

The invisible war: past and present bilateral perception of the 1992 military conflict in the East of the Republic of Moldova

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Introduction

The Transnistrian region is a narrow strip of land between the Dniester River and the Moldova-Ukraine border, comprising altogether 3800km². Since 1992, it has been a separatist region with the support and presence of a small Russian military contingent called “peacekeepers”.¹ The conflict in the East of the Republic of Moldova lasted from 2 March to 21 July 1992 but its political and social consequences remain unresolved to this day. Even though no shooting has been heard on the Dniester River for over three decades, conditions have not returned to the pre-war situation. My opinion, informed by my experience as a former diplomat, currently working in the government of the Republic of Moldova, is that the war continues in an insidious, invisible manner. Instead of the battlefield, the war endures to this day in the media, in the school curriculum, and in the collective mind.

For a long time, Moldova avoided engaging openly with the Transnistrian topic. This was due to a number of diplomatic reasons, such as the government’s unwillingness to upset Russia, fear of reopening the file, and the desire to focus on other issues such as socioeconomics and European integration. Consecutive governments in Chişinău put the Transnistrian file almost permanently on hold. The conflict has become a somewhat forgotten page of history and many political analysts have the impression that “forgetting Transnistria”, without officially renouncing it, amounts to state doctrine. Tiraspol, on the other hand, has an entirely different attitude towards the commemoration and actuality of the conflict. For them, the war has never ended. The conflict continues to this day in the battle for the minds of people, especially those of the younger generation.

Collective memory and the Transnistrian conflict in schools

My earlier reference to schools was not accidental. The school textbooks of the Republic of Moldova almost completely ignore the subject of the Transnistrian conflict. Its absence is all the more surprising if we take into account the war’s importance in the destiny and public life of the country since independence. The official history textbook for the 12th grade (17-18 years old) dedicates a mere two pages to the subject.² Furthermore, the war is not considered to be an essential part of the history programme. Thus, although the conflict is indeed touched upon in the textbook, it would be more accurate to say that it is missing from the school curriculum of the Republic of Moldova.

Historian Ion Negrei points out that the events of 1992 are not only far away from the education curriculum but also from the priorities and concerns of the wider Moldovan society on the right bank of the Dniester River.³ Anatol Croitoru, a leader of the Dniester War veterans, concurs:

“Almost 30 years have passed since the end of the war, and children are not told anything about it in schools. Children are taught about all wars, but not about the war for our independence. This is not normal and everything needs to be brought back to normal.”⁴

On the left bank of the Dniester River, the memorialisation of the conflict unfolds differently, as is the case in the Romanian language high school “Ştefan cel Mare” in the city of Grigoriopol, in the Transnistrian region.⁵ Eleonora Cercavschi, the school director, shares some insights:

“On 2 March at school, we annually commemorate this tragic day, which destroyed many lives and destinies. But this is not

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enough. We adults know little about this war. Not everything was said. There was great sacrifice and heroism, but there was also a lot of betrayal. Maybe that's why they keep schools away from these things. New generations must know the truth. Not for revenge, but as a life lesson. So that the war does not happen again."⁶

In Transnistria eight schools teach in Romanian language with the Latin script. As even language is a major point of dispute, the eight schools using Latin are treated as 'Romanian' by the Transnistrian authorities and administered by the constitutional authorities of the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, the consensus among the Moldovan intelligentsia is that even in these eight schools located within Transnistria, the history of the conflict is taught insufficiently, if at all.

Everywhere in Europe, the topic of history teaching in state schools is a particularly sensitive one, but it is a vital issue in the conflict-ridden countries of Eastern Europe. The curated presentation of the past, which turns one's individual memories into the collective memories of societies, is extremely sensitive and important. In the Republic of Moldova, Moldovan political and academic elites have discussed the issue of history teaching for over two decades. Unfortunately, the question of Transnistria has been somewhat marginalised in these discussions, perhaps because it is perceived as belonging to the 'present' rather than 'history'. Today, we are experiencing the results of this negligence. On the right bank of the Dniester River, polls indicate that a large part of Moldovan society is not interested in the Transnistrian conflict and the region in general. Over the last ten years, opinion surveys have demonstrated that the Transnistrian problem is not among the top five priorities of Moldovan society. In the spring of 2022, an opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute in Washington revealed that 16 percent of all respondents declared that they would agree with the independence of Transnistria, 14 percent had no opinion on this topic, and 6 percent agreed that the region should be ceded to either Russia or Ukraine.⁷ The results of this poll are even more concerning if we focus on answers given by young people.

