

## RESEARCH ARTICLE: IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS: IN THE CASE OF THE TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the current aspects of the relations between the parties in the process of resolving disputes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the Transnistrian conflict, it can be seen that the parties to the conflict not only changed their positions and did not stop the conflict, but also made actions that aggravated the situation.

This article analyzes the new restrictive measures taken by Moldova against the Transnistrian region and comments on how relations between the parties to the conflict will develop after the end of the pandemic. As in dozens of other modern conflicts, in the conditions of the pandemic, the conflict in the Moldova-Dniester conflict did not subside, but new conflicts arose: increased social tension, diversion of forces and attention from the current order of political and diplomatic negotiations, reversing the sides from the process of conflict resolution.

**Key words:** Transnistria, Moldova, pandemic, conflict, negotiation process «5+2».

In his latest article, *The Pandemic and the Political Order*, Francis Fukuyama writes: "The increased nationalism that the pandemic provokes increases the likelihood of international conflict. Barriers to the movement of people have appeared everywhere, including in the heart of Europe, and instead of working constructively for the common good, countries have become obsessed with themselves. They quarreled with each other and turned their opponents into political culprits for their failures." Today, it is difficult to find a topic that has not been discussed by international experts in the light of the pandemic and its consequences.

The issue of international conflicts was no exception. Some predict a general decrease in conflict and note the positive effect of the March address of the UN General Secretary, in which he called for "an end to the disease of war and to fight the disease raging in the world." Others urge not to consider that the pandemic has turned the world upside down, although they agree that it has exacerbated many trends, and also accelerated and catalyzed processes that began with the end of the Cold War and an attempt to establish a world order under the patronage of the United States. Still others see the pandemic as a challenge for conflict resolution, since there is a great temptation to suppress the opponent, further worsening his position when fear of the pandemic serves as a distraction. Here an illustrative example is the situation in problem areas of Africa, where armed groups take advantage of the difficult epidemiological situation to resume conflicts in order to increase their influence and gain political benefits. There are indeed many risks of increasing conflict, despite the fact that more than 70 states and 12 conflicting parties almost immediately supported the call of Antonio Guterres.

The International Crisis Group, which actively studies the impact of coronavirus on conflicts, noted that some actors nodded in support of this call, most likely for public relations purposes, without any apparent intentions to put it into practice<sup>1</sup>. This opinion does not seem to be an exaggeration, because for the population in conflict zones, the fight against coronavirus has become the main information point. Aljazeera pointed out how fear of the pandemic has eclipsed even potential talks between the Taliban militant group and the divided Afghan leadership in Afghan media headlines<sup>2</sup>. Another risk is that a new global crisis is exacerbating the problem of mock talks. Thus, the goal of the negotiation process is not to find a peaceful solution or even a temporary compromise, but to solve image or information problems, and sometimes to receive material dividends if agreement to a settlement is encouraged by the direction of international financial assistance.

An important problem is also the narrowing of the possibilities of mediators and “shuttle diplomacy”. The effectiveness of “soft power” tools is also weakening, since all this requires a lot of inclusion and, most often, direct involvement. At the same time, according to experts, the coronavirus, which has forced many people to change their usual forms of work, can also have a positive effect on contacts between the conflicting parties. For example, the trilateral contact group on the Donbass settlement, which switched to videoconferencing in March, began meeting more often and working longer. At the same time, decisions on new meetings are agreed upon much more quickly than in the case of the Minsk rounds.

For some conflicts, tactical steps and tricks of the parties may be problematic. They agree to a truce and negotiations under pressure from the international community, but in this case they exaggerate their pre-negotiation demands or intensify violence on the eve of supposedly upcoming negotiations. This was the case in Libya when the declared interest in the initiative of the UN General Secretary was combined with an escalation of confrontation and an increase in the number of victims.

In this regard, there is a possible aggravation of the socio-economic situation in regions where the economy is already devastated by the conflict. There are also difficulties with the full implementation of peacekeeping mandates and the problem with the supply of humanitarian aid to conflict zones, the volumes of which are objectively decreasing.

