

Reportercast October 2022 with Alexandru Flenchea: Transnistria explainer

00:16 MR: Hello dear people to the fifth episode of our monthly Reportcast for October 2022. I am Matei Rosca, the journalist who owns reporter dot London and this time we are doing something of a special edition, looking at a particular issue, which I think deserves a lot more attention. Although it is only indirectly connected to our usual mission of discussing and exposing economic crime, though this theme is certainly part of the mix. The issue is the Russia-occupied territory of Transnistria in the east of Moldova, and within the country's recognised borders with Ukraine to the east, and the river Nistru to the west acting as a de facto border. The capital is in Tiraspol, the largest city; this supposedly separatist enclave was created in 1992, after Russia invaded Moldova and waged a brief war because the country sought independence after the collapse of the Soviet empire. And as our guest today knows all about it, and is about to explain, not very much has changed since, however, the region has seen increasing tension and its rulers have been repressing dissent a lot harder since the onset of the Ukraine invasion by Russia in February this year, which I think requires attention from the international community. Our guest has been the chief negotiator in the peace process between Moldova as legitimate government in Chisinau, and the separatists. He was a lead advisor on this issue for the US Embassy in Chisinau, and also he launched recently an NGO in Moldova to focus on the topic. The name of the organisation is called is initiative for peace based in Chisinau, and our esteemed guest's name is Alexandru Flenchea. Welcome to Reportercast, Alexandru.

02:21 AF: Thank you. Hi.

02:23 MR: Before I start asking questions, I would like to say thank you to our advertisers at H5 Strategies in Bucharest. Political and executive consultancy specialised in Eastern Europe, Africa and Central Asia. And now before we start discussing current events, I would like Alexandru to tell us a little bit about his life experience, and how he ended up as an expert in the region of Transnistria.

02:54 AF: Quite accidentally, to be honest, when I was in my last year at the University, I was an intern at the Secretariat of the Moldovan parliament. And then, I think it was, what, 18 months after graduation, my internship supervisor called me and said, Hey, there's a vacancy in the Moldovan government, the newly created Ministry of reintegration, and it was back in 2003. And once you apply, which I did, and pass the interview, and was employed as a junior civil servant, at the, again, newly created Ministry of reintegration, and the ministry was created, and the head of the ministry, the minister back then, because now it's Deputy Prime Minister, in the position they are in charge of the overall political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, and the head of the agency of the Deputy Prime Minister, minister at the time, also acts as more of a chief negotiator in the talks. So this is how it started almost 20 years ago. And since then, I've been working on it and about the ministry all the time, non stop.

04:13 MR. Understand, okay. And thanks. Thanks for giving us that bit of background. Can we talk a little bit also about Transnistria itself to give people who might not know a bit of colour? What is the economy like, what is the standard of living? What are the biggest activities, economic activities, that sort of thing?

04:37 AF: I guess from London, the living standards in Transnistria, and those in Moldova are comparable. There's nuance differences that can only be seen from when you're here on the ground in Chisinau. Wages are generally a bit lower in Transnistria, which I will further also refer to as the left bank because there's a river separating Transnistria from the rest of Moldova. So the wages are a bit lower, but then on the bright side, they have extremely cheap public utilities and petrol for a number of reasons, which I understand we'll be talking about later. So yeah, comparable from from a distance I would say. And Moldova, note, is among the, if not the poorest country in Europe. Definitely poorer than any EU member states even like Bulgaria or Romania. The economy is super monopolised. On the one hand, they've inherited in a number of industrial plants from from the Soviet Union. Most of them collapsed. They were part of the so called industrial military complex of the Soviet Union. So those collapsed, but they also inherited the energy sector enterprises, a huge power plant that operates on gas, Russian gas, Gazprom, also steel plant, and a couple of others. And then there's that business empire, or as it often referred to, business conglomerate called Sheriff. That controls literally, virtually everything interesting, straight from retail, to fuel, telecom, and even has businesses in sports like, Moldova, Moldova's many times, 10 times I think, champion, Sheriff Tiraspol, with all the one football championship. Ah, that's about it briefly, a big, big part of Transnistria's, economy and transmission, this business model is based on two pillars. First pillar is the free Russian gas that the different nations haven't been paying for since 2004. And the second pillar is smuggling. And when I say smuggling, it's petrol and diesel fuel, it's alcohol and tobacco products.

