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Geopolitical Evolutions in the Eastern Space in Romania's Proximity

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Abstract: We will debate some aspects related to the geopolitical equation of space in Romania's proximity where we have bigger actors (Russia), smaller actors (Republic of Moldova), as well as actors without international legitimacy (Transnistrian Republic). The geopolitical issue includes the analysis of the intersections between the Russian border and the Euro-Atlantic area, on the border line represented by the Republic of Moldova. The effect of the geopolitical tensions on the internal dynamics of R. of Moldova's policy, exclusively the dependence on the Nistru crisis and the geopolitical and security blockage, is represented by the "frozen conflict" in Transnistria. We will show with arguments why the states in the Black Sea - Caucasus - Central Asia region have a double hypostasis: seen from Brussels, they are part of the eastern neighborhood of the EU, but seen from the Kremlin, they are part of the "close neighborhood" of Russia. Therefore, each of these states resembles the pieces on the chessboard waiting to be moved. In conclusion, the problems that the area raises are countless - interethnic conflicts, a mosaic of religions, frozen conflicts, instability, the presence of non-democratic institutions, collapse of states, economic backwardness, authoritarian regimes. Of the above list, no feature has positive features, which is an alarm signal.

Keywords: geopolitics; the proximity of Romania; Transnistrian Republic; frozen conflict

1. Introduction

The lack of natural boundaries has fueled a national obsession in Russia about the need to control territories as a cover against invasions. Historian G. Patrick March said that the vulnerability of the Russian territory gave rise to a "higher tolerance for tyranny" (March, 1996, p. 73). We believe that this finding could help to understand some of President Putin's tough political decisions.

The western media loves to hate him, because he does not fit the templates - a sort of liberal leader who receives cheering in chic conferences. What the media should see in Putin is not really the totalitarian authoritarian, but only a Russian, ordinary semi-dictator whose cynical neo-imperialism is the result of deep, very deep geographic insecurity.

Putin wants a dominant influence in the Baltic states. He wants state buffers in Eastern Europe. He does not accept the collapse of the Warsaw Treaty. He knows he cannot reconstruct that treaty, he knows he

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cannot take back the Baltic states because they are NATO members. But he will try. He will continue to press in various ways, through gas pipelines, organized crime, cyber attacks etc.

The same situation explains his need for buffer states in Belarus and Ukraine. For the same reasons, he invaded Georgia in 2008; he exerts a significant influence in Central Asia, even if he does not have the military capacity to reconstruct the Russian empire there. Putin thinks as a traditional Russian leader, because Russia is open to invasions almost on all sides. Russia is a great land-based power without natural barriers, and terrestrial powers are particularly vulnerable and insecure. They lack the security of ocean-protected marine powers.

It is very likely that Russia will not succeed in overcoming all the “holes” in its frontier protection system. It will have to consider priorities to preserve its right to state life. And the first is Ukraine. Ukraine occupies the most productive part of the Russian cereal area - the southernmost area, where it rains regularly. As the Russian capital and labor shortages accumulate, maintaining control over high productivity and low-spending land will gain increasing importance. Together with the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine controls the Bessarabian pass (low area between the Black Sea and the Carpathians). By controlling this passage, Russia will limit Turkey's ability to threaten the Russian central territories.

Ukraine holds the largest population of ethnic Russians outside the Russian Federation. Their numerical inclusion in the Russian system would improve and postpone the demographic twilight for a few years. The industrial base of Eastern Ukraine is located in the immediate vicinity of Russia. Combining them would help all parts of the Russian economy take some time. Ukrainian infrastructure transports almost half of Russian oil and gas to Europe, so Ukraine is a special economic value. The only truly navigable river in the former Soviet Union is the Dnieper, flows to the south, and allows Ukraine to integrate economically with the Black Sea, the Marmara Sea and the rest of the world. Crimean Peninsula controls the mouths of the Dnieper and is the seat of the only Russian naval base that do not freeze - Sevastopol. As long as Crimea and Sevastopol are in the hands of Russia, Ukraine cannot reach a real economic development, and foreign naval powers - the most important, Turkey - cannot dominate the Black Sea. Russia's efforts to re-anchorage began in the Crimea in 2014. But they will not stop there. Under any circumstances, a completely independent Ukraine would be a challenge for Russia.¹

2. Frozen Conflict in Transnistria

The cold war covered the planet more completely than the other wars of the XXth century. The specifics of the period 1945 and 1990 were given by tensions between two superpowers recognized as protagonists of the Cold War: the US and the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War “*is marked by the collapse of the Berlin Wall (1991). Although for the historians marks the end of a short XXth century begun in 1914, the end of the Cold War does not also mean the disappearance of the privileged relations between the US and the USSR, then Russia: the fallout situation and the nuclear arsenal of Russia and Ukraine make them a partner to be spared. American diplomacy, on the other hand, sees itself widowed by its Cold War ideology. Some, like Senator Paul Tsongas, even state, in the context of the economic crisis and the debate about the American decline that “the Cold War ended with the victory of Japan”. This strange end, unique in history, has the gift of provoking debates; and if the Cold War is over, for historians it is just beginning, with the gradual opening of archives in the East.*”²

¹ Constantin Crănganu, *Russia - The Closeness of Twilight (geopolitical)*, According to - <http://www.contributors.ro/global-europa/rusia-aproprierea-amurgului-geopolitic/>.

² International Relations Dictionary - XX Century, Volume coordinated by (Vaisse, 2008, p. 291).

