The Annexation of Crimea and the Secessionist War in Eastern Ukraine: A View from the Republic of Moldova

Abstract. The paper examines the official reactions in the Republic of Moldova to the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the secessionist war in eastern Ukraine. It also analyses the impact of these events on the interaction between the authorities in Chișinău and Tiraspol in the period between February and June 2014. The strong pro-Russian direction of Transdniestria and the pro-European reforms initiated by Moldova, led to opposing interpretations of the Ukrainian crisis as well as to a distancing in the negotiations on the resolution of the Transdniestrian conflict itself. The high expectations provoked by the triumphalist slogans after Crimea’s annexation, the suggestions made by Russia about the rehabilitation of the territorial identities from the time of the Russian Empire (such as Novorossiya), allowed the Transdniestrian authorities to bring back the previous political agendas, in which the East-West divisions are centre-stage.

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Introduction

The annexation of Crimea at the beginning of 2014 and the secessionist war that followed in Eastern Ukraine generated a wave of political discussions and initiatives in Chișinău and in the separatist region of Transdniestria.

Shortly after the disputed Moscow-backed referendum was carried out on 16 March 2014 in Crimea, through which the region expressed its desire to become a part of the Russian Federation, the separatist authorities in Tiraspol followed suit. The Transdniestrian Speaker, Mikhail Burla was delegated to Moscow to present to the Russian authorities the region’s desire to join the Federation. To back this request, the Supreme Council adopted an official declaration addressed to the Vice President of Russian State Duma, Ivan Melnikov. The document, adopted on 16 April 2014, was asking the Russian authorities “to recognise the Transdniestrian Moldovan Republic as a sovereign independent state”.

At the time, the mass-media reported that during the meeting between Burla and the Russian representatives, a legislative proposal was made that would facilitate the annexation of new territories to the Russian Federation without the agreement of the countries to which these territories are a part of. Burla argued that according to the results of a previous referendum held in Transdniestria in 2006, 97.2 percent of voters made their choice in favour of the region’s

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independence and its unification with the Russian Federation. He further pointed out that for the 200,000 residents living in Transdniestria the living conditions might worsen as the result of Moldova signing the Association Agreement with the European Union and the introduction of restrictive economic measures by the Moldovan authorities. According to the results of 2006 referendum, Burla argued that the next step should be the accession of the region to the Russian Federation. In his speech to the Russian officials, Burla noted that “[t]hese steps should be implemented consistently following not only the logic, but also the legal mechanisms. For the beginning, the recognition of the republic should take place; only then we can address the Russian government with the demand of accession.”

On 22 April 2014, in support of this initiative the non-governmental organization “Союз русских общин” (Union of Russian Communities) from Transdniestria initiated a campaign to collect signatures for a petition addressed to Vladimir Putin. The Russian president was asked “to initiate the procedure for the official recognition of Transdniestria.” The petition argued that “the developments in neighbouring Ukraine, and the rise of the political and economic crisis led violations of the rights of our citizens and increased the pressure on Transdniestria. In the context of security threats Transdniestria, of a particular importance to us is the question of our state’s status and Russia’s position”. Viorica Kohtarjova, the president of the organization, claimed that during the two weeks of campaigning more than 185,000 signatures had been collected in support of the petition. The pro-governmental media in Russia interpreted this petition as a univocal demand of Transdniestria’s population to join Russian Federation. Transdniestria was referred to as a region of Novorossiya. The lists with the signatures were submitted to the Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Dmitrij Rogozin, during his visit to Tiraspol for the Victory Day celebrations on 9 May.

