


The Transnistrian War: Post-Conflict negotiations and the spheres of influence In Eastern Europe

Érico Azera *

PUC-Rio

*Autor correspondente. E-mail: erico.rocha.contato@gmail.com

Abstract

This work explores the normative constructions following the Transnistrian War (1990–1992) and analyzes Moldova’s geostrategic role in Eastern Europe. First, the article will analyze the background of the Transnistrian conflict and the concreteness of the separatist war. Then, the disputes between Western players and Russia are addressed. Finally, the text will discuss the post-conflict negotiations and its ineffectiveness in the conflict aftermath. Moldova and the Transnistrian breakaway state have been targeted by Western enlargement policies since the 1990s. At present, this strategy is being heavily opposed by Moscow in the post-Soviet space and clashes of interests between the West and Russia are frequently observed. The main objective of the article is to understand how the failures in the resolution of the Transnistria conflict occurred and how they are related to the disputes of influence in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, these failures are an obstacle in Moldovan contemporary geopolitics, which is increasingly inclined towards the Euro-Atlantic axis fearing Russian expansionism in the post-Soviet states. The methodology used in the study consists mainly in data collection and literature review regarding the history of the conflict itself, as well as the analysis of primary sources concerning the proposals for the conflict’s resolution.

Keywords: Moldova, Transnistria, Frozen conflict, Conflict resolution

1. Introduction

Eastern European countries are at the center of disputes that raise geopolitical discussions, especially regarding the clashes between spheres of influence over the region. The disputes refer mainly to the Western advance of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against the interests of the Russian Federation in the region. Moscow has been losing the prestige it had during the Soviet period, a process that culminated in the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991 (Devyatkov 2012). Therefore, the Kremlin seeks to strengthen cultural, economic, and political ties with former Soviet states (Sanchez 2009; Miarka

2020), and we can point to Moldova as one of the most prominent cases where rivalries are observed, especially when we direct our analysis to the Transnistrian War (1990–92) and its aftermath.

The unilateral declaration of independence by the Pridnestrovian Republic of Moldova (PRM) strengthened Russia's ties with Tiraspol, which was seen as a guarantee to maintain the influence on the Moldovan side, increasingly conditioned toward rapprochement to Romania and other European states. Given this, the maintenance of the frozen conflict¹ is seen as beneficial from the Russian point of view, as it would allow Moscow's presence near Chisinau and the permanence of the Russian pacification troops on the east bank of the Dniester River. This is why attempts to impose a solution to the separatist issue were initially led by Russia, which established proactive diplomacy to contain the Euro-Atlantic advances.

However, the 1997 and 2003 negotiation failures have boosted the Western offensive in securing the Moldovan distancing from Russia and creating in Moldova a stimulus for entering into membership processes with the EU and NATO. One of the most relevant points concerning the constant changes in Chisinau diplomacy refers to the domestic political dynamics that are directly responsible for the advances and retreats in the conflict resolution talks. There is a Western bargaining system toward Moldova that is based on economic cooperation and military support against possible violations by Moscow (Kennedy 2016; Rogstad 2018). Simultaneously, the Soviet past in Transnistria is constantly mobilized, and the continuing financial support directed to Tiraspol was used to reaffirm the Russian presence against EU-NATO enlargement.

Research detailed in this paper sought to analyze the causes of the separatist conflict and the first proposals to achieve a ceasefire in the region, aiming to avoid new armed confrontations. Then, we discussed the geostrategy of post-1991 and the Western advances toward Moldova within the framework of European institutionalism. The rapprochement of the Western sphere of influence occurred through agreements and projects in Eastern Europe, which will be detailed in the following sections. Finally, as the study's primary objective, the Russian and Western proposals for a final agreement to solve the frozen conflict are presented. Several actors and institutions were involved throughout the meetings, with an increase in European participation after the 2003 agreements.

The document's objectives aim to contribute new interpretations of the Transnistrian War and the Eastern Europe dynamics research field, crucial for understanding the contemporary Russian military reactions to Western advances conflict under the logic of the two axis of influence. Taking into account the existing gaps in previous works, this article seeks to address with a higher level of detail the memorandums and other conflict resolution initiatives, understanding them as an active part of the maintenance of a frozen conflict in Transnistria. We also point out that other research possibilities can be developed based on the conclusions brought by the following

1. This article uses the definition brought by Tudoroiu (2016, 2) and McFarlane (2008, p. 23 *apud* Tudoroiu (2016, 2) that define frozen conflicts as "situations of conflict where there are no active large-scale hostilities, there's a durable mutually agreed ceasefire, but efforts to achieve a political settlement or peace are unsuccessful". In addition, it will be also assumed that "the opposing parts in frozen conflicts are usually internationally recognized states on the one hand and de facto states on the other" based on the work of Cuppuleri (2020).

article, such as a more detailed analysis of the domestic politics in Moldova and the study of the multilateral talks after the Meseberg dialogues in 2010, which intensified European advances in the region.

