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**“PRIDNESTROVIAN MOLDAVIAN REPUBLIC”:
GENESIS OF ISSUE AND INFLUENCE ON THE INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS**

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Abstract

An important and urgent issue in the context of ensuring European and international security is the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. Despite the considerable number of works on the Transnistrian issue, they are mainly devoted to the history and features of the conflict development. At the same time, problem of the present state of the territory and future forecasts are not explored properly. Therefore, the article aims to determine the historical background and stages of the conflict, to characterize the current state of the separatist region and to provide forecasts for the future situation. Methods used for the research include: content analysis, statistical, historical-genetic and the analytic-prognostic methods.

The article analyzes the basic historical prerequisites and causes of the Transnistrian conflict, which are divided into four blocks: historical, ethno-national, economic and geopolitical. The stages of conflict confrontation and the negotiation process in 5+2 format, the positions of the participating countries are explored. The process of conflict peaceful settlement began after the end of the armed confrontation phase in 1992. It is characterized by considerable activity of external actors, but has not led to significant consequences. A description of the current state of the so-called “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic” is given. Particularly noteworthy is the ever-growing role of the Russian Federation, which traditionally views the territory as an area of its imperial national interests and uses this “frozen conflict” as a lever of influence over the pro-European Republic of Moldova. The main scenarios are highlighted: reintegration into the mother country; inclusion territory of the “de facto state” into patron state; achieving international recognition of sovereignty; maintaining the status quo.

It is concluded that federalization is the most possible forecast for the Transnistrian conflict, because Moldova already has similar experience in Gagauzia. But at the present stage we are observing the status quo.

Keywords: Transnistrian conflict, Moldova, patron state, “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic” (“PMR”), “de facto state”, the format «5+2»

«ПРИДНІСТРОВСЬКА МОЛДАВСЬКА РЕСПУБЛІКА»: ГЕНЕЗА ПРОБЛЕМИ ТА ВПЛИВ НА МІЖНАРОДНІ ВІДНОСИНИ

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Анотація

У статті проаналізовано основні історичні передумови і причини придністровського конфлікту. Досліджено етапи конфліктного протистояння і переговорного процесу у форматі 5+2, позиції країн-учасниць. Мирне врегулювання конфлікту розпочалося після завершення фази збройного протистояння у 1992 р. Він характеризувався значною активністю зовнішніх акторів, втім, не призвів до вагомих наслідків. Надано характеристику сучасному стану проблеми так званої «Придністровської Молдавської Республіки». Особливо варто відзначити дедалі зростаючу роль Російської Федерації, яка традиційно розглядає цю територію як зону своїх імперських державних інтересів і використовує цей «заморожений конфлікт» як важіль впливу на Республіку Молдова, що демонструє проєвропейський вектор зовнішньої політики. Виділено основні варіанти розвитку подій: реінтеграція до материнської держави; включення території «де-факто держави» до складу держави-покровителя; досягнення міжнародного визнання суверенітету; збереження статус-кво.

Ключові слова: придністровський конфлікт, Молдова, держава-патрон, «Придністровська Молдавська Республіка» («ПМР»), «де-факто держава», формат «5+2»

Problem statement. One of the important issues in the context of ensuring European and international security is the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict. It has a special importance for Ukraine due to a number of reasons. First, the occurrence of any armed conflict in the immediate vicinity of the borders of an independent state is always a potential threat of involving this state in the confrontation of other parties. Secondly, the territory of Transnistria is a source of illegal migrants and smuggling that creates strategic instability at the borders and threatens the national interests of Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens. And the last (but not the least) reason became especially relevant after the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022. Existence of the territory that is under the Russian full-control makes the military situation on the South of Ukraine more tension and can be a reason for Ukraine to strengthen this region with additional forces.

That is why Ukraine is directly interested in the settlement of this conflict, and this is impossible without determining the international legal status of the so-called “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic” (“PMR”) – a self-proclaimed state entity that controls part of the territory of Moldova, is not recognized by the world community, and belongs to the group of “de-facto states”.