Among those aged between 18 and 35, an alarming 28 percent said that Chişinău should recognise the independence of the region, 15 percent

had no opinion, and 7 percent believed that Chişinău could cede Transnistria to Russia or Ukraine.⁸ These responses suggest that half of the people born after the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Moldova would not see any problem in renouncing this territory. This situation is starkly different from all the other post-Soviet countries that have also faced comparable territorial conflicts. The state of affairs in the Republic of Moldova is significantly, if not entirely, facilitated by the ways in which the Transnistrian conflict is presented in school (or rather, its lack of presentation). One of the reasons for the current estrangement between the two banks of the Dniester is Transnistria's almost complete absence from the school curriculum.

Of course, education is not the only factor that shapes collective memory. Literature, cinema, the press, monuments, and official holidays also play a role. Interestingly, the subject of the Transnistrian War, and of Transnistria in general, was overwhelmingly absent from Moldovan literature in the first 25 years following independence. Interest in this subject began to emerge slowly only in recent years, with novels such as *Montana* by Alexandru Popescu and *A Cry on the Nistru* by Gheorghe Budeanu, or the film *Carbon* directed by Ion Borş. [⁹][¹⁰] For many teenagers and young people in Moldova, these works were their first encounter with the subject of the war.

It is equally curious that for two decades there were no monuments in the Republic of Moldova dedicated to remembering the conflict. Similarly, there is no museum to commemorate the war, despite its decisive role in the future trajectory of the young state.

The Transnistrian perspective

In the Transnistrian region, the educational landscape is totally different. As early as 1 September 1997 the controversially-named 'Bender Tragedy Museum' was inaugurated in Bender, the second largest city in the seceding region.¹¹ In this museum, the attempt of the Moldovan units to maintain control over the city in June 1992, itself located on the right bank of the Dniester, is presented as an almost-genocidal action. The museum is included in the compulsory educational curriculum for students at schools in the region.¹² The war also occupies a privileged place in Transnistrian classrooms,

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as a substantial topic in history textbooks. The Republic of Moldova is presented as an aggressor and the ideological successor of “fascist” Romania, while the conflict is defined as a turning point in the creation of a new ‘Dniestrian’ collective identity. The main local history textbook, authored by Nikolai Babilunga and Boris Bemasko, replicates previous Soviet history publications. It encourages opposition to Moldova and the rejection of anything culturally Romanian. More broadly, the narrative of the textbook is constructed in opposition to the West, and praises the ‘Russian World’ (*Russkiy Mir*) for holding Transnistria’s collective identity together.^{[13][14]} For example, paragraphs 6 and 7 of the Transnistrian history textbook for grade XI (16–17 years old) cover the interwar period when Romanian forces ‘occupied’ the contemporary territory of the Republic of Moldova.^{[15][16]} In these sections, the authors present the students with the argument that a Moldovan language and identity existed separate to the Romanian one. The textbook also argues that between 1918 and 1944, the USSR was fighting for the ‘liberation’ of Moldova (including Transnistria), as an ‘illegally occupied’ territory.¹⁷ These examples suggest that Transnistria’s young generations continue to be educated in the tradition of Soviet historiography, which promoted the idea of a distinct Moldovan language and advanced Russia’s right to rule the territory of the Republic of Moldova.¹⁸

Transnistrian historical literature divides the enemy into three main groups, which it is claimed all played a ‘destructive role’ in the conflict, as outlined in the work of Russian historian Mikhail Medinets. These are the Moldovan political elites, who are blamed for the war; the Romanian-speaking intelligentsia, whose representatives became “ideologists of the interethnic conflict”; and finally the Moldovan security forces (army, police, national security service).¹⁹ The Transnistrian government in Tiraspol argues that it was the ethnic Moldovan section of the nomenclature of the Moldavian SSR who, in their pursuit to preserve their power, precipitated the outbreak of the war. In pursuing this objective, they redirected the attention of Moldova’s population from social problems to interethnic ones, which heightened tensions on the ground. Authorities in Tiraspol also argue that during the post-Soviet transition period, competent Russian-speaking professionals were removed to make room for less competent Romanian speakers, a move that

represented a form of ethnic cleansing of the state administration. Medinets further points out that the argument of an administrative purge is sometimes paired with an anachronistic analogy to the Jewish pogroms that took place at the beginning of the 20th century in the Moldovan region of Bessarabia.²⁰

