

Ukraine's Ambivalent Policy on Transnistria in 2023-2025

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Abstract

Since Ukraine gained independence, the Transnistrian conundrum has wrought its interaction with Moldova. Throughout the war, an escalation in Transnistria has been subject to speculations. Yet, Kyiv's stance on the enclave remains widely unexplored. This study establishes that the Ukrainian top foreign policy players inconsistently legitimise and further their standpoints on Transnistria, repeating the paradoxes of their antecedents. Constructivist interpretation of foreign policy, and Van Leeuwen's legitimisation theory, are applied to the public communication of President Zelensky and the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to unravel strategic narratives and plausible inconsistencies in their stances. The research period stretches from January 2023 to November 2025; primary material is retrieved from the authorities' official websites.

The research reveals a visible divergence between Kyiv's stated policy and its actual steps. Kyiv chiefly employs authorisation by past and present, as well as by regulations to advance its commitment to Moldova's sovereignty. Rationalization, understood as reference to studies and research, is less common. The Zelensky administration is repeating the paradoxes of its predecessors, as Ukraine clearly aims to limit the possibilities of Transnistria – either Kiev or the “aggressor” Moscow.

Keywords: Transnistria, Moldova, Ukraine, President Zelensky, foreign policy, constructivism
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Introduction

In August 2025, Moldovan columnists speculated about the collapse of Transnistria², especially after the upcoming completion of the Isaccea-Vulcanesti-Chisinau high-voltage power line (e.g. Călugăreanu, 2025).³ Since early February 2025, the gas deliveries via Moldova to Transnistria flowed through an international network of purchasers and suppliers (GRM, 2025a; PPMR, 2025a). The complex solution was introduced to avoid another social crisis in Transnistria, which a month earlier materialized in daily curfews of electricity, heating and hot water. Thus far, the Russian gas was delivered via Ukraine and Moldova to Dnestrovsk (Cuciurgan) power plant in the pro-Moscow enclave, which returned the compliment by producing some 80% of Moldova's electricity. However, the "economic emergency" in Transnistria continued until the introduction of a temporary solution in mid-October. During the cold months (September 2025-March 2026), Gazprom will once again hold a license to supply the republic (ANRE, 2025). Moldova, on the other hand, purchases its electricity from the western pool and platforms. The downside is that significant state subsidies are needed to offset the effects of the market price for both consumers and businesses (CSE, 2025a; CSE, 2025b; GRM, 2025b).

First and foremost, Kiev's refusal to extend the gas transit agreement between Russia and Ukraine beyond December 2024 worsened the situation in the Dniester region and therefore necessitated the search for alternative energy routes (Gazprom, 2024; Tiraspol'transgaz, 2024). The issue affects the broader interests of Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine and demonstrates how interconnected the fates of Chisinau, Kiev, and Tiraspol are. This deep connection is also visible in Moldova's National Security Strategy, according to which if Ukraine falls, Moldova will follow suit (Security strategy, 2023: 2-3). The obvious reference is to the 1,500 fighters from the Russian Operative Task Force, the Russian peacekeeping battalion near the Dniester, and the Transnistrian armed forces, which number 67,000 soldiers after reserves are mobilized (Strauțiu and Melintei, 2021: 113; Marandici, 2023: 99; Lamminparras, 2023a: 148, 152; Lamminparras, 2024a: 156, 166; Military strategy, 2025: 12.2). In late 2022, a military analysis described the Dniester region (and Belarus, for its part) as "a phoney front" that without any armed action limits Kyiv's strategic and political options (Lamminparras, 2023a)⁴.

As throughout the entire period of independence, the conflict in Transnistria continues to determine the interaction between Ukraine and Moldova. Although diplomatic relations

² People in the enclave condemn this Romanian-language term because of associations with the Nazi and Fascist regime during the Second World War. Instead, they consider the correct designation to be "Pridnestrovie". However, for reasons of clarity, "Transnistria" is used throughout this article.

³ As of late November 2025, roughly 60% of the construction works in Vulcanesti, and some 80% in Chisinau, are completed. The 157 km power line is to enter into service in a few months, thus extending Moldova's energy independence. It is capable to deliver up to 630 MVA, and thus, guarantee more than half of the needs during peak hours (Jurnal, 2025).

⁴ This estimate continues to be valid as of November 20, 2025, when the final draft of the paper was submitted.

between Kyiv and Chisinau were established in 1992 (Treaty, 1992) and borders were agreed upon in 1999 (Agreement, 1999), from 1991 to early 2005, Kyiv nevertheless pursued a dual-track policy. After the so-called Yushchenko⁵ plan collapsed in the summer of 2005, Chisinau and Kyiv took common steps toward Europe; that, however, estranged Transnistria. Between 2010 and 2013, the Moldovan-Ukrainian boundary was demarcated, the countries' bilateral trade increased, and a region-wide economic zone was envisaged. The Russian annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 changed the dynamics: in 2015–2016, the post-Maidan Ukrainian politicians mainly argued over language, educational and communication laws (see Baysha, 2024: 17–21). Due to the ongoing conflicts in Eastern Ukraine (Matsuzato, 2022; Kudelia, 2022; Uehling, 2023), Kiev has paid minimal attention to the Transnistria issue (except for the cancellation of the Russian-Ukrainian military transit agreement in 2015 and the strengthening of its southwestern border in 2017). From late 2016 to early 2021 there were no top-level meetings between Kyiv and Chisinau. Between the fall of 2017 and the summer of 2018, Kiev's foreign policy resources were focused on the "language wars" against Ukraine, waged by Hungary and Romania (Lamminparras, 2018). Thereafter, President Petro Poroshenko⁶ concentrated on advancing his re-election by promoting a national Orthodox Local Church (Lamminparras, 2023c). From 2020 to 2022, under President Zelensky⁷, Ukraine generally emphasized state sovereignty but lacked a vision about how to restore it, whether in Transnistria or Donbas.

Although the conflict along the Dniester has been widely studied (e.g. Sadovnik, 2020; Coadă, 2022; Cebotari, 2022; Marandici, 2023; Roney, 2023; Miarka, 2024: 65–117), Kiev's policy towards Transnistria from 1991 to the present day remains largely ignored. This article examines the current (use of) language of the President of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the pro-Eastern enclave along the Dniester River. It seeks to answer the question of how leading Ukrainian foreign policy figures perceive the Transnistrian conundrum, and legitimize and promote their positions. The text therefore resembles a constructivist interpretation of (regional) foreign policy (see Reus-Smit, 2005; Finnemore, 2017: 128–150; McCourt, 2022), which perceives language as the basis of global politics. Opposite to what Morrow (1988: 80–81) claims, this does not imply lasting balanced choices; neither is it assumed that players always possess consistent preferences or that they persuasively pursue their goals or that they respond adequately to events.

