

THE “FIRST HYBRID”: THE TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN- UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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The article presents an analysis of the Transnistrian conflict of 1990-1992 through the lens of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and criteria for “hybrid warfare”. According to the author, the Transnistrian conflict may also be considered a “hybrid” one due to its methods and means. Just like the Russian aggression against Ukraine, it has also been a part of the Russian strategy to restore Moscow’s control over the former Soviet republics.

The Transnistrian conflict cannot be classified as understudied. There have been written enough books about it in the 25 years since the active phase of the conflict and its completion¹. At the same time, this historical event in itself was considered beyond the interrelationship with similar events that were happening at the beginning of the 1990s in the former Soviet republics. The Russian aggression against Ukraine makes it possible to regard this conflict not only within the certain historical context and to find similarities between the events of 1990-1992 and those of 2014-2017 but also to determine political interconnection between the events separated by the time gap of 20 years.

Is the Transnistrian Conflict a Hybrid One?

Traditionally, the Transnistrian conflict is localized by March-July 1992, and the armed confrontation in Dubossary on 2 March 1992 is considered its beginning. At the same time, the armed phase of the conflict was just the culmination of confrontation. The referendum on the establishment of TMR (Transnistrian Moldovan Republic) was held in December 1989-November 1990 (due to the impossibility to hold the referendum simultaneously throughout the territory); the first armed clashes took place in November 1990, with the seizure of administrative buildings by the separatists,

¹ Волкова, А.З. *Создание Приднестровской Молдавской Республики (Creation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic)*, Бендеры, 2010., *История Приднестровской Молдавской Республики (History of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic)*, Том 2-2, Тирасполь: Риопгу, Приднестровский Государственный Университет им. Т.Г.Шевченко, 2001., А.В. Козлов, В.Н. Чернобривый, *Непокоренное Приднестровье. Уроки военного конфликта (The Unconquered Transnistria. Lessons of the Armed Conflict)*, М., 2015., Г. Перепелица, *Конфликт в Приднестровье. Причины, проблемы и прогноз развития (Conflict in Transnistria. Causes, Problems, and Development Forecast)*, К., 2001.

and the establishment of their own authorities and armed units was completed by the end of 1991-beginning of 1992.

First of all, it is necessary to answer the question: Can the Transnistrian conflict be classified as a “hybrid war”? There are several definitions characterizing this type of conflicts. One example is a “classical” definition by F. Hoffman:

Hybrid wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors. Hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects².

Thus, it is worth noting that a number of similarities unite the Transnistrian conflict and the conflict in Ukraine. The scenario under which the events in Donbas are developing is very similar to the events of 1990-1992 in Transnistria:

- The formation of two poles of the social confrontation: the Popular Front of Moldova against the International Movement (Maidan and Anti-Maidan in Ukraine).
- Transnistria was supported by Moscow, which was, at that time, the centre of the Soviet Union, seeking to retain Moldova in the USSR with the help of separatist enclaves, though the position of the Communist Party Central Committee was not consistent in this matter. In 1990-1991, the leaders of Transnistrian separatists, I. Smirnov and G. Marakutsa, as well as the leadership of Gagauzia had numerous informal meetings in Moscow with the Head of the Supreme Council of the USSR, A. Lukyanov, who fully supported and contributed to declaring and establishing new state entities on the Moldovan territory. Despite the fact that Moldova boycotted the referendum on the preservation of the USSR (17 March 1991), it was held in Transnistria and Gagauzia. Among 84% of the Transnistrian population, 98% voted for the preservation of the Soviet Union. Permanent close ties of the Ukrainian President V. Yanukovich government and the Party of Regions with Russia were well-known as well.
- The language issue was the formal reason for confrontation (adoption of the Law of the Republic of Moldova “On the functioning of languages on the territory of the Moldavian SSR” [September 1989], according to which the Moldovan language received the status of a state language and was transliterated into Latin). In the Ukrainian situation, the eastern regions actively referred to the attempt to repeal the law on the principles of state language policy (2012) by the representatives of the Maidan.
- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Transnistria received not just political but also military support from Russia. Units of the republican guard have been armed with the assistance from the 14th Russian army. Units of Cossacks arrived at Transnistria from Russia. Igor Strelkov (Girkin), who later became the main media figure of the Donbas seizure, had gone through combat “practice” exactly in the Transnistrian conflict. In the Ukrainian situation, the Black Sea Fleet units and supplies of Russian weaponry to Donbas played a decisive role.

