



Challenges to Eastern Security in the context of The War in Ukraine. The Case of Transnistria

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Received: 12 February 2026

Revised: 9 May 2026

Accepted: 15 June 2026

Available online: 30 July 2026

Suggested citation

A. Orjuhovschi, L. Petrilă. "Challenges to Eastern Security in the context of The War in Ukraine. The Case of Transnistria", *Research and Science Today*, vol. 2026, no. 2, art. no. 22.2026, pp. 1–18, 2026, Doi: 10.38173/RST.2026.2.1

Abstract

The Transnistrian conflict, a legacy of the dissolution of the USSR, has traditionally been analysed as an intractable frozen conflict sustained by Russian military presence, geoeconomic dependency, and unresolved identity cleavages. This article re-examines the case in light of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, asking how the war has reconfigured the structural conditions of Transnistrian separatism and the Republic of Moldova's options for reintegration.

Drawing on the literatures on frozen conflicts, geoeconomic coercion, and EU external conditionality, and employing process tracing across official documents, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the study argues that the war has inverted the dependency vector which historically consolidated Tiraspol's de facto autonomy. The closure of the Ukrainian border and the disruption of Russian energy supplies have forced the progressive integration of Transnistria into the Republic of Moldova's customs and regulatory framework, while Moldova's 2022 EU candidate status has activated conditionality pressures that operate as an indirect conflict-transformation mechanism. The article contributes to the frozen conflicts literature by showing that geoeconomic entanglement, conventionally treated as a freezing factor, can under exogenous shock become a vector of de facto reintegration even in the absence of a political settlement.

Keywords: *Frozen Conflicts; Transnistria; Geoeconomic Coercion; Eu Conditionality; Post-Soviet Security; De Facto States.*



INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the Transnistrian region has emerged as a major geopolitical flashpoint, and security challenges in this area have gained significant importance in the context of global dynamics. Both the authorities of the Republic of Moldova and those in the international community are concerned about the unregulated legal status of the region and the difficulty of ensuring lasting stability in a territory marked by complex external influences. According to Thomas de Waal, “frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space are not just about territories, but about networks of power, economy and identity that have consolidated over time” [1]. In this context, it is necessary to identify common solutions to ensure the long-term security of the region and prevent the escalation of conflicts, given its complex ties with Russia and their impact on European security.

The security challenges in Transnistria must be analysed in light of the region’s political and economic vulnerabilities, the manifestation of which can generate instability both at the national, regional and international levels. As Sabine Fischer has pointed out, “Russia’s economic and military influence in the separatist regions is a strategic instrument that blocks European integration processes and keeps the targeted states in a condition of dependence” [2]. Thus, the security strategies applicable in this area must be calibrated according to the local specifics and the geopolitical interests involved. In this regard, the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova plays a decisive role in managing this frozen conflict, and diplomacy becomes an essential tool in efforts to promote stability and balance regional and international interests.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to examine the security challenges in Eastern Europe, with a specific focus on the effects of the war in Ukraine on the Transnistrian region and how this conflict affects the dynamics of an ongoing dispute. Recent geopolitical developments, marked by Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, have highlighted risks and uncertainties with direct implications for regional security, and Transnistria, as a de facto separatist entity within the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Moldova, represents a central element in this equation.

Beginning on February 24, 2022, with the launch of the Russian Federation's "special military operation" in Ukraine, numerous international analysts have considered the possibility of the conflict expanding to the Republic of Moldova, given the presence of Russian troops on the Transnistrian territory and the strategic relevance of the region for Moscow. Consequently, the Transnistrian conflict, originating in the 1990s and having remained predominantly 'frozen' for many years, poses a risk of evolving into a new centre of military confrontation, particularly in light of the escalating tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Although the authorities in Chisinau and Tiraspol have so far managed to avoid a direct military escalation, the war in Ukraine has significantly influenced the economic and political dynamics of the region. In particular, this conflict has led to a reconfiguration of trade flows between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria, facilitating a progressive integration of the Transnistrian economy into the regulatory framework of Chisinau. Moreover, geopolitical tensions and the deterioration of economic relations between the separatist regions and the Moldovan authorities have accentuated social and economic vulnerabilities, including affecting the energy security of the region.

Simultaneously, the Russian aggression towards Ukraine has exposed numerous structural weaknesses in the energy and economic framework of the Transnistrian region, prompting concerns regarding the long-term viability of the separatist regime, which is heavily reliant on financial and logistical assistance from Moscow. Expert Dan Dungaciu emphasizes that "Transnistria's dependence on Russian energy resources is a double-edged sword - a source of influence for Moscow, but also a factor of economic vulnerability for the separatist regime"

[3]. At the same time, this international crisis has highlighted the complexity of the geopolitical factors involved, especially in terms of Russian influence and the Republic of Moldova's aspirations for European integration, which complicates any effort to resolve the conflict.

In this context, the integration of the Transnistrian region into the political and economic space of the Republic of Moldova is emerging as a major challenge in relation to the objective of accession to the European Union, given that the legal status of the region, together with the presence of Russian troops, constitute significant obstacles in this process. As Wolfgang Ischinger states, "European security cannot be strengthened without resolving frozen conflicts, and Transnistria is a relevant example of the complexity of these problems" [4].