⁵ Viktor Yushchenko (1954–) served a brief term as Ukraine's prime minister in 1999–2001. From January 2005 to February 2010, he served as Ukraine's third president.

⁶ Petro Poroshenko (1965–) retained the portfolio of Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009–2010, and in 2012, shortly led the Ministry for Economic and Industrial Development. Poroshenko was Ukraine's president in 2014–2019. Since mid-February 2025, he is under personal economic sanctions, imposed by the National Security and Defence Council and promulgated by Zelensky, perhaps due to Poroshenko's ambition to challenge the incumbent in the later-to-take-place presidential elections.

⁷ Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine from May 20, 2019. His five-year term ought to have ended in 2024, but the Ukrainian Constitution does not allow for elections in a state of war. Hence, Zelensky's presidency has been prolonged.

On the contrary, this paper argues that the perceptions of government actors - in this case, those of Ukraine - are constantly interpreted in terms of their semantics and communicated in a similar way through the same mechanism. The diversity and even contradictions in the behaviour of states are found to stem from factors of a psycholinguistic nature.

Despite its connection to international relations and to regional and conflict studies, this study primarily applies a sociolinguistic approach, namely Van Leeuwen's concepts of legitimation. Discourse analysis, as broadly defined by Fairclough, is applied to the public speeches of the core figures of Ukraine's foreign policy to interpret the strategic narratives and expose the possible incongruities in Kyiv's policy on Transnistria. The research covers the period from January 2023 to November 2025, which suggests an up-to-date analysis. Significant light is shed on the relations between Ukraine and Transnistria, as well as those between Ukraine and Moldova, from 1991 to 2025.

The article begins with a discussion of previous research on the topic. The methods and data are then explained. The results of the study are presented in four thematic sections summed up in the conclusion.

Literature review

It is striking that the topic has been neglected by scholars around the world. Furthermore, local research on the subject is scarce (see Pyntsak, 2008; Pyntsak, 2011; Sadovnik, 2020: 152-166). Even the studies that compare the conflicts in Transnistria and Donbas (e.g. Jitari, 2015; Kharitonova, 2019a; Marandici, 2023) either fail to assess the Ukrainian policy on Transnistria or hardly mention it. This is rather strange, as the more Moldova - and Ukraine - advance in the EU accession process, the more the question of the status of the pro-Russian republic sandwiched between them needs to be explored. As for Tiraspol, this study would not go beyond preliminary comments on its legitimization actions. Targeted research on Kyiv's policy towards Moldova is also needed. The war, in turn, provides specific grounds for examining Kiev's current positions regarding the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (for interpretations on Eastern Ukraine in 2014-2019 see Hauter, 2021; for Zelensky and Donbas before the war see Onuch and Hale, 2022: 134-136).

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, significant attention has been paid to Russian-speaking populations in the former Soviet republics and/or their enclaves (e.g. Cebotari, 2022; Matsuzato, 2022; Roney, 2023; Miarka, 2024). It is amazing that an unknown Ukraine overnight became a major topic for many authors (e.g. Wilson, 2022; Uehling, 2023; Baysha, 2024). A French biography of Zelensky was immediately published, as was another title focusing on the president's early years, his career as a comedian, and his subsequent popularity (Onuch and Hale, 2022). Most of these more recent works do not include the term "Transnistria"; at best, they mention it in the references. However, Baisha (2024: 42-57) summarizes that Zelensky's wartime discourse presents Ukraine as a vanguard of civilization, as a defender of democracy against tyranny, and as a united nation. Unlike many leaders, Zelensky left military command to professional cadres, as envisaged

by military reforms since 2014. The president took on the role of a key communicator, both inside and outside Ukraine. As for his outer appearance, it is worth noting how Zelensky ditched his black suit just days after the war began. He began favouring T-shirts and polo shirts embellished with patriotic symbols. Similarly, he continued his pre-war use of short videos for communication, a medium that emerged from social media (Onuch and Hale, 2022: 153-158).

As for the potential for escalation on the Dniester side, the heated debate of February 2023 about a plausible joint Ukrainian-Moldovan invasion of Transnistria has already been examined. The study includes an assessment of the position of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but focuses primarily on the conflicting parties, their military training, as well as tactical means and obstacles. A recent study of President Zelensky's policy towards Transnistria in 2019-2022 reveals that while Kiev openly promises a commitment to state sovereignty and combat readiness, it simultaneously makes a clear distinction between Transnistria and Eastern Ukraine. Zelensky is primarily looking for a specific solution for Donbas, while Transnistria remains on the periphery (Lamminparras, 2025).

Methodology and data

In the present paper the method of discourse analysis is used to examine Kiev's policy on Transnistria. This method draws on Norman Fairclough's theory of (the use of) language in close connection with its social framework with three distinct levels of analysis. At the textual level, the solitary words and phrases stand in the spotlight. Secondly, at the so-called production level, the resources and processes involved in the production of a given text are analyzed. Thirdly, at the sociocultural level, the focus is on the text's connection with the past and the present. At the same time, this representation "constructs" the social environment (Fairclough, 1992). Fairclough later on developed his theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with a focus on ideas, rule and social wrong (Pälli and Lillqvist, 2020: 387-388). Yet to avoid any political bias, Fairclough's initial version is applied here.

As the presenters in this study are the Ukrainian president with his administration and MFA of Ukraine, resources and data are available and accessible. The analysis of the data concentrates on the textual and sociocultural levels applying specifically the concept of *hedges*, i.e. the language devices by which the authorities soften their statements (Ibid.: 392-393). *Legitimation*, in turn, consists of four umbrella terms. The first is *authorisation* here with the meaning 'to argue with allusions to traditions, laws and customs'; the second is *rationalisation*, which is to employ surveys and statistics, such as opinion polls; moral evaluation concerns expressing and fomenting emotionally-charged estimates. A third related concept - *mythopoesis* - can be interpreted as storytelling (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Legitimation and mythopoesis may function in two ways: their point of reference may be situated in the past and/or the future. In order to trace these time-based manoeuvres, but also due to the events' contemporaneity, it is essential to describe the axioms, implications and omissions the actors in Kyiv (but also in Chisinau and in Tiraspol) pronounce.

Hence, there are a number of auxiliary questions: How does Kyiv interpret the Transnistrian case? How does this relate to Moldova? On what issues does Kyiv remain silent?

