“There’s No ‘I’ in Threesome”: European-Russian Power Struggle Obstructs Conflict Resolution At Transnistria Talks

With last week’s cautious advances prior to the formal launch of negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict and Iliazsei’s pledge to not caress the Russians’ behinds, the ménage à trois between Russia beside its Transnistrian protégé and the European Union as vanguard of the other summit participants was destined to be a messy affair. In the early hours of April 23rd, 2012, key political representatives from the United States, the European Union, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Moldova and Transnistria’s elected leader gathered at the University of St Andrews’ International Relations Department, seeking common ground in one of the most complex conflicts of the post-Soviet space. Yet even before the official beginning of the summit, disaster loomed on the horizon. With only a fraction of the participants present twenty minutes before the official commencement of talks, Kristanti was noticeably concerned about the entire project suffering from a miscarriage.

When discontent arose over the seating arrangement the OSCE had envisioned in accordance with the formal procedure of placing participants in alphabetic order, the meeting faced one of several dramatic apices marking the negotiations. Yet Kristanti admirably kept her countenance although inwardly seething at the immature objections of the Ukrainian and Moldovan representatives, affirming widespread rumours that the levelheaded Indonesian career woman starts her day with a serving of chilies. Upon finally complying with Kristanti’s request, Moldovan Foreign Minister Catie Leancă insisted on her move to another seat as performed solely “for logistics’s sake” - emblematic of the diplomatic tightrope walk between maximal self-assertion and slim willingness for concession that continued to dominate the discussions. With the room for manoeuvre accordingly minuscule, the mediators struggled to establish common ground between the direct parties to the conflict, whose positions were reinforced by the strongman politics of the Russian Federation and an overly assertive European Union.

Following the traditional Scottish blessing for fruitful discussion by the God of Aubergines Andrew Williams, the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the Transnistrian Settlement Process Maria Kristanti opened the summit fervently condemning the shooting of a young Moldovan who attempted to trespass the Transnistrian border by Russian peacekeeping forces in January. With this highly charged inception, the tone for a heated debate mostly fought between the European Special Representative to Transnistria Dánlmán Iliazsei and the Russian Federation’s delegation comprised of Foreign Minister Paul Lavrov and Special Representative Bruno Rogozin was set. Kristanti and Casey, however, seemed determined to counteract the sword of
Damocles, emphasizing in their initial statements that the conflict not only constituted an expensive endeavour to all parties involved, but that the pronounced objective of the OSCE was to find a win-win solution to the precarious status quo. Kristanti, nevertheless, despite her pronounced insistence on a settlement acceptable to all parties, upheld the uncompromising EU position reaffirming the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Moldova. With this biased stance towards one of the parties stated as a preferred outcome at the outset of negotiations, little was to be achieved for the Transnistrian side.

Moldova as the first country to convey its official position towards the conflict needless to say endorsed this solution. Foreign Minister Catie Leancă accordingly invoked alleged multi-ethnic roots and common national identity as grounds for reunification, pledging for a “normalization of relations”. Her advocated piecemeal approach, while certainly feasible as a resolution mechanism in the protracted conflict, at the same time demonstrated Leancă’s resolve to not allow for transformation of the status quo besides the option of reintegration. As an overarching theme for the four key points deemed essential to conflict resolution, the Moldovan Foreign Minister alluded to the unwelcome external influence the Russian Federation exerts in the Transnistrian enclave, yet without making her charges explicit.

In stark contrast to his Moldovan counterpart, president of the Transnistrian de facto state Graeme Young did not shy away from boasting his presumed entitlement to full statehood. Claiming that he was “duly elected [to] office”, Young's erratically delivered statement startled those who had not previously met the Transnistrian representative. Citing principles under international law such as the right to self-determination, Young aimed to appeal to the rhetoric commitment to international legal frameworks traditionally upheld particularly by participants such as the European Union and the United States. Young even glaringly attempted to beguile the US government by invoking Transnistrian sovereignty as an
“inalienable right” to its people; a paradigm championed in one of the core documents of US national identity and politics, the Declaration of Independence.

