relations between Kyiv and Budapest. Looking more broadly, if the settlement of Transnistrian conflict takes place in accordance with the Russian scenario, it would serve as a tool against Ukraine.

The status-quo in the Transnistrian region did not change significantly, although the elements maintaining the status-quo have been evolving. The long-awaited ban of Russian forces transit through the territory of Ukraine targeting personnel and weapons supply lines of Russian illegal forces in the separatist region has been established in 2015, although it was de-facto in power since 2012. Additionally, an ambitious program of joint Moldova-Ukraine border and customs checkpoints on the Transnistrian perimeter of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border has been agreed between Kyiv and Chisinau. The first joint control border checkpoint was already established in Cuciurgan in 2017. The next ones might be established soon, as both Moldovan Government and Ukrainian Parliament approved the framework

*The paper was written within the Think Tank Development Initiative for Ukraine (TTDI), carried out by the International Renaissance Foundation in partnership with the Think Tank Fund of the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE) with financial support of the Embassy of Sweden in Ukraine.*

*The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Embassy of Sweden in Ukraine, the International Renaissance Foundation, and the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE).*

agreement, which will allow establishing joint control checkpoints on the entire Ukraine-Moldova border, which includes Transnistrian perimeter. The joint border control is a crucial step in moving towards monitoring the migration flows to the region and facilitating the business activity for entrepreneurs from the secessionist region. For instance, before the joint control in Cuciurgan, the entrepreneurs from Transnistria had to get clearance and their paperwork done in Chisinau, and now they can do it at the border checkpoint and skip the burden of going to Chisinau. This also contributes to the implementation of the economic part (DCFTA) of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Moldova. Finally, Moldova knows much better who enters and leaves its territory, which is important, especially in the context of state security.

At the same time, 2017 regime change in the Transnistrian region, which brought to power the so-called president Vadim Krasnoselski, a representative of the Sheriff business group that also controls the local parliament, made the regime more open to negotiations, but not to concessions, positioning itself as practical and business-oriented entity, but still playing within the red lines drawn by Russia. Similarly, in Moldova, President Igor Dodon, elected in 2016, a broadly ceremonial position, has been actively echoing the Russian narrative in Moldova, which created more confusion regarding the conflict.

The domestic conditions in Moldova have also changed. The Democratic Party led by Vlad Plahotniuc, who has been the main decision-maker for the last four years, has governed Moldova. Vlad Plahotniuc proved to be a powerful manager and is often employing the Machiavellian approach “the end justifies the

means”. Having very complicated relations with Russia, Plahotniuc jumped into the Transnistrian issue, hoping that it could serve as a bridge in sorting out the conflict with Moscow. However, as it turned out later, the progress on Transnistria was rather used to raise the profile of Moldova with its partners in the West and improve Chisinau’s relations with Brussels and Washington. For this, Vlad Plahotniuc contributed to signing of five protocols between Moldovan and Tiraspol administrations after he agreed with Victor Gusan, the head of Sheriff and the de-facto decision-maker in the region. The five protocols signed in 2017 cover

- (1) apostille by Moldovan Ministry of Education of diplomas issued by universities in the Transnistrian region;
- (2) elimination of barriers in the telecommunication domain that would lead to direct connection of fixed, mobile, and internet networks;
- (3) elimination of barriers to the functioning of Romanian language (Latin script) schools in Transnistria;
- (4) allowing farmers to use their lands across Tiraspol-Camenca road in Dubasari district (Transnistria); and
- (5) opening of the Gura Bacului bridge over Nistru river.

In return, although not as a part of any formal agreement, Moldova keeps buying electricity from Transnistrian Cuciurgan power station (Moldovan GRES), which is the second contributor to Transnistrian budget and a way to cash Russian funding through natural gas supplies to the power station.

Russia’s reaction was generally absent and did not help Vlad Plahotniuc. In fact, it helped more his relations with the EU and the US



who are enthusiastic about the progress in the conflict settlement. Less enthusiasm was seen among the Moldovan society interested in the Transnistrian issue, who warned that any concessions made by Moldova are legalizing the semi-sovereign attributes of the secessionist region. Others reacted to these developments more positively and described the protocols as practical steps to fix long-lasting issues. Despite signing the protocols, little was made to implement them, and the results are yet to come.

In 2003, Russia and Moldova secretly negotiated a package deal called “Kozak Plan”. The “Kozak Plan” meant, among others, to create an asymmetric federation in Moldova in order to “transnistrianize” Moldova and legalize Russian military presence. As it did not work then, the plan is still on the agenda; however, it is now split in pieces, which will get implemented portion by portion under such beautiful names as “small steps” and “confidence building measures”. It is not about the protocols, but about the trend to legalize elements of Transnistrian “statehood” that will have political consequences in the long-term perspective. However, with Transnistria, Vlad Plahotniuc has a chance to prove he is a statesman despite his personal interest and withstand the temptation to set his accounts with Russia by using Transnistria.

The carrying Moldovan society is ready to make steps towards compromise in settling the issue, however, not at any cost. The options that imply “compromises” to the detriment of Moldovan independence and sovereignty are not accepted, as they are unconstitutional. Moreover, for some reasons, the OSCE has been pushing hard for the last 3 years for solutions that undermine both independence and sovereignty, contrary to the OSCE mandate

in Moldova, which is to “to help achieve a lasting, comprehensive political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict; and to consolidate Moldova’s independence and sovereignty”.