Analysis of previous research and publications. Addressing to the officials, it's worth to mention a speech of the former Vice Prime Minister of the Moldova V. Osipov at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (USA) on 3rd of May 2010, where he described the conflict around Transnistria as follows: “The artificial character of this externally-inspired conflict, as well as the lack of any antagonisms of ethical or religious nature, create proper conditions for a realistic settlement. ...Beyond these “positive”

characteristics of the Transnistrian conflict, that make it stand apart from similar regional crises, some natural questions occur, such as: why two decades of efforts to solve the conflict have not been successful? How does a feasible and realistic plan to settle the Transnistrian conflict look like? A first step to answer those questions has to be taken by defining the nature of the “Transnistrian syndrome” and identifying the true causes that generated its apparition” (Osipov, 2010).

At the same time, Ukrainian researcher D. Yermolenko deals with the problem of historical origins and causes and course of the Transnistrian conflict (Yermolenko, 2009). A fundamental monograph devoted to this issue is the work of G. Perepelitsa “Conflict in Transnistria: causes, problems and development forecast” (Perepelitsa, 2001). Russian researchers also pay considerable attention to the problem of resolving the Transnistrian conflict. The historical backgrounds and current state of the conflict are covered in the articles of N. Nechaeva-Yuriychuk (Nechaeva-Yuriychuk, 2011) and O. Tsukanova (Tsukanova, 2011).

Characteristic features of Russian studies are the emphasis on the special role of the Russian Federation in the cessation of armed conflict and full compliance with official propaganda. That's why it is so important to study the position of enemy. Among the Western studies, we highlight the scientific intelligence of the experts of the European Center for Minorities M. Vahl and M. Emerson (Vahl & Emerson, 2004), who focus on the role of the European Union in the process of peaceful settlement of the conflict. Of particular interest is the briefing by the American researcher M. Rojansky (Rojansky, 2011) for the US Helsinki Commission (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe), which not only outlines the main characteristics of the Transnistrian conflict, but also provides practical recommendations for the US government to increase its participation in the settlement.

Materials and methods. Despite the significant number of works on the Transnistrian issue, they are mainly devoted to the history and development of the conflict and the problem of current state of the territory and forecasts for the future have so far been researched a bit. In addition, Transnistria has received much less attention in recent years due to the frozen state of the conflict. Therefore, the article aims to determine the historical prerequisites and stages of the development of the conflict characterize the current state of the separatist region and provide forecasts for the development of the situation in future.

The most relevant information of the problem should be found only from sources, which can be conditionally divided into four groups. The first group includes the internal legislation of the Republic of Moldova, represented by the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova (2011), in which special attention is paid to the issue of a peaceful resolution of the conflict around Transnistria and the preservation of the territorial integrity of Moldova. The second group of sources includes statements, excerpts from the speeches of the heads of states, governments and other official political figures. For example, the anniversary address of the President of the Republic of Moldova on the peacekeeping operation beginning (2018). The third group of sources includes international agreements, treaties, and memoranda relating to conflict resolution mechanisms. For example, the signing of the Agreement on the Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Dniester Region of the Republic of Moldova (1992) only marked the end of the military confrontation around the so-called “PMR”, but did not solve the problem of the status of this “de facto republic” and laid the foundation for a long-term frozen conflict. The fourth group of sources is represented by information resources. Statistics made it possible to form an idea of the dynamics and main changes in the ethnic composition of the population of the separatist region, starting from the 1930s.

Therefore, important research methods for our study are the content analysis (studying the source base) and the statistical method (accounting for quantitative indicators of the percentage of different nationalities). The historical genetic method application helps to identify the main causes and historical preconditions of the political

crisis. Particularly noteworthy is the analytical and prognostic method, which allowed us to make certain assumptions about the possibility of solving this problem.

Theoretical background. Determining the features of the current state of so-called “PMR” is not possible without a thorough analysis of the causes and main stages of the development of the conflict around this territory. The author proposes to divide the complex of reasons and prerequisites for the conflict into the following blocks:

1. *Historical block of causes.* After 1812, most territory of the modern Moldova, together with Transnistria became part of the Russian Empire. But the revolutionary events of the beginning of the 20th century changed the map of Europe, and Moldova became part of Romania in 1918. The Soviet Union, which sought to return to the former borders of the Russian Empire, created in 1924 the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MARSR) as a part of Ukraine, which also included the Transnistrian lands. This autonomy was considered by the Soviet leadership as a springboard for the further rejection of Moldovan lands from Romania and their inclusion in the USSR. The majority of the population consisted of Ukrainians (48.49%) and Moldovans (30.13%), but as a result of the territory expansion and national policy of the USSR until 1940, there was a significant increase in the share of the Russian population along with a decrease in the number of Moldovans (Nechaeva-Yuriychuk, 2011: 64).

