

The European Union engagement with de facto states from the Black Sea Region. Some Evidence from Transnistria Region

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Abstract

During the last decade, de facto states from the Black Sea Region have received much attention predominantly seeking to delve into different dynamics around the patron and parent states relations. Less attention is given to the relations of the de facto states with other international institutions. The aim of the policy paper is to address this gap by analyzing the impact of the EU's engagement on the Transnistria region's foreign policy. Moreover, it is seeking to identify whether the EU's strategic actions have resulted in a change in public opinion and political regime behavior in the region. It examines the potential gaps and limitations of the EU's engagement policy in the Transnistria region which can be considered when discussing other de facto states as well.

Overall, the paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the implications and limitations of the EU engagement with de facto states, with a specific focus on the Transnistria region, aiming to shed light on the complexities and challenges associated with such engagement strategies. The findings of the paper suggest that the EU's engagement efforts have not significantly shaped public attitudes or political behavior in the region, raising important considerations for future engagement policies.

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Introduction

The study of the Black Sea Region's de facto states² has increased significantly in the last two decades (Ker-Lindsay 2022; Kosienkowski 2022; Ker-Lindsay & Berg 2018). Yet very few scholars (Istomin & Bolgova 2016; Dembinska & Mérand 2018; Berg & Vits 2020) are looking at the BSR de facto states dynamics through the lenses of the two competing foreign policy projects, those of the Russian Federation and of the EU. To date, none of the existing work on de facto states has thoroughly examined the impact of the engagement³(Berg & Pegg 2016) of European countries on Transnistria⁴ region's foreign policy.

As several scholars pointed out, since the ratification by the European Parliament of the European Union - Republic of Moldova Association Agreement (2014), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) (which applies to the Transnistria region as well starting from 2016, Cenușă 2017⁵), a shift of Transnistria region's exports from Russia and CSI market to the EU one is noticed. However, trade agreements between the EU and the Transnistria region have existed before the DCFTA (Mospanov 2019⁶). Since 2008 the exporters from the region benefited from tax deductions for certain products sold on the EU market. That explains the willingness of Transnistria's elite to accept some conditionality from Moldova's side to ensure the continuation of trade with the EU in the context of the Association Agreement. Thus, the DCFTA just made more visible the balancing economic policy of Transnistria. It is expected that the current regional context due to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine is going to influence the existing balancing policy of the Transnistria region towards the EU.

In this policy paper I aim to discuss the potential impact of exposure (by choice or constraint) of de facto states to the European market and culture on the attitudes, values and foreign policy preferences of the de facto states population and their political elites. Being seen as part of Russian "civilizational space" (Cojocari et al. 2019; O'Loughlin,

² Scholars usually refer to four states in the former USSR as breakaway regions or de facto states (Dembinska & Campana 2017): Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh.

³ The engagement term is understood as a "foreign policy strategy of establishing contacts and building close ties with the government and civil society of the target state" (Smith 2005 in Berg and Pegg 2016).

⁴ "Transnistria" term refers to a secessionist territory established in 1990 as an internationally unrecognized region with administrative headquarters in the capital city of Tiraspol de jure controlled by the Republic of Moldova.

⁵ Cenușă, D. 2017. IPN News Agency. IS DCFTA implemented in Transnistria region or not? Op-ED. Available at: <https://www.ipn.md/en/dosar-transnistrean/81676>

⁶ Grău, L. 2019. Radio Free Europe Moldova. Romania is now an economic window to the EU for Transnistria. Available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/rom%C3%A2nia-este-acum-pentru-transnistria-oferestr%C4%83-economic%C4%83-c%C4%83tre-uniunea-european%C4%83-/29965699.html>

Toal & Kolosov 2015; 2017) and a “Russian puppet”, the Transnistria region’s population has been for decades the target of Russia’s policy of “compatriots”, sharing the media space and historical memory with Russia. This contributes to the shaping of the so-called traditional values, which I argue (Cojocari 2021 in Iordache 2021), are in contradiction with liberal (European) values.

In relation to this, there is a strategic necessity to explore the impact of the EU engagement without recognition policy on the sense of belonging and ideological preferences of secessionist Transnistria region’s population.

Does the knowledge that Europe is a main economic partner of Transnistria change the population’s opinion of Russia and the EU? One can expect that the EU’s engagement with a state would shape the social attitudes towards it and would increase the level of democracy. Is the same expectation applicable in the BSR de facto state where two competing projects exist?

Additionally to the aim of answering the above questions, in this paper I argue the need for developing a new research framework while studying the BSR de facto states, analyzing them as subjects which can make calculated and informed decisions (in a limited options environment) to maximize benefits for secessionist’s elites and ensure the survival of the unrecognized entity (rational actor models). This framework challenges the preferred “Russian puppet” approach showing that the alignment of a de facto state with a foreign actor/state/power is rather a matter of choice than a state of affairs. In showing that, I hypothesize that in the case of the BSR de facto states a lack of choices and alternatives is leading to an increased pro-Russian foreign policy while an engagement of other states with the BSR secessionists entities would decrease the dependency on Russia.