07:30 MR: And before we get into the gas, because I want to ask a question about how the gas setup works, because it's a bit special. When you mentioned smuggling, shall we imagine that alcohol and tobacco and petrol and so forth, that are produced in Transnistria, end up in, in the European Union through through smuggling?

AF: Oh, no, they're not produced in Transnistria. They're imported from elsewhere from from all sorts of countries, and then they then if so to speak, there is the goods are physically and officially, in many cases, with full respect of government legislation with customs clearance, it's imported into the region into the Transnistrian region, and then it's gone. It's gone on papers, it's gone physically and cargo ends up in Moldova proper, in Ukraine, and in the UK, especially when it comes to cigarettes and alcohol. Yes. Much of that ends up in Europe. Okay.

MR: And the gas transit, Transnistria has one of the biggest electricity generation plants in Eastern Europe, if not the whole of Europe, and it receives gas from Russia, that it transforms into electricity and it doesn't pay for the gas. You already said this was happening, but can we explain a little bit the arrangement with the gas also because gas is of major concern at the moment for everyone not just in Moldova?

09:17 AF: Well, the arrangement is that there is no particular arrangement, there is only one legitimate importer of gas in Moldova, which is Moldova gas company, and I have to I have to explain the setup and who owns the company. So 50% of the shares of Moldova national gas operator are owned by Gazprom itself, then 30 or whatever it is, 36% of shares owned by the Moldovan government, and then the rest which is 13 point something percent owned by the Transnistrian administration. And they

transferred their shares to Gazprom. So effectively Gazprom controls [over] 60 - two thirds of the company. And Moldova gas is the only company that has a contract within Moldova that has a contract signed with Gazprom. And as the sole official importer of that gas because of geography, because Transnistria is located at Moldova's eastern border, and this is where the pipeline can enter. It's Moldova, though. So obviously, the gas, physically, I'm simplifying things, but just to explain how it works. So the gas that comes from Russia first enters Transnistria, they consume the amount they need, in particular to operate their [industry]. And then not only cover their own needs of electricity, but also so they sell electricity to us to the rest of Moldova. And then the remainder goes on the other side of the river, it's Moldova proper. And since 2014, Transnistria have not paid a single penny for it because they've consumed, so basically, it's just theft.

MR: It's a subsidy, isn't it? It's because of the fact that Russia occupies this, the Russian army occupies Transnistria has been continuously present in Transnistria. Since 92. And the political leadership, the so called political leadership, is allied to Moscow and its subordinate to Moscow. Gazprom gives them this economic lifeline through gas. And it enables them to create free energy and, and also, I suppose, in extremis, control the supply of gas to Moldova, because if there were a conflict, I suppose that the Transnistrians would have the physical possibility of stopping gas flows to Moldova, is that correct?

AF: Yes, this is what they did back in the summer of 1992. During the war, they did indeed stop to get supplies to the side of the river. It is a form of subsidy from Moscow. And we're talking about almost 9 billion of US dollars worth of such kind of subsidies, and then divided by a population of roughly 300,000 people. It's a tiny region, tiny population, and \$9 billion, almost \$9 billion is a lot of money. Even for all of Moldova.

12:46 It is comparable to Moldova's GDP. It's not as as much as Moldova's GDP, but it's comparable. It is indeed a lot of money. I'd like to make two remarks here. In your introductory remarks, you said supposedly separatists; originally it is a separatist region. Without discussion. It's part of Moldova that separated itself and proclaimed independence back in 1990. In violation not only of the international law, but also in violation of the Constitution. The Soviet Union, which still existed back in September 1991, interesting, strict proclaimed so called independence. And the other remark also said Russia invaded Moldova in 1992. It didn't technically. The Russian troops had been there, they just never left. So service Russia troops and then Soviet troops. And then after 1991 Russian Federation troops have been there and the remodel proclaimed independents were supposed to leave the territory of a sovereign state that they were illegally deployed and which obviously, as we know, never happened.

MR: Right. Okay. Well, thanks. Thanks for putting that straight.

