


Ukraine and Transnistria: A troubled borderland

Ukrainian-Transnistrian relations have been quite good since Transnistria broke away from Moldova, declaring its (unrecognised) independence in the 1990s. Volunteers from the Ukrainian nationalist from the Ukrainian National Assembly-People's Self-Defense movement (UNA-UNSO) even helped Transnistrians in their fight against Moldovans in the 1992 war, however, the Ukrainian authorities have incessantly declared their support for Moldova's territorial integrity. Generally, Kyiv appreciated Tiraspol's policy towards Ukrainians, an ethnic group which makes up approximately one-third of the quasi-state's population, and treated the predominantly Slavic Transnistria as a counterbalance to Romanian Moldova. Moreover, Ukraine's adjacent regions and part of its political and business elite enjoyed economic cooperation with Transnistria based on trade, transit and investment as well as illegal activities such as smuggling. For Transnistria, Ukraine was a window to the outside world.

September 29, 2014 - [Marcin Kosienkowski](https://neweasterneurope.eu/post-author/marcin-kosienkowski/) (<https://neweasterneurope.eu/post-author/marcin-kosienkowski/>) -  [Articles and Commentary](https://neweasterneurope.eu/category/articles-and-commentary-50/) (<https://neweasterneurope.eu/category/articles-and-commentary-50/>)



Bilateral relations worsened in the aftermath of the 2004 Orange Revolution. Igor Smirnov, then-Transnistria's leader, supported the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych. At the same time, Smirnov overtly opposed Viktor Yushchenko who was perceived as a pro-western candidate, and in the end became the president. However, the relationship between Kyiv and Tiraspol recovered relatively quickly. The new Transnistrian authorities, now led by Yevgeny Shevchuk who took power at the end of 2011, did not repeat the mistake of his predecessors and remained silent during EuroMaidan revolution, even though he sympathised with Yanukovych.

The situation changed when Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in March 2014 and the pro-Russian rebellion began in eastern Ukraine. Relations between Ukraine and the pro-Russian Transnistria, with 1,500–2,000 Russian soldiers on its soil, became hostile. Ukrainian authorities identified the quasi-state as a staging ground for Russian and Transnistrian groups to infiltrate and destabilise south-western Ukraine, mainly the neighbouring Odesa region. Moreover, they seem to fear that the Russian army based in Transnistria could invade Ukraine. The Ukrainians also expressed concern that Russia wants to carve out a corridor from Crimea/eastern Ukraine via the southern regions to Transnistria, cutting Ukraine off from the Black Sea.

Transnistria denied these accusations. For some time, it even presented an opposite view claiming that it could be invaded by Ukraine. Tiraspol further accused Ukraine of imposing a blockade on the region because of tightened border control and reinforced defences and military personnel along the common 453 km-long border.

A Transnistrian threat: real, imagined, promoted

Experts offer dozens of opinions on the present Ukrainian-Transnistrian relations and, to put it simply, they can be divided into three types. The first coincides with statements made by Ukraine's authorities claiming that Transnistria poses a real threat to Ukraine's security and territorial integrity. The quasi-state is usually seen either as a Moscow puppet or an entity eager to support Russia. The number of Russian troops based in Transnistria, however, is quite small, but an expert of the US-based Jamestown Foundation, Dumitru Minzarari (http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5btt_news%5d=42752&tx_ttnews%5bbackPid%5d=228&cHash=1580aed0b26c1482691c346c4c01d54a#.VCkAw_l_uzZ), claims that it could (or already has) quickly and easily increase the number to about 6,500 personnel. Add that number to the Transnistrian military and security forces and the force size could easily reach (sufficiently equipped) 10,000–12,000. Mînzărari concludes: "Given that the initial force size of the Russia-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine was in the low thousands and they were, nevertheless, able to take over two of Ukraine's regions, the [group of Russian forces] in Transnistria possesses a highly threatening potential for Ukraine".

The second type of opinion is that Transnistria poses no (or little) risk to Ukraine, but it is still perceived as a real threat by Kyiv. Such an opinion is expressed, for example, by Sergey Shirokov, the head of a Transnistrian NGO and a former foreign ministry official, who said: "If your state is falling apart, then everything is perceived a threat". Transnistria emphasises it has never attacked anybody, it only defends itself. Shirokov says he is afraid Kyiv may undertake various irrational steps against Transnistria. This may explain why Tiraspol is so nervous about defensive actions taken by Ukraine along the border. It is enhanced by an image of Transnistria as an enemy propagated by Ukrainian media and responds with aggressive rhetoric and takes steps such as military exercises and mobilisation. This, in turn, enhances Ukraine's perception of Transnistria as a threat, creating a vicious circle.

