

## THE EU'S ROLE IN THE TRANSNISTRIA CONFLICT SETTLEMENT

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**Abstract:** *The end of the Cold War allowed many Eastern European countries to claim their right to self-determination. This event has created challenges to these states' sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Republic of Moldova was one of them, whose integrity was challenged by a separatist entity supported by the Russian Federation, which ended in a frozen conflict. In the struggle for reintegration, Moldova asked the international community for support, mainly the European Union and NATO, whose values are close to its way of development.*

**Keywords:** *EU; Transnistria; security; Russia; economy, soft balancing.*

The end of the Cold War added a new page in Europe's history. The collapse of the former Warsaw Pact raised new opportunities for the European Union (EU) and former Soviet countries allowing increasing cooperation in the security and economic fields, consequently augmenting the population's well-being. In this context, many countries tried to improve their financial situation by adhering to the European family (Olsen 2021). The European integration process brought the Republic of Moldova, a former Soviet country with a frozen conflict on its territory, to the outskirts of the EU. This situation forced EU members to take a stance in conflict resolution to stabilize the region and possibly integrate Transnistria into its common market.

The paper will argue that the EU/NATO soft approach to conflict resolution through a soft balancing approach played a vital role in the future integration of the region despite its few movements toward conflict settlement. First, the EU has the same agenda as the Republic of Moldova: a peaceful solution to the conflict. Second, the recent developments in the Ukrainian conflict impacted the Transnistria business environment and, consequently, its economy, forcing businesses to look for new markets.

With the agreement on ceasefire in 1992, the conflict resolution format changed. Set as five parties with Russia in the lead, it did not match the goals settled in the beginning as Russia and Ukraine were periodically impartial during meetings, supporting Transnistria (Cantir Cristian, Kennedy Ryan 2015). However, the NATO "open door" policy brought new opportunities for the former Warsaw Pact and ex-Soviet states as they could join its security umbrella and increase their defense capabilities (Hendrickson 2000). Republic of Moldova could not join as it did not match the requirements. Yet, the situation changed as the EU and NATO enlargement brought the conflict to its borders. The 2005 "Odessa Protocol" changed the existing "3+2" format to the current "5+2" format, adding the United States and the EU as observers (OSCE 2005). As the former minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Moldova pointed out in one of his articles, enlargement brought new opportunities to the EU, strengthening its capability by encompassing "new states with a greater knowledge of these conflicts" and "which can strengthen the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) to seek the settlement of these conflicts" (Popescu 2006). Moreover, NATO officials emphasized such an opportunity. Javier Solana maintained that the EU was "the only regional organization with a wide range of political, diplomatic, humanitarian, economic and financial, police and military instruments" (Solana 2004).

However, in the EU enlargement and its attempt to tackle conflict in Transnistria, Russia saw it as a competition for influence in the region, with Moldova as the centerpiece (Kennedy 2016). In this situation, some scholars saw the Republic of Moldova as "a second front in a struggle between the EU and Russia," a region that "balanced on a knife's edge between a future as an

impoverished, militarized Russian colony or as a beneficiary of EU integration and European values” (Orenstein and Mizsei 2014). Consequently, the EU has no solution but an integrated approach to conflict resolution because, besides economic and political influence, “it also needs to be able to guarantee stability, prevent conflicts and manage crises on its doorstep” (Commission 2004). Moreover, the way the West needed to intervene was seen as a process dictated by some aspects: “the raw size and military strength of the targeted state; whether there are any competing issues on the Western foreign policy agendas relating to this state/region; and whether there is another alternative (regional) power that provides political, economic, or military support” (Levitsky and Way 2006).

However, Western intervention in the region was soft, mainly emphasized by political and economic involvement. The EU and NATO strategy was understood as focused to reduce Russian influence in the area by affecting the conflict settlement seducing parties as a structural realist of soft balancing approach (Kennedy 2016) because of the US calculations on China as the biggest competitor (He and Feng 2008). In his view, the realist concept of the soft balancing approach tackled by the West had little success as it neither solved the conflict nor restrained the Russian influence.

The limited success of the Western strategy was due to Transnistria's security and economic dependence on Russia. This support increased after the 2003 Kozak Memorandum failure, a Russian effort to reintegrate the region, giving Transnistria a special status and maintaining its military presence (Rogstad 2016). In the EU's and US's perceptions, such an agreement would permit Transnistria (consequently Russia) to block any uncomfortable administration in Chişinău by vetoing critical decisions. Moreover, it will leave Russian forces stationary in Transnistria. So, it contravened Western interest in the area and downgraded its soft effort over the conflict. Consequently, the EU and the US through their diplomatic representatives intervened to support Moldovan government to cope with Russian pressure (Hill 2012).