Young furthermore argued that Moldova’s claims for reunification had their sole legal basis in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, in order to emphasize the illegitimacy of affirming Moldovan sovereignty at the cost of Transnistrian self-determination. Ironically, the case most pertinent for pressuring the political power players to reassess their position towards Transnistria’s legal status, that is Kosovo’s independence, was the ace Young could not pull from his separatist sleeve. With the Russian Federation unwilling to recognize Kosovo’s independence, Young’s hands were tied; he for reasons unknown, however, also refrained from embracing the parallels between his case and South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia’s separatist entities which received the Russian Federation’s formal recognition, as a means of political leverage towards Lavrov and Rogozin.

As the next speaker, Romania’s Special Representative to Moldova, Jordan Williams, stressed her country’s special relationship with Moldova. Not hesitant to frankly address the economic interest in Moldova’s EU accession, which would entail enforcing trade regulations to thwart the thriving contraband economy and ease visa restrictions, Williams affirmed to act as an “advocate for Moldova”. While this in itself could be read as an overestimation of Romanian influence in European politics, it nevertheless demonstrates the rigid mindset of participants. The complete subordination to the course chosen by the European Union was not only obvious in these opening statements, but continued to shape the ensuing debates.

Entering the scene with an aura of Russian grandeur supported by approximately 300 dead squirrels lavishly dangling from his Muscovite shoulders, Paul Lavrov demonstrated that he would not succumb to the European Union’s bargaining. While his partner in crime Bruno Rogozin sported a comparatively modest attire more pleasing to the Western eye, he likewise assumed a strongman stance from his first words uttered, voicing the only formal objection concerning the official framework provided by the OSCE when he rejected Kristanti’s initial condemnation of the border incident. Framing Russian influence in the region as a purely altruistic measure, Rogozin argued that Russia had not “shied away from its responsibility” and “devoted significant resources to safeguarding peace and security in the region”.

While this reasoning to a certain extent corresponds to persistent Transnistrian demands for Russian peacekeeping forces as a security guarantor against Moldovan aggression, it provides a skewed image of Russian politics. Russia’s enduring noncompliance with its officially signed, past agreements prescribing troop withdrawal from Transnistrian grounds, the earliest of which was signed between the Russian and Moldovan government as early as October 1994, as well as the repeated claims of Moldova for Russian forces to retreat from their under international law sovereign territory.

With the Operational Group of Russian Forces under the direct command of the Russian Ministry of Defense instead of the armed
forces, Russia’s political agenda clearly goes beyond the maintenance of peace. The inconvenient truth that the Russian government has formally committed itself to evicting any Russian forces from the ground under the Yeltsin presidency within the framework of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, signed in 1999, was carefully omitted from Rogozin’s account of Russia’s role in the region. The pledge to instead rearm the peacekeeping forces and establish a Russian consulate in Transnistria, objectives that none of the participants seemed to take offense with, presented the Russian hard line that the delegation attempted to subdue with its rhetorical assertion of Moldovan territorial integrity. Linked to Rogozin’s rather threatening advice that Moldovans should “for the sake of [their] own people” join the Union of Russia and Belarus, a regional economic cooperation organized between the Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan, substantiated the delegation’s regional aspiration for Russian dominance. If considered in light of the South Ossetia War, which demonstrated Russia’s willingness to abandon the smokescreen of the host state’s proclaimed territorial integrity alongside Russian support for separatist regimes and to resort to force in favour of the latter, the Russian call for an end to Moldovan dominance over Transnistria bore a latent threat. Culminating their official position with the proclamation of the Age of Eurasia provided that the European Union and the United States would choose the path of cooperation on the Transnistria issue, the Russian delegation reclined to their demonstrably disengaged sitting posture, overlooking the panel members from the back of the conference room.

In contrast, Ukraine’s Special Representative to Transnistria, Yuki Harcenko, passionately reiterated her right to be taken seriously in the negotiations, based on Ukraine being the only country at the negotiation table sharing a border with both Moldova and Transnistria. Harcenko also cited the ethnic Ukrainian population in Transnistria as an affirmation of the nationally held stake in the region. Due to these national interests as well as Ukraine’s pronounced, yet under the current government half-
heartedly pursued aspirations for EU membership, high hopes had been placed on Harcenko’s assumption of providing positive impulse to the conflict resolution process. Yet the Ukrainian representative’s assertion of being “prepared to defend Moldova’s right to sovereignty and territorial integrity” in light of recent anti-democratic domestic trends may in fact only serve to exacerbate regional tensions.