The primary sources are data retrieved from the official sites of the President of Ukraine the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Apart from one speech President Zelensky gave in English, all sources are in Ukrainian, Romanian/Moldovan, and Russian. It is significant that the wording 'Придністров' (Prydnistrov), truncated to enable all grammatical spellings, returned merely 3+8 results (see PoU, 2023; PoU, 2024; PoU, 2025a-k; MZS, 2023a; MZS, 2023b; MZS, 2024a; MZS, 2024b; MZS, 2024c; MZS, 2025a; MZS, 2025b; MZS, 2025c)⁸. Curiously, a meeting between Transnistria's and Ukraine's new ambassador to Moldova took place in June 2025. It is relayed by the former Moldovan presidential administration but not by the Ukrainian MFA (PPMR, 2025b). Secondary sources are obtained from the same authorities in the three parties under examination – Ukraine, Moldova and Transnistria. Altogether, both the nominal number of topical news, and Kyiv's silence over the latest discussion, suggest the low significance assigned to the Transnistrian question.

Ambivalence about integrity

As Ukraine firmly fights to hold its positions and to repel the Russian advances in Ukrainian Eastern regions of Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia and has conducted multilateral preparations for the proposed but insofar unrealised peace talks with Russia (MZS, 2025d; PoU, 2025f; PoU, 2025g; PoU, 2025h), Transnistria remains an irrelevant issue of secondary importance. Since the 1990s, the Transnistrian conflict has played an ambiguous role in Ukrainian foreign policy, influencing Kiev's relations with Chisinau. During the full-fledged war by the Dniester in 1992⁹, Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, and Romania together assured their allegiance to the principles of international law and Moldovan integrity (Sadovnik, 2020: 153). Kuzio (2000: 212) praised Leonid Kravchuk¹⁰ for his vague calls for peace and offers of mediation while Kiev was secretly negotiating the merger of Transnistria with Ukraine.

The background for this is the Declaration of Independence of Moldova of August 27, 1991, which annulled the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, thanks to which in June 1940 the Soviet Union annexed the then Romanian Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia. In legal

⁸ One of the results includes two mentions of the enclave's name by a journalist in the MFA's press conference (MZS, 2025a) and because of that is not included in the data pool.

⁹ Both sides perceive December 13, 1991 as the starting point of the armed conflict by the Dniester (Țaranu, 2011: 148-149). With alternating temporary ceasefires and heated conflicts, the war reached its climax in late June 1992 in Bender, the strategic crossing point and entrance to Transnistria on the right bank of the Dniester. A second Russian intervention a month later ended the fighting while also freezing the dividing lines. On July 21, 1992, peace was forged between Russia and Moldova with Transnistria participating as an observer. A tripartite peacekeeping operation and a buffer zone along the Dniester were introduced (Kharitonova, 2008: 193-195; Dulgheru, 2018: 217-221). The estimates revealed about 1200 deceased, and an equal number injured, of which the majority in Bender alone; thousands sought refuge.

¹⁰ Leonid Kravchuk (1934-2022) served as the Chair of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR in 1990-1991 and Ukraine's president in 1991-1994.

terms, the Declaration laid the foundation for the unification of Transnistria and Ukraine (Korobov and Byanov, 2012: 212). And yet, this provision is one of the main arguments of Transnistria, namely, that it was precisely the then Soviet Moldovan politicians in 1990-1991 who liquidated the unitary state of the Moldavian SSR.

Therefore, there was no integrity to defend in 1992, nor is there such today (PPMR, 2025c). Although Tiraspol's discourse is not the focus of this research, its semantic meaning deserves some attention. Krasnoselskiy refers to both history and law, and his conclusion seems logical. However, he does not say that events would inevitably lead to today's Transnistria. In other words, Tiraspol practices storytelling and this topic needs further exploration. As for the early 1990s, there were no references to a land swap, namely Transnistria for southern Bessarabia (the western wing of today's Odesa region). Of course, the likelihood of these territorial changes even then was minimal (Korobov and Byanov, 2012: 212).

It is pertinent to note that Kyiv and Chisinau first agreed on free trade in 1995, during Leonid Kuchma's¹¹ initial years in office. It was only in January 1997 that the Agreement on good neighbourly relations, friendship and cooperation entered into force. In addition, even though the Moldovan-Ukrainian boundaries were agreed in 1999, the demarcation took place during Viktor Yanukovich's¹² term, in 2011, after the Palanka issue in the south-eastern corner of Moldova was settled (Ibid., 2012: 211, 213, 216, 218-221). Nowadays, Palanka is the only border crossing in the south-eastern part of the country that bypasses the Transnistrian-controlled areas. It has proved to be a vital conduit for ensuring the resilience of the Odessa region, as well as its population, in the current war.

For three decades, Ukraine has functioned as a guarantor-mediator in the Transnistrian conflict resolution process and has participated in the joint peacekeeping mission through its ten observers (Kharitonova, 2019b: 211). In 1996-1997, Kuchma's Ukraine actively mediated draft resolutions, with Transnistria being granted a special status. These discussions led to the signing of Memorandum on the Basis for Normalization of Relations between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria in May 1997, outlining Ukrainian participation in a united Moldova. Despite the fact that the conflicting parties never came to terms upon the contents of a "unitary state" (Sadovnik, 2020: 154-155), the seven strict demands for "Moldova's sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders" voiced by the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry in 2023-2025 reiterated Ukraine's basic position. At the very least, Kiev has consistently emphasized its "unchanged position" on the process (MZS, 2023a; MZS, 2023b; MZS, 2024a; MZS, 2024b; MZS, 2024c; MZS, 2025b; MZS, 2025c).

The allusion to the past and present – as inferred in "unaltered" – constitutes an intriguing model of authorisation. This not only legitimizes Kiev's current position, but also projects a future one: any territorial loss is excluded. This explicitly concerns Moldova,

¹¹ Leonid Kuchma (1938–) was Ukraine's prime minister in 1992–1993. From July 1994 to January 2005, he served as the country's president.

¹² Viktor Yanukovich (1950–) retained the post of Prime Minister in 2002–2005 and again in 2006–2007. From February 2010 onwards, he was President of Ukraine before being ousted from power in February 2014.

and implicitly the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry outlines conditions for the case of Donbass as well, since the terminology itself refers to international law. Regrettably, the ministry does not envision the procedures, nor the means to restore Moldovan integrity. Now, the resemblance with Zelensky's initial caution is striking. In early 2021, at the first meeting of the Moldovan and the Ukrainian Heads of State in more than four years, Zelensky stated that Kyiv's perennial standpoint persists. But he did not project any measures to achieve a reintegrated Moldova (Lamminparras, 2025: 5-6).

Likewise, the Ukrainian position circumvents the (future) status of the Ukrainians in Transnistria. According to the enclave's MFA, these constitute 27 percent of the local population of 465 100 persons, that is, they number slightly over 124 000 (MID-PMR). It is worth noting that one of them is the president of the republic, Vadim Krasnoselskiy¹³, as is sometimes evident from his pronunciation. In contrast, the Moldovan registers speak of a total of 367 776 individuals residing in the eastern side of the Dniester (GRM, 2024). As the former number seems to follow the data gathered during the Transnistrian census a decade ago, the latter may truly reflect the reality. For the purposes of this study, it is assumed that the "deficit" of about 97 000 people affected each nationality in the enclave equally. Therefore, there are still some 100 000 – 120 000 Ukrainians permanently residing in Transnistria.