From a geopolitical point of view, the present Republic of Moldova appears as a Romanian outpost in the Slavic world, a Romanian-speaking territory whose language was “moldavized” and transcribed in Cyrillic letters according to the needs of the Soviet power, until 1989. As a testimony to its very tumultuous history during the XIX-XX centuries, the society of the Republic of Moldova could have a special charm through its borderline character between Latin and Slavism. The demographic data converge to the same idea: in 1989, at the time of its re-emergence, the Republic of Moldova was the common home of a population of 4,335,360 inhabitants, of which 2.8 million Romanians/Moldovans, 600,000 Ukrainians, 525,000 Russians, 150,000 Gagauz, 70,000 Bulgarians and 65,000 Jews. Known more as a garden of the former USSR, an appreciated provider of vegetables, fruits, tobacco and wine, the Republic of Moldova has not excelled in industrialization during the Soviet power; even so, most of its industrial potential lies in the Transnistrian region - a strip of about 5 000 km² located on the left bank of the Dniester, at the border between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, with a population (in the same reference year 1989) of about 800 000 inhabitants, out of which over two thirds of Russian speakers (mainly Russians and Ukrainians). To keep in mind a historical detail about Transnistria: it was, in a way, the core of the future entity since 1924 when Stalin, for purely political reasons and without any historical basis, created here the Moldavian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (as part of the Ukrainian RSFS) - for the simple reason that it could claim that the Moldavia itself (meaning Historical Bessarabia), located in Romania's borders after the Great War, would be under the “yoke of the occupation” of Romania (between 1918 and 1940, and then in conditions of “Romanian occupation” between 1941 and 1944).

After the creation of the Moldavian RSFS and after years of intense repression of the Russian-speaking elite - it remains unforgettable the deportation of 11239 families of Romanians, comprising 30050 people to Siberia, on the night of 5 to 6 July 1949, and totally subject to a monopolized political leadership by the Russian-speaking natives, over the nearly 50 years of Soviet history (Igor, 1991), The RSFS of Moldavia seemed to be a relatively easily manageable republic. It is probably not a coincidence that passed through here, in their first part of their political career Leonid Brejnev (first secretary of the PC Moldovans in 1950-1952) and one of his protectors at that time and later his successor, Konstantin Cernenko (secretary of agitation and propaganda in the Moldavian RSFS in 1948-1956). These totally parallel legends about the recent Romanian past of the Republic of Moldova were still to persist and still recoverable today. Probably, as an author says (Cioroianu, 2009, p. 252): “*if the Romanian state had more time, it is very possible to have succeeded in transforming the Basarabians into Romanians*”, but “*in the short period between the two world wars, (...) homogenization efforts of the Romanian state failed to convert the pre-modern, regional identity of basarabians in a modern, national one. That is why the Soviet project to build the Moldovan nation found favorable conditions in Bessarabia*”, with the mandatory mention that, according to the same interpretations, “*to the success of this project, but also contributed substantially the frustrating experience of Basarabians during the period when they were part of the Great Romania*”¹. Area with vineyard, fruit-growing, horticultural, apicultural area a.s. enviable potential, the Moldavian RSFS remained until recently a profoundly rural one. In 1944 and 1959, it had the lowest level of urbanization in the USSR (18 and 22 percent of the population lived in cities); in 1989 only, the percentage of the urban population will reach 47 percent.

As in other republics of the Soviet Union - and in any case, as in those in which independence was obtained by fighting or at the cost of frozen conflicts - also in the Republic of Moldova it became very clear that it is impossible to find that (state) identity to please all citizens, as historian Adrian Cioroianu

¹ Cristina Petrescu, Construction of National Identity in Bessarabia, în (Heintz, 2007, p. 143).

states¹. Not so the Russian-speaking population in the area, as Russia (through this population) reacted immediately to the possibility (rather theoretical, at that time) that the Republic of Moldova would go to Romania; and a scenario that was to be repeated throughout the former Soviet Union was put into practice.

In an article entitled *Transnistrian Conflict: Geopolitics and Geostrategy*, Oleg Serebrian, speaking of Transnistria, says that „Moldovans had a permanent presence in the country? The colonization of the Dniester's left began especially since the XVIIIth century, although migratory waves existed in the XVIIIth century. XV, but especially in the XVIth century. However, due to the fact that the Russians and the Ukrainians have not made their massive presence in the region until after 1792, it cannot be said that Moldovans would have fewer rights on the given land than the Ukrainians.”² Usually, Russian and Ukrainian historiography refers to the Slavic presence in the Bugo-Nistrian interfluvial space during IX-XII centuries. “The possibility of this presence cannot in any way be denied or the slave migration campaigns of the previous centuries, as well as the limits of the maximum extension of Kyiv Russia. But there is no evidence that the Transnistrian territory was thoroughly controlled by the Slavs and, moreover, there are no significant vestiges of the Slavic material culture of the period”.³ The same article shows that Transnistria was not a Moldovan political territory. Transnistrian Moldovans are the natives who, after 1792, had a regime of occupation and national pressure from the Russian Empire. The same author shows that the Romanianness of Transnistria was challenged even in Romania. “When Marshal Antonescu ordered the passage of Romanian troops across the Dniester there were several voices reserved for this gesture. This was also the case in Chisinau in 1992, when a murmur of dissatisfaction about the losses suffered sneaked in order to maintain in the Republic of Moldova a foreign territory to the country's body”.⁴ In order to be as correct as possible in expressing Oleg Serebrian's point of view, we will continue to reproduce the extract from the article quoted below, which shows that, “in fact, those who recognized the Moldovan (Romanian) character of the Transnistrian region were indeed the Soviets when they created the Moldovan Autonomous Republic in 1924. Even if the purpose was a territorial rebellion in Bessarabia and beyond the Prut, the constitution of the Moldavian autonomy in the left bank of the Dniester set the beginning of Moldovan political-geographic presence in Transnistria. In August 1940, with the transformation of the Moldovan Autonomous Republic into the union republic, five of the eleven Moldovan Transdnistriean districts were attached to Ukraine- Kodima, Balta, Kotovsk, Red Salt Mines and Ananiev. Din pacate, foarte adesea uitam ca Basarabia a pierdut în august 1940 nu doar patru raioane la nord și 9 raioane la sud, ci și aceasta parte a Transnistriei, în care mai locuiesc zeci de mii de moldoveni transnistreni.”⁵

With a population of about 550,000 people and a territory of 4,163 km², the Transnistrian region has evolved since the proclamation of “independence” in 1991 and to date in a de facto state entity not controlled by the Moldovan central authorities⁶. The attempts of political settlement of the conflict in Transnistria have achieved poor results. The political negotiations involving Transnistrian and Moldovan parties, as well as representatives from the OSCE, Ukraine and Russia failed to identify a solution regarding the status of the region. This is why the Moldovan authorities have attempted to

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² <http://transnistria.md/ro/articles/0/542/>.

