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Chisinau's Transnistrian Dilemma

The Moldovan authorities face a dilemma regarding their policy towards the separatist region on the left bank of the Dniester River. The new circumstances on the international scene resulting from Russian aggression against Ukraine mean that there is an increased possibility to exert pressure on the government of the separatist republic. A prompt resolution of the problem would be in the interests of Ukraine, which has signalled its readiness to become involved in the matter. However, Moldova is refraining from taking any decisive action, unwilling to create grounds for another crisis to arise.

A new, troublesome world. Russian aggression in Ukraine has exacerbated as well as further highlighted the rift between the interests of the Russian Federation and the elites of unrecognised Transnistria. Since 2016, the separatist republic – ruled by local oligarchs with links to the Sheriff company – has strengthened its economic ties with the European Union. Russia's most important instruments of influence over Transnistria include the presence of Russian troops and free gas – thanks to which its economy still qualifies as competitive – and a substantial influence on the domestic population in the media and the symbolic sphere. As a result, the unrecognised republic has functioned in an arrangement in which ties with Moldova and the EU have provided opportunities for business development and enabled it to gradually gain independence from the Kremlin, whereas Russian influence has protected it from being incorporated into Moldova (Komentarze IEŚ, no. 529). The war has demonstrated that the potency of this influence has declined. Given the actions of the Russian soldiers in Ukraine, most notably their low morale and military competence, the discipline, loyalty and expertise of the units stationed in Transnistria has been called into question, especially as the vast majority of soldiers there were born and raised in the unrecognised republic. Russia's raw materials policy, including gas blackmail against Moldova and interruptions of gas supplies to the West (including suspended delivery through the Nord Stream pipeline), clearly indicates that the political factor far outweighs economic considerations in that area. The Transnistrian elites have realised that as part of a wider showdown with the West, their access to free gas might be withheld because discontinuing supplies to Moldova will also deprive Transnistria of gas. Furthermore, Moldova is clearly striving to reduce its dependence on Russian gas (Komentarze IEŚ, no. 690), while the pipelines supplying it run through Ukraine; therefore, the unrecognised republic may lose access to free gas in a few years.

At present, it is difficult to state anything conclusive concerning the attitude of the Transnistrian population to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to notice certain major symptoms. First, the local authorities have not unequivocally sided with Russia in the conflict, adopting a rhetoric which primarily aims at appeasing their citizens and the neighbouring states. Reports of alleged attacks from the Transnistrian territory on Ukraine turned out to be untrue, nor has the support for Russia's operations become apparent at the public level. Second, in spring 2022, a series of incidents took place in Transnistria that bore the hallmarks of diversionary attacks, but there were no casualties and no perpetrators could be identified. It is highly likely that they were carried out by the local security services, whose strong links with the Russian counterparts are well known. Instead, their goal was to create an atmosphere of fear of imminent Ukrainian or Moldovan aggression. Third, when the Russian Federation announced partial mobilisation, the politicians of Transnistria focused their efforts on reassuring the public that they would not be affected (approximately 220,000 citizens of the Russian Federation reside formally in Transnistria).

The Ukrainian perspective. Following 24 February 2022, the Ukrainian government and the public have been looking at Transnistria with much concern. In the first few weeks, when it was feared that the Russian offensive

might reach Odessa, the involvement of the troops stationed in Transnistria – if only in the form of logistical support and supplies – seemed very real. For this reason, the bridge near the Kucirgany-Pervomaisk border crossing was made impassable. Certain opinions expressed in the Ukrainian media by influential public figures asserted that the local military should preemptively seize control of the separatist republic, which after all constitutes a part of Moldova in the light of international law. One also speaks of the potential gains that such a move may bring, including taking over the post-Soviet arsenal and a fuel depot as well as dealing a blow to Russia's reputation. Still, were it to take place, it would put the Moldovan government in a very awkward position, both internationally and vis-à-vis their own citizens.

The Moldovan restraint. The government of Moldova has adopted a wait-and-see attitude on the Transnistria issue. In late 2021-early 2022, a new Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration was appointed. Vlad Kulminski, whom many considered to be a proponent of an active policy with respect to Transnistria, was replaced by Oleg Serebrian, an intellectual and diplomat who effectively pursues a policy of moderate dialogue and waiting it out. President Maia Sandu and the Party of Action and Solidarity presume that a period of war and energy crisis is not a good time to try and resolve the conflict. Sandu has explicitly stated that the time for such talks will come after the war is over.

Conclusions. The current political elite in Transnistria have so far been primarily driven by their own economic interests. In this perspective, there are more and more arguments in favour of the Western-oriented course. Making its parastatal existence contingent on a political-military alliance with Russia – whilst caught between hostile Ukraine and the evidently pro-Western Moldova – does not seem viable. Even assuming that Russia could still win the war, remaining under its strict control does not appear attractive to either the authorities or the public for the time being. Simultaneously, the elites are probably increasingly aware of the following choice ahead: reintegration with Moldova under Western auspices or Ukrainian intervention. The first option seems much more advantageous given the political, economic and even personal security of those in power.

Thus, a historic window is opening for Moldova, thanks to which the Transnistria issue might be resolved. In the coming months, the government of that country are unlikely to take decisive steps on the issue as they confront overwhelming crises. Discontinued gas supplies from Russia would indeed be a factor which might precipitate actual reintegration of the state. In such circumstances, Transnistria would have to rely on the Western sources, whereby Moldova would act as an intermediary and all transactions would be carried out under terms set by Chisinau. This would also lead to a serious economic and social crisis in the separatist republic.

The pace of these processes also depends on the outcomes of military operations on the Ukrainian fronts. Russian defeats will translate into greater pressure on Tiraspol and conversely. Western partners have so far supported Moldova's policy of restraint. However, if the Ukrainian army achieves a major success, there may be a desire to exploit the opportunity and actively address the matter of Transnistria. The importance of this issue will also depend on the pace of talks concerning Moldova's membership in the EU.