² F. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies: Arlington, p. 14.

- The so-called “state security institutions” of Transnistria were established with the assistance from Moscow. In late 1991, Vladimir Artyufeev, under the name of Vadim Shvetsov, and other wanted (because of the armed dispersal of Latvian protests for independence) officials of the Latvian Ministry of Internal Affairs came to the unrecognized republic to participate in the establishing of the Transnistrian Ministry of State Security. It is noteworthy that V. Artyufeev, forced to leave the post of the head of the Transnistrian special services in 2011, and his former employees have become active in the Russian “hybrid war” against Ukraine. Initially they participated in the operation to occupy Crimea and then they were sent to DPR for strengthening the cadres there. In a short while, the Transnistrian leaders gained leading positions: Artyufeev himself took the post of the vice prime minister for security issues³, the former TMR vice prime minister A. Karaman became the vice prime minister for social affairs and then minister of foreign affairs in DPR; other leading positions were also taken by other former officials of the Transnistrian special services.
- In the course of the conflict, the 14th Russian army, located on the territory of the separatist enclave, was increasingly getting involved in the armed confrontation, pretending to be “volunteers who want to defend their families” at the early stage. Participation of the Russian military in the war became undisguised in June 1992 at the height of the Battle for Bender: The tank attack on the Bender Bridge, retained by Moldovan military and police, and the artillery

attack on Moldovan positions turned the tide in favour of separatists. Similarly, direct participation of the Russian armed forces units reversed the course of events near Ukrainian Illovaisk in August 2014⁴.

Methods and Tools Used

Thus, it should be noted that during the Transnistrian conflict as well as during the war in Donbas a similar set of methods and tools was used, namely:

- active use of irregular forces supported and armed by Russia;
- information warfare: discrediting the leadership of the states (Ukraine and Moldova), their armed forces and security forces within and outside of the state; shaping a negative attitude toward attempts of the government to regain control over the separatist territories, etc.;
- direct participation of the Russian armed forces in military actions.

In the Ukrainian case, a range of methods applied was enlarged through economic sanctions and terrorist acts (Odessa and Kharkiv, late 2014-first half of 2015).

At the same time, both conflicts are related to each other not only by means of similar methods and tools. The analysis of ideological methods, myths, templates, memes that were used in the Russian information wars against Moldova (1991-1992) and Ukraine (2014-2017) is indicative of certain schemes and templates for waging these wars. The following directions of information campaigns can be distinguished:

³ *Экс-министр КГБ Приднестровья стал «вице-премьером» ДНР (Ex-minister of Transnistrian KGB Became “Vice Prime Minister”)*, “NB News”, 11 July 2014, <http://nbnews.com.ua/ru/news/126804>.

⁴ *Прокуратура выяснила все обстоятельства Иловайской трагедии (The Prosecutor’s Office Discovered All Circumstances of the Ilovaisk Tragedy)*, “Pravda.com.ua”, 14 August 2017, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2017/08/14/7152171>.

- dehumanization of the enemy, dissemination of information about their cruelty and inhumanity (rumours about a mass rape of school graduates committed by Moldovan soldiers; dissemination of information about Moldovan military throwing booby traps made in the form of toys for children; in the Ukrainian case – a sensational fake about the national guards crucifying a boy in Sloviansk; a story that “nationalists played football with severed heads of police officers”, etc.);



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- manipulation of historical facts. The most widespread manipulations against Ukraine are the following: “Ukrainians and the Ukrainian language were invented by the General Staff of Austria-Hungary at the time of the First World War in order to weaken Russia”⁵; “Ukrainian language is the Polish dialect of Russian language”; “the war in Ukraine is waged by Uniates (Greek Catholics), Protestants, and schismatic (supporters of Kyiv Patriarchate)”⁶; “all the patriotic actions in south-eastern regions are held by Western Ukraine citizens”. There were also active attempts to use historical facts for justification of claims for independence in Transnistria: for example,

a constant emphasis on the difference between Romanians and Moldovans; also, Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which existed within Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924-1940 and covered territory of TMR and several districts of Odessa region in Ukraine, was considered a historical basis for Transnistrian statehood;

- restoration of the constitutional order and the fight against separatism and terrorism are presented as an aggression of one state against another. Therefore, there are attempts to bring negotiations into an “equal” bilateral format, with the presentation of Russia as a mediator;
- an effort to present separatists’ actions as a continuation of the “Great Patriotic War”: Transnistrian separatists claimed to fight against “Romanian fascists”; separatists in Donbas – against “banderites and Nazis”; the use of symbols related to the war times;
- the use of vocabulary that revives stereotypes of the Soviet era: “junta” (the analogy is with “Pinochet junta” in 1970-1980s), “punishers”, “fascists”;
- dissemination of information about the participation of foreign mercenaries in military actions on the side of governmental forces: Lithuanian snipers and Romanian soldiers in the Transnistrian conflict in 1992; Georgian snipers, German, Polish, and American soldiers in Donbas⁷;
- emphasis on the “popular” nature of the separatist movements, and lack of weapons in their hands at the first stage of the conflict.