³ <http://transnistria.md/ro/articles/0/542/>.

⁴ <http://transnistria.md/ro/articles/0/542/>.

⁵ <http://transnistria.md/ro/articles/0/542/>.

⁶ *EU Action Plan - Republic of Moldova*, ADEPT Guide, Gunivas Publishing House, Chisinau, 2006, p. 61.

internationalize regulatory efforts by involving, since 2005, the US and the EU in the negotiating mechanism as observers.

Why is Russia interested in keeping control of this enclave and why many Russian parliamentarians and officials see Transnistria¹ as a “*region of privileged interest*” for Russia? The answer is an elementary strategic consideration. Transnistria (located in the “coast” of Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) alongside Kaliningrad² (the Russian enclave that no longer has a border with Russia, but it is also on the “coast” of Poland and Lithuania) and the Crimean peninsula pulled from the territory of Ukraine in 2014³, are all three parts of a security cord useful to Russia from a geopolitical point of view, especially since NATO has penetrated significantly in the East of the European continent. The alibi of the rebellion of the Russian-speakers in Transnistria was originally a linguistic one: the declaration by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova in 1990 of the Romanian language as an official language was rejected to the left of the Dniester in the most concrete way possible. Transnistria is the first to become a target in the war against terrorism, being a paradise for illegal smuggling of arms and smuggled goods and a pre-designed place of rest for mafia and terrorist groups. The business here is feeding the accounts of terrorists from all over the world.⁴

Referring to the origin of the Transnistrian conflict, Oleg Serebrian shows that “*if we remember the problems of 1988-89, when the conflict arose, we would notice a little nuance - we then opted not for ethnic, but linguistic identity, not for national independence, but for the revival of national culture. Ideas regarding the union with Romania, independence from the USSR, or anticommunist slogans were not very noticeable. Hence, neither ethnic nor political factors could have been the source of the conflict. The Transnistrian problem has originated more an intercultural conflict, which, after November 1989, became more and more pronounced from geopolitical point of view.*”⁵

The Transnistrian conflict represents „*only a geopolitical conflict, and the ideology or political regime in the present case has no importance. Besides, even Western observers do not hurry with such ratings. Speaking of the geopolitical and geostrategic value of the conflict, some political analysts in Chisinau attribute an exaggerated dimension to it, even if Transnistria is said to be a “Russian knife stuck in the back of Ukraine”, and when it is said that Transnistria would be a base of Russia for the Balkan “direction”. If we are talking about the Balkans and its “gates”, let us not forget that the old and metaphorical qualifier of Bessarabia as the “gate of the Balkans” was valid for Russia in its geographic configuration at that time.*”⁶

According to Oleg Serebrian “*the geopolitical value of Transnistria is one that states not the control of the Balkans nor the threat of Ukraine, but only the control of the Republic of Moldova. Paradoxically, the Republic of Moldova largely owes its existence to the Transnistrian problem, and this is not only that legally contemporary Moldovan statehood has its origin in Transnistria of 1924, but also because if this conflict did not exist, then the story of the independence of the Republic of Moldova, with its*

¹ Transnistria - surface about 5 000 km², population of about 800 000 inhabitants, mostly Russian-speakers. Enclave, which is part of the Russian Federation, is - geopolitically speaking - a point of control over the Republic of Moldova, Romania and Ukraine.

² Kaliningrad - the former capital (Königsberg) of Oriental Prussia, the city was a war trophy obtained by the USSR in 1945. After the collapse of the USSR, the city (about 415 000 inhabitants) and the surrounding region remained part of the Russian Federation - even if no boundaries with it. Geopolitically, Kaliningrad offers an exit to the Baltic Sea and control over the North of Poland and the West of Lithuania.

³ The right of residence of the Russian Federation's fleet in the port of Simferopol - Sevastopol, was prolonged until 2017 (s.n.).

⁴ Republic of Moldova - Anti-democratic Sinking of Galagious Government, Country Report 2003, Coordinator: Iulian Chifu, Politeea-Snspsa Publishing House, 2004, p. 261.

⁵ <http://transnistria.md/ro/articles/0/542/>.

⁶ <http://transnistria.md/ro/articles/0/542/>.

dominance in the Chisinau political elite in December 1991, would have ended with the fall of the Soviet flag in Kremlin and by the reunification of Bessarabia with Romania."¹

Speaking of the interest of US² and EU on Transnistria, in his work on the geopolitics of the Transnistrian conflict, Oleg Serebrian shows that „*Americans and Europeans rarely manifest glimpses of interest, but this is generated not by the conflict itself, but by the stockpiles of weapons and the paths that that weapon comes surprisingly through the most undesirable corners of the Earth.*”³

3. Points of View on the Transnistrian Issue

Ion Leahu⁴ analyzed the tensions between Chisinau and Tiraspol, as well as the “convenient” intervention of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission. At the same time, he also mentioned the contribution that Romania should have in the conflict between the Republic of Moldova and the self-proclaimed pro-Russian republic, the Nistrian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria).

He declared that *the JCC's (Joint Control Commission) activity does not in any way affect the basic aspirations of the Transnistrian region, such as the coveted sovereignty or control regime in the security zone completely dominated by the secessionist regime. At the same time, due to an informational tradition, the Commission's activity awakens a certain interest and can be interpreted as an indication of bilateral or multilateral relations in the negotiation process.* Major changes will not occur if Moscow is not interested.