Actually, 1940 (when Bessarabia was annexed into the Soviet Union) became a year of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) creation. These historical factors caused a significant difference between the mentality and national composition of the population of the modern Republic of Moldova and Transnistria, becoming the basis for the second block of reasons – ethno-national.

2. *Ethno-national block of reason.* As mentioned above, the Soviet leadership actively promoted the settlement of these lands by Russians and Ukrainians, so Moldovans did not make up the majority in the separatist region. So, with the beginning of reconstruction and national revival in Moldova, the population of Transnistria was more prone to reactionary sentiments for the preservation of the Soviet Union.

This block of reasons can include the linguistic factor, which became particularly noticeable after the adoption of the Law on the Functioning of Languages in the territory of the Moldavian SSR (1989). Despite the established special status of the Russian language as the language of international communication, this law was considered discriminatory in Transnistria. The main demands of the protesters (the introduction of Russian as the second state language and the refusal to translate the Moldovan language into Latin) once again demonstrated the orientation of the Transnistrian leadership towards Russia, which can be partially explained by the third block of reasons – economic.

3. *Economic block of reasons.* When the USSR collapsed, the Transnistrian local party nomenclature demonstrated a clear orientation to maintaining ties with the center not only because of the national factor (it consisted mainly not of representatives of the national Moldovan elite, but of Russians), but also due to a purely pragmatic concern. For example, a large number of enterprises in Transnistria were under Russian control. Therefore, the Transnistrian elite was not only interested in preserving the planned economy and full control over the industrial complex of the region, but was also confident in the ability of the region to provide for itself in the event of independence. The separatists were given additional confidence in their own strength by tangible external support, which is explained by a complex of geopolitical reasons.

4. *Geopolitical block of reasons.* As already mentioned, Transnistria was under the control of the Russian Empire for a long time, then the USSR, and the rest of the territory of Moldova from 1918 to 1940 was part of Romania. Therefore, it is not surprising that the separatist region still remains in the sphere of interests of the Russian Federation. Moreover, account the location of the 14th Russian army at this territory since the Second World War was a great destabilizing factor in this conflict. All of this reasons for the Transnistrian issue are closely related and mutually conditioned. The economic independence of the region, the difference in the ethno-national composition of the

population and its geopolitical orientation can be explained precisely by historical reasons. At the same time, the economic factor affects the national factor, considering the fact that mainly Russians lead a large number of enterprises. In turn, the national composition of the region's population is reflected in the geopolitical orientation of the leadership.

Thus, a complex of historical, ethno-national, economic and geopolitical reasons became the basis of the Transnistrian conflict, which has been going on for almost 30 years. Taking into account the significant duration of the confrontation, the question of periodization of the conflict is expedient. The adoption of a language law on 31.08.1989 is considered to be the beginning of the pre-conflict phase of the confrontation, which resulted in protests and enterprise strikes. This stage was not of a latent nature, the conflicting parties openly expressed their dissatisfaction. The completion of the process of the disintegration of the Soviet Union (as in most other conflicts in the region) gave impetus to the intensification of the confrontation and escalation of the Transnistrian conflict. Ukrainian researcher (Yermolenko, 2009) notes: "Military aid to official Chisinau from Romania and the readiness of the 14th Russian Army to act on the side of Tiraspol created the conditions for the transition of the conflict from the latent stage to the stage of armed expansion".

