

The conflict in Transnistria: where things are, why, and where they might be going

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For almost two decades, the brief and comparatively not very intense violent conflict between Transnistria and Moldova has been 'frozen': the lack of violence has been matched by the lack of tangible progress towards a final, sustainable settlement. At times, there has been a flurry of activity, on at least one occasion the parties came tantalizingly close to reach status agreement, but for the most part talks between the sides, mediated by Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, and with the EU and US as observers, have produced very little. To be sure, there are about a half-dozen relatively [concrete proposals](#) which reflect a basic consensus on the parameters of a settlement (including most importantly special territorial status for Transnistria, power sharing, and international guarantees). There are also between 140 and 170 different bilateral agreements between the sides, but no-one knows exactly how many, what their legal status is, and which have been made obsolete by later agreements and/or by developments on the ground. What they all have in common, sadly, is that almost none of them has ever been implemented.

The question is, why? It is always tempting in such situations to allocate blame to the sides and/or the third parties involved. Often, Russia is singled out for its alleged obstruction, and while certainly no solution can be found without Russia, Russia cannot single-handedly deliver a solution either. The European Union is a relative late-comer in the process, it runs [programmes](#) to make Moldova more attractive for Transnistrians and help the country on its path to closer EU integration, but lacks, at this stage at least, a real strategy for what to do with the conflict. Transnistrians, in public, insist on their right to self-determination and thus independence. But most importantly, one has to recognise that the status quo over the past 19 years has been stable, tolerable for many, and profitable for some—not only in Moldova and Transnistria, but also in Ukraine and Russia, and among the many serious crises the EU has had to deal with since it became a more aspirational international security player, Moldova was hardly a major threat. In other words, there has been little desire on the ground to change things and no pressure from the outside to do so.

Is this a problem? It would not have been had there not all of a sudden been a push on the international level to make the Transnistria conflict a test case for EU-Russia security cooperation, the first collaborative effort between the two in a newly to be created EU-Russia Political and Security Committee, institutionalising the process begun some five years ago with the [Common Space for External Security](#) as part of the EU-Russia dialogue. For many in Brussels and Moscow, and to some extent Washington, such a test case is needed to enable Russia and the West to address jointly the real and more serious security challenges they both face, including in Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Africa and which neither side can handle on its own. To press home this point, in quick succession over the past months, senior British, German, EU and US officials visited the Moldovan capital Chisinau, including [EU High Representative Baroness Ashton](#) and [US Vice President Biden](#), all making a point about the need and importance of resolving the Transnistria conflict. Yet, this external push is not the problem in itself, it is the lack of preparedness of the conflict parties and the publics on both sides to deal with it. There is little by way of a real understanding, let alone strategy, to manage not only the negotiation of a sustainable settlement but the rather difficult reintegration process that will inevitably follow after two decades of separation.

The challenge for Moldova and Transnistria is now to make the best of this situation. They will need to rely on international support in coming to the right settlement, one that can be sustained over time and makes things better for both sides. The challenge for the international community is to proceed with care in managing the complex dynamics of this process locally, regionally, and internationally. Meaningful security cooperation between Russia and the EU (and by extension NATO) cannot be achieved or sustained at the price of a solution for the Transnistria conflict that will do more harm than good. In this sense, meaningful European and transatlantic security cooperation is not just about improved cooperation, it is also about improved security.