The pros and cons of the “engagement without recognition” with de facto states

International relations discipline defines the engagement as a foreign policy strategic action aiming to build close ties with governments and civil society to shape a conflict or a decision that affects a state’s interest (Henrikson 2013, Berg & Pegg 2016). While engagement is reserved to a state-to-state interaction, engagement without recognition however is meant to allow a collaboration of a state with an internationally unrecognized territory (de Wall 2017). That’s why its role is usually two-sided: it can serve as a conflict management tool for international actors, as well as a “gate” for secessionist entities to be part of diplomatic relations (Ker-Lindsay 2014) and visible to the rest of the world. As the concept’s meaning strongly suggests, and due to its double-edged sword effect,

engagement without recognition is a policy aiming to allow international relations with unrecognized entities under the legal diplomatic practices and without compromising the parent states'7 territorial integrity.

Its primary strategic role however remains unchanged. While applied, it is expected to produce desired changes in the target de facto states (promoting democratization and influencing political change) (Kupchan 2010); modify the behavior of regimes (Haass and O'Sullivan 2000); undermine illiberal practices; building popular support for the engaged states and providing an alternative for political course (Berg and Pegg 2016). In the case of the BSR de facto states, along with maintaining diplomatic relations, engagement without recognition of European states endeavors to achieve a decreasing dependency on Russia, offering the de facto states' elite an alternative to diversify their economic and political channels.

Yet, not always is the international actors' direct interaction with de facto states, and their usually undemocratic regimes, seen as a good and legal practice. It is argued that a diplomatic engagement with a de facto state, no matter of its ultimate purpose, is an act of legitimization of secessionist entities and their political elites which are invoking the self-determination principles. The parent states perceive the diplomatic relations with the break-away territory as a threat to their territorial integrity, thus usually not allowing any engagement with secessionists or permitting a controlled access (Geldenhuis 2009).

The challenge of the policy remains on how to follow the strategic interest of decreasing Russian influence in the Black Sea Region in a way that would accommodate the parent states' concerns, without stimulating a desire for recognition of de facto states while offering them an alternative of survival. While some parent states categorically refuse to take some risks for the long-term benefits (e.g. Georgia), the Republic of Moldova is allowing, since the very beginning of the secessionist conflict, direct bilateral relations between the Transnistria region leaders and international actors, including the EU. As Berg and Pegg (2016) correctly pointed out, in doing so, the Republic of Moldova's decision is based on a cost-benefit analysis and, I would add, lack of necessary resources to solve the conflict, which leaves the relevance of norms and principles of international law in second place. The next section is showing several engagement's directions of the EU in the Transnistria region.

⁷ In the scientific literature, parent state is defined as the recognized sovereign state the de facto state is trying to secede from.

The costs of building ties with de facto states: evidence of the EU in Transnistria secessionist entity

V. Axyonova and A. Gawrich (2018) defines four levels of international actors' engagement with de facto states. According to the authors, an actor can avoid any direct interaction with a de facto state and focus instead on cooperation with parent states. In this case the development projects granted to the parent states can or cannot target the de facto entity. The next level of engagement is the monitoring of the social-political situation of a de facto state through observation and international actors' visits to the unrecognized territory. Then, as a more frequent and accepted practice, states can take part in the confidence-building as parties (observants, mediators or peace guarantors). They can increase the dialogue between conflict parties and stimulate negotiations. The last and most active level – the cooperation, includes economic assistance, provisions of security measures and exchange of information with secessionist leaders and civil society.

As one can notice, except for the first level, the rest of the three are not mutually exclusive. They can be implemented complementary or partially. The most visible European Union's engagement in the Transnistria region is on the negotiation and cooperation level, monitoring being a part of the two. Because both negotiation and cooperation levels include different spheres of actions and not just the political one, below I provide an overview of the EU's engagement in the Transnistria region on different spheres and not on the levels as defined by authors.

Political engagement

The political engagement of the EU with the Transnistria region comes in a broader context of the intention of strengthening the relations between the EU and the Republic of Moldova. Although the EU' interest in engagement started just at the beginning of 2000s, in the last ten years the EU Delegation has managed to become one of the most active international actors involved in the negotiation as an observer in the 5+2 conflict settlement format (Popescu & Litra 2012). The EU's role in the conflict settlement is two folded: at the diplomatic and security level, and through financial incentives.

The most well known examples of diplomatic and security initiative addressing Transnistria region conflict settlement perhaps is the The Meseberg process launched in 2010 by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Aside from aiming to involve Russia in the European security architecture and relaunching the EU-Russia security agenda, the initiative was stipulating the necessity of concrete measures for conflict progress from Russia in line

with the Republic of Moldova’s interests (Popescu & Litra 2012). The Meseberg initiative failed, yet it helped to re-launch in 2011 the 5+2 talks on Transnistria abandoned since 2006. In 2016 new progress was made under the German chairmanship of the OSCE - Berlin Plus package.

