

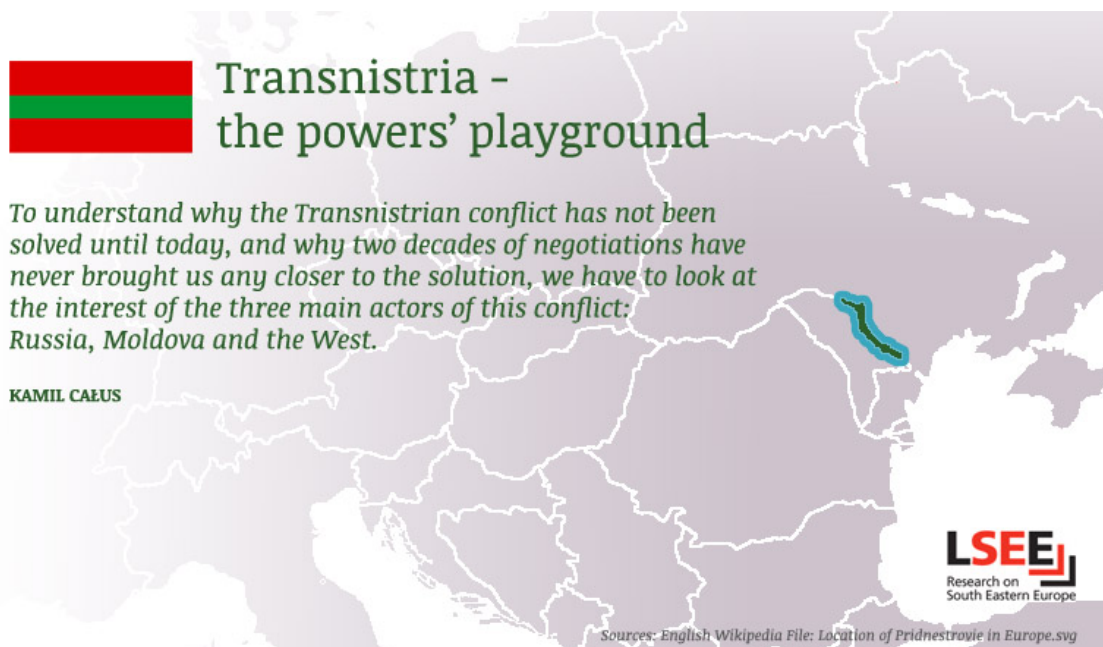
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Power politics on the outskirts of the EU: why Transnistria matters

Blog Team



*In September this year, Transnistria, the separatist region located in the Eastern part of Moldova, is set to celebrate the 24th anniversary of its de-facto independence. And yet there is little scope for celebrations – as only the contested states of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia recognise its independence. To understand why the Transnistrian dispute has not yet been solved, and why two decades of negotiations have never brought us any closer to the solution, we have to look at the interest of the three main actors involved: Russia, Moldova and the West. **Kamil Calus** explains.*



Russia: pushing for a federalist solution to prevent Moldova from “going west”

As minister Sergey Lavrov recently declared in an [interview for Bloomberg TV](#), Russia is officially “in favor of a settlement which would respect territorial integrity and sovereignty of Moldova”. This is a line being pursued by Russia for a very long time now. Moscow claims that its goal is to help both sides to work out an acceptable solution, which would allow to keep the territorial integrity of a country and, at the same time, protect the rights of the people living on the left bank of the Dniester river. Russia’s official position is that the only way to achieve this goal is through the creation of a federation uniting the two entities (mainland Moldova and Transnistria), possibly with a third component – Gagauzia (the autonomous administrative region in the southern part of Moldova, inhabited by the Gagauz, a Turkic but Christian Orthodox minority). The reason is simple. The creation of a federation would mean that the deeply pro-Russian Transnistria and maybe also Gagauzia (which is at least as pro-Russian as Transnistria), would have considerable influence on the central government in Chisinau, especially in the field of foreign policy.

Up until now, all forms of the Moldo-Transnistrian federation that Russia was trying to impose were giving Transnistria the right to block every inconvenient decision from Chisinau. The famous [Kozak Memorandum of 2003](#), Russia’s proposal for settlement, was meant not only to provide Transnistria with a veto right, but also legalize deployment of Russian troops on the territory of a newly federalized state for at least two decades of transition period. For the Russians, such federation would guarantee that Moldova remains a neutral state, and probably never be able to integrate fully in the European or Euroatlantic structures. Thanks to this solution Russia would also secure its right to keep troops on Moldovan soil. What’s more, the possibility that Transnistria could change its attitude towards EU and NATO integration is minimal, while the chance that Moldovans would at some point elect a pro-Russian government is pretty high. As a result, a Moldo-Transnistrian federation would surely be unable to “go west” because of this Transnistrian anchor, and would likely be eager to cooperate with Russia