AF: And but yeah, that does not annul the fact that Russia was indeed involved in the 1992 War. And that explains why, in what is usually being referred to as the ceasefire agreement signed by Moldovan and Russian presidents in July 1992, where there was a particular article stipulating that Russian forces deployed located in in Moldova in its Transnistrian region would observe neutrality, there was a reason for that. They have not observed neutrality during the war. And obviously, just like, look at what happened in Donbass, back in 2014. It was this exact same scenario of what happened in Transnistria in 1992. Civilians all of a sudden in possession of Kalashnikovs in possession of artillery systems,

including multi launch artillery systems, like the ones used by the Russian troops in Ukraine, as we speak. Suddenly in possession of tanks, and basically there was no inspiration, it just they just happened to own tanks and Kalashnikovs and and artillery systems. So yes, the war was provoked by Moscow and by the Russian troops, it was sustained by Russian military and it was stopped by Russian military when deemed appropriate and convenient for Moscow.

MR: Right, of course. And just just to clarify, when I said supposedly, I just meant that it wasn't an organic sort of grassroots separatist movement like the UK; in the UK, we have separatists in Scotland, we have a Scottish National Party that wants to separate from the rest of the country and create Scotland as an independent country. And that's also separatism but the difference is obviously, is that there's no foreign power, a nuclear power even that is subsidising and encouraging Scotland to become independent. So that's why I said supposedly just because the separatism of Transnistria is, is sustained and encouraged by the Russians.

AF: Okay, point taken, and I agree on that. It's linguistic nuances,

MR: no, of course, and you know, language these days is a sensitive issue. So, no worries. First of all, point taken on the semantics and thanks for allowing me to clarify that. And I would like us to, I would like you to give us a brief list of the top three, four most important people in Transnistria, who are the decision makers, the the influences, the politicians, the leaders, who should we remember when, when we talk about Transnistria?

17:29 AF: Well, the list is actually much shorter, I could limited to just one name, that is Victor Gushan, the owner of, the co owner of the Sheriff conglomerate of companies, there is a second co owner named Ilya Kazmaly, but he has not been involved that much into politics. lately. The two come from police background, cops in their past, founded the company back in the early 90s. in Transnistria. And smuggling has been with that point, especially in the 90s. Smuggling was the main business operations so so to speak.

18:23 All there's the public faces, you see, for example, you will not be able to find recent photos of Victor Gushan on on the web. The person is is not public, does not talk to press. He doesn't, his security does not allow taking pictures of him. So you will literally not be able to find pictures more recent than like 15 years ago, maybe even 20.

MR: Well, that's quite interesting.

AF: So not very public faces and yes, he's the public names and the public faces the people who who make the so called Transnistrian government, the so called President and others are in fact work for Victor Gushan, and he controls everything. In addition to that, I can't help but also mentioned that Russia, Moscow, they have their own people in Tiraspol. And there's people in the security sector in the military who have the respective chains of commands in Moscow not in Tiraspol.

19:42 MR: Okay, right. That's interesting. And yeah, well, I've known how private Mr. Bhushan is. For several years I've been writing about Moldova for about 10 years now, and a couple of times I phoned

his his underlings. To try to get an interview, I tried to ask a few questions and there was just no chance. And the last time I tried to do this was when Sheriff Tiraspol was playing in the Champions League in November, I think, or October last year. And again, they said, there won't be an interview. They won't be a press conference and our, my questions, I was working for a newspaper at the time, our questions will not be answered. So there we are. But Sheriff Tiraspol is, as we have learned, now, a big business conglomerate which includes a football team. Could you talk a little bit about the football team? It was quite surprising for many in the West when the football team started playing Real Madrid and Inter Milan and how come such a small employer in an internationally unrecognised enclave has generated such world class competitive football? Was football a particular hobby of Transnistrian people since Soviet times? What's the explanation?

21:14 AF: I Know football was and still is a particular hobby for Mr Gushan, which is why here he created the team, the end of 90s I think it was late 90s. Well, with the caveat that I myself am not a football fan, and will not be able to talk much about sports itself, but the business and the political aspects of it. First, when it's explained that Sheriff football team is a member of Moldovan Football Federation, and is otherwise a fully legitimate football team and legal entity in the team act as Moldova legal entity and this member of the Federation, it is in this capacity that the team participates in all sorts of European tournaments, wherever they can make it into there are obviously questions, big question marks not answered yet about the transparency of and the legality of funding of this football team. Because obviously, it's easy to make a miracle. Even such a small country, such a small country as Moldova is, and even a smaller region as Transnistria is when you have millions and millions and hundreds of millions of unaccounted cash. And so it just happens. So Victor Gushan is a big fan of football, and had lots of money in cash back in the 90s when he made the team and it is a business. I would be hard for me to tell whether or not it generates money for him or was just a hobby that he keeps paying for every year, but he definitely can definitely afford buying players from a long list of African and South American countries, young talented football players who can who can then grow in the European Cups, and then they share or sell those players to other other teams in Europe.