Although not always in line with the Republic of Moldova’s civil society approach to the conflict settlement, the diplomats of Germany has been constantly supporting the 5+2 format by proposing different settlement models and organizing conferences to identify technical projects that could contribute to the building of closer ties (UNDP Report 2014-2017).

Another diplomatic and security action is the EU Border Assistant Mission⁸ launched in 2005, involving the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. As stated in the official acts, the mission’s main objective is to contribute to promoting the confidence building and peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. In practice it contributes to the countering of cross-border smuggling (Axyonova & Gawrich 2018), affecting the Transnistria black market business which is not in line with the secessionist’s leader’s aims. As part of the conflict settlement, the EU is focusing on confidence building measures between the two banks of Dniester River adopting small steps in the long term. Thus, one of the EU’s development central programs is ‘Support to Confidence Building Measures’ – running since 2009. Back then, the EU committed to invest nearly €30 million in the Transnistria region (Popescu & Litra 2012). Currently, the program is in its last and sixth phase ending in 2025 with spendings exceeding €40 million.

Table 1. Support to Confidence Building Measures’ financial aid. Source UNDP⁹

Program Phase	Period	Sum USD
Phase I-II	2009-2012	Aprox. 4,016,868.00
Phase III	2012-2014	Aprox. 11,508,897.00
Phase IV	2015-2018	11,104,000.00
Phase V	2019-2023	15,104,143.00
Phase VI	2023-2025	4,375,200.00
Total		Aprox. 46,109,108.00

⁸ EUBAM official website available at: <https://eubam.org/>

⁹ UNDP official website available at: <https://www.undp.org/moldova/projects/support-confidence-building-measures-programme-vi>

According to the EU-UNDP Confidence Building Measures 2014-2017 report¹⁰, there are many other projects and initiatives sponsored by European states and directed to the Transnistria region. Among few mentioned are the UK government's Conflict Management Initiative; the Embassy of Sweden projects, contributing to the institutional capacity building in Transnistria; The Embassy of Poland funding program which supports the Left Bank through the small-grants scheme; The Austrian Development Agency which has supported the Council of Europe's Confidence Building Measures programme; the Council of Europe financial aid, and many others.

Unfortunately, a complete statistic of the entire amount of the investment in the confidence building measures is not publicly available nor is public news or information that can help to generate an estimate of costs of the measures.

Economic engagement

As stated previously, the Transnistria region is benefiting from the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area provisions allowing its business and de facto state' enterprises to export under a preferential regime to the EU market. It seems that Tiraspol has a direct channel of communication with the EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova (Axyonova & Gawrich 2018) which also impacted the progress of the negotiation process between Chişinău and Tiraspol on DCFTA conditions. Although the negotiated provisions are not publicly accessible, some opinions are saying that the Transnistria leaders radically opposed any control and certification body from Chişinău. In this regard, it can be expected that the EU compromised quality standards of Transnistria exports to maintain its influence in the region. A. Mospanov (2019) is emphasizing that the DCFTA saved the left bank from an economic catastrophe.

Even though the exports to EU markets are continuing to grow reaching almost 70%, the imports from EU are beneath those of Russia. This might be partially caused by the 2016-2017 Transnistria elites's increases of the import taxes for the EU products (Mospanov 2019).

¹⁰ The report is available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/md/Pro_doc-CBM4.pdf.

Table 2. Exports of Transnistria region by year and country (USD million)

	2001	2005	2010	2015	2018	2019
Total	390,2	579,7	584,9	611,1	685,7	655,9
Including:						
Belarus	1,8	1,7	2,5	2,1	2,9	3,6
Brazil	-	-	27,9	-	-	-
Germany	6,2	28,0	38,2	30,4	6,4	3,4
Italy	18,8	34,3	58,4	39,6	27,2	23,5
Kazakhstan	0,1	0,3	0,5	0,7	0,2	0,2
China	0,0	0,6	0,0	-	2,9	2,5
Moldova, Republic of	105,1	59,4	202,9	299,9	205,7	246,2
Poland	1,0	11,6	14,7	9,1	75,0	34,9
Russia	73,3	231,5	104,3	47,4	71,9	86,7
Romania	12,5	20,2	41,0	94,8	108,5	86,0
Slovakia	0,3	21,4	4,6	8,7	3,0	1,8
USA	42,4	6,7	1,6	1,5	2,3	1,9
Turkey	-	9,7	9,0	0,6	1,1	0,5
Ukraine	14,4	12,8	31,2	51,2	137,0	125,2
France	-	0,7	3,3	2,2	4,5	5,8
Others	114,3	140,8	44,8	22,9	37,1	33,7