It seems very clear that parties to conflicts are becoming even more vulnerable. But at the same time, the coronavirus appears to be the very common enemy, the fight against which can play, if not a unifying, then, with a high degree of probability, a reconciling role. In this context, the example of the UAE, which sent humanitarian aid to Iran, is indicative, which, unfortunately, cannot be said about the conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

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<sup>1</sup> **Global Ceasefire Call Deserves UN Security Council’s Full Support.** — URL: [https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/global-ceasefire-call-deserves-un-security-councils-full-support?fbclid=IwAR1DWQBDQU1PmPh60rQOf43zu8hPJ59Zpo50TnRo8o\\_gMsHtVGOv9A41OpA](https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/global-ceasefire-call-deserves-un-security-councils-full-support?fbclid=IwAR1DWQBDQU1PmPh60rQOf43zu8hPJ59Zpo50TnRo8o_gMsHtVGOv9A41OpA)

<sup>2</sup> **War-ravaged Afghanistan battles a new threat: coronavirus.** — URL : [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/war-ravaged-afghanistan-battles-threat-coronavirus200316135224827.html?fbclid=IwAR1ahtz9TsQU8ewXEqnew4U\\_ga4ij5MUYM6MSjyOtvkYIRwii3w\\_fsDsVrA](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/war-ravaged-afghanistan-battles-threat-coronavirus200316135224827.html?fbclid=IwAR1ahtz9TsQU8ewXEqnew4U_ga4ij5MUYM6MSjyOtvkYIRwii3w_fsDsVrA)

For example, the conflict in Transnistria has noticeably worsened, which, in comparison with other post-Soviet conflicts, is of much less interest to modern researchers due to its “frozenness” and the absence of armed clashes. However, new challenges associated with the pandemic and the inability of the parties to the Transnistrian conflict to interact constructively to combat. They will only expand the conflict field, adding new problems to the heap of old and unresolved ones.

### **Pandemic as another tool of subjugation?**

International Crisis Group recently organized an online discussion about the impact of the pandemic on conflict situations in the post-Soviet space and what role organizations such as the WHO, OSCE and ICRC could play in this regard. The suggestion made there that the new situation could worsen the gap between unrecognized entities and states seeking reunification is noteworthy, which will create additional obstacles to possible normalization and peace. Among the conflicts discussed, Transnistria was mentioned only in passing, although in their reporting material posted on the organization’s website, ICG experts noted a number of alarming aspects for this conflict<sup>3</sup>.

So, they refer to the statements of the Moldovan negotiator Cristina Lesnic, who accuses the Transnistrian side of rejecting its initiative on the participation of Transnistrians in the work of a special Moldovan working group with WHO representatives. Also, according to Lesnic, the Transnistrians are not ready to interact in the format of the existing joint working group on healthcare. An analysis of statements by Moldovan diplomats in the media shows that the above-mentioned problem is almost the main one in the current situation. However, among the claims made against the Transnistrians are also accusations of quarantine closure of borders and deliberate concealment of the true indicators of morbidity and mortality, criticism of the initiative to open its own laboratory for testing COVID-19, and reluctance to participate in the emergency remote meeting of the “5+2” negotiation format proposed by Moldova.

It seems that in the current crisis conditions, the importance of these problematic aspects in Moldovan-Transnistrian interaction is greatly exaggerated by European experts. Of course, the logic of the Moldovan side promoting these topics in the media space can be understood. It should be noted that the Moldovan initiative to invite Transnistrians to join a special group to interact with the WHO is an “old rake” in the Transnistrian settlement, another manipulative attempt to demonize the Transnistrian side in the eyes of international community.

The fact is that for many years now, interaction at the level of experts from the conflicting parties has been an auxiliary mechanism for the negotiation process, which is constantly stalling and going into pause modes. They represent different areas: ecology, customs and law enforcement activities, economics, education, etc. Healthcare is no exception. The success of this track is confirmed, for example, by the fact that representatives of the relevant departments of Moldova and Transnistria cooperated even when the parties refused to negotiate. This situation existed from 2006 to 2011

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<sup>3</sup> **Isolation of Post-Soviet Conflict Regions Narrows the Road to Peace.** — URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/isolation-post-soviet-conflict-regions-narrows-road-peace>

and in 2014-2015. It is worth noting that during the exit from the longest negotiating pause in the history of this conflict, in 2011, the decision to draw up general regulations for expert (working) groups on confidence-building measures became the first agreement signed at the highest level by the conflicting parties<sup>4</sup>.