This research examines the security challenges in Eastern Europe in the context of the war in Ukraine, with particular emphasis on the management of the Transnistrian conflict and its effects on regional stability and security. The study aims to highlight recent political and economic developments in the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria, the influence of the Russian invasion on the internal and international dynamics of the region, as well as possible solutions for managing this conflict in a constantly changing geopolitical environment.

Against this background, the article contributes to the frozen conflicts literature by arguing that the war in Ukraine has inverted the geoeconomic logic that historically sustained Transnistrian separatism. Whereas the pre-2022 configuration relied on Russian-subsidised energy and unmonitored trade corridors through Ukraine to reproduce Tiraspol's de facto autonomy, the wartime reconfiguration has made Chişinău the principal gatekeeper of Transnistrian economic survival. The case thus suggests that frozen conflicts embedded in dense geoeconomic dependencies are more responsive to exogenous shocks than institutionalist accounts typically assume, and that EU conditionality can function as an indirect conflict-transformation instrument even in the absence of a formal settlement.

Three research questions guide the analysis. (RQ1) How has the war in Ukraine altered the structural conditions that sustained the Transnistrian frozen conflict between 1992 and 2022? (RQ2) Through which mechanisms, economic, energy-related, and institutional, is the post-2022 context reshaping the bargaining positions of Chişinău, Tiraspol, and Moscow? (RQ3) To what extent does Moldova's EU candidacy function as a conditionality mechanism capable of transforming, rather than merely managing, the conflict? These questions structure the subsequent sections and are revisited, implicitly, in the concluding discussion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis draws on three intersecting bodies of scholarship. The first is the literature on frozen conflicts and unrecognised states, which has increasingly moved away from static representations of conflict stasis toward more dynamic conceptualisations. Kolstø [5] argues that the sustainability of quasi-states depends on a triangular configuration of external patronage, internal state-building capacity, and international non-recognition, any of which can be destabilised by exogenous shocks. King [6] and Caspersen [7] further show that de facto states are not merely "frozen" but are continuously reproduced through elite bargains and material flows. Smetana and Ludvík [8] explicitly problematise the "frozen" metaphor, proposing instead a spectrum between latent conflict and active hostilities. Applied to Transnistria, this literature suggests that the region's apparent stability between 1992 and 2022 was not a stable equilibrium but a reproduction mechanism sustained by a specific configuration of external and internal dependencies.

The second body of literature concerns geoeconomic coercion and energy statecraft. Blackwill and Harris [9] define geoeconomics as "the use of economic instruments to produce beneficial geopolitical results", while Wigell [10] refines this into a typology of regional powers' geoeconomic strategies, distinguishing between hegemonic, imperial, and neoliberal



modalities. Work on Russian energy statecraft shows how pipeline politics, price differentials, and debt-based leverage have historically been deployed as instruments of foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. This literature provides the conceptual grammar for analysing the energy and trade dimensions of the Transnistrian case as something other than mere economic dependency: it constitutes a form of coercive capacity whose reversal, as argued here, can recompose the balance of bargaining power.

The third body of literature addresses EU external governance and enlargement conditionality. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's external incentives model [11] remains a reference point for analysing how credible membership perspectives shape domestic reforms in candidate states. Subsequent refinements [12] have extended the model to contexts of contested statehood, where conditionality interacts with unresolved territorial disputes. For Moldova, EU candidate status since June 2022 operates at two levels: as a direct incentive for internal reform and as an indirect pressure on Transnistrian elites, whose economic survival is increasingly conditioned by alignment with EU-compatible regulatory standards. The study positions itself at the intersection of these three literatures, arguing that the Transnistrian case illustrates how the simultaneous activation of exogenous shock, geoeconomic reversal, and conditionality pressure can initiate conflict transformation processes that neither freezing nor settlement frameworks adequately capture.

These three literatures connect, for the Moldovan case, with a complementary strand of Romanian scholarship on the Eastern neighbourhood and on the internal conditions of European integration. Brie [13] conceptualises Moldova's ethnic, linguistic, and geopolitical cleavages as overlapping "identity frontiers", arguing that the boundaries that structure the Transnistrian dispute are not exclusively territorial but are produced and reproduced through cultural and institutional practices. This perspective complements the dynamic reading of frozen conflicts adopted here, by showing that freezing mechanisms operate simultaneously on material and symbolic registers. Ciot and Damaschin [14], in turn, examine the limits of the Eastern Partnership framework and argue that the uneven progress of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia towards European integration is partly explained by idiosyncratic decision-making and ideological drift on both the EU and the partner-state sides. Taken together, these contributions refine the article's conceptual framework by linking macro-level conditionality mechanisms to the mezzo-level processes of identity boundary-making and elite decision-making that shape how conditionality is translated into domestic reform outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-informed single-case design, treating Transnistria as an instrumental case [15] for examining how exogenous shocks reconfigure frozen conflicts. The choice of a single-case design is justified on two grounds: the analytical depth required for process tracing, and the specific configuration of variables (dense Russian patronage, contested sovereignty, active candidacy for EU accession, geographical exposure to an ongoing war) that makes Transnistria a critical case for theory development rather than merely a typical instance.

The analytical strategy is process tracing [16], used here to reconstruct the causal mechanisms that connect the Russian invasion of Ukraine (February 2022) to the observed shifts in Transnistria's economic, energy, and political status quo. Process tracing is particularly suited to the questions posed by this study because it allows for the disentangling of concurrent causal streams, the direct effects of the war, the closure of the Ukrainian border, the disruption of Russian gas transit, and the activation of EU candidacy, within a single analytical framework.



