

**THE TRANSNISTRIAN ISSUE IN THE CONTEXT OF
 RUSSIA'S "NEAR ABROAD" POLICY**

Abstract:	<i>The fall of the Soviet Union witnessed the birth of a new kind of conflict in some of its former republics. Classified as frozen conflicts, these situations destabilize the region and prevent nation-state consolidation. This study aims to explore the complex nature and variation in Russian foreign policy in Near Abroad states from the collapse of the USSR in December 1991 and the accession of Boris Yeltsin to the end of Vladimir Putin's third term as President of the Russian Federation. The present paper aims explicitly the analysis of the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova, its implication for the emergence of Russia's Near Abroad policy and its far-reaching consequences over the relationships between Moldova and the Russian Federation.</i>
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Introduction

Over the course of 1992 a significant shift of opinion occurred within Russian governmental circles concerning Russia's relations to its new neighbors. As was pointed out at that moment among Russian leaders, as a result of miscalculations in assessing the role and place of the new Russia, there were drawn the strategically erroneous political conclusion that Russia should turn inward, within the borders of the Russian Federation, getting out of all the former USSR republics, thereby openly renouncing any special rights and interests in the post-Soviet space outside the Russian Federation.

The events that occurred in Russia and the republics during 1992 made some serious adjustments in the understanding of Russia's role and place in the post – Soviet space. It was in particular the events in the Transnistrian region of Moldova in 1992, when ethnic Russians for the first time were pulled into military action, which pushed Russians out of their inward-looking policy. During the conflict Boris Eltsin engaged

the powerful Fourteenth Army in the fray, sending the Moldovan army into quick retreat.

The Moldovan conflict that coincided with the Baltic citizenship restrictions and the conflict with Ukraine over the former Soviet armed forces but as well with massive out – migration of Russians from Central Asia and Transcaucasia, raised within Russian government circles the issue of Russia’s geopolitical interests in the Near Abroad.

In that context Russia moved to define its own “Monroe Doctrine” towards the post – Soviet republics and began to interfere more actively in their domestic affairs.

The present paper aims explicitly the analysis of the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova, its implication for the emergence of Russia’s Near Abroad policy and its far-reaching consequences over the relationships between Moldova and the Russian Federation.

The Transnistrian conflict: a perspective on implication in the emergence of the Near Abroad Policy of the Russian Federation.

The Transnistrian conflict is characterized by quite a few features which make it distinct from other post-soviet conflicts. The Transnistria conflict that arose in 1989/90 is one of the most unusual outcomes of the late- and post-Soviet transformation processes. Until 1988 “Transnistria” was neither a political unit nor a contemporary term in the Soviet Union. And the territory’s secession came not at the end of a longer escalation, but virtually overnight during the late-Soviet convulsions.

Transnistria is a region in Eastern Europe, a narrow strip of territory on the east side of the River Dniester. “Transnistria” was neither a political unit nor a contemporary term in the Soviet Union. Transnistria, officially the „Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic”, is a primarily unrecognized state that split off from Republic of Moldova after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The Transnistrian conundrum laid heavily on the process of post-communist transition in R. of Moldova. The conflict has generally portrayed as ethnic by Russian Federation. Nevertheless, efforts to deal with the ethnic concerns of the separatists remain ineffective so long as the more fundamental sources of the conflicts are Russian imperial ambitions in the post-Soviet context. In the same time, the crisis has been the result less of legitimate ethnic grievances and more of a long-term contest between two different political elites, pro-Russian/Soviet and pro-Romanian, one of which replaced the other in Moldova’s transition from Soviet republic to independent state.¹ As Y. Seleznev stressed in 1993, Russian Federation started the war in Transnistrian region in order to stop the reunification of the R. of Moldova with Romania.

A complicating factor is that the Transnistrian republic established rudimentary state structures, that is, an elected president and parliament, military formations, a vast network of rayon and city councils left over from the Soviet period, and even introduced its own currency. As a result, since the Transnistrian leaders have

¹ Charles King, *Post-Soviet Moldova: a borderland in transition*, Center for Romanian Studies, Iași, 1997, p. 21.

profited from the lack of central Moldovan control over the region, they also unlikely to commit to political reforms which would diminish their position of leverage toward Chisinau.¹

The complexity of the territorial entity of the space between the Dniester and the Southern Bug is due to the fact that throughout history, it has had several names. Therefore, after the incorporation of the territory between the Dniester and Southern Bug rivers in 1792 into the Russian Empire, it was called Zadnestrovie (beyond ..., across the Dniester)².