This fact partly explains Zelensky's statement in the spring of 2025 about Ukraine's readiness to supply coal to Transnistria to prevent a "humanitarian crisis" (PoU, 2025a). The choice of words describes the conditions well, but this statement also falls into the category of moral judgment, not least because Zelensky refers to the dire circumstances as "crisis" and "suffering", thus provoking emotional reactions. The president's affection for nationals across borders seems a bit exaggerated, but overall it turns out to be consistent. For example, in 2020, Zelensky listed history, shared values, good manners, and common achievements as markers of Ukrainian identity, which cannot be reduced to language alone (Onuch and Hale, 2022: 127-128).

Understandably, the Ukrainian president also wags a finger at the culprit for the current needs of national kinship. According to Zelensky, Russia is largely to blame for the "energy resource vacuum" as Moscow has tended to influence the public atmosphere ahead of the parliamentary elections in Moldova on September 28, 2025 (PoU, 2025a). According to Wilson, Zelensky's assertiveness towards Moscow increased in the spring of 2021. On the one hand, the backdrop for this is the election of Joe Biden as US president and the resulting need for Kiev to "get back into Washington's good books." On the other hand, changes in Ukraine's political landscape accelerated the phenomenon (Wilson, 2022: 368-369). In this case, Zelensky legitimized Moscow's guilt by referring to the future, namely the elections that would be held seven months later. Even if Russian interference in the electoral process were later proven, at the time Zelensky's remark was more of a forward-looking narrative

¹³ Vadym Krasnoselskiy (1970–): President of the Transnistrian Supreme Council from 2015 to 2016; President of Transnistria from 2016 to 2021, re-elected in December 2021.

than a solid argument. Somewhat controversially, he downplayed the whole problem by benevolently offering assistance from Ukraine.

However, the precedents of Kiev's two-way activity make one think of other plausible incentives. By the second decade of the millennium, the Ukrainian language and culture in Transnistria were promoted by two cultural organizations, five television channels, and a combined Ukrainian primary and secondary school. Local Ukrainian speakers identified themselves as Ukrainians, and leaders of cultural associations openly expressed their support for the enclave (Kotsur, 2011: 426-427). Despite the reduced number of Ukrainian national relatives in Transnistria today, there have been no significant changes in the educational and cultural spheres. For example, at a meeting with the Ukrainian delegation in June 2025, the President of Transnistria Krasnoselskiy praised the teaching of the Ukrainian language in the enclave's schools and the administrative services for Ukrainian refugees (PPMR, 2025b). In short, Tiraspol practices authorization through traditions – hinting at past as well as present cordiality – and implicit rationalization through naming specific state subsidies, such as education, housing, and care.

In this sense, it is of paramount importance that in February 2024, Kyiv's special envoy, Pavlo Rokhovey, was contemplating the restoration of consular services for Ukrainians living in Transnistria (MZS, 2024a). As the Ukrainian ambassador to Moldova, he confirmed this possibility during the aforementioned negotiations in June 2025 (PPMR, 2025b). According to him, the factors are personal security and the unhindered free movement of personnel (MZS, 2024a). In other words, Rokhovey was demanding guarantees of the inviolability of consular activity, especially against hypothetical allegations of espionage or similar charges. These are, of course, specific safeguards; at the same time, Rokhovey was raising doubts about the hospitality of the enclave. Today, working and living in a pro-Moscow republic may sound awkward for the Kiev authorities. Krasnoselskiy's idea of zero conflicts between local and newly arrived Ukrainians (PPMR, 2025b) can (or should?) be interpreted as dispelling such doubts. First, there is a moral assessment, because Krasnoselskiy emphasizes the absence of contradictions. Then, the solution is visible by referring to historical and current interethnic relations. However, whether Transnistria can fulfil its obligations is not the main question. If the consulate were to reopen in Tiraspol, Kiev could reinforce Ukrainian identity in the enclave, not to mention concrete identification services for local Ukrainians. This would further undermine Moldova's integrity.

Transnistrian financial crisis

In February 2024, Krasnoselskiy and Rokhovey exchanged views on “solutions to problematic aspirations of an economic and socio-humanitarian nature” (MZS, 2024a). In practice, the starting point was the tariffs imposed on January 1, 2024 by Chisinau on Transnistrian foreign trade enterprises; the fees were quickly condemned by Krasnoselskiy. Besides comparing Moldova's customs policy to the 33-year dispute, especially the tragic events of 1991-1992, Krasnoselskiy criticized it as a “violation of European values of human

rights and freedom of enterprise" (PPMR, 2024a; see also *Strategiya*, 2018: 6, 40). According to the President of Transnistria, "with financial and logistical blockades," Moldova is seeking to "stifle the economy of Transnistria." However, this will not lead to the "political capitulation" of the republic (PPMR, 2024b). In summary, Krasnoselskiy calls on Moldova to abandon the "path of aggression" (PPMR, 2024a). All the general terms of legitimization are revealing. To begin with, through parallels with the 1990s and the note on fundamental civil rights, Tiraspol uses authorization through traditions and laws. The rationalization is present in the allusions to the local economy being threatened by new barriers. As such, the concepts of "blockades," "suffocation," and "aggression" imply strict moral judgments. Overall, whether realistic or not, this is perfect storytelling.

It is noteworthy that the choice of words and the tone are reminiscent of those of 2006. Before that, Ukraine, led by Yushchenko, proposed a "seven-step" concept for Transnistria, covering, for example, democracy, civil society, external mediation, and Western control of the borders. The master plan failed to dispel the doubts of Moldova and Transnistria. (Miarka, 2024: 77). Sadovnik insists that the document was intended to be a mirror resolution of the Kozak Memorandum, drafted in the Kremlin and named after Putin's close aide and envoy to Transnistria, Dmitry Kozak.

Since this would limit Transnistria's ability to unite with Russia, despite the envisaged large autonomy, Tiraspol rejected Kiev's proposal (Sadovnik, 2020: 158-160). After that, both Ukraine and Moldova, the latter led by President Vladimir Voronin¹⁴, chose the European orientation and introduced stricter product and tariff policies (Korobov and Byanov, 2012: 215). In Transnistria, such policies were seen as a clear obstacle. From this perspective, the referendum of September 17, 2006, was quite logical. In it, 97% declared independence, while a bit less than 95% rejected reintegration into Moldova; the plebiscite therefore served to consolidate the enclave's status. In principle, since the allegations clearly concern fundamental freedoms so valued in the West, there are strong grounds to assume that Tiraspol is deliberately portraying Moldova in dark colours, both in 2006 and today. The goal was and is to denigrate Moldova and therefore to belittle Chisinau's pro-European path.