MR: Right so I take two interesting aspects from this and one is that it seems Mr. Gushan and Transnistria are very happy to be part of Moldova when it comes to football there is no separation when it comes to football, the countries are united, well, because it's one country, the country is united.

AF: And now not only football if I may, that applies to all sports. All Transnistria fans sports people take part in their respective Moldovan sports federations, and they all participate in international tournaments under Moldovan flags.

MR: Okay, that's very nice because it shows that potentially in the future there is hope, it shows that these are somehow pragmatic people and they're not totally obsessed with the idea of separatism.

AF: Oh, no, no, they're not. I think we have to, to explain this to unprepared audience. Moldova Transnistria situation is, is nothing similar to conflict in South Caucasus for instance, or in the Balkans back back in the 90s. There are no animosities among people, there is no religious or ethnic conflict; it is political conflict with the huge economic slash business background and motivation to keep the

conflict unresolved because of trust issues. Business model can only operate as long as the entity is not recognised, for reasons we discussed above, but otherwise, people have no problem and no issue to have crossing the river with each other making fun, of players playing football or or even organising concerts on the other side of the river.

MR: Right. And so I would like us to come back to the present times now and of course, Russia decided to conquer to try to conquer Ukraine, the whole of Ukraine in February. And I would like you to say how you perceived the reaction in Transnistria to this invasion. What was the atmosphere like and what are the concerns in Moldova, around the potential annexation of Transnistria, or potential involvement of Russian troops in Transnistria in the Ukrainian war, Ukrainian invasion,

AF: that's actually many questions and reaction in Transnistria after February 24, was super cautious. Because obviously, Russia is the political parent of Transnistria and provides political, economic, and military support and cover to Transnistria. Yeah, but there's Ukraine in between Transnistria and Russia. And that, by the way, is to my mind is the only explanation for why Russia has never recognised Transnistria and never tried to enact it. And the conditions that they don't have a common border, so they could just not be able to sustain it should Russians recognised Transnistria's so called independence. So the decision maker and his puppets will have been very cautious and mindful from the first days of the war. And they adopted their usual tactic, which they also use back in 2014 the Russians in annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass. They just think no more, nothing is happening in Ukraine. No reports in the press about the war, no mention of the war. The only mention were the refugees because many of Ukrainian refugees also ended up in, in Transnistria, including because many of them are originally from Transnistria. So many people just went back home to their parents, extended families. So yeah, there's refugees all of a sudden for no good reason. I mean, if you were in Transnistria, and follow their official public narrative, for no good reason, all of a sudden, there was 1000s of refugees from Ukraine, either transiting Transnistria or stopping in Transnistria. So they had to be, the Transnistria leadership had to be cautious and never, they never called it the war. They never call that a special military operation. They just avoided referring to it. They pretended it didn't exist.

MR: Now, so I apologise. There's a bit of noise in the air conditioning or the heating system here, which is a bit annoying, but there we are.

29:00 AF: So there you have it. It's good. You have it.

MR: Yes. Well, quite Yeah. So they pretended that the war didn't exist. But in June, a man called Victor Plescanov who is, we should mention, he's just an ordinary man living in a block of flats. He's 58 years old, and he's not a known dissident or political player or anything like that. He was just a man who had a sense of humour and he liked to speak out about things that he didn't like, especially regarding the political situation in Transnistria. He'd like to criticise the Transnistrian government, the so called Transnistrian government and express his verbal support for the Ukrainians who are suffering a great deal because of the invasion because of the Russian aggression. And this man was arrested in June for displaying the Ukrainian flag on his balcony. And then the MGB which is the local version of the KGB, the MGB after they arrested him, they searched his house and they searched his, his computer

and phone. And then, on top of the accusation about the flag, they gave the the case a bigger meaning by accusing Mr. Pleascanov of extremism, for expressing support for the Ukrainians in his online posts on Facebook, mostly. And in September, he was sentenced by a Transnistrian so called judge to three years and two months in prison. And I would like to I would like us to talk about this case a little bit, because I think first of all, it's not right for ordinary people to suffer because they have certain opinions. And if they express their opinions peacefully, they shouldn't be put in prison. And secondly, because, as you said, the Transnistrians were very anxious to ignore the war and not take part in Russia's campaign in any way. Now, could you give us your analysis of why they would have arrested Pleascanov and what this means for the relationship between Tiraspol and Moscow?