The empirical base draws on three categories of sources. First, official documents and declarations issued by the Republic of Moldova, the self-proclaimed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, the Russian Federation, the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE. Second, policy and analytical reports produced by research institutions with a record of specialisation on post-Soviet security (DGAP, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Carnegie Endowment, Chatham House, IPN Moldova, Expert-Grup). Third, peer-reviewed scholarship on frozen conflicts, post-Soviet security, Russian foreign policy, and EU external governance. Press sources are used exclusively for event verification and timeline reconstruction, not as evidentiary basis for theoretical claims. Source selection followed a criterion of analytical relevance to the three research questions and of temporal proximity to the 2022–2024 period of observation.

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, the case-specific nature of the findings constrains direct statistical generalisation, though analytical generalisation to comparable post-Soviet de facto states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and, cautiously, the Donbas before 2022) is plausible and is flagged in the concluding section. Second, restricted access to the territory controlled by the Tiraspol authorities required exclusive reliance on documentary sources; elite interviews were not feasible within the timeframe of the study. Third, the ongoing nature of the Russo-Ukrainian war means that the causal chain examined here is still unfolding, which makes the conclusions provisional and revisable in light of subsequent developments.

THE ORIGIN OF TRANSNISTRIAN SEPARATISM

In the aftermath of the USSR's dissolution, numerous ethnic conflicts emerged in the Greater Black Sea Region, gradually affecting its political, economic, and social spheres. These conflicts serve as a mechanism for undermining the state internally, hindering its progress.

To extend its geostrategic influence, the authorities from Moscow have utilized propaganda and misinformation to sustain Russian dominance across all facets of the ex-Soviet territory.

Russia has endorsed territorial claims that have resulted in humanitarian crises and destabilized the entire region. This situation has given rise to national liberation movements, which are essentially forms of separatism. These movements often argue that intervention by the forces from Moscow would facilitate freedom and protect the rights of the Russian minority in diverse states. However, the policies implemented have, in practice, undermined the territorial integrity of these nations. The resulting conflicts remain unresolved, with peace treaties and ceasefires frequently disregarded. Consequently, these conflicts are deemed frozen, and the ongoing negotiation processes, which occur over multiple rounds, aim to anticipate their potential escalation or development.

A notable illustration in this context is the dispute in Transnistria, located in the eastern region of the Republic of Moldova along the left bank of the Dniester River. Since its emergence, this conflict has been examined by numerous national and international experts from various perspectives, encompassing its origins, future outlooks, and potential resolutions that could facilitate its settlement.

The 1992 Dniester War should be understood as the culmination of a longer process of contested sovereignty over the left bank of the Dniester, whose modern political salience emerged with the late-Soviet mobilisation of identity politics. While some authors situate the origins of the territorial dispute in the imperial expansion of the late eighteenth century [17], a more analytically productive framing locates the immediate conflict drivers in the institutional collapse of the USSR and in the instrumentalisation of ethnolinguistic cleavages by local and external actors between 1989 and 1992. In this context, the statements of Gennady Seleznev, President of the Russian State Duma, during his official visit to Chişinău in 1992, are



analytically revealing: "We, the Russians, had to support Transnistria in the conflict. If we had not supported the Transnistrians, Moldova would now be an integral part of Romania" [17]. This statement illustrates how Russian elite discourse explicitly framed Transnistrian separatism as an instrument of geopolitical containment against Moldovan-Romanian rapprochement, a framing consistent with what Kolstø [5] describes as "sponsored separatism" within the post-Soviet typology of de facto states.

Research into the origin of the conflict has shown that the issue of Transnistria became visible with the process of the disintegration of the USSR and the independence of the former member states. Based on liberation movements and secessionist ideas, it becomes even more complex with the signing of the Declaration of Sovereignty of the MSSR. Operating each time with terms such as respect for rights and their own identity, the leaders in Tiraspol promoted a separatist regime, which is also supported by Russia. If at first the emphasis was placed on the linguistic issue, with a tendency to preserve the Moldovan language with the Cyrillic alphabet and Russian as the language of communication, during the 1990s the idea of independence and, later, accession to the Russian Federation was increasingly and actively promoted. The Transnistrian Moldavian Autonomous Republic was not recognized by the international community, not even by the supporters of this regime, the leaders in Moscow.

The separatist enclaves served as a viable tool for the central authority to apply pressure on the republics seeking national independence, compelling them to conform and ensuring control through threats to their territorial integrity [18]. This method was also used in the case of the MSSR, where the leaders of the Russian-speaking population, the majority in the districts on the left bank of the Dniester, mobilized, with direct support from Moscow, to create an autonomous republic in this region, which aimed to defend socialism.

The developments of the ethno-political conflict in the MSSR put pressure on the authorities, through protests and clashes, the geopolitical vector of the Kremlin authorities, although varying, pursued a single goal: "preserving the territorial integrity of the fraternal Union"[19]. Consequently, movements emerged that challenged the concept of sovereignty and subsequently independence, supporting the policy advocated by Moscow, which disregarded the notion of autonomy or the development of the MSSR as entirely separate and independent from the USSR. Therefore, because of the movements, which promoted completely opposite concepts, the territory of the MSSR became a platform for manifesting the interests of the Kremlin leaders, and the idea of sovereignty, which anticipated that of obtaining independence, became increasingly difficult to achieve [20].