In her initial statement, the United States Representative to the OSCE Kathryn Kelly appeared to strike a different chord. In advocating for a solution “that would unite the two territories”, Kelly was hesitant to all too readily insist on Moldova’s full sovereignty over the enclave. Not specifically excluding the possibility of autonomy for the Transnistrian entity, Kelly instead endorsed conventional themes in US foreign policy, democracy promotion, economic development and humanitarian improvement to bring parties closer to a feasible solution. Kelly also alluded to the War on Terror, causing an indistinct murmur among participants, and emphasized that regional security was a prime US objective. Whether Kelly’s call for a “militarization of the security zone” constituted a Freudian slip or was deliberately made to rebuke the Russian Federation, remained elusive.

EU Special Representative to the conflict Danlman Ilazsei, despite his reputation of being a party animal, first of all emphatically rejected rumours of having succumbed to the negotiation scheme of the honey trap, instigated by the Russian Federation. But not only because of this intimate confession and even more his ability of deterrence did Ilazsei cause startled faces. Ilazsei furthermore voiced grave frustrations concerning the pending success of the OSCE-administered 5+2 framework and called for a far-reaching transformation in the mediation set-up. Arguing that good faith was required for a viable solution to the protracted conflict, Ilazsei advanced the idea of a UN-led process of conflict settlement, including all key regional players.

Strained relations between Kristanti and Ilazsei, which could have been at the root of this drastic diversion from the conventional course of the European Union’s Transnistria policy, had already preceded the official commencement of negotiations. An inappropriate incident at a local pub which according to a confidential source involved the extensive placement of chocolate double fudge cake in Kristanti’s facial area soured relations between the OSCE and the body comprising its main donors. Although Kristanti has so far refrained from taking legal action, the tense atmosphere was painstakingly obvious at last Monday’s summit. Immediately following the final opening statement, the representatives of the United States, the European Union and the Russian Federation rushed to realize a scheme they had been plotting for in the week preceding the official negotiations. Aiming for a low-profile distinct from the extensively covered OSCE-talks in the 5+2 framework in March, an unexpected alignment of EU officials and the Russian cadre occurred in the form of an inconspicuous football game at the local playing fields. What in the context of St
Andrews’ left-wing, liberal academic circles had been misconstrued as a paradigm of creative advances in peacebuilding in fact served to conceive an offer Transnistrian representative Young could not refuse. Masterminded just a day before the start of official negotiations on Monday, April 23rd, Ilazsei, Rogozin, Lavrov and Kayumkhodjayev used the cover-up of the local sport facilities to draft a strategic plan, with the help of two German experts on International Business and Finance. Taking advantage of Young’s dependence on Russian aid, the great powers cornered the clearly distraught Transnistrian representative during a ten minute break in front of infamous Taste Coffee, a prime intersections for local drug trafficking routes. Yet even among the conspirators, there was no consensus to be found, which became evident when Kayumkhodjayev approached Russian Foreign Minister Paul Lavrov to forge a bilateral pact on the Transnistrian issue. Substantiating earlier rumors that the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation had been part of the Russian entourage, president Putin interrupted Kayumkhodjayev’s attempt by immediately calling Lavrov’s mobile phone, which convinced the latter to quickly abscond from the scene of the crime.

In a manner not uncommon to those questioning Russian policy motives, Kayumkhodjaev did not return to the negotiating table after this mischievous intermission, allegedly due to conflicting appointments, as his colleague Kelly told the remaining participants. Prior to his precipitous exit, Kayumkhodjaev had however also told the press in a confidential side note that he highly disapproved of the allegedly biased chair, which allowed certain participants more speaking time than others. This resentment, however, might have also stemmed from a sense of emasculation Kayumkhodjaev suffered from the tough-minded US Ambassador to the OSCE Ms. Kathryn Kelly at his side, who fiercely upheld the US position on condemning the persistent violations of human rights.

