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History, Ideology, and Geopolitics in Regional Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space. Transnistria in the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation

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The study of Russia's foreign policy represents an essential field of research for understanding contemporary geopolitical developments and the dynamics of international relations in the post-Soviet space. Russia's foreign policy is among the most complex and controversial subjects of scholarly inquiry, both to its historical continuity and the diversity of internal and external factors that have shaped it over time.

As with other states, Russia's foreign policy—whether during the Russian Empire, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (R.S.F.S.R.), or the Russian Federation—was designed and implemented within specific internal and external contexts. Although it was influenced over time by frequent regime changes and shifting state ideologies, and although it often represented a response to diverse international circumstances, Russian foreign policy has demonstrated a remarkable degree of historical continuity.¹ During the imperial period (up to 1917), partly shaped by the “balance of power” doctrine adopted by the major European states at the Congress of Vienna (1814 - 1815)², Russia's commitment to the international system followed multiple patterns of thought and practice.

During the imperial period (up to 1917), partly shaped by the “balance of power” doctrine adopted by the major European states at the Congress of Vienna (1814 - 1815), Russia's commitment to the international system followed multiple patterns of thought and practice. Positioned as a bridge between Europe and Asia and endowed with significant political, military, and economic potential, Russia was compelled, according to Russian historiography, to respond constantly to challenges to its security. Furthermore, research confirms that Russia has been a key actor in international politics, both through triggering major crises and conflicts and through its contribution to the reshaping of regional and global orders.³ Its borders defined both its cultural and international identity, while its internal territorial organization was closely tied to the nature of its political regimes.⁴

¹ Alan Freeman, Boris Kagarlitsky, Radhika Desai, *Russia, Ukraine and Contemporary Imperialism* (New-York: Routledge, 2019), 99.

² Jacques-Alain de Sédouy, *Le concert européen. Aux origines de l'Europe, 1814 – 1914* (Paris: Fayard 2009).

³ Jennifer Mitzen, *Power in Concert. The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Global Governance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁴ Dmitri Trenin, *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 14.

Although it has evolved in an uncertain and constantly changing environment, Russian foreign policy has been marked, at least since the early eighteenth century, by undeniable continuity - primarily driven by its aspiration to occupy a central place in the international political system. Consequently, Russia's current behavior in international relations must be understood within a historical framework.

By thoroughly examining the Transnistrian issue, this dissertation seeks to provide an analytical framework for understanding Russia's foreign policy, from the imperial era to the Soviet system and up to the present, through the comparison and contrast of recent analytical perspectives. The study focuses on the history, ideology, and geopolitics of Russia in the context of problematic regional conflicts in the post-Soviet space, with particular emphasis on the armed conflict on the Dniester River (the Transnistrian conflict). The research examines the evolution of the Russian Federation's foreign policy as reflected in the Transnistrian region, analyzing Russia's interests and foreign policy projections regarding territories on the left bank of the Dniester⁵ from the eighteenth century to the present. This approach is essential for understanding contemporary Russian policy toward the post-Soviet space, particularly since the current Russian leadership regards recourse to the past as a key element in the foundation of foreign policy decisions.

Analyzing Russia's foreign policy from a chronological perspective - from the Russian Empire, to the U.S.S.R., and later to the Russian Federation - reveals a long-term understanding of Russia's behavior in the international arena. This clearly reflects that the guiding principle of its foreign policy has been the maintenance and affirmation of its great power status. Accordingly, one of the dissertation's central research objectives was to uncover how Russian elites have defined their foreign policy interests and goals. Throughout the evolution of the Russian state, from empire to Soviet regime, the direction of foreign policy thinking and the state's perception of its national interest took diverse forms, yet essentially maintained a distinct continuity. This aspect is fully demonstrated through the case study at the heart of the research.

The transformation of the northern Black Sea region and the Danube Delta into priorities of imperial Russia's foreign policy illustrates its desire to assert itself at least as an equal partner with other powers in matters concerning Southeastern Europe. This aspiration, present since the era of political-diplomatic disputes over the Ottoman legacy, continued with Russia's involvement in successive regional

⁵ The "territories on the left bank of the Dniester" refers to the geographical area between the Dniester River and the Southern Bug.

settlements following the First World War. For the Soviet Union, control of the territories on the left bank of the Dniester and the subsequent creation of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (M.A.S.S.R.) were actions grounded in political, ideological, and expansionist rationales.⁶ By establishing the M.A.S.S.R., and later the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (M.S.S.R.), Moscow pursued its goal of creating a “Moldovan people” distinct from the Romanian one, while provoking and maintaining a state of tension and instability on Romania’s eastern border, with the prospect of future “sovietization” or annexation under favorable geopolitical conditions.