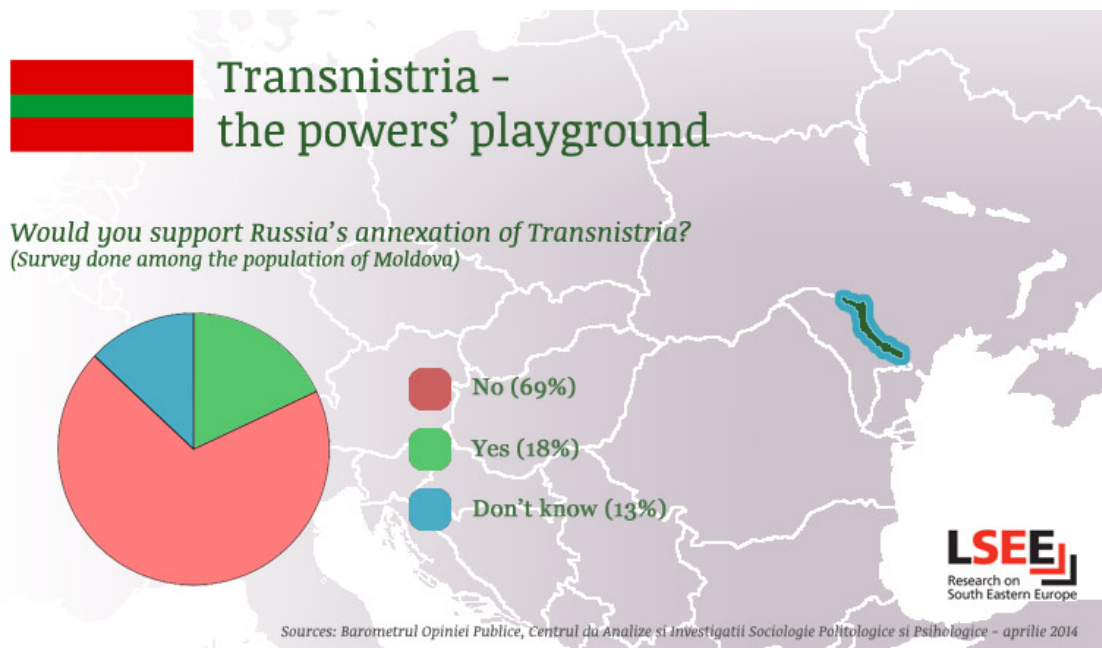
and integrate in the Customs Union. That's why Russia has never recognized Transnistria's independence: federalization remains an option only so long as Transnistria remains (de iure) a part of the Moldovan state.

Moldova: aiming at reunification, but with reserves

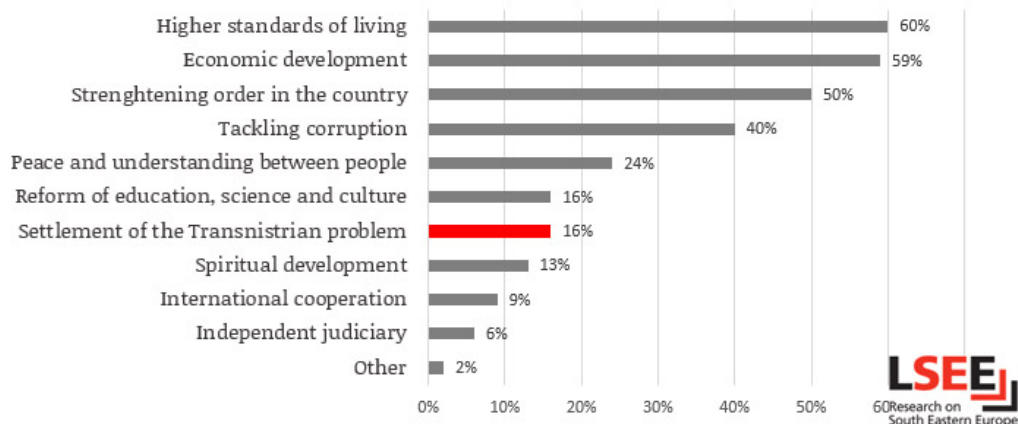
Moldova's stance towards the Transnistrian issue is more complex. After the failure of the 2003 Kozak Memorandum, Chisinau is reluctant to the idea of a federation, and well aware of the possible threats coming from such a solution. In 2005, the Moldovan parliament adopted a [law](#) on the special status of Transnistria which regulates its status within an indivisible Republic of Moldova. The document excludes federalization from the array of possible models of Transnistrian conflict settlement. Even though the official policy of the Moldovan government is still geared towards reunification, they are very reluctant to put in into practice because of the edge this solution would give to Russian interests in the country, and for the following three reasons:

1) The **political and economic price** of reintegration would be very high. The exact figure is hard to estimate, but it is safe to say that the reunification's cost would reach at least 4 bln USD (the gas debt accumulated by Tiraspol in the last 20 years, as opposed to Moldova's current GDP of just \$7bn). This would probably result in a massive fall in support for the government. But reunification would also entail a different kind of threat: a political one, embodied by the 220,000 Transnistrians who would have the right to take part in Moldovan elections. Transnistrians would be a strongly pro-Russian electorate. They would almost certainly not vote for any Moldovan pro-European parties (seen by them as pro-Romanian), nor for the Communists, still unpopular because of [Vladimir Voronin's](#) aggressive policy towards Tiraspol. It's likely that Transnistrians would give their vote for some third political power in country. Transnistria's reintegration would thus result in a major fall in consensus for the Moldovan government, caused both by the decline in domestic support on the right bank and the appearance of a big number of new, pro-Russian voters from the left bank.

