

Forum: General Assembly 4th Committee

Issue: The question of Transnistria

## **Introduction**

Transnistria – also referred to as Trans-Dniester- is a piece of land located between the river Dniester and the western Ukrainian border. Transnistria proclaimed its independence as a republic from Moldova in the early 1990s; a status that however has not been recognised by any United Nations (UN) member state. Moreover, Transnistria is populated by about 476,000 people of whom the majority are Russian speakers and are of Slavic nationality. However, language is a largely controversial issue within Transnistria, since Moldovan is the mother tongue of about 40% of the population. Regarding religion, the Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the one followed by 91% percent of the population with the rest adhering to Roman Catholicism.

The territory is most often characterized as one of the post-Soviet “frozen conflicts” with due reason. Intertwined with the Russian Empire since 1792 and the Soviet Union after that, Transnistria became part of the Republic of Moldova, following the latter’s unilateral declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Growing tensions between the pro-Russian people in the region of Transnistria and the governing pro-Romanian ethnic nationalist party, led to armed conflict between the two and an unilateral declaration of independence on the part of Transnistria under the name “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic”. Ever since, the situation has been on and off up to today with main highlights being the 1992 Transnistrian conflict and the following ceasefire which although seemed controversial at first, was long-lasting.

On that note, when one talks about the Transnistrian conflict there are many issues to be considered, such as military presence in the area since 1992, as well as the economic issue arising from illegal activities occurring within Transnistria. Considering Russia's recent pattern of renewed aggression – as seen in the case of Crimea and now Ukraine, the question of Transnistria and how this can be resolved has become once again one of paramount importance and interest, that has to be approached in a multifaceted nature.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **De facto sovereign state**

As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, de facto refers to real existence that is either not intended, legal or accepted. Within politics, de facto is used in sharp contrast to the de jure, refereeing to an existence that is deemed rightful by law. The term de facto independence is highly relevant in the case of Transnistria, since the country is in reality independent, having its own government and constitution, but lacking the relevant legal status internationally.

### **Separatism**

Simply, separatism is the faith in the act or movement of separation. Consecutively, separation is the procedure of distinction between two united entities. Politically, separatism refers to movements of people who wish to secede from a greater state.

### **Frozen conflict**

A frozen conflict is one which has reached a stalemate for many years, with no resolution being possible in the near future. Although the actual conflict might have come to an end and fighting have elapsed, there have not been any treaties or frameworks setting the peace terms in a manner that is deemed satisfactory by the opposing sides.

### **Republic**

A republic is characterized by two main things. First of all, it usually has a leader of the state that does not have the characteristics of a monarch and who most probably, has the characteristics of

a president. Secondly, a republic government is one that is elected, comprised of individuals eligible to vote as elected officers and bound to follow the law and serve the public.

### **Background Information**

The background of the conflict

The question of Transnistria is one that strongly involves three parties: Transnistria, Moldova and Russia. Thus, briefly looking into the reasons behind this connection is imperative for understanding the question of Transnistria and its contemporary importance. Transnistria was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1792, whilst the remaining part of present-day Moldova was incorporated in the 19th century, after the Ottoman Empire ceded it to Russia.

Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, Moldova voluntarily came under the Kingdom of Romania. Challenging this incorporation, in 1924 the Soviet Union set up the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), which comprised of Transnistria and a large part of Ukraine. MASSR survived until 1940 and served as a means of influence for the Soviet Union across the Dniester and into Bessarabia, the former Russian province that joined Romania. On the grounds of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact between Hitler and Stalin, Stalin invaded Romania and consequently, forced it to cede Bessarabia to the Soviet Union on June 26th 1940. The merging of Transnistria and Bessarabia created the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR), which remained under the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991. On August 27th 1991, Moldova followed the example of Ukraine and unilaterally declared its independence from the Soviet Union, placing Transnistria under its full control.

## **History of Transnistrian creation**

As mentioned above, Transnistria announced its secession from Moldova in the early 1990s, as a result of growing hostility between the two parties and a Moldovan nationalist policy that demoted the status of the Russian language and promoted the Moldovan-Romanian culture.

Although hostility was increasing steadily in the early 1990s, open war between the two states only occurred after the winter of 1992. That being said, the situation started boiling up between Moldova and the region of Transnistria when the Russian-speaking population in 1990, after a series of events such as the opening of borders between Romania and Moldova, started believing that Moldova and Romania would be reunified again. If that were to be the case, it is most likely that the Russian-speaking population would be discriminated- or even ousted- from participating in civic life procedures. As a result of this, there were protests held all over the region. However, the limited conflict only began on the 2nd of November of 1990 when Moldovan forces decided to cross into Dubăsari with the attempt of separating the Transnistrian region into two separate halves. The movement was short-lived, since Transnistrian inhabitants had decided to form a roadblock in the Dniester Bridge which then led the Moldovan forces to open fire in order to get through.