The Kremlin leadership appreciated at fair value the geostrategic importance of this acquisition and built the port of Odessa not far from the Dniester estuary, which later became the largest port on the Black Sea. Later, Russia changed, again, the name of the governorate with its center in Tiraspol, calling it Podnestrovie (next to ..., near the Dniester). The proximity could be to the left, but also to the right of the Dniester. The land beyond the Dniester - Transnistria - bears this name in the late ninetieth-beginning on the twentieth century and represent the Romanian perspective on the region (which means beyond the Dniester River) as long as Russia imposed the new name: Pridnestrovie, around or on the Dniester.

In other narrative comes from the eastern part of Moldova, from Transnistria, where a majority group of Russians identify themselves as being part of the Russian political and cultural world. Pridnestrovie – *ruskaya zemlea* (Transnistria is Russian land) is their slogan although Moldovans, or Romanians, represent one third of the population and Ukrainians another third³. The emergence of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMR) on 2 September 1990, supported by the Soviet power and later the Russian Federation, divided the Republic of Moldova into two parts and led to a war that both parties have interpreted as one of independence, that of Chisinau from the Russian Federation and that of Tiraspol from the Republic of Moldova.

Transnistria, over which the Republic of Moldova has no longer any control, has developed a particular perspective on Moldovan statehood. It is argued that its beginnings go back to the creation of the Autonomous Republic of Moldova within the Ukrainian SSR in the 1924, since the area had never been part of the medieval Moldovan state.

The Transnistrian regime therefore has refused to acknowledge any historical connection with the Republic of Moldova and claims to subscribe to the condemnation of the 1812 Russian and 1940 Soviet occupations that forms part of the Moldovan Declaration of Independence of 1991, thereby legitimising the existence of a Transnistrian state which had not been occupied. The authorities of the PMR consider themselves to be the authentic heirs of the Moldovan SSR and the Moldovenism

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 24

² George F. Jewsbury, *Anexarea Basarabiei la Rusia 1774 -1828*, Polirom, Iași, 2003, p. 26

³ V. Kolossov, J. O'Loughlin, A. Tchepalyga, *National Construction. Territorial Separatism, and Post-Soviet Geopolitics in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic* "Post-Soviet Geography and Economics", Vol. 39, No. 6, 1998, pp. 336-337

created in 1924¹. They have preserved the emblem and flag of the former Soviet Republic but also introduced symbolic elements that have no historical connection with the territory, such as the image of the Moldovan ruler Dmitrie Cantemir on the Transnistrian one-hundred-rubles bill².

The authorities of the PMR see no future for a united Moldovan state and have been promoting the idea of a distinct Transnistrian people (*Pridnestrovskii narod*)³, made up from a melting pot of Moldovans (more than one third of the population), Russians and Ukrainians (each almost one third). The Transnistrian border and identity construction shows many affinities with the Soviet pre-war conception of Moldova: Transnistrians are distinct from Moldovans as Moldovans were held to be distinct from Romanians.

Adherents of this narrative see the Republic of Moldova and Romania, as well as Ukraine since the 2005 Orange Revolution, as the main threats to the integrity and security of Transnistria, with the Russian Federation as the guarantor of its existence. Although Russia officially recognises the territorial integrity and independence of the Republic of Moldova, it has remained the main ally of the Tiraspol administration and given it political, economical, financial and military support. Indeed, despite allowing Transnistria to function as a pseudo-state, the Russian Federation has been unwilling to confirm its independence. Thus, when the Tiraspol authorities, during the Russian-Georgian war, asked the Russian Federation to recognise the PMR on similar grounds as those invoked for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow rejected their demand. Russian diplomacy rather seems to pursue the „Transnistriation” (or Federalisation) of the Republic of Moldova by promoting a federal state in which Chisinau and Tiraspol would have equal status. Such a solution would ensure Russia’s influence over political decisions made by Chisinau, the maintenance of its military base in Transnistria and the recognition of Russian as the official language of the new state⁴.