⁵ For example: В. Панов, *Корифей украинской мифологии (The Coryphaeus of Ukrainian Mythology)*, “Stoletie”, 24 August 2014, http://www.stoletie.ru/territoriya_istorii/korifej_ukrainskoj_mifologii_337.htm.

⁶ For example: А. Никишин, *Получите, «суки православные». На Украине готовится чудовищная провокация против Православия (Take That, “Orthodox Bitches”...)*, “Русская Правда”, <http://ruspravda.info/Poluchite-suki-pravoslavnie.-Na-Ukraine-gotovitsya-chudovishchnaya-provokatsiya-protiv-Pravoslaviya-17096.html>.

What Makes It Different?

However, despite formal resemblance between the conflicts, serious differences should not be ignored. The Transnistrian conflict developed within another historical context, when centrifugal tendencies covered the entire Soviet Union. Attempts to establish an independent Republic of Gagauzia in Moldova and Republic of Bessarabia in Ukraine (in the south of Odessa region) were the integral parts of this process.

The economy of Moldova was not integrated into the global one and was a part of the single all-union Soviet economy. From the beginning, the Transnistrian conflict looked like a movement for preserving the USSR. The economy of Donbas, on the contrary, has already been integrated into the global economy, although its significant part was oriented to the Russian market.

Furthermore, in the Ukrainian case, an important factor influencing the nature of the conflict is the existence of a common border with Russia. As for Transnistria, it is an enclave separated from Russia by Ukraine, which complicates economic and military relations with Moscow.

Thus, the similarity of scenarios, means, tools, ideological methods used in both conflicts (Ukrainian and Transnistrian) as well as their interim results (establishment of the enclaves that are not controlled by the legitimate governments) suggest that the Transnistrian and Ukrainian conflicts belong to the category of “hybrid” ones. We can say Transnistria was a “test case”, the first and, unfortunately, successful experiment that allowed Russia to accumulate the necessary experience to conduct such operations.

Russian Goals

However, the creation of controlled enclaves (TMR in Moldova, DPR and LPR in Ukraine) has not reached the final objective to get these states back under the Russian political influence. The final objective is the settlement of the conflict on favourable for Russia conditions, namely the conditions depriving Moldova and Ukraine of international subjectivity and of the possibility to implement their foreign policy irrespective of Moscow’s political will.

In 2003, Moldova was close to signing a document, which, under the pretext of solving the Transnistrian conflict, would have fixed its state of a Russian vassal. It is about the well-known Kozak Memorandum, which envisaged the transformation of the Moldovan Republic into an “asymmetric federation”.

An analysis of demands to Ukraine, articulated by Russia and terrorists from the so-called DPR and LPR (controlled by Russia), points to similarities between them and leads to the conclusion that they are parts of a single scenario. The principles are as follows:

- at the constitutional level, establishing quotas in the parliament for representatives of the separatist enclaves and actual transformation of Ukraine into a federation;
- granting for the separatist enclaves the right to recruit staff for police, security services, judiciary, prosecutor’s office, border guards, etc. independently, without coordination with the central authorities;
- granting broad economic (freedom of foreign economic activity), political (right to choose its own parliament,

⁷ *Американский блогер: В Донбассе воюют и гибнут кадровые офицеры стран Запада (American Blogger: Western Officers Fight and Die in Donbas)*, “Русская весна”, 14 August 2015, http://rusvesna.su/recent_opinions/1439583413.

government, and president), and cultural (protection of the Russian language) autonomy of the region;

- granting the right to coordinate all passing laws and the right to veto all decisions of the states (Ukraine and Moldova) in foreign policy;
- neutral or non-aligned status for the state.

History does not know conditional clauses, but if the Kozak Memorandum had been adopted, the model of conflict resolution serving as an example for other similar conflicts in the post-Soviet space (particularly the Ukrainian one) would have been implemented.