2. The Transnistrian War and its regional aspects

To begin with, it is necessary to contextualize the formation of the separatist movements in Transnistria and the fabrication of an anti-Western and anti-Moldovan opinion east of the Dniester River, related to issues of identity and identification among the Slavic populations living there. It is crucial to emphasize the underlying tensions that led to the Transnistrian War, which took place amid the collapse of the Soviet Union. Understanding the rivalries between the Western expansion front and the Russian resistance in Eastern Europe requires a detailed knowledge of this process. The breakaway state's use of Soviet history is still strongly linked to these forms of resistance.

In 1990, Moldova gained its independence from the USSR, and from then on, a territorial split began between the western part of the Dniester River and a thin strip of land in the east, Transnistria. While the country encompasses various peoples and cultures, there is a prevalent Romanian ethnic majority in the western bank. Additionally, Moldovan elites identify with Europe and adjusted to the language, resulting in the creation of a new language (Adam 2017; Cojocaru 2006; Dailey, Laber e Whitman 1993). However, a segment of the population, primarily consisting of Russian speakers and Slavs, viewed the process of Westernization with skepticism and apprehension, fearing a potential reunion with Romania (Cojocaru 2006; Sanchez 2009). They believed in maintaining ties with Moscow instead.

Tensions peaked and resulted in secession movements in the eastern part of Moldova and the Gagauzia region (consisting of a Turkish-speaking minority in the southeast). In September, the Congress of Representatives of the Transnistrian People met in Tiraspol. The declaration of the Pridnestrovian Republic of Moldova was made unilaterally, leading to the conflict. It is essential to mention that the USSR did not recognize the independence of the PRM since President Mikhail Gorbachev considered it "without legal basis" and annulled it by presidential decree in 1990 (Urse 2008, 58).

The resistance movements against the advancing Moldovan forces built blockades on the banks of the Dniester River and managed to prevent Transnistria from being incorporated into the territory of Moldova. The fighting forces on the Moldovan side consisted of volunteers, police, and members of the armed forces, and on the Transnistrian side, they included Cossack fighters, militia, and soldiers from the 14th Russian Army (Dailey, Laber e Whitman 1993, 20). The Russian troops, stationed in the region since the 1950s, are relevant for us to understand the identification of the PRM with the Russian presence, seen as "guarantors of the security of the population" (Citac *apud* Dailey, Laber e Whitman (1993, 21)). The presence of the contingent of approximately 10,000 men in the East was crucial for preserving the territory of Transnistria, given that, in addition to the presence of soldiers, there were ammunition depots that were used in the independence conflicts. The decision of General Alexander Lebed in entering the war with Russian soldiers played a crucial

role in maintaining PRM's sovereignty against Moldova and Romania's occupying forces, considered by Transnistrians as "invaders", "enemies" and "fascists" (Adam 2017; Cojocaru 2006, 264).

Moscow interceded with the Tiraspol fighting forces addressing the decisions of Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, the commander of the Commonwealth of Independent States Army. In 1992, he authorized the transfer of military equipment from the Russian Army to the Transnistrian government (Azrael, 1996 *apud* Adam (2017, 21)) and at the same time, during the Yeltsin government (1991-1999), the separatist groups received support from the 14th Russian Army. Strengthening political ties between Russia and Transnistria also increased identification between their populations. This can be seen from the fact that 80% of the soldiers in the Russian battalion stationed in the region come from the trans-Dniester area (Arbatov, 1997 *apud* Adam (2017, 21)).

Authors have differing opinions on how to categorize the armed conflict. Some attribute them to ethnic factors (Dailey, Laber e Whitman 1993; Sanchez 2009; Beyer e Wolff 2016; Rogstad 2018) while others consider economic and geostrategic factors as the leading causes (Kunze e Bohnet 2007; Grund, Sieg e Wesemann 2011). Undoubtedly, we must think of Moldova as a melting pot of ethnic rivalries. For example, in 1989, demographic surveys indicated that the population comprised 65% Moldovan, 14% Ukrainian, and 13% Russian (Urse 2008, 57). The reasons behind the outbreak of conflicts were strongly influenced by these motives, as evidenced by the "Granting the Moldavian Language the Status of State Language and the Return to the Latin Script of 1989" initiative (Dailey, Laber e Whitman 1993, 15), which provided the replacement of the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin one. This measure is imperative in distancing Moldova from the sphere of influence of the former Soviet Union.

The efforts to promote a proper Moldovan culture went against the interests of the inhabitants of the trans-Dniester; many settled there due to USSR policies that created in Tiraspol the industrial center of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). Transnistria was the target of an intense migratory influx of Russians, and from this process originated elites that continued to head domestic political decisions. Igor Smirnov was the first Transnistrian president and remained in power from 1991 to 2011, relying on the support of these manufacturing industry elites that control the industrial and financial sectors, like the Sheriff group (a holding with several subsidiaries created in 1993) (Devyatkov 2012, 58). The political leadership of the PRM imagines, until nowadays, a modernized look inspired by the Soviets. That is why both ethnic and economic aspects must be considered in the emancipation process.

