

THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS: A NEW CONTEXT FOR A TRANSNISTRIAN SETTLEMENT

The recent political changes in the region, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea and Moldova's signature of an Association Agreement with the EU, have transformed the political context of the Transnistrian problem, ongoing for the past 20 years. The repositioning of the involved actors – Moldova, Russia, Transnistria, and Ukraine – in the context of these new political realities might be the key to breaking the deadlock surrounding this breakaway region. In this article, the author explores each actor's evolving approaches to the problem and assesses how the problem could be resolved or exacerbated in the near future.

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In the past 12 months, a radical change in the situation surrounding Transnistria has occurred. In connection with the recent events in Ukraine, but also due to the success of Chisinau in the process of European integration – mainly thanks to its signing of an Association Agreement with the EU – a re-evaluation of the positions of all key players involved in the Transnistrian issue has taken place, primarily Ukraine, Moldova, and Transnistria itself. It also became clear that to achieve its geopolitical objectives Russia would be willing to use not only classical political and economic pressure, but also its armed forces for destabilization of the situation in the region and/or for the annexation of certain territories. The observed changes in the behavior of individual actors appear to be permanent. This means that recent events in the region have created a completely new context for the Transnistrian problem, which has been ongoing for over 20 years. It is likely that the new conditions will encourage a solution to the problem of the breakaway republic in the near future. However, two questions remain open: In which way will the problem be resolved, and who will be the beneficiary of such a solution?

Ukraine – From Indifference to Hostility

Up until the beginning of 2014, the attitude of Kiev towards Tiraspol could be described as ambivalent. At the official level, the Ukrainian authorities did not recognize Transnistrian statehood and expressed support for the territorial integrity of Moldova. At the same time, however, they were reluctant to take part in initiatives of Chisinau aimed at the subordination of region. For example, among other things, Kiev did not agree on the formation of joint checkpoints with Chisinau along the so-called Transnistrian segment of border between Ukraine and Moldova. Such checkpoints would allow Moldovan authorities to control the movement of people and goods entering from the Transnistrian region into the Moldovan territory that is controlled by Chisinau. The only significant example of cooperation between both states was the economic blockade of Transnistria, imposed by Moldova and Ukraine on Tiraspol in 2006 in order to force the registration of Transnistrian enterprises in Chisinau. At the same time, Ukraine tolerated the existence of this unrecognized region on its borders. Transnistrian officials traveling to Moscow often use the airport in Odessa. Economic cooperation between Transnistria and the region of Odessa was always very dynamic. It is also no secret that the authorities of Odessa maintained relatively friendly relations with the leadership of the unrecognized republic.

Kiev's policy was determined by two main factors. The first was the desire to preserve the best possible relations with Russia, which required if not support for the existence of Transnistria than at least refraining from acting toward its detriment.

The second factor was the economic benefits that part of the Ukrainian political class and the oligarchs drew (and so far continues to draw) from Transnistria. Additionally, authorities in Kiev had been recognizing the issue of Transnistria as an internal problem of Moldova and as such had not perceived the region as a source of real danger for Ukraine.

Events in Crimea and the outbreak of fighting in Donbas, however, forced Kiev to revise its relations with Tiraspol. It has become clear that Transnistria can be used by Russia to conduct subversive activities in the southwestern area of the country – particularly in the region of Odessa, but also in the areas of Nikolayev and Kherson. These fears are grounded. At the beginning of March 2014, the first information about the Russian troops from Special Forces entering Transnistria in civilian outfits surfaced. It also became clear that the region has become one of the sources of weapons and ammunition for separatists fighting in Donbas – well-known Moldovan arms dealer, Ion Druță, participated in transactions with Ukrainian separatists. In addition, not only have fighters penetrated Ukraine from Transnistrian territory, but so have former members of the administration and military apparatus of the region, such as the creator of the Transnistrian KGB, General Vladimir Antufieiev, and long-time Vice President Alexandru Caraman. All of these factors led Kiev to start perceiving Transnistria as a vital threat to Ukrainian security and pushed it to take steps to minimize this threat.

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The Ukrainian-Transnistrian border was strengthened, with Kiev deploying additional military forces and expanding permanent defensive infrastructure. In July 2014, Ukrainian soldiers started digging antitank trench along the entire length of the border with Transnistria. At the same time, Ukraine also tightened its border-crossing regime for holders of Russian passports entering Ukraine from Transnistria. The change of Kiev’s policy towards Transnistria was also evident in relation to officials from Tiraspol who were increasingly hindered from, and eventually completely denied, the right to use Odessa’s airport, which forced them to travel *via* Chisinau. In August, the Ukrainian prosecutor’s office decided to take another unprecedented step in relation to separatist Transnistria by arresting Dmitry Soin, the Transnistrian MP wanted by the Moldovans and, for more than a year now, a resident of Odessa. Although Soin remains in open conflict with

the current Transnistrian leader Yevgeny Shevchuk, his arrest should be seen as a demonstration by Kiev to the Transnistrian elite, signaling that other politicians from Tiraspol may be subject to actions of the Ukrainian judiciary.

Moldova – From “Not Antagonizing” to Assertiveness

Already since the end of the military phase of the conflict with Transnistria in 1992, Chisinau had been trying to pursue a policy aimed at the non-exacerbation of relations with Tiraspol, which can be perceived as a kind of appeasement strategy. This resulted primarily from a desire to maintain at least neutral (if not good) relations with Moscow, especially because of the great importance of Russia for the Moldovan economy – mainly for trade, energy security, and the labor migrants – and because of the pressures of the Moldovan electorate, which has traditionally opposed any inflammation of the Transnistrian problem due to fears of a possible outbreak of armed conflict and Russian sanctions. For these reasons, even though they do not recognize Transnistria, the Moldovan authorities *de facto* tolerate its existence. Chisinau considers Transnistria as a formal and a fully legitimate side of negotiations in the 5 + 2 format, which positions the US, Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, and the EU as intermediaries and Moldova and Transnistria as conflicting parties. Further, Chisinau officially accepts Transnistrian officials and does not prevent vehicles bearing Transnistrian license plates from movement on Moldovan territory or crossing a border, etc. Moldova also has no control over the administrative border between the territory of Transnistria and the remaining part of the country.

Roughly from the middle of 2014 onwards, a distinct change in the policy of Moldovan authorities against Transnistrian separatists can be seen. In recent months, Chisinau initiated a number of criminal cases against Transnistrian politicians. Among others, these investigations included the “Prime Minister” of Transnistria Tatiana Turanskaya, the “Minister of Agriculture,” and the Chairman of the Supreme Court. Moldova also suspended the issuance of export certificates for Transnistrian companies trading with Russia, and began systematically impeding travel by Transnistrian officials *via* the Chisinau airport. Authorities have also adopted a more assertive stance towards Russian involvement in the Transnistrian issue. In May, the Moldovan Secret Service confiscated letters expressing support from residents of Transnistria for the region’s incorporation into Russia, which were carried by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin onboard a Russian airplane. Also, over the last few months the government has refused entry to Russian soldiers going to Transnistria *via* Chisinau airport on several occasions. In October Moldovans declared Vasili Kashirin, head of the Tiraspol branch of the Russian

Institute of Strategic Studies Studies (RISI) *persona non grata* and expelled him from the country. All of these actions are evidence of an unprecedented shift in policy of Chisinau towards Transnistria.

It seems that there are two reasons for the increased assertiveness of Chisinau towards Tiraspol. The first is the previously described change in policy of Ukraine towards Transnistria, which increases the potential for pressure by the Moldovan authorities on the separatist region and allows them to conduct joint actions with Kiev against Tiraspol. The second reason is the signing and ratification by the Parliament of Moldova (on 27 June and 2 July 2014, respectively) of the Association Agreement with the EU. Until the adoption of the document,

Moldova refrained from tightening its policy towards Transnistria, mostly because of fears of possible actions by Tiraspol that could sabotage negotiations with the EU. Brussels, which wanted to stop the spread of destabilization from Crimea and Donbas to Transnistria, played an important role here as well in urging Chisinau to exercise restraint against Tiraspol.

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Contrary to some popular assumptions, the reason for the change in the policy of Chisinau toward Transnistria is not the Moldovan parliamentary elections scheduled for November 30th. The Moldovan authorities’ actions toward separatists increase the tension in relations with Tiraspol – an outcome that, as previously mentioned, is not seen positively by the majority of voters.

Transnistria – From Fragile Stability to Depression

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict put the Transnistrian authorities in a very awkward situation. On the one hand, Tiraspol, economically and politically dependent on Moscow, officially supports the Kremlin and its policies aimed to protect Russian-speaking populations outside the borders of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, however, Transnistria tries to maintain the best possible relations with the authorities in Kiev. Tiraspol is aware that Ukraine provides the only *de facto* window to the world for Transnistria other than Moldova, which is traditionally

reluctant toward policies favoring the separatists. For this reason, the authorities of the region refrained for a long time from officially commenting on the events, which began in the late November 2013 on Kiev's Independence Square. The few statements Transnistrian officials gave were limited only to expressing sorrow for the victims of the demonstrations and general concern about the situation. Remembering the Orange Revolution, Tiraspol decided to wait and not openly criticize either the supporters of European integration or President Yanukovich. This policy in the long run, however, did not bring the expected results. Kiev, which realized the risks arising from the existence of Transnistria began, as previously described, to tighten its policy towards the region. At the same time Transnistria began to sink into economic crisis.