Ukraine itself joined negotiations on the political status of Transnistria in 1995. The Memorandum on the Basis for Normalization of Relations between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria was signed on 8 May 1997. According to it, Ukraine alongside with Russia and the OSCE act as guarantors of the negotiation process. Within these years, the Ukrainian position in the negotiation process was ambivalent. Standing for the territorial integrity of Moldova, offering its own settlement plans (e.g. Yushchenko's plan of 2005), Kyiv very often followed the Russian position. Many of the problems were overlooked.

The attitude to Transnistria changed after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the events in Donbas. The presence of the Russian military forces in the unrecognized republic gave grounds for considering this enclave to be a threat to the national security of Ukraine. It was fixed in the relevant strategic documents. During 2014-2017, Ukraine took steps to reduce risks related to Transnistria: It increased security of the Ukrainian-Moldovan part of the border, including establishing of the common border and customs posts. The Parliament of Ukraine denounced the agreement on transit through the Ukrainian territory of Russian

military formations temporarily located on the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

As for now, the existence of the unrecognized TMR constitutes direct and indirect threats to Ukraine.

The direct threats include:

- intelligence activities against Ukraine;
- presence of the Russian armed forces units numbering 1,400 soldiers and officers on the territory of TMR;
- Transnistrian armed forces (4,000 soldiers, artillery, armoured vehicles including heavy armour, aircrafts);
- weapons depots at the Colbasna station;

The indirect threats include:

- necessity to improve security of the Transnistrian part of the border, which diverts significant forces from other directions;
- threat of blockade of the railway communication with the Danube ports;
- disconnection of southern districts of Odessa region from electricity supply from the Moldovan hydro power plant;
- participation of Transnistrian residents in the anti-governmental actions in Odessa region;
- broadcasting of Russian TV channels in the border areas of Odessa region, information warfare;
- smuggling of goods.

Furthermore, there is a risk of retaking the Kozak Memorandum as a model of the Transnistrian conflict resolution. President of Moldova I. Dodon claimed reintegration

of Transnistria by means of transforming Moldova into a federation to be one of his priorities. He reaffirmed his intention during his visit to Moscow in January 2017. At the joint press conference with the Russian president, Dodon admitted that the refusal to implement the Kozak Memorandum in 2003 was a mistake⁸. If the plan is successfully implemented, this model can be imposed on Ukraine, which will contribute to reaching the aims of the “hybrid war” waged by Russia against Moldova in 1990-1992 and Ukraine in 2014-2017.

Conclusions

The Transnistrian conflict in 1990-1992, the annexation of Crimea, and the conflict in the Eastern Ukraine in 2014-2017 are the parts of the Russian general strategy to keep Moldova and Ukraine in Moscow’s sphere of influence. In this context, the Transnistrian conflict has an apparent “hybrid” nature. The final objective of this strategy is the reintegration of the separatist enclaves on favourable for Russia terms, namely: the possibility to influence foreign policy, change of foreign policy priorities (abandoning the course on European and Euro-Atlantic integration), and maintaining dependence on energy supplies from Russia.

Responses to the “hybrid” aggression can be in the following forms: asymmetric actions aimed at neutralizing Russian influence on certain regions of states undergoing humanitarian aggression, including Transnistria; an active humanitarian policy (publishing books, creation of movie and TV products, support for national culture, holding conferences, culture and social campaigns) aimed at neutralizing the Russian impact; holding information campaigns abroad in order to shape the image of Russia as an aggressor.

Given the fact that Ukraine and Moldova are subjects to Russian foreign policy ambitions to the same extent, there is a need to join efforts to weaken Russian influence in the region, force the Transnistrian separatists to obey the rules worked out in Chisinau and Kyiv on the terms of legitimate authorities.

The key conditions for the reintegration of Transnistria should be the following:

- a) demilitarization of the region: withdrawal of Russian troops and weapons, replacement of armed peacekeepers with a police mission under the auspices of the United Nations;
- b) democratization of the region: authorization of activity of Moldovan political parties, non-governmental organisations, and mass media in Transnistria;
- c) restoration of the single economic space, namely, the use of the Moldovan leu as the single national currency; establishing a single banking system;
- d) development of a single educational and cultural space: gradual unification of educational programs and systems of education assessment, adoption of single rules of getting academic titles, certification of teachers, etc.

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⁸ Совместная пресс-конференция с Президентом Молдовы Игорем Додоном (Joint Press Conference with President of Moldova Igor Dodon), “Kremlin”, 17 January 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53744>.