Former member of the Moldovan delegation to the Joint Control Commission, Ion Leahu, said the representatives of Austria, holding the presidency in the OSCE for 2017, announced the availability to have no less than two meetings in the format “5+2”. *Berlin, when chairman of the OSCE, had the “Mezenberg process” in which it had something to propose to Moscow in exchange of boosting negotiations on the Transnistrian issue. Austria only has the protocol of June 2016 in Berlin. Tiraspol and Moscow, however, will not abandon the examination of this deeply erroneous document, a factor that may have been conditioned by the abdication of Vienna from the convening of the format “5+2”.* Starting from this finding, obviously, we cannot expect dynamism in the settlement of the conflict.

Regarding Moscow's position, the Moldovan expert shows that *this is limited by the financial factor, a factor that has greatly influenced how to react to changes in the region. Previously, Moscow could afford the delivery to Tiraspol \$ 100, 200 million a year to ensure its indisputable dedication to the population. Then these transactions became more and more difficult to bear for Russia, being aggravated by massive embezzlement by the former Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov and his family. Russia cuts out of financial assistance.* Not long ago, Moscow encouraged Tiraspol to expedite the application of the Russian Federation's legislation in the Transnistrian territory. Obviously, the action is a response to Bucharest's evolutions in relation to the North Atlantic block and Chişinău with Brussels. At that time Tiraspol decided to habg the Russian tricolor at the same time as the red-green bicolor one, applied as its “own flag”.

¹ <http://transnistria.md/ro/articles/0/542/>.

² *The vast country, as the entire European continent, with a large exit to the two largest oceans of the planet (Pacific and Atlantic) and with huge ground and underground resources, the United States were predestined - as some American personalities have expressed, over time - to dominate the world. The events of the last decade of the XXth century propelled the United States into a singular world position, the world's only superpower. cf. (Negrut, 2005, p. 109).*

³ <http://transnistria.md/ro/articles/0/542/>.

⁴ Former member of the Moldovan delegation to the Joint Control Commission, an expert in Transnistrian settlement.

According to the experience of the Moldovan expert, Leahu said that *the involvement of the OSCE in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict is not one that corresponds to the mandate of the mission and the capabilities of this international structure*. The OSCE mission practices a tactic, both comfy and inefficient, which could be exposed in the following way: *“The OSCE will support all the agreements reached by the parties involved in the conflict”*. Because of this passive position, the parties commit serious deviations, which condition the absence of positive effects. *The nonessential reaction of the OSCE to the serious deviations from the provisions of the basic acts, which regulates the peacekeeping operation in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova and the regulatory process supported by the Russian Federation and Transnistria, contributes to the complete depletion of these norms*.

As a result, the peacekeeping mission in the Republic of Moldova no longer has mechanisms to influence the situation, to ensure peace and stability. Annually, about 10 extremely serious situations (conflicts, altercations, murders (Vadim Pisari's case of January 1, 2011), involvement of force structures) are committed. They are caused by the inability of the OSCE Mission to demand unconditionally compliance with the prescribed rules. Basically, there has been no assessment of the crisis situations. I believe that the OSCE Mission has the obl to require permanent monitoring of compliance with legal rules for the implementation of the peace process, the settlement of the dispute and the adoption of decisions.

On Romania's contribution to solving the Transnistrian conflict, Ion Leahu said that *Romania in its current quality as an EU member state and North Atlantic block obviously is limited in actions. It promotes the policies developed and proposed by the designated bodies*.

As for the contribution made by civil society, the media, the possibilities are enormous in this respect. The problem, however, is the position of Chisinau. It is necessary for the Republic of Moldova to prepare a well-argued strategy of collaboration with the Romanian partners, to use the capacities of the state and the Romanian society in support of Moldova. The involvement of the Republic of Moldova in international structures, of which Romania is also part, would be a very positive support. It would be useful to explain the nature and content of economic relations between Romania and the Transnistrian region. Tiraspol exports a lot to Romania. From there, it procures raw materials and technologies. To explain, what reasons condition this collaboration, at first glance, untested in the aspect of Russian anti-Romanian propaganda. *Romania has a rich experience in the issue of interethnic relations, especially the "Lipovans". There is no doubt what would be the positive effect of establishing some contacts, relations between the Danube Delta inhabitants and those from Moldova and Transnistria*.¹

*“The notion of special status is an instrument of reexpanding Russia in the former Soviet republics, especially in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Russia has had federalization projects for both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. The word federalization is rightly provoking such fears that the new denomination of federalization is a special status”*², says Vladimir Socor³, in an interview with HotNews.ro. Socor argues that Russia's interest in the Republic of Moldova is limited to the opening of a precedent in Transnistria, but the Kremlin is not able to support Chisinau. In his opinion, Romania is more influential in Moldova than Russia at the moment. Socor Vladimir supports some important ideas about the Russia-Moldova relationship, such as:

¹ https://www.dcnnews.ro/conflictul-din-transnistria-expert-de-la-chi-inau-pozi-ia-formatului-5-2-comoda-contribu-ia-romaniei_535667.html

