



BULLETIN

No. 49 (644), 11 April 2014 © PISM

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Is Transnistria the Next Crimea?

Anita Sobják

In terms of association with the EU, Moldova is now where Ukraine was before the Vilnius Summit: highly exposed to destabilisation, be that internal or external. Yet as Tiraspol has just cancelled the next round of the 5+2 format peace talks set for 10–11 April, it is becoming clear that the major challenge for Chisinau is a sudden change in the Transnistrian situation. In the run-up to the planned signing of the AA in June, Moscow will instigate incidents on the ground and employ diplomatic pressure towards federalisation. As a last resort, the Crimea scenario could play out in Transnistria.

Speeding up Association after Ukraine. If just a year ago Moldova's reputation as a frontrunner in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was endangered by a months-long domestic political crisis, the new Pro-European Coalition (PEC), in place since 30 May 2013, has so far demonstrated relative stability and an ability to withstand Russian pressure. Yet such political determination would not have been sufficient had it not been for the developments in Ukraine—first the EuroMaidan protests and then the crisis in Crimea—which made the EU understand the threats to the association process if prolonged further. As such, an Association Agreement (AA) with Moldova was initialled at the Vilnius Summit in November 2013 and is planned to be signed as soon as in June. Visa liberalisation was also accelerated and finalised: in mid-November the European Commission announced completion of the implementation of the visa liberalisation action plan, and visa requirements will be abolished for Moldovans (holding a biometric passport) from 28th April. The technical progress of association is also accompanied by more financial support and a visible intensification of political backing from the West, translated into frequent high-level visits to Chisinau.

Domestic and External Vulnerabilities. The signing, however, and especially implementation of the AA, might be obstructed in many ways. Domestically, a challenge is PEC's weak majority in parliament, thus it is a regular target for votes of no confidence initiated by the opposition Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, the general election in November might see the comeback of the communists, as public support for them is 31% and is higher than that of the three coalition parties altogether. The communist party advocates for tighter relations with Russia, so even if the AA is signed before the election, in the event of a government change, the political will to implement it might prove scarce. Therefore, the PEC needs to build up its support until November, partly by capitalising on quick success in the dialogue with the EU (particularly visa liberalisation, which if effