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A Thorn in the Flesh of Westernization: Transnistria's Influence on the Relations between the Republic of Moldova and NATO

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Citation

Solomon, M. A. (2022). *A Thorn in the Flesh of Westernization: Transnistria's Influence on the Relations between the Republic of Moldova and NATO*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Date of submission: 28/06/2022

Word count: 21813

MA Russian and Eurasian Studies

Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, and of the communist Eastern Block prior to that, an ample process of European integration started in Central and Eastern Europe, which has brought a tremendous number of nations in Western institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While former Eastern Bloc countries, which were under the sphere of influence of USSR, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, or Romania, were integrated within NATO in the late 1990's and in the 2000's, other nations with a communist past, especially post-Soviet nations, have not been on the same pathway. For the countries that emerged from the Soviet Union, only the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) were able to integrate within NATO and the EU. Meanwhile, nations such as Ukraine or Georgia are still attempting to join these institutions, whereas countries such as Russia and Belarus stand against them.

This dissertation will look at a nation from the post-Soviet space that is often overlooked, although its unique geopolitical and economic situation make it a fascinating case study and a pariah in the European space - the Republic of Moldova (or simply Moldova). Their internal situation, as well as its external demands and desiderates, have been subjected to tumultuous modifications since its independence in 1991. The rather small-sized nation is placed between the EU-and-NATO-integrated Romania, and Ukraine, being constantly seen as a "second front in a struggle between the EU and Russia",¹ a tug-of-war between Westernization and Russification. Besides the complicated foreign policy situation that Moldova is situated in, the nation also faces many internal challenges, one of the most severe being the fact that it does not have full control over its territory.

The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, commonly referred to as Transnistria, is an unrecognized breakaway state, located in the eastern part of Moldova, which operates as

¹ Kennedy, Ryan. "The limits of soft balancing: the frozen conflict in Transnistria and the challenge to EU and NATO strategy." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 3 (2016): 512-537, p. 515.

a “de facto” separate entity, whose leadership has been described as leading a totalitarian regime.² Transnistria managed to separate from Moldova, after a short war between the two sides in the same year, which was ended by a ceasefire in 1992.³ In the last days of the conflict, due to the pro-Russian political stance and the fact that Transnistria describes itself as being part of the “Russian world”,⁴ the breakaway state received a decisive military help from the 14th division of the Russian forces (still entitled at that point as the Soviet Army).⁵ These forces have created military bases in Transnistria and approximately 1500 Russian soldiers are stationed there to this day.⁶

Naturally, the existence of this de facto state has severely affected Moldova internal political stability of the nation, its economic development, and its external affairs. As such, this paper will thoroughly analyse Transnistria’s impact on Moldova’s bilateral relations with NATO, the most important Euro-Atlantic defence institution.

The research question is: **“to what extent have Moldova-NATO relations been influenced by the breakaway state of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic?”**. To answer this question, the paper will firstly present a literature review involving two topics which are highly correlated to the theme of the paper, namely the issue of separatism, based on both theories and other case studies (mainly the one of Georgia) and NATO expansionism (what the pro and con arguments were in the first expansion into the Eastern Bloc).

To clarify the materials and theories that will be utilized, they will be exposed in the methodology section, followed by a motivation subsection to justify the purpose and

² Mardarovici, Ion. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times." *NATO Research Fellowships programme*, 2002, p. 18.

³ Jović-Lazić, Ana, and Jovanka Kuvekalović-Stamatović. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova-Strategy for Survival Between Russia and NATO?" *The Review of International Affairs* 71 (2020): 21-53, p. 22.

⁴ Девятков, Андрей Владимирович. "Республика Молдова в контексте внешней энергетической политики Европейского союза." *Вестник Московского университета. Серия 25. Международные отношения и мировая политика* 9, no. 1 (2017) [Devyatkov, Andrey Vladimirovich. "The Republic of Moldova in the context of the external energy policy of the European Union." *Moscow University Bulletin. Series 25. International relations and world politics* 9, no. 1 (2017)], p. 174.

⁵ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 26.

⁶ Țurcanu, Mihai. "Republica Moldova și opțiunile de securitate în urma noilor provocări la adresa securității regionale." *Revista Militară. Studii de securitate și apărare* 11, no. 1 (2014): 35-44 ["Republic of Moldova and its security options following the new regional security challenges", *The Military Magazine, Security and Defence Studies*], p. 40.

importance of the chosen topic Furthermore, the paper will focus on the backdrop that led to the high tensions which exploded later into the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict, and how the ethno-linguistic characteristics of the two areas have influenced relations between each other and their general foreign policy in the 1990's, all in the "historical background" chapter.

The next section will investigate the geopolitical pressure used by Transnistria to jeopardize NATO-Moldova relations, namely the presence of Russian troops on Transnistria's territory and the economic pressure that Transnistria exercised upon Moldova.

Later, the next chapter will look at the procedural pressure exercised by Transnistria. By far the most crucial factor that altered the way Moldova and NATO could interact is the adoption of the permanent neutrality status by Moldova in 1994. It has had internal implications, and it is used as a *modus operandi* abroad by the Chisinau authorities, although it is not officially and legally recognized at international level.⁷ The same section will investigate the negotiation process following the ceasefire, that involved different parties such as Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for the Security and Co-operation of Europe (OSCE) had tremendous consequences on how Moldova maintained its relationship with NATO.

The last larger section will firstly look at the evolution of Moldova-NATO relations from 1992 until today by using different official NATO documents. Since the main research question focuses on the extent of Transnistrian influence, it is relevant to show how the relations between Moldova and NATO have evolved, despite the separatism issue. This will be followed by what are deemed as the policy mistakes made by both sides (NATO and Moldova) in the evolution of their relation. Then, in the conclusion, there will be analysis of the extent to which Transnistria is the main factor in this bilateral relationship.

⁷ Ilinca, Dan, "Neutralitatea Republicii Moldova – de la transnistrizare, la finlandizare" [The neutrality of the Republic of Moldova- from transnistrianization, to Finlandization], *H1.md*, link: <https://h1.md/ro/neutralitatea-republicii-moldova-de-la-transnistrizare-la-finlandizare/>

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Separatism from a Theoretical Perspective, Georgia as a Case Study

Theories on Separatism and on Home State Behaviour

Scott Pegg defines a de facto state as “a secessionist entity that receives popular support and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a defined territorial area, over which it maintains effective control for an extended period of time”.⁸ It is a territory that can provide a certain amount of services to its population (although, as we shall see, many are dependent on a so-called “patron state”),⁹ but does not receive full international recognition.

Separatism or separatist movements are present in both developed countries, if we take the example of Quebec in Canada or of Catalonia in Spain, and in developing countries, such as in Moldova or in Georgia. Still, Müllerson argues that although secessionism is present in both types of nations, it is usually in developing countries where secessionism succeeds more. In developed countries, the conditions are better, and the regional oppression is lower, as most of them are liberal democracies. As such the determination of separatist forces in these countries is much lower.¹⁰ Also, modern states have a better internal control of their territory, and it is harder for a separatist group to directly take control of a certain area.¹¹

⁸ Pegg, Scott. *De facto states in the international system*. Vancouver: Institute of International Relations, University of British Columbia, 1998.

⁹ Blakkisrud, Helge, Nino Kemoklidze, Tamta Gelashvili, and Pål Kolstø. "Navigating de facto statehood: trade, trust, and agency in Abkhazia's external economic relations." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62, no. 3 (2021): 347-371, p. 347.

¹⁰ Müllerson, Rein. "Precedents in the mountains: on the parallels and uniqueness of the cases of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia." *Chinese journal of international law* 8, no. 1 (2009): 2-25, p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 6.

Regarding the motivation for secessionism, there are multiple reasons that can be invoked by the leadership of a de facto state. The most common justifications are grounded in linguistic, ethnic and cultural distinctions, that make the secessionist state a separate entity from the home state, and that often are not allowed to be fully expressed in the current state format.¹² Another justification that a separatist country might use, especially if there is not a clear monolithic ethnic or cultural group within that territory, is the usage of a certain ideology or a certain religion, to attract the support of countries at an international level that share the same ideological or belief system, as opposed to the home country.¹³

The portrayal of “national” history is also another identity-creating mechanism, as de facto states can claim their roots in a former political formation. As such, it can be a clearly defined homeland that has hundreds or even thousands of years since a certain population has been living there, as is the case of Abkhazia for example,¹⁴ but it can also be a rather obscure or short-lived state form. Examples of the latter would be the cases of Transnistria, which finds its roots in the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which existed between 1924 and 1940 as part of the Soviet Union, or the case for Donbas, the Krivoi Rog Republic, which existed during the Russian Civil War for only one month.¹⁵ The identity of a state can be crafted in many ways, with the scope of either attracting foreign support or to set very clear and justified boundaries between the de facto and the home state.

Lastly, separatism can also have economic justifications. As Giuliano states in the case of Ukraine’s separatist region of Donbas, ethnic and linguistic arguments were not the main considerations of the majority Russian-speaking region, but also material reasons.¹⁶ Thus, there was a sense of economic neglect by the Ukrainian central authorities towards the

¹² Ibid, p. 5.

¹³ Saideman, Stephen M., and Beth K. Dougherty. "Secessionist Foreign Policy and the Strategic Use of Identity." In *Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Los Angeles, CA* (2000).

¹⁴ Smith, Mary Elizabeth. "De facto state foreign policy “Social moves” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia." *Iran and the Caucasus* 22, no. 2 (2018): 181-205, p. 201.

¹⁵ Voronovici, Alexandr. "Internationalist separatism and the political use of “historical statehood” in the unrecognized republics of Transnistria and Donbass." *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 3 (2020): 288-302, p. 289.

¹⁶ Giuliano, Elise. "Who supported separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and popular opinion at the start of the Ukraine crisis." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 2-3 (2018), p. 18.

region, and a sense that Ukraine getting closer to the European Union was considered by many to be a threat for the Donbas local economy.¹⁷

Another characteristic that is a common theme among de facto states, especially in the post-Soviet area, is the existence of a patron state from outside that must support them on a political and economic level. It can be a burden for the patron state to support such a regional actor, which often is not very developed from an economic point of view, with the notable exception of cases such as Taiwan. As such, what are the usual motivations patron states choose to support a de facto state? Meydan claims that there are three main variants: it is a method of imposing costs and political pressure on the home state, it is based on ethnic solidarity with the people in the de facto state, or it is an initial procedure for an eventual annexation.¹⁸ In the case of Russia's support for Transnistria, for example, one could argue the first reason is the clearest foreign policy goal of Kremlin, to prevent Moldova's territorial integrity and shift towards the West, and the second one to a certain extent, as Transnistria, being a Russian-speaking region, is considered part of the "Russian World".¹⁹

As part of the theoretical understanding of separatism, the home states different response options should be mentioned. According to Saideman, the ethnic mixture of the home state is a very important factor regarding the engagement with the separatist state. Analysing the state of separatism in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the aforementioned author implies that when the two state formations have totally different ethnic roots, for the home state it will be easier to have a more hostile approach and motivate the population against the separatist state.²⁰ Conversely, when the home country has a mixed population, that contains people which are also present in the de facto state, the home state cannot be too hostile and has to maintain a more tolerant approach.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Meydan, Vildan. "A Paradox of international (non) recognition: the relationship between de facto states and patron states." *Uluslararası Ekonomi Siyaset İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Dergisi* 1, no. 1 (2018): 1-7, p. 4.

¹⁹ Pieper, Moritz. "Russkiy mir: the geopolitics of Russian compatriots abroad." *Geopolitics* 25, no. 3 (2020): 756-779, p. 761-762.

²⁰ Saideman, Stephen M. "Explaining the international relations of secessionist conflicts: Vulnerability versus ethnic ties." *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 721-753, p. 733.

²¹ Ibid.

Considering that Moldova has a quite large Russian population, especially in urban areas,²² this could serve as an explanation for why Moldova had a more lenient approach towards Transnistria, as opposed to Georgia against Abkhazia, for example. As Saideman further said, the importance of maintaining the internal support for the administration of the head politicians often overrides the threats that separatism such as the one in Transnistria could result in the long term.²³

On the same line, Scott Pegg provides a three option framework for a home state in dealing with separatism: actively opposing the separatist state through embargos and sanctions, ignoring their existence, and lastly the “limited acceptance” model, that acknowledges their existence and tolerates it to a certain extent.²⁴ Considering that Transnistria has some leverage in the republic, as Transnistrian citizens are allowed to vote in Moldovan elections, for example,²⁵ we can assume that Moldova fits in the third category, showing a certain degree of acceptance and not a great amount of hostility (outside of rhetorical hostility) to Transnistria. This differs from the case of Georgia, which would fit in the first category, as it had an aggressive attitude against its two breakaway republics: South Ossetia and Abkhazia especially.

NATO Relations in the Context of Separatism: The Case of Georgia

Currently, Georgia has 20% of its territory occupied by separatist forces supported by the Russian Federation,²⁶ which would make one assume that their chances of closer relationships with Western powers and towards NATO especially would be few. In fact, although Georgia is still not a member of NATO, collaboration increased significantly,

²² “Structura etnică pe raioane”, *Biroul Național de Statistică al Republicii Moldova*, 2014 [“The ethnic structure based on counties”, *The National Bureau of Statistics of The Republic of Moldova*], link: <https://statistica.gov.md/pageview.php?l=ro&idc=479>

²³ Saideman, “Explaining the international relations of secessionist conflicts [...]”, p. 749.

²⁴ Pegg. *De facto states in the international system*, p. 4.

²⁵ “Transnistrian election fraud ‘a slap in the face of Moldovan democracy’”, *Global Voices*, 2021, link: <https://globalvoices.org/2021/09/01/transnistrian-election-fraud-a-slap-in-the-face-of-moldovan-democracy/>

²⁶ Kavadze, Amiran, and Tina Kavadze. “NATO Expansion to the East: Georgia’s Way to NATO Membership, Perspectives and Challenges.” *Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2014): 21-27, p. 21.

especially after the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, and despite of the reluctancies manifested by some of the member states.²⁷

The first territory that Georgia lost control of after the collapse of the Soviet Union was Abkhazia, after a still-prolonging war that took approximately 25000 lives (only in the 1992-1993 peak point), and the displacement of 250.000 ethnically Georgian refugees from Abkhazia.²⁸ While initially Abkhazia received no international recognition, this was doubled down later, in 2008, when during the Russo-Georgian war, Georgia lost the Kodori Valley in the detriment of Abkhazia, as another de facto state, South Ossetia, also claimed its autonomy.²⁹ The differences in the two secessionist states' justifications of independence are clear. While the Abkhaz maintained a clear sense of ethnic and cultural identity distinct from Georgia, and as such expressed their demand for their own homeland, South Ossetia has a close historical relationship with Russia, and wanted to integrate with it and with North Ossetia, a region that is part of the Russian Federation.³⁰

Furthermore, after the war, Russia recognized Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence at an international level, along with Venezuela, Nicaragua, and some states from Oceania.³¹ Nevertheless, internationally, Georgia still has the large support of the international community and has managed to stop any attempts at further recognition of the two republics.³² In this situation, Georgia secured its sovereign right to those territories internationally, and could now use its increasing economy to financially pressure the de facto states, an aggressive strategy that stands in contrast with the one employed by Moldova.

Georgia imposed since 2008 a law that made all economic activity on Abkhaz territory illegal, which led to it becoming more dependent on Russia, limiting its economic

²⁷ Nichol, Jim. "Georgia [Republic] and NATO Enlargement: Issues and Implications." *Library of Congress Washington DC Congressional Research Service*, 2009, p. 6.

²⁸ Kupatadze, Alexander, and Thomas Zeitzoff. "In the shadow of conflict: how emotions, threat perceptions and victimization influence foreign policy attitudes." *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2021): 181-202, p. 184.

²⁹ Hoch, Tomáš. "Legitimization of statehood and its impact on foreign policy in de facto states: a case study of Abkhazia." *Iran and the Caucasus* 22, no. 4 (2018): 382-407, p. 389.

³⁰ Smith. "De facto state foreign policy [...]", p. 201.

³¹ Kyle, Joe. "Perspectives Roadblocks: Georgia's Long Road to NATO Membership." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 27, no. 2 (2019): 237-247, p. 239.

³² Ibid, p. 246.

options, and ultimately losing more and more of its ever-wanted sovereignty,³³ making Abkhazia more of a puppet state of the Russian Federation. This economic pressure started initially during the mandate of President Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013), by reducing trade volumes and reducing the illegal activities such as smuggling, which represented large profits for the Abkhaz authorities.³⁴ Furthermore Georgia opposed the separatist republics by using its diplomatic legitimacy and putting pressure on foreign companies, such as Nokia or Benetton, to not engage in business in/with Abkhazia. Failure to do so would result in restricted access to the much larger Georgian market.³⁵

Now that we have established the historical context and the various pressuring methods that Georgia undertook to maintain its legitimacy, this section will analyse Georgia-NATO relations, and how they have evolved especially since 2008.

Pressure at Georgia's internal level after the war, could have negatively affected their accession to NATO to a great extent. The opposition in Georgia at that time (after the war) tried to gain signatures for a referendum that would declare the country's neutrality status, as a way to protect Georgia from Russian aggression.³⁶ This did not go through, as this would have taken Georgia on the same pathway as Moldova, which would have slowed, or even jeopardized the process of joining NATO, and all of the progress that had been made thus far.

Since the 1990's, there has been a collaboration between Georgia and NATO in the field of military tools and mechanisms,³⁷ but this increased to a political level in the early 2000's. The first clear declaration of Georgia's interest in joining NATO was in 2002, at the NATO summit in Prague, as these relations enhanced even more after 2004, when Saakashvili took power.³⁸ The new president was the first leader of the country to develop an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO, while also using the organization to train Georgian soldiers and law enforcement, especially with the help of

³³ Blakkisrud, "Navigating de facto statehood [...]", p. 350, 352.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 357.

³⁵ Hoch. "Legitimization of statehood and its impact on foreign policy in de facto states [...]", p. 402.

³⁶ Nichol. "Georgia [Republic] and NATO Enlargement [...]", p. 6.

³⁷ Kipiani, Marion. "NATO and Georgia: The Ever Closer Partnership." *Analysis Paper, BLGESAM* (2016), p. 2.

³⁸ Kavadze. "NATO Expansion to the East [...]", p. 21-22.

the United States army.³⁹ Probably the biggest commitment that Georgia did to show its clear intentions of being an active and valuable member state was to send more than 2000 Georgian soldiers to Iraq to assist American soldiers.⁴⁰

Even after 2008, a similar soldier deployment was prepared for the battlefields in Afghanistan, where Georgia, being the largest non-NATO contributor was the nation in the alliance that lost the most soldiers on a per capita basis.⁴¹ Furthermore, Georgia put some caveats to deploying their troops in Afghanistan, by sending them to the most dangerous areas of the conflict, which has received praise from NATO, and especially from the United States.⁴² The integration process continued on other fronts after 2008, by establishing an Annual Program with NATO, building training centres to increase the level of the Georgian army, and even continuing doing joint military exercises on their soil.⁴³

In sum, Georgia did a considerable effort to show its allegiance and its wish to join this military block. Unfortunately, despite the separatist territories that Georgia must deal with, there were other impediments to the country's entrance into NATO.

De Haas argues that the support that NATO in general has offered to Georgia has been only moral or declarative, as the lack of reaction from the main NATO bodies made Georgia, and even some Eastern European member states, doubt whether in case of a threatening action such as the one of Russia's armies in 2008, the main Western NATO allies will intervene.⁴⁴ This is of course a structural factor - Georgia can do very little about it until it becomes a member. A similar structural factor that has been considered by member states is Georgia's geographical position, being totally separated by mainland Europe by the Black Sea, which makes it inaccessible and hard to defend from Russian actions.⁴⁵

³⁹ Kipiani. "NATO and Georgia [...]", p. 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Coffey, Luke. "NATO membership for Georgia: In US and European interest." *The Heritage Foundation Special Report* 199 (2018), p. 1.

⁴² Kipiani. "NATO and Georgia [...]", p. 3.

⁴³ Ibid, p 5.

⁴⁴ De Haas, Marcel. "NATO-Russia Relations after the Georgian Conflict." *Atlantisch perspectief* 33, no. 7 (2009): 4-9, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Kyle. "Perspectives Roadblocks [...]", p. 246.

While the geographical factors can be accepted and worked out between the two parties, one of the most significant reasons for which Georgia is facing issues joining NATO is represented by its recklessness during the 2008 war. Member states were worried by how Tbilisi handled the conflict, by provoking Russia when Saakashvili sent soldiers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which led to Georgia losing the former and spoiling any chances of recovering the latter.⁴⁶ Many of the NATO member states will not in any way take the risk of starting a war with Russia because of an unstable nation in the Caucasus. Even before the conflict, countries such as France, Italy, or Germany, who have declared their reluctance in what they deemed Russia's sphere of influence, were actively avoiding any behaviour that would upset the Kremlin.⁴⁷ This conflict has only reinforced the ideas that these countries had about Georgia's entrance previously and made them more reluctant. Georgia eventually lost a significant part of the United States support, as President Barack Obama declared that Georgia is not on a path to NATO membership or in NATO's expansion plans.⁴⁸

In sum, Georgia has been in an astonishing process of integration with NATO, for which the country literally had to spill blood. The cooperation on a technological and military scale is well established, but the integration process was drawn many steps back by Georgia's rash intervention in 2008. Still, choosing to not become a neutral country has aided Georgia to benefit more from NATO's funds and cooperation to a much larger extent than Moldova, and its aggressive attitude on an economic and diplomatic level towards Abkhazia has decreased Russia and Abkhazia's influence. Expansionism is still an issue that could concern Moldova, and as such in the next section, NATO's largest expansion, the Eastern expansion, will be assessed, so that possible parallels to Moldova can be drawn.

⁴⁶ Kavadze. "NATO Expansion to the East [...]", p. 24.

⁴⁷ Kipiani. "NATO and Georgia [...]", p. 2.

⁴⁸ Kavadze. "NATO Expansion to the East [...]", p. 25.

NATO's Expansion in Eastern Europe (Pro and Con) and how it can relate to Moldova's Chances of Entrance

Historically speaking, Moldova, and other countries such as Ukraine or Georgia have not been the only nations that experienced doubts or setbacks regarding their entrance in NATO, as different scholars and Western leaders were assessing their “fate”. The current NATO members from Eastern Europe have been going through the same dilemmas, and to a certain extent the same pro and con arguments for NATO expansion have been used before their acceptance. Given the similarities, one must investigate the actual considerations in academic literature that scholars had regarding the expansion to the east, as it can still give out a framework for further expansion in post-Soviet nations nowadays. The main pro and con arguments will be presented, followed by the counter arguments to the opposition side, as ultimately, they were the most relevant in NATO's decision to expand.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO could not justify its primary reason of being set up, as its main enemy was no longer existing.⁴⁹ As such, NATO repositioned itself, and its new stated purpose was spreading democratic values and securing democratic Europe, by starting an expansion process in the post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.⁵⁰ At some point, there were discussions of including even Russia in this new alignment, but this was short-lived, as the expansion in Eastern Europe was already seen by Moscow as a breach in their sphere of influence (especially in the Baltic States),⁵¹ and as an inherently anti-Russian organization.⁵² The new mode of engaging with these countries, until membership would be achieved, was the “Partnership for Peace” program, which had military and civilian-related outreach and

⁴⁹ Kuus, Merje. "Cosmopolitan militarism? Spaces of NATO expansion." *Environment and Planning A* 41, no. 3 (2009): 545-562, p. 550.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 551.

⁵¹ Black, Joseph L. "Russia and NATO expansion eastward: Red-lining the Baltic states." *International Journal* 54, no. 2 (1999): 249-266, p. 264.

⁵² O'Hanlon, Michael. *Beyond NATO: a new security architecture for Eastern Europe*. Brookings Institution Press, 2017, p. 117.

purposes, serving as a first step towards becoming a member state.⁵³ When advancement started and the first members from Eastern Europe were about to be received in 1999, namely Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, debates started stirring regarding whether this decision would tremendously boost NATO's power regionally, or whether it could represent the organization's demise. Even then, there were doubts if this was the right approach, with some scholars and policymakers arguing that choosing to start these integration processes without Russia's cooperation or consent was one of the biggest threats and dangers to European security.⁵⁴

The proposition side focused on many aspects, which revolved around the rather realist question "which option is better for the safety of the West?". They reached the conclusion that a post-Communist Europe, albeit flawed and vulnerable, brings safer conditions for the West if it is under the protection of NATO, rather than having fewer defensive responsibilities on the Eastern front, but being threatened by a resurgent Russia, re-establishing its sphere of influence within the Eastern Bloc.

Firstly, it is argued that a NATO expansion increases protection firstly for the fragile nations that it absorbs, while promoting democratic values in tandem with the European Union, but it is also useful in aiding adjacent countries, that cannot be integrated yet, such as Ukraine.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Russia's foreign influence would diminish significantly in member states, but also be challenged in countries adjacent to NATO.⁵⁶ This argument can be considered limited, as although the military aid and ideological influence of NATO on new member states is undeniable, it does not apply that significantly to non-member adjacent states. As we have seen in the case of the annexation of Crimea or in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, NATO's response to Russian interventions can be counterbalanced, but ultimately it is rather limited. Still, as the current invasion of Ukraine by Russia is shown, it is much more convenient, from a diplomatic and logistical

⁵³ Kuus. "Cosmopolitan militarism? [...]", p. 551.

⁵⁴ McGwire, Michael. "NATO expansion: 'a policy error of historic importance'." *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 1 (1998): 23-42, p. 34.

⁵⁵ Ball, Christopher L. "Nattering NATO negativism? reasons why expansion may be a good thing." *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 1 (1998): 43-67, p. 53.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

point of view, to have NATO member states in the proximity to supply weapons and military equipment.

Secondly, it is argued that NATO had a window of opportunity of incorporating Eastern European states in their sphere of influence after USSR's collapse, which should not have been ignored. As such, Christopher Ball argued that it was important, especially for weaker (politically and economically) post-communist states, such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia, to be incorporated in NATO as soon as possible, because they were reliant at that point on support, which, if not provided from Western sources, would have been provided by Russia.⁵⁷ Furthermore, it could be argued that any sign of NATO stagnating in the late 1990's-early 2000's would have led Russia to consider it as a sign of weakness, as dialogue with Russia should be done by NATO from a position of strength.⁵⁸

Furthermore, it is argued that a secured Eastern Europe allows Western countries to focus more on other areas of the world where their assistance is needed. Luis Simón argues that a weak European front can weaken the West standing in other important military battlefields, such as the Asia-Pacific area, where China is acquiring more and more power, and the Middle East.⁵⁹ The larger geopolitical implications that the West, and especially the United States, face in the world favour a stable and integrated Eastern Bloc.

The opposition arguments that have been fluctuating regarding Eastern expansion, that one could argue apply to a certain extent to Moldova and to other post-Soviet cases as well even today, are the following. It was argued in the 1990's that politically isolating Russia while NATO democratizes Eastern European states affects Russia internally. At that point in time, there were more existing hopes for Russia to follow a path to democracy, and it was seen that isolating Russia away from the rest of Eastern Europe

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 54.

⁵⁸ Simón, Luis. "Assessing NATO's Eastern European" Flank"." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 44, no. 3 (2014), p. 79.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

will gravely affect and weaken the democratic forces within the country, as the authoritarian forces will have more leverage and less pressure internationally.⁶⁰

Next to that, it was argued that especially in the cases which involve the expansion in post-Soviet countries with significant Russian minorities, as it was the case in the Baltic States, there is always an inherent risk. Thus, Mark Kramer points out the arguments that were used at the time against the entrance of the Baltic States. They have territorial disputes with Russia, which could trigger Russian attacks, they face clear ethnic conflicts between the main population and the Russian one, and they have little to no military capacity to defend themselves.⁶¹ Especially the ethnic minority argument has been very much emphasized, as it was believed and it is a concern to this day that Russia could weaponize the Russian minority to create internal unrest, or it could be instrumentalized as a pretext for invasion or for protecting the Russian people.⁶² These arguments to a certain extent fit in Moldova's case as well, but it has not stopped NATO from still accepting the Baltic States in the alliance. As a counterargument to this approach, Kramer mentions that the risk of the Baltic States emerging into a civil war is overestimated, and that not accepting new countries because of Russia, in essence giving the Kremlin a "veto" over NATO's policies, could represent a dangerous precedent that Russia could exploit to the fullest.⁶³ Lastly, Christopher Ball has attempted to take each argument used by the more sceptical analysts against spreading the alliance to the East, deconstruct it and find the main counterpoints that could be made.

It was often stipulated, especially in the early-to-mid 1990's, that expansion is not necessary, as there was no Russian threat to Eastern Europe, due to the state of its economy and its army.⁶⁴ To counter that, he argues that if there is not a risk of Russia attacking, then why not expand either way and take the given opportunity?⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Mandelbaum, Michael. "Preserving the New Peace-The Case against NATO Expansion." *Foreign Aff.* 74 (1995): 9-13, p. 11.

⁶¹ Kramer, Mark. "NATO, the Baltic states and Russia: a framework for sustainable enlargement." *International Affairs* 78, no. 4 (2002): 731-756, p. 747.

⁶² Veebel, Viljar. "NATO options and dilemmas for deterring Russia in the Baltic States." *Defence studies* 18, no. 2 (2018): 229-251, p. 246.

⁶³ Kramer. "NATO, the Baltic states and Russia [...]", p. 747.

⁶⁴ Ball. "Nattering NATO negativism? [...]", 45.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Furthermore, considering the rise in economic and military power Russia had in the 2000's, it is safe to say that being patient about the entrance of Eastern Europe into NATO would not have been the best option and a waste of a rare opportunity, especially considering what waiting too much has led to in Ukraine or Georgia.

Furthermore, another argument is that states that are excluded from the NATO integration process become more threatened after the Eastern expansion. While that might be true, Ball argues this justifies NATO's presence in Eastern Europe even more, as that means the risk Russia poses for the rest of Eastern Europe is not trivial.⁶⁶ Despite the fact that it cannot fully accept countries such as Moldova and Ukraine, it is much more useful being in their general vicinity than NATO being solely in the Western block.

Lastly, another argument and counterargument that are worth mentioning is that NATO and its advantages could be received by Eastern Europe solely through the "Partnership for Peace" programs.⁶⁷ Ball points out that this framework lacks the core element that in essence Eastern Europe is looking for military protection from Russia, and for the mandatory intervention of Western allies in case of an attack, as stipulated in the Article V of NATO's regulations.⁶⁸ Additionally, one could argue that offering only partnerships instead of the membership could make many post-communist countries think that all of the political, economic and military reforms they have undertaken were in vain, and that would not only decrease the trust in NATO as a block, but potentially distrust the Western world and its future intentions.

In sum, the arguments pointed out by both sides were convincing and compelling, but eventually NATO and its forces decided that expanding was the best option for the security of both Eastern Europe and of the other member states. The key word here is compromise, from both sides, as the East had to undertake tremendous efforts and distancing from Russia to fulfil most of the entrance conditions. Likewise, the West was also compromising, by assuming the risk of maintaining the security of many new countries, and the compromise of often accepting unprepared countries. For example,

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 46-47.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 50.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Kramer argued that Romania and Bulgaria were not meeting the full criteria when they entered NATO in 2004 but they compensated by maintaining a strong military relation with the United States and aiding significantly in the Middle East after 9/11.⁶⁹ This could have relevance for Moldova in the future, as it implies a form of compromise or support in another domain could smoothen its way into the alliance much easier.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AND JUSTIFICATION

The main sources that will be used in this dissertation are a variety of primary and secondary sources. The main primary sources that have been gathered are press releases, transcripts, speeches, and official documents from NATO's archive, which have been accessed and selected by using the search term "Republic of Moldova" and utilizing the most relevant sources for the given topic. They stretch from 1992, when the first mention of Moldova was made, until 2022. In that way, it is also easier to observe how the narrative and the discourse regarding Moldova has evolved over time within NATO official documents. In short, it shifted from an optimistic and more straightforward tone regarding the Transnistrian issue in the 1990's, to slowly repeating the same accusations in yearly reports in the 2000's, to a more imposing tone again, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea, which inevitably led to speculations in the region of other possible annexations. Besides NATO's archives, other primary sources will be opinion polls, showing the perception the Moldovan public has towards issues such as the general opinion on NATO and adhering to it.

As for secondary sources, this paper will utilize a wide variety of journalistic and academic articles, from three different languages (English, Romanian, Russian), to present an all-encompassing view of how Moldova is analysed in different countries and journals. Most sources are on themes such as the historical timeline of Moldova-NATO relations, how Russia uses Transnistria to further its agenda in Moldova, the factors that

⁶⁹ Kramer. "NATO, the Baltic states and Russia [...]", p. 731.

hinder Moldova's Europeanization or the economic power grip Transnistria has over Moldova.

Regarding the theoretical framework, some of the theories that can be seen in full application within the selected case study of this dissertation are the ideas of spheres of influence, of, as emphasized in the literature review, the patron-client relations between big and small political entities (in the case of Russia and Transnistria), or the theory mentioned previously of Scott Pegg on how a home state (in this case Moldova) deals with separatism. These will shed light on the power dynamics that play behind the mere conflict of Moldova and its separatist region, namely the geopolitical battles for influence between Western countries, whose expansion in Eastern Europe is viewed as a threat by the Russian Federation, which views itself as having a lawful right over post-Soviet region. Furthermore, the theories that circulated around the expansion of institutions, namely NATO, that have been clarified in the literature review, will also be utilized to understand the actions or the lack of action by NATO in certain crucial points of its collaboration with Moldova. They will serve as bases for the research and as the operating framework.

This paper is tackling an important and relevant theme, that can bring value to academic debates regarding the expansion of European institutions in Eastern Europe or regarding the influence *de facto* states can have, especially by acting as mainly the proxy of a great power.

As such, based on the research done for this paper, it can be assessed that there are certain gaps in the academic space, especially regarding the deep understanding of the internal realities of the Republic of Moldova. It has been rather neglected as an important political battleground, and especially in the context in which this paper is written (the 2022 Russian military invasion of Ukraine, and the signing of Moldova's association agreement with the EU) it is even more relevant to know which factors influence and have influenced the external orientation of Moldova towards the East or the West. On that same note, there have been justified assumptions that Moldova might be the next

possible target for a Russian invasion,⁷⁰ and thus it is even more important to analyse what has led to the current situation, in which Moldova is not part of neither EU or NATO, with a separatist entity on its territory and a shaky neutrality status.

Furthermore, while there has been research on Moldova's Europeanization and closeness to the European Union, NATO's relationship with the Eastern European nation is a rather neglected topic, although it could serve as the key to understanding issues such as Russian puppet regimes, the ways of approaching post-Soviet states towards integration, or the effects a breakaway state can have on the foreign relations of the home state. By looking through the NATO archives and through the perceptions of Moldovan scholars, one can get a clearer image of the factors that were not detrimental to the NATO entry of other post-communist states but were detrimental to Moldova.

It is also important to look at Moldova's case, to properly understand the flexibility and the limits of neutrality. As Russia retains a Cold War attitude towards its self-claimed rightful spheres of influence, while the Western policy is more based on responding to the wish for association of different states,⁷¹ it is very likely for Moldova and Transnistria to become a hotspot for conflict, and thus even more relevant to research Moldova's past endeavours.

CHAPTER 3: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND- WHAT LED TO TRANSNISTRIA?

To understand the Moldova-NATO relations and Transnistria's influence on them, one must firstly understand the factors that have led to the 1990's conflict, and how Moldova and Transnistria have evolved, firstly separately, then together, in the 20th century.

⁷⁰ Mrachek, Alexis, "Russia's Next Target: Moldova?", *The Heritage Foundation*, 25th of May 2022, link: <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/russias-next-target-moldova>

⁷¹ Nyysönen, Heini. "Spheres of influence: A few reflections on the concept." *Corvinus Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 3 (2016), p. 11.

Moldova, today, is a majority Romanian-speaking country, which has been a region of the Russian Empire from 1812 until 1917, at a point where Moldovan identity existed as a part of Romanian identity, but, as Johansson specifies, there was not a historical predecessor existing in that period of a Transnistrian identity.⁷² As the First World War and the 1917 Russian Revolution were underway, Moldova (also known as Bessarabia) managed in this unstable environment to unite with Romania in 1918. This unification excluded the de facto territory of Transnistria from today, which would become in 1924 the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), as part of the Ukrainian Socialist Republic within the Soviet Union.⁷³ This was a geopolitical tactic used by the Soviets in protest to Moldova's unification, and a means to counterbalance the pro-Romanian Moldovan identity with a pro-Russian one.⁷⁴ In fact, as it was not even recognized as its own Soviet Republic, and only as a territory part of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, it could be assessed that the status of a sovereign state was rather limited, if not non-existent. The leadership of the Soviet Union simply turned an area of Ukraine with Moldovan inhabitants into a new region in a fully arbitrary way.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the MASSR stands as the founding "state" of Transnistria, at the origins of this identity, and was later used as an argument for its separate identity from Moldova.⁷⁶ In this context, even from the interwar period, there was a geopolitical separation between Moldova and Transnistria, with one being part of a Western-oriented Kingdom of Romania, while the other was a territory within the Soviet Union.

Moldova's period as part of the Kingdom of Romania would be short lived, as it would be annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, as part of the Soviet-Nazi Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, then temporarily regained during the Axis offensive (which included Romania) and then later recovered again by the Soviets in 1944. After that, the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) will be established. This new republic would incorporate the territories of both Moldova and Transnistria, but the latter would remain the region that

⁷² Johansson, Andreas. "The Transnistrian conflict after the 2005 Moldovan parliamentary elections." *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 22, no. 4 (2006): 507-516, p. 508.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Van Meurs, Wim. "Carving a Moldavian identity out of history." *Nationalities Papers* 26, no. 1 (1998), p. 47.

⁷⁶ Johansson. "The Transnistrian conflict after the 2005 Moldovan parliamentary elections.", p. 508.

would be more loyal and trustworthy to the Soviets. This was also illustrated by the fact that most of the heavy industry of the MSSR was in Transnistria, while Moldova maintained a more agricultural profile.⁷⁷

Tensions were already starting between the two entities of the MSSR before the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially from the beginning of the Perestroika Era of the late 1980's, a context in which the greater freedom of speech led to nationalist sentiments, especially among the ethnic Romanian population within MSSR, who could express their discontent.⁷⁸ As such, a push for "Romanianization" in the MSSR commenced, which was marked by the legislative introduction of Romanian as the only state language of Moldova in 1989,⁷⁹ which also included the recognition of the Moldovan-Romanian identity and the Romanian Latin script in the detriment of Russian Cyrillic.⁸⁰ This was part of a rising wave of pro-Romanian nationalist groups in Moldova, represented by entities such as the Popular Front of Moldova (political party), the "Alexei Mateevici" literary circle⁸¹ or the military group known as the "Ilașcu Group".⁸² These groups relied on individuals who felt affected by the denationalization and Russification process that Moldova went through after its annexation by the USSR. The pro-Romanian movements led to a counter movement containing mainly members of the Russophone/ethnic Russian population, as well as other minorities found in Moldova's territory, who created the Internationalist Movement, later known as the Movement for equality in rights „Edinstvo" (=unity).⁸³ As it was showcased in the literature review, under Müllerson's reasons for separatism, Transnistria is clearly a case of mainly linguistic and partially cultural separatism, as the main elements that differentiated the two sides were their advocacy for different languages and their revendication of different identities, a Romanian and a Russian one respectively.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 509

⁷⁸ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 26.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Duffy, Martin. "Moldova and the Transnistria Conflict: Still a Regional Cold War?", *E-International Relations*, 2021, p. 1, link: <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/03/moldova-and-the-transnistria-conflict-still-a-regional-cold-war/>

⁸¹ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 10.

⁸² Roper, Steven D. "Regionalism in Moldova: The Case of Transnistria and Gagauzia." *Regional & Federal Studies* 11, no. 3 (2001): 101-122, p. 108.

⁸³ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 10.

The fall of the communist dictatorial regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania in 1989 made the fear of the pro-Russian secessionists even greater, as unification between Romania and Moldova seemed more and more inevitable.⁸⁴ This led to the Supreme Council from Transnistria to declare its independence as a separate Soviet Republic from Moldova in September 1990,⁸⁵ by entitling themselves the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), out of fear that the Russian-speaking population might be separated from the Soviet Union and de-nationalized. The Transnistrians found grand support from Moscow elites and political figures, being considered the anchor of political influence that the central authorities had upon the Moldovan region.⁸⁶ Even in the later stages of the war, in 1992, there were key politicians, such as Russia's vice-president, Alexander Rutskoy, who said in a public speech that Transnistrians should demand their independence.⁸⁷

Two months after the declaration of independence, armed skirmishes began between the two sides, with the Moldovan soldiers attempting to re-conquer what they deemed as occupied cities.⁸⁸ As the war was ongoing, Moldovans gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 after the August Coup, which only led to an escalation of the armed conflict in the following months,⁸⁹ in a war that was fought sporadically mainly on the line of the Dniester river, that separates Moldova and Transnistria even today, with little advancement.⁹⁰ Besides the armies of the two sides, there were military volunteers involved in the conflict, with Romanian volunteers on the side of Moldova and Russian and even Ukrainian volunteers on Transnistria's side. The Ukrainians were interested in protecting the sizeable ethnic Ukrainian population from Transnistria.⁹¹ What is considered a turning point in the war was the capture of the town of Bender by Transnistrian forces, which started receiving direct help from the Russian 14th army, which is stationed in Transnistria to this day.⁹² Moldovans were struggling against

⁸⁴ Duffy. "Moldova and the Transnistria Conflict [...]", p. 2.

⁸⁵ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 26.

⁸⁶ Kennedy. "The limits of soft balancing", p. 515.

⁸⁷ Duffy. "Moldova and the Transnistria Conflict [...]", p. 2.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 26.

⁹⁰ Duffy. "Moldova and the Transnistria Conflict [...]", p. 2.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Roper. "Regionalism in Moldova [...]", p. 109.

Transnistrian forces, already, let alone against a Russian army division. To a certain extent, reconsidering the theory on reasons for separatism, it can be argued that Transnistria also used its ethnic and political identities to gain support. As such, the Ukrainians helped them since there is a significant Ukrainian minority in the breakaway region, and the Russians helped them to the allegiance of the Transnistrians to the “Russian world”.

After approximately 1000 casualties in total,⁹³ the war was ended in July 1992, when a ceasefire was finally agreed,⁹⁴ thus leading to the current geopolitical situation, with a de facto independent Transnistria, and a Moldova that claims de jure control and sovereignty over the region. The war in a way produced a new Transnistria, who could use this conflict to create and reinforce its national identity, as the Transnistrian leaders were seen as heroes, all the while Moldova had a defeatist attitude. The two would follow different paths, with the nationalist and unionist movement fading after the declaration of neutrality in 1994.⁹⁵ Transnistria became a dictatorial regime surviving fully through the aid of Moscow, while Moldova adopted a highly unstable and corrupted, yet democratic system, that has been in the last couple of years politically closer to Europe and its ideals.

To conclude, even from the historical context itself, we can already extrapolate certain influences that Transnistria had over Moldova’s (future) relation with NATO. The Soviet authorities, by bringing Moldova and Transnistria under the same republic in 1944, had already set the stage for a possible interethnic conflict, in the case of an increasing wave of liberal reforms and revived nationalism, as it was the case in the Soviet Union of the late 1980’s. As such, when Romanian Moldovans had the opportunity to finally express their national identity and their wish to reunite with Romania, because of the structure of the Moldovan SSR, a pro-Russian secessionist movement was inevitable. An interethnic conflict makes it harder for Moldova to create any connections to NATO, since internal stability is a crucial factor for adherence to this international institution. Furthermore, the war that Transnistria fought against Moldova brought upon the latter two more impediments to its Europeanization and to its NATO connection: a separatist republic on

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 26.

⁹⁵ Roper. "Regionalism in Moldova [...]", p. 109-110.

the sovereign territory of Moldova, which hardens any bilateral relations, and deployment of the Russian army on its territory.

CHAPTER 4: TRANSNISTRIA'S GEOPOLITICAL PRESSURE ON NATO-MOLDOVA RELATIONS

Military Pressure and The Russia Factor

Before going into detail about the actual factors of influence, one must establish the Transnistria-Russia relation, so that it is clear how the Russian factor is still connected to the main research question. Thus, their relation will be based on the patron-client model, which in the field of international relations has been described as “a mutually beneficial exchange of goods and services between two international actors, mainly states, that are unequal in terms of their military, economic, and political power”.⁹⁶ Since Transnistria is highly dependent on Russia, it can be assumed that Russia exchanges its economic and military support to Transnistria for Transnistria's positions and policies at an international level, and especially the ones directed at Chisinau. Since that is the case, many of Transnistria's foreign policy decisions are Russian decisions. Based on Kosienkowski's interpretation on these types of unequal relationships, the patron state is usually looking to obtain any of the three following geopolitical favours: ideological convergence, international solidarity, strategic advantage.⁹⁷ In Russia's case, the most relevant benefit that it gains from its relationship with Transnistria is the strategic advantage, by using Transnistria as a pawn made to stagnate Moldova's Europeanization process and to block NATO collaboration as much as possible, by invoking arguments

⁹⁶ Kosienkowski, Marcin. "The patron-client relationship between Russia and Transnistria." In *De Facto States in Eurasia*, Routledge, 2019, p. 1.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 5.

such as the protection of Transnistrian and pro-Russian citizens.⁹⁸ The attempts by Moldova or by international institutions to unblock the stagnating military situation have been mostly futile, as there have been, besides the numerous debates and negotiations which will be discussed later, two agreements for Moscow to withdraw their army from Transnistria's territory, in 1994 and in 1999, but which have not been respected by the Kremlin.⁹⁹ Below, several ways in which the Russian army or Russia influences the relationship between Moldova and NATO through Transnistria. As mentioned in the literature review section on separatism, one of the justifications for a patron state to protect a client state, which fits in Russia's case, is imposing costs on the home state (in this case Moldova). As the title of this paper indicates, Transnistria is not necessarily supported because of ethnic solidarity or to become a Russian region, but to be kept as a thorn in the flesh of Moldova and used when the country gets too close to the West.

Transnistria creates a clear stagnation effect in Moldova's collaboration with Western institutions, especially with ones with a military aspect, such as NATO. Since Moldova is still a conflict zone, despite the ceasefire, NATO does not have a right to involve itself in it to a large extent, and thus can only stand as an observer, while Russia has been leading the negotiation process.¹⁰⁰ Still, there have been instances of certain compromises done by European institutions, who have accepted countries facing de facto state issues or internal conflicts. A clear example of that is the 2004 adherence of Cyprus to the European Union, despite the country facing issues with the breakaway region of Northern Cyprus. Still, Kosiekowski argues that such an instance is highly unlikely to repeat within the EU, let alone in a military institution such as NATO.¹⁰¹ Western institutions would not risk beginning a conflict of any sort with a region where a Russian army is posted only for an attempt at integrating Moldova.

⁹⁸ Pîrțac, Grigore, and Valentina Stan. "Colaborarea Republicii Moldova cu NATO în noile condiții geopolitice." ["The collaboration of the Republic of Moldova with NATO within the new geopolitical conditions"] *Moldoscopie* 83, no. 4 (2018): 174-183, p. 178.

⁹⁹ Crandall, Matthew. "Hierarchy in Moldova-Russia Relations: the Transnistrian Effect." *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 4, no. 1 (2012): 3-15, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Paiu, Dana. "Republica Moldova și colaborarea cu NATO—argument forte pentru integrarea în Uniunea Europeană." (2021), *Teoria și practica administrării publice* [The Republic of Moldova and collaboration with NATO - a strong argument for integration into the European Union, *Theory and practice of public administration*], p. 223.

¹⁰¹ Kosienkowski. "The patron-client relationship between Russia and Transnistria.", p. 7.

Another factor is that with the Russian 14th Army at Moldova's doorstep, any attempt of even putting under scrutiny Moldova's neutrality status would be considered a conflict risk. Considering the difference in every aspect between Moldova's and Russia's army, even if we refer only to the 14th Army from Transnistria, and not the army in its entirety, Moldova would only last a few hours in such a war.¹⁰² In the case that Moldova pursues relations with NATO that Russia considers too close, Moscow has some geopolitical and military options. One would be annexing Transnistria and internationally considering it a Russian region, which would block Moldova's attempts at Europeanization.¹⁰³ The other would be to directly start an open conflict with Moldova, which would be destructive,¹⁰⁴ and would make NATO back off its integration efforts from the region. As such, Moldova is forced to maintain its neutrality status, in a general and rather justified fear, at a both political and public level, that any further collaboration with Euro-Atlantic structures would be considered a war justification for Moscow.¹⁰⁵

Another factor that trickled down from Russia's military presence is that NATO was incapable to get involved in the post-war negotiations. It is important to assess the impact the 14th Army had on NATO's response, which was rather timid and limited. Starting with 1994, when the conflict was over and Moldova had just declared its neutrality, NATO made an official statement to support a deal that would lead to the orderly withdrawal of Russia's army. It could not have had a more assertive stance, and instead had to be side-lined and to support the mission of the Organization for the Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).¹⁰⁶ Mardarovici thinks that the OSCE mission had a poor balancing role in the negotiations, considering that the other members, Russia, and

¹⁰² Варданыан, Эрнест. "Молдова между Россией и Западом: внутренний раскол за ширмой европейской интеграции", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, 2018 [Vardanyan, Ernest. "Moldova between Russia and The West: internal split behind the screen of European integration], p. 22.

¹⁰³ Rogstad, Adrian. "The next Crimea? getting Russia's Transnistria policy right." *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 1 (2018), p. 29.

¹⁰⁴ Țurcanu. "Republica Moldova și opțiunile de securitate în urma noilor provocări la adresa securității regionale." ["Republic of Moldova and its security options following the new regional security challenges"], p. 43.

¹⁰⁵ Stercul, Natalia. "Основные направления сотрудничества Республики Молдова и НАТО." ["The main directions of cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and NATO."], *Moldoscopie* 71, no. 4 (2015): 138-145.

¹⁰⁶ "Statement issued at the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council", 10th of June 1994, *NATO Official Texts*, 19th of October 1994, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24452.htm?selectedLocale=en

Ukraine, mainly supported Transnistria. OSCE had little power to impose its ideas, and signed documents that would favour Transnistria as a compromise for maintaining peace.¹⁰⁷ Thus, with a weak negotiator on its side, and with a NATO institution that had to be cautious in its involvement, due to the Russian military presence and to Moldova's neutrality status, Moldova would find itself cornered and kept in stagnation in its Europeanization process. This foreign policy role of NATO has continued in the following years, which can be summarised as an observing and condemning role. This was also mentioned in the literature review section on NATO expansionism, namely the fears that Western leaders and analysts had regarding expanding into Russia's perceived sphere of influence, which one could argue are still existent to a certain extent to this day.

Based on NATO's archives, the narrative that remained throughout the 1990's is that the peaceful settlement must be done through the Russia, Ukraine, OSCE negotiation format, although Moldova's president at that time, Petru Lucinschi, was arguing for the greater implication of NATO in this frozen conflict.¹⁰⁸ Later, in the 2000's, NATO started to urge more vehemently against the withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria, by using the Istanbul Treaty as a legal basis, which stipulated the gradual yearly withdrawal of troops and equipment and the closing of bases by Russia from both Transnistria and from Abkhazia, Georgia.¹⁰⁹ These were largely not followed, and Russia continued its pressure on Moldova. It was even stated by one of the foreign ministers of Moldova in 2005 at NATO's headquarters that the Russian army plays an active role in the perpetuating of separatism and puts pressure on the negotiation process.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, as late as 2013, NATO was still claiming that "while NATO is not involved, it closely

¹⁰⁷ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 18.

¹⁰⁸ "Statement by Petru Lucinschi, President of the Republic of Moldova, at the meeting of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council at the level of Heads of State and Government", *NATO Speeches & Transcripts*, 9th of July 1997, link:

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_25586.htm?selectedLocale=en

¹⁰⁹ "MEETING OF THE NAC IN DEFENCE MINISTERS SESSION HELD IN BRUSSELS ON 5 DECEMBER 2000 - FINAL COMMUNIQUE", *NATO Archives Online*, 5th of December 2000, p. 11 link: https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/4/145246/M_NAC_D_2_2000_114_ENG.pdf

¹¹⁰ "Addressing Europe's unresolved conflicts". Address by Eugenia Kistruga, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova at the first panel of the EAPC Security Forum in Åre, Sweden", *NATO Speeches & Transcripts*, 25th of May 2005, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_21786.htm?selectedLocale=en

follows developments related to the Transnistria settlement process”.¹¹¹ This creates a fine line between NATO’s rather faded involvement in the Transnistrian issue as a necessary reaction to the Russian military forces placed in the region, and NATO’s lack of reactivity as a motivated, voluntary policy decision.

After the invasion of Crimea, although NATO had a more imposing approach towards Moscow, it still claimed as recent as 2020 that NATO does not have any direct role in the Transnistrian issue, but at least it maintained its policy line of urging Russia to follow its international obligations and respect the territorial integrity of Moldova.¹¹² Only in January 2022, a month before the start of the war in Ukraine, NATO declared that it was ready to sit down and discuss the issues of breakaway states in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine,¹¹³ and as such it can be declared that the Russian 14th army played a tremendous role in slowing down the reaction of NATO to the Transnistrian conflict and conduct the negotiations mostly on their terms.

The Russian army also indirectly influenced Moldova’s foreign policy making. The mere presence of the troops means that Moldova cannot risk any form of adversarial position towards Russia, and has to pursue an appeasement policy, Russia being an irreplaceable piece of the puzzle in that region, that cannot be eliminated through European and American influence.¹¹⁴ In fact, when pro-Russian forces have been in power in Moldova, they would pursue closer political and economic relations with Moscow as a way to guarantee that Russia will not become an aggressor and will continue to not recognize Transnistria as a sovereign state on the international stage.¹¹⁵

Moldova, because of the army presence, has been faced with a dilemma that threatens its Euro-Atlantic integration. As Berg (2020) has stated, as Moldova integrates closer and closer to the West, the more this undermines its internal integration attempts with

¹¹¹ “NATO Secretary General: Alliance open to closer ties with Moldova”, 14th of June 2013, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_101431.htm?selectedLocale=en

¹¹² “Relations with the Republic of Moldova”, *NATO Topics*, 27th of October 2020, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49727.htm?selectedLocale=en

¹¹³ “Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council”, *NATO Speeches and transcripts*, 12th of January 2022, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_190666.htm?selectedLocale=en

¹¹⁴ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 46.

¹¹⁵ Rogstad, Adrian. "The next Crimea? [...]", p. 12.

Transnistria, with the breakaway region being used as a fifth column to sabotage Moldova's foreign policy.¹¹⁶ Transnistria is fully opposed to the entrance of Moldova in NATO, with Moldova even facing internal pressure from other semi-autonomous regions that have a largely pro-Russian stance, even being considered Russian puppets, such as Gagauzia.¹¹⁷ As such, Moldovan officials have declared that Russia's decision to maintain the army on Transnistria's territory is directly related to Moldova's growing interest, especially in the 1990's and the 2000's to pursue closer relations with NATO.¹¹⁸ Even more worryingly, the Russian armies from Transnistria have performed military exercises along the Dniester River, simulating a crossing of the river (and thus in Moldova's controlled territory) as early as 2016, in contradiction with any negotiation agreements signed prior.¹¹⁹

The Russian military presence and Russia in general, through its role as a patron state of Transnistria, has played a decisive role in how Moldova has cautiously pursued its relations with NATO and vice versa. As long as the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict has possible military implications that could put two great military powers, NATO and Russia, at the brink of conflict, NATO will be forced to maintain a more nuanced, reticent approach to those regional issues, and Moldova's chances of adherence would remain low.

Economic Pressure: Sabotage as a Modus Operandi

Although the economy is not a subject one would think would affect a nation's relation with a military alliance such as NATO, in this case it plays a role, since the economic

¹¹⁶ Berg, Eiki, and Kristel Vits. "Transnistria's European Drive: A Means to What End?." *Geopolitics* (2020): 1-23, p. 8-9.

¹¹⁷ Paiu, Dana. "European integration of the Republic of Moldova: geopolitical realities." *Relații internaționale. Plus* 18, no. 2 (2020): 140-146, p. 143-144.

¹¹⁸ Crandall. "Hierarchy in Moldova-Russia Relations [...]", p. 7.

¹¹⁹ O'Connor, Robert. "Transnistria Isn't the Smuggler's Paradise It Used to Be", *Foreign Policy*, 2019, link: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/05/transnistria-isnt-the-smugglers-paradise-it-used-to-be-sheriff-moldova-ukraine-tiraspol/>

sabotage that has been perpetrated by Transnistria affects more than just the mere economy of Moldova, but its sovereignty and internal stability, which are important criteria for joining any organization, let alone NATO. Theoretically, NATO specifies only one clear economic criterium in their enlargement policy, namely having a free market economy,¹²⁰ practically, in the process of joining NATO, not having control over the economy, which entails corruption, smuggling, and debt, can slow down the integration process. As it has been reiterated, NATO is considered by many analysts to be an essential step towards European integration, and thus these forms of economic pressure against Moldova can have implications that trickle down to their entry in other institutions as well, such as the European Union.¹²¹ As such, Transnistria economically affects Moldova in two main ways: by burdening it with gas debt and by controlling certain border checkpoints and using them for illegal activities.

Transnistria already had an economic advantage over Moldova since it gained its autonomy in 1992, since 25% of the light industry, 87% of electricity and 100% of electric machinery output from Moldova as a whole comes from Transnistria, since in the Soviet Union, Transnistria was designated as the more industrialized area and the rest of Moldova had a more agricultural role.¹²² With that, Transnistria already had a chance of blackmailing Moldova, by having control over key industries that were essential for the whole country, such as electricity. Furthermore, Transnistria has largely been in a superior financial position, since it has been able to run a tremendous budget deficit, because Russia usually covers more than half of it (around 70%).¹²³ Moldova does not have the same capabilities and the same possibilities of running such a budget, since it does not have a superpower state to constantly fund it, as it is the case with the Tiraspol regime.

¹²⁰ "NATO Enlargement & Open Door", *North Atlantic Treaty Organization Fact Sheet*, July 2016, p. 1, link: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160627_1607-factsheet-enlargement-eng.pdf

¹²¹ Paiu. "Republica Moldova și colaborarea cu NATO [The Republic of Moldova and collaboration with NATO], p. 223.

¹²² Roper. "Regionalism in Moldova [...]", p. 110.

¹²³ Țurcanu. "Republica Moldova și opțiunile de securitate în urma noilor provocări la adresa securității regionale." ["Republic of Moldova and its security options following the new regional security challenges"], p. 40.

Transnistria is affecting the Moldovan economy through gas debt. For example, in 2015, Moldova's gas debt to Gazprom (Russian state gas company, the main provider of gas in Moldova), was around \$2.4 billion.¹²⁴ However, this was not fully accumulated by the Moldovan state, not even close, since 2 billion out of the \$2.4 billion was gas debt created directly by the Tiraspol regime, which then, according to the contract, would fall on Moldova's shoulders.¹²⁵ On that same line, Transnistria has been showing intentions of doing gas contracts directly with Gazprom, which would highly undermine Moldova's sovereignty and reinforce the Tiraspol regime as a legitimate entity.¹²⁶ As a result of this framework of the national energy market, Moldovagaz, the state company dealing with gas distribution, accumulated a tremendous debt, which is next to impossible to recover from, and which prevents another form of Europeanization: integration in the European Energy System.¹²⁷

In sum, this financial burden is enough to slow down both the internal development of the country, which is drowned in debt, and burdens Moldova's integration within Euro-Atlantic structures. A nation which cannot control its finances properly would be seen as a doubtful candidate by any organization, especially by the EU or by NATO.

The second economic issue created by Transnistria in the detriment of Moldova is the problem of a redundant customs control. Since Transnistria controls the eastern part of Moldova, it also has control over a part of Moldova's eastern border with Ukraine. There, Transnistria has full customs control and even its own custom stamp.¹²⁸ These customs have been very often used for economic crimes, including arms trading and the smuggling of cigarettes, alcohol, revenue which was used by the Transnistrian state and by its largest company, Sheriff, to consolidate their power.¹²⁹ Recently, especially since 2017, the Transnistrian leverage over the customs control was lowered by a Moldovan-

¹²⁴ Cebotari, Svetlana. "Politica hard-power a Federației Ruse în Republica Moldova." In *Teoria și practica administrării publice*, [Cebotari, Svetlana, "Hard power politics of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova", *Theory and practice of public administration*], 2015, p. 179.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Лавренов, Сергей Яковлевич. "Новый этап газовых отношений России и Молдавии." *Геоэкономика энергетики* 9, no. 1 (2020). [Lavrenov, Sergey Yakovlevich, "A new stage of Russia-Moldova gas relations", *Goeconomics of Energy* 9], p. 50.

¹²⁸ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 12.

¹²⁹ O'Connor. "Transnistria Isn't the Smuggler's Paradise It Used to Be".

Ukrainian cooperation, who administered an extra joint checkpoint, which has threatened the contraband channels.¹³⁰ Ukraine changed its position on Transnistria especially after losing Crimea to Russia in 2014, and decided that a collaboration with Moldova on the customs issue would be beneficial for Kiev.¹³¹ Still, until then, Transnistria was one of the hubs of illegal trading in Europe, which affected gravely both the state budget of Moldova but also its internal stability, since weapons, among other goods, have been going inside and through the country in an uncontrolled manner for at least 25 years.¹³²

When it comes to the Moldovan economy, there have been integration efforts from the European Union, such as allowing Transnistria along with Moldova, through the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, to also benefit from a free export of goods and services to the EU.¹³³ This has helped with the unification and legalization of trade within Moldova, and thus has increased the country's internal stability. Furthermore, Russia has been, as mentioned previously, a patron state to the breakaway region, investing in it also, the development of the region as much as possible, in contrast to Moldova. This was done to attract the Moldovan population towards a more pro-Russian stance.¹³⁴

In conclusion, the economic side has an impact on Moldova's Europeanization process as well. The issue of smuggling has only increased the power of organized crime in Moldova and furthered the reputation of Chisinau as a failed, not self-sustaining state. Especially if we compare Moldova's economic policies to the case study of Georgia, it can be assessed that Moldova's response was weak. While Georgia imposed trade blockades, pressured smuggling rings, and restricted companies operating in Georgia to do business in Abkhazia, Moldova has been lenient towards the economic blackmail that it was subjected to.

While this issue of smuggling has been trumped upon in the last 5-6 years and progresses are being made in that department, the issue of the increasing gas debts, as an

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 16.

¹³³ Berg, Eiki. Kristel Vits. "Why the International Community Should Be More Accommodating to De Facto States", *PONARS Eurasia*, Policy Memo No. 565, January 2019.

¹³⁴ Kosienkowski. "The patron-client relationship between Russia and Transnistria.", p. 6.

“inheritance” from Transnistria has not been tackled yet, burdening the budget and the development of Moldova, and increasing its dependency on Moscow.

CHAPTER 5: TRANSNISTRIA’S PROCEDURAL AND LEGAL PRESSURE ON NATO-MOLDOVA RELATIONS

Neutrality Status

Compared to other neutral states from Europe, such as Finland, Sweden, Austria, and others, Moldova’s neutrality has a particular aspect, that makes its neutrality be of a lesser international value. As paradoxical as it might sound is the only neutral state in the world that has foreign military troops occupying a part of its territory,¹³⁵ which technically puts under doubt the validity or worthiness of the status in the first place. Nevertheless, as unstable this status might be, it has been fully adopted by authorities as a defining aspect of Moldova’s foreign policy, which inadvertently influenced its chances of NATO accession, making it impossible as long as the country is militarily neutral. This chapter will skim through the following aspects: the historical context of the adoption of the neutrality status, the reasoning and caveats of the status, the pro and con arguments that have been circulated throughout academic sources regarding it, which inevitably are connected to NATO, and how the status has been used by Moldovan authorities, and the effect it had on the perception of the public.

As mentioned in the “historical background” chapter, after the ceasefire was signed in 1992, Moldova was cornered in a precarious situation: economic issues, a frozen conflict on its territory and the presence of Russian troops. As such, because of Transnistria and by extent Russia, and also because of Moldova’s incapability to defend its interests,

¹³⁵ Ilinca. “Neutralitatea Republicii Moldova” [“The neutrality of the Republic of Moldova”].

Moldovan authorities were forced to adopt to constitutionally declare a status of permanent neutrality in 1994, which can only be changed through a popular referendum.¹³⁶ Strangely enough, even though there is already a foreign military presence on Moldova's territory, the neutrality article stipulates that the deployment of troops of other nations is prohibited.¹³⁷ The status, because of Russia's presence, is not recognized at a legal international level, but more likely it is accepted as a *modus operandi* by NATO and other Western institutions.¹³⁸

Considering the weakness of this neutrality, one must investigate what were the motivations at that time and how it was expected for this status to serve the Moldovan state. At that time, it was thought that "neutrality served as an argument for withdrawing the military forces and defence technology from the eastern part of the country".¹³⁹ It was thought that simply declaring neutrality would instil a sort of international procedure that would force Russian troops to retreat,¹⁴⁰ and thus enabling a better negotiation position, without a Russian threat hanging above Moldova's head. It was also thought that neutrality could be a way through which Moldova can defend its sovereignty over its full territory, while also promoting a peaceful resolution of the conflict.¹⁴¹ Since the situation has been relatively the same for the past 28 years since the declaration of neutrality (Moldovan-Transnistrian tensions still exist, Russia keeps its 14th army in Transnistria) it can be stated that it was not the appropriate measure. Moldova's neutrality thus is and has always been only on paper, and it does not serve any value against the possible aggression of Transnistria or of the Kremlin.¹⁴² It hasn't served much for Ukraine against Russia neither, who renounced its neutrality status in 2014, after Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.¹⁴³ As such, Moldova has forgotten to consider the fact that

¹³⁶ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 27.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ilinca. "Neutralitatea Republicii Moldova" ["The neutrality of the Republic of Moldova"].

¹³⁹ Cebotari, Svetlana. "The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status." *Postmodern Openings* 1, no. 3 (2010): 83-92, p. 86.

¹⁴⁰ Ilinca. "Neutralitatea Republicii Moldova" ["The neutrality of the Republic of Moldova"].

¹⁴¹ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 22.

¹⁴² Țurcanu. "Republica Moldova și opțiunile de securitate în urma noilor provocări la adresa securității regionale." ["Republic of Moldova and its security options following the new regional security challenges"], p. 43.

¹⁴³ "Ukraine Votes To Abandon Neutrality, Set Sights On NATO", *Radio Free Europe*, 23rd of December 2014, link: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-parliament-abandons-neutrality/26758725.html>

neutrality is more than a position that is proclaimed, then written and stipulated into law, and then immediately reinforced. Such a status, as much as any other international statuses, must be obtained, not just declared, otherwise it will not bring regional and international guarantees of any sort, an aspect that has been side-lined by Moldovan politicians.¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, although not fully legitimate and faulty, the neutrality status was maintained with determination by all the Chisinau authorities that would follow, regardless of their political positions, be it pro-European or pro-Russian. There were some claims regarding how this neutrality can serve Moldova in a positive way, even have a good influence on Moldova's relationship with NATO, since many analysts and politicians claim that neutrality does not equal isolation from NATO or isolation of the country as a whole.¹⁴⁵ As such, a pro-neutrality argument that can be made here is that Moldova can conduct its foreign affairs in a safer and less threatening way towards Russia by maintaining and reiterating the neutrality status, while also pursuing Europeanization on other fronts.

Another positive aspect circulating around Moldova's neutrality is the fact that in a situation in which Moldova is, namely at the crossroads between two great powers, a neutrality status assures a better position to try a multipolar foreign policy.¹⁴⁶ As such, playing the neutrality card would prevent Russia from being irritated by a closer relationship with the West and vice versa. As Efremova states, "the existence of an independent and neutral "buffer state" meets the needs of greater powers, which want to be assured that the buffer's territory would not be used to launch an aggression against any of them".¹⁴⁷ These analysts consider that a fully neutral Moldova would be a safety guarantee and a way of bringing balance in Eastern Europe, which, as mentioned above,

¹⁴⁴ Ilinca. "Neutralitatea Republicii Moldova" ["The neutrality of the Republic of Moldova"].

¹⁴⁵ Lupitu, Robert, "Chișinăul a aprobat planul de cooperare dintre Republica Moldova și NATO pentru anii 2022-2023: Neutralitatea constituțională nu înseamnă izolarea țării", *Calea Europeană*, [Chisinau approved the cooperation plan between the Republic of Moldova and NATO for 2022-2023: Constitutional neutrality does not mean the isolation of the country, *the European Way*], 20th of January 2022.

¹⁴⁶ Mosneaga, Valeriu, Tatiana Turco, and Gheorghe Mosneaga. "Moldova's Experience with Nato: An Example of Neutrality Policy.", *Institute of International Politics and Economics Belgrade*, 2019, p. 426.

¹⁴⁷ Efremova, Ksenia, "Small States in Great Power Politics Understanding the "Buffer Effect"", *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 13, no. 1: 100–121, p. 109.

has been a contested viewpoint. This is especially illustrated after Russia's Crimea annexation, despite Ukraine's neutrality. On the other hand, it is a status that is deemed by some analysts as being less and less relevant and flexible, as in the end countries such as Moldova must choose Russia or the West at some point. A multilateral policy, in which Moldova demands and appeases both ends is possible, but only after a clear choice of a side. While previously the choice was towards the East, in the last couple of years Moldova has deeply shown its adherence to the West and its values.

Another argument used in favour of neutrality, especially used by pro-European analysts, is the fact that Moldova, considering Russia's military presence, cannot bring NATO troops on its territory nevertheless, but at least by maintaining its neutrality, it does not have to enter any military alliance alongside the Russian Federation, which maintains its chances of Europeanization (especially through the European Union).¹⁴⁸ That is a valid argument, since the current situation is preferable for Moldova's Europeanization than a situation in which Moldova would be militarily allied with Russia and would (willingly) have Russian military bases on its territory.

The last two arguments encountered in the academic literature that support neutrality have a more pragmatic nature, operating on the given circumstances, of a politically unstable democratic system in Moldova, and an aggressive world power in the East, that has an upper hand diplomatically and especially militarily. In this context, some have argued that if Moldova adopts neutrality, it will create a context that would make Russia have a milder position in the negotiation process, while currently greatly favouring Transnistria.¹⁴⁹ It could be assessed as a naïve approach to the situation, since Moldova has been clear about its neutrality on the international stage, and the negotiations have experienced little changes. A much more realistic argument, which will be further emphasized in the section on Moldovan and NATO mistakes in handling the Transnistrian conflict, is the fact that in order for Moldova to renounce its neutrality and join NATO, there would be a need, in both Moldova and the breakaway region within it, for a politician or a political force that can create the societal consensus and rally the

¹⁴⁸ Mosneaga, Turco, Mosneaga. "Moldova's Experience with Nato", p. 426.

¹⁴⁹ Ilinca. "Neutralitatea Republicii Moldova" ["The neutrality of the Republic of Moldova"].

populations for these policies to occur, which at the moment seems quite unlikely.¹⁵⁰ It is indeed true that Moldova has a divided society, that fluctuates between the East and the West, and it is much more complicated to achieve NATO membership through a referendum and through a consensus.

Considering the stated arguments for neutrality, it has to be mentioned that a majority of academic sources and political articles encountered, from a varied number of sources, are mainly maintaining that this status has been working in the detriment of Moldova's path towards Europeanization and has been mainly favouring Transnistria and Russia.

Firstly, the validity and usefulness of the status is criticized. It is assessed that this neutrality is futile, since Moldova cannot be de facto neutral as long as it has foreign soldiers stationed in a part of its territory against the will of Chisinau.¹⁵¹ Thus, in this context, Moldova suffers from all of the drawbacks of an actual neutral status (not entering a military alliance, in this case NATO) without reaping any of the benefits, such as maintaining internal peace and stability and having a viable multipolar foreign policy. Moldova's neutrality was never respected in the first place by Transnistria and by Moscow, and thus it is purely declarative and cannot be guaranteed.¹⁵² From that logic, the status is useless and must be changed.

Another argument provided by the sceptical analysts is the fact that NATO membership and adherence plays a very important role in integrating in other European institutions, such as the European Union. It is often argued that NATO and the EU are the two sides of the same coin, and that NATO is a preliminary step, from a political and economic point of view, towards the EU, as many of the non-military requirements demanded by NATO fit within the EU integration scheme.¹⁵³ Although there are EU members who are not part of NATO, such as Sweden or Finland, thus far there has been no post-communist

¹⁵⁰ Țurcanu. "Republica Moldova și opțiunile de securitate în urma noilor provocări la adresa securității regionale." ["Republic of Moldova and its security options following the new regional security challenges"], p. 43.

¹⁵¹ Cebotari. "The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status.", p. 90.

¹⁵² Pîrțac, Stan. "Colaborarea Republicii Moldova cu NATO în noile condiții geopolitice." ["The collaboration of the Republic of Moldova with NATO within the new geopolitical conditions"], p. 178.

¹⁵³ Ungureanu, Veaceslav. "A Geopolitical Approach to the National Security of the Republic of Moldova in the Context of the Interferences of the Geostrategic Relations of the Great Powers." *Cross Border Journal for International Studies* 2, no. 1 (2017): 116-137, p. 136.

state that went through the EU integration process without going through the NATO integration process first.¹⁵⁴ In that sense, Moscow, by forcing Moldova in this neutrality status, has jeopardized its European integration process. Neutrality is only a Russian tool, meant to not allow Moldova to get too close to Europe.¹⁵⁵

Especially in the context in which this paper is written, namely during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, another argument against Moldova's neutrality can be ensued: since neutrality does not mean much for Transnistrian and Kremlin authorities, Moldova can only rely militarily on itself. This has been reiterated even by Moldovan authorities, who claim that Moldova must appeal to international institutions in case of Transnistrian or Russian aggression, but in principle Moldova's army can only be self-reliant.¹⁵⁶ Of course, as mentioned previously, a conflict right now with Russia would be impossible to manage, and even a conflict only with the Transnistrian separatists would be a struggle for the Moldovan army. As such, neutrality puts Moldova in a position where it is vulnerable to any Russian aggression, and virtually at the mercy of the Kremlin, who views the post-Soviet state as part of its sphere of influence.

Therefore, many analysts have seen neutrality as a Transnistrian, and in extension Russian tool of control over Moldova. Even since the 1990's, pro-Russian politicians from Moldova would use the neutrality status to deny any cooperation with NATO¹⁵⁷ and it has been further used as an argument to stray away as much as possible from European and Euro-Atlantic organizations. With pro-European forces recently coming to power in Moldova, the new administration has made the distinction between neutrality and isolation clear, but they still must operate within this restrictive framework of a fragile, semi-recognized neutrality. Moldova's neutrality was considered a way in which Moscow can increase its influence and keep the young nation in its sphere of influence, a

¹⁵⁴ Cebotari. "The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status.", p. 89.

¹⁵⁵ Ilinca. "Neutralitatea Republicii Moldova" ["The neutrality of the Republic of Moldova"].

¹⁵⁶ „Fiind o țară neutră, nu putem miza pe nimeni. Noi trebuie să mizăm pe noi”. Interviu cu Anatolie Nosafii, ministrul Apărării al R. Moldova” [“Being a neutral country, we cannot rely on anyone. We must rely on ourselves, Interview with Anatolie Nosafii, the Defence Minister of the Republic of Moldova], *Ziarul de Gardă*, link: <https://www.zdg.md/interviuri/fiind-o-ara-neutra-nu-putem-miza-pe-nimeni-noi-trebuie-sa-mizam-pe-noi-interviu-cu-anatolie-nosatii-ministrul-apararii-al-r-moldova/>

¹⁵⁷ Paiu. "Republica Moldova și colaborarea cu NATO [The Republic of Moldova and collaboration with NATO], p. 223.

model which was intended to be pursued by Russia throughout the region.¹⁵⁸ The assumption made by the Kremlin, which might not fully apply to Europe, but especially to the post-communist space, is that a neutral country is much less aligned to Western institutions and values, and thus easier to interfere in and keep in the Russian sphere of influence, which could be the case especially to fragile and recent democracies.

Another question that also must be addressed briefly in this section is how the Moldovan authorities utilized this status in different geopolitical situations or as a response to the population. Moldova has attempted to institutionalize the neutrality status and make it an essential point in the state's foreign policy making, reiterating this status in official EU and NATO documents and seeking guidance from other neutral countries.¹⁵⁹ This can be seen as the best option in the given situation: it is harder and harder to build consensus around the NATO issue, and as such accepting this status, as fragile as it is, is the only way to showcase consistency and reliability on an international level. Conversely, some other analysts have argued that neutrality was used by the political class as an excuse for a weak army, using it as a substitute for investments, and as a "cheap form and a convenient way of defending the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova".¹⁶⁰ Although this is a rather narrow argument, which does not capture the full picture regarding the origins and usage of the status, it can be stated that neutrality did play a role in the authorities' reaction towards foreign threats and towards military investments, by hiding behind a neutral position.

This approach by national authorities had an impact on the perception of the public towards neutrality and NATO. The authorities, although cooperation with NATO in other domains was established, did not manage to forward to the public all of the benefits that NATO has brought to their country.¹⁶¹ As such, NATO is mainly missing, from the Moldovan political discourse,¹⁶² which has created a mostly negative and uninformed perception towards the role this organization plays in the country. Most people associate

¹⁵⁸ Rogstad, Adrian. "The next Crimea? [...]", p. 20.

¹⁵⁹ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 45.

¹⁶⁰ Cebotari. "The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status.", p. 86.

¹⁶¹ Paiu. "Republica Moldova și colaborarea cu NATO [The Republic of Moldova and collaboration with NATO], p. 223.

¹⁶² Cebotari. "The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status.", p. 84.

NATO with an aggressive, fully military institution.¹⁶³ With this in mind, the statistics regarding public perception are much clearer, with a majority of the population seeing neutrality as the most suitable security option for Moldova,¹⁶⁴ while at the moment, in 2022, polls show that only a quarter of Moldovans support Moldova's entry into NATO.¹⁶⁵

Neutrality has evolved in Moldova from a desperate solution to the Transnistrian crisis towards a status that, despite its differences from a regular neutral state, is recognized by the nation's citizens and has become part of the diplomatic discourse of the political class. Despite its fragility and the impossibility of internationally recognize this status, it has nevertheless stood the test of time, and it is accepted by both Russia and Western countries. It still is and will remain a controversial status, that has brought many pro and con opinions from analysts and politicians. Still, the decisive influence Transnistria and the Russian Federation have had on this status taking shape, as well as the way in which neutrality has considerably altered the Moldova-NATO cooperation spectrum, are undoubtable.

Unequal Negotiation Process

After the ceasefire was signed in 1992, Moldova has been part of a negotiation process that can be labelled as highly unbalanced and biased, and in which the Transnistrians managed to jeopardize the position of Chisinau, and thus slow down their Europeanization. Russia, in these negotiations, is seen by some analysts as not being an impartial nation in the negotiations, but as a direct supporter and an active party in the conflict.¹⁶⁶ This section will go through the different formats, stages, and treaties signed as part of the negotiation process, and how it has affected and restricted Moldova's

¹⁶³ "Fiind o țară neutră" [Being a neutral country], *Ziarul de Gardă*.

¹⁶⁴ Mosneaga, Turco, Mosneaga. "Moldova's Experience with Nato", p. 432.

¹⁶⁵ "Sondaj: Doar un sfert dintre cetățeni susțin aderarea Moldovei la NATO" ["Poll: just a quarter of citizens support Moldova adhering to NATO"], *Știri.md*, link: <https://stiri.md/article/politica/sondaj-doar-un-sfert-dintre-cetateni-sustin-aderarea-moldovei-la-nato>

¹⁶⁶ Bebler, Anton. *"Frozen conflicts" in Europe*. Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2015, p. 51.

foreign policy. To do that, the following stages proposed by Venturi (2011) will be used as guidance: the Post-war period (1992-1996), the period of equality of parties (1997-2000), confrontation period (2000-2005), and the period of internationalization of the negotiation process (2005-onwards).¹⁶⁷

The first period consisted mainly in the signing of the actual ceasefire in 1992, the entrance of OSCE as a negotiating party in 1993, and the entrance of Ukraine as a negotiator in 1995.¹⁶⁸ Romania was also shortly part of the negotiation process, from March to June 1992, but was removed from the negotiation table by Russia and Ukraine.¹⁶⁹ The reasons for these actions were Romania's pro-Moldova positions, which rejected any form of recognition and negotiation with the Transnistrian authorities.¹⁷⁰ As such, with the removal of Romania from the negotiation table, Moldova had no clear allies going forward, as Russia and Ukraine largely had positions favouring Transnistria.