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In April 2014, 95 percent of the planned revenue was in the budget of Transnistria but in May this figure had dropped to 85 percent, and the deficit forecast was even worse. This forced the government to cut salaries paid from the budget by approximately 15 percent and to introduce restrictions in financing government expenditures. Faced with such a situation, and fearing of an outbreak of social discontent, Transnistrian leader

Shevchuk decided to use the existing crisis in Ukraine and Moldova's pro-European course to account for the deteriorating situation of public finances. The official declarations of the authorities began to emphasize that Ukraine and Moldova had led to the economic blockade of the region, which directly affects exports and reduces budget revenues. While not true, Shevchuk's explanations convinced many inhabitants of Transnistria.¹

In addition to shifting responsibility onto Kiev and Chisinau, authorities in Tiraspol have also started to stir up fear among their constituencies of a possible armed intervention from Ukraine or Moldova (supported by Romania). Beginning in April, military exercises of various types of forces have been regularly conducted in order to maintain a sense of danger in Transnistria. These steps were meant to further distract the population from the poor economic situation and bolster electoral support for Shevchuk, who was losing popularity due to the public finance crisis.

¹ Contrary to statements by the Transnistrian authorities, the region's budget problems do not stem from an alleged economic blockade. According to data reported by the Transnistrian customs committee in the period from January to October 2014, the region recorded approximately 40 percent increase in exports. The real reasons behind the financial problems experienced were the poor fiscal policies pursued by the government of Shevchuk and massive corruption.

Russia – From “Supporter of Reunification” to...?

Officially, Russia has always supported the idea of the reintegration of Moldova and Transnistria, provided, however, that this process would be conducted on terms dictated by Moscow. From the perspective of the Kremlin, Transnistria was meant to serve as an obstacle to the affiliation of Moldova with the West, understood as integration with the EU – or, less likely, NATO – and the possible reunification with Romania. Russia has always seemed aware, however, that the optimal solution would be to cause the reunification of Moldova and Transnistria through the establishment of some form of federation in which Tiraspol would have the right to influence the political decisions – especially on foreign policy – of Chisinau. The best example of how Russia saw such a union was the so-called Kozak Plan, proposed by Moscow in 2003. This plan provided not only the creation of a federation in which Transnistria would have the right of veto over the decisions of Chisinau, but also gave Russia the right to maintain a significant number of troops in Moldova for 20 years as guarantors. This plan also allowed Transnistria to exit from the federation unilaterally, technically at any given time.

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However, Moldova’s signing of an Association Agreement with the EU, together with clear and regular statements of the Transnistrian authorities about their wish to integrate with the Customs Union promoted by Russia, seems to completely roll back the possibility of a resolution of the conflict implemented on the basis of federalization. What is more, in the political mainstream of Moldova, there is no force currently advocating such a solution. Even the Communist Party in Moldova, opting for rapprochement with Russia and enjoying the support of approximately 20 percent of the electorate, is opposed to the idea of federalization.²

At the same time, Russia realized in recent months that the existence of Transnistria in its present form actually in no way prevents Moldova from its integration with the West. This means that the separatist entity in eastern Moldova, which costs Moscow approximately one billion dollars a year, is an expensive but very ineffective tool of

² Although Socialist Party of Moldova led by Igor Dodon is advocating federalization and have some chances to enter new Parliament after upcoming elections, it’s hardly to regard this party as a political mainstream.

leverage over Chisinau. Both conclusions described above may make Russia look increasingly less favorably on the continued maintenance of the breakaway region, particularly in light of the huge expenses that must be borne in connection with the annexation of Crimea. Therefore, Moscow's interest in a major change in region's status in the near future cannot be ruled out.

Perspectives

Contrary to popular fears, it is highly unlikely that Russia has decided to annex Transnistria. First of all, this step would be very difficult to achieve, not only militarily, but also in terms of logistics. It is expected that in such a situation, both Ukraine and Moldova would close their borders with the breakaway region. Airlift would be impossible, as it would need the approval to use airspace of Ukraine or Moldova. This would prevent, or at least complicate, the transport of supplies and troops. Most importantly, however, such a step does not hold back Moldova from its deepening integration with the West.

However, the possibility that Russia, instead of annexation, could decide to unilaterally recognize the region should not be ruled out. This would allow Moscow to include Tiraspol in the Eurasian integration process, which is now largely blocked because of the imprecise legal status of the region, and complicate the situation of Moldova. Despite this, as in the case of annexation, recognition would prevent Chisinau from its pro-European aspirations and would undoubtedly strengthen the position of Tiraspol.

Meanwhile, Chisinau's policy towards Transnistria will be primarily determined by the results of the parliamentary elections of November 30th. If the current pro-European coalition remains in power, a further increase of pressure on the authorities of the separatist region should be expected. It is very likely that Chisinau will manage to coordinate these activities with Kiev, which will likely continue to perceive Transnistria as a possible source of danger for a long time. This pressure, combined with the continuing economic crisis in the region could lead to increased social tensions, which will focus on either the current government in Tiraspol or what seems more likely on Ukraine and Moldova. In this case, if the recognition of Transnistria by Russia became a reality and the expected response from Chisinau were to occur, this would cause a serious exacerbation of relations with the breakaway region, and perhaps even the beginning of hostilities.