Table 3. Imports of Transnistria region by year and country (USD million)

	2001	2005	2010	2015	2018	2019
Total	529,2	855,6	1294,6	1138,3	1154,5	1150,8
Including:						
Belarus	9,6	27,9	60,7	48,4	47,3	45,8
Brazil	0,1	8,0	19,8	0,6	6,9	3,7
Germany	30,3	56,9	61,8	47,2	29,9	30,6
Italy	27,3	35,3	23,0	24,7	16,7	11,6
Kazakhstan	0,1	2,4	13,4	15,7	26,5	22,6
China	0,1	16,1	39,8	13,2	18,3	16,1

Moldova, Republic of	45,5	75,2	44,0	77,0	111,3	99,6
Poland	16,8	44,1	23,4	22,3	23,0	29,9
Russia	145,3	189,3	566,6	587,5	488,5	554,0
Romania	16,4	20,7	15,2	22,0	49,4	86,3
Slovakia	1,9	1,5	7,0	14,1	2,9	3,6
USA	21,3	44,1	21,8	10,4	15,1	14,3
Turkey	2,5	4,5	14,9	12,2	13,3	14,8
Ukraine	111,5	246,8	192,5	161,6	224,2	132,7
France	2,6	3,9	10,2	2,5	2,3	1,8
Others	97,9	78,9	180,5	78,9	78,9	83,4

Source of Table 2 and Table 3: Gosudarstvennaya Slujba Statistiki Pridnistrovye. 2020 Annualy (Translated by author).

According to the Bureau of Reintegration Policies¹¹, in 2022, the exports of economic agents from the Transnistria region reached 67.1%, with a 10.2% increase over 2021. Among the EU countries which absorb over 80% of the exports and imports of the companies in the region are: Romania, Poland, Italy, Germany and Slovakia.

According to the left bank experts, in Germany and Italy, Transnistria region exports textile from the Tirotext concern and the Odema and Vektra factories. As for Poland and Romania, the exports represent mainly the production from the Râbnîța Metallurgical Plant (Mospanov 2019). Compared to previous years, 2022 also recorded an increase of goods imported from the EU into Transnistria, reaching a total of 50.1%.

It is worth mentioning that the EU-Transnistria region trade does not go without side effects. Among the Republic of Moldova's civil society representatives are voices arguing that some EU countries are financing the separatist regime and its survival. According to an analysis of customs border statistics, it is stressed that in 2022, 96% of the Transnistria region's gasoline import came from Romania. The number reached 100% in 2023 when the entire gasoline import of Transnistria came from a Lukoil refinery from Romania¹².

¹¹ Necșuțu, M. (2022). Anticorupție. How much increased the exports of the separatist regime from Tiraspol during the pandemic. High export share to the EU for a region that wants to join Russia. Available at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/cu-cat-au-crescut-exporturile-regimului-separatist-de-la-tiraspol-in-pandemie-cota-mare-de-export-in-ue-pentru-o-regiune-care-si-doreste-alipirea-la-rusia>

¹² Prisacariu, C.; Ozon, S.; Călugăreanu, V.; Oganov, O. (2023). Diesel fuel for GOTR: how EU companies fuel the Russian armed forces in the Transnistrian region. Available at: <https://zonadesecuritate.md/motorina-pentru-gotr-cum-alimenteaza-comaniile-din-ue-fortele-armate-rusesti-din-regiunea-transnistreana/>

Social Engagement

According to the 2022 data from the Chişinău Bureau of Reintegration Policies¹³, the Republic of Moldova, 351,892 people out of the entire population of the Transnistria region (around 475,000) have the citizenship of the Republic of Moldova. From the total number of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova residing in the Transnistria region, 328,625 have passports which means that they benefit from the EU visa-free liberalization since 2014¹⁴. The EU visa-free liberalization contributed to reshaping the preferences for work migration destinations for both citizens of the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistria region. Analyzing the foreign money transfer data from the Transnistria region “central bank”, A. Ostavnaia (2019) concludes that in the 2017-2018 period the amount of money which came from European countries exceeded those from the Russian Federation. The most popular European destinations for Transnistria migrants are believed to be Italy, Germany, Poland and Great Britain. The fact that Great Britain is also among the preferred destinations of Transnistria residents suggests that most probably those working in Great Britain benefit from the Romanian citizenship allowing them to enter the country without visa requirements (Ostavnaia 2019¹⁵).

Yet, the EU engagement in the social sphere is not limited just to granting the freedom of travel for the Transnistria population. The confidence building projects between the two banks of the Dniester river aiming to increase the people-to-people connection, economic development of the region, job creation, community development and small-scale social infrastructure support, has also a cultural dimension, aiming to promote the EU’s cultural heritage in the de facto state.