The fact that socio-economic issues were on the agenda of the summit with the special envoy of Ukraine in 2024 is due to a similar trend. Krasnoselskiy called on the guarantor-mediator to convince Moldovan politicians; not least because Ukraine, once again hand in hand with Moldova, is aspiring towards the EU. In return for the support, the Transnistrian leader confirmed Tiraspol's readiness to cooperate with Chisinau while alternative routes for Ukrainian exports were sought (MZS, 2024a). Through its proactive behavior, Tiraspol positioned itself as a reliable and innovative partner. We can repeatedly observe rationalization in the allusions to financial aspects. The need for a mediator to influence Chisinau constitutes the moral assessment. The use of local infrastructure becomes

¹⁴ Vladimir Voronin (1941–), retired major general. Minister of Internal Affairs of Soviet Moldova (1989-1990), President of Moldova (2001-2009). Due to alleged election fraud and large protests, he was forced to step down, but as chairman he took over as acting president until September 2009, MP in 2009-2019 elected again in 2021.

storytelling; it is worth considering whether, for example, the old railway lines serve this purpose. Also, if Kiev does open cargo links to and from Transnistria, it would increase the risk of security and/or safety incidents. To monitor the increasing traffic, Ukraine will need to bolster the border, although new personnel are desperately needed in the trenches of eastern and southern Ukraine.

In fact, these elements were among the main concerns of an unnamed journalist during the press conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 2025. Ministry spokesman Georgi Tykhii was asked about the possible resumption of transport from Chisinau to Odessa via Transnistria. Kiev's general position on the conflict is almost unchanged: Ukraine has not changed its position regarding the Transnistrian region of Moldova. Ukraine, as before, is, first and foremost, a participant in the resolution process. Ukraine considers the Transnistrian region to be part of an indivisible Moldova, supports the territorial integrity of Moldova and believes that the peaceful reintegration of the Transnistrian region into Moldova is necessary (MZS, 2025b).

Ukraine's position regarding Transnistria leaves no doubt. Tykhyi¹⁵ uses a high register of vocabulary that only emphasizes the content. Authorization by tradition is double: Kiev's position forms a continuum and still functions as a guarantor. Similarly, references to regulatory aspects are abundant: "the resolution process", "indivisible Moldova", "territorial integrity" and "reintegration". A reverse allusion to the past and therefore a moral assessment is evident in "peacefully" (before the attempt to restore unity ended in tragedy). Regarding the reporter's question, the spokesperson noted that the idea originated in Moldova. Ukraine is willing to cooperate, but there are many details that cannot be disclosed; according to Tykhyi, security aspects are certainly "key [factors]" in the process (Ibid.).

Once again, certain ambivalence can be observed. Kiev signals its benevolence. But the idea of the origin of the idea shifts the main responsibility – whether in the economic, infrastructural or military sphere – onto the shoulders of Moldova. Likewise, the allusion to security concerns almost rules out the implementation of the entire proposal; if it had been deemed imperative to close the border nearly four years earlier, it is hardly likely that the risks and dangers would have suddenly disappeared. Of course, if the peace talks, which for a second appeared, for example, at the end of August 2025, had been specified, perhaps a better chance for the idea would have appeared.

Second, in February 2024, the day before Putin's address to the Federal Assembly of Russia, Transnistria's decision makers from every administrative level gathered to call for protective measures from Moscow "in an era of enormous geopolitical storm," with Transnistria "finding itself in quite difficult circumstances" (PPMR, 2024c). Above all, the features of storytelling are specific, but so are the dire consequences of the aforementioned Moldovan tariffs. It is noteworthy that the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry only called on all parties for a "peaceful resolution of problematic economic and socio-humanitarian

¹⁵ Heorhii Tykhyi (1989-), Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine since July 2024.

aspirations within the framework of Tiraspol-Chisinau relations, without any destructive external interference" (MZS, 2024b). The statement itself is in line with the best traditions of diplomacy. Unlike President Zelensky, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs distanced itself from the ongoing difficulties in Transnistria and called on the parties to negotiate; that is, a resolution through normative documents, such as memoranda and pacts. Secretly, through the words "destructive external interference" the ministry nevertheless implies Russia's interference in the deteriorating living conditions. However, the desire for negotiations provides further evidence of duplicity rather than serving any real purpose, since the 5+2 and 1+1 negotiations have been stalled since 2019 (for the years 2012-2019, see Kharitonova, 2019a; Kharitonova, 2019b; Miarka, 2024: 78-79).

An analogy from 2004 suggests darker reasons for Tiraspol's commercial orientation. Twenty-one years ago, it was Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma who refused to address the Transnistrian issue. The supposed reason was the absence of his Moldovan counterpart, Voronin. Dulgheru (2018: 239-240) suggests rather dark reasons for the failure of the plan, the so-called Kozak Memorandum, intended to resolve the Transnistrian conflict through a federalized Moldova. The undefined status of Transnistria favours the illegal activities and meetings of the underworld of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and the enclave itself. This seems plausible when we consider the steps that followed. Due to the pro-European course of Moldova and Ukraine, the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) was launched in the region in 2005. Its task was to prevent smuggling and human trafficking across the unclear borders of the three communities (Korobov and Byanov, 2012: 215). However, its mission is largely limited to cooperation and knowledge sharing (Sadovnik, 2020: 142-143, 148-149). Since 2022, the EU Border Agency Frontex has been cooperating with Moldova. While assessing the importance of EUBAM or Frontex, it is important to remember that the mandate of both missions ends in the western reaches of the Dniester, i.e. where Moldovan jurisdiction ceases and Ukrainian jurisdiction does not extend.

Virtually, Ukraine's frontiers are closed (Roney, 2023: 136). This effectively hinders many economic ventures in the southwest of the country or forces them into costly and time-consuming diversions. Yet, cross-border delinquency appears to be a problem for the area.

In fact, Zelensky has tasked security agencies, law enforcement agencies, and border authorities with preparing a plan to strengthen the border between Transnistria and Ukraine. In this context, the report by then-Minister of Internal Affairs Igor Klimenko is most revealing. His report to the president concerned "the strengthening of the state border to terminate the functioning of channels for the illegal crossing of Ukrainians" (PoU, 2024). It is obvious that officials had data and were interested in this activity, which is why Zelensky and his aides used rationalization.

There are several discursive implications that need to be analyzed. First, Kiev seems less concerned about smuggling of products or devices than it is about human trafficking. Overall, this attitude deserves applause. Second, the word "illegal" legitimizes Kiev's preventive measures. However, it is worth considering whether these clandestine border crossings would be a problem if there were no urgent need for men in the Ukrainian army.