These purported explanations of the origins of the conflict generally fail to mention the geopolitical interests of the Russian Federation to remain militarily and politically present in the Republic of Moldova after it gained independence. Considering this lack of contextualisation, it is no wonder that Transnistria’s public opinion remains hostile to the idea of the region’s reintegration. History textbooks are often confined to the educational realm, yet their influence on people’s minds beyond the classroom’s walls seems to be paying off politically. A survey conducted in 2016 by the Centre for Analytical Studies in Tiraspol showed that 40 percent of the inhabitants of the region believed that the Republic of Moldova was the root of all social and economic problems in the region. Another 41 percent believed that these problems originated in Ukraine. Ultimately 72 percent of the 1,000 survey respondents said that they would opt for independence followed by membership of the Russian Federation.²¹ Even assuming that, in the heavily controlled society of the self-declared ‘Dniester Moldova Republic’, these opinion polls are biased, the overall trends are likely to be accurate. They also run parallel to the surveys conducted in the Republic of Moldova, where opposition to the reintegration of the country is also greater among young people than among those over 40 years old, who once lived in an undivided Moldova.

Conclusion

This article has provided an introduction to aspects that have been neglected so far in discussions of the conflict. While in the Republic of Moldova, the conflict is rarely discussed and remains mostly absent from politics, in the Transnistrian region the narrative about the conflict has been shaped by political aims that serve Russian geopolitical interests and represent the existential backbone of the region’s de facto political structure.

These brief observations call for some initial conclusions to be drawn about the dominant views on both banks of the Dniester River. First, the

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educational and commemorative approaches contrast starkly. The Republic of Moldova presents the war as an attempt to preserve the territorial integrity of the country and to defend its independence and constitutional autonomy in the face of Russian aggression. Conversely, in the Transnistrian region, the conflict not only represents a fight for independence, but also a way to maintain ties with Russia and a push-back against the ‘forced Romanianisation’ policies allegedly applied by Chişinău.²² Unfortunately, historical education plays a nefarious role in perpetuating this invisible war in the Transnistrian left bank. Over time, the perspective of Chişinău has also shifted to identify Russia’s 14th army, rather than the Transnistrian region, as Moldova’s main opponent in this conflict. The optics of those on the left bank of the Dniester are different. In the Transnistrian narrative of the conflict, the Russians intervened only to end the hostilities, forcing Chişinău to proceed to negotiations.

In the last twenty years, millions of euros have been spent to fund trust-building projects on both banks of the Dniester. By 2018, the European Union had invested 45 million euros in various projects just in the Transnistrian region, becoming its biggest foreign donor.²³ However, the impact of this funding has been negligible, perhaps because none of these projects engaged directly with the topic of the conflict. The integration of the war in

school textbooks was never on the agenda during the negotiations between Chişinău and Tiraspol, nor has it been part of the numerous international projects implemented with the aim of restoring trust between the two parties. This absence is even more surprising given that trust-building is a frequent theme in the public discourse of the OSCE, the EU, and the UN, which have all funded initiatives in the region.²⁴

The war has become an invisible conflict. It has morphed an ongoing battle to win people’s minds, in order to maintain the status quo created after July 1992, rather than to open roads to reconciliation. For decades, the negotiations regarding the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict have focused on political matters. The general belief was that ongoing problems could be solved with the elaboration of a legal status for the Transnistrian region, a status that could be accepted not only by the local elites but also by the population on both banks of the Dniester. In recent years, this discourse has changed, acknowledging that social and economic questions are no less important than political and legal issues. In that regard, it is equally important that the question of education and collective memory should also be considered as part of the public debate. Reconciliation and peaceful coexistence are only possible if we cease to view the other as the enemy.