In doing so, the EU countries are culturally engaging with the main educational institution from the region - the “Taras Shevchenko State University of Tiraspol”. Several exchange services and cultural centers have opened their branches in the Transnistria region. Among these is the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) organizing seminars, workshops,

¹³ Ziarul Național (2023). The Citizens of the Republic of Moldova are the majority in Transnistria. Almost 352 thousands persons that reside in Transnistria have the Republic of Moldova citizenship. Available at: <https://www.ziarulnational.md/oficial-cetatenii-r-moldova-majoritari-in-transnistria-aproape-352-de-mii-de-persoane-care-locuiesc-in-transnistria-detin-cetatenia-r-moldova/>

¹⁴ The European Commission proposed on 27 November 2013 to allow visa-free travel to the Schengen area for Moldovan citizens holding a biometric passport. The decision to transfer the Republic of Moldova to the list of third countries whose nationals are exempt from visa requirement came into effect on 28 April 2014. From this date, the visa obligation for citizens of the Republic of Moldova who hold a biometric passport and want to travel to the Schengen zone for a short-stay was abolished.

¹⁵ Grâu, L. 2019. Radio Free Europe Moldova. Romania is now an economic window to the EU for Transnistria. Available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/rom%C3%A2nia-este-acum-pentru-transnistria-ofereastr%C4%83-economic%C4%83-c%C4%83tre-uniunea-european%C4%83-/29965699.html>

providing information about international exchange programs for the Taras Shevchenko University's students and academic staff.

The Centre for French Culture opened in 2008 in Tiraspol, a resource and information center on contemporary France at the "Taras Shevchenko" University. It has a library with books, films, and computers promoting French culture (de Waal and von Lowis 2020).

Even though the Transnistria students cannot take part in the Erasmus programs, they still have access to some study schemes such as the US Hubert Humphrey Fellowship or Fulbright Scholarships, exchange schemes run by the DAAD and the Alliance Française (de Waal and von Lowis 2020). Similar to the visa-free liberalization, many students can actually access European universities scholarships and grants by having the Republic of Moldova citizenship.

The Assessment of the Impact of the EU's engagement in Transnistria

Quoting the Former Moldovan Foreign Minister Andrei Stratan who once said that Transnistria has been developing a taste for the 'European butter on their bread' (Berg & Pegg 2016), one could expect that the numerous programs and EU's facilities to the de facto state would curb Russian influence in the secessionist entity; would contribute to an increasing popular support towards EU; and would also stimulate democracy in the region.

Moreover, according to the strategic role of the engagement policy, we should also be able to notice in the Transnistria region some signs of a change in the behavior of the political regime (Haass and O'Sullivan 2000) and diminishing of illiberal practices.

One efficient method of assessing the impact of the EU's engagement in Transnistria is consulting the empirical research showing the popular trends among its citizens. The limitation of this method when it comes to de facto states is the scarcity of data and lack of public survey. Other methodological approaches in understanding foreign policy trends can be the analysis of narratives that prevail in public discourse and state-controlled media outlets.

Based on available resources, I scrutinized the media outlets from the Transnistria region, public speeches, and bilateral meetings of the Transnistria region's leaders.

Then, I correlate the above findings with data that I collected in an opinion poll conducted in 2018 on 499 respondents from the Transnistria region. No need to say that this is just an attempt to qualitatively assess the impact of the EU's policy on the Transnistria region's foreign policy and a qualitative in-depth analysis is still very much needed.

Discussions of main findings

In various disciplines there are different approaches to explain how the individual preferences towards the EU are shaped. Two of the most prevalent theories are the power of social institutions to structure individuals' preferences according to the information that they receive and trust, and the utilitarian approach.

According to the first one, scholars are arguing that supranational institutions such as the EU are complex structures which make it harder to be understood by citizens. That's why a person would be more tempted to form an opinion based on the information, opinion, clues, that they receive from information sources that they trust, local institutions' representatives, opinion leaders or other social institutions (school, family, church, etc.). These informants are usually defined as third parties.

Thus, it is expected that positive and non-conflictual relations between a de facto state and the EU would increase the public support of the EU. Similarly, if there is a consensus among political parties and public figures in regards to the beneficial support of the EU to the secessionist's region, public opinion would show a higher willingness to join the union. Similarly, the utilitarian approach is suggesting that people tend to support or oppose the European Union depending on the benefits they believe they would personally get from their state-EU cooperation. Thus, if the EU has an active cooperation with a state or a region, allocating funds for different projects and contributing to their economic development, people will tend to approve a closer cooperation with the EU.

However, in the Transnistria case the above theories seem to fail. Even though, as shown before, the EU has a development program for the Transnistria region, with political, social, and economic directions, and despite the active engagement with business and political elites from the regions, including compromises to "save the region from the economic catastrophe", the 2018 data shows that these efforts are not appreciated by the population.

For example, asked which country is the best economic and political partner for Transnistria, from 499 respondents just 5 respondents mentioned the European Union and 3 Romania. It is worth mentioning that in 2018 the Transnistria region exports already reached a historical high level of almost 70% being headed to EU countries.