On the other hand, the geopolitical decryption of the space we have in mind, respectively the setting of the frameworks of a geopolitical analysis would allow understanding the evolutions and dynamics that marked this space and aroused the constant interest of Russian military strategists, being considered the strategic line separating two large geopolitical spaces, the Slavic space of the rest of the European world. The geopolitical interest of the Russian Empire for this space increased at the end of the seventeenth century, and especially with the crossing of the Dniester in 1792⁵.

The line of fortifications created by the medieval Moldovan state and the Turks was later used by the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, but also by post-Soviet Russia as an area of great strategic value, in the desire to master the entrances to the

¹ Gheorghe E. Cojocaru, *Cominternul și originile moldovenismului*, Civitas, Chișinău, 2009, p.10.

² Gh. E. Cojocaru, *Separatismul în slujba Imperiului*, Civitas, Chișinău, 2000, p. 5.

³ Anatol Țăranu, Mihai Gribincea, *Conflictul transnistrean. Culegere de documente și materiale*, vol. I (1989-1993) Lexicon-Prim, Chișinău, 2012, p. 7.

⁴ Octavian Țicu, *O istorie ilustrată a românilor de la est de Prut*, Litera, Chișinău, 2020, p. 574.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 54

great strategic hallways of yesteryear, especially Galicia, Bessarabia and the Danube Mouths. This strategic ring road represented by the space between the Prut and the Dniester ensured the strategic maneuver between three major hallways:

- Galicia, the north area of the Carpathian and Alpine mountain range, to Normandy;
- the strategic corridor of the Danube;
- strategic maritime corridor - Black Sea, Aegean Sea, Mediterranean Sea¹.

The current configuration of the region is the result of politico-territorial metamorphoses after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Republic of Moldova on August 27, 1991, in a period of decisive transformations, accompanied by major risks of potential conflicts in the east and south.

In conclusion, we can say that Transnistria represents, from the perspective of its spatial meanings, as a relationship between potential, project and organization, an important strategic alignment for post-Soviet Russia in a context of evolving power. Taking into account all these conditions and developments, the Russian strategy for the development of Transnistria is combined with its interests and projects in the Black Sea, in a complicated international context.

The conflict between the new Moldovan authorities in Chișinău and the „Dnestr Moldavian Republic” (with the Russian acronym PMR) on the Dnestr left bank broke in late spring and summer 1992, and resulted in several hundred casualties. The conflict was soon eclipsed by other world events and disappeared from the news headlines. It remains, however, one of the most complicated conflicts on the post-Soviet scene, both in terms of its pre-history, its political constellations and its possible future developments². While an effective ceasefire was concluded on July 7, 1992, no solution has yet been found to the underlying contentious issue-the legal-territorial status of the Dnestr left bank of the Moldovan state.

Although the Russian mass media and officials have regularly referred to the war as an ethnic conflict³, however, it would be a gross oversimplification to present the conflict as a showdown between the ethnic Moldovan and the „Russian-speaking” part of the Moldovan population. Indeed, the Transnistrian region’s ethnic mix before the war was over 40 percent Moldovan, 28 percent Ukrainian, and only 25, 5 percent Russian⁴. Moreover, neither side involved in conflict agrees to this description and insist that it is essentially political in character.

¹ Gheorghe Văduva, *Pivot sau margine?*, ”GeoPolitica: Revistă de Geografie Politică, Geopolitică și Geostrategie”, Vol. III, No. 14 – 15, 2005, p. 50

² Anatol Țăranu, Mihai Gribincea, *Op. cit.*, p. 8

³ The Russian newspapers titles on the epoch: “ethnic cleansing”, “apartheid”, and “genocide” – announced a new kind of martyrology, while in many cases reflecting reality, in other cases provided Russians with a certain psychological relief from feelings of historical shame or guilt, Mark R. Beissinger, *The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire*, ”Post-Soviet Affairs”, Vol. 11, 1995, p. 166.

⁴ *Yevropeizatsiya i razresheniye konfliktov: konkretnyye issledovaniya yevropeyskoy periferii* (Europeanizarea și soluționarea conflictelor: un studiu de caz al periferiei europene), Izdatel'stvo «Ves' Mir», Moskva, 2005, p. 159.

At the same time, the ethnic dimension cannot be denied altogether: in the Transnistrian region, and only there, the dominant sector of the population was the group, including Russified Moldovans and Ukrainians as well as Russians. Conversely, until after the war the post-communist Moldovan government in Chisinau was composed almost exclusively of ethnic Moldovans.