Following the Declaration of Sovereignty on May 23, 1991, the Republic of Moldova was declared a unitary and indivisible state, affirming the supremacy of its Constitution and laws over those of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, establishing the separation of powers within the government (legislative, executive, judicial), instituting republican citizenship, and officially designating the territory as a demilitarized zone.

This declaration of independence represents a significant milestone in the history of the Republic of Moldova, as well as a crucial element of its modern statehood. This event marked the establishment of the nation as a sovereign entity with democratic institutions [21].

Transnistrian separatism, one of the critical issues surrounding the Republic, originated with the Declaration of Sovereignty and has become increasingly intricate since the Republic of Moldova declared its independence, continuing to pose an unresolved challenge for the state today.

The dissolution of the USSR led to a division among Soviet citizens, with one faction supporting the centrally endorsed communist regime and the other opposing it. The Transnistrian dispute, in this context, "was the conflict between the loyal squires and the opponents of imperial interests, who pursued the sole goal - the elimination of the imperial



presence on this territory" [22]. Thus, this "border" between the two participating parties was characterized by the ethno-cultural problem: on the one hand the Romanian majority and on the other hand the Russian speakers [23].

The anti-Romanian policy and propaganda strategies that the centre applied were determined by the fear of the leaders in Moscow that the Great Union of Romania and the restoration of the territory with grants as in 1918 could become a reality again [24].

Therefore, Transnistrian separatism has its origins in the process of the decline of the USSR, as an anti-revolutionary reaction, inspired from the outside, expertly speculating on the problems existing inside, that is, interethnic differences.

The Declaration of Sovereignty and, later, the *Declaration of Independence* are a representation of the aspirations of the Moldovan people to establish their legality and social stability. The Republic of Moldova has become "a subject of international treaties, participating in the European process by expressing its consent to the principles and norms of international law, assuming its responsibility to reject confrontations not only at the level of international relations, but also interethnic ones" [25]. According to these Declarations, the state has the power to independently resolve the linguistic problem and the vector of its development.

Despite the favourable conditions for the functioning of languages on the territory of the republic, the relations between the dominant and minority national groups have highlighted tensions within interethnic relations. Consequently, the escalation of the disintegration process of the USSR, particularly the Republic of Moldova's separation, has led to the proliferation of ethnic-based propaganda, which has been fuelled by the dissemination of misinformation to the public via Russian-language media channels. The authorities in Chisinau adopted the Moldovan language as the state language, a decision that faced severe criticism from extremist groups advocating for the socio-political interests of Russian speakers, who support the notion of autonomy for the Gagauz and Transnistrians [26].

The military capabilities, weaponry, and combat assets of the Transnistrian region are intricately connected to the strategic goals of the USSR, which are now represented by the Russian Federation, in southern and central Europe.

As one of the most militarily and industrially integrated components of the Soviet Union in the region, the MSSR saw the Moscow authorities establish a series of strategic assets that enabled continued control over its territory. The Dubasari hydroelectric power station, which provided most of the electricity needed by the MSSR, the Moldavskaya thermal power station, and the Ribnita steel plant were important nodes of the Soviet metal industry. On August 29, 1991, I. Smirnov, who was in Kiev at the head of a Transnistrian delegation with the aim of requesting recognition of the autonomous republic on the left bank of the Dniester and the creation of a commission that would coordinate Dniester-Ukrainian relations, was arrested. The separatist was charged "under art. 2031, p.2 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova on civil disobedience to state authorities, which provided for a sentence of 3 to 10 years, with exile from 2 to 5 years"[27].

On September 2, 1991, an ultimatum was established, which involved a definitive dismissal of the notion of independence for the Republic of Moldova, by the fourth congress of councillors and deputies from Tiraspol. Additionally, during this congress, the Constitution of the RSNM was ratified, declaring it to be 'a multinational, sovereign, and independent state within the USSR'[28].

The Transnistrian Moldavian Republic, which declared independence on September 2, 1990, has yet to receive international recognition, including from the Russian Federation, which was its primary supporter during the separatist movement in Tiraspol.



THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY

The Transnistrian conflict originated from the separatist aspirations of both the local elites and the populace residing on the left bank of the Dniester River. Despite the declaration of independence by the Republic of Moldova on August 27, 1991, this region continued to align its foreign policy with that of the Russian Federation through: industrialization, concentration of Soviet weapons and equipment, urbanization of the region. In this sense, the geopolitical and geostrategic interests of the Soviet Great Power on the territory of Transnistria can be defined as follows:

- preserving Russia's strategic positions in Eastern Europe;
- advocating for the rights of the Russian community, which constitutes an ethnic minority within the Republic of Moldova;
- maintaining industrial-military relations;
- strengthening Transnistria-Russia relations and blocking the evolution of relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova [29].

The linguistic and Moldovan identity problem has been the subject of several analyses by historians, but also one of the current issues for the authorities in Tiraspol and Chisinau.

The identity problem arose with the collapse of the USSR, when the population on the left bank of the Dniester River tended to build an ethnicity different from the Moldovan one. The desire to become an independent republic of Transnistrians generated this "identity confusion". On one side, there were advocates for liberation from Soviet oppression and the removal of any communist presence, while on the other side, there were individuals striving to preserve Moscow's influence in the region by fostering closer ties with the Russian Federation. These conflicting perspectives among the populace significantly impacted the social fabric of the Republic of Moldova.