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Footnotes

- 1 Harrington K. (2022), Moldova marks 30 years since ceasefire ended war on costly terms, *BalkanInsight* (21.07.2022). <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/21/moldova-marks-30-years-since-ceasefire-ended-war-on-costly-terms/>, accessed 15 March 2024.
- 2 Cașu I., Șarov I., Păsariuc V., Solomon F., Cerbușcă P., *Istoria românilor și universală. Manual pentru clasa a XII-a*. Editura Cartier [Romanian and universal history. Textbook for the XIIth grade. Cartier Publishing House], Chișinău 2013, pp.103-105. For the situation in the secondary school textbooks see: Suvac, S. (2021), „Războiul de pe Nistru în programele școlare și manualele de istorie din Republica Moldova (ciclul gimnazial)” [“The war on the Dniester in school programs and history textbooks from the Republic of Moldova (secondary school cycle)”], *Plural. History. Culture. Society*, vol. 9. No. 2, pp. 192-202, https://doi.org/10.37710/plural.v9i2_14
- 3 Ziarul de Gardă (2021), Войну на Днестре не преподают в школе. Почему? [The war on the Dniester is not taught in school. Why?] (10.10.2021). <https://www.zdg.md/ru/?p=75842>, accessed 11 March 2024.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 In Transnistria eight schools teach in the Romanian language with the Latin script. In this conflict even language is a major point of disagreement as the Transnistrian authorities follow the Soviet approach, which means the same language there is called Moldovan and uses Cyrillic script. So, the eight schools which use Latin script are therefore treated as Romanian by the Transnistrian authorities.
- 6 Ziarul de Gardă, *op.cit.*
- 7 Sondaj IRI (2022), 48 % dintre moldoveni vor ca regiunea transnistreană să rămână parte a Republicii Moldova fără un statut special [IRI survey: 48% of Moldovans want the Transnistrian region to remain part of the Republic of Moldova without a special status] (03.05.2022). <https://disinfo.md/sondaj-iri-48-dintre-moldoveni-vor-ca-regiunea-transnistreana-sa-ramana-parte-a-r-moldova-fara-un-statut-special/>, accessed 02 February 2024.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Alexandru Popescu, Montana, Editura Arc, Chișinău, 2022.
- 10 Carbon, directed by Ion Borș (2022), Chișinău.
- 11 The “museum” is a blatant, typical Soviet-style falsification of the history of the military conflict, hardly deserving of the name and is used as a cornerstone of the Transnistrian founding mythology.
- 12 Felcher A. (2022), “The 1990-92 Armed Conflict at the Dniester River: Continuous Memory Confrontation”. *Cultures of History Forum*, 1-6, doi: 10.25626/0141. Felcher A. (2022), “Thirty Years of Discontent: Memory Confrontation Regarding the Transnistrian Conflict on the Banks of the Dniester River”. Hanna Bazhenova (ed.), *Constructing Memory: Central and Eastern Europe in the New Geopolitical Reality*, Instytut Europy Środkowej, Lublin, 207-232 (19.09.2022). <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/politics/the-1990-92-armed-conflict-on-the-dniester-river>, accessed 11 March 2024.
- 13 The idea of “Russian World” (Русский мир) is a concept that has resurfaced in modern day Russia and is a tool used to exert influence beyond the country’s borders. It is a somewhat elusive concept but is usually defined by the influence of the Russian language, sometimes the existence of Russian minorities in other countries and also by an adherence to Russia’s cultural heritage in the broader sense of the word.
- 14 For more details see: MUSTEAȚĂ S., „History Education and the Construction Identity in a Conflict Region: the Case of Transnistria, the Republic of Moldova”, Rath I., Maier R., Kendzor P. (eds) (2019), *Zivilgesellschaft in Zeiten militärischer Bedrohung: Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement und Reaktionen im Bildungssektor auf gewaltsame Konflikte im östlichen Europa sowie im überregionalen historischen Vergleich* [Civil society in times of military threat: civil society engagement and responses in the education sector to violent conflicts in Eastern Europe and in a transregional historical comparison]. Eckert Dossier 6, Braunschweig, P. 84-104.; MUSTEAȚĂ S. (2021), „Evenimentele din 1992 în manualul de istorie din școlile transnistrene” [“The events of 1992 in the history textbook of Transnistrian schools”], *Plural. History. Culture. Society*, vol. 9. No. 2, p. 215-236, https://plural.upsc.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/15_Sergiu-Musteata.pdf; Covalenco N. (2023), “Noi manual rusești de “istorie” au fost transmise Transnistriei. În acestea se povestește despre ucrainenii “neonaziști” și despre “eliberatorul” Putin” [New Russian “history” textbooks have been sent to Transnistria. They refer to the “neo-Nazi” Ukrainians and the “liberator” Putin], *Newsmaker* (20.10.2023). <https://newsmaker.md/ro/noi-manuale-rusesti-de-istorie-au-fost-transmise-transnistriei-in-acestea-se-povesteste-despre-ucrainenii-neonazisti-si-despre-eliberatorul-putin>, accessed 11 March 2024.
- 15 Babilungo N.V., Bomeshko B.G. (2014), “История Приднестровской Молдавской Республики”, XI Klass [History of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic], XI Grade, Tiraspol, PGIRO, pp. 47 – 62.
- 16 According to the official Soviet position, the current territory of the Republic of Moldova was under Romanian occupation from 1918 - 1940/1947, although the international community recognised the decision adopted on 9 April 1918 by the parliament of the Democratic Republic of Moldova to unite with Romania. The separatist authorities in Tiraspol continue to perpetuate this idea.
- 17 Since, from a Soviet perspective, today’s territory of the Republic of Moldova would not have been legally annexed to Romania in 1918, the entry of Soviet troops into the country, both in 1940 and 1944, would have been a liberation of the Moldovan people from Romanian rule.
- 18 Since the Soviet regime did not recognise the legality of the incorporation of the current territory of the Republic of Moldova into Romania, after 1991 Tiraspol, and also certain pro-Moscow parties in the Republic of Moldova, rejected the idea of this territory having any Romanian identity. Their argument is that the period of Romanian rule was just a historical accident and that by virtue of the fact that from 1812 the current territory of the Republic of Moldova was part of the Russian Empire and that most of its inhabitants were bilingual and also followers of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Republic of Moldova and especially its Transnistrian region, which in 1918-1940 was not under Romanian control are part of Russian civilization.
- 19 Мединец М. Я. (2017) Образ противника в приднестровском конфликте 1989–1992 гг.: взгляд из Приднестровья, [The image of the enemy in the Transnistrian conflict of 1989–1992: a view from Transnistria]/Изв. Саратов. ун-та. Нов. сер. Сер. История. Международные отношения. 2017. Т. 17, вып. 1. С.