31:37 AF: It is exactly for the reasons stated above the Transnistrian leadership pretend that there's no war in Ukraine nothing is happening. And they avoid taking any sights and honestly Mr Pleascanov was a disturbing factor, so to speak, speaking out loud about the war, condemning Russia. Look, you are an oligarch in the tiny separatist region of Transnistria, your businesses and your prosperity depends on Russia's political support and depend on the degree to which Russia is happy with you running the region. So you don't want to annoy Russia. It also depends on your relationship with certain people in in Ukraine and most specifically in Odessa, which is the closest large city to Transnistria, also a large seaport, and also people in Kyiv. So and when he depends people in Moscow, in Kyiv as well as some people in Chisinau, what he wants is to avoid annoying those people. And the best way to keep everyone happy is silence. Keep silence and keep everyone silent and pretend nothing is happening. And make your money in the shade, so to speak. And obviously people like Pleascanov, who speak out loud, who call things what they, have called out the aggressor in Transnistria, the war. And so one they're disturbing the public order and they need to be neutralised. I mean, I'm using a bit of a cynical language. That's exactly where things are in Transnistria. And this is exactly how they, the decision makers in Transnistria perceived these things. The person has to be neutralised, best way is to put him in jail, supposedly three years should be enough for the war to be over. And that one's okay.

MR: And so before I move on, I'd like to bring up our advertisers. Again, thank you to H5 Strategies in Bucharest, it's a business and political advisory group specialising in Eastern Europe, Africa and Central Asia. And I would like also to mention that this podcast is completely independent of the advertisers. They don't have any veto or involvement in the content or the questions, or the guests. And that's all up to me and we thank our advertisers for their trust and support, and now back to the subject at hand. So they thought that by putting Pleascanov in prison, they would make him quiet and also encourage the rest of the population to stay quiet in order to avoid prison. Now be that as it may, given that Pleascanov was arrested for free speech. Do you think he should or will be released. And do you think he got a fair trial? I was in touch with his lawyer, Mr. Pavel Cazacu, from Promolex [an NGO] . And he said that he couldn't find, he couldn't obtain the sentencing documents and other important case documents and the trial was held secretly. And that in general, it's his legal opinion that this wasn't a fair trial. But I would like you to give us your opinion. And what do you think the partners should do regarding Mr. Pleascanov and in general also is the so called justice system in Transnistria fair?

AF: Now there is not, does not exist fair, independent judiciary system in Transnistria and in Transnistrian courts there is anything but justice. And unfortunately, Mr Pleascanov is not a unique example. He is one in a long list of political detainees in Transnistria. There has always been

repression against opponents, against independent NGOs, and media. And there has never existed, a genuine or even apparent pluralism in Transnistria, which is why political parties in Transnistria don't exist. They're just one political party, which is why free press in Transnistria does not exist. It did exist, a couple of independent media outlets in late 90s, early 2000s. But the last decade, I think all of the independent media has been shut down. And so were independent NGOs. So civic activism, political, Services NGOs, human rights NGOs cannot operate fairly in Transnistria. And the mentioned lawyer Pavel Cazacu. Him I happen to know pretty well, from Promolex, the Chisinau based NGO, which was banned by the tyranny of Transnistria. I think it was 2013. So for almost one decade, the key Moldovan a human rights NGO with a focus with a particular focus on Transnistria, has been unable to travel across the river to Transnistria to defend people to document cases, for that exact reason, because it's a human rights and because the Transnistrian regime does not need NGOs doing human rights, because that interferes with their political and business interests.

MR: Right. And in that context, what do you think outside partners of Moldova should do regarding Transnistria regarding the case of Mr. Plescanov. I'm talking about Brussels, Washington, London, and various international NGOs, the United Nations; the government in Moldova, the spokesman for the Foreign Affairs Minister in Moldova told me that they've already filed complaints with the United Nations regarding Mr. Plescanov and other political detainees in Transnistria. What is your opinion about this?