Conceptually, the identity cleavage in Transnistria is best understood not as a primordial division but as a politically constructed boundary, produced through Soviet-era administrative decisions, post-1991 elite mobilisation, and the continued flow of Russian-language media [30]. Survey evidence from Blakkisrud and Kolstø [30] and from O'Loughlin, Kolossov and Toal [31] suggests that Transnistrian identity operates less as a coherent ethnic category and more as a civic-territorial attachment to the de facto state itself. This finding has direct implications for reintegration strategies: if identity in Transnistria is institutionally produced rather than ethnolinguistically predetermined, institutional reforms and EU-aligned economic integration may erode the boundary over time, even without formal settlement. This theoretical reframing connects the identity dimension of the conflict to the article's broader argument about the reversibility of freezing mechanisms under exogenous pressure.

THE TRANSNISTRIAN ISSUE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UKRAINIAN WAR

The central analytical claim of this section is that the Russo-Ukrainian war functions as an exogenous shock that recomposes the geoeconomic foundations of Transnistrian separatism. Drawing on the geoeconomic framework outlined in Section 2, the analysis examines three interconnected mechanisms: (a) the disruption of the trade corridor through Ukraine, which had previously enabled Tiraspol's extra-legal commercial operations; (b) the energy reconfiguration forced by the destruction of Ukrainian infrastructure and the unreliability of Russian gas transit; and (c) the acceleration of Moldovan regulatory integration, which converts a previously permissive border into a binding institutional constraint. Empirically traced across the 2022–2024 period, these mechanisms produce an inversion of dependency relations: rather than reinforcing Transnistria's autonomy, the wartime configuration increases Tiraspol's structural reliance on Chişinău and the EU regulatory space, a finding that process



tracing below substantiates. As a consequence of the Russian attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, many observers warned of the possible imminent expansion of the conflict into the Republic of Moldova [32]. Despite these speculations, the authorities in both Chisinau and Tiraspol managed to avoid military confrontation. Even without active military operations inside Moldova, the war in Ukraine radically transformed the variables of the Transnistrian peace settlement.

After Vladimir Putin launched what he defined as a "special military operation" [33] in Ukraine, in February 2022, many analysts predicted that the conflict would inevitably expand into the Republic of Moldova due to the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria and the strategic importance of the secessionist region for a possible Russian advance towards Odessa. The armed conflict in the former Soviet Republic of Moldova was provoked in the early 1990s, when the secession of the country's eastern districts led to open warfare, manifested in the form of liberation movements. A temporary settlement of the conflict between Moldova and Transnistria was eventually achieved through the "5+2" negotiation platform initiated in 2005, in which Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) served as mediators, and the United States and the European Union participated with observer status [34]. Russian aggression in Ukraine has increased the risk that decades of frozen conflict will again turn into open war. The fact that the two important mediators in the Transnistrian peace settlement, Russia and Ukraine, are engaged in an active military conflict has made it officially impossible to continue negotiations to resolve the Transnistrian War [35].

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has led to significant alterations that have impacted the economic dynamics of the Transnistrian situation, intensifying economic and social vulnerabilities in both the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria more than any other occurrence in recent decades. It has also created opportunities for the Moldovan authorities to incorporate Transnistria into a common customs area. Russian aggression against Ukraine will further accelerate the integration of the Moldovan and Transnistrian economies as long as those Russian troops in Transnistria cannot reach the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, on the Transnistrian-controlled side. Consequently, the Moldovan authorities are compelled to promptly develop a comprehensive long-term integration strategy.

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has resulted in an energy crisis affecting both Moldova and Transnistria [36], as they receive gas from Gazprom via a transit pipeline that runs through Ukraine. As Russian missile attacks have consistently targeted Ukraine's energy infrastructure, both Moldovan and Transnistrian leaders have expressed concerns about the sustainability of Russian gas supplies. In October 2022, Gazprom also reduced gas supplies to Moldova, and Moldovan authorities have alleged that Russia is using gas to undermine the Moldovan government. At the same time, Gazprom has deepened The Russo-Ukrainian war is also a significant blow to Ukrainian infrastructure. The destruction of Ukraine's power generation facilities, along with much of the country's transportation system, has left both Moldova and Transnistria disconnected from and dependent on post-Soviet infrastructure [37].

The deterioration of post-Soviet relations commenced on February 28, 2022, when Ukraine shut down the Transnistrian border crossings along the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, which was the sole route for Transnistria to engage in international trade without passing through Moldovan customs. Since the beginning of the secession process, the Transnistrian authorities have used this section of the border as a means of access to carry out illegal commercial operations [38]. This decision forced the Transnistrian authorities to reorient their trade towards Moldova and, as a result, by the end of 2022, right-bank Moldova became the main destination for Transnistrian exports, which for 2022 amounted to 738 million USD, of which exports to the right-bank of the Republic of Moldova amounted to 301 million USD, while exports to the EU were 261 million USD [39]. In the current geopolitical landscape,



where Transnistria is unable to export goods to Ukraine, 76 percent of its products are now directed towards the markets of the Republic of Moldova and the European Union [40].

As a result, for the first time in decades, Moldova has the power to finally control and coordinate Transnistrian exports. In other words, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict contributed to the full integration of Transnistrian trade into the legal framework of the Republic of Moldova. In the early 2000s, when Moldova and Ukraine implemented a series of measures that increased joint control of goods crossing their border, Transnistria defined what Moldova called the “establishment of a legal regime and the limitation of smuggling operations” as a “trade blockade”. This time, the Transnistrian authorities have reiterated their opposition to the “Moldovan blockade”, but they have no choice but to cooperate with the Moldovan authorities if they want to continue their trade operations.

