

Transnistria: If even your biggest ally does not recognise you.

It is September 28, 2021. Real Madrid are playing at home against the little-known side Sheriff Tiraspol. On paper, it appears to be a routine Champions League fixture for Europe's most successful club—a match many expect to be an easy victory. But events on the pitch tell a very different story.

Late in the match, Luxembourg international Sébastien Thill unleashes an unstoppable strike into the back of the net at the Santiago Bernabéu. His goal secures a historic victory for Sheriff Tiraspol and hands Real Madrid one of the most shocking defeats in the club's European history.

Most people assume Sheriff Tiraspol is simply a Moldovan football club. Technically, however, that is not entirely correct. The club is based in Transnistria, a self-proclaimed republic in eastern Moldova that is internationally unrecognized. It is a region where the legacy of the Soviet Union remains remarkably visible to this day—in its politics, culture, and even its national symbols.



Flag Transnistria. Source: wikipedia.org

Existence of Transnistria

For me, Sheriff Tiraspol was my first introduction to this remarkable "country." Transnistria, officially known as the *Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic*, has functioned as a de facto state since 1990. The term *de facto* literally means "in practice": it operates as an independent country but is not officially recognized by the international community. Transnistria is located in eastern Moldova, along the border with Ukraine.

One look at the flag is enough to reveal its unique identity. In the upper-left corner, the hammer and sickle—the iconic symbol of the Soviet Union—are still prominently displayed. This is no coincidence. Across



the region, Soviet-era bunkers, monuments, and propaganda remain visible reminders of its past. Many of Transnistria's residents feel culturally and politically closer to Russia than to Moldova, a divide that has fueled tensions and polarization for decades.

What makes Transnistria particularly unusual is that it possesses nearly all the characteristics of a sovereign state. It has its own currency, passports, armed forces, border controls, and government institutions. In almost every practical sense, it functions as an independent country. Yet because no United Nations member state officially recognizes its independence, it does not legally exist as a sovereign state under international law.

During the Second World War, the territory that now forms Transnistria was part of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldavian ASSR), an autonomous republic within the Soviet Union. Between 1941 and 1944, the region was occupied by Romania. During this occupation, large numbers of Romanian and Ukrainian Jews were deported to camps in Transnistria, where many of them perished.

After the Second World War, Bessarabia—covering present-day Moldova and parts of modern Romania—and Transnistria were united to form the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union. While most of Moldova's population consisted primarily of Romanian-speaking Moldovans, Transnistria had a significantly larger Slavic population, made up mainly of Russians and Ukrainians.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Moldova became an independent state. Transnistria, however, was reluctant to identify with the country's Romanian-speaking majority and instead sought to maintain close ties with the Slavic world, particularly Russia. This difference in identity and political orientation led to growing tensions between the Transnistrian authorities and the Moldovan government, often described as a conflict between the region's Slavic population and Moldova's Latin-speaking majority.

Amid this political turmoil, Igor Smirnov, a Russian-born factory director, seized the opportunity to declare the creation of the Transnistrian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Moldova rejected the declaration and launched military action in an attempt to preserve its territorial integrity.



The result was a short but intense conflict known as the Transnistria War (1990–1992). Transnistria ultimately emerged victorious, largely thanks to military and logistical support from Russia. Smirnov's forces also benefited from the large stockpiles of Soviet weapons and equipment that remained in and around the regional capital, Tiraspol.

To this day, Russia continues to provide Transnistria with political, economic, and military support. The region is widely viewed by Moscow as a strategically important buffer between increasingly pro-Western Moldova and neighboring Ukraine. Interestingly, despite this close relationship, Russia has never formally recognized Transnistria as an independent state. Instead, it has continued to support the region in practice while stopping short of granting it official diplomatic recognition.



Transnistria (Red) on the Moldovan map. Source: wikipedia.org

Moldova (Latin) vs Transnistria (Slavic)

To understand the division between Moldova and Transnistria, it is important to examine its historical roots. The split is deeply connected to differences in language, identity, and demographics.

Moldova has a turbulent history and has, at various points, been ruled by or closely associated with Romania. As the name *Romania* suggests, the region was once part of the Roman Empire. During this period, Latin spread throughout the province of Roman Dacia—roughly present-day Romania and Moldova. Over the centuries, the language gradually evolved into Romanian, a Romance language that developed from Latin in much the same way that modern dialects and slang evolve from a standard language over time.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476, the eastern half survived as the Byzantine Empire, also known as the Eastern Roman Empire. The territories of present-day Romania and Moldova remained within its sphere of influence for centuries. Meanwhile, much of Eastern



Europe gradually came under strong Slavic and later Ottoman influence. Romania and Moldova, however, largely managed to preserve their distinct linguistic and cultural identity.