The confrontations, which had their peak in March 1992, had as focal points the regions of Cocieri, Cosnita, Dubasari, and Tighina and mobilized the industrial system structure for the production of weapons (Harrington 2022). As a result, the Moldovan military fled and the breakaway state became *de facto* independent. The outcome of the clashes is pointed out in different ways, but figures of 500 dead and 80,000 displaced are estimated (Arbatov, 1997, p. 178 *apud* Adam (2017, 24)). Having lost control of Transnistria, the government of Mircea Snegur (1990-1997) agreed with President Yeltsin to end the conflict.

On July 21, 1992, the "Agreement on the principles for a peaceful settlement of the armed conflict in the Dniester region of the Republic of Moldova" was signed (UNSC 1992). First, tetrapartite talks were established between Moldova, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine, but afterward, peace negotiations were held only between Chisinau and Moscow. Among the measures agreed upon in the document were: (a) the establishment of security zones between the conflicting territories; (b) the removal of the 14th Russian Army from the region along with the demand for Russian neutrality in matters related to the conflict; (c) an end of hostilities and the evacuation of military personnel within seven days from the time of signing; (d) the creation of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) with headquarters in the city of Bender and; (e) the unimpeded operation of humanitarian organizations for the provision of necessary assistance to those impacted by crises (UNSC 1992; Miarka 2020; Sanchez 2009; Urse 2008).

The three-part disadvantageous position that was formed in the JCC is significant. Discussions were held with PRM and Russia, which left Moldova in a numerically inferior position. For Chisinau, Transnistria did not seem interested in peace, a perception reaffirmed by Snegur in the context of the post-conflict settlement resolutions. However, Transnistria's interests were not limited to the desires of Smirnov and its allies, but rather comprised the foreign policy established by the Kremlin for the post-Soviet region. This process is apparent in analyzing the retarding withdrawal process of the Russian Army from the region proposed to take a three-year period (Urse 2008, 59), but neglected by the military authorities.

Although there was resistance, the Russian presence was reduced over time, from 9,250 men in 1992 to 2,600 in 1999 (Sanchez 2009). In the future, the maintenance of Russian peacekeeping forces would be agreed upon between Moldova and Transnistria, which resulted in an extension of Russian presence on the territory of the trans-Dniester (Cordesman e Hwang 2020). We can understand the permanence of the 14th Russian Army in the breakaway region as a victory for Moscow in containing the advances of the Western sphere of influence. The following section will deal with Russian-Western rivalries at a greater level of detail, mentioning the normative aspects and failures of the conflict solution processes.

3. Europeanization and Russian resistance

To understand the Transnistria conflict's geostrategic dynamics, we must identify the two opposing axes competing for influence in Moldovan territory and Eastern Europe: (a) the Russian apprehension related to Western expansionism and (b) the EU and NATO's enlargement strategy through the Euro-Atlantic approach. We reaffirm, therefore, that the post-Soviet space consists of a dispute between spheres of influence and resistance fronts that can occasionate in armed tensions.

At first, we enter the discussion of Russian interests with the PRM. The progress made by NATO in 1952 towards Greece and Turkey is a significant event that still influences the Kremlin's actions in the region today. The Balkans and Eastern Europe territories have become critical locations for managing the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, and the advance of the West over Moldova produces rivalries between Moscow and the Western players, a process that has intensified since the 2000s. It's

important to acknowledge the expansion of European institutionalism, which involved countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria that completed its accession processes to NATO and the European Union between 2004 and 2007 (Richter 2018; Tostes e Renni 2021). European entities are now directed to Moldova as part of their ongoing movement.

Observing the waning of its sphere of influence, Russia started reaffirming its geostrategic presence in the region more incisively, exercising reactive diplomacy to prevent the emergence of states oriented to the Euro-Atlantic integration axis. The military presence of Russian units in Transnistria plays a crucial role in fortifying Moscow's presence vis-à-vis the EU-NATO advancements, such as preserving the status of the frozen conflict (Sanchez 2009; Grund, Sieg e Wesemann 2011).

The search for the construction of a "Moldovan barrier" against the Western enlargement was one of the Kremlin's foreign policy guidelines since the Transnistrian War, and the impasse status of the conflict began to serve as an element of bargaining with Chisinau and the Western players. On the other hand, Russian diplomacy with Tiraspol was designed based on ethnocultural, political, and economic ties (Beyer e Wolff 2016), which created a state extremely dependent on Russia in multiple aspects. First, the Transnistrian population sees Moscow as a guardian of the region's cultural identity, which has long been threatened by Romanian influence during the construction of post-Soviet Moldova. In the 2006 referendum, for example, 97% of the Transnistrian population expressed their support for independence and further integration into the Russian Federation, indicating a strong sense of identification (Kunze e Bohnet 2007). The Russian economic weight permits cooperation with Tiraspol undermining the capability of the breakaway state to oppose the Kremlin's interests. Despite Russian support for the separatist war, there was no expressed recognition of Transnistrian independence, and, in a clear condition of asymmetry, it was up to the elites of Tiraspol to accept the submission.