This trade reorientation is compounded by the deep crisis of the Transnistrian economy, which is heavily dependent on Russian gas both for industrial production and for electricity generation at the Cuciurgan (Moldavskaia GRES) thermal power plant in Dnestrovsk — the largest such facility in the Republic of Moldova, currently operated by the separatist authorities on the shore of the Cuciurgan reservoir, at the border with Ukraine. Conceptually, this configuration exemplifies what the geoeconomic literature describes as asymmetric energy dependence [9]: a single production node supplies a majority of downstream consumption, granting its operator significant leverage, while its own operation depends on an external input (Russian gas) whose delivery has itself become politically contingent. The wartime disruption of this input converts a source of leverage into a vector of vulnerability.

The Transnistrian authorities have introduced an “economic emergency regime” [41] that drastically reduces electricity and gas consumption. Under normal conditions, Transnistrian gas-fired power plants provide most of Moldova’s electricity. However, in the face of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, all major Transnistrian industrial enterprises are shut down. The country cannot generate enough electricity for the entire Moldovan market. As such, Transnistria is facing a reduction in tax revenues due to the decline in industrial production. In December 2022, Moldova and Transnistria reached a temporary agreement. According to it, Transnistria can receive all the gas that Gazprom has agreed to deliver to Moldova. This would mean that Moldova is supplied with 50 percent of its electricity at \$73 per MW/h from the Russian-owned Moldavskaia GRES. The Moldovan authorities favoured this agreement over buying gas from Romania, which was being sold at a much higher price [42]. Based on this agreement, the Republic of Moldova opted for cheaper Russian energy supplies instead of aligning itself with its Western partners, many of whom have taken decisive steps to limit their dependence on Russian gas in the wake of the Ukrainian conflict [43]. The Moldovan government chose this short-term solution with the expectation that it would be able to switch to Western energy sources in the future once prices fell.

MILITARY PRESENCE – A SECURITY THREAT

The existence of this separatist territory represents a serious security problem for Moldova, especially in the context of an armed conflict in Eastern Europe. It is internationally recognized that Russia exercises effective control over Transnistria. On March 15, 2022, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted an act, according to which Transnistria is considered a territory occupied by Russia [44].

During the press conference with the President of the Republic, organized on the sixth of June 2023, in Chisinau, several topics were addressed, the most important being the Transnistrian issue. At the same time, several questions were asked regarding the appropriate format that should be applied in the negotiations, with particular emphasis on the 5 + 2 Format: "For us, there is only one form of resolving the Transnistrian conflict, and that is the peaceful



form. This format (the 5+2 format) is not functional and I don't see how it would be functional considering what is happening (...) It is none of Russia's business what is happening in the Republic of Moldova, I don't want to go into details on how we should resolve the conflict, the Russian army must withdraw its army from there" [45]. Simultaneously, several statements and threats from the Kremlin addressed to the authorities in Chisinau [46], who are trying to manipulate and destabilize the state through economic means, such as gas, were analysed: "Moscow continues to show disrespect for the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, but the government in Chisinau, which represents the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, no longer humbles itself as it did in the past in front of the Kremlin, but defends the interests of the citizens and calls things by their names. When we see disrespect from Moscow, we say about it. When we see attempts to destabilize the situation in the Republic of Moldova, we said it loud and clear, we did not hide the details as other governments in the past" [47]. A topic addressed in several discussions, the proposal to grant a special status to Transnistria is envisaged as a solution for resolving the dispute only by the Republic of Moldova, not the area on the left bank of the Dniester River.

According to the Political Bureau for Reintegration, the special status of Transnistria is provided for in the Constitution. Thus, respecting the norms of the European Charter on autonomy, the Republic of Moldova is a unitary state, and the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic is a component part of it, but with administrative powers at the level of its territory [48]. The Political Bureau for Reintegration is a government structure specialized in managing the Transnistrian issue, and in particular the negotiation process.

Transnistria hosts the largest ammunition depot in Eastern Europe, Cobasna, established in 1949 as part of the Soviet military logistics network and retaining this function through the post-Cold War transition. The Transnistrian region currently hosts the Operational Group of Russian Forces, which guards the facility, and the so-called Russian peacekeeping mission deployed in the demilitarised zone. Analytically, this configuration generates a classic security dilemma [49] for the Republic of Moldova: the presence of Russian troops and unaccounted ammunition on sovereign Moldovan territory constitutes a continuous security threat, while any unilateral Moldovan action to address the threat risks triggering the very escalation it seeks to prevent. The combination of an unaccountable military presence with a politically aligned local administration in Tiraspol thus functions as a structural vulnerability rather than a contingent one. Moldovan and international actors have repeatedly called on Russia to withdraw its military forces and ammunition [50]. At the 1999 Istanbul Summit, Russia committed to this demand and, between 2001 and 2004, destroyed part of the ammunition under the supervision of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) [51]. However, the Russian Federation failed to withdraw its army and approximately 20,000 further tonnes of ammunition remain on site. The ammunition is expired, and its use is assessed as highly dangerous: according to a study by the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova, in the event of a deflagration, the power of the explosion could be equivalent to that of an atomic bomb. Moldovan authorities do not have access to the warehouse, and the only available information on its contents dates from 2006, when an international fact-finding visit was organised for OSCE ambassadors [52].