On 10 May, on the way back from Tiraspol to Moscow, Rogozin’s aircraft was grounded at the airport in Chişinău and the lists were confiscated by the Moldovan authorities after a control on-board the aircraft. Furthermore, the Romanian and Ukrainian authorities denied access of Rogizin’s plane through their airspaces. Upon his return to Moscow, Rogozin declared that the

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Moldovan special services, which detained and raided the plane in Chișinău, confiscated only a small part of the lists: “[...] we took care of the main load. The Russian delegation also brought home the Transdniestrians’ appeal to the Russian leadership. It might have a symbolic rather than a legal meaning, but for us this is of importance now. Anyway, Chișinău’s provocation will have serious consequences for our bilateral relations”\textsuperscript{6}. He further declared that “Romania closed their airspace for my plane at the request of the United States. Ukraine did not allow it [the access], again. Next time I will flight by TU-160.”\textsuperscript{7}

This could be regarded as a random episode, if the attitudes that were dominating the Russian society at the time would not be taken into consideration. However, Rogozin’s declaration triggered a firm reaction from the Romanian Foreign Ministry, which requested an official explanation. In his reaction, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, Iurie Leancă declared: “It is time for Mr. Rogozin to understand that the Republic of Moldova should be treated with respect, as are treated other countries which are subject of international law, based on these principles, based on our sincere and strong desire to have the best possible relationship with the Russian Federation.”\textsuperscript{8} Leancă said that the relevant institutions will investigate the issue and will decide on the character of these signatures and on Moscow’s attempt to remove them out of the Republic of Moldova: “I do not see how they [the lists with collected signatures] fit with the official position of the Russian Federation, which always supported the principle of territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.”\textsuperscript{9} More broadly, in Chișinău this episode brought back the discussion about whether Russian Federation respects its role as a mediator and guarantor in Transdniestrian conflict or, whether it is in fact a guarantor of this secessionist region’s existence.

In Chișinău the most widely accepted interpretation of the events in Ukraine was that for the Russian Federation, Ukraine is “the last redoubt” in front of NATO enlargement. The recent signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union and the European vector of Ukraine’s new administration would lead to Ukraine’s integration into Euro-Atlantic organizations. In order to counteract these projects Russia triggered actions of territorial dismemberment and political destabilization of Ukraine. The same pressures - primarily, to stop


\textsuperscript{7} МИД Румынии считает угрозой обещание Рогозина прилететь на Ту-160 [Romania’s MFA considers that Rogozin’s declaration to arrive by a TU-160 is a threat], РИА Новости, 10.05.2014, available at <http://ria.ru/world/20140510/1007291400.html>.


\textsuperscript{9} Ibidem.
the signing and ratification of the Association Agreement with the European Union - could affect the Republic of Moldova. For the officials in Chișițnău these pressures began with the organization of a consultative referendum in UTA Gagauzia on 2 February 2014. The referendum was aimed at determining “Gagauzia’s right to declare its independence.”\textsuperscript{10} The authorities in Chișițnău referred to this referendum as being inspired and financed by Moscow to challenge Moldova’s territorial integrity and to “stimulate separatist processes” in contradiction to the Constitution, the Election Code and other legislative acts of the Republic of Moldova.

With a participation rate at 70 percent, the results of this “consultative referendum” were similar to those of Crimea’s referendum: 98.9 percent of the participants supported Gagauzia independence if the Republic of Moldova would lose its sovereignty, and 98.47 percent of voters supported Moldova’s accession to the Eurasian Customs Union. Although the referendum was declared illegal and unconstitutional by a ruling of the Court in Comrat, the case cannot be considered entirely exhausted. The press both in Chișițnău and București drew worrying parallels between the referendums that took place in Transdniestria and in the South Ossetia in 2006. The latter, even if contested by Tbilisi, was used as a pretext by Moscow in 2008 to invade Georgia, and later in recognizing Ossetia’s independence. The political disagreements spread with the initiation of the secessionist conflict in eastern Ukraine and by regarding this area as part of Novorossiya - an area of interest for the Russian Federation, different from the rest Ukraine. On 24 May 2014 the secessionists declared the creation of the Federal State of Novorossiya which, according to the plans of its founders, should become a union of independent states with the right of accession to other countries.

\textbf{Recycling the concept of Novorossiya}

Most recently, the term “Novorossiya” was used by the Russian president in his annual TV special “The Direct Line with Vladimir Putin” on 17 April 2014. He explained that Ukraine should protect “the legitimate rights and interests of Russian and Russian-speaking citizens of the Southeast”, which “was called Novorossiya back in the tsarist days”. “Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, Odessa were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government.”\textsuperscript{11} The reference to South-eastern

\textsuperscript{10} Gagauzia is a “national-territorial autonomous unit” in the Republic of Moldova, with a population of about 155,000, mostly ethnically Gagauz (Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christians), and with three official languages - Moldovan, Gagauz, and Russian.