AF: Unfortunately, international organisations cannot help and have not been able, and helping in the past similar cases in releasing people, political detainees. Transnistria, unfortunately obviously is not a member of any international organisation and is outside of the control of the international laws, so to speak, is outside of the control of Moldova's constitutional authorities. So no legal instruments can be efficient in having political detainees released, it is only direct negotiations with Tiraspol combined with pressure, political and economic, basically, they have to apply leverage on those people's interests or that particular person in Tiraspol who, who makes decisions, and force the person to make the decision to release people. Unfortunately, it's only this way that can work. And guess what, if one person is released you have two more arrested the next day. So the point I'm trying to make is that there does not exist any good solution to the problem of political detainees in Transnistrian territory, other than the resolution of this protracted conflict and of reintegration of Transnistria into Moldova and return of this region into full legality provided by Moldovan constitution, Moldovan law and international conventions that Moldova is party to.

MR: Right. But, of course, I take all these points, but the UK and the EU and and the Americans as well have a Magnitsky regime of sanctions in place. And sometimes with with these sanctions, they target people who they consider to have abused human rights.

40:56 AF: You're breaking up. Can you repeat the last sentence? Yes, yes, so so. So in London and Washington and Brussels, there's a Magnitsky sanctions regime in place, the sanctions programme and these sanctions often targeting leaders that have been accused of abusing human rights. So, you know, by this definition, you would think Transnistria's decision makers might be subject to sanctions, because they tend to abuse human rights in Transnistria. And I just wonder, why do you think there have been no sanctions against Transnistria so far, and whether they think they should be or not?

41:43 MR: Well, in fact, there have been sanctions imposed against persons from leadership by the EU, and the request of Moldovan authority is back into those three in 2004 and 2004. The EU imposed sanctions travel ban for a list of Transnistrians, top political leadership, including so called President and members of the so called government and other key decision makers for undermining the negotiation process. And then also in 2004, this was extended, in fact, the council of the EU adopted an addendum to the initial sanctions decision for another violation committed by the trust Instrument Museum, and that is the forceful closure of Romanian language schools in the region. And that closure happened with violent acts with violence against children, the students of those schools and their parents and their teachers. So and the list was expanded and with more people directly involved in into what was called the 2004 Tiraspol school crisis. As of now, those the sanctions are still in place. It just the the, the lists are blank, the names, because the situation has improved. Both in the talks who had improved at at the point in time when when the when the sanctions were suspended.

43:40 In fact, technically, it wasn't even a suspension, the these sanctions are still there, just the the list is empty. But to my mind, and as far as I know, there's people in Brussels who share the same opinion. In fact, there is even a consensus at any point if there is a good reason for sanctions to be reintroduced against the Transnistria leadership. The Council of the EU can do that. So because the decision is still there is valid. Since 2004, nobody cancelled it. Yeah, it's just that the annexes would the names have to be have to be approved by the council.

MR: Right. And so so it turns out that in addition to the Magnitsky sanctions, there is also this previous tool that they have which which they could use so do you think they should use it in the case of Mr. Plescanov or not?

AF: I think there's many more reasons to at least have this issue put on the agenda of the European Council. It is up to the government of Moldova to request that because again, Plescanov not a single case, the list of political detainees in Transnistria is much longer. The list of abuses and human rights violations by Transnistria is also much longer. So should the government decide to address the EU and ask the decision be discussed, I see no reason why the EU the council would not at least consider re imposing those sanctions. And even a travel ban would, would and could be quite an efficient use if you think of Transnistria, if you can picture Transnistria on the map, sandwiched between Ukraine and the rest of Moldova. With no ability to travel to the EU, and the EU, is only 90 kilometres from where I am physically right now in Chisinau. So it is the closest destination, especially now with the ongoing war in Ukraine. There is little the people, decision makers in Transnistria could or would want to do in in Ukraine or even in Russia, Russia being under sanctions, many of the people so called Transnistrian government and law enforcement and security have their own real estate in Europe, in countries like Cyprus, Spain, Germany. So without the ability to travel to those locations freely. Those people would really be restricted in their freedom of movement. And if you think Transnistria is just a strip of land, something in between 12 and 25 kilometres wide. I mean, it's not too many destinations that you can travel to in the Transnistria strip?