The 1 June 2023 European Political Community summit, hosted at Mimi Castle in Bulboaca and attended by representatives of 45 European states alongside EU institutional leadership, symbolically anchored Moldova's European trajectory and placed the Transnistrian question on a visibly multilateral agenda [53]. Beyond its symbolic dimension, the summit consolidated a discursive shift from the effectively suspended 5+2 format toward an EU-centered framing of the conflict, in line with the conditionality logic identified in the theoretical framework.



Considering that the Transnistria issue concerns security not only in the Republic of Moldova, but in the entire region, it was proposed to resolve it through EU accession, excluding the area on the left bank of the Nistru River, an idea supported by Joseph Borell – the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

The interest of the authorities in Chisinau is the reintegration of Transnistria in all aspects, both economic and political. The proposal of European leaders regarding the gradual accession to the EU: first the Republic of Moldova, then, over time, Transnistria, was viewed with suspicion by Moldovan representatives, since the area on the left bank of the Dniester River "cannot function as an island" [54], emphasizing, in particular, the economic aspects and relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol: *"The businesses established post-1991 are numerous, and not all enterprises currently in operation date back to that year. Therefore, a thorough analysis is essential to navigate the various circumstances. Many of these businesses operate outside the legal framework, which contributes to significant resistance against the notion of reintegration. This reintegration would bring numerous activities into the legal domain, making them more transparent. It is particularly important to note that as the Republic of Moldova aspires to become a candidate for accession, it will face new requirements and stricter regulations, affecting many activities on both sides of the Dniester River."* [55].

Despite this high-level engagement, the resolution of the Transnistrian issue remains highly complex and lacks a definitive settlement. The outcome depends not only on international stakeholders and the government in Chişinău but also on the authorities in Tiraspol, who continue to support the pro-Russian status quo and who so far have not publicly acknowledged that the continued presence of Russian troops constitutes a contributing factor to regional instability.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the Transnistrian conflict plays an important role not only for the Republic of Moldova but also for the broader evolution of the Russo-Ukrainian confrontation. The trajectory of the latter transforms the left bank of the Dniester into a plausible escalation pathway that could enable the expansion of Russian control across the post-Soviet space. Although conflict settlement becomes more difficult with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the current configuration may nevertheless open an opportunity for the economic reintegration of Transnistria into the Republic of Moldova, given that the principal mediators in the 5+2 framework are themselves parties to the war. Over time, the incentive structure facing Tiraspol elites, regarding the maintenance and evolution of enterprises and of internal and external trade, will likely be redirected towards the West; absent such reorientation, the budget deficit and the social situation of the area are expected to deteriorate further.

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE CONTECT OF THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

The accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union presents numerous challenges, with one of the most intricate being the situation concerning the separatist region of Transnistria. This territory, which operates independently of Chisinau's control, poses a significant barrier to the nation's European aspirations in political, economic, and security dimensions.

First of all, the Transnistrian issue calls into question the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. The EU promotes the principle of state unity, but avoids the integration of countries with frozen conflicts. In this context, the question arises whether Moldova could join the EU without a definitive settlement of the conflict, following the model of Cyprus, where European legislation does not apply in the separatist territory. At the same time, Russia maintains considerable influence in the region, through the presence of its troops and economic support, which further complicates the prospects for a peaceful settlement.



In the framework of Moldova's journey toward joining the European Union, the situation in the separatist region of Transnistria poses a considerable obstacle. This protracted conflict not only undermines the territorial integrity of Moldova but also introduces uncertainties regarding the nation's prospective integration into Europe. Nevertheless, officials from the European Union have suggested that the settlement of the Transnistrian issue is not a condition for Moldova's accession to the EU.

In June 2022, the Republic of Moldova obtained the status of an EU candidate country, which prompted the authorities in Chisinau to accelerate the implementation of the reforms necessary to open accession negotiations. However, the presence of a frozen conflict on its territory complicates the integration process. Some analysts believe that although the EU claims that the Transnistrian issue will not prevent accession, in practice, the existence of a separatist region supported by Russia could constitute a significant obstacle.

In this context, the Moldovan authorities have adopted various measures to manage the situation. Since January 2024, Chisinau has initiated the transposition of the new Customs Code, aiming at the economic integration of the Transnistrian region with the rest of the country. At the same time, President Maia Sandu mentioned the possibility of joining the EU in two steps, initially without Transnistria, but with the prospect of the region's subsequent reintegration [56].

Comparative scholarship on EU pre-accession instruments reinforces this reading. Corpădean [57] argues, on the basis of the Western Balkans experience with the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), that EU financial conditionality can function as an indirect conflict-resolution tool when it couples macroeconomic support with targeted reforms on rule of law, anti-corruption, and minority protection. Transposed to the Moldovan case, this logic suggests that the Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova and the broader Growth Plan announced in 2024 can produce reintegration effects in Transnistria not through direct political pressure, but through the gradual alignment of administrative and regulatory standards. Corpădean and Pop-Flanja [58] add a further dimension by documenting the rapid reconfiguration of Romanian public and institutional perceptions of Ukraine and Moldova after February 2022, a shift driven in substantial part by civil-society actors and sustained at the EU level through Bucharest's advocacy for Chișinău's candidate status. This reconfiguration is relevant to the present argument because it identifies an additional causal mechanism, bilateral political-societal support from a neighbouring EU member state, through which conditionality pressures reach the Transnistrian periphery.