After the dissolution of the Soviet state, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his first post-1991 Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyrev, defined the national interest primarily through integration into the Western economic and security architecture.⁷ This endeavor, however, generated dissatisfaction within conservative political circles, leading to the revival of late-imperial paradigms of thought, with Pan-Slavism and the notion of the unique historical mission of Russian civilization serving as key reference points. Consequently, Russia’s attitude toward regional conflicts in the former Soviet republics reflected a double standard: Yeltsin’s liberal objectives for conflict resolution clashed with the interests of Moscow’s post-Soviet “nomenklatura”. Yevgeny Primakov, Russia’s second foreign minister after 1991, considered it necessary to restore Russia’s great power status and to balance its sphere of influence in the former Soviet republics.⁸ Ultimately, Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov advanced their own vision of “national interest”, centered on consolidating Russia’s special influence in the post-Soviet space through the promotion of the concept of the “Russian World” (*russkiy mir*). This concept encompasses a set of values and policies articulated around national unity, prioritizing the state over individual freedoms and interests, defending “traditional values”, and rejecting interference by Great Powers in what Russia perceives as its “vital” sphere of influence. A closer examination reveals that much of Russia’s foreign policy and national interest can be understood within the broader context of international relations.

This dissertation contributes new data to the research on the Transnistrian issue, positioned within the history and contemporary realities of Russian foreign

⁶ Octavian Țăcu, *Rusia și separatismul transnistrean în Republica Moldova. Implicări geopolitice, militare și energetice* (Chișinău: Litera, 2022).

⁷ Nicole Jackson, *Russian Foreign Policy and the CIS* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁸ Leon Aron, „Foreign Policy Doctrine of post-communist Russia”, *The New Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Michael Mandelbaum (New-York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1998), 31-37.

policy. Given the current stage of research and the documentary sources available, and against the tragic backdrop of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, the study offers a diachronic analysis of the Transnistrian conflict across three distinct periods: 1) the imperial period; 2) the Soviet period; and 3) the post-Soviet period. The entire analysis is framed within a broad perspective that allows for comparison with other border regions of the former U.S.S.R., which Russia has historically integrated into its traditional sphere of influence (eastern and southern Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia). The primary objective of this dissertation is thus analytical in nature, aiming to deepen research and provide new interpretive paradigms regarding Russia's foreign policy toward the post-Soviet space in general, and the territories east of the Dniester in particular.

The war in Ukraine following 2014, and especially Russia's large-scale military invasion launched in February 2022, constituted the initial impetus for this research, lending significant contemporary relevance to this academic endeavor. The current context of the war in Ukraine provides additional significance to the study, illustrating how the past continues to shape present-day political decisions. Since Russia's foreign policy has moved in an uncertain direction (a dynamic that might be termed "constructive destruction"), this variable remains conceptually significant and must be carefully examined when analyzing the present geopolitical situation in the post-Soviet space.⁹ With the aim of explaining the realities of Russian foreign policy orientations in the post-Soviet region, the dissertation advances a clear analytical perspective and argument. The choice to explain Russian foreign policy is of pressing relevance, given the acute need to understand Russia's international role and behavior. Without a thorough investigation of the historical continuity of Russia's foreign policy elements, such an objective cannot be achieved.

In its three chapters, the dissertation examines and analyzes in detail Russia's foreign policy projections. Returning to the concepts of national interest and national security mentioned earlier, it is essential to emphasize that when such political concepts are integrated into foreign policy, they require careful scrutiny. Their meaning can vary significantly depending on the state, culture, educational system, strategic reasoning, and national identity of each international actor. Thus, a meticulous approach is required to understand not only the formal definition of these

⁹ Mihai Melinte, „Politica externă a Federației Ruse în raport cu problematica transnistreană”, *Războiul de pe Nistru din 1992: 30 de ani după*, Coord. Sergiu Musteață, Natalia Putină, Cosmin Budeancă, (Chișinău: Pontos, 2023), 164.

concepts but also the ways in which they are interpreted and applied in diverse geopolitical contexts.

The study deliberately distances itself from partisan interpretations of Russian foreign policy. This means that the research does not adopt a unilateral perspective or one influenced by a specific ideological stance with respect to Russia's foreign policy. The perspective taken here is neither liberal nor nationalist, nor is it subordinated to any particular set of political interests or preferences. While both perspectives have influenced the formation of Russia's foreign policy, each defended its own viewpoint without ultimately managing to respond to the broader need for understanding and applying Russian theoretical-political conceptions in policymaking.