Despite a clear decrease in the dynamics of meetings in this format in 2019 and early 2020 (3 meetings in 2019 versus 30 in 2018), the health care group continued to work normally. So, on the eve of the start of the pandemic, in February, the medical experts of the parties met twice, and another meeting was held in March. The subject of the meetings is to discuss the dynamics of the situation with the prevention of the disease caused by coronavirus infection. In addition, from the first days of the fight against the pandemic in the conflict region, interaction at the level of medical institutions in Transnistria and Moldova was carried out in a constant and systematic manner. This is well illustrated by the fact that for a long time all tests to determine coronavirus in sick Transnistrians were done in Moldovan laboratories, where they were taken by a service specially organized in Transnistria. It is known that the mechanism is partially preserved even now. It is against this background that the appointed chief Moldovan negotiator on March 16.

Cristina Lesnic proposed creating a new format of work - a new, this time Moldovan group, and approached WHO with a proposal to include Transnistrians there and coordinate with such a group all WHO activities in Transnistria. The practice of subordinating any interaction within the framework of the settlement to its main goal - the so-called reintegration of the country is not new, as well as many years of attempts to limit and stop direct connections of Transnistria with representatives of international organizations or those accredited in Chisinau foreign embassies. All this has nothing to do with the humane intentions of joining forces in countering a common threat, but to a certain extent, such tactics allowed observers to shift attention from the problems that Transnistria is trying to talk about. In this case, it is also necessary to recognize that the slippage that has arisen in organizing new meetings of the existing joint Moldovan-Transnistrian expert group on health care is also the result of Lesnic's provocative initiative. In addition, the Moldovan negotiator has repeatedly made it clear that a meeting of the health group is required to discuss the issue of organizing new border posts by the Transnistrian side. They have already tried to put this toxic issue on the agenda of several meetings of expert groups, including the human rights group.

As for international actors, they continue to work with Transnistria. Constant interaction has been established with representatives of Rospotrebnadzor. In his report to the OSCE Permanent Council, the head of the mission in Moldova, Klaus Neukirch, said, in particular, that during the fight against the pandemic, the mission made more than 30 monitoring visits to the Security Zone<sup>5</sup>. As for WHO, it responded to the request sent by the Transnistrian side to organize a monitoring mission for a transparent assessment of the entire range of measures to combat the pandemic in Pridnestrovia.

<sup>4</sup> Давление Республики Молдова на Приднестровье в период борьбы с пандемией COVID19. — URL: <http://mfa-pmr.org/ru/node/789>

<sup>5</sup> ВОЗ: проверка COVID-лаборатории и госпиталей. — URL: <https://tv.pgtrk.ru/ru/news/20200506/94499>

And already in May, first a remote meeting of the WHO delegation with the Transnistrian government took place, and then a monitoring visit of the organization's experts. Thus, the international inspection of the Transnistrian crisis center, laboratory for testing samples for COVID-19 and medical institutions of the unrecognized republic still took place without the participation of the Moldovan authorities and artificial politicization. Chisinau medical specialists also visited the Transnistrian laboratory, which indicates the preservation of horizontal ties between the medical communities of the parties, despite the dysfunction of political and diplomatic ties.

In this context, it must also be taken into account that Chisinau does not meet Tiraspol halfway on the issue of organizing a number of expert meetings, including a joint group on banking issues and a customs group, either refusing to hold or ignoring requests from the Transnistrian side. Perhaps Tiraspol links this aspect with the expediency of new meetings on healthcare, since no one has canceled the principle of reciprocity in diplomatic activities.

As for the initiative put forward by Moldovan diplomats to convene an emergency meeting of negotiations in the "5+2" format, the latter did not take place not because of the refusal of the Transnistrians. The idea was not supported by any of the format participants. Traditionally, the actors involved, especially with regard to the current OSCE Chairmanship, oppose the convening of negotiation rounds when the negotiators do not have a general idea of the upcoming agenda and when at least approximate parameters have not been developed at the level of expert groups and meetings of political representatives of the parties in the "1+1" format draft agreements planned for discussion. To some extent, this restrains the conflicting parties from using international negotiations for purely informational purposes - attracting broad international attention to mutual or unilateral accusations.