On the Moldovan side, the conflict began as a mass insurgency, but it became a case of popular chauvinism after Moldovan nationalists came to power in Moldova and pushed ahead the policy of hard Romanization and the unification to Romania. In this initial stage the violence was primarily the responsibility of the Moldovan Popular Front. Under the influence of the nationalists among the Popular Front leaders, the legislature introduced a series of extremely divisive measures, which heightened the growing anxiety of the Russian-speaking minorities. The process of anti-Soviet mobilization that preceded the dissolution of the USSR thus reinforced the ethnic cleavage that was already existent in Moldova¹.

On the side of the Russian speaking secessionists in the Transnistrian region, in contrast, the violence was a case of elite conspiracy, with support from Moscow playing a crucial role. Incumbent Russophone leaders in the Transnistria region used ethnic outbidding to exacerbate mass hostility and the security dilemma in order to preserve and increase their own power. The war in Moldova happened as it did because Moscow deterred mass-led violence on the Moldovan side, but later determined that its strategic interests were best served by supporting instead of preventing the Transnistrian elites' secessionism. Moscow therefore helped the Transnistrian elites to start the war, and then to win it.²

De facto the war started on 29 March, 1992 when the Moldovan president, Mircea Snegur, issued an ultimatum to the left bank leaders, demanding full compliance with Moldovan laws. When the PMR leaders remained unrepentant, martial law was declared on the entire territory of the republic. But in reality, it was in stage on September 2, 1990 when Tiraspol proclaimed the creation the Dnestr Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (later renamed The Dnestr Moldavian Republic) as independent from Moldova and as a constituent part of the USSR.³

From September 2, 1990, Tiraspol stopped taking orders from Chisinau and became de facto independent, as the Moldovan authorities were not in a position to enforce their decrees on the left bank.

The major battles in the Dnestr June war took place in the city of Bendery, which is located on the right hand (Bessarabian) side of the river, and which has a predominantly Slavic population. The losses in military personnel and civilian casualties of both warring sides were considerable. According to the Chisinau branch of the human rights centre Memorial, 203 persons from the Dnestr side lost their lives between 19 June and 3 July as a result of military actions. These figures include 34

¹ William Crowther, Iurie Josanu, *Political Institutionalization in post-Soviet Republic of Moldova*, "Pontes. Review of south east European studies", No.1, 2004, pp. 143-144.

² Stuart J. Kaufman, *Spiraling to Ethnic War: Elites, Masses, and Moscow in Moldova's Civil War* "International Security", Vol. 21, No. 2, 1996

³ William Crowther, Iurie Josanu, *Op. cit.*, p. 144,

civilians plus unidentified bodies. In addition, according to the Bendery city council, around 200 local inhabitants were missed. The same source reports that more than 300 civilians have been treated for serious injuries. Moldovan government sources report that 77 persons from the Moldovan side lost their lives during the June hostilities, including 37 civilians. Some 532 persons were injured, of whom 348 had taken part in the military confrontations.¹

As in most modern wars, both parties accused their adversary of having perpetrated terror and massacre of civilians. The word “genocide” was tossed around lightly. There is, however, reason to believe that most of the atrocity stories were greatly inflated. The annual report on human rights observation around the world, issued by the US State Department in February 1993, remarked that in the Transnistrian conflict, „*while some abuses occurred, press reports on both sides exaggerated their actual extent*”.²

Besides the two warring parties, three states - Russia, Ukraine and Romania - were directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. Ethnic Russians make up some 25% of the population of PMR, and the Russian Federation has been engaged both through the presence of its 14th Army in the area and as a party to the political negotiations concerning the conflict. Ukraine is not only an adjacent state, but also feels a special responsibility for the 170 000 Ukrainians living in the Dnestr republic (28% of the total population). Finally, Moldovans are ethnic Romanians (according to some; according to others, their very close relatives), and active groups in both Romania and Moldova are lobbying for the unification of the entire present-day Moldovan state, including the Dnestr area, with Romania³. This makes the Transnistrian conflict the only post-Soviet ethno-territorial controversy which is not only a matter of territorial (re)distribution among the former Soviet nationalities, but also a question of an irredenta of another European state.⁴

The negotiation process on Transnistrian conflict started on July 3, 1992 in Moscow and a bilateral agreement was signed on July 21, 1992. The PMR was allowed to participate as an observer, but not as a negotiating partner. It is very important to stress here that the peace agreement was signed between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation and this fact once again confirmed the direct involvement of Russia in the Transnistrian conflict. Or, in the interview for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Boris Eltsin said that “...*it was not an intervention of Russia but some officers' willing to defend the local population against the Moldovan army*”.⁵

¹ Pal Kolsto, Andrei Edemsky, Natalya Kalashnikova, *The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism*, “Europe-Asia Studies”, Vol. 45, No. 6, 1993, p. 975.