Other questions from the data set show that the European Union is standing somewhere in the shadow for most of the Transnistria region's population, representing neither a partner nor a threat for the region. The public opinion does not show any interest in a closer cooperation with the EU (2%) or disappointment in the EU actions (3,4%).

Figure 1. Which is the country you consider to be the best economic and political partner for Transnistria?

Figure 2. Which of the below countries do you consider a threat for Transnistria?

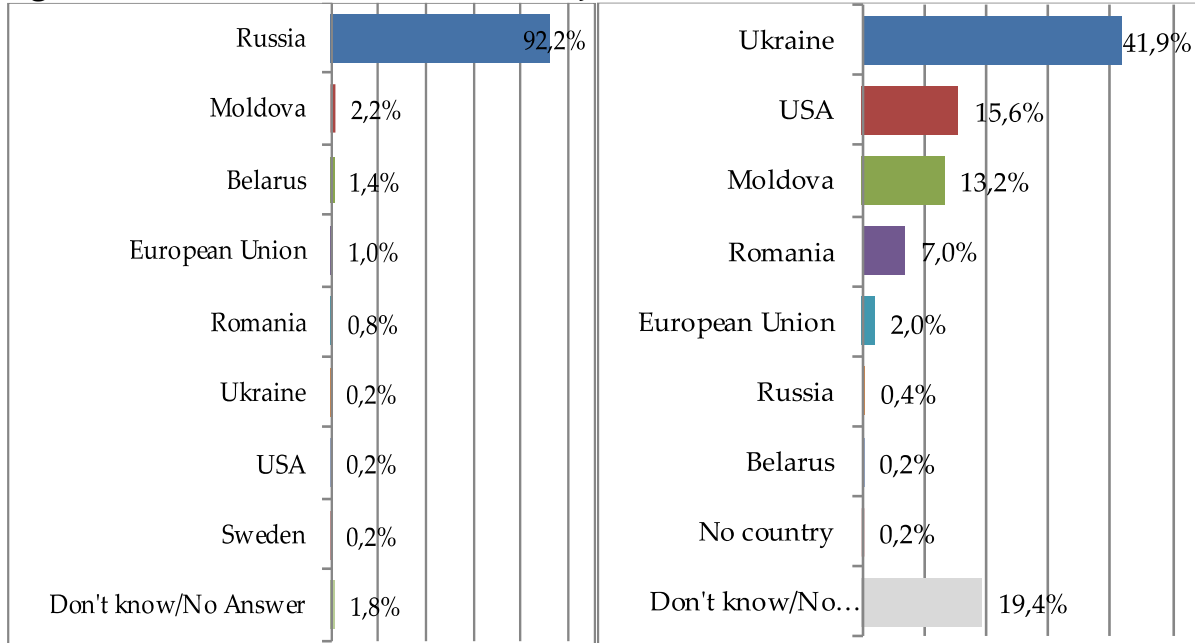
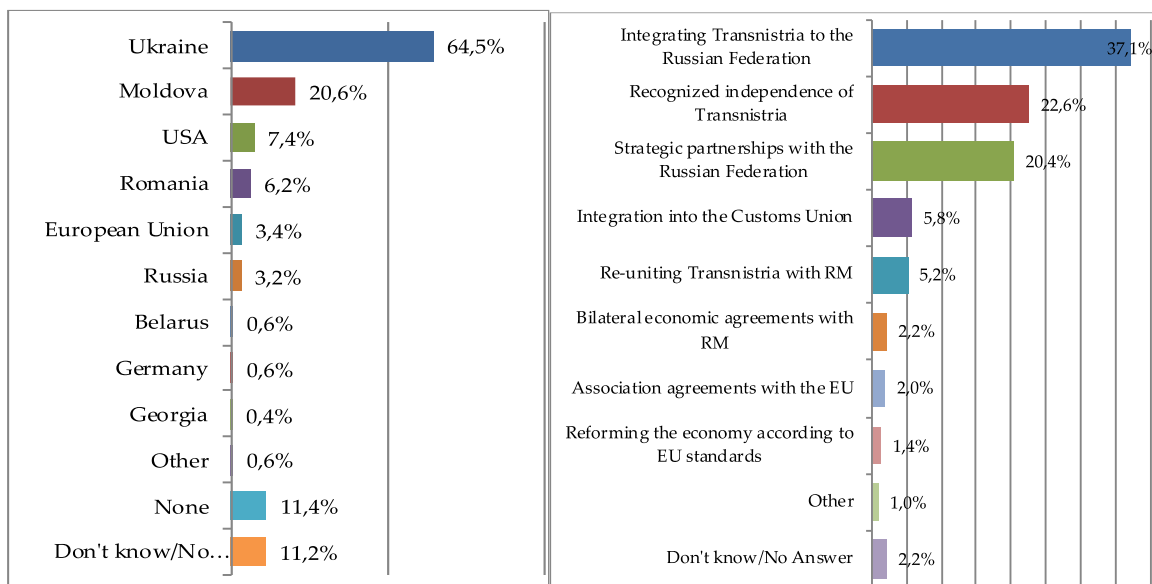


Figure 3. In your opinion, the relationship of Transnistria with which external partner disappointed you the most in the last 5 years? Multiple random answer, maximum 3 choices

Figure 4. Which of the following do you think would lead to a faster development of Transnistria?