The annexation of Transnistria was never a Russian ambition. However, some movements proposed Transnistrian integration with Russia appealing to the Soviet past in Tiraspol. The stimulus to industrial modernization allowed the local economy to develop its manufacturing industry and enabled the emergence of oligarchic elites in the region (e.g., the Sheriff group). Economic support is to this day insured by Moscow in the trans-Dniester, providing energy supplies and guaranteeing the production of industrialized goods via the delivery of natural gas by Gazprom (Grund, Sieg e Wesemann 2011, 66). To bolster their relationship with the PRM, the Moscow offers loan concessions, import reliefs on Russian goods, and establishes Russian diplomatic representations in Transnistria to make it easier for people to obtain citizenship (Kunze e Bohnet 2007; Beyer e Wolff 2016, 343).

After discussing the shared interests of Russia and RPM, we will now focus on the challenges that arise from expanding Euro-Atlantic influence in Moldova and how Russia is positioning itself in this situation. The disputes in the post-Soviet space have caused impasses that weakened the negotiation talks in the discussion forums, and, therefore, it is essential to address the advances of Western institutionalism in Eastern Europe. The Russian government's position on the ongoing frozen conflict in Transnistria is largely motivated by their apprehension regarding the potential loss

of control over this region. If the EU-NATO borders had remained in their pre-1991 form, a consensus on the Trans-Dniester case would likely have been reached by now.

The process of enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic axis of influence was guided by the soft balancing strategy, which is a non-confrontational and non-militarized approach with intentions to contain a hegemonic actor (Kennedy 2016, 514). According to structural realism, soft balancing is demonstrated in multilateral institutions that aim to increase their formal and informal institutional political influence. The proposed definition applies to Western institutions expanding into Eastern Europe, particularly through efforts to establish closer ties with Chisinau in the former Soviet state.

In order to define the chronology of Moldovan approximation to Western institutionalism, we again take the post-2000 period as a reference, in which normative structures began to be built by the European Union (Kennedy 2016; Richter 2018; Tostes e Renni 2021; Deen e Zweers 2022). It is important to note that Moldova exerts pendulum-like movements that align with Western initiatives at times and also value maintaining a non-hostile relationship with the Kremlin at other times. The fluctuations are related to the internal political changes in Chisinau that interfere with the decisions taken in relation to Transnistria. When Russia increases its hegemony promotion over the post-Soviet space, there is a perceptible rapprochement of the Moldovan government to the EU-NATO axis, and, in a period of cooling tensions, Westernization seems to reduce.

Backed by the ideal of "EU's external governance" (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011 *apud* Tostes e Renni (2021, 2)), a formal integration plan began to be developed by the European Union players, targeting ex-Soviet states. A process of Europeanization² (Buller e Gamble 2002) was planned in Moldova. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the progression of Western institutionalism within the nation, it is imperative to scrutinize the endeavors undertaken to establish normative advancements. In this sense, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) developed two of the leading institutional frameworks on the EU Moldovan rapprochement: the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) of 1998 and the Action Plan (AP) of 2005. The intent of the ENP and the mentioned agreements was the creation of an integrated neighborhood and an increased cooperation between the European bloc and the neighboring countries (Popescu 2005, 9).

The EU enlargement principles comprise a set of policies that are designed to achieve specific objectives, such as: (a) freedom of speech and democracy promotion; (b) political stability and the reduction of violence; (c) governance committed to public policies independent of political pressures; (d) regulatory quality and promotion of

2. Throughout the text, we understand Europeanization as a complex process that manifests itself at different levels and in diverse ways, varying according to the country's aspirations to join the EU. Briefly, we can adopt Olson's definition (2002, *apud* Bandov e Kolman (2018)) in five categories: (a) changes in territorial borders (EU enlargement); (b) development of governance institutions at European level; (c) penetration into national and sub-national governance systems; (d) export of forms of political organization and governance beyond EU territory; (e) a political project that seeks unification and a politically strong EU. In addition, there is an EU interest in exercising the mechanism of "facilitated coordination" in areas of low competence (Radaelli, 2004 *apud* Bandov e Kolman (2018)). This implies changes in the beliefs and expectations of national actors in order to promote measures towards greater integration and is applicable when analyzing Moldova's position.

development; (e) consolidation of the rule of law and; (f) monitoring corruption (Tostes e Reni 2021, 7).

As Moscow observed the weakening of its power in Moldova, alternatives to Euro-Atlantic cooperation started to be diffused in Chisinau. In an attempt to enhance economic cooperation, Russia made endeavors to integrate Moldova into the customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan (Grund, Sieg e Wesemann 2011), pretending to foster closer ties between the country and the Commonwealth of Independent States. As Moldova drove closer to the West through its dialogues with the European Energy Community, the Kremlin used economic pressure to influence the country's decisions. In this particular situation, the provision of natural gas from Western countries could have an impact on Gazprom's control over the Moldovan energy market, especially concerning Moldovagaz (the most prominent natural gas firm in the country). Thus, the greater closeness of the EU-NATO axis resulted in an increase in energy prices in Moldova manipulated by Moscow, that even blocked the gas supply to the country (Beyer e Wolff 2016, 344).