This marked the first casualties of the Transnistrian conflict, with three civilians shot fatally. The situation came to a halt up until 1991 when there was a second Moldovan attempt by the forces to cross the Dniester bridge, only this time the attempt resulted in the killing of four Moldovan troops and the imprisonment of 27 Transnistrian troops, marking it as the second failed Moldovan attempt to enter the region. Once again, the conflict reached a stalemate up until the 2nd of March 1992, when Moldova was recognized as an official state by the United Nations,

which meant that Transnistria was also a part of it and not recognized by the UN. On the same day, Moldova launched a military campaign aiming for the suppression of separatists in Transnistria, which prompted volunteers from Russia and Ukraine to help the separatists, and open war began between Moldova and Transnistria. Spring of 1992 was characterized by increasingly intense fighting, with the fighting taking place in three regions surrounding the Dniester river, namely the areas of Cocieri-Dubăsari, Coşniţa and Bender, where Moldovan forces destroyed three Russian tanks fighting along the separatists.

The entire situation prompted a heavy reaction by Russia, as seen in the deployment of the 14th Guards army, who fought in favour of the separatist movement and overwhelmed the Moldovans outside Bender. The conflict left about a thousand people dead and three thousand wounded as well as a thousands of internally-displaced-people. Moreover, the Moldovan side has been accused of committing many human rights abuses such as opening fire within residential areas and in backyards of houses as well as firing Russian ambulance cars carrying wounded people. On the 21st of July, a ceasefire agreement was reached between Moldova, Russia and Transnistria with the Russian and Moldovan president actively taking part in the communication process. The measures taken within the agreement were the creation of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) in which Moldova, Transnistria and Russia were to participate through overseeing if the ceasefire were kept. Moreover, the agreement set a “security zone” along the Dniester river (as can be seen in the picture to the left) which would be demilitarized and would separate the two sides. This ceasefire has been maintained up until today, however, the tension between the two sides is not completely resolved.

## Post-War Transnistria

Post-War Transnistria is characterized as a self-proclaimed republic meaning that it has its own current President and government. It also has a cabinet of ministers which is headed by the Prime Minister. Transnistria also has its own constitution which has paved the way for many referendums. The most recent and notable one was the one held on September 2006 which asked voters to decide whether they were in favour of Transnistria's road to independence and its free association with Russia or whether they would prefer renouncing the procedures and becoming part of Moldova. The results of the vote favoured the former with a percentage of 78.1%, which is of course much greater than the simple majority needed to make the referendum "valid" with regard to the Transnistrian legislation. As regards the economy, Transnistria has its own currency, the Transnistrian Ruble. Transnistria's economy is a largely privatized one comprising of mostly private industries with its strong factors being steel, electricity and textile production. After 2013, Transnistria's economy has only been getting worse, affecting the residents negatively. This is largely due to the fact that Russia stopped providing economic aid to Transnistria which was used by the government to cover pensions.

However, the largest issue with Transnistria's economy is its, as described by a former President, Transnistria's purpose as a safe haven for "international mafia". As has been reported by diplomats and politicians, Transnistria's ruling elite has been largely taking part in illegal activities which harm the country's economy. More specifically, Transnistria served both as the base as well as the trader of a number of demerit goods, such as alcohol which had been stripped off of taxation, drugs and most commonly, armaments. This largely occurs for the reason that although Moldova has imposed VAT on most of its products, Transnistria has not, thus giving an

incentive for illegal trading. More often than not, traders would get through Moldova with official papers and then cross into Transnistria to sell their products, such as gasoline and arms, without added tax and in this way gaining a higher profit.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### **Russia**

After the two opposing sides, Russia is the country most involved in the issue of Transnistria. Her involvement is multifaceted and is of great controversy within the international community. Primarily, Russia was involved in the Transnistrian conflict and has maintained military presence within Transnistria since then. Although at the beginning of the open war Russia's official stance was one of neutrality, many Transnistrian inhabitants were Russian-speakers and later found sympathy amongst Russian soldiers and officers, specifically of the 14th Russian Guards Army. With that being stated, a great amount of arms was given to the Transnistrian forces as well as many Russians from the 14th Army physically joined Transnistrians in the fighting. Additionally, their military presence continued even after the fighting in the sense that, since they were part of the JCC, they had to be there to supervise the implementation of the ceasefire. This presence continues today with the international community questioning the aspirations that this presence has over the region. In 2008 the Parliamentary Assembly of the NATO passed resolution 371 which in one of its sub clauses urged Russia to "respect its commitments which were taken at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in 1999 and withdraw its illegal military presence from the Transnistrian region of Moldova in the nearest future"

Although Russia has announced that she will be retrieving their troops from the area, only a small number of troops have been deported and a large number – approximately 1,000 troops- remains in the Transnistrian region to date. The reason as to why the presence of Russia is so controversial amongst the international community lies with the fear that Russia's aspiration wishes to use Transnistria as a bridge to Kiev. In other words, it is of popular opinion that Russia's aim is to annex Transnistria into its greater Federation, an option hugely supported by Transnistrians which would ultimately, give it an easy stepped passage to Ukraine. Other means of Russia's involvement include the economic aid Russia has provided to Transnistria, namely through the provision of money which have been used by the government to support many basic economic aspects such as the fulfillment of wages and the funding of policies.