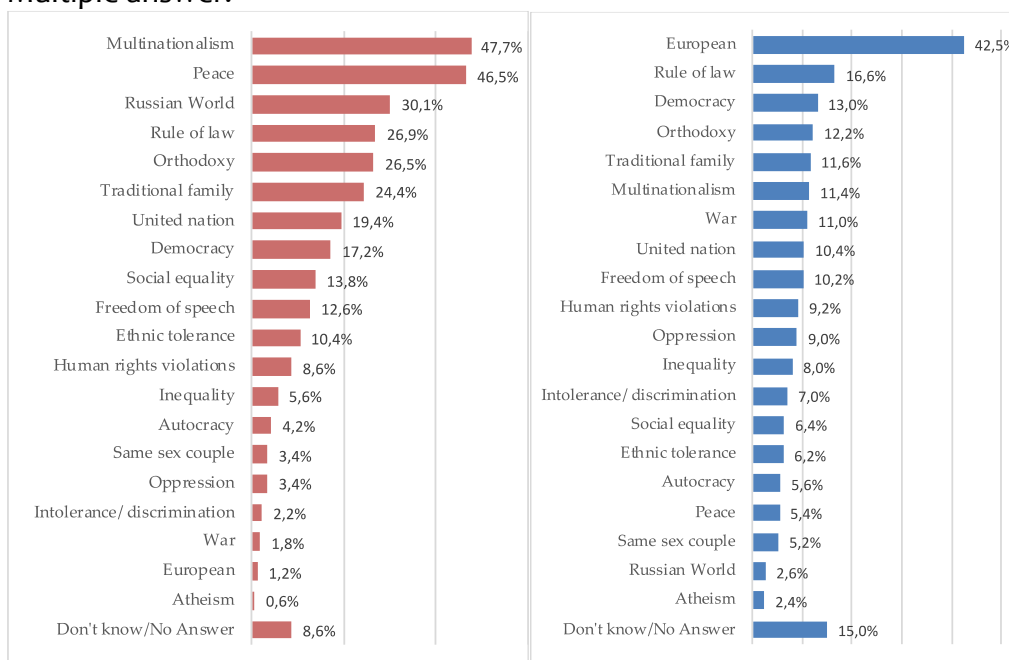


Source: Cojocari et. all (2019). Perceptions, Attitudes and Values of the Population from the Left Bank of Dniester River. Research Report. The Black Sea University Foundation. Romania.

Data emphasize that the strategic aim of the EU to curb the Russian influence in the region, at least on the public level, is failing as well. Interestingly enough, the respondents do not consider that they belong to European culture but do attribute the European features to the inhabitants of the Republic of Moldova.

Figure 5. Which of the following values do you associate with Transnistria? Multiple answer.

Figure 6. Which of the following values do you associate with the Republic of Moldova? Multiple answer.



Source: Cojocari et. all (2019). Perceptions, Attitudes and Values of the Population from the Left Bank of Dniester River. Research Report. The Black Sea University Foundation. Romania.

The opinion poll's findings correlated with the analysis of the prevalent narratives from Transnistria region's public space indicate some potential gaps of the EU's engagement policy in de facto states.

1. At the political level, the EU engagement, according to the bilateral meetings held between the Transnistria's leaders and EU diplomats, seems to be active and fruitful. The bilateral meetings with the representatives of the European countries,

as presented in the press-releases of unrecognized leaders, exceeded those of Russia (3 meetings for Russia compared to 11 for European countries for 2023¹⁶). Although the engagement is active, most often it takes place between closed doors, without media representatives or press releases from both sides to provide details on the held discussions. This results in no or very poor media coverage in the Transnistria local outlets of the constant visits of the EU leaders in the Transnistria region and no information on the relevance or results of these bilateral meetings.

2. The leaders from Transnistria, especially Vadim Krasnoselski, make very neutral and careful statements when speaking about EU countries. No recent evidence (2022-2023) could be found of critics towards the EU action, which cannot be said about the parent state – Moldova.