Since the beginning of Russian aggression in Ukraine, over one hundred military applications have been held in Transnistria. The novelty of the military applications after aggression in Ukraine is that Russian occupation troops in Transnistria (known as GOTR) were also involved in exercises along with Transnistrian armed forces and Russian peacekeeping contingent – intimidating Moldova by imitating crossing the Dniester through assembling military bridges across the river. In this context, the evident question is how Russian peacekeepers, who should deter any military activity in the Security Zone, could oppose Russian occupation forces if they are conducting joint military applications? The situation is not only absurd, but also dangerous. However, at the same time, Russia is consolidating its role as a party in the conflict, from which it tried to distance during the last 20 years, positioning the conflict as an issue between Moldova and Transnistrian region. However, from the legal point, including through decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, Russia is responsible for everything that happens in Transnistria. In this respect, the example of Moldova could be used by Ukraine for defending its positions and maybe bring Russia to justice for the crimes in ORDLO.

Even more disappointing aspect of the military exercises is that the OSCE did not demonstrate any reaction that would condemn the escalation in the region. Moreover, the OSCE does not have access to Transnistria and is not able to monitor the violations that occur there. However, the OSCE mission in

Moldova was quite vocal in informal meetings, advising who should be dismissed from the Government of Moldova and why Ukraine and Moldova are wrong. Unlike the OSCE mission in Moldova, which wants to deliver results at any cost, the Moldovan Government is willing to progress on the settlement without violating the Constitution of Moldova and creating a precedent that would have a negative impact on other conflicts in the region, including the one in Ukraine. The poorly solved conflict has a high probability to reignite and lead to instability or impair the very functioning of the state of Moldova. Diplomats do their job and leave, while people have to live with their results. Moreover, for comparison, one diplomat confessed that if the OSCE mission in Ukraine would behave in the same way it does in Moldova, it would be shut down “tomorrow morning”.

The OSCE does not “impress” only at the local level. The Italian presidency of the OSCE appointed former FM Franco Frattini, who had already managed to prove to be the most biased mediator that the OSCE ever had, as the OSCE representative for Transnistria. Franco Frattini has associated himself with Russia in his statements, underlining the “unrealistic” expectations that Russia should withdraw its troops from Moldova and operating with distorted information about the conflict and the settlement process; moreover, the very fact that Frattini choose to send messages on Transnistrian settlement via RT, which could hardly be associated with journalism, is a message itself. Appointing such an experienced diplomat and a friend of Russia is not accidental. It is meant to show “progress” in Transnistrian settlement for a Russian cause.

Franco Frattini seems to be more obsessed with the “unfair” sanctions of EU against Russia

than with the settlement of the conflict in Transnistria. That is precisely the reason why the OSCE representative for Transnistria is seeking progress in resolving the conflict. The apparent progress in certain dossiers of the Transnistrian conflict will be sold to the EU member states by Frattini as a Russian gesture in favor of diplomacy and Russia’s constructive position on fixing the issues in Moldova, but certainly not mentioning that it is Russia that created the conflict and has been sponsoring it until today.

The proposed ideas for settlement are not only directed towards keeping Moldova in Russia’s sphere of influence, but also to shape the debate around the conflict settlement in Ukraine. If Russia, in conjunction with the OSCE, will be able to sell the narrative that the progress in the Transnistrian settlement is real, and it is, because Moldova holds direct negotiations with the Transnistrian authorities and progress is happening because Moldova wants it, this will have repercussions on the Ukrainian dossier as well. The argument will be centered on the idea that “it is Ukraine that blocks the progress in Donbas, because as the example of the neighboring Moldova shows, one can make progress if they want.” Therefore, Ukraine should certainly support the settlement process of the Transnistrian conflict but in such a way that would mirror the model it wants to see in the case of ORLDO. In parallel, Kyiv needs to support Chisinau’s endeavor to establish a full control on the Transnistrian perimeter of the Ukraine-Moldova border and insist on the withdrawal of the Russian ammunition and illegal troops from the territory of Moldova.

The United States of America and the European Union and its member states need to look at the conflict settlement process from different



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points, including the one of the logic of settlement. If the conflict is resolved only at the expense of Moldova, then Chisinau will give the conflict more reasons to exist than to be solved, since there would be no discomfort about the conflict existence for the secessionist region of Transnistria, nor will exist any desire for settlement, since the region will enjoy all the rights of a “de facto” state without any responsibilities.

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## ABOUT NEW EUROPE CENTER

*The **New Europe Center** was founded in 2017 as an independent think-tank. Despite its new brand, it is based on a research team that has been working together since 2009, at the Institute for World Policy. The New Europe Center became recognized by offering high-quality analysis on foreign policy issues in Ukraine and regional security by combining active, effective work with advocacy.*

*The New Europe Center’s vision is very much in line with the views of the majority of Ukrainians about the future of their country: Ukraine should be integrated into the European Union and NATO. By integration, we understand not so much formal membership as the adoption of the best standards and practices for Ukraine to properly belong to the Euroatlantic value system.*

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