\textsuperscript{11} Путин: Харьков, Луганск, Донецк, Херсон, Николаев, Одесса не входили в состав Украины [Putin: Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, Odessa were not part of Ukraine back then], Сєдня.УА, 17.04.2014, available at <http://www.segodnya.ua/politics/pnews/putin-harkov-lugansk-doneck-herson-nikolaev-odessa-ne-vhodili-v-sostav-ukrainsy-513722.html>.
Ukraine as “Novorossiya” by the Russian officials and the mass-media needs to be explained as it points to parallels and continuities in the Russian imperial policies.

The origins of this concept can be traced to another project of Russia’s restoration initiated by Tsarina Ekaterina II during a period when “profound transformations occurred in the way that the Russian state and the Russian elite understood and acted on territory in the eighteenth century.”\textsuperscript{12} It has been mentioned that the consolidation of the state in the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, presided by an elite whose visions and ambitions in shaping territory were distinctly different from those that had prevailed a century earlier, have been edifying of the territorialising models of modern Russia. The tsarist authorities acquired an essentially spatial view of government and gradually developed a diverse range of tools and practices that allowed it to deepen its conceptual and physical grip on the territory of the state, to emphasise “the size and expansion of Russia’s territory as national achievements and the acquisition and display of Russian territorial knowledge as acts of patriotism.”\textsuperscript{13} In a message addressed to the Austrian emperor Joseph II on 10 September 1782, Ekaterina II unveiled a plan of Russian imperial diplomacy regarding the oriental policy which was inspired by Counsellor A. A. Bezborodko and General Field marshal Gh. A. Potemkin. Later known as the “Greek Project”, this plan was drawing the task for the geopolitical reorientation of the Russian Empire. That is away from the Baltic Sea region and Peter I’s interest in the German-Protestant world, to the extension towards the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkans, inhabited by Greeks, south Slavs, Moldavians and Wallachians. These territories were previously united under the Byzantine sceptre and, earlier, by the state of Alexander the Great.\textsuperscript{14} This geopolitical reorientation mirrored Tsarina’s support for “an active oriental policy” to defeat the Ottoman Empire and temper the rebirth of the Byzantium. In fact, Ekaterina II initiated a geopolitical game with multiple objectives and options for its implementation.\textsuperscript{15}

One of the unmentioned objectives of this plan was the intention of annexing the Crimea and soon after receiving assurances of support from the Austrian Emperor, a military campaign was launched. It was led by Potemkin ended in August 1783 in Russia’s favour. Potemkin outlined an action plan “to bind” the peninsula to the Russian Empire in a series of writings


\textsuperscript{13} Ibidem, 53-54.

\textsuperscript{14} Андрей Зорин, Кормя двуглавого орла… Литература и государственная идеология в России в последней трети XVII - первой трети XIX века [Feeding the headed eagle... Literature and state ideology in Russia in the last third of 17\textsuperscript{th} – the first third of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century]. Москва 2001, 38-39.

addressed to Ekaterina II in October 1782 - Reflections of a Russian patriot about past wars with the Tatars and ways to stop them forever. His plan included the redeployment and settlement of 30 000 soldiers in this region, with their descendants to be recruited in the army reserve; the resettlement of Russian peasants from other provinces, that apart for receiving land would be prepared for military service as well. Potemkin also sought the relocation in the area of Cossacks from the Don River region, Ukrainians (Малороссы - Russ.) and other Christians such as Greeks, Armenians, Wlachs and Bulgarians. He declared “Thus, we may venture to say, that soon Crimea will become forever Christian and Russian.”