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20 *ibid.* Bessarabia is not a firmly defined geographical concept but generally is regarded as the area between the Prut, the border river between Moldova and Romania, and the Dniester. Thus, in political language nowadays it is mostly identified as the Moldovan-controlled part of the Republic of Moldova. The Chisinau pogroms took place in 1903 and 1905. 49 and 19 Jews were killed respectively. The first pogrom received international attention and highlighted the antisemitic incidents in Tsarist Russia at the time. These events were part of a larger wave of pogroms in the Russian Empire.

21 Press Обзорение, Интернет-газета (2016) Опрос: более 70% жителей Приднестровья выступают за присоединение к России, [Poll: more than 70% of Transnistrian residents are in favour of joining Russia] (16.05.2016). <https://press.try.md/item.php?id=159034>, accessed 15 March 2024.

22 Romanization, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanization>, accessed 10 December 2023.

23 Radio Chisinau (2018), UE – cel mai mare donator al Transnistriei. Proiecte de zeci de milioane de euro în ultimii ani [EU – Transnistria's biggest donor. Projects worth tens of millions of euros in recent years] (19.04.2018). <https://radiochisinau.md/ue-cel-mai-mare-donator-al-transnistriei-proiecte-de-zeci-de-milioane-de-euro-in-ultimii-ani---66405.html>, accessed 10 December 2023.

24 For a broad description of the confidence building approach see Douglas, N. & Wolff S. (2018), Economic Confidence-Building Measures and Conflict Settlement: the Case of Transdniestria. ZOIS. Zentrum Für Osteuropa und Interantionale Studien. No. 1.