² *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1992*, p. 849, <https://archive.org/details/countryreportson1992uni> (12.11.2021)

³ Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 2000, p. 181.

⁴ Pal Kolsto, Andrei Edemsky, Natalya Kalashnikova, *Op. cit.*, p. 976

⁵ *Yel'tsin i Snegur vstretilis' v Kremle. Tiraspol' ne zhelayet govorit' s Kishinevom* („Elfin și Snegur s-au întâlnit în Kremlin. Tiraspolul nu vrea să vorbească cu Chișinăul”), “*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*”, 3 iyulya 1992 r. <http://www.yeltsincenter.ru/digest/release/den-za-dnem-3-iyulya-1992-goda> (12.11.2021)

One of its most important points of agreement, the composition of a multilateral peace-keeping force was agreed. It was to consist of units from Russia, Moldova and the PMR. Bulgaria, Belarus and Romania had been asked to contribute peace-keeping units as well but declined the invitation, despite Moldovan pledges to cover all expenses. It was further agreed that the 14th army should be gradually withdrawn from the area, and a number of economic issues of mutual concern were addressed. In the lengthy communiqué the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova were underlined. Significantly, should the status of Moldova as a state be changed at any time in the future, the population of the left bank was guaranteed a right to secede. The details of a „special status” (osobyi status) for the left bank were to be worked out later. In a subsequent round of negotiations, in September 1992, the Moldovan side offered the city of Bendery a status as a free economic zone¹.

The outbreak of major military confrontations in the Dnestr area put Boris Eltsin in an unenviable position. It was extremely difficult to find the point of balance between support for the Moldovan alliance partner in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the need to stop the wave of allegations that he was betraying the interests of fellow Russians in the PMR. In addition to this, the position of Russia was complicated by a number of other concerns:

a) The territorial integrity of not only Moldova, but also of Russia was at stake. If Russia should decide to recognize PMR and the Gagauz republic, Moldova and Romania would most certainly retaliate by recognizing the breakaway Russian territories, Tatarstan and Chechenia. Other states could then be expected to follow suit; b) Eltsin had not forgotten that Mircea Snegur was one of the few Soviet republican leaders who explicitly supported him in the struggle against the putschists in August 1991 - while the PMR leaders did not; c) If strong anti-Russian sentiments should prevail in Moldovan politics, this state could possibly, together with Ukraine and the Baltic states, end up as a kind of anti-Russian „*cordon sanitaire*”. That would greatly complicate the attempts of the Eltsin regime to integrate Russia into the Western world; d) The Eltsin regime was very sensitive to allegations of Russian neo-imperialism. Despite the fact that it contributed to the dismantling of the Soviet Union, it is regularly being accused of harboring imperialist schemes, and it tries to avoid any action that could substantiate such accusations. Eltsin’s government divided and indecisive attitude toward the Transnistrian conflict lead to ambiguities in the official Russian policy regarding this issue².

In the end, the efforts of the patriotic opposition to bring about a more active Russian policy in the Transnistrian conflict met with sympathy and support among certain members of the Eltsin entourage. Significantly, Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi was a leading champion of the Dnestr cause in Russian politics. Rutskoi has on a number of occasions directly and indirectly attacked the position of the Minister

¹ *Yevropeizatsiya i razresheniye konfliktov: konkretnyye issledovaniya yevropeyskoy periferii* (Europenizarea și soluționarea conflictelor: un studiu de caz al periferiei europene), Izdatel'stvo «Ves' Mir», Moskva, 2005, pp. 163-164