### **When the border is "locked"**

The problem of border closures deserves special attention. It should be noted that Moldova is generally very sensitive to the existence of a border with Transnistria, either denying its existence or calling it administrative. But it would be unfair not to say that on this "non-existent" border Moldova carries out customs control and patrolling by special services, and has been doing this successfully for more than 20 years.

In addition, Moldova itself quarantined not only its individual settlements, but also areas within towns and cities. It is unlikely that the de facto closure of the border in the context of the fight against coronavirus should be considered something out of the ordinary. This is done by countries that are not burdened by conflicts and maintain friendly ties. It would be strange if the borders were not closed by entities that are unable to establish systematic cooperation in any of the areas. At the same time, Transnistria allowed diplomats, truck drivers, police, as well as people going for treatment to Moldova through its borders (a special center operated to issue such passes). By the way, this list was supplemented by farmers from Moldovan villages who have plots on the territory of the unrecognized republic, which clearly looks like a gesture of goodwill.

Another thing is that Transnistria has increased the number of posts on the border. This, despite the declared medical purpose of the measure taken, in the current conditions did not look like the most balanced step, since the issue falls within the

competence of the Joint Control Commission, which controls the Security Zone, the governing body of the peacekeeping operation. But at the same time, the logic of such a measure could initially be explained by a possible desire to prevent the movement of doctors living on the Transnistrian side, but working on the Moldovan side, to border settlements. There are about 100 of them there. They tried to seek a solution to this problem in cooperation with the UNDP operating in the conflict region, which agreed to finance accommodation for this category of medical personnel in Chisinau, but, as Moldovan diplomat Cristina Lesnic reported, most of the doctors refused this opportunity.

There have been concerns in Moldova that Transnistria is using the pandemic as a reason for long-term isolation. In May 2020, Kristina Lesnik's predecessor, former Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration Alexander Flenkya, on the Ukrainian television program "Polar World", explained concerns about the closure of the Transnistrian border by the fact that the PMR used the pandemic only as an excuse and would not want to open the borders after the end of the coronavirus quarantine. He was partly right. By the beginning of July, the Transnistrian authorities not only did not open the borders, but also tightened the procedure for the passage of those who were issued special passes for daily trips to Moldova for work and to receive medical care. Thus, Transnistrians working on the territory of Moldova were allowed to leave only for 12 hours and at the same time serve a 14-day quarantine upon return. Of course, this threatened either dismissal for thousands of PMR citizens working on the right bank of the Dniester, or long-term separation from families for those who remained in Moldova to avoid quarantine and to save their place of work. The actions of the Transnistrian authorities caused alarming reactions not only in Moldova, but also among the Transnistrians themselves. The chief negotiator of the Republic of Moldova, together with the country's Minister of Defense, addressed the parliament in order to determine response measures, which in Transnistria was perceived as aggressive intentions<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, the Transnistrians themselves, who found themselves hostage to "locked borders," greeted the tightening of the regime at the border with protests<sup>7</sup>. The rally that spontaneously formed on the Transnistrian-Moldavian border in the city of Rybnitsa and the opinions of high officials and ordinary citizens of Transnistria that were voiced there revealed a number of problems, including the distrust of local residents in the statements of the authorities about the epidemiological justification for closing the border.

### **Voice in the desert**

The new difficulties and restrictions faced by Transnistria deserve special attention. Objectively, this conflict region is already in a special risk zone. Among the alarming factors, noticeable aging of the population should be highlighted. Local statistics show that the share of the working-age population has been rapidly declining in recent years due to outflow caused by labor migration, which is highly stimulated

<sup>6</sup> Комментарий Министерства иностранных дел ПМР в связи с очередными инсинуациями представителя по политическим вопросам от Молдовы. — URL: <http://mfapmr.org/ru/node/8038>

<sup>7</sup> Стихийный митинг в Рыбнице: люди протестуют на мосту «Рыбница — Резина». — URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-j6DHpN6Lw8>

by the economic downturn, the unresolved conflict, and the lack of clear prospects and stability. The share of people employed in the real sector of the economy barely reaches 30%. The healthcare system cannot cope with its tasks even outside of a pandemic. Many categories of patients are forced to undergo treatment in neighboring Ukraine and Moldova. The fight against coronavirus has also exposed such problems as outdated, Soviet-era infrastructure, and a lack of qualified medical personnel.