Dembińska argued that Russian support became vital for Transnistria's survival as the EU effort to consolidate the control in the area deployed EUBAM (European Border Assistance to Moldova and Ukraine) that stopped smuggling and regulated the exports and transit of goods to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) market (Dembinska and Mérand 2019). The customs agreements between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, signed in March 2006, boosted the EUBAM effort. As a result, it highlighted that the remittances from workers abroad and Russian economic assistance “in the form of gas and humanitarian aid” represented the foremost contributors to the Transnistria economy (Caşus 2013). Soft balancing brought slight improvement to conflict resolution and did not change the preferences of Transnistria elites in the initial stage, considering the massive dependency on Russian political and economic support (Beyer and Wolff 2016).

However, the Ukrainian conflict draws a new line in Transnistria's strategy. Dembińska argued that local business constitutes substantial leverage over the political elite, which could influence the situation toward conflict resolution. She argued that a dual reliance on external resources for economic survival played a central role in maintaining the status quo. She claims that the geopolitical shift in the region pushed Transnistria to balance Russian Federation financial support and Western market facilitation (Dembinska and Mérand 2019).

The same argument introduced by Ryan Kennedy sustained that the Western approach to conflict resolution through soft balancing diverged local businesses into two sides that facilitated a Western integration of those companies (Kennedy 2016). Even though both methods did not resolve the conflict, they moved it to the right side. The premise of integrating regions without escalating the situation became more realistic than it was before, mainly due to synergistic interaction between market interests. Republic of Moldova's economic statecraft eased Russian Federation pressure.

The Eastern Partnership significantly enlarged and extended the scope of cooperation, emphasized particularly by the Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) signed in June 2014. Moreover, the population received with happiness the offer of a visa-free regime, which opened a new perspective for rights and the left bank of the Nistru River population. The Republic of Moldova thus arose as an example for others in the EU integration process.

The visa-liberalization process illustrates that the Republic of Moldova was the principal partner, "meeting all EU benchmarks and having Schengen visas lifted for its citizens" (Delcour 2021).

Diplomatic reality emphasized a significant change as the EU and NATO viewed Moldova as more critical to their foreign policy, a situation different from the '90s. The acknowledgment "as one of the EU's most reliable partners in the Eastern Partnership and by signing the AA and DCFTA" represented an essential change in the EU assessment about Republic of Moldova (Soloviev 2014). Such perception showed the commitment of the West not to accept any more Russian exclusive dominance in the area. Moreover, it will not tolerate a Russian military intervention in support of Transnistria without severe consequences (Kennedy 2016).

Moreover, Russia's invasion of Ukraine emphasized that the EU's support for the Republic of Moldova to handle frontier problems played a crucial role. With an increasing number of refugees, Moldovan authorities were overburden with potential intensification of smuggling and illegal human traffic while monitoring a border with an active war zone. In this context, Moldovan border management authorities were assisted to regulate the influx of refugees. Frontex mission allowed information exchange, training, and coordination of certain joint operational measures (Frontex 2023). Such support increased the Republic of Moldova's border control capability.

June 2022 marked a special event for the Republic of Moldova as EU leaders granted EU candidacy. Such an occurrence propelled the Republic of Moldova toward a new stage in the European integration process and strongly indicated support to strengthen its security. Concurrently, the EU decided on a financial assistance aiming to boost the Republic of Moldova's affected economy, mainly focused on easing energy and gas dependency on Russia.

Furthermore, in December 2023, the Republic of Moldova opened accession negotiations that increased the Republic of Moldova's position in the process of Transnistria conflict regulation. Such a change in geopolitical landscape allowed the Republic of Moldova to change the discussion format to "1+1" and apply the same taxation rules for business located on the left bank of the Nistru River. Moreover, the EU allocated €13 million in humanitarian assistance for Republic of Moldova to ease neighboring conflict effects on the Moldovan economy (EU 2023).

Additionally, in April 2023, the EU took more steps toward increasing the Republic of Moldova security, launching a civilian mission in Moldova (EUPM Moldova) under the Common Security and Defense Policy. The main task of the mission is "to enhance the resilience of the security sector of the country in the areas of crisis management and hybrid threats, including cyber security" (EU 2023). Such commitment will help the Republic of Moldova to cope with an increasing Russian effort to intensify internal societal fragmentation.

To conclude, Western low interest in the Republic of Moldova during the '90s allowed Russia to strengthen its position as a regional leader. Using Transnistria conflict as lever Russia kept Republic of Moldova in its area of influence. There were fewer tools for Moldovan government to cope with Russia political and economic pressure as its economy was linked with CSI market and Western interest was low as Russia was perceived as following a democratic path of development.

However, the EU and NATO "open door" policy in the early 2000s created new opportunities for the Republic of Moldova (Hendrickson 2000). Using political leverage, the Republic of Moldova could change the format of discussions over the conflict by adding Western support. Having an exclusive economic interest in the region, the EU conducted a soft policy that boosted the economy of the Republic of Moldova. It created leverage over Transnistria through the EUBAM mission, increasing custom control of the goods traded with the CIS market and diminishing the smuggling effect. Moreover, the customs agreement between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine gave leverage and reduced Russian direct support for Transnistria. Even though it did not solve the conflict, it created new ground for its peaceful settlement.

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