With working groups on military and political issues as well as one on economic and cultural issues, the second track was presided over by Czech academics Olga Marek and Mo Dalina from Prague’s Charles University, who aimed for the seemingly impossible in achieving an outcome acceptable to all participants. In an open floor debate, a two-hour, heated discussion on possible measures of conflict resolution emerged, almost exclusively fought between the Russian delegation and the European Union.

With the round of talks on military and political issues concerning the final status of Transnistria, Marek and Dalina made every effort to find the common denominator among the participants’ incompatible goals. EU representative Ilazsei’s argument that both the grounds for full independence as well as any form of Transnistrian autonomy in a federal Moldovan framework would be immature and required preliminary democratization and development caused outrage among the Transnistrian and Russian delegates. The idea that poor economic development could
be rationalized as a defence for the denial of democratic rights sparked strong rejections from the Russian side, to which Young defiantly responded with the suggestion of a third referendum, this time monitored by the OSCE. Yet even this reconciliatory proposal did not convince Ilazsei, who claimed that the current state in Transnistria would not allow for freedom of expression. Again, the Russian Federation took great offense with this assessment, contending that it constituted an inherent right of all former Soviet citizens to express their sense of belonging to whomever they felt akin to. Empathetically appealing to the less powerful players’ hearts and minds, Special Representative to the Transnistrian conflict Bruno Rogozin asserted that the issue at hand was “not about Brussels, but about real people”.

Once and for all sweeping the issue off the table before it would evoke relevant historical precedents of referenda on independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in Ukraine in 1991 and Moldovan secession from Romania decided by popular vote in 1994, Ilazsei retorted that Transnistria presently qualified as a “legal limbo […] only serv[ing] the Russian oligarchs” and that a referendum would hence categorically be denied the EU’s official recognition. But the final status issue as the cornerstone of a comprehensive Transnistrian peace settlement constantly re-emerged. Cunningly exploring the Russian comfort zone, Young nebulously referred to precedents under international law, which would support the Transnistrian case should it be brought before the International Court of Justice. Met with deathly silence from the Russian delegates, Young had discernible to all participants recklessly entered dangerous territory. Russia’s firm commitment to nonrecognition for Kosovo in view of its own separatist issue in the North Caucasus would accordingly prevent any Transnistrian advance of that sort from eliciting Russian approval.

On the question of Transnistria’s military security, the panel remained similarly divided. While EU representative Ilazsei again made several suggestions, none of them were adopted as feasible options by the majority of the present officials. His proposition of deploying NATO forces did not receive significant attention and was rejected even by the Moldovan side. Concerning the possible transformation of the military status quo, Transnistrian representative Young vehemently insisted on the enclave’s entitlement to Russian peacekeeping forces as the solely accepted security guarantor. Romanian diplomat Jordan Williams and Ukrainian representative Yukie Harcenco joined forces in maintaining that the continued
presence of Russian peacekeepers was unacceptable. The OSCE’s motion for a multinational peacekeeping force under an OSCE mandate, including Russian personnel, did not resonate well with Moldovan Minister Catie Leancă, who declared that continued Russian engagement would only corroborate the undermining of Moldova’s territorial integrity.

A third suggestion brought forward by Ilazsei advocated to strip Moldova of its army entirely and merely retain a police force, in order to reduce the threat posed to Transnistria and eventually promote the withdrawal of Russian military personnel in the separatist enclave in return. While Ilazsei’s idea demonstrated an empathy for Transnistrian underlying fears and past grievances essential to conflict mediation, it was again Leancă who showed her notorious teeth by holding that the current state of security in the region necessitated a standing army, not as a means of aggression, but self-protection.

Revealing his growing impatience concerning the progress of talks, Ilazsei in response effusively proclaimed that “under the EU security umbrella, there will be no fear” - but the EU’s recent history in resolving frozen conflict in the post-Soviet space tells a different story. In the case of Georgia’s separatist conflict in 2008, the EU desperately failed at conflict prevention, despite significant funds allocated to the reconstruction of the post-conflict regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which according to Johns-Hopkins University’s Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst Nicu Popescu amounted to €30 million between 2003 and 2008. The complicated triangle between the European Union, the OSCE and the Russian Federation prior to the South Ossetia War serves as a pertinent precedent to comprehend the dynamics between Kristanti, Ilazsei and the Russian delegates in the negotiations concerning Transnistria. In the case of Georgia, the Russian Federation’s veto to the extension of the OSCE’s border monitoring mission in 2004 resulted in a meagre EU take-over of Russian-Georgian border control, comprised of a three person “Border Support Team”. Ilazsei’s uncompromising yet among participants unanswered insistence on a joint peacekeeping force under NATO command can hence be interpreted as a direct response to this failure.