It is important to note that the need is indeed urgent. A clear sign of this is the “Contract 18-24” campaign for recruiting young people aged between 18 and 24, introduced in February 2025 by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. In practice, this includes a one-year service, a “decent salary,” “prestigious experience, and social security unavailable in civilian life” (MOU, 2025a; MOU, 2025b). Fourth, if Ukrainians themselves prefer to avoid conscription rather than defend the integrity of their own country, how serious are Kiev’s demands for Moldovan recruits?

Russia’s military presence

As much as Kiev promotes Moldova’s territorial integrity, it rarely calls for Russia’s withdrawal from Transnistria. In terms of military traditions, the Operational Group of Russian Force (OGRFV) dates back to nearly 70 years. After the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, the Soviet troops were reorganized. In the Moldavian SSR, the 14th Soviet Army was stationed in Bălți in the north, Chișinău, Tiraspol in the east, and Cahul in the southwest. Part of the contingent was stationed across the border in the Ukrainian SSR, in Bolgrad, with the relevant air force and naval units subordinated. The army’s main task was to ensure Soviet superiority in the Balkans. The upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East were considered secondary (Lamminparras, 2023a: 144, 155).

During the escalation in 1990-1991, the army trained and equipped the so-called “local guard” while its soldiers seized bridges and road crossings across the Dniester. In doing so, they secured both the proclamation of Transnistria on September 2, 1990, and the plebiscite for independence on December 1, 1991. Amid the large-scale fighting on the Dniester in 1992, the initial role of the Russian 14th Army remained unclear. Finally, the culmination of the war, the bloodshed at Bender in June-July, ended with the army’s second intervention. Moldova and Russia agreed to a ceasefire on July 21, 1992, during which the trilateral peacekeeping mission was established. According to the 1994 Moldovan-Russian agreement, the withdrawal of troops and the huge weapons depot in Cobasna was to take place within three years. However, the State Duma refused to ratify this pact. On the other hand, in the mid-1990s, the number of Russian soldiers in Transnistria dropped from 6,500 to 2,600. At the same time, the contingent was transformed into the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), with the task of ensuring the rotation of Russian peacekeepers near the Dniester and guarding Kobasna. As already indicated, even if the creation of the OGRF had not been abandoned, the actual number of pro-Russian fighters in Transnistria would probably not have decreased. Overnight, they became the basis of the nascent local forces. Nevertheless in 1999 the deadline for withdrawal was postponed for another three years. In the early days of the new millennium, Moscow withdrew and destroyed weapons banned by the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Ultimately, the planned American missile shield and increased cooperation with former satellites like Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria irritated the Kremlin. In 2007, Putin cancelled the commitments,

freezing the debate (Lamminparras, 2023a: 146-147, 156; Lamminparras, 2024a: 156-157, 183-185).

The process has stagnated. Since the mid-1990s, the Russian military presence has remained relatively stable. The OGRF alone number 1,500 people, and there are also about 500 Russian peacekeepers (Marandici, 2023: 99). If we express this in military units, the combined result corresponds to a regiment. Such a contingent is not able to act independently, but needs air and technical support. For defensive purposes, a unit of this size is suitable for a certain period, at least if it is trained and its positions are considered in advance. Again, support and logistics, not to mention reinforcements, become critical factors. Moreover, in 2017, Ukraine reinforced its southwestern part with ten to twelve thousand fighters, i.e. two brigades (Chernyavskiy, 2017: 189). They are capable of independent operations, especially thanks to their artillery and armoured vehicles.

Despite all these elements, it is unlikely that Kiev will fear the OGRF or an attack from the rear. However, in the summer of 2023, Zelensky called on Europe to finally take measures to force Russia to withdraw from Ukraine's backyard: Why are Russian contingents still in Transnistria? The Kremlin needs this for just one day to thaw the attack on Moldova. How long will Europe tolerate this? This question is already more than 30 years old and is worth answering (PoU, 2023).

Above all, the words "still," "30 years," "more than 30 years" refer to the past (and present), interpreting "permission." The words signal legitimization of Zelensky's implicit demand for Russia's withdrawal. Moreover, both the call and the legitimization are reinforced by a reference to a theoretical threat of invasion. Furthermore, the verb "unfreeze" itself indicates that Russian aggression against Moldova has only been temporarily halted, but will resume soon. Perhaps, with more than two references to the future, these sentences become storytelling.

From a policy perspective, Zelensky's assessment of Moscow's ultimate goals may prove to be valid. Although Putin refrains from making explicit statements about Moldova's status in the Kremlin's eyes, his conclusions leave the world uncertain about whether Russia's border runs along the Dniester or the Danube and Prut (Lamminparras, 2024b). However, the failed capture of Nikolaev in April-May 2022 halted the Russian offensive towards Odessa and Moldova. Given the new Russian conquests in Zaporizhia Oblast and Pokrovsky District, and also with the striking Ukrainian military recruitment, there are no claims that a new attack beyond Kherson could lead to noticeable Russian progress. This, in turn, would threaten Moldova or at least seriously change regional circumstances, as the country's current national security, defence, and military security strategies unequivocally state (Security strategy, 2023: 2-3, 5; Defence strategy, 2024: sections 2-4, sections 8-10; Military strategy, 2025: section 10, section 12.1-12.3).

Conversely, Moldova plans to generally strengthen its armed forces, continue with "integration into the EU security architecture" and strengthen cooperation with NATO, "the key pillar of security and stability" (Defence strategy, 2024: sections 3, 20, 26.1-26.2, 27.1.-27.21.; Military strategy, 2025: sections 1.1.-2.5., 3.1.-3.3., 4.1c, 5.1c). Chisinau aims

to increase the share of the defence spending to one percent of the GDP by 2030 (Ibid.: sections 26.4., 30.1). All these measures raise concerns in Transnistria (see Miarka, 2024: 85-86). As of 23 August 2025, there was a vague potential that the planned Russian-Ukrainian negotiations would lead to a compromise freezing the front lines and therefore containing the risk of escalation from the Dniester side (EC, 2025). To prepare for unpleasant negotiation patterns, Zelensky sought security guarantees from Britain, northern European countries, and NATO (PoU, 2025f; PoU, 2025g; PoU, 2025h). Half a year earlier, Ukraine agreed to deepen bilateral cooperation in the fields of defence and finance with the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, with Canada, as well as with Spain and Belgium (see all references to PoU from 2025).

In late November 2025, even a one-day ceasefire seems unattainable. As for Kiev, Zelensky and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron signed a framework agreement that allows Ukraine to purchase 100 Rafale fighter jets, air defense systems and radars, as well as air-to-air missiles and aerial bombs (PoU, 2025i). Ukraine has just agreed with Spain a €600 million package, half of which consists of IRIS-T air defence systems (PoU, 2025j). At the same time, headlines or leaks of information are circulating about a peace concept pre-conceived by Washington and Moscow (Lukiv and Kirby, 2025; Balmforth and Malenko, 2025). However, the success of the draft document seems unlikely, as it cannot be enforced by force. Kiev has already signaled that it is seeking a solution that respects Ukraine's sovereignty and brings "lasting peace" with security guarantees (PoU, 2025k).