The phase of the armed confrontation was characterized by high intensity of actions of the opposing parties, the consequences of which were victims on both sides, flows of refugees, and significant material damage. The conflict escalated on June 19-21, 1992, when there were battles for the city of Bendery. The beginning of a new phase of balanced countermeasures is considered to be the signing on July 21, 1992 by the presidents of Moldova (M. Snegur) and the Russian Federation (B. Yeltsin), of the Agreement on the Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Dniester Region of the Republic of Moldova (1992), which recognized the territorial integrity of Moldova and Transnistria's right to "independently decide its own destiny". The incoordination of these two provisions indicates the absence of specific solutions and the parties' efforts to freeze the conflict. This document did not address the issue of the future status of the separatist region, but only established a ceasefire regime and laid the groundwork for further negotiations. Nevertheless, this agreement helped to end hostilities and create a security zone between the warring parties with joint peacekeeping contingents under the leadership of the Joint Control Commission. We consider it appropriate to divide the last phase of conflict interaction into several periods:

Table 1. Periodization of last phase of the Transnistrian conflict

| № | Estimated period duration | Brief description |
|---|---------------------------|---|
| 1 | 1994-1997 | Began with the signing of the Joint Declaration by the President of Moldova M. Snigur and the leader of Transnistria I. Smirnov on 28.04.1994. Was characterized by significant successes in negotiations on security issues. On January 19, 1996, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine signed a joint declaration that emphasized Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Tsukanova, 2011: 135). |
| 2 | 1997-2001 | Main attention was paid at the status of "PMR". The Memorandum on the Bases for Normalization of Relations between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria (The Moscow Agreement) was signed on 08.05.1997. It confirms the intentions of the parties to build their relations within the framework of a common state within the borders of the Moldavian SSR as of January 1990. But, differences in ways to reach out the goal proclaimed, led to aggravation of relations during the next period. |

| | | |
|---|-----------------|--|
| 3 | 2001-2003 | Marked by parliamentary elections in February 2001. In result of which the Communist Party won, receiving 50.2% of the vote and 71 seats out of 101 in the parliament. Already in August 2001 the new Moldovan leadership introduced restrictions on trips abroad for persons from the Transnistrian administration. "PMR" viewed this step as an "economic blockade" (Unrecognized States, 2009). |
| 4 | 2003-2006 | In 2003 the situation is stabilized and a feature of new period to be significant intensification of the activities of external actors (Russian Federation, USA, and the EU) in the field of conflict resolution. Moldova began to demonstrate a pro-European external orientation, to which Russia responded by developing a new plan called the "Kozak's Memorandum". He envisaged the transformation of Moldova into an "asymmetric" federation (Memorandum of Kozak, 2003). At the same time, at the GUUAM summit Ukraine proposed the "Yushchenko's Plan", which provided for the internal democratization of Transnistria and the placement of a new OSCE peacekeeping contingent in the conflict zone instead of the Russian army. According to this plan, the Republic of Moldova adopted a law on 22.07.2005, according to which the separatist region is considered an autonomous territorial entity with a special legal status. But further implementation of the "Yushchenko's Plan" contradicted the interests of the pro-Russian Transnistrian elite and the Russian Federation itself in the region. |
| 5 | 2006 – till now | The consequence of the Russian influence was the holding of a referendum on 17.09.2006 on the territory of the Transnistria. According to the "PMR": 97.2% of voters voted for joining Russia (Preparing in Transnistria, 2016). In the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, which entered into force on 15.06.2011, the Transnistrian conflict is indicated as one of the main threats to the state's national security, and the main way to resolve this conflict is to preserve the territorial integrity of Moldova and grant a special status to Transnistria. In December 2013, the so-called Verkhovna Rada of Transnistria adopted a law on the application of Russian federal legislation on the territory of the de facto state, and in March 2014 (after the beginning of the annexation of Crimea), the PMR appealed to the State Duma of Russia with a request to develop a law that would allow Transnistria to become part of the Russian Federation. So, the last period is characterized by the "freezing" of the negotiation process and the strengthening of Russia's influence on the "PMR". |

On June 22, 2018, the UN General Assembly finally adopted a resolution on the complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign armed forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova, which again emphasized the importance of preserving the territorial integrity of neutral Moldova. Also, in this resolution the UN strongly recommended the Russian Federation to withdraw its troops from the territory of Transnistria (Complete and unconditional withdrawal, 2018). But former president of Moldova I. Dodon in his statement called this step premature, pointing to the importance of preserving the peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation for maintaining peace and stability in the region (Address by the President of the Republic of Moldova..., 2018). The policy of ex-president I. Dodon was a step back in the settlement of the Transnistrian problem: rapprochement with the Russian Federation and constant concessions to the separatist region cannot contribute to the reintegration of the state.