Considering economic issues, Ilazsei again assumed a leading role in the negotiations by rigorously lobbying for an Integrated Border Mission to tackle contraband activities and drug trafficking. Ilazsei’s proposal was strongly supported by Kristanti, who introduced OSCE-cooperation in such an endeavour, and backed by Serex who pushed for economic cooperation with Transnistria to suppress the black market.

When the discussion turned to cultural issues, Paul Lavrov revealed himself a true poet, whilst resembling the proverbial Russian wolf in squirrels’ clothing. Drawing on similes concerning Ford automobiles and describing Transnistria to be helplessly floating in “a sea of economic hostility”, Lavrov made use of a recently discovered mode in Russian foreign policy, soft power. Reminiscent of the Brothers Grimm chalk-eating beast, Lavrov laid the groundwork by in this way appealing to participants’ emotions before sharing what turned out to be the biggest coup of the negotiations. Following Young’s heart-warming assertion that Transnistrians had a “right to formulate [their] own identity and identify [their] own needs”, too, the Russian delegation announced its plans to establish a consulate in Tiraspol, subordinate to the Russian embassy in Chisinau. This thinly disguised attempt of tightening the Russian grip on Transnistria, however, was not only quickly embraced by Young, but perplexingly also warmly received by the panel members. The only cautious qualifications added originated in the OSCE’s requirement for the consulate to cease its activity should the embassy in Chisinau be closed.

Negotiations took an even more rapid turn following a second break, when the Russian Delegation had finalized its stratagem by staging another secret meeting, this time involving only the direct parties to the conflict. Trying to forge a deal that
would maximize Russia’s benefit, Lavrov and Rogozin performed a diplomatic speciality of the KGB, the “Russian Oyster”, on a clearly discomforted Leancă, who had been framed without being cognizant of the previously held secret meeting at Taste Coffee. While strongly objecting to a Transnistrian referendum proposed in the Taste Accords, Leancă was nevertheless successfully pressured into allowing the establishment of a Russian consulate on Transnistrian grounds, whose construction as Lavrov later let slip had already been initiated. The second point of the agreement envisioned the addressing of Transnistrian grievances, which was expanded by Ilazsei’s proposal to create a Truth and Friendship Commission.

But just as the mediation process seemed to arrive at a mutually acceptable, if modest solution, Transnistrian renegade Young decided to live up to his madman reputation. Playing his Russian protectors like a fiddle, Young when the forwarded proposal came to a vote among the panel members decided to denounce the plan drafted just an hour earlier. Tantamount to the blood-dripping horse head found among the clean sheets, Young had proven to the startled Russians that he as well held leverage in this power struggle. Emblematic of the overall tense climate, this puzzling conclusion to the negotiations proved that the lack of mutual trust even within factions render the Transnistrian issue a frozen conflict. While the joint agreement on the recognition of Transnistrian grievances, conceivably in the EU-promoted model of a Truth and Friendship Commission, signified a tentative step towards accounting for the past and potential trust-building, the Russian consulate constitutes a latent threat to the progress made.

As another positive development, the issue of re-entry into the mediation process, which for the previous stalemate had been sustained by the reluctance of the European Union to invest sufficient political capital and the Russian Federation’s contentment with the status quo, has ostensibly been preempted. According to a local source, several of the participants have already made arrangements for returning to the site of talks in late November for a series of official ceremonies marking the panellists’ progress. The faint hope that by then, the conflicting parties will harvest collective aubergines of peace remains.

EDITORIAL NOTE
Since the publication of this article, Kayumkhodjaev has been alive and thriving. Any insinuation of his swift departure being related to an effort of the Russian delegation are hence withdrawn.