At present, the foreign policy orientations of the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet space remain ambiguous and complex. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was compelled to redefine its geopolitical interests and establish a new type of interaction with the states of this region¹⁰, later developing the concept of the "near abroad" and engaging actively in the resolution of regional armed conflicts. In this process, Russia sought to maintain historical continuity in its foreign policy. *De jure*, the Russian leadership invoked the fundamental principles of international law, particularly the protection of territorial integrity, which in theory implied non-interference in the policies and state directions of the former Soviet republics, including in managing regional conflicts. However, in reality, the evolution of geopolitical circumstances in the post-Soviet space led to the *de facto* abandonment of such detachment, prompting Russia to intervene directly in conflict-affected regions.¹¹

In this context, one may advance the hypothesis that Russia's foreign policy is centered on revisionism and the reaffirmation of its status as a great power. These orientations are pragmatic and less idealistic, especially when framed in terms of Russia's national interests and security values. Ultimately, understanding Russia's foreign policy requires an integrated approach that captures both historical continuities and adaptations to contemporary geopolitical realities.

¹⁰ Mihai Melinte, „Politica externă a Federației Ruse în raport cu problematica transnistreană”, 165.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 165-166.



Abrevieri	3
Sumar	4-8
Introducere	9-32
CAPITOLUL 1 Teritoriile din nordul Mării Negre în viziunile politice și geopolitice ruse și sovietice în secolele XVIII-XX	33-35
1.1. Teritoriile din nordul Mării Negre în politica externă a Imperiului Rus. De la Tratatul de la Kuciuk-Kainargi (1774) la Primul Război Mondial	35-50
1.2. Doctrina bolșevică a revoluției mondiale. Constituirea Uniunii Republicilor Sovietice Socialiste (1922) și crearea R.A.S.S. Moldovenești (1924)	50-61
1.3. Relațiile sovieto-române în perioada interbelică (1918-1939) și problema Basarabiei	61-84
1.4. Problema Basarabiei și teritoriile din stânga Nistrului în timpul celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial	84-93
1.4.1. Administrația României în teritoriile dintre Nistru și Bug (Guvernământul Transnistria) în timpul celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial	93-98
1.4.2. Reinstaurarea ordinii sovietice în Basarabia (1944). Reînființarea R.S.S.M. ..	98-103
1.4.3. Problema Basarabiei în negocierile Alianților din cel de-al Doilea Război Mondial	103-106
1.4.4. Politica de „Transnistrizare” culturală în R.S.S.M.	106-111
1.4.5. Politicile economice sovietice în raioanele din stânga Nistrului ale R.S.S.M.	111-116
1.5. R.S.S.M. în relațiile româno-sovietice din perioada 1950-1990	116-123
CAPITOLUL 2 Dezintegrarea Uniunii Sovietice. Premisele și desfășurarea conflictelor regionale	124-126
2.1. Criza structurală a Uniunii Republicilor Sovietice Socialiste și evoluția problemei naționale	126-133
2.2.1. Provocările problemei naționale: 1986-1988	133-138
2.2.2. Procesul de dobândire a suveranității naționale a republicilor unionale și escaladarea conflictelor regionale: 1988-1990	138-149
2.3. Tentativa de lovitură de stat din august 1991 și Acordurile de la Belaveja ..	149-160
2.4. Conflictele armate din spațiul post-sovietic	160-162
2.4.1. Primul și al doilea război din Nagorno-Karabakh. Direcțiile de politică externă ale Federației Ruse privind problema Nagorno-Karabahu-lui	162-173
2.4.2. Conflictele din Osetia de Sud și Abhazia. Conflictul armat ruso-georgian din august 2008	173-186
2.4.3. Primul și al doilea război din Cecenia	186-196
CAPITOLUL 3 Geneza și evoluția conflictului armat de pe Nistru	197-199

3.1. Cauzele și pretextele confruntării politice dintre Chișinău și Tiraspol (1989-1990)	199-205
3.2. Escaladarea confruntărilor armate de pe Nistru (1990-1991)	205-220
3.3. Evoluția conflictului armat de pe Nistru și implicarea unităților Armatei a 14-a (1992)	220-254
3.4. Proiecțiile politice și diplomatice ale Rusiei în raport cu problematica transnistreană	254-260
3.4.1. Politica externă a Federației Ruse privind misiunea de menținere a păcii în regiunea transnistreană	260-265
3.4.2. Memorandumul Kozak - strategia diplomatică a Federației Ruse cu privire la reglementarea transnistreană	265-270
3.4.3. Realitățile geopolitice din regiunea transnistreană	271-277
3.4.4. Problema instituțiilor de învățământ cu predare în grafie latină din regiunea transnistreană	277-287
ÎNCHEIERE Politica externă a Federației Ruse în spațiul post-sovietic de la începutul anilor 1990 și până la criza din Ucraina	288-309
Politica externă a Rusiei față de regiunea transnistreană în contextul agresiunii ruse din Ucraina	309-316
Analiza comparativă a conflictului transnistrean, din Osetia de Sud, Abhazia și Nagorno-Karabakh. Reflecții finale	316-321
Concluzie	322-323
Bibliografie finală	324-345
Anexe	346-356



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