² Octavian Țicu, *Op. cit.*, p. 575

of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, who was generally considered a soft-liner on this and on most other issues. In a situation almost unprecedented in democratic states, the vice president of the Russian Federation expressed the attitudes of the parliamentary opposition just as much as the attitudes of his government. The contrast between the two voices of the Russian executive was made abundantly clear in early April 1992 when both Rutskoi and Kozyrev visited Chisinau and Tiraspol within two days. Rutskoi proclaimed that the Dnestr republic „has existed, exists and will continue to exist”, while Kozyrev talked in Chisinau about Moldova’s sovereignty and integrity.¹

In a heated debate at the 6th Congress of People’s Deputies of the Russian Federation shortly afterwards Rutskoi advocated official recognition of the PMR. The cautious faction in the parliament prevailed, however. At the very same time, on 6 April 1992, diplomatic relations were established between Russia and Moldova. The escalation of the conflict after the Snegur ultimatum in March 1992 threatened to compromise the neutrality of the 14th Army in Moldova, which Russia took under its control by a presidential decree of 1 April, 1992².

General Lebed’, who replaced Yurii Netkachev as commander of the 14th Army in June 1992, on a number of occasions voiced strong support of the PMR regime. He has declared the right bank city of Bendery an inalienable part of PMR and PMR itself “a small part of Russia” and the Transnistria region is „the key to the Balkans”³. When Bendery was captured by Moldovan forces on 19 June, tanks from the 14th Army crossed the bridge over the Dnestr. This event appears to have been the turning point of the battle⁴.

The June 1992 war created a new situation for Russian policy makers: the 14th Army was involved in the recapture of Bendery and the statement by Aleksandr Rutskoi regarding Transnistria indicated a change in Russian policy towards the Transnistrian conflict but also related to the Near Abroad generally. So, what happened meanwhile in the Russian Foreign policy that changed the situation and pulled Moscow out of the inward looking policy?

Out of the Inward-Looking Policy: What is the „Near Abroad”? it is generally accepted that the post-soviet honeymoon of the Russian Federation in relations with the West, especially the United States, came to an end in the mid-1990’s. In this sense was arguing that as a result of marginalization in the West, Russia increasingly turned its attention to the former Soviet republics – the “Near Abroad” (the very term implying a special relationship).⁵ A wide range of factors were mentioned in explanation of this shift: the necessity to strength the economic ties with Community

¹ ”Moldova Suverană”, April 14, 1992

² Decree nr. 320 of the Russian President Boris Eltsin from April 1, 1992 was illegal since it was extended over a territory which was not part of Russian Federation and over the individuals who were not the citizen of Russian Federation, ”Rossiiskaya Gazeta”, April 3, 1992

³ Oazu Nantoi, *Transnistrian Conflict – Status Quo and Prospects*, Institute for Public Policy, Chişinău, 2005, p.8

⁴ Pal Kolsto, Andrei Edemsky, Natalya Kalashnikova, *Op. cit.*, p. 388.

⁵ Pierre Verluise, *După douăzeci de ani de la căderea zidului: Europa reconfigurată*, Cartier, Chişinău, 2009, p. 39

of Independent States; strong interest in the fate of ethnic Russians, 25 millions of whom found themselves outside the Russian Federation and imploring protection; border issues like Crimea and in low key north Kazakhstan; and the peril of the Islamic fundamentalism.¹

Nevertheless, there is evidence that a shift toward the former Soviet republics occurred early. And out of all the arguments pointed out above, the most important in our case is how the interests of Russia in defending the ethnic Russians interfered with the pursuing of the Russians state/empire building in the Near Abroad.

Usually in presenting the emergence of the Near Abroad policy is cited Andrannik Migranyan, Eltsin's adviser for security, who said in early 1992 that: „As a result of miscalculations in assessing the role and place of Russia and the deep-seated nature of relations between Russia and the countries of the near abroad, officials of the Russian Foreign Ministry and other political leaders in the country drew the strategically erroneous conclusion that Russia should turn inward, within the borders of the Russian federation, get out of all the former USSR republics, and not interfere in interethnic and regional conflicts in the former Union...”,² thereby openly and publicly renouncing any special rights and interests in the post-Soviet space outside the Russian Federation. However, the events that occurred in Russia and in the republics during 1992 made serious adjustments in the understanding of Russia's role and place in the post-Soviet space...A significant portion of the political establishment...*began to realize more and more clearly that a special role in the post-soviet space belonged to Russia*”.³ It was in particular the events in Moldova in 1992, when ethnic Russians for the first time were pulled into military action that pushed Russians out of their inward looking policy⁴. Beside there were the problems generated by the Baltic citizenship restrictions, the conflict with Ukraine over the Crimea, the former Soviet Fleet and policy of “Ukrainization”, massive out-migration of Russians from Central Asia and Transcaucasia and the widespread perception of Russia's artificial borders that stimulated the shift from inward looking policy of the Russian Federation toward the Near Abroad. The so-called neo-authoritarian representatives of the Russian foreign policy stressed that the problems cited above as well as the guaranties for security imposed for Russia the necessity to become the center for reintegration of the former Soviet Republics.