² Vladimir Socor, analyst at Jamestown Foundation

- *The Republic of Moldova is not a priority of Russia's foreign policy. Russia has its hands full in the area with Ukraine and in another area with Syria, and now at the official level it suddenly manifests a deep disappointment to Donald Trump. Russia's leadership had great hopes in Trump;*
- *In the Kremlin's vision, Putin's gesture with that map was a sarcasm or a malicious gesture free of charge. Free from a political point of view. Neither Dodon nor Putin have the intention of creating a large Moldavia in the Carpathians;*
- *Russia is unable to support the Republic of Moldova. If Dodon's party by absurd came in the Republic of Moldova, economic support would fall into Russia's taks. Russia is not capable of supporting not even Transnistria, certainly not the Republic of Moldova. Russia has a limited interest in Moldova that Moldova should pursue a policy of balance between the West and Russia and consult Russia on major economic and foreign policy decisions;*
- *Russia wants to establish some precedents in the Republic of Moldova for use in other situations. For example, the precedent to renegotiate the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, to subject it to a three re-examination with the participation of Russia. An approach that Russia would like to impose on Ukraine. Success in Moldova would be a precedent;*
- *Granting a special status to Transnistria. The official goal of the 5 + 2 negotiations is to finally reach a special status. It has become the official, declared purpose, and that's why I think it would be a very dangerous thing. The notion of special status is an instrument of reexpansion of Russia in the former Soviet republics, especially in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova;*
- *Russia has had federalization projects for both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. The word federalization rightly provokes such fears that the new denomination of federalization is a special status. This status would integrate the secessionist territory and its representatives formally into the recognized state political system, but the territory would continue to be under Russian control and that territory would delegate its representatives to the political system of the reunified state with blocking powers. Decisional blocking for foreign policy decisions etc.*
- *In Transnistria there was a change for the worse after the election of Krasnoselski (the new president, replacing Sevcuic from December 2016). Transnistria opened a representative office in Moscow. It is called the representation of the Transnistria' president in the Russian Federation, which is a sort of first step towards the establishment of diplomatic missions;*
- *If Transnistria receives a so-called special status in which Transnistria would be part of the Republic of Moldova to a sufficient extent to be represented in institutions, but to an extent insufficient to be controlled by the Chisinau government, so it would remain under Russian de facto control, if Moldova accepts such a thing, we will wake up with a cascade of claims for special statutes. The Gagauzia administration has already announced that if Transnistria receives a special status, Gagauzia will ask to raise its status at the same level as Transnistria. The city of Balti will surely require a special status, it is populated by 70% of Russian speakers. So we will witness a cascade of claims of special statutes, with the danger of dismantling the Republic of Moldova;*
- *The question to which Western diplomats cannot answer is: if a special status for Transnistria is reached, what will happen to the Russian troops? No Western diplomat has been able to give me assurances that the Russian troops will withdraw. All political negotiations took place with the presence of Russian troops on the ground. The connection that had existed between granting special status and withdrawal of Russian troops disappeared. I think it is completely wrong for any Western diplomat to*

press the Republic of Moldova to consent to a special status as long as the Russian troops are on the ground and as long as no one can guarantee that the Russian troops would withdraw;

- At the present stage, the Republic of Moldova is incapable of absorbing Transnistria. The state in the Republic of Moldova is practically a collapsed state. Transnistria is a kind of proto-state supported by Russia, but otherwise Transdnistria is in some ways more viable than the Republic of Moldova. It has an internal propaganda that instills to population the feeling of belonging to a state and a specific type of identity, a post-national identity linked to the Russian world. The Republic of Moldova is not appealing for the ordinary population of Transnistria. The reintegration of Transnistria into the Republic of Moldova in this situation would lead to the complete disintegration of the Republic of Moldova. The institutions are so crashed, they will not be able to absorb Transnistria;

- Romania has instruments of influence in the Republic of Moldova with a major impact, which I sometimes feel under-appreciated. The Embassy of Romania, compared to Russia, is very influential in Chisinau. The Russian Embassy in contrast is not relevant in Chisinau, while the embassy of Romania and others are always consulted. Unfortunately, Romania has failed to complete the gas and electricity connection projects, this is a big drawback. Romania for the first time after the 90s is able to provide budget assistance to the republic of Moldova. I think Romania becomes more influential than Russia in Chisinau.¹

4. Russia's Internal and External Actions

About what Putin has done in recent years, both externally and internally, Cosmin Popa² shows that the political inventiveness resources of the regime are exhausted, and force and intimidation are beginning to play an increasingly important role in promoting Russian interests. Using and abusing power, outside and within the country, Putin potentiates the availability of those whom Russia regards as opponents to use force in their turn.

Started as a new, seemingly paradoxical modernization experiment, putinism turned into a catalyst for the return to classic realism, in which the alliances succeeded with stunning repetition, and the interests changed according to the personal perspective of talented politicians or monarchs full of political vitality. The historic role of the Russian Empire, the USSR, or the Russian Federation, believe Russian leaders, is to intervene decisively in the political game or in war when the confrontational camps are weak enough to be imposed conditions.

In fact, the country that occupies the sixth part of the land, which has the largest reserves of raw materials, which gave the world geniuses of science and culture and has an impressive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, thinks international relations at the scale of a power medium-sized, preoccupied to ensure survival between the empires.

The attraction by Russian officials of governments and corporations in Western Europe in a “miracle” business line, in order to undermine Euro-Atlantic solidarity, is only a reflection of traditional Russian “realism”. *In order to stimulate the pride of a continent unable to find itself politically, since Stalin,*

¹ <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-21631527-video-cum-juca-rusia-moldova-transnistria-vladimir-socor-notiunea-statut-special-este-instrument-reexpansiune-rusiei.htm>.

² Cosmin Popa is a scientific researcher of the Nicolae Iorga Institute of History of the Romanian Academy. He is specialized in the history of the USSR/ Russia and the history of Central and Southeast Europe, the communist and contemporary period. He studied in Bucharest and Moscow and is a member of the bilateral Commission of Historians from Romania and Russia.

Russia still complained of Europe's pitiful mercy, subjugated by American "imperialism" or reduced to neocolonial status.

Putin tried and partly managed to cheat "Old Europe", helped by the mirage of a price of oil, which was only to grow, constantly whispering to his ear that Russia healed the imperial obsession and that the profit was the new ideology of the Kremlin.

So, Germany, France, Italy, but also good defenders of rights and freedoms, such as the Netherlands or Austria, have been pretending for years that they do not see how the institutions are formed and how the laws of putinist kleptocratic authoritarianism appear, nor how Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine were held in a kind of political imponderability by local politicians, perfectly integrated into mafia networks led by people in Putin's entourage. The August 2008 Georgian and February 2014 Ukraine forced the old European democracies, not without a healthy US pressure, to agree in some respect the claimed principles, the political declarations and the concrete actions.

Cosmin Popa analyst shows, in this context, Russia mistakes went on and on. *Annexation of Crimea, an act that came out somehow from the logic of Russian traditional political action, although allowed Putin to call himself "the unificator", like Stalin, meant leaving by Russia the "Ukrainian front", at least for the near and medium future.*

The challenge and support of the pro-putinist rebellion in Southeast Ukraine is nothing more than another desperate attempt to keep a number of strategic positions in the Ukrainian state by imposing a federalism to turn it into a nonfunctional entity.