Potemkin made several proposals about the toponymy of the area. Crimea was to return to its previous name - Hersonia; the city of Caffa was to be renamed as Feodosia; “and, in memory of the fact that here the Grand Duke Vladimir received the holy Christian faith, to be built a great temple of God.” After Crimea’s annexation more changes were made such as Taurida, Sevastopol, Simferopol, Eupatorija, Panticapaeum, Fanagoria. Immediately after the Treaty of Jassy (9 January 1792) and the annexation of the territory between Dniester and Bug, the tsarist authorities founded new settlements such as Odessa (1794), Grigoriopol (1792), Ovidiopol (1795), Tipaspol (1792). These, in the authorities’ view, were to support the symbolic environment of Translatio Imperii project. Therefore, the South-eastern border of the Russian Empire reached the Dniester River in 1792. At the same time, the area between Bug and Dniester is referred to in some texts as Bessarabia, before this name was given to another region, annexed by Russian Empire in 1812 after the Peace Treaty of Bucharest. The expansion of the Russian Empire in South-eastern Europe and its colonization practices, together with new military and administrative structures, reflect a symbolic reconfiguration of the new territorial identities in order to “build” legitimacy of the imperial presence in these regions.

Until 1873 Crimea, as well as the other regions mentioned above, became part of several administrative units under the name Novorossiya (Novorossiysk Governorate - between the years 1764-1783, 1796-1802; Novorossiysk-Bessarabian governor-generalship - between the years 1822 to 1874). The structure and the administrative centres of these new units, from one period to another, were different and did not correspond to previous boundaries. The current rehabilitation of the name of an administrative structure, absent for over a hundred years, on the

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16 Г. В. БЕРНАДСКИЙ, Записки о необходимости присоединения Крыма к России (Из Тавельского архива В. С. Попова) [Notes on the need for the accession of Crimea to Russia (From the Tavelsk Archive of V. S. Popov)], Известия Таврической Ученой Архивной Комиссии 56, no. 32. Симферополь 1919, 111-126.
17 Ibidem, р. 167-168.
18 См.: ПАВЕЛ СУМАРКОВ, Путешествие по всему Крыму и Бессарабии в 1799 году. С историческим и топографическим описанием всех тех мест [Travel around Crimea and Bessarabia in 1799. With historical and topographical description of all those places]. Москва 1800.
Eastern edge of this area and in the immediate vicinity of the Russian Federation, suggest a revival the old practices and imperial projects of territorial expansion.

**Transdniestrisation of Ukraine**

The authorities in Chișinău reacted with concern to the most recent annexation of Crimea by Russia, reiterating the idea that it sets a precedent that breaks the principles of collective security; that it has the potential to trigger new conflicts and to endanger the neighbouring countries; and that it “dynamites” the political situation in Ukraine and Moldova on the eve of signing the Association Agreement with the European Union. For the Moldovan political class it was an argument in favour of maintaining the pro-European vector.

Following the logic of the previous conflicts in Transdniestria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it was noted that the next stage in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, would be for the Russian Federation to request the status of moderator, thus triggering what is referred to as the Transdniestrisation of Ukraine. The notion of “transdniestrisation” appeared earlier and was often mentioned in the context of postulates and possible consequences of the “Kozak Plan”19. According to this notion Russia’s interest in the Republic of Moldova is not to recognize Transdniestria as an independent state or to aim its annexation. In reality its interest is to keep the geopolitical status quo in the region and conflict is a mechanism to maintain its control on Tiraspol and Chișinău, and to stop / limit the expansion of the West.

In its statement of condemnation of the Russian military aggression in Ukraine, the Chișinău based Foreign Policy Association noted: “The recent events show that we are witnessing the phenomenon of ‘transdniestrisation of Crimea’. The Russian Federation applies the same method of dividing the society, of encouraging and institutionalizing separatism, and of creating illegal structures of state power in an independent and sovereign country, experienced for the first time 22 years ago in Transdniestria.” 20 In the same vein, the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration of the Republic of Moldova, Eugen Carpov, while answering “Are there any similarities between the transdniestrisation Ukraine and the way the problem of Transdniestria emerged in Moldova?” noted that: “The situation was different. In 1992 the Soviet Union disappeared and it was attempting the reorganization of territories that remained after the

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empire’s disappearance. Now we see a different geopolitical situation, but surely many elements can be seen in parallel: internal movements and the use of military troops, disobedience to the central authorities, and many other items that would be very good for our European partners to avoid; at least, by learning the lessons that we passed.” 21 The newly elected president of Ukraine, Petr Poroshenko, recounted his own childhood and adolescence years that he spent in Transdniestria. While delivering a speech the problems Ukraine war currently facing and the possible ways of reconciliation, Poroshenko mentioned that “my classmates died in this local military conflict”. The self-proclaimed and unrecognized republic hardly “flickers” already for the third decade, “[a]nd I will not let the Donbas turned into something similar to Transdniestria” 22.