Furthermore, the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003 was also responsible for the increased securitization of borders in Eastern Europe (Popescu 2005). The year 2005 marked the establishment of the European Union Assistance Mission for the Moldovan-Ukrainian Border (EUBAM) within the framework of the ESS, enhancing the effectiveness of border police control in a region that was plagued by transnational offenses, including parallel commerce of weapons and human trafficking (Kunze e Bohnet 2007; Tostes e Reni 2021, 6). Transnistria controls the border region between Moldova and Ukraine, and for this reason, the blockades imposed by neighboring countries directed at the breakaway state have enabled the proliferation of such illegal activities. The atmosphere of leniency provided during the Smirnov government permitted the increase of this type of practices (Grund, Sieg e Wesemann 2011).

Greater integration with NATO took place simultaneously with the advancement of the ESS structure but with less normative appeal. During Vladimir Voronin's government (2001–2009), the organization's secretariat visited Chisinau, and Moldovan political officials went to NATO headquarters in Brussels in a show of support for Euro-Atlantic integration (Rogstad 2018, 9). The Istanbul Communiqué (2004) came to establish instruments for formalizing the Moldovan rapprochement of the North Atlantic alliance, evolving into the 2006 Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with the organization. What's more, Western-Moldovan cooperation intensified in 2014 with the sending of Moldovan troops to Kosovo and the establishment of a bureau in Chisinau to consolidate NATO's support for local security reforms. It is evident that efforts are being made in Eastern Europe to prevent Russia from exerting exclusive control over the post-Soviet states, both politically and militarily.

The 2008 design of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), also within the framework of the ENP, reinforced the plan to establish greater control over the countries neighboring the European Union. The parliament of Moldova granted approval for a novel proposition for an Association Agreement (AA) in 2014, which superseded the previous PCA with the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). The proposal received significant support from the public, indicating that Europeanization has been well-received by Moldovan society (Popescu 2005). This period was accompanied by

the implementation of new trade blockades by Russia prohibiting the Russian import of Moldovan wine and food and weakening the potential for deeper integration with the West. Endowed with tensions that persist to this day, especially in the PRM and Gagauzia, Moldovan westernization is challenging to some extent, with delays in the consolidation of an effective membership, to Moscow's relief.

However, the construction of the image of Western democracies as guarantors of human rights, freedom of speech, and anti-corruption fights have been successful, especially in a former Soviet republic with an authoritarian heritage. As more people identify with the EU-NATO alliance (Tostes e Renni 2021, 16), there is a rise in politicians and parties dedicated to following European institutionalism in the country. Since 2010, a noticeable polarization has emerged between currents who espouse support for Russia and those who do not share this view. These trends are often mentioned as a domestic clash between euroscepticism and pro-Europeanism, expressed among other Eastern European countries. Due to this divide, political organizations like the Alliance for European Integration (AEI), have arisen. Moldova elected in 2020 the former prime minister Maia Sandu, a politician who advocates European integration and Euro-Atlantic rapprochement.

Thus, we conclude that the soft balancing operated by the EU-NATO axis has been successful on Moldovan territory despite Russian resistance. The last section of the paper will detail the official determinations for the resolution of the Transnistrian War, its conquests and retreats. Once the dynamics of the expansion fronts over Chisinau and Tiraspol were handled, the influence of these international actors on the country became unquestionable

4. Advances and setbacks in post-conflict negotiations

In order to understand the proposed frameworks for the resolution of the Transnistrian War, we base our analysis on the developments of three proposals after the 1992 ceasefire: the Moscow Memorandum (1997), the Kozak Memorandum (2003), and the Meseberg Initiative (2010). To this end, the dialogues between Moldova and the PRM are contemplated along with the participation of Russia and European players in the talks, and the advances and impasses to the full solution of the frozen conflict. The analysis of the continued disagreements is relevant for understanding that the rivalries presented constituted the main cause for the eclosion of the 2022 Ukraine War, that brought questions about the current strategic role of trans-Dniester and the future of Chisinau-Tiraspol relations.

Soon after the ceasefire agreement between Moldova and Russia, negotiations involving Transnistria and Ukraine continued, and numerous determinations were developed regarding the non-use of military force and economic sanctions in mutual relations (Tsukanova 2011, 135). Also, in the immediate post-conflict period, in 1993, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) began taking part in the post-conflict talks, establishing offices in Moldovan territory to solve the impasses in the breakaway state. In this context, the discussions were framed to give the PRM a special status within the Republic of Moldova, an aspect that was reinforced in future resolutions. Other improvements were achieved in the scope of the OSCE's work, such as the removal of Russian armaments between 1999 and 2004 and the

establishment of the "five plus two" model in the talks ([OSCE, n.d.](#)), including the two belligerent states and the mediators and observers (United States, OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, and EU).