In August, 2023, president of Moldova Maia Sandu said: “I repeat once again that the solutions we see are only peaceful. Perhaps, when Ukraine wins this war and returns its territories, a geopolitical opportunity will appear that will allow us to settle the conflict peacefully. The problem of Transnistria will be solved gradually “because everything is quite complicated” (Ukraine’s victory, 2023).

At the current stage of the conflict development, the so-called “PMR” occupied an area on the left bank of the Dniester river (including several settlements on the right bank), borders with Ukraine. According to the latest population census, which was conducted separately from the all-Moldovan census, the population of PMR amounted to 475,373 people (Main characteristics of the demographic map of Transnistria, 2017). As a result of the ethnic policy of the USSR and the subsequent course of the Transnistrian conflict, the number of Moldovans in this territory in percentage terms decreased significantly (from 41.8% to 28.6%), while the number of Russians, on the contrary, shows a stable tendency to increase (from 14.2% to 29.1%) (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). The percentage ratio of Ukrainians to the total number did not change from 1936 to 2004 (within 28%), but the last census showed a sharp reduction in the share of Ukrainians (to 22.9%), which is connected with the military aggression of the Russian Federation.

Therefore, the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic, which has not received international recognition for 27 years of conflict, continues to position itself as a sovereign state. The Transnistrian conflict was caused by a complex set of preconditions, among which historical, ethno-national, economic and geopolitical blocs of causes can be distinguished. It was the historical development of the region and the chauvinistic ethno-national policy of the Soviet Union that became the basis of all other reasons for the appearance of another “de facto state” on the map of the post-Soviet space.

The process of peaceful resolution of the conflict, which began after the end of the phase of armed confrontation in 1992, is characterized by significant activity of external actors, but it did not lead to significant consequences. One should be especially noted – the ever-growing role of the Russian Federation, which traditionally considers this territory the sphere of its imperial state interests and uses this “frozen conflict” as a lever of influence on the pro-European Republic of Moldova. Thus, keeping the Russian peacekeeping contingent on the territory of Transnistria (despite the constant protests of the official authorities of Moldova and the world community) is an additional factor in destabilizing the situation. Therefore, it is quite logical to conclude that Russia, although it does not directly recognize the “PMR”, but provides this separatist region with significant support and considers it in its sphere of influence.

The main question remains the status of the so-called “PMR”. If the official authorities of the Republic of Moldova consider “PMR” to be autonomy with a special legal status, then the “de facto state” agrees only on the level of law with the center as part of the federation. Recent events show that “PMR” is increasingly gravitating towards the Russian Federation and intends to join it. The impetus for this is the events of 2008 during the Russian-Georgian conflict and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. But now all Russian forces are concentrated on the full-scale war in Ukraine, that’s why the Transnistria stays without strong Russian military support.

The main obstacle on the way to solving the problem of the existence of this “de facto state” is the difference in the approaches of all interested countries to defining the format of the “common state”. We can single out the following potential models of the development of events around the “PMR”:

- reintegration into the mother state;
- inclusion of the territory of the “de facto state” in the patron state;
- achieving international recognition of sovereignty;
- maintaining the status quo.

Conclusion. The inclusion of the “de facto state” territory in the patron state is quite unlikely, given the lack of adequate economic resources in the Russian Federation

and the opposition of the world community. Recognition of the independence and sovereignty of “PMR” is absolutely impossible, considering the fact that at least one state (Moldova) does not recognize this sovereignty. Reintegration into the mother country has two scenarios: either unification on the basis of federalization or full reintegration. Unification on the basis of federalization is a very likely option for solving the Transnistrian conflict, since Moldova already has a similar experience in Gagauzia. At the current stage, we observe the preservation of the status quo, which can be explained by the lack of political will of the Moldovan leadership, the Russian Federation’s attempt to prolong the phase of the “frozen conflict” and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

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