One of the main reasons for this was the Carpathian Mountains. This vast mountain range acted as a natural barrier, making it more difficult for outside powers and cultures to penetrate deep into the region. As a result, the Latin linguistic heritage endured despite centuries of pressure from neighboring Slavic and Turkic peoples.

The result is unique within Eastern Europe. Romanian—and by extension Moldovan, which is linguistically the same language—is the only major Romance language in the region. It is far more closely related to French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese than it is to Slavic languages such as Russian, Serbian or Bosnian. This linguistic and cultural distinction lies at the heart of the divide between the Latin-oriented identity of Moldova and the predominantly Slavic identity of Transnistria.



The Byzantine Empire (East Roman Empire) with Constantinople (Istanbul) as its capital. Source: wikipedia.org

A significant part of the population, however, felt a much stronger connection to Russia—a sentiment that can be traced directly back to the Cold War. For decades, the Soviet Union maintained firm control over much of Eastern Europe. Although it consisted of multiple republics, it functioned as one vast state, with Moscow serving as its political and administrative center.

It is therefore not surprising that people who grew up under leaders such as Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin developed a strong attachment to the Soviet system and the identity that came with it. The Soviet government provided employment, housing, and rapid industrialization, particularly in strategically important regions.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union collapsed shortly afterward, the Soviet republics regained their independence—including



Moldova. Almost immediately, the country found itself divided between two distinct communities:

- On one side were the native Moldovan population, who identified culturally and linguistically with the Romance world, particularly neighboring Romania.
- On the other side were the predominantly Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking Slavic communities, many of whom continued to identify with the Soviet legacy and, later, with Russia.

During the Soviet era, many of the region's industrial and military facilities were concentrated in what is now Transnistria. Factories, military bases, and large Soviet ammunition depots were established there, attracting thousands of Russian and Ukrainian workers and soldiers. Over time, this led to a significant demographic shift: Transnistria became increasingly Slavic, while the rest of Moldova largely retained its Romanian-speaking character.

These differences in language, culture, and historical identity made conflict increasingly difficult to avoid. What began as a divide over identity gradually evolved into a political and territorial struggle between a predominantly Romance-speaking Moldova and a predominantly Slavic Transnistria—a conflict that, more than three decades later, remains unresolved.

Never recognized

Now that we have explored the historical divide and the conflict between Moldova and Transnistria, a logical question follows: why does no country officially recognize Transnistria as an independent state? After all, considering the region's close relationship with Russia—and, to a much lesser extent, Belarus—you might expect at least those countries to grant it diplomatic recognition.

The fact that Western European countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark do not recognize Transnistria is not particularly surprising. From a political, economic, and legal perspective, they have little to gain from doing so. Moreover, European Union member states—including Romania and Bulgaria—have a strong interest in upholding the principles of territorial integrity and international law. Recognizing Transnistria would undermine those principles and conflict with their broader foreign policy objectives.



The more intriguing question is why Russia itself has never officially recognized Transnistria.

There are several strategic reasons for this. First, Russia benefits more from maintaining Transnistria within its sphere of influence than from recognizing it as a fully independent country. Formal recognition could, at least in theory, allow Transnistria to pursue policies that might eventually diverge from Russian interests. This is particularly significant given that Russian troops and military facilities remain stationed in the region.

Second, Transnistria serves as an important geopolitical buffer between Russia and the increasingly pro-Western governments of Moldova and Ukraine. By keeping the region in a state of legal and political uncertainty, Russia retains leverage over both countries and can complicate or slow their integration with Western institutions such as the European Union and NATO.

Although Transnistria possesses many of the practical characteristics of a sovereign state—including its own currency, passports, border controls, and government—formal recognition is strategically disadvantageous for Moscow. Instead, Russia has chosen to keep the region politically, economically, and militarily dependent. Political scientists often describe this type of arrangement as a puppet state: a territory that appears independent on the surface but is, in reality, heavily influenced or controlled by a more powerful external state. In many respects, this resembles the relationship between the Soviet Union and its satellite states during the Cold War.



Transnistria is a puppet state. Source: reddit.com



Conclusion

It is remarkable to realize that such a relatively large territory is, in legal terms, a state without international recognition. Sheriff Tiraspol is widely regarded as a Moldovan football club, yet that is not entirely accurate. The club is based in Transnistria—a region with its own customs service, currency (the Transnistrian ruble), passports, government, and armed forces. Despite functioning much like an independent country, not a single United Nations member state officially recognizes Transnistria as sovereign—not even its closest ally, Russia.

That is what makes the story of Transnistria so unique. From its separation from Moldova, to the clash between different national identities, and the geopolitical interests of Russia, the region has evolved into one of the world's most unusual political entities. More than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Transnistria continues to preserve many of the political structures, symbols, and strategic dynamics associated with the Soviet era, making it one of the closest modern-day examples of a state shaped by the legacy of the Cold War.

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