The concerted pressures of Germany and France on Ukraine to accept the absurd terms of the "armistice" in Minsk in both versions show that Berlin and Paris have rushed to close the "file", accepting Russia's illegitimate interests in Ukraine, but trying, in parallel, to maintain its external worthiness. The non-application of the Minsk I and Minsk II provisions shows that the Russian-German-French stratagem to anchor Ukraine on the Moscow trailer, under the appearance of a democratic truce, failed, and Washington it is not alien to this.

Eventually, in their chaotic effort to reconcile action and claimed principles with their historic obsessions, Berlin and Paris ended by disappointing Russian "partners" and irritating American allies.

It is no surprise that the "New Europe" saw in the Ukrainian crisis an opportunity to reset the Euro-Atlantic security system, relying on a direct agreement with the US. As the Russians say, "farther, more". The international isolation of Russia and the imposition of sanctions have stimulated the creativity of Russian political propaganda. On all channels and through all major political actors, Russia accredits the idea that, while they officially support sanctions, Western countries are able to use any pretext to cancel them.

A number of marginal politicians in Western countries, a plethora of "reputable analysts", all kinds of exotic characters are strongly promoted by Russian environments, with statements stating the "absurd" of sanctions and the idea that Ukraine was "abandoned" by the West.

Sergei Lavrov does not forget to "remember" in every interview, and the last is no exception, that all "relevant" European countries, even the Americans, whisper to his ear that if they organize a new referendum in the Crimea after all the rules that Russia would win anyway, the sanctions would be immediately lifted. "Realism" makes Russia's leaders believe that anything can be traded in a lunch break, regardless of the number and quality of international obligations assumed by "partners".

Direct involvement in Syria, a decision meant not only to secure the Russian military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, but especially to retrain Putin as a frequent partner of the West, is also a risky bet. Besides the fact that Russia has become the object of the hatred of an important part of the population that opposes Bashar al-Assad, Putin must avoid, almost at any price, a confrontation with ISIL extremists. Once attacked, they would create Russia a series of major “nuisances” in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. As things evolve in Syria, it is hard to believe that at the end of the war, Russia will only have to agree with Bashar al-Assad to maintain its bases in Tartus and Latakia.

In the meantime, Moscow is in full political and economic war with Ankara, and if the oil that President Erdogan's close friends, as Russian officials say buy it from ISIL is so much, the Islamic fundamentalists' reaction will not delay to appear.

Soon, Lavrov will have to mediate between Syrian Kurds and Bashar al-Assad, which is perfectly plausible in the Middle East, but that will reduce Russia's maneuvering space in Syria, forcing Putin to diversify the targets of the attacks of Russian aviation.

The alliance with China. Moreover, in search of markets for its resources and high tech suppliers for a number of strategic industry sectors, Russia claims it is about to conclude a major alliance with China. The noisy campaign around the start of the “Siberian Force” energy project, the transport system meant to link China to Russian resources, suspended for the time being because of the stubborn Chinese negotiation of the price of Russian gas, contrasts with the heavy silence surrounding the project.

Trying to prove to the West that he can resist without selling it oil and gas, Putin is about to “surrender” to China, knowing well that after Mongolia, Russia is the most exposed country to China's formidable expansion at all levels. True policymakers, the Chinese do not rush to respond to Russia's stingy signs of goodwill, expecting Moscow's bargaining margin to fall. The Great Dragon is now “only” experiencing an acute shortage of cultivated land, which Russia has in full use, being already connected to the international oil and gas supply system.

The “Russian variant” would immediately increase China's autonomy, but it would link it to a series of agreements that it should respect in the future, and it could bring better auspices than it does today. China can afford to wait. Russia?

Russia's policy towards European neighbors including Romania. Neither Russia's policy towards European neighbors does not excel in creativity, even if this does not make it less damaging. Although they kept all the force lines of imperial policy, the Bolsheviks brought a distinct note in foreign policy, where the dominant elements were violence and institutionalized lie.

The interval between the two wars can be considered the “golden age” of the subversive Russian foreign policy, with destabilizing effects.

The interposition of the “sanitary cordon” based on Romania and Poland between Soviet Russia and the Republic of Weimar strengthened Lenin's conviction that if Russia cannot control a country then it must at least be destabilized.

Propaganda, pure lying, corruption, subversive actions, the stipending of some local political forces, the instigation to rebellion and the intensification of internal and international dissensions have since become Russia's favorite tools in relations with the states of the area, which they perceive as hostile.

In his last interview, Lavrov, the one who constantly makes the parade of “retention” and “balance” of Russian diplomacy, did not hesitate to draw loosely a real “list of shame” with the states he considered “hysterical”.

Romania, Poland and the Baltic states, the old pillars of the “sanitary cordon”, were accused by the refined Lavrov that, instigated by Washington and assisted by the United Kingdom, “stir the myth of Russian dangers up to hysteria”.

As it has been accustomed to throughout its contemporary history, when it rages with its smaller neighbors, Russian propaganda leaves aside any diplomatic inhibitions, excelling in pettinesses, more bizarre. It is expected that the Russian press will fill again, in the following period, with articles and reports about poverty and crisis in the named states, as well as a series of Russian journalists' stories, which are more fanciful.

Schematic in its external actions, unable to overcome the era of state interests, Russia persists in not understanding that the international influence of a state is directly proportional to the progress it generates. *Putin's economic and social model, based on a massive state presence in all spheres, but funded by a huge oil price, almost collapses silently.*

Sadly for her, but also for the Europeans, Putin's Russia is not ready to put anything else in its place, trying to fill the void created with the brutal force and the illusion of an imperial restoration.

The primitive way in which he acts does not make it less devastating, but it gives those who are targeting precious indices of how it can be countered.