Regardless of the situation in Ukraine, developments in Moldova appear to be complicated. As a start, the new Prime Minister Munteanu recently outlined the country's priorities in Brussels, emphasizing cooperation with the EU four times (GRM, 2025c). At the same time, the Ukrainian Ambassador to Moldova, Paun Rohovei, met with the President of the Moldovan Parliament Igor Grosu¹⁶. The agenda consisted mostly of "tandem European integration," but those that casually mentioned security challenges and "initiatives and projects that contribute to stability in the region" likely included Transnistria. Strangely, the name itself or the conflict was not mentioned at all (MZS, 2025e). Moldova recently adopted its Military Strategy for 2025-2035, which is in line with the other two strategies. In addition to the usual development visions, it envisages increasing military personnel to 8,500 soldiers and 2,000 civilians by 2030 (Military strategy, 2025: 45.1). This will certainly not contribute to reducing tensions by the Dniester.

Cobasna arms depot

Oddly enough, the Ukrainian president omits the local armed forces in Transnistria. Including reserves, they number about 70,000. Even without counting the troops of the enclave's Ministry of Internal Affairs, which number about 6,000, their ranks reach 67,000 soldiers (Lamminparras, 2023b: 50). In terms of personnel, this unit represents almost two

¹⁶ Igor Grosu (1972–), leader of the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) in Moldova. President of Parliament from July 2021.

armies. During the Soviet years, such a unit numbered approximately 40,000 soldiers, which is a powerful and mobile contingent. Hypothetically, it is these troops that would launch a possible offensive against Moldova or Ukraine, capture and occupy key bridges, crossings, production complexes, etc. Indeed, both Tiraspol and Chisinau maintain that “joint diplomatic, political, economic and social efforts” are imperative for resolving the conflict (Security strategy, 2023: 5; Strategiya, 2018: 15-16). At the same time, the sheer number of fighters does not reveal how the corps are organized, nor their tactics, let alone their tasks. It is also likely that significant amounts of Soviet-made weaponry are obsolete or inconvenient, and are more likely to be found in the vast Cobasna weapons depot in northern Transnistria than in the hands of Russian or local guards.

However, little attention is paid to Cobasna itself. First, the landfill covers 132 hectares and is located east of Râbnîța/Rybnitsa, a few kilometres from the nearest residential buildings in Ukraine. With the withdrawal of Soviet Army divisions from the GDR, Czechoslovakia and other satellite states, their equipment was withdrawn and stored in Kobasna (Cebotari, 2022: 123). In the early 2020s, there was talk of 20,000 tonnes of ammunition and a huge number of military vehicles and equipment (Strauțiu and Melintei, 2021: 115). As such, obsolete weaponry poses an environmental as well as humanitarian risk, not to mention the possible explosion. According to Cebotari, the worst-case scenario resembles a nuclear explosion with a power of ten kilotons, i.e. two-third of that of Hiroshima. The range would reach 50 km, with walls within a radius of four to five kilometers being damaged. The human and ecological catastrophe could cover an area of 500 to 3000 sq. km. (Cebotari, 2022: 124). By the Dniester, large areas of Rybnitsa could be partially, if not completely, devastated. The effect could extend to Cocieri north of Dubăsari/Dubossary. In Ukraine, the towns of Balta, Kotovsk, and Kodima, along with their surrounding rural areas, are within the hypothetical range of the explosion. Although estimates vary, it is clear that in the event of a detonation, the region – and all of Eastern Europe – would face a severe environmental and social crisis.

President Zelensky neither highlighted nor mentioned Cobasna in his speeches in June 2023, August 2024, or January 2025. This in itself is consistent with Zelensky's reticence in the first year of the war. He made only two general comments about Ukraine's combat readiness in the event of an offensive from the southwest (Lamminparras, 2025). Furthermore, Onuch and Hale (2022: 157-159) negate allegations that the outbreak of the full-fledged war transformed the pre-strife president into another Zelensky. If this is the case, then his silence on Cobasna proves a natural consequence. Instead, it was the Ukrainian MFA in February 2024 that specified Kyiv's standpoint: “Furthermore, Ukraine continues to advocate for the withdrawal of Russian military from the Transnistrian region, the destruction of weapons from the warehouses in Cobasna, and the transformation of the Transnistrian mission from military to civilian” (MZS, 2024a).

Here, the verb “continues” legitimizes Kiev's demands, as it implies continuous action—a resolution from the past, present, and future. It is strange that there is no data, for example, on the environmental risks. Perhaps the claim would be more convincing if

some rationalization were presented? Partly because of this lack, but also because of the context, one is inclined to wonder whether the above-mentioned goals are Ukraine's true goals. Paradoxically, in May 2015, it was Ukraine that shaped the fate of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) after Russia withdrew from the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty (Strauțiu and Melintei, 2021: 114). The Verkhovna Rada after the Maidan revoked the bilateral transit agreement between the countries, i.e. the contingent was left with no way out (Kharitonova, 2019a: 88). At that time, the likely goal was to exhaust these corps, leaving them without ties to their homeland. Nowadays, the decision may backfire.

Moreover, during the heated Moldovan-Russian-Transnistrian debate on the Russian withdrawal in 2021, Kiev remained virtually silent. Overall, after Maia Sandu¹⁷ was sworn in as President of Moldova in December 2020 and again in December 2024, the climate is favourable for such debates. Unlike her predecessor Igor Dodon¹⁸, who proposed federalization of Moldova as the optimal solution, Sandu cites Moldova's sovereignty and integrity as her main focus (Coadă, 2022: 91-94). It is logical that this focus would not be realized if Russian sentries patrol the banks of the Dniester or Cobasna.

On the other hand, the fact that the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry began promoting the relevant goals not until the spring of 2024 requires a separate explanation because promoting these goals from the very beginning of the war would have been more insightful. One is thus prompted to consider whether the MFA proposal functions as an alarm (then and still in November 2025). In this case, Ukraine's ongoing difficulties, such as heavy losses at the front and difficulties with raising troops at home, could lead to rapid territorial losses, and then it may be too late to discuss Russia's withdrawal. At the same time, Kiev was seeking additional attention from the international community on a topic that, in the worst -case scenario, could cause a transnational catastrophe.

The cynical hypothesis is reinforced by the rapid repetition of the position. In connection with the high-level meeting in Transnistria and the subsequent appeal for protection from Moscow less than two weeks later, the Foreign Ministry in Kiev highlighted the same goals: „Furthermore, Ukraine continues to advocate for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Transnistrian region of Moldova, the destruction of weapons from warehouses in the city of Kobasna, and the transformation of the Transnistrian mission from a military to a civilian one” (MZS, 2024b).