However, Russia's economic aid to Transnistria has been cut off since 2013, a move which plummeted many Transnistrians into poverty due to the fact that the government couldn't find enough resources to support pensions after the elimination of the economic aid. OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has mediated talks between the two sides since 1997 and continues to facilitate them, as well as provide further aid through measures such as missions. As aforementioned, the first attempt at resolving the issue was in 1997 with the Primakov Memorandum which is an agreement supporting the "settlement" between the two sides. It would be fair for one to argue that the most notable clause is the last clause which asks for any relations between the opposing sides to take place under the umbrella of a common state, a state which would be limited within the borders of Moldova. However, due to the fact that the two sides interpreted the memorandum differently, the conflict was not settled and thus, more

negotiations were held. Moreover, the OSCE has hosted the so called “5+2” talks since 2005. The talks are called 5+2 because they consist of the four most involved countries on the issue, namely Transnistria, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE as well as two observers which are the United States of America (USA) and the European Union.

The talks follow one of the OSCE’s main objectives which is the resolution and prevention of conflict. It is in this regard that the negotiations are held, so as to create amiable relations between the nations. According to the OSCE website, the negotiators of the 5+2 talks meet systematically with the aim of discussing the living of residents on both sides of the Dniester River, specifically “freedom of movement, education, telecommunications, economy, transport, environment and matters related to the security zone”.

The OSCE has also organized a Mission to Moldova which will be further discussed throughout the “Previous attempts to solve the Issue” section.

## **Timeline of Events**

### **1940**

Moldovan Socialist Republic, comprised of two regions; the post-Romanian occupied Bessarabia region and the Dniester region is created

### **1989**

Law which recognizes Moldovan as an official language in the region, thus creating a large number of protests from soon-to-be Transnistrians, is passed.

### **March 1990**

Transnistria announces its secession from Moldova

### **2nd of November 1990**

Moldovan forces try to pass into Transnistria through the Dniester Bridge, resulting in three people fatally shot

### **1991**

Second attempt by Moldovan forces to cross into Transnistria which this time ends with 4 Moldovan troops imprisoned and 27 Transnistrian troops killed

### **1992**

14th Army's military presence begins

**2nd of March 1992**

Moldova gets recognized by the UN and open war between the two sides begins

**21st of July 1992**

Ceasefire agreement is passed, marking the beginning of the JCC

**December 1995**

Transnistria passes its own constitution

**1997**

Primakov Memorandum comes into effect, wishing to set a framework under which Transnistria and Moldova can work

**1999**

OSCE Mission to Moldova comes into force

**2005**

5+2 talks begin taking place

**2008**

NATO resolution 371 is passed, urging Russia to withdraw its military troops

## **Possible Solutions**

As far the handling of the Transnistrian issue is concerned, one is required to use a multifaceted approach. There are many aspects that need to be dealt with, with economic and security issues being a prime example.

To begin with, the status of the Transnistrian region needs to be reassessed. Although there was a referendum in 2006, it is considered by many either outdated or not lawful and thus, a new referendum regarding Transnistria's status will need to be organized. This referendum should ideally, be monitored by the UN which would make sure that no electoral fraud is present, deeming the results invalid and leading the region to even greater instability. Once the referendum has been held, the UN along with possibly the OSCE will need to evaluate the results of the referendum, in the sense of examining the possibility of the result being implemented. For example, if the result of the referendum calls for full autonomy, it will be imperative to look into and assess whether Transnistria's infrastructure and national institutions are adequate to support it. If not, a viable plan of action will need to be drafted which would set a transition phase and which would serve towards achieving the results of the referendum.

That being said, before any plan is drafted and any drastic measure towards Transnistria's full/partly autonomy is taken, what needs to be ensured is Moldova's assurance in the region. An instance of Moldovan aggression as a result of too drastic measures supported by international organizations such as the UN is to be avoided. However, what the UN as well as the international community could do is place pressure upon and provide incentives for Moldova to agree with the

referendum results. If all else fails, another means of compromise which does not undermine the position of either sides needs to be found.

Moreover, another important issue that needs to be addressed is the issue of economic shrinkage and the trading of illegal armaments in the area. Stricter legislation with regard to the passage of armaments in and out of the region needs to be advised as well as closer monitoring. The introduction of VAT would also serve beneficially since many take advantage of Transnistria's lack of VAT in order to conduct illegal activities. Means of economic growth such as the improvement of infrastructures, the introduction of new sectors which would allow employment opportunities are crucial for Transnistria's economic status.

Finally, Russia's military presence in the region will also need to be assessed. Are the actions of the Russians illegal, in the sense that they pose a threat to the stability and security in the area, no matter the fact that they are supported by the Transnistrian people? Such questions are ones that need immediate answers, which would serve to guide solutions on that aspect of the issue.

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