Putin's conservatism, imposed on society as a formula for reconciliation with the past, now in a state of crisis, rekindles the war of the Russians with their own history, urging them again to approach to them not only hatred and bias, but also the acute feeling of an incomplete accomplishment.¹

5. Putin's Battle to Maintain His Power in Russia

Vladimir Putin's authority is increasingly challenged, which worries the Kremlin leader. As a result, the President of Russia has begun to take measures to prevent instability and to stifle potential dissidence movements. Even if Putin surrenders to many Kremlin elites, he will not get away from political purges if necessary. And Putin's most dangerous opponent might turn out to be even someone close to him - the leader of the lower chamber of the State Duma, Viaceslav Volodin, according to an analysis by Stratfor.

A report by Moscow's Carnegie Center, quoted by Stratfor, shows that the battle for power in Russia will be given in the State Duma. If until now the Russian parliament was a tool used by Vladimir Putin to give him legitimacy and to strengthen his power through various legislative acts, now it is not anymore the Russian President the one giving the orders but the new president of the lower chamber of the Duma, Viaceslav Volodin.

Ever since he came to the leadership of Russia, initially as prime minister, then as president, Vladimir Putin did everything in his power to strengthen his power over the State Duma, writes Stratfor. In order to ensure that he keeps control over the Russian Parliament, Putin needed to appoint a strong and loyal leader at Duma's leadership. He chose Viaceslav Volodin, the one who helped him manage the crisis created in Russia in 2012 after the parliamentary vote was defrauded. Stratfor writes that *Volodin has long wanted to be part of the Kremlin elite, but he has never had the necessary power. Normally, his job now does not allow him to achieve this goal, but his position is much more important in the context of Putin's need for laws to pass through the Duma to receive more much power. In this context, Volodin began to take steps to strengthen his own power.*

¹ <http://www.ziare.com/vladimir-putin/presedinte-rusia/realismul-rusesc-sau-diplomatia-obsesiilor-1408241>.

Stratfor writes *that what happens to Volodin is not at all new, on the contrary it fits in a pattern. In recent years, several close friends of Putin preferred to pursue their own goals, even if it meant defying the Russian president.*

For example, in 2016, Rosneft chief, Igor Secin, took over a majority stake in rival company Bashneft behind Putin. He also ignored the orders of the Russian leader to sell the company's shares to buyers on an approved list and has chosen his own partners. Stratfor also writes that the president of Chechnya criticized on social networks the Ministry of Finance's initiative to cut federal subsidies for his region, suggesting that, in the absence of funds, the country already affected by the war, could become unstable. And Sergei Cemezov, the head of the Rostec defense state giant, bought various companies to make sure his company infiltrated every arm of the Russian military-industrial complex, an action Putin tried to prevent in the past.

But this is not the most worrying, says Stratfor, and even unexpected. *A surprise, however, is that politicians in the second or third echelon began to deviate from the Kremlin line, especially leaders from regional governments. Some have removed local government structures to ensure their stay in power. Putin's answer has not been expected: in the past three weeks he has dismissed six regional leaders.* Also, on February 17, it was also he the one who organized a Security Council meeting to claim that a huge sweeping purification operation would develop aimed at regional governments.

Stratfor writes that *Vladimir Putin needs loyal close friends to implement his strategy. And if at the moment Viaceslav Volodin is one of them, the situation could become disastrous for the president of Russia if the president of the lower chamber of Duma will gain more power.*

Russia is a country that is almost surrounded by land, with difficult access to the sea, and this defines its geopolitical strategy as its most, to fight to push its frontiers to the West, according to American analyst George Friedman¹, in a Forbes article. That is why, he shows, *Russia is more like Sparta, not Athens, if we look at the ancient models of development.* A nation that pulls its strength not from wealth, like the West, but from the effort to overcome the hardships and vulnerabilities it faces, is more united, and from its simple geography it can actually reveal the danger to the West, however bad would be its economy, Friedman considers.

The American shows that *the most important feature of Russia is that it is caught nearly complete between lands. The European Peninsula is surrounded by three sides of the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea. The division to Russia is seen on the map if we draw a line from St. Petersburg to Rostov on Don. The line almost coincides with the eastern border of the Baltic countries, Belarus and Ukraine.*

Moreover, *Europe controls Russia's access to the oceans*, says George Friedman. European Russia has three points to access international maritime trade: through the Black Sea and the Bosphorus Strait - a Turkey-controlled route that can easily be blocked through the Denmark waters from St. Petersburg - and this passage is easily blockable, and through the Arctic Ocean, to Murmansk, crossing Greenland, Iceland and the UK. The access of a country to the sea can greatly influence its economic and political power.

The Russian population is concentrated along its western border with Europe and at the southern border with the Caucasus (the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea). Siberia is sparsely populated, and its rivers and infrastructure are heading west. The heart of Russia's agriculture is in the southwest. North Russia cannot support agriculture, which makes Russia's border with Ukraine and that of the

¹ George Friedman – the manager of *Stratfor Analysis Group*.

Caucasus and Central Asia vital. As in the population, the west and south are the most productive Russian agricultural areas.

The importance of these two regions - the West and the South - can also be seen from Russia's transport infrastructure. Railways remain critical in Russia, and they are oriented to the West and to the former Soviet republics. Only two routes link European Russia to the Pacific maritime region, and Siberia is almost isolated, shows the American analyst.

Being a terrestrial power, Russia is vulnerable, being situated on the European Plain with few natural barriers to defend it from Western enemies. To the east of the Carpathian Mountains, the plain goes south, and the gate of Russia is open, says Friedman. To this is added that Russia has few rivers, which makes domestic transport difficult and reduces economic efficiency. That is why, *Russia's strategy is to move its frontier as far as possible. European countries from the first Eastern line - the Baltics, Belarus, and Ukraine - provide Russia with the depth from which Russia can project its power and present economic opportunities.*

At present, the Russian border has not been so close to Moscow for a long time, losing control over both country lines from the European Peninsula. The West absorbed the Baltic countries in NATO, bringing St. Petersburg a few hundred kilometers from the North Atlantic block. To stabilize the situation, they fought the Chechens, intervened in Georgia and sent troops to Armenia.