With two minor exceptions, the choice of words is completely identical. In addition to suggesting haste, this speaks of convenience, not of a programmatic approach. In contrast, during the MFA press conference in April 2025, not a word was mentioned about Kobasna. Now the president and the ministry are also silent. Therefore, it can be assumed that the

¹⁷ Maia Sandu (1972-), Minister of Education in 2012-2015. Prime Minister of Moldova for less than six months in 2019, President of Moldova from December 2020.

¹⁸ Igor Dodon (1975-), Deputy Minister of Economy and Trade in 2005–2007, Minister of Economy and Trade in 2008. After sixteen years of a parliamentary vote, Dodon was the first President of Moldova again elected through a universal one, a post Dodon retained till December 2020.

two previous calls for Russia's withdrawal acted purely as a political tool. Since the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry "considers the 5+2 format of the negotiations to be dysfunctional due to the presence of the aggressor state Russia" (MZS, 2024b) and "Russia has given up its status and role" in the Transnistrian process (MZS, 2025b), this not only condemns Moscow's position, but also sets the stage for future debate. Discursively, both expressions imply a clear moral assessment and reverse resolution through regulatory action, i.e. they hint at agreed procedures that Moscow has abandoned. That is, although Transnistria seeks mediation and assistance against the backdrop of its economic and social difficulties, it should not rely on an invader, but turn to Kiev. The MFA statement aims to strengthen Ukraine's position in resolving the conflict, rather than suggest feasible steps.

Conclusions

Transnistria represents a false front and as an issue remains trivial for the authorities in Kiev. During the research period (January 1, 2023 – November 20, 2025) leading Ukrainian foreign policy institutions, represented by President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian MFA, merely ten times pronounced their standpoints on the enclave. Kiev firmly upholds the integrity and sovereignty of Moldova. Ukraine's foreign policy actors legitimise their stance ad hoc rather than a consistent manner. They present their demands for the integrity of Moldova as a permanent commitment of Kiev and refer to international law, i.e. they practice authorisation by traditions and regulations. Yet, both President Zelensky and the MFA ignore the fact that in 1992 their predecessors discussed a union of Transnistria and Ukraine. At present Kyiv seeks to restore consular services in Transnistria where a hundred thousand Ukrainian nationals reside. Such a measure, however, would enhance the Ukrainian identity in the enclave, thus undermining Moldovan integrity. To support Ukrainians in Transnistria during the spring 2025 energy crisis in the region, Zelensky expressed goodwill, combining open moral evaluation and storytelling, literally referring to the upcoming elections in Moldova. By contrast, Ukraine is demanding the withdrawal of Russian forces from Transnistria and the removal of the Cobasna weapons depot from its "backyard," using allusions to past and present European passivity. And yet, since 2015, Ukraine itself has repeatedly impeded transport from the region by closing its borders. Currently, in order to combat illegal border crossing, the President and his team are pushing for further strengthening of the border, applying rationalization and to a lesser extent moral evaluation.

Zelensky accused Moscow of trying to destabilize the Dniester region before Moldova's elections, while the Ukrainian MFA used more diplomatic terms like "destructive external involvement." Although Russian interference ahead of the September 2025 elections seemed plausible, it also served as political narrative. The crisis was in fact triggered by Kyiv's refusal to extend the Russian-Ukrainian gas transit deal. Hardships grew, with speculation in August 2025 that Transnistria was facing collapse. A temporary agreement required Gazprom to supply gas

to Transnistria from September 2025 to April 2026, yet problems persist due to unstable power infrastructure.

Diplomatic relations between Ukraine, Transnistria and Moldova reveal further nuances. The 2024 discussion on reopening Ukraine's consulate in Tiraspol showed Kyiv's mistrust and Tiraspol's calculated response; tellingly, the 2025 debate was communicated by Tiraspol, not the Ukrainian MFA. The consulate's reopening reflects Kyiv's aim to promote Ukrainian identity in the enclave, as in the 1990s, though this would undermine Moldovan territorial integrity, which both Zelensky and the MFA claim to prioritise.

Regarding conflict resolution, Ukraine insists on a peaceful solution, as do Moldova and Transnistria, but Kyiv has not identified the steps toward a unified Moldova. The latter two favour diplomacy and socio-economic measures, relying on memoranda and negotiated formats. Whether future Moscow–Kyiv talks will affect Transnistria remains uncertain. As the US role in post-war Ukraine is unclear, Zelensky seeks broader Western military and financial support. Meanwhile, Moldova aims to strengthen EU-linked security cooperation, improve NATO interoperability, and expand its army, steps unlikely to ease tensions along the Dniester.

Paradoxically, top Ukrainian foreign policymakers have urged Russia to withdraw from Moldova only four times, and each call is brief. Apart from Zelensky's implicit appeal, the wording is identical and highly formal. Moldova's president Maia Sandu revived the issue in 2020, and her re-election in 2024 makes such demands timely. In the summer of 2023, Zelensky urged Europe to increase pressure on Moscow regarding Transnistria, using historical and current references and warnings about future Russian incursions. Although partly storytelling, his prediction appears plausible given the presence of the Operational Group of Russian Force (OGRF) and the expanded Transnistrian forces after mobilization. Putin's hints that Russia may go beyond the Dniester, even to the Danube or Prut, keep tensions high. In two of three statements, the Ukrainian MFA briefly mentioned the Cobasna arms depot but avoided rationalizing by providing facts or risks. By 2025, it no longer addressed the issue aligning fully with Zelensky — a sharper silence than in 2019, when Kyiv at least supported Moscow's proposal to remove ammunition.

These developments raise questions about the MFA's real priorities. In 2015, Ukraine itself blocked Russia's military exit from Transnistria by denouncing the transit pact after Moscow quit the CFE Treaty, and in 2017 strengthened its southwestern border. Yet recently, Ukrainian representatives and Transnistrian leaders discussed potential export routes through the enclave. The 2025 initiative to reopen highway transport across Transnistria also deserves to be examined in a separate study, especially as Ukraine has set security conditions and shifted responsibility to Moldova. Kyiv's calls for Russian withdrawal thus serve mainly to assert its primacy in the conflict-resolution process.

The recurring situation repeatedly raises questions about the true purpose of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry. The events surrounding the withdrawal of Russian forces from Transnistria in 2015 or the initiative to restore the highway transport between Ukraine and Transnistria in 2025 are reminiscent of Ukraine's two-track policy under Kravchuk in the

early 1990s. Calls for a Russian withdrawal reinforce Kyiv's leading role while simultaneously denouncing Russia as the "aggressor state" that has abandoned its obligations as a guarantor. Meanwhile, Transnistria, facing socio-economic hardship, is left with only a grim choice — to turn to its distant patron or to rely on an ambiguous Kyiv.

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