In the Russian political language the notion “Near Abroad” implies, therefore, two aspects: the official one, invoked for the external uses, means the natural desire to protect the interests of the Russian or Russian speaking community in the former Soviet republics; the second aspect, accepted unofficially, is the using of the first

¹B. Porter, K. Seyvits, *Imperiya bylaya i budushchaya: Rossiya i „blizhneye zarubezh'ye,* (Porter B., Seyvits K., *Imperiul de odinioară și viitor: Rusia și ”vecinătatea apropiată*), ” *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnyye Otnosheniya*”, No. 7, Moskva, 1995, p. 85

²A. Bykov, *Postsovetskoye prostranstvo. Strategii integratsii i novyye vyzovy globalizatsii.* (Bykov A. *Post-Soviet space. Integration strategy and the new challenges of globalization*), Izdatel'stvo Aletyya, Sankt-Peterburg, 2009, p. 16

³ Didier Chaudet, Florent Permentier, Benoit Pelopidas, *Imperiul în oglindă*, Cartier, Chișinău, 2008, p. 181

⁴” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*” (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*), 12 ianuarie 1994.

aspect as well as of the various economic and military mechanisms for the restoration of the viable integrated structure in the former Soviet space having Moscow as a decisional center.¹

Already in spring 1992, in the context of the Transnistria conflict a debate was raising within government circles over the issue of Russia's geopolitical interests in the "Near Abroad". Russia had moved to define its own "Monroe Doctrine" towards the post-Soviet republics and began to interfere more actively in their domestic affairs.²

Even though the basic contours of the Russia's policy towards the "Near Abroad" were already in place well before the December 1993 elections, it was explicitly the strong showing of nationalists and neo-communists during the elections that stressed the Russian geopolitical interests throughout the region.

In January 1994, in his opening speech to the new Federation Council, Eltsin stressed Russia's destiny as "a great power" and as "first among equals" among the former Soviet republics³. In the same time Russian officials drawn a distinction between a "great power" and an "imperial power": the first was about the legitimate pursuit of state interests towards its neighbours within the norms and expectations of the state system, the second was a policy of domination standing outside those norms. Within the post-Soviet context, however, the distinction between the legitimate pursuit of state interests and empire-building is entirely nebulous and is likely to remain so for long time. Very suggesting in this sense was Alexander Rutskoi, Vice-President of the Russia Federation, when he said in 1994 that "...*the peoples of the former Soviet Union are destined by the Lord God himself to live as one family, one nation, one state – a great power*".⁴

Some circles within the Russian government have viewed issues of citizenship and human rights as proxies for other goals of expanding Russian influence. As Gennady Mozhayev said in March 1994, the strategic task of Russia was to keep all Eurasian territory of the former Soviet Union if not under control, the under strong influence. From this point of view, he said, it is an advantage for us to have a big number of Russian in the Near Abroad.

The Russian special mediator in the Transnistrian conflict said at the first round of negotiations that Russia has geostrategic interests in Moldova and also to defend the Russian speaking population clearly linking geopolitical and human rights concerns.⁵

¹*The Emergence of Russian Foreign Policy*, "The Library of the Congress", <http://countrystudies.us/russia/77.htm>

² Mihai Grecu, Anatol Țăranu, *Trupele ruse în Republica Moldova. Documente și materiale*, Litera, Chișinău, 2004, p. 13

³ V. Pantin, *Politicheskoye samoopredeleniye Rossii v sovremennom mire: osnovnyye faktory, tendentsii, perspektivy* (V. Pantin, *Auto-determinarea politică a Rusiei în lumea modernă: factorii-cheie, tendințele și perspectivele*), "Polis. Politicheskiye Issledovaniya", No. 5, 2007, p. 110