The support of European and international partners is essential for finding a sustainable solution. The European Union has demonstrated openness to the integration of the Republic of Moldova, providing financial and technical support for the implementation of the necessary reforms. However, internal challenges, such as corruption and the influence of oligarchs, remain significant obstacles to European integration.

Therefore, the future of Transnistria is intricately tied to the European trajectory of the Republic of Moldova. While EU membership may not provide a quick resolution to the conflict, the process of integration can establish beneficial conditions for the reintegration of the region, facilitated by economic incentives, institutional reforms, and the strengthening of the rule of law. The diplomatic and strategic initiatives of Chisinau will play a vital role in shaping a European future for the Republic of Moldova, encompassing the Transnistrian region as well.

CONCLUSIONS

The Transnistrian conflict represents one of the most complex security challenges in Eastern Europe, with significant geopolitical implications, especially in the context of the war

in Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. The evolution of this frozen conflict has been deeply influenced by the dynamics of relations between the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and the European Union. The historical analysis of the Transnistrian issue highlights the fact that the region has remained in a state of de facto separation from the Republic of Moldova, being politically, economically and militarily supported by the Russian Federation. However, after 2022, Transnistria's dependence on Russia has become more vulnerable due to international sanctions and logistical restrictions generated by the conflict in Ukraine. In the perspective of the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, the Transnistrian file represents both an obstacle and an opportunity. On the one hand, the presence of an unrecognized territory and partially controlled by an external power raises issues of security and internal cohesion. On the other hand, the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova with the European Union could constitute an incentive for the peaceful resolution of the conflict through economic integration and institutional reforms.

The main obstacles to attaining a sustainable resolution for the Transnistrian conflict are shaped by several factors: the lack of strong political will for international mediation, Russia's reluctance to cede its influence in the area, and the economic and social difficulties associated with a possible reintegration process. As a result, the future of Transnistria remains uncertain and heavily depends on the outcomes of the war in Ukraine, the geopolitical strategies of the EU and NATO, and Chisinau's ability to address this matter in a practical and sustainable way.

Theoretical implications

The analysis carries three implications for the scholarly literatures engaged in this article. First, it supports dynamic reconceptualisations of frozen conflicts [8] by showing that apparently stable post-Soviet conflict configurations are in fact sustained by specific material arrangements, trade corridors, energy subsidies, security guarantees, whose disruption can reopen bargaining space without requiring a formal settlement. Second, the Transnistrian case refines the geoeconomic literature [9][10] by illustrating how the same instrument (asymmetric energy dependence) can function as leverage for the dominant actor under stable conditions and as vulnerability for the dependent actor under exogenous shock. Third, the case speaks to debates on EU external governance [11][12] by demonstrating how candidate status, combined with crisis conditions, can activate conditionality mechanisms that operate indirectly on contested territories, transforming conflict dynamics without requiring recognition of the contested entity.

Limitations

The findings are subject to three principal limitations. First, the single-case design, while analytically appropriate for theory development, does not allow for direct statistical generalisation; the argument generalises analytically to comparable post-Soviet de facto states but requires further case-based verification. Second, documentary reliance substitutes for direct elite interviews with Transnistrian decision-makers, which remain inaccessible under current conditions; triangulation via official statements, leaked documents, and independent reporting partially mitigates this constraint but cannot fully replace it. Third, the causal chain examined here is still unfolding: conclusions are therefore provisional and sensitive to how the Russo-Ukrainian war, Moldova's EU accession negotiations, and the 2024–2025 energy transition evolve in the period following the study's temporal cut-off.



Avenues for further research

Three avenues for future research follow from this analysis. First, a structured comparison between Transnistria and other post-Soviet de facto states, notably Abkhazia and South Ossetia, could test whether the “inverted dependency” mechanism identified here travels to other cases with different configurations of patronage and geography. Second, sustained investigation of elite perceptions and bargaining strategies within Tiraspol, conducted through interviews, discourse analysis, or archival work as access permits, would illuminate the micro-foundations of the structural shifts identified at the macro level. Third, the role of the Moldovan diaspora and of domestic public opinion in shaping the political sustainability of reintegration merits dedicated empirical work, given the polarised reception of the EU accession trajectory in both right-bank Moldova and the Transnistrian region. Taken together, these directions would extend the analytical framework proposed here and strengthen the empirical basis for conclusions about the transformation of frozen conflicts under wartime conditions.

A fourth and particularly promising line of inquiry concerns the role of Moldovan civil society as a vector of reintegration. Recent work by Costea and Brie [59] documents how the combined shocks of the 2022 Russian invasion and the EU candidate-status decision have transformed the conditions under which Moldovan non-governmental organisations operate, turning civil society into a central channel for the absorption of EU conditionality. Corpădean and Pantea [60] show, on the basis of qualitative fieldwork with young Moldovans engaged in civic organisations, that the war in Ukraine has produced both heightened collective anxiety and increased collective efficacy around European integration. Integrating these findings into the analytical framework proposed here would require extending the focus of process tracing from macro-level geoeconomic mechanisms to the mezzo-level actors that translate conditionality pressures into domestic reform outcomes, including in relation to the Transnistrian region.

Author Contributions: All listed authors must have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not required for this study.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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