Following the initiatives to resolve the conflict, we will start by mentioning the Primakov Memorandum of 1997, also known as the Moscow Memorandum, which aimed at normalizing relations between the two sides of the war by ensuring Moldovan integrity in the territorial frame of the former Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. It is essential to mention that the document was named after Russia's foreign minister at the time, Yevgeny Primakov, one of the prominent architects of the final resolution and the main character of a shift in Russian foreign policy, becoming more hostile towards Westernization (Mospanov, 2017). The 1997 Memorandum had the OSCE as an observer and included the signatures of Moldova under Petru Lucinschi (1997–2001) and Transnistria under Igor Smirnov, apart from the presence of Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005) acting as guarantor states ([OSCE 1997](#)).

The final document cited the 14th Russian Army, a recurring issue since the 1992 ceasefire. Henceforth, the Odessa Agreements (1998) were signed, determining the reduction of Russian troops and adding Ukrainian soldiers to the peacekeeping effort ([OSCE 1998](#)). The first projects to regulate illicit commercial activities in the separatist state's borders also began to expand with Western support, aiming to reduce human, weapon, and drug trafficking.

In the debates on resolving the frozen conflict, it was emphasized that the handling of tensions should be done under the UN and OSCE principles of promoting stability on the European continent. The primary intent was to constitute a unitary state regarding the participation of Transnistria in Moldovan foreign policy decisions, a proposition that contributed to the failure of the resolution due to Moldovan suspicion (Mospanov 2017). Observing the terminologies in the document enables the noting of frequent mentions of an "unified state" with "international legal personality" and "economic independence" in the shape of Soviet Moldova territory and ensuring the continuity of Russian peacekeeping troops (Tsukanova 2011, 136).

However, the future of the Primakov Memorandum could have been more beneficial for resolving the impasses. The Transnistrian proposals were neglected in the negotiations, making the decisions not mutually fruitful. One of the impediments to the realization of the agreement referred to the foreign trade issue. The integration between Moldova and PRM required the inspection of RPM goods at Moldovan customs, which was seen as an obstacle to Tiraspol (Mospanov 2017). In any case, the 1997 specifications were also viewed with suspicion by Western institutions, which feared Transnistria's disproportionate influence on the unitary state's foreign policy decisions, serving as a puppet of Moscow's interests.

The early 2000s marked a new phase for Moldova, operating swing movements on its foreign guidelines, sometimes closer to the Western EU-NATO axis, sometimes aligned to the Kremlin. In this scenario, Dimitri Kozak, head of the presidential administration during the first Vladimir Putin's presidency (2000–2008), presented a proposal for conflict resolution that included the creation of the Moldovan Federation (Urse 2008). The Kozak Memorandum intended to transform of the country's state

system, basing it on democratic guarantees like the rule of law, free circulation of goods, political and speech freedoms, maintenance of private property, and a demilitarization of the state (International Crisis Group 2004; *Regnum Russia* 2005). The territorial composition along the lines of the MSSR would consider Transnistria an "entity of the Federation" with its organs, independent legislation and a separate constitution. According to the 2003 resolutions, separatists would be given a special status within the joint Republic.

The conception of the document came from the talks between Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE in 2002, and the negotiations were conducted between Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin and Russian representative Dimitri Kozak. It is worth mentioning the domestic context of Moldovan politics, which caused the oscillations in Chisinau's diplomacy. The Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) came to the presidency in 2001 with a pro-Moscow platform, demanded by part of the traditional electorate still aligned to Soviet communism. However, from pro-Romanian popular mobilizations in 2004, Kozak's project started to be questioned by Moldovan public opinion as an element of Russian rapprochement (Beyer e Wolff 2016, 340). At the same time, the scenario of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004–2005) made the Moldovan population more identified with the Western sphere of influence, rejecting the Kremlin's proposal for a Federation, which would grant autonomy to the breakaway region (Kunze e Bohnet 2007; Rogstad 2018).

Internal aspects allow for a better understanding of Chisinau's withdrawal to the Kozak Protocol. The failure of the resolutions in the final document was due to the federalist proposal, giving to the Transnistrian parliament the responsibility for laws and foreign policy matters, as well as the veto power to Moldovan suggestions. Thus, a dysfunctional state with incompatible political systems would be created (Urse 2008; Grund, Sieg e Wesemann 2011) if the Kozak talks succeeded. From the Kremlin's point of view, this would be extremely advantageous, as it would consolidate the Moldovan barrier against Western advances, with Transnistria preventing any rapprochement to European institutionalism and reinforcing its ties with Moscow. The persistence of Russian troops in the east bank of the Dniester also played a major role in the failure to establish a settlement for the conflict. One of the stipulations of the Memorandum ensured the presence of Russian units until 2020, distancing the Moldovan leaderships farther from the realization of the agreement (Urse 2008, 62).