OSCE from the start prepared a report, outlining the objectives and framework the negotiations should occur in, according to them. It concluded that Transnistria should have its right to "external self-determination" if Moldova unites with Romania, and that Moldova should have a decentralized political system.¹⁷¹ From the very start of the negotiations, the dynamic of Transnistria receiving certain favours, exceptions, and yields (despite its absence as a negotiating side until 1997) while Moldova's side is mainly imposed obligations can be observed. The trend continued well into the early 2000's. This can also be noticed in the 1994 Russian-Moldovan agreement, in which the Kremlin forced Moldova to accept a treaty formulation that is detrimental to Chisinau, and a steppingstone in Russia's policy towards Transnistria. Moldova signed an agreement (a non-binding one though) stipulating the retreat of Russia's divisions from Transnistria synchronous with the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict.¹⁷² The conflict outcomes

¹⁶⁷ Venturi, Bernardo. "Civil society organizations and conflict resolution: Moldova-Transnistria." *International Journal on World Peace* (2011): 7-34, p. 9-10.

¹⁶⁸ Bebler. "Frozen conflicts" in Europe., p. 46.

¹⁶⁹ Corneanu, Constantin. "România, Rusia și Geopolitica Conflictului Transnistrian", *Asociația Europeană de Studii Geopolitice și Strategice* [Romania, Russia and the Geopolitics of the Transnistrian Conflict", *The European Association for Geopolitical and Strategic Studies*], 2021, link: <https://www.aesgs.ro/romania-rusia-si-geopolitica-conflictului-transnistrean/>

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Bebler. "Frozen conflicts" in Europe., p. 46.

¹⁷² Rogstad, Adrian. "The next Crimea? [...]", p. 10.

and termination are already more or less under the Kremlin's wish. If it remains unresolved, Russian troops remain in Transnistria. This formulation thus gives Russia an increased power over the negotiations. Furthermore, this power also trickles down to Transnistria itself, who has the power to "infinitely block any essential step in the direction of restoring the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova".¹⁷³ With such a treaty, Transnistria was given an immense power and independence, and is given a status in which Transnistria is at least recognized as an entity that is equal to Moldova and not as a separatist region that de jure belongs to the Republic of Moldova.¹⁷⁴

Ukraine was also involved in these negotiations, as it had a direct interest in Transnistria, due to shared borders and the 30% ethnic Ukrainian population in Transnistria.¹⁷⁵ It has been assessed that Ukraine has not been favouring Moldova in the negotiations, its role being considered for the best part of the 1990's insignificant and very similar to any positions that Russia would undertake.¹⁷⁶ In these circumstances, with 5 parts being involved in the negotiations, namely Moldova and Russia from the beginning, OSCE since 1993, Ukraine since 1995 and Transnistria since 1997, Moldova was put into a position in which two sides (Russia, Ukraine) would actively favour Transnistria and the other side would be an allegedly neutral party, but nevertheless a weak and non-state entity, that has little power in imposing its will and in counterbalancing the two other states. The only treaty from the end of this period that was favourable to Moldova was a joint declaration of Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia in 1996, that recognizes the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.¹⁷⁷ While this is not a conflict resolution issue, at least it annuls any endeavour of Transnistria of becoming an internationally recognized sovereign nation, but it does not affect the status quo and the separatist regime. Also, it did not affect Russian interests, because Moscow is not in need of an independent Transnistria, but of a Transnistria that can be used as a blackmailing tool against the Republic of Moldova, in order to keep it in its sphere of influence.¹⁷⁸ If interpreted in that

¹⁷³ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 16.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Bebler. "*Frozen conflicts*" in *Europe.*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 46.

¹⁷⁸ Cebotari. "Politica hard-power a Federației Ruse în Republica Moldova." [Cebotari, Svetlana, "Hard power politics of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova"], p. 179.

note, the aforementioned treaty is highly favouring Moscow, it compromises Tiraspol's dreams of becoming fully independent, and it "accidentally" aids Moldova's position as well, whose sovereignty is reinforced, albeit by the nation that violated it in the first place.

Entering the second period, which was called by Venturi as the "period of equality of parties", from 1997 to 2000, this can be considered a continuation by mainly the Transnistrian-Russian parts against Moldova.¹⁷⁹ As an OSCE report from 1999 stipulates, Russia and Transnistria coordinate their policies in these negotiations in order to legalize the military presence of the Russian army on Moldova's territory.¹⁸⁰ A treaty that fits exactly in the description provided by OSCE above is the 1997 Moscow Memorandum, which stipulated, against all international law, that Moldova and Transnistria were "equal parties" in the negotiation process.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, this treaty also again indirectly recognized the territorial integrity of Transnistria, by claiming that the Tiraspol authorities have a right to conduct their own foreign policies, and that the "peacekeeping force" (the Russian army in Transnistria) has a right to remain there.¹⁸² These were followed by a treaty in 1998 in Odessa on the reduction of peacekeepers and the inclusion of Ukrainian peacekeepers, which had little effect, since the number of Russian soldiers remained relatively stable.¹⁸³ In 1999, a treaty was signed in Kiev, that had the potential of finally finding a solution and a compromise in integrating Transnistria within Moldova, by the implementation of five common spaces between Moldova and Transnistria in different domains.¹⁸⁴ This treaty was not implemented though, and fell short.

The quality of the treaties is blamed by Mardarovici on OSCE, which he considers as having been a poor party in these negotiations. He views OSCE as having a role in increasing the number of treaties favouring Transnistria, with some of the yielding being

¹⁷⁹ Venturi. "Civil society organizations and conflict resolution", p. 9.

¹⁸⁰ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 18.

¹⁸¹ Venturi. "Civil society organizations and conflict resolution", p. 9.

¹⁸² Bebler. *"Frozen conflicts" in Europe.*, p. 47.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

without precedent in international law and against the Moldovan Constitution.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, as it has been concluded beforehand, most of the treaties stipulated rights for Transnistria, with little obligations, which fall mainly on Chisinau's shoulders.¹⁸⁶ In the same year of 1999, however, Russia would sign a treaty that can be considered as being one of the most favourable for the Moldovan side. The Istanbul Treaty was utilized by Western countries and by NATO to force Russia and demand it to follow the different articles written in this agreement. Even today, one of the firmest positions of NATO towards the Transnistrian issue is urging Moscow to fulfil its Istanbul commitments.¹⁸⁷ Thus, this treaty was signed as part of an OSCE summit, and in it the Russian Federation committed to the withdrawal of weapons from Moldova by the end of 2001 and of troops and equipment by the end of 2002.¹⁸⁸ This was seen by Moldova and by Western countries as a remarkable step in the right direction from Moscow, as NATO announced it is looking for an "early and effective implementation of Russia's commitments".¹⁸⁹ For a while, it was seen as an actual commitment from the Kremlin, as it started pursuing tighter bilateral relations with the Moldovan presidency, for example, signing economic cooperation treaties in the same year, 1999.¹⁹⁰ This was followed in 2001 with military agreements and the lowering of Russian gas prices for Moldova.¹⁹¹ These collaboration efforts were in fact only favours done mainly to the pro-Russian administration that took power in the early 2000's, and not as part of the whole reconciliation and retreat process of the Istanbul Treaty.

The third phase, or the confrontation phase, between 2000 and 2005, can be seen as one of the most tense and decisive moments of the negotiations, especially between the Moldovan and the Russian side, which settled the status quo and the structure for the future negotiations. Returning to the Istanbul Treaty, the Russian Federation eventually

¹⁸⁵ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 18.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ "North Atlantic Council wants to help the Republic of Moldova reach its reform ambitions", *NATO News*, 12th of February 2010, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_61426.htm?selectedLocale=en

¹⁸⁸ Bebler. "*Frozen conflicts*" in *Europe.*, p. 47.

¹⁸⁹ "MINISTERIAL MEETING OF THE NAC HELD IN FLORENCE ON 24 MAY 2000 - FINAL COMMUNIQUE", *NATO Archives Online*, 24th of May 2000, link: https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/4/145196/M_NAC_1_2000_52_ENG.pdf

¹⁹⁰ Rogstad, Adrian. "The next Crimea? [...]", p. 12.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

decided to not respect the commitments of army and weapon withdrawal from Transnistria and maintained its soldiers, declaring that it has no clear commitments, and that the treaty is not legally binding.¹⁹² Meanwhile, when the deadline was approaching, NATO was urging Russia to follow its commitments, and then in the following years, each report with repeating messages, became a copy of the latter.¹⁹³ It is interesting and paradoxical likewise to observe Russia's modus operandi when it comes to treaties related to these Moldovan-Transnistrian negotiations. While the 1994 Russia-Moldova agreement was stressed by Moscow constantly, urging Moldova to follow their commitments, when commitments were imposed onto them and signed by Russia during the Istanbul 1999 summit, these treaties suddenly became non-binding. This clearly shows the double standards Russia is following throughout the negotiations.

One of the most relevant treaties of this period was one which was eventually not implemented, but which caused great fervour, and which could have had considerable consequences on Moldova's future. Known as the "Kozak Memorandum" (2003), named after the head of the Russian presidential administration at that time, Dmitry Kozak, it was a treaty with two main elements: one regarding the rights of Transnistria and Gagauzia (a semi-autonomous, largely pro-Russian region from within Moldova) as integral parts of the Republic of Moldova, and one on the presence of Russian soldiers.¹⁹⁴ As such, Transnistria and Gagauzia would receive a higher, disproportionate representation in the new parliament, would have the power to veto any international agreements, and would have the right to secede in case the country would engage in geopolitical actions such as reuniting with Romania or joining the European Union or NATO.¹⁹⁵

Regarding the Russian soldiers from Transnistria, the treaty stipulated a guaranteed presence of the soldiers for a period of 20-30 years.¹⁹⁶ Such a treaty, if it were to be

¹⁹² Ibid, p. 23.

¹⁹³ "MINISTERIAL MEETING OF THE NAC HELD IN BUDAPEST ON 29 MAY 2001 - FINAL COMMUNIQUE", *NATO Archives Online*, 29th of May 2001, link: https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/4/145283/M_NAC_1_2001_77_ENG.pdf

¹⁹⁴ Kennedy. "The limits of soft balancing", p. 515.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

accepted, would have put Moldova directly in the hands of Moscow, becoming a vassal state under the military threat and political control of the Russian puppet, Transnistria. Transnistria would have been able to block any efforts by the Chisinau authorities to get closer to Europe. Ultimately, the pro-Russian Moldovan president at that time, Vladimir Voronin, who even arranged a meeting with Vladimir Putin to sign the treaty, was stopped from signing the treaty at the last minute. This was mainly because of pressure from OSCE, EU and the United States, which vehemently rejected it,¹⁹⁷ while also receiving pressure internally, from opposition groups who protested in the capital city.¹⁹⁸ Weirdly enough, as Crandall points out, the Kozak memorandum, as controversial and unbalanced as it is, and also detrimental to Moldova's Europeanization, it was the closest point that was achieved in solving the conflict.¹⁹⁹ This moment made most of the Moldovan populace/political force that was not fully pro-Russian doubt any attempts by Moscow of solving the conflict, as they would be considered attempts to reach the power grips in the region. Moldova needed new guarantors, new parties involved in the negotiations, that could counterbalance Russia's immense power. Thus, starting around 2005, a new stage of the negotiations would start, one that can still be considered actual. The last stage (thus far) has been called by Venturi the period of "internationalization of the negotiation process", and its main elements are the changing of the negotiation format and the larger implication of Western states and institutions.²⁰⁰ Although it was the same people in power in Moldova in 2005 as when the Kozak Memorandum was almost signed, the furious reaction of the Russian Federation, both politically and economically, after the refusal of this treaty, allegedly forced the pro-Russians to become slightly more pro-European, to counterbalance the situation and play a multilateral foreign policy.²⁰¹ In 2005, the United States and the United Kingdom were added as observers to the negotiations, in what would become the new 5+2 format.²⁰² The most valuable presence in this new format for Moldova was definitely the United States, supporting them in joint

¹⁹⁷ Crandall. "Hierarchy in Moldova-Russia Relations [...]", p. 6.

¹⁹⁸ Kennedy. "The limits of soft balancing", p. 515.

¹⁹⁹ Crandall. "Hierarchy in Moldova-Russia Relations [...]", p. 6.

²⁰⁰ Venturi. "Civil society organizations and conflict resolution", p. 9.

²⁰¹ Kennedy. "The limits of soft balancing", p. 516-517.

²⁰² Kennedy. "The limits of soft balancing", p. 517.

meetings, claiming that the country has every right to decide whether to have foreign troops on its territory or not, and that Moldova's wish was clearly expressed and should be respected.²⁰³ Also, coupled with this increased support was also an increasing support from NATO. Nevertheless, the presence of these two new parties did not stop Russia in playing the same strategies as before and prevented the Western counterparts in producing any advancements in the negotiations. As such, Russia has refused to start any discussions with the Western representatives regarding the Russian soldiers from Transnistria, invoking the fact that the two are merely observers, and that this issue should be discussed with the five parties involved (Russia, Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine, OSCE).²⁰⁴ These blockages have created a stagnation in the negotiations, which are currently at a dead end, with the biggest advancement in this period being the reopening of dialogue between Moldova and Transnistria. Especially between 2011 and 2013, the Moldovan Prime Minister and the Transnistrian leader would have regular meetings, discussing mainly administrative issues, such as freedom of movement, security, circulation of vehicles, and others.²⁰⁵ On the same note, the biggest Western contribution that resulted in relation to these negotiations thus far is the creation of the European Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM), which, according to their website, "contributes to the peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict through confidence building measures and as a monitoring presence at the Transnistrian segment of the Moldova-Ukraine border".²⁰⁶ The presence of European Union authorities on the territory of Moldova is an immense advancement, that increases the security guarantees of the nation. In this last period, Western presence has prevented Russia from imposing its agenda through unbalanced treaties that greatly favoured the Tiraspol regime, while also aiding in restarting the Moldovan-Transnistrian talks and in reinforcing Moldova's borders.

Considering the theoretical framework that Pegg (1998) outlined regarding the three options a home state has towards a de facto state (active opposition, ignoring, limited acceptance), it can be assessed that Moldova fits in the third category - limited

²⁰³ Urse, Cristian. "Solving Transnistria: Any Optimists Left?" *Connections* 7, no. 1 (2008): 57-75, p. 73.

²⁰⁴ Bebler. "*Frozen conflicts*" in *Europe.*, p. 47.

²⁰⁵ Bebler. "*Frozen conflicts*" in *Europe.*, p. 49.

²⁰⁶ "What we do?", *EUBAM.org*, link: <https://eubam.org/what-we-do/>

acceptance. It has opposed Transnistrian statehood, but it has not imposed almost any forms of political or economic blockades for the first 20 years after the war. Comparing it to Georgia's approach, which pressured its breakaway regimes on all fronts, Moldova has been more lenient, also because of the format of the negotiations.

Using biased treaties and through geopolitical pressure, Transnistria, and implicitly Russia, affected Moldova's relations with NATO, by being stuck in different traps: from finding legal justifications for the presence of troops in Transnistria, to giving more autonomy to the breakaway state, both outside of Moldova, but also as a part of the Moldovan state (if the Kozak Memorandum would have passed). The negotiations slowed down Moldova's Europeanization by at least 13 years, by transforming peace talks into a geopolitical battle for the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova.