MR: Yes, well, that's a very important point. And of course, on top of that, the football team now is an international financial player, because it sends and receives international banking transfers from, you

know, all over the world, including prestigious organisations such as the Champions League. So that is potentially a target for sanctions as well, I would imagine.

AF: You know, of course, I don't know how, how it might turn out, I think we have to differentiate between when political people are people who make political decisions, decisions that affect the broader public, or certain individuals, limiting or violating their legitimate rights and freedoms stipulated in modern legislation provided for by the relevant international conventions. And so you have to make the difference between these people who are responsible for this kind of violations and support legitimate entities, whether a football team or a business operator if it's a legitimate business, and the legit legal entity that respects all relevant middlemen legislation, and by extension, international legislation, who is financing the company, the sanctions, the possible sanctions have to be very targeted, and target those who are indeed responsible for violations of human rights.

MR: Right. Well, I suppose that's a very good point because similar thing happened with Chelsea London. And there were sanctions against the former owners of Chelsea but the team carried on, the team never stopped. Its work and and the players weren't affected, the funds weren't affected. Some of the fans were a bit upset but in the end, the team continued and there's new ownership now.

49:16 AF: After all, it is not the football players fault that Putin decided to invade. Russia [decided]. And they may agree or disagree and I suppose most if not all of them disagree with that and strongly condemned the aggression. So definitely no reason to punish their sports people. For violations that they did not commit.

49:45 MR: I would like to make you speculate a little bit which you're probably not gonna like, but still, what would a victory of Ukraine in this invasion mean for Transnistria so if the Ukrainian army drives out the Russian army and Ukraine regains its territorial sovereignty, what does that mean for Transnistria? And conversely, what does it mean if the Russians win, you know, the unthinkable happens and the Russians actually conquer Ukraine or southern Ukraine eventually.

50:25 AF: Now to be honest and that may not be necessarily obvious, but to my mind, it is my firm belief that the future of Transnistria is in Moldova's hands. It depends on us, on the government here. The politicians here in Chisinau, more than anything anyone else outside Moldova. What will happen to Transnistria in the near to midterm future, whether or not Transnistria will continue being a separatist unrecognised region entity, whether it will be part of Moldova again, and Moldova will restore its integrity, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, which is in itself not that clear, this, a couple of hours ago, Putin decreed martial law in the newly annexed territories. So it's really hard to predict what the future dynamic of the war will be or the future of the war will be; the dynamic is unfortunately negative, we're seeing a sequence of escalating steps taken by Moscow. But if, if Moscow were to, let's just imagine, for a minute, if Moscow were to occupy all of Ukraine, would they probably stop in Ukraine, and not march, all the way to NATO and the border which in our case is the border, Moldova's border with Romania? And I think that scenario was quite realistic in the first week of the war, and many people in Chisinau feared that was going to happen. And let us not forget that in the plans that Putin's generals presented to him before the war, he was supposed to march a parade on the central streets of Kyiv 72 hours after the invasion, and again, if that was to happen, it would have taken them another 72

hours to march on the streets of Chisinau. Now, obviously, Ukrainian resistance and the the overall dynamic of this war has put pressure on Putin, made him reconsider the war plan and consider new possible exit strategies. And unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be too many good face saving options for Putin. And, again, Putin is the kind of person for whom face saving matter more than substance. He could shoot himself in the foot, just for the sake of good faith saver and the good narrative of him being the strong leader of the greatest nation on Earth. So unfortunately, again, I answer your question about, it was about Transnistria. I'm speaking more about the war in Ukraine, but I cannot ignore this, especially in the light of today's decision made in Moscow. I think we, the world is not getting any closer peace at this point, the most recent decisions.

MR: Right. Okay. Well, with that, I would like to, to conclude our our podcast, I would like to say thanks again. And I hope some people out there who are listening and watching will have learned something new about Transnistria. And about Moldova, which is an increasingly important part of the world. It's very important for Europe's security and therefore for global security. And so if any policymakers may have been listening as well, I think they should come to their own conclusions, and perhaps focus a little bit more on Moldova and Transnistria in the context of the war in Ukraine. Thanks again, Alexandru. And thanks again to H5 Strategies in Bucharest, our advertiser who is an executive and political advisory group specialised in Eastern Europe, Africa and Central Asia. And Alexandru in the future best of luck and every success.

AF: Thank you.