2) There is virtually **no pressure from the Moldovan electorate** to find a solution to the conflict. Moldovan society's attitude towards Transnistria seems ambivalent. On the one hand, the overwhelming majority of Moldovans is not interested in the negotiation process between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Most people living on the right bank of the Dniester river have never even been to Transnistria. The region was not a part of the historic Bessarabia, and has virtually no sentimental value for Moldovans. show that the Transnistrian problem is among the issues Moldovans are least concerned with, far behind poverty, corruption and economic development. According to an opinion poll conducted in April 2014, 2% of Moldovans think that the Transnistrian problem should be treated with priority, and only about 16% of the entire population recognizes this as one of the main problems of a country at all. On the other hand, however, the possibility of losing this region to Russia is strongly opposed by nearly 70% of respondents.



Which are the three most pressing issues for the government of Moldova to tackle?



Sources: Barometru Opiniei Publice, Centrul de Analize si Investigatii Sociologice Politologice si Psihologice - aprilie 2014

3) The very existence of Transnistria, a territory which functions outside the framework of the international legal system, creates very **comfortable conditions for illegal activities** whose perpetuation would be made much harder was Transnistria to become a de facto part of Moldova. It is very apparent that local Transnistrian authorities, and the businesses by them controlled, are using their privileged position to make big profits. But the authorities in Tiraspol are not the only ones to benefit. During the eight years of communist rule (2001-2009) several high level politicians were benefiting from the cooperation with Transnistrian business and authorities. It's safe to assume that, at least to some extent, the same dynamics are taking place under the current government. The resolution of the Transnistrian dispute would deprive these players of their main source of income, and is therefore not a welcome development.

In spite of these pull factors, it would still be unthinkable for Moldova to recognize Transnistria's independence. Such a move would undermine the legitimacy of the Moldovan state, as it would mean renouncing to part of its territory and to a considerable number of citizens living on the left bank of the Dniester. The delimitation of the new borders would be a thorny issue, too: Transnistria claims rights on a number of villages on the right bank of the river, which are perceived by Chisinau to be exclusively under its control. Ultimately, it would trigger a very negative reaction from Russia (because of the reasons described at the beginning), and from the EU, or broadly speaking – West. Moscow would probably use all available political, economical and military leverages (like provoking border clashes caused by Moldovan attempts to delimitate new border) to divert Chisinau from such decision and relations of West with Moldova would deteriorate.

The EU: trying to minimise Transnistria's influence

The EU would like to see Transnistria reintegrated with Moldova, mainly because the existence of such a lawless entity virtually at the borders of the Union represents a source of instability for the entire area. The EU is however not keen to concede Transnistria any real influence on Chisinau's policy, for reasons opposite to Russia's. The best option for this player would be the reintegration of Transnistria within the unitary Moldovan state as an autonomous region with a wide cultural and economical independence, but certainly without any serious voice. Federalization is also an option, but in this case Transnistria shouldn't be granted any special right to block the decisions of the central government.

The Transnistrian dispute has in last few months become one of the key issues that can influence the situation in the region. This happened for two main reasons:

First, its role has grown in the run up to the closure of the [EU-Moldova Association Agreement](#), to be signed on 27th of June. Transnistria is one of the key policy instruments that Moscow can use – and is using – to change the geopolitical orientation of Moldova. A Russian attempt to destabilise the situation in order to sabotage the signing of the agreement, perhaps by provoking clashes on the administrative border between mainland Moldova and Transnistria, is to be expected. An even likelier scenario is that it will use the same methods after the agreement's closure to "punish" Chisinau for this decision. Russia deems that such punishment (together with additional trade sanctions) would result in a rise of social discontent in Moldova and in a fall of the support for the parties that form the current pro-European coalition. Ultimately, those parties could lose the parliamentary elections scheduled for 30th of November to openly pro-Russian communists.

The second reason is the Ukraine crisis. It seems that Russia's initial plan was to destabilise the entire southern and eastern Ukraine from Kharkiv and Donetsk to Odessa. If this theory is correct, Transnistria might serve as a territory from which Russia could send troops and equipment to support the separatists [And this is one of the reasons why [Ukraine closed its border with Transnistria this week](#) – editor's note]. If the Odessa region was to declare independence as Donetsk and Luhansk did, then it can be expected that it will try to form a "federation" – similar to [Novorossiya](#) – together with Transnistria. This would allow Russia to kill two birds with one stone and seriously destabilise the situation not only in Ukraine, but in Moldova as well. One may say that at this point the plan didn't quite work out, as the situation in Odessa has remained stable for over a month, but it does not mean that this will not change and that Russia will not decide to make use of its Transnistrian leverage.

The rising Transnistrian role indicates how much Russia is preoccupied with further EU (and possible subsequent NATO) expansion in former soviet republics. Moscow is determined to stop it, or at least counter-balance it, by almost any means.

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For background reading, we recommend European Parliament's report [available online here](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.

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