In such conditions and in connection with the spread of coronavirus, Transnistria is faced with new problems, the overcoming of which is not associated with the end of the pandemic, but to a greater extent with the political will of the Moldovan side and, to some extent, with the reaction of international actors.

An analysis of the steps taken by Moldova regarding Transnistria allows us to make very pessimistic forecasts about how the interaction between the parties to the conflict will develop after the pandemic is overcome.

The Moldovan side appears to have used additional external difficulties to strengthen its negotiating positions and promote ideas that have long become a mainstream maxim in Moldovan approaches to resolving the Transnistrian problem.

We are talking about the so-called reintegration of the country already mentioned above - the comprehensive extension of Moldovan jurisdiction to the self-proclaimed republic. The progressive sanctions-blockade strategy, which Moldova has been using for many years for this purpose, it must be said, has brought a lot of fruit. For example, the closure of borders agreed with Ukraine to Transnistrian exports that were not provided with Moldovan accompanying documents in 2006 made it possible to reassign more than 2,000 Transnistrian enterprises, including the main budget-generating ones. They were forced to obtain permits in Moldova and go through customs clearance there with all the ensuing encumbrances. So they were reoriented from the Russian to the European market (not without the help of the EU), and the economic elites were made dependent. The gradually implemented Ukrainian-Moldovan initiative to organize Moldovan customs and border control of Transnistrian checkpoints on the territory of Ukraine will in the near future make it possible to achieve even more tangible effects in this area.

Coronavirus has created additional conditions for the accelerated implementation of planned mechanisms. In the second half of March, when the pandemic reached the conflict region in full force, Moldova agreed with Ukraine to close the borders to Transnistrian imports for all types of cargo. Chisinau thus blocked the entry and exit of citizens and vehicles through the Ukrainian-Transnistrian sections of the border. Those moving for humanitarian purposes were no exception: labor migrants returning home from EU and CIS countries, imported medicines, medical protective equipment, reagents for laboratory tests. Eleven loaded cars, which, at the request of Chisinau, went around Transnistria to the Ukrainian-Moldovan border, were blocked by the Moldovan side for nine days, from March 16 to 27. Chisinau demanded that they submit to Moldovan jurisdiction and obtain permits in Moldova, which not only created new threats for those in need of medical care, but also ultimately led to additional financial costs for pharmaceutical companies. Later, at the beginning of April, cargo for hospitals - spare parts for ventilators - was again delayed in Moldova for almost a week. This time, the condition for the passage of cargo was the registration of

Transnistrian medical institutions in Moldova and ensuring access for the Moldovan authorities to carry out control functions in hospitals under the pretext of checking the receipt of cargo to the addressee. In addition, Moldova recognized spare parts for ventilators as dual-use goods, which required obtaining additional permits issued by a special interdepartmental commission. And although Tiraspol called such actions inhumane and called on international structures to intervene, already at the end of April there was a delay in humanitarian cargo again. This time - medical products, including a printer for the production of components for personal protective equipment (masks).

The interaction between the parties was also complicated by Moldova's initiative to introduce, from March 31, requirements for the mandatory purchase of a health insurance policy worth 200 euros when entering the country. Transnistrians returning home without work due to the pandemic took this financial burden painfully. The average salary in the republic barely reaches 250 euros per month<sup>8</sup>. Despite the fact that previously, within the framework of the "5+2" format, the parties had already managed to agree on the non-application of the norms of Moldovan legislation<sup>9</sup> that impede their freedom of movement to the residents of Transnistria, this time Moldova obliged the Transnistrians to obey the new requirement. At the same time, it was not taken into account that in Transnistria there is no compulsory health insurance system, the healthcare system is not subject to Moldovan jurisdiction, and the opportunity for Transnistrians returning home to enter the unrecognized republic from Ukraine, at the request of Moldova, was blocked in mid-March.