When V. Krasnoselski does speak about the EU, usually he asks the EU Delegates to take the side of Transnistria in the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova, blaming the officials from Chişinău for violating the rights of the civil population from the Transnistria region. There is some news that is framed to show that the EU supports the Transnistria region and condemns the Republic of Moldova actions. One such case is the blockade by Moldova of the exports of several enterprises from the Transnistria region due to the international sanctions of Russian companies¹⁷. The other one is related to the law against separatism adopted by the Parliament of Moldova in 2023. The news is stressing on the idea that the European Commission criticized the Moldova government for adopting such a law, which can influence the freedom of expression and negatively impact the negotiation process between Moldova and Transnistria¹⁸.

3. In the local news there is enormous scarcity of information on the EU's development projects in the Transnistria region. On the website novostipmr.com, one of the notorious outlets from the region, I could not find any piece of news about the EU support to the region¹⁹. While Russian Federation financial aid to Transnistria decreased considerable in the last years, news that are stressing the Russian support can be found more often than those which are generally

¹⁶ “The president of the Transnistria Moldovan Republic” official website. Available at: <https://president.gospmr.org/press-sluzhba/novosti/>

¹⁷ Novosti PMR (2023). Available at: <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/23-11-23/blokadnye-mery-kishinyova-popali-v-pole-zreniya-es>

¹⁸ Novosti PMR (2023). Available at: <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/23-11-10/evrosoyuz-raskritikoval-prinyatyy-v-moldove-zakon-o-separatizme>

¹⁹ Novosti PMR. Available at: <https://novostipmr.com/ru/hash/evrosoyuz?page=2>

mentioning European countries. Even the news tackling the trade relations of Transnistria are emphasizing the increased trade with Russia and not with the EU countries²⁰.

These observations indicate that currently the EU's engagement with the Transnistria region is oriented towards politics and less towards people. This can partially explain why the European Union countries are absent from public spheres having no impact on shaping the people's attitudes towards the EU.

Moreover, it is noticed that currently, the secessionists' leaders are engaging with the EU, without searching to belong to the EU norms and values. The multiple violations of international law in the region and oligarchic illiberal political actions²¹ show that the Transnistria leaders are receiving more benefits from the EU's engagement than the achieved strategic actions aimed for by the EU. It suggests as well that the secessionists are still counting on the balancing foreign policy as a leverage to maximize their political and economic benefits leaving behind a society that is fed with the belonging to the Russian "civilizational space".

Conclusions and recommendations

The engagement without recognition is a powerful foreign policy action that can contribute to the conflict settlement in de facto states. Due to the engagement of international actors with unrecognized entities which usually are seen as "pariah", the engagement with de facto states is not always welcome nor allowed by the parents' states. When in place, however, the engagement is required to follow the legal diplomatic practices, without compromising the parent states' territorial integrity. Among other strategic aims, when engaging with de facto states from the Black Sea region, European countries are also seeking to diminish the influence of Russia on these entities, allowing them to put "their eggs in different baskets".

Following this consideration, and based on the research findings, I show that, in the case of Transnistria, engagement is contributing to the stimulating of a rationalized or 'utilitarian' foreign policy in de facto states, where political and business elites are

²⁰ Novosti PMR (2021). Available at: <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/22-02-26/tovarooborot-pridnestrovya-v-2021-godu-vyros-na-50-po-sravneniyu-s>

²¹ Guvernul Republicii Moldova (2022),. The issue of respecting human rights in the Transnistria region remains under the scrutiny of the Bureau of Reintegration Policies. Available at: <https://gov.md/ro/content/problema-respectarii-drepturilor-omului-regiunea-transnistreana-ramane-vizorul-biroului>

searching for different options to maximize their benefits and ensure the survival of the unrecognized entity. Thus, it is no longer appropriate to study de facto states just as Russian satellites as the international context evolved and so the de facto states political aims.

The policy reveals that the EU engagement with Transnistria region, although active and at some level, politically benefic, is currently oriented primarily towards politics and less towards people. The closed-door approach in the engagement with secessionist elites has not generated a positive impact at the social level, and the lack of visibility of the EU development aids among the local population is maintaining the EU somehow invisible and unpopular. This is contributing to an excellent opportunity for secessionist leaders to cooperate with the EU for achieving their aims, without any desire of belonging to the EU family.

However, these conclusions are based on limited available empirical data and should be taken with a grain of salt. Although incomplete, these preliminary findings might already support new strategic actions in the Transnistria region and provide an introductory guideline for a comprehensive self-assessment of international actors that are cooperating on different levels with Transnistria civil and political actors.

In this regard, some actions are recommended:

- a) A more transparent approach from the EU states regarding their engagement with de facto states – amount of aid support, of achieved results, of challenges and lessons learned.
- b) An assumed responsibility of the Moldova EU Delegations to supervise the engagement actions from different actors (embassies and non-governmental bodies) to create a real cost efficiency policy.
- c) A revision of visibility guide for the future projects implemented in the Transnistria region to stimulate communication campaigns on the involvement of the EU in the de facto state.
- d) Ensuring for each confidence building program a research-based project to measure the public impact of the project and the level of achievement of the strategic aims of the donor state.

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