The Russian Spring and Transdniestria

The official positions taken by the authorities in Chișinău and Tiraspol regarding Ukraine, further distanced the two in the ongoing negotiations on the resolution of the conflict in Transdniestria itself. The withdrawal in April 2014 of the Transdniestrian authorities from the “5+2” negotiations format, meant that, de facto, the Transdniestrian administration did not participate in the process of European integration of the Republic of Moldova. Thus, it maintained its affiliation to the geopolitical projects directed by Moscow. An argument for the Tiraspol authorities in favour of this affiliation was the rehabilitation of Novorossiya - a region under Russian control, with its borders closer to Transdniestria. On the eve of the signing of the Association Agreement by Moldova, Yevgeny Shevchuk, the Transdniestrian president, once more put forward the idea that a “civilized divorce” would be “the best solution” between Transdniestria and the Republic of Moldova.

At the same time it has to be mentioned that while vocal, the Transdniestrian leaders were as well cautious in their statements. Although Transdniestrian foreign ministry expressed its support for the referendum in Crimea and “the decision to enter into the composition of the Russian Federation”, Yevgeny Shevchuk did not officially express his opinion vis-à-vis Crimea’s annexation. Furthermore, various requests to recognize their “sovereign state” and initiate diplomatic relations made by the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk to the Transdniestrian authorities, remained unanswered. For the administration in Tiraspol concerning


22ПЕТР ПОРОШЕНКО: Я не допущу, чтобы Донбасс превратился в нечто подобное Приднестровью [I will not let the Donbas turned into something similar to Transdniestria], Сайт города Донецк, 22.06.2014, available at <http://www.62.ua/news/560451>.
has been that the new Ukrainian agreed to cooperate with the Moldovan government in resolving the conflict in Transdniestria. While the Ukrainian Rada adopted a decision on 17 June to close all customs offices under the Transdniestrian authorities’ control, the authorities in Chișinău initiated several criminal investigations against some of the officials in Tiraspol.

Combined with these external pressured are the views put forward by the internal opposition in Tiraspol. In one of his articles published on 18 March 2014, the political analyst Andrei Safonov noted that after a period of two decades projects of USSR’ integration are put forward: the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union. Although a union state still does not work completely between the Russian Federation and Belarus, some regions of the former Soviet Union move toward a union. On 17 February 2014 the Russian Federation acted with the same decisiveness as it did in 2008 when it recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In answering the question “What should Transdniestria do in these conditions?” Safonov noted, in February 2014, that Ukraine is for Transdniestria a gateway to the East and Transdniestria is for Ukraine a Western shield, “a buffer in the way of the militant Romanism”.

“During all these months of confrontation neither the government nor our society has given any reasons to the political forces in Ukraine to accuse the Transdniestrians of insincerity, shadow games or any hostile intentions against the Ukrainian people”. According to Andrei Safonov, Transdniestria’s strategies in relation to Ukraine have to be built in several directions: (1) economic interaction between adjacent regions at the border between Ukraine and Transdniestria (particularly Odessa); (2) privileged trade status with Ukraine; (3) preservation of the Ukrainian military observers in Transdniestria; (4) drafting projects to create free trade and business zones on the border between Transdniestria and Ukraine; (5) create incentives to attract Ukrainian investments to Transdniestria, without any sanctions from Chișinău.

The difficulty with which the Transdniestrians are formulating political solutions to the conflict, suggests that, in this dialogue, the economic arguments become more efficient. However, this contradicts the Kremlin interests, which created separatist enclaves on the territory of former soviet republics - the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine - in order to keep its influence in the region, to delay

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the process of European integration and, still, will insists on inclusion / entry of the separatist entities in the economic and political structures created by Russian Federation and its allies.

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