However, after 1991, the key country for Russia was Ukraine, because the border with it was passing through the heart of Russian agriculture, the most populated areas and the transport nodes.

In the current conflict with Ukraine, Russia assumes that Europeans and Americans have a goal beyond creating a pro-Western regime in Kiev. From their perspective, this buffer zone was lost, and Ukrainian forces hostile to Russia advanced near the Russian border. The situation is precarious for Russia at this time, and this means that things will not remain like this in Ukraine, because Russia cannot assume that the West's interests in the region come from good intentions. At the same time, the West cannot assume that Russia, if occupying Ukraine, will stop here. That is why we are in the classical situation where two forces assume the worst one about the other. However, Russia is in a weaker position, shows Friedman.

Although Russia has been involved in the conflict in Syria, demonstrating its military capabilities and gaining strength against the West, this operation is peripheral to Russia's interests, for which the western border and Ukraine as well as the southern Caucasus remain the main objectives.

It is clear that Russia's economy, based on energy exports, is doing badly because of the collapse in oil prices, but Russia's economy has always been bad. That did not prevent her from winning the Second World War. The difficulties unite the Russians. Why Russia is Sparta rather than Athens. Thucydide distinguished Athens and Sparta, showing that Athens is closer to the sea and has an excellent port in Piraeus, while Sparta was not a maritime power. Athens was much richer than Sparta, because it could make international trade much easier than Sparta, surrounded by land. That is why Athens was rich, but there were two flaws here: the luxury that corrupts and the vast experience that creates moral ambiguity. On the other hand, Sparta was much poorer than Athens, not based on trade, but on hard work. It did not know the world but had a robust sense of good and evil.

This distinction could also be made between the European Peninsula and Russia, according to George Friedman. Europe pulls its power out of wealth, but it is also prone to internal struggles. Russia, though provincial, is rather united and pulls its power out of difficulties.

It is not prosperity that unites the Russians, but the idealized vision of loyalty to the Russian Mother, and from this point of view there is a deep fault between Europe and the US, on the one hand, who use

prosperity as a justification for loyalty, and Russia, where loyalty derives from state power and the inherent definition of being Russian. All this gives the Russians an opportunity. No matter how bad the economy would go, the simplism of their geographical position gives them the ability to surprise their opponents and perhaps make them more dangerous, Friedman says in the conclusion of his analysis.¹

6. Conclusions

Moldova is considered to be decisive for the redesign of the regional geopolitical configuration. Located on the southern flank and considered a NATO and Russia buffer zone, it was wickedly compressed between two powerful force fields, with little chance of finding a way out.

The Transnistrian problem is no longer an internal problem of the Republic of Moldova, it is an international one and it can be solved only with the help of the international community and only after the Russian military retreat from the region. The real democratization of the Transnistrian region could only begin after the withdrawal of the Russian troops, after the demilitarization of the region and the liquidation of the structures in the region to suppress the democratic values. The presence of Russian troops on the territory of Moldova is the main cause of the failure to democratize the country and its autonomous development, and the influence of force instruments is felt in all sectors of political life. Transnistria is maintained in the so-called “frozen conflict” but everyone is aware that Moscow can always “warm up the situation” if it sees its interests threatened.

This military outbreak is an essential factor in keeping Russia's control over the entire area. No political analysis can disregard the presence of the regional military force. Hence the discussion about the real authority of the Moldovan state. This is the brief summary of Bessarabian issues...²

From a geopolitical perspective, Russia has two major problems: a bad demography and difficult/impossible to defend frontiers. At present, Russia's south and west borders stretch over 11,000 km, from the Caucasus Mountains to the Arctic Circle. Russia already does not have enough troops to defend this border, and due to negative demographic trends it will have fewer available soldiers in the future. That is why Russia needs to shorten its border to about 1,500 km, much easier to control/ defend. Russia would only need some clever moves on the geopolitical chessboard: to head west and occupy three major cities: Riga, the eastern half of Warsaw and Bucharest. Is it possible? What will NATO do?

We do not know the answer. But we saw how Russia can do it: in a way that NATO and other countries of the European Union do not appreciate at the real scale and significance of the Russian territorial advances until it is too late. We have seen relatively recently how Russia has quickly entered a country, either officially or unofficially, as in the case of Ukraine, under the pretext of protecting native Russians or Russians from the former Soviet Union. It happened in 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia, and much more recently, when Russia invaded Crimea and vast portions of eastern Ukraine. In both cases, the international response was just a noisy indignation and some occasional economic sanctions. However, NATO has never felt the need to trigger a war due to the two invasions. I think NATO will have the same reaction when Russia moves forward in Ukraine, Moldova and the Caucasus. But if a Russian invasion of the Baltic countries is to come, I think NATO will react. But the Baltic countries will be conquered very quickly, possibly in a weekend, and NATO will not be able to defend them initially.

¹ <http://www.gandul.info/international/zece-harti-care-explica-strategia-rusiei-15089856>.

² <http://cyd.ro/tinta-geopolitica-rusiei/>.

An analogy between the pre-World War II situation and what is now happening with Russia is a must. The great historical lesson of Munich should not be forgotten. Even if in Russia the geopolitical twilight is approaching.¹

The EU's contribution to conflict resolution in the European space was mainly in the form of economic aid. European funding is an important support for conflicting communities, but it is not the most effective solution to conflict resolution. The EU has also been involved in supporting the dialogue between the parties, but has failed to remove the existing borders between the various conflicting communities.

Addressing conflicts in the immediate neighborhood is important for the EU, both because of their negative effects on neighboring countries and the security risks they pose to the EU. The problems faced by the Republic of Moldova, and here I am referring especially to the Transnistrian conflict, are major obstacles in the process of democratization and, at the same time, sources of instability for the rest of Europe.

However, the EU is not generally perceived as an important actor, but rather as a “neutral benefactor”. This has its advantages, but also underlines the limited role that the EU assumes in the transformation of conflicts. The EU is not an independent actor, because its actions depend on local political conditions, nor does it have a direct impact on society.

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