The Moldovan side did not meet Transnistria halfway on the issue related to resolving the so-called banking crisis, which worsened even before the start of the pandemic. At the end of 2019, Moldova, with the support of international partners, managed to block the use of international bank cards Visa and Mastercard in Transnistria. For the population of the unrecognized republic, which was clearly dependent on external revenues, this was a serious blow. The situation is well illustrated by the fact that last year alone, remittances worth \$104 million<sup>10</sup> were received from Transnistria from abroad, which is 5 times higher than the income of the consolidated annual budget of the republic<sup>11</sup>. By the way, two thirds of private transfers arriving in the PMR are from Russia. More than 10,000 residents have become hostages of the situation with the blocking of the use of international cards in Transnistria, including pensioners who have registered for receiving pensions using cards. Under quarantine conditions, the Transnistrian authorities were forced to

<sup>8</sup> **Пресс-выпуск о заработной плате в Приднестровской Молдавской Республике за февраль 2020 г.** — URL: <http://mer.gospmr.org/gosudarstvennaya-služhba-statistiki/informacziya/ozarabotnoj-plate-v-pmr/p-r-e-s-s-v-y-p-u-s-k-o-zarabotnoj-plate-v-pridnestrovskoj-moldavskojrespublike-za-fevral-2020-g.-bez-subektov-malogo-predprinimatelstva1.html> <sup>2</sup> **Протоколно решение о некоторых аспектах свободы передвижения.** — URL: [http://mid.gospmr.org/misc/docs\\_pproc/2013/ПР%20о%20некоторых%20аспектах%20свободы%20передвижения%2026.11.2013.jpg](http://mid.gospmr.org/misc/docs_pproc/2013/ПР%20о%20некоторых%20аспектах%20свободы%20передвижения%2026.11.2013.jpg)

<sup>9</sup> **Протоколно решение о некоторых аспектах свободы передвижения.** — URL : [http://mid.gospmr.org/misc/docs\\_pproc/2013/ПР%20о%20некоторых%20аспектах%20свободы%20передвижения%2026.11.2013.jpg](http://mid.gospmr.org/misc/docs_pproc/2013/ПР%20о%20некоторых%20аспектах%20свободы%20передвижения%2026.11.2013.jpg)

<sup>10</sup> **Объем денежных переводов в Приднестровье в прошлом году вырос на 10 млн долларов.** — URL : <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/20-02-11/obyom-denezhnyh-perevodov-vpridnestrove-v-proshlom-godu-vyros-na>

<sup>11</sup> **Закон Приднестровской Молдавской Республики «О республиканском бюджете на 2020 год».** — URL : <http://president.gospmr.org/pravovye-akty/zakoni/zakon-pridnestrovskoymoldavskoy-respubliki-o-respublikanskom-byudjete-na-2020-god-.html>



organize special convoys to transport persons interested in withdrawing funds from their cards to neighboring Moldova, to the nearest ATM. Calls to begin negotiations to resolve the current problem were not heard. Thus, the Transnistrian request to discuss the issue at the expert level within the framework of a joint working group on banking issues remained unanswered<sup>12</sup>.

All these poorly justified new administrative and bureaucratic barriers in a state of emergency caused a wide public outcry in Transnistria.

It is difficult to judge how significantly Moldovan “tightening the screws” of the PMR has actually brought Moldova closer to achieving its goal, but it seems clear that new difficulties are contributing to a decrease in the degree of already extremely fragile trust between the parties to the conflict. Moreover, the strengthening of trust is hampered not only by the weak agreement between the parties and the lack of an effective system of guarantees, but also by the traumatic memory of the past - the bloody war of the early nineties. The pandemic and its effect only expose old problems in this conflict and cement the foundation for a deepening crisis in the settlement process in the future. Conflict here, as in dozens of other modern conflicts, not only has not decreased, but has also acquired new complications: aggravation of social tension, diversion of forces and attention from the current political and diplomatic agenda, throwing the parties back in the process of conflict resolution.

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<sup>12</sup> Заявление МИД ПМР: Молдова подрывает деятельность экспертных (рабочих) групп. — URL : <http://mfa-pmr.org/ru/node/7935>