National dynamics deterred the continuation of the Kozak project, and simultaneously with the Ukrainian pro-Europeanism movements, the Voronin government began to intensify its rapprochement with the West. Then, Moldova withdrew from the negotiations, and the country was increasingly orienting itself toward EU-NATO institutionalism (Devyatkov 2012). The meetings between Voronin and Putin were canceled, and the Memorandum's developments revealed a failure of Kremlin diplomacy to press Moldovan decisions. This process will extend to successful Western advancements in Eastern Europe and to the building of Chisinau's identification with the EU-NATO's expansion front.

Therefore, in the post-Kozak period, relations between Moldova and Transnistria became even more confrontational, with the Moldovan government seeking to limit the independence of the breakaway state (Urse 2008). In this context, the referendum

on the separatist issue occurred in 2006, reaffirming the Transnistrian interest in independent status and establishing closer ties with Russia (Kunze e Bohnet 2007). The alternative of Westernization was emerging as a desire for part of the Moldovan population, a subject that worried the Kremlin.

There was undoubtedly Russian frustration over the unsuccessful attempts to achieve influence over Chisinau with the Primakov and Kozak projects. Each slip in the negotiations ended up representing the advance of the Euro-Atlantic front over the post-Soviet space. The wishes expressed in the speeches of Moldova's new political leaderships mentioned ideals promoted by the ENP and Brussels's institutionalism. At the same time, Russia was seen as a supporter of undemocratic regimes and human rights violations. Hence, Moldova started to deal with the frozen conflict independently after several decisions of Voronin's government, increasing the separatist tensions (Urse 2008; Sanchez 2009).

In the post-2003 period, Moldova continued to shape its foreign policy under the pendulum logic. The rescue of an anti-Romanian sentiment allowed a move away from the Western axis after the rejection of Moscow's federalist proposal. The sanctions applied by Russia after Chisinau's withdrawal from the Kozak initiative can be pointed to as a direct cause of the Western rapprochement (Regnum Russia 2005; Beyer e Wolff 2016, 337). Looking at Moldova's domestic politics after the tensions involving the Kozak Memorandum, it is possible to observe another positioning shift back to the alignment with Moscow. This bouncy positioning that took place during the Voronin presidency can be explained by domestic episodes, like the PCRM's loss of popularity in the 2007 local elections. Further distancing from the West and closer ties with the Kremlin were made in order to attract back the traditional Moldovan communist electorate, vital for triumphing in the 2009 general elections (Urse 2008; Kennedy 2016).

The European expansion front continued to outline new projects for peace negotiations from 2005 onward, seeking to avoid repeating the 1997 and 2003 mistakes. With the end of the PCRM administration after the 2009 Moldovan elections, talks began between the new political voices in Chisinau, determined to establish proximity with the Western axis of integration and to foster Europeanization in future attempts to resolve the Transnistrian War. At the same time, Russia's new president, Dimitri Medvedev (2008-2012), was less antagonistic to the Euro-Atlantic powers and inducted open dialogues with Western countries on the future of security in Eastern Europe.

As a consequence, the Meseberg Initiative (2010) emerged, conceived by then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel to establish more comprehensive cooperation efforts between European states and Russia. Considering the international financial situation, the West was interested in fortifying its trade and economic ties with Moscow due to the 2008 crisis, which implied research for trade partners and alternative consumer markets (Panait 2013; Remler 2013). Even in the United States, Obama's foreign policy toward Russia softened during Medvedev's term. In this scenario, Germany sought a rapprochement with the Kremlin proposing the resumption of dialogues along the "five plus two" model (OSCE, n.d.), proposing discussions between the EU, Russia and the Policy and Security Committee (EU-R-PSC). The dynamics

of participation in the talks would be held in a ministerial format, and the PSC would have the participation of the EU's foreign affairs representative, Catherine Ashton, and the Russian minister, Sergei Lavrov.

The main goal of the June 2010 Meseberg meetings was cooperation with Russia and bringing the Kremlin to join the European security dialogues, which demanded Russia's adaptation in its foreign policy guidelines (Panait 2013, 71). However, there were different expectations about the agreements. Russia saw the rapprochement with the West as a possibility for gaining voice or perhaps a veto power in Western security issues, for example, concerning the European missile defense (Remler 2013). On the other side, Europe idealized a reduction in tensions with Moscow in order to foster the enlargement of its sphere of influence by achieving conversations with Russia (Socor 2010; Devyatkov 2012). One of Merkel's wishes was that the approach to Medvedev also included the possibility of economic gains for Western European states concerning trade liberalization and the suspension of barriers. Regarding the frozen conflict, there were disagreements about the methods for resolving the impasses between Chisinau and Tiraspol. As the West guided its approach through institutional means (partnership normative strategies and the promotion of agreements), Russia historically took it more informally, based on personal talks between Moscow's representatives with Moldovan and Transnistrian leaderships (Urse 2008).

Examining Meseberg's proposals, the assurance of Moldova's territorial integrity is a central point, as in the previous two memorandums, just as the conferral of special status to the PRM. The international community's recognition of Transnistria as an independent state was unreachable, both from the Western and Russian sides, being the granting of a special status the most viable alternative (Grund, Sieg e Wesemann 2011; Panait 2013). Despite initial resistance, the "five plus two" model was resumed, as were the dialogues between Chisinau and the West after Voronin's government. In this sense, rapprochement with Romania retook place regarding proposals for border issues with Bucharest backed by France and the United Kingdom (Urse 2008; Socor 2010).