CHAPTER 6: NATO-MOLDOVA RELATIONS- PROGRESS AND BLUNDERS

NATO-Moldova Relations: Working Past Transnistria

Since the paper has gone through the means through which Moldova was held back by Transnistria and by Russia from an internal and a foreign policy point of view, and how it was kept away from Western institutions, including NATO, it is important now to provide an overview of how the NATO-Moldova relations have involved. In the 30 years since the two first engaged, there has been a multitude of projects in the benefit of Moldova, provided from NATO funds. It is important to reiterate that NATO is not a purely military organization but has many other attributions and many other means through which it can aid non-member states. The main general domains in which NATO can provide aid and has aided Moldova are: defence and security (not only military, but also supporting military academies, cyber security etc.), the support of public authorities (through anti-hazard missions, environmental projects), scientific training and investment

in logistics, and the support of journalists and of civil society (anti-corruption and freedom of the press projects).²⁰⁷ Considering this, the next section will go decade by decade (1990's, 2000's, 2010's until nowadays) to observe how this relation between Moldova and NATO has evolved over time, despite the incoming pressure from Tiraspol and Moscow.

1990'S: FIRST COOPERATION STEPS

The first time Moldova was mentioned in a NATO document (at least from the ones available in the NATO Archive) was in 1992, when, along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western institutions started a disarmament process in both Russia and the other post-Soviet republics that emerged, including Moldova. The document provides numbers on Moldova's amount of military equipment.²⁰⁸ The first official meeting between the two parties was held in December 1992, in Brussels, when Moldova officially became a member of the NATO Co-operation Council, the first step towards collaboration.²⁰⁹ In that same meeting, NATO lauded Moldova's efforts in maintaining the ceasefire with Transnistria and urged towards "an expeditious permanent solution to the problem of the Left Bank Dniester Areas without further violence".²¹⁰ As such, NATO assumed an early position towards the conflict, but one which was still not fully in support of Moldova, but rather a more conciliatory position.

One of the first forms of actual collaboration with NATO was in 1993, when Moldova was part of an international military education and training program,²¹¹ meant to

²⁰⁷ Serotila, Igor, and Elena Mârzac. "Cooperarea multiaspectuală dintre Organizația Tratatului Atlanticului de Nord și Republica Moldova." *Revista de Știință, Inovare, Cultură și Artă „Akademos”* 50, no. 3 ["The multifaced cooperation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Republic of Moldova". *The Science, Innovation, Culture and Art Magazine "Akademos"*], (2018): 11-16, p. 12.

²⁰⁸ "HIGH LEVEL WORKING GROUP (HLWG) MEETING ON 25TH MAY 1992. CHAIRMAN'S SUMMARY", *NATO Archive Online*, 25th of May 1992, link:

https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/4/142008/PRESS_RELEASE_92_50_ENG.pdf

²⁰⁹ Cebotari. "The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status.", p. 87.

²¹⁰ "Statement issued at the Meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council", *NATO Official Texts*, 18th of December 1992, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23973.htm?selectedLocale=en

²¹¹ Cebotari. "The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status.", p. 87.

standardize the Moldovan army to Western standards. In 1994, the first Partnership for Peace (PfP) program was signed by Moldova with NATO, which stipulated the benefits that Moldova would receive, such as disarmament, civil protection, conflict prevention measures, resolution of crises and the training of military staff,²¹² but also its obligations (more investment in military, implementing NATO training standards, democratic control of armed forces etc.).²¹³ Following that, in 1995, Moldova participated in an event regarding the environmental risks of soil and groundwater in Eastern Europe, which are valuable for Moldovan authorities, since floods in rural areas are common.²¹⁴ On the digital side, NATO funded in 1996 the first independent IT network for scientific purposes, which offered internet access to some of Moldova's universities.²¹⁵ Lastly, in 1999, more investments were made in this IT network, with NATO also starting to offer scholarships to Moldovan scientists.²¹⁶

The 1990's were only the incipient form of NATO-Moldova cooperation, as in the following years NATO would increase its investments in a wider array of domains and Moldova would also commit and be involved in more common projects. Nevertheless, the highlights of this period are NATO's support for Moldova's ceasefire and negotiations, the investments in IT and science, and the signing of the first Partnership for Peace, which would stand as a basis for future cooperation.

²¹² Paiu, Dana and Ludmila Roșca. "The Republic of Moldova under the partnership for peace: development opportunities and perspectives." *Relații internaționale. Plus* 17, no. 1 (2020): 150-161, p. 153.

²¹³ Varzari, Pantelimon, and Vitalie Varzari. "Consolidarea securității naționale a Republicii Moldova prin prisma colaborării cu organizația atlanticului de nord." [The consolidation of the national security of the Republic of Moldova through the prism of collaboration with the North Atlantic Organization], *Moldoscopie* 39, no. 4 (2007): 120-134, p. 126.

²¹⁴ "NATO ADVANCED RESEARCH WORKSHOP ON "REMEDIATION OF SOIL AND GROUNDWATER A S A TECHNICAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEM: OPPORTUNITIES IN EASTERN EUROPE"", *NATO Archives Online*, 2nd of November 1995, link: https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/4/143271/PRESS_RELEASE_95_104_ENG.pdf

²¹⁵ Serotila, Mârzac. "Cooperarea multiaspectuală dintre Organizația Tratatului Atlanticului de Nord și Republica Moldova." ["The multifaced cooperation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Republic of Moldova"], p. 14.

²¹⁶ Mosneaga, Turco, Mosneaga. "Moldova's Experience with Nato", p. 421.

2000's: Remarkable Expansion in Collaboration

During this period, cooperation between the two parties increased significantly, despite the pressures felt inside and outside, such as the Kozak Memorandum or Transnistria's political and economic sabotage.

2001 marked the first major project of this decade, when through the 2001 NAMSO memorandum, a NATO mission was sent to help Moldova deal with the safe disarmament of expired mines, ammunition, and fuel.²¹⁷ In 2003, Moldova made its first firm commitment to the alliance, by participating in its first joint NATO-led joint peace support operations in Sofia, Bulgaria, along with NATO members (Hungary, Spain, Turkey, the United States) and other countries aspiring at NATO membership/NATO partner nations.²¹⁸ Although it was a relatively small operation, which was more or less dedicated to partner nations, and not a full-on coordinated NATO military exercise (which is also shown by the relatively small number of NATO members that participated), it is nevertheless a first step in military collaboration between Moldova and NATO. Moldova did increase its military involvement though, when between 2003 and 2008, 107 Moldovan troops were involved along with NATO in the post-conflict operations in Iraq.²¹⁹

As mentioned previously, the NATO yearly final communiques started giving attention to Moldova's separatism issue more and more, reporting on the progress (or lack of it) made by the Russian Federation in retreating its army and military equipment from the breakaway region of Transnistria, as stipulated in the Istanbul Treaty of 1999. The most "optimistic" report provided by NATO on this issue was in 2003, when progress was

²¹⁷ Popilevski, Dumitru. "Istoriografia relațiilor de cooperare Republica Moldova–NATO." In *Materialele Conferinței științifico-practice internaționale „Spațiul european de securitate: provocări, oportunități, perspectivă de integrare”* ["The Historiography of Cooperation Relations Republic of Moldova-NATO, Materials of the International Scientific-practical Conference "The European Security Space: Challenges, Opportunities, Integration Perspectives""], 2019. pp. 315-319, p. 316.

²¹⁸ "NATO and partner countries exercise joint operations", *NATO News*, 16th of November 2003, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_20057.htm?selectedLocale=en

²¹⁹ Paiu, Roșca. "The Republic of Moldova under the partnership for peace", p. 156.

reported on the withdrawal of forces,²²⁰ but this was short lived, as the process was reported as being ceased by Moscow the following year,²²¹ and eventually no other form of progress was reported. Although NATO could not contribute more to the resolving of the country and could not pressure Russia to continue following the Istanbul Treaty, Moldova was at least given a platform at the NATO events, where invited Moldovan heads of state could voice their opinions on current issues in the country and criticize Russia or the Tiraspol regime. An example of that is the 2005 invitation of the Moldovan deputy foreign minister, Eugenia Kistruga, at a NATO security forum, where she expressed some of the key issues that her country is facing and some of the future collaborations that need to be pursued. One of the main themes that was touched upon was the need for increasing the Moldovan-Ukrainian collaboration in order to disrupt the Transnistrian smuggling network, with the minister calling Transnistria a “mafia type separatist clique” and accusing the Russian army for putting pressure on negotiations.²²² This served as a means to bring Moldova’s issues to the acknowledgement of Europe, and it can even be assessed that Moldova’s insistence on its border collaboration with Ukraine was what let later in 2011 to EUBAM, the joint Moldovan-Ukrainian mission, with aid from the European Union.

Also in 2005, another scientific investment was made by NATO, by giving out a grant for the procurement of seismologic equipment, helping Moldova to deal with the earthquake risks it often faces.²²³ In 2006, Moldova signed its first individual action plan with NATO, a flexible form of collaboration, which allows the partner country to choose exactly the domains and the directions of cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic structures.²²⁴ This did not come without controversy though, as even the mere discussions

²²⁰ “FINAL COMMUNIQUE. MINISTERIAL MEETING OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL HELD IN MADRID ON 3 JUNE 2003”, *NATO Archives Online*, 3rd of June 2003, link:

https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/4/145461/PRESS_RELEASE_2003_59_ENG.pdf

²²¹ “ISTANBUL SUMMIT COMMUNIQUE. ISSUED BY THE HEADS OF STATES AND GOVERNMENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING OF THE NAC HELD IN ISTANBUL ON 28 JUNE 2004”, *NATO Archives Online*, link:

https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/4/145506/PRESS_RELEASE_2004_96_ENG.pdf

²²² ““Addressing Europe's unresolved conflicts”. *NATO Speeches & Transcripts*, 2005.

²²³ Serotila, Mârzac. "Cooperarea multispectuală dintre Organizația Tratatului Atlanticului de Nord și Republica Moldova." ["The multifaced cooperation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Republic of Moldova"], p. 14.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 12.

on the individual action plan were blocked by the Moldovan president at that time, Vladimir Voronin, who delayed the signing of the treaty for two years. His arguments were that such a treaty would make Russia doubt Moldova's friendship to them, and thus will not help with solving the Transnistrian conflict.²²⁵ This directly showcases how Moscow pressure has affected NATO-Moldova relations. Nevertheless, the president eventually succumbed to the pressure and accepted the signing of the accord, with NATO even pushing forward in showcasing its support for Moldova. In 2007, in a brief between Moldovan and NATO officials, NATO reinforced its support for Moldova's integrity and the preservation of the Istanbul Treaty as the *modus operandi* with Moscow on the Transnistrian issue.²²⁶

2008 was the year when many projects and declarations were directed towards Moldova, which will be mentioned briefly. Scientific cooperation included seminars in collaboration with Moldovan scientists on the reduction of seismic risks, research on pollution and on sustainable development.²²⁷ When it comes to humanitarian aid, NATO has helped Moldova and Ukraine in dealing with floods that have affected houses and infrastructures.²²⁸ In the education sector, NATO has started implementing standardized Bachelor's and Master's degree programs at the Chisinau Military Academy, which allows young military professionals to receive the same level of education and training as their other European counterparts.²²⁹ On a geopolitical level, NATO has also restated its respect for Moldova's choice of maintaining a status of neutrality and that it will continue cooperation with it along these lines, while also claiming that in regards to the

²²⁵ Varzari, Varzari. "Consolidarea securității naționale a Republicii Moldova prin prisma colaborării cu organizația atlanticului de nord." [The consolidation of the national security of the Republic of Moldova through the prism of collaboration with the North Atlantic Organization], p. 128.

²²⁶ "Moldovan Ministers brief NATO on reform progress", *NATO News*, 4th of July 2007, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_7580.htm?selectedLocale=en

²²⁷ Serotila, Mărzac. "Cooperarea multiaspectuală dintre Organizația Tratatului Atlanticului de Nord și Republica Moldova." ["The multifaced cooperation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Republic of Moldova"], p. 14.

²²⁸ "Helping Moldova and Ukraine cope with flooding", *NATO News*, 31st of July 2008, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_8173.htm?selectedLocale=en

²²⁹ "Cooperation with the Republic of Moldova", *NATO Backgrounder*, 2017, p. 4, link: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_12/20171207_1207-Backgrounder_NATO-Moldova.pdf

Transnistrian conflict, the mandate rests on OSCE.²³⁰ Lastly, in 2009, a new cooperation front was open, in an essential and ever-development domain for the current era. NATO, thus, funded an advanced training course in Chisinau on ways to examine and prevent cyberterrorism and cyber security threats, and on the development of public awareness on such threats.²³¹

In conclusion, in the 2000's, many setbacks were set against Moldova's cooperation, but nevertheless the cooperation has expanded in many fields, with the two sides learning how to keep the fine line between collaboration and breaking the neutrality status.

2010's and Nowadays: The Normalization of Cooperation

While the second stage was aimed at consolidating the Moldova-NATO relations, in the last 10-12 years the collaboration has been normalized, and has faced less backlash than before, most probably because Moscow understood that the two other parties are working together within the neutrality framework, and the threat of Moldova joining NATO was minimal.

In 2013, the cyber security effort started in 2009 was reinforced, collaborating on topics such as maintaining security of private data of Moldovan citizens, which is followed in 2016 by creating the lab for cyber security analysis.²³²

In 2014, Moldova sent its first military force in a NATO mission (the ones previously mentioned were United Nations missions), by collaborating with the Kosovo peacekeeping force.²³³ This is indeed a milestone for the Moldovan army, as it has proved

²³⁰ "Speech by NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, at the University of Chisinau, Chisinau, Moldova", *NATO Speeches & Transcripts*, 30th of October 2008, link:

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_47649.htm?selectedLocale=en

²³¹ "Workshop raises awareness of cyber terrorism as a threat to state security", *NATO News*, 16th of October 2009, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_57985.htm?selectedLocale=en

²³² Serotila, Mârzac. "Cooperarea multiaspectuală dintre Organizația Tratatului Atlanticului de Nord și Republica Moldova." ["The multifaced cooperation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Republic of Moldova"], p. 16.

²³³ Mosneaga, Turco, Mosneaga. "Moldova's Experience with Nato", p. 424.

that its training and capacities are at a standard that is good enough to collaborate with the most important military alliance in the world. As a result of Moldova's dedication to NATO, in 2016, the Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, has clearly declared the support for Moldova's sovereignty, saying that Transnistria undermines it, and that it will never recognize that breakaway state.²³⁴

2017 marked a milestone, a controversial one for the Moldovan President sitting at that point: the creation of the NATO Liaison Office in Chisinau, which is meant to "promote practical cooperation and facilitate support for the country's reforms".²³⁵ This was opposed by President Igor Dodon, who also had pro-Russian views, claiming it is not beneficial for Moldova and that it is a provocation, claiming that the presence of this office will be analysed and revised in the future.²³⁶ In the same press conference where the president's declaration was made, the Deputy Secretary General of NATO at that time, Rose Gottemoeller, has countered Dodon by saying that neutrality does not equal total isolation, and that NATO can and is working with other neutral countries from Europe.²³⁷ In the end, since the president of Moldova does not have that much executive power and the opposition was co-governing at that time, the liaison office remained and the collaboration continued.

In 2018, NATO implemented a project, as part of a national action plan, meant to increase and integrate women into the armed forces, as part of the development, both militarily and societally, of the country.²³⁸ They have also launched a second cybersecurity project in the same year, as part of a multi-year funding.²³⁹

In 2020 and 2021, NATO's efforts have mainly concentrated on combating the COVID-19 pandemic, by sending tremendous aid to Moldova, which was heavily affected by the

²³⁴ "Joint press point with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, Pavel Filip", *NATO Speeches and transcripts*, 29th of November 2016, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_138326.htm

²³⁵ "Relations with the Republic of Moldova".

²³⁶ "Joint press point with NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller and the President of the Republic of Moldova, Igor Dodon", *NATO Speeches & transcripts*, 7th of February 2017, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_140774.htm?selectedLocale=en

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Mosneaga, Turco, Mosneaga. "Moldova's Experience with Nato", p. 424.