In the above-presented view Transnistria is seen as an entity, more or less making decisions on its own. This independence is clearer according to the last opinion which states there is no threat. Moreover, there may actually be room for cooperation. Shirokov emphasises that Transnistria can give Ukraine what it badly needs, namely a secure border with the Odesa region. Piotr Oleksy (<https://www.neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1286-transnistria-s-difficult-choice>) writes in *New Eastern Europe* there already is some kind of covert collaboration on security issues. He refers to secretly recorded conversation (allegedly) held between the Transnistrian minister of interior, Gennadiy Kuzmichev, and a Ukrainian border guard officer from the Southern Regional Directorate. The former assured the latter that Transnistria would not attack Ukraine. They also talked about Vladimir Antyufeev, a former Transnistrian minister of state security wanted by Transnistria's authorities but also of interest to Ukrainians – he was involved in a detachment of Crimea from Ukraine and later on held the post of deputy prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) between July and September.

The military narrative and steps taken by both parties may not fit the third opinion, however, they can be explained. Kyiv wants to rally Ukrainians around Ukrainian statehood and territorial integrity and attract attention of the international community. Tiraspol wants to appease its patron, Russia, and its own pro-Russian population and distract the people's attention from the harsh economic crisis that Transnistrians are facing.

However, even in this case Kyiv and Tiraspol have shown signs of insecurity. Ukraine has deployed extra military personnel in the Odesa region. And Transnistrian authorities now travel abroad via the Chişinău airport in Moldova, not Odesa, as was its common practice.

A mutual fault

Crucially, both parties have caused problems for themselves. When Shevchuk came to power, he at first adopted a pragmatic foreign policy, but shortly became very pro-Russian. Former Transnistrian diplomats even called him more Russian than Russia. It was reflected mainly in the serious tensions with Moldova in the spring of 2013, while relations with Ukraine were somehow put aside.

While Ukraine, for more than twenty years, has maintained an ambivalent policy towards Transnistria. Kyiv has taken steps both in favour and against restoring Moldova's territorial integrity. Such an approach – sometimes called benevolent neutrality – has contributed to the survival of Transnistria as a quasi-state. However, aside from the social, economic and geopolitical factors behind this policy, there was on other key factor which most likely persuaded Ukrainian to maintain this course – Russian interests.

A leading Ukrainian expert on the Transnistrian issue and a former official in Yanukovich presidential administration, [Vitaliy Kulyk \(http://replika.com.ua/ru/3_politika/kreml_i_pridnestrove_ne_poydut_na_razmorozku_konflikta\)](http://replika.com.ua/ru/3_politika/kreml_i_pridnestrove_ne_poydut_na_razmorozku_konflikta), used to see the quasi-state as an element facilitating the implementation of Ukrainian interests in the broader region and had close relations with Transnistrian elite. Currently, he describes Transnistria as a volatile, dangerous region. On the other hand, he doubts that both Moscow and Tiraspol will decide to attack Ukraine and open a western front because such a conflict may involve Romania – a NATO member – and Moldova.

Interestingly, a few former members of the Transnistrian government, who were previously tolerated by Kyiv, are among the authorities of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. Antyufeev was dismissed on September 24th, but there are still his two associates from the Transnistrian ministry of state security: Andrey Pinchuk and Oleg Bereza who hold now ministerial posts of state security and internal affairs, respectively. There is also Alexander Karaman, Transnistria's vice-president between 1991 and 2001 and leader of Rodina (Motherland) party. At present, he is the deputy prime minister on social issues of the DPR. Although the current Transnistrian government is in conflict with them, they are still associated with Transnistria. Furthermore, they emphasise that they have not forgotten about their "motherland" and express a belief that they could still serve their native republic, as stated in their September [letter \(http://rodinapmr.ru/bez-kupyur/2014-09-03-11-20-31.html\)](http://rodinapmr.ru/bez-kupyur/2014-09-03-11-20-31.html) to Transnistrians.

The vague future

At this point, it is difficult to clearly say which explanation of Ukrainian-Transnistrian relations is valid. There may be some variations and the situation may be changing over time. It is also difficult to predict the future of Ukrainian-Transnistrian relations, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and Russia's policy in the broader region. If there is no open invasion from Transnistria, the use of "hard" means by Kyiv against the quasi-state, such as military action or an economic blockade, is not very likely. Moreover, Kyiv is focused on the eastern part of the state and there are other problems such as political instability and an economic crisis.

It is more likely that Ukraine will either not do much or it will use "softer" means to push out Russians from Transnistria and Ukrainianise the quasi-state as much as possible. It may put emphasis on diplomacy, economic cooperation and harness media to influence Transnistria's population and additionally suggest that a harder approach may be taken. However, it is a complex task that, most likely, will meet resistance from Moscow. This has been already tried by the Orange government, but did not bring significant results. Additionally, it seems that no breakthrough in the Transnistrian conflict settlement led by Ukraine should be expected. All in all, facing these new circumstances, Transnistria will have to decide on its future policy related to both Ukraine and Russia.

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