The reasons for the low effectiveness of the Meseberg Initiative included: (a) the non-recognition of Transnistria as an independent state; (b) the different strategy of conflict resolution between European institutions and Russia; (c) Moscow's resistance to the multilateral model proposed by Germany, which imposed a disadvantage on negotiations to the Russian side (Devyatkov 2012); and (d) Putin's return after 2012 with its incisive diplomacy to the post-Soviet territories. Another point that weakened the conflict resolution was the West's proposal for demilitarization of the trans-Dniester region in the 2010 talks. The withdrawal of the 14th Russian Army had been postponed until 2020, and Moscow was successful in maintaining influence over Tiraspol, displeasing the EU countries involved in the negotiations (Socor 2010). The Russian inability to contain Euro-Atlantic expansionism in Chisinau has intensified since the Meseberg talks, bringing new standards to analyzing the geostrategy clashes in Eastern Europe.

5. Conclusion

Given the statements brought by this research, it is worth mentioning that the ambitions to solve the conflict have not been fully successful due to the multiple disagreements between the parties involved. However, the analysis of the negotiations reveals that geostrategic disputes between the West and Russia have caused such failure. Western institutionalism, represented by the Euro-Atlantic axis, promotes the enlargement of its borders towards the Eastern Europe neighborhood, and Moscow pursues to reaffirm its regional presence by maintaining military presence and political rapprochement with Tiraspol. This process is notable when we examine the Russian proposals for resolving the conflict, based upon creating a unitary state with a high degree of influence from Transnistria. The existence of the PRM in a unified Moldova would prevent Westernization and promote alignment with Russia, preventing Western presence in the post-Soviet space.

The study also discusses Moldovan domestic politics, a key factor in understanding the progress of the failure of the post-conflict negotiations. Since the rapprochement with Western institutions, a greater identification of the Moldovan population with the West has been observed, claiming for democracy promotion, anti-corruption fight and liberalization of markets. Furthermore, the region's past after the dissolution of the USSR intensified the separatist tensions in trans-Dniester, establishing a rift between Chisinau, tending toward an alignment with the West, and Tiraspol, close to Russia due to its Soviet past and economic links. However, there were periods of rapprochement between the Moldovan side and Moscow, largely due to Moldova's existing economic dependency on Russia. The advances of European institutionalism in the 2000s included Eastern European countries' accession to the EU and NATO and conditioned the swing in Moldova's foreign policy, clearly reflecting the country's polarization between Eurosceptic and pro-European party factions.

When it comes to the resolutions established after the 1992 ceasefire, the present research concluded that it is evident that the Kremlin has lost its influence on post-war decisions. Soon after the end of the armed clashes, Russia took a leading position in the negotiations by directly agreeing with Moldova on the normative determinations, also ensuring a peacekeeping military presence in Transnistria. The Primakov Memorandum of 1997 and the Odessa Agreements of 1998 reinforced Moscow's strategic ambitions for the region, postponing the withdrawal of the 14th Russian Army from the breakaway region. The idea of a unified state along the lines of Soviet Moldova was also a recurrent Russian interest since Tiraspol would play a large role in the decision-making process. Years later, the Kozak Memorandum of 2003 revealed that the Kremlin's sphere of influence was suffering from increased Westernization in Moldova and Eastern Europe as a whole. The withdrawal of former Moldovan president Vladimir Voronin from the 2003 talks made the constant shifts in the country's foreign policy explicit. It ensured Chisinau's rapprochement with the West during the mid-2000s.

The article also addresses that the future of the clashes of influence on Moldovan territory will remain shaped by the rivalries between the West and the Kremlin. Despite EU-Russia dialogues during the Medvedev government, the rivalry between the two actors has not been overcome, and the period following the Meseberg initiative

has reawakened tensions. Under Vladimir Putin's second government, Crimea was annexed in 2014, and the neo-imperial project for the post-Soviet space became a reality (Rogstad 2018). This process culminated in the 2022 Ukraine War, the most relevant case for analyzing these clashes to date. It is also important to understand the dispute between spheres of influence following the outbreak of the 2022 conflict.

Thus, research possibilities are raised in the direction of bringing into the discussion the future effects of the low effectiveness of negotiations to solve the trans-Dniester conflict in the post-2010, addressing the geostrategy of the conflict also in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Moreover, the future of negotiations on the separatist issue is still uncertain, given Moscow's military advances in Ukraine near Moldova's eastern border and Chisinau's consequent approach to Western institutions. Talks are being held, and the pro-European government of Maia Sandu has shown significant interest in achieving EU and NATO membership. Currently, this interest is being stimulated by the Ukrainian leadership and by Eastern European countries that see the North Atlantic alliance as a possibility of confronting the Russian military advances.

Received: 13/12/2023.

Approved: 25/03/2024.

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