²³⁹ "NATO launches second cyber defence project with Moldova", *NATO News*, 13th of February 2018, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_152364.htm?selectedLocale=en

health crisis. This help varied from mobile bio laboratories,²⁴⁰ to 25000 disposable hazmat suits,²⁴¹ with the rest of the NATO member states also collaborating tremendously to aid Moldova. In the last couple of years, the main highlights of the NATO-Moldova relation have been shadowed by the increasing Russian pressure, which culminated with the invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. The NATO Secretary General reinforced the fact that Russia's army is unwelcomed in Moldova and that NATO respects Moldova's territorial integrity.²⁴² In January 2022, the new individual action plan with NATO has been established, which entails future assistance in domains such as: democratic reforms (consolidating rule of law, fight against corruption), public consultations on regional developments, assisting Moldova's security capacities, gender policies within the defence sector, democratic control of the army, modernizing the military infrastructure etc.²⁴³ Since the start of the invasion, the only relevant mention of Moldova in NATO's archives was regarding their participation in military exercises in Georgia.²⁴⁴ Still, NATO's concern for Moldova's vulnerable position in the war taking place near its borders is visible.

In sum, it can be concluded that NATO-Moldova relations were beneficial for Moldova and have developed well, despite the backlash from Transnistria and from Russia. Non-military collaboration was the focal point, especially in the fields of science, education, and cyber security, but most actual military collaboration was blocked. Still, it would be biased to assert that Transnistria is at fought fully for this development, which is why the

²⁴⁰ "Fighting COVID-19 with science", *NATO News*, 7th of September 2020, link:

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_177729.htm?selectedLocale=en

²⁴¹ "Coronavirus response: NATO support to the Republic of Moldova", *NATO News*, 24th of February 2021, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_181794.htm?selectedLocale=en

²⁴² "Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council".

²⁴³ "R. Moldova a stabilit prioritățile de cooperare cu NATO pentru anii 2022-2023. Cabinetul de miniștri a avizat în cadrul ședinței de miercuri, 19 ianuarie, Planul Individual de Acțiuni al Parteneriatului R. Moldova-NATO pentru anii 2022-2023" [The Republic of Moldova has established the cooperation priorities with NATO for 2022-2023. The Cabinet of ministers has adopted, during the Wednesday, 19th of January, meeting, the Individual Action Plan of the Moldova-NATO Partnership for the years 2022-2023], *Ziarul de Gardă*, link: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/doc-r-moldova-a-stabilit-prioritatile-de-cooperare-cu-nato-pentru-anii-2022-2023/>

²⁴⁴ NATO Secretary General highlights Allied and Georgian forces training together", *NATO News*, 23rd of March 2022, link: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_193624.htm?selectedLocale=en

next section will investigate some of the policy mistakes, from Moldova and from NATO/European institutions, to answer the initial research question.

Moldovan and European Policy Mistakes: All Transnistria's Fought?

After this paper has been looking at the multitude of means through which Transnistria has affected the Moldova-NATO relation, in this section there will be analysed five of the main errors that have been committed by Moldova and by NATO/the international community in handling the sensitive Moldovan geopolitical situation.

The Lack of Promotion of Public Debate on NATO and on Transnistria

As Țurcanu points out very well, for at least the first 20 years of Moldovan statehood (and to an extent even now), no Moldovan government has taken the responsibility of hosting an honest public campaign, showcasing the costs and benefits that a NATO membership will bring to the public, which led to a distorted public perception of the Euro-Atlantic alliance.²⁴⁵ In fact, the topic of NATO integration has been avoided not only in the public, but also in the political discourse.²⁴⁶ As such, with a total void existing in regards to the positive aspects of NATO, the Moldovan authorities, purely out of their fault, have lost this discourse war against the Russian TV propaganda, which is active in the Moldovan media space,²⁴⁷ and which has promoted the old Soviet thesis, that NATO

²⁴⁵ Țurcanu. "Republica Moldova și opțiunile de securitate în urma noilor provocări la adresa securității regionale." ["Republic of Moldova and its security options following the new regional security challenges"], p. 43.

²⁴⁶ Cebotari. "The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status.", p. 84.

²⁴⁷ Munteanu, Igor. "Moldova's Security Cannot be Achieved Outside of NATO." *Foreign And Security Policy Paper* 26 (2016): 12-16, p. 14.

is an enemy and an aggressor.²⁴⁸ This is also illustrated by the recent polls that have come out from Moldova during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as 43.6% of Moldovans believe that Ukraine and NATO are guilty for the start of the war, and only 41.6% blame Russia for it.²⁴⁹

When it comes to the official political discourse on Transnistria, it should have been more focused on emphasizing certain aspects of the breakaway state, that would make the Moldovan side more attractive and defensible to the international community. For example, there has not been enough emphasis by Moldovan authorities to point out that the Tiraspol regime is a totalitarian one, where basic human rights are being violated daily.²⁵⁰ Instead, Transnistria was criticized on other facets, such as the issue of smuggling, but in total, the Transnistrian issue was largely avoided and ignored by the political class, especially in the last years. In fact, as recently as 2019, there were parliamentary groups that were in power that stipulated very clearly that the Transnistrian issue shall never be discussed within that specific alliance,²⁵¹ which shows how the conflict has been kept under the rug and avoided by the political class, as opposed to searching for new solutions. Of course, it must be stated that Moldova has had pro-Russian governments for many years, especially in the 1990's and the early 2000's, and has also dealt with political crises, which excuse some of the blunders affecting relations with the West, but not fully. Since 2021 though, a fully pro-European movement has developed in Moldova, as the president Maia Sandu and the prime-minister Natalia Gavrilita look towards the West, supported also by a pro-European majority in parliament. Also, the recent accepting of Moldova as a candidate country for the European Union proves the Europeanization process that is taking place.²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Paiu, Roșca. "The Republic of Moldova under the partnership for peace", p. 154.

²⁴⁹ "Sondaj: Un moldovean din trei crede că Rusia denazifică Ucraina" ["Poll: one out of three Moldovans believes Russia is de-nazifying Ukraine"]. *Stiri.md*, link: <https://stiri.md/article/politica/sondaj-un-moldovean-din-trei-crede-ca-rusia-denazifica-ucraina>

²⁵⁰ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 18.

²⁵¹ Ilinca, Dan. "Opinii: "Prin politica „pașilor mici” se creează un stat dincolo de Nistru"" ["Opinions: through the policy of 'small steps' a new state is being created beyond the Dniester], *H1.md*, 10th of October 2019, link: <https://h1.md/ro/opinii-prin-politica-pasilor-mici-se-creeaza-un-stat-dincolo-de-nistru/>

²⁵² Herszenhorn, David M. and Andrew Gray. "European Commission backs EU candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova", *Politico*, 17th of June 2022, link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-backs-eu-candidate-status-for-ukraine-moldova/>

Adopting and Insisting on The Neutrality Status

Although in the section on neutrality, most analysts viewed the issue as a status that was adopted because of Russian pressure, there is also the perception that Moldova willingly opted for it, and that this decision could have been delayed or avoided. Jović-Lazić, for example, says that the Moldovan status was a mistake made by Moldova, and that it has only generated further instability and threats.²⁵³ Of course, this issue of whether the adoption of neutrality was voluntary or forced is debatable and hard to assess properly, since indeed, there was a Russian military threat at that time within Moldova, but it can also be argued that there were other modes of action, such as not becoming neutral and asking for foreign aid (similar to Georgia's position). What is not that debatable and what can be viewed as a policy mistake is that Moldova insisted vehemently on that status, making neutrality a defining aspect of their foreign policy. That can be seen as peculiar for two reasons. Firstly, the status is not recognized from an international law point of view, since neutrality cannot be legitimate when a foreign army is, willingly or unwillingly, on your territory. Secondly, the status, from a practical point of view, has produced no results since it has failed to eliminate the Russian forces from Moldovan sovereign territory.²⁵⁴

Neutrality, as such, has been used as a defining part of foreign policy making not only under pro-Russian governments, who have an "excuse", since neutrality can and has been used in Russia's benefit, but even by pro-European governments. Most probably, this was done to show that Moldova has stable and reliable positions, and to increase its status as a reliable international partner. Still, it can be considered a policy mistake the fact that, considering that the neutrality status is only on paper, it has never been put under scrutiny at a high political level. There was even a bill passed in 2016, for example, mainly with the consensus of the pro-Russian parties in Moldova, meant to "stop attacks on the status

²⁵³ Jović-Lazić. "Permanent Neutrality of the Republic of Moldova [...]", p. 32.

²⁵⁴ Munteanu. "Moldova's Security Cannot be Achieved Outside of NATO.", p. 14.

of neutrality and consolidate Moldova's independence.'", without any mention on the actual Russian soldiers in Transnistria who are trumping on Moldova's independence.²⁵⁵

As Țurcanu emphasized, instead of finding solutions to the geopolitical situation in Transnistria, which in turn would unlock Moldova's international cooperation with NATO and with other organizations, the authorities opted for shouting far and wide that Moldova is a neutral country, hoping that this would prevent Russian aggression and would give foreign policy credibility, despite the shaky basis that the status relies on.²⁵⁶

Unnecessary Administrative Concessions

Mistakes and yields to the Transnistrians done by the Moldovans sometimes happened because of political blunders, without any external pressure. Moldova has given the breakaway regime a considerable number of rights and privileges, probably as a reconciliation and integration attempt, but which did not bring any results and only put Transnistria on a shorter path to actual statehood. Most notably, Moldova has for a long time given Transnistria full control over customs, their own customs stamp, and even included Transnistrian officials as representatives at an international level, as part of Moldovan delegations.²⁵⁷ This has changed only in the last 7-8 years, when Moldova and Ukraine started collaborating on the Transnistrian border issues. Other concessions made by Moldova to Transnistria include free movement through Europe with their own special license plates and their own drivers' license, or the recognition of diplomas from Transnistrian universities in Moldova, which can lead to the rather harsh conclusion that in the last years, Moldovan authorities have created more leverage and more facilities to the Transnistrians than to the Moldovans.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

²⁵⁶ Țurcanu. "Republica Moldova și opțiunile de securitate în urma noilor provocări la adresa securității regionale." ["Republic of Moldova and its security options following the new regional security challenges"], p. 43.

²⁵⁷ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 12-13.

²⁵⁸ Ilinca. "Opinii: Prin politica „pașilor mici” ["Opinions: through the policy of 'small steps'"].

Such concessions could not have led to the framework Moldova was targeting, namely attempting to reunify the region within the country, since they have not promoted a standardization of the two administrations, but on the contrary, they have promoted a separate administration, with separate standards, who received increased benefits, nonetheless. This approach has only increased Transnistria's means of profiting from Moldova.

Moldova's Neglect Towards the Defence Sector

Unlike other neutral states, some of which are actively considering joining NATO, such as Sweden and Finland,²⁵⁹ Moldova has not even the slightest chance of entering NATO, since its army is underdeveloped and poorly funded, using the neutrality status as an excuse for a weak military. The defence part of the GDP has been usually below 1%, even being 0.4% in 2012, for example.²⁶⁰ This is not enough to be at the NATO standards, that would allow Moldova to quickly join the organization in case of a foreign threat, such as the current one (Russia's invasion of Ukraine). As Munteanu wrote, Moldova "has so far avoided addressing its defence priorities in a comprehensive manner, and has mostly relied on partners".²⁶¹ Furthermore, Moldovan political leaders have to come to the conclusion that a stable country cannot be achieved without a modernized and capable national army,²⁶² and that neutrality does not spare Sweden or Finland from Russian aggression, countries which have an actual internationally recognizable neutrality, and not the "on paper" neutrality Moldova possesses. This disregard for military investment was also coupled with a lack of strategy in implementing cooperation treaties with NATO, which led to Moldova promoting

²⁵⁹ Hanley, Jon. "Finland and Sweden take major step towards joining Nato", *The Guardian*, 13th of April 2022, link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/13/finland-and-sweden-could-apply-for-nato-membership-in-weeks>

²⁶⁰ Crandall. "Hierarchy in Moldova-Russia Relations [...]", p. 6.

²⁶¹ Munteanu. "Moldova's Security Cannot be Achieved Outside of NATO.", p. 12-13.

²⁶² Ibid, p. 12.

“contradictory and sporadic” actions.²⁶³ These were from a desire to pursue a flawed multilateral foreign policy, that promotes collaboration with NATO on certain issues, but also aims to not anger Moscow in any way, which ultimately led to a lack of trust in Moldova as an international partner from both sides.²⁶⁴

Not Enough NATO/International Community Pressure

Not all mistakes were committed by the Moldovan side. International institutions, including NATO, carry their burden of often conducting a passive foreign policy, that is too lenient towards the Tiraspol regime. Considering that Transnistria as a regime is illegal, that Russia’s actions in Transnistria are illegal, and that even the negotiation process imposed by Moscow is against international law, there could have been more pressure from the international community.²⁶⁵ Furthermore, NATO, chose to pass the mandate of the Moldova issue to OSCE, which gravely affected the Moldova-NATO relations, since Moldova would think it was abandoned and forced to face negotiations against an imposing Russia and a complacent OSCE. NATO does not have a clear framework of working with neutral countries, which can explain the slower development of a clearer Moldova-NATO partnership.

Still, one of the efforts that had an effect in closing in Moldova and other post-Soviet states to Europe was the Eastern Partnership (created in 2009), the European Union’s platform to support these countries. Although it has been beneficial, it does not guarantee European integration or protection from Russia’s threat, thus it can be considered as a plan which delivers too little, too late.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Varzari, Varzari. "Consolidarea securității naționale a Republicii Moldova prin prisma colaborării cu organizația atlanticului de nord." [The consolidation of the national security of the Republic of Moldova through the prism of collaboration with the North Atlantic Organization], p. 132.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times", p. 41.

²⁶⁶ Țurcanu. "Republica Moldova și opțiunile de securitate în urma noilor provocări la adresa securității regionale." ["Republic of Moldova and its security options following the new regional security challenges"], p. 38.

CONCLUSION

Moldova's Europeanization path has been facing many obstacles, both internal and external, out of which the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic was one of the most significant. After what can be described as a historical tension, Transnistria has influenced Moldova's closeness to Western organizations through the presence of Russia as a military and geopolitical factor. Also, it has slowed down the development of Moldova through the constant pressure from gas debts and through the trafficking, due to Transnistria's control of a part of the customs. Throughout the next years after the independence, Transnistria and Russia forced Moldova into a neutrality status, then made it concede little by little, through a rigged negotiation format.

When it comes to the extent that Moldova's relationship with NATO has been affected by Transnistria, this paper has assessed that it has done so to a large extent. From the start of Moldova's independence, Transnistria has become a thorn on its path to finding new alliances, and by creating an internal conflict, through the presence of Russian army troops in Transnistria, and by forcing Moldova to adopt a neutrality status, Moldova's relationship with NATO was compromised barely after it began. Later, by receiving the aid of the Russian Federation, Transnistria has pressured through the constant threat of another conflict starting, which forced Chisinau to maintain good relations with Tiraspol and Moscow.

Furthermore, the 1994 neutrality status had changed NATO's entire operation framework, although it must be mentioned that Moldova is also at fault in this situation, since it has promoted and embraced this status fully. The negotiation process following the ceasefire has forced Moldova to yield more and more to the separatists, losing its power internally and externally, and making NATO more and more reticent to engage in that geopolitical issue. Lastly, the economic blackmail that Transnistria has played has slowed down the development process of Moldova, and as such its relations with NATO. NATO adapted to these circumstances though, and has tried to develop Moldova,

especially in the fields of military education and training, science, crisis prevention, and cyber security.

To an extent, Moldova-NATO collaboration adapted to the dire circumstances, but Transnistria has blocked further aid in the fields of military development, investment in (military) infrastructure, and engagement with civil society, who was left uninformed and became an easy prey of Russian propaganda.

It is not guaranteed whether without the Transnistrian issue Moldova would have joined the organization, but it can be stated that the Russian political puppet called Transnistria played a big role in influencing Moldova's relationship with NATO, by first and foremost not giving it the mere chance of a choice, and by essentially blocking most channels of integration.

Especially now, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Transnistria's influence on NATO-Moldova relations is even more visible, as Moldova is left vulnerable and can easily become the target of Russian aggression. As the current Moldovan Defence Minister said, Moldova can indeed only rely on itself, which, as it was argued throughout the paper, might not be enough. Transnistria has turned a country with potential for Euro-Atlantic military cooperation into an open target, at the mercy of the Russian Federation. Thus, Transnistria's extent of influence on Moldova's current geopolitical position has been massive, and it is even more visible now when faced with conflict near its borders.

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Annex 1: Picture of Moldova and NATO flags

source: <https://stiri.md/article/politica/moldova-a-stabilit-prioritatile-de-cooperare-cu-nato-pentru-2022-2023>