⁴S. Potseluyev, *Dialog istoricheskikh vremen v konstruktakh grazhdanskoy natsii*, (S. Poțeluev, *Dialogul istoric în formarea națiunii civice*), "Politicheskaya Kontseptologiya", No. 1, 2010, p. 15

⁵ Stuart Kaufman, *Op. cit.*, pp. 127-128

More explicitly on this point was the seminar held on December 17, 1993 in Moscow and focused on the perspective for solving of the Transnistrian conflict. At the seminar were presented officials from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Duma, Military Head Quarter, academics from Academy of Diplomacy and Russian Academy of Science, but also N. Medvedev, who was Boris Eltsin's adviser for the solution of the Transnistrian conflict. During the seminar was pointed out that the interests of the Russian Federation in Transnistria were determined by the following considerations: a) to maintain the strategic positions of the Russian Federation in South-Eastern Europe; b) to defend in Moldova the interests of Russian population and other nationalities that consider Russia as their historical motherland; c) to maintain the strategic links with the economic enterprises of Transnistria, many of them being unique within the military-industrial complex; d) to solve the conflict in the interest of Russia's own stability and the consolidation of Russia's relationships with the states from near abroad having a Russian minority; e) to establish stable and predictable relations with Romania and to not admit the growing of its nationalist influence on Moldova.¹ Beside the Transnistrian conflict, the Russian Federation used very successfully both the control over the energetic resources and the problem of Russian minority in order to involve decisively Moldova within the new geopolitical space called Community of Independent States in official use and the Near Abroad in that familiar².

What is certain is that, at the current stage, the geostrategy of the Russian Federation is based on a mixture of missionary work anchored in defending ethnic Russians and neo-imperial intentions vital for maintaining the influence of the Russian state in the Dniester region. The Russian strategy is in fact marked by two contradictory tendencies; on the one hand it encourages the development of an atmosphere of trust by engaging organizations, regional cooperation schemes, in joint actions to preserve security against so-called „new risks” and on the other hand it uses military force in frozen conflicts or only with a discouraging role when Moscow finds that the orientation of some riparian states tends to take a „dangerous” turn, of integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Statements such as „the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov basin are in the Russian zone of strategic interest” or „the Black Sea gives Russia direct access to the most important global transport routes” only emphasize that Russia does not want to abandon its positions held in the immediate vicinity.

Conclusion

In the course of the first three years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's official policy toward its neighbors evolved from isolation to active engagement and to reintegration at the same time that Russia discovered a new language of self-determination in reference to its compatriot communities in the “Near Abroad”. In this

¹ ”Bezopasnosti, Informatsionnyi sbornik Fonda Natsional'noi i Mezhdunarodnoi Bezopasnosti”, No. 1-2, 1994, pp. 52-54

² Emil' Pain, *Sovremennyy russkiy natsionalizm: dinamika politicheskoy roli i sodержaniya*, (Emil Pain, Contemporary Russian nationalism: dynamics of political role and content), ” Vestnik Obshchestvennogo Mneniya”, Vol. 122, No. 1–2, 2016, p. 128

sense, Russian state-building and Russian empire-building interfered, maintaining ambiguity, and remain opaque and elusive, difficult to define.

The events that occurred in Russia and the republics during 1992 made some serious adjustments in the understanding of Russia's role and place in the post – Soviet space. It was in particular the events in the Transnistrian region of Moldova in 1992, when ethnic Russians for the first time were pulled into military action, which pushed Russians out of their inward-looking policy and drove them toward involvement in the territories of the Near Abroad.

Over the past three decades, Moscow created the appearance of being a constructive player in the settlement process while actually being satisfied with the status quo. On a regional level Moscow uses Transnistria to create a security issue in the Western part of the post-Soviet space that prevents NATO and the EU from penetrating the “near abroad”. Moscow would thus oppose a settlement or even a reunification of Moldova if its geo-political interests are not met. Gaining Moscow's consent would at least require credible guarantees that Moldova keeps its neutral status, meaning integration neither with NATO nor with the EU. The conflict over Transnistria is characterised by elite interests on a local level and a geopolitical power struggle on a regional level. On both levels Russia holds a great many of critical cards and follows.

In spring and summer 2014, Moscow's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas supplied the international community with a sudden reminder of the unresolved conflicts festering in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. In this context the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR) finds itself in an existential dilemma between its uncompromising political orientation on Russia and its economic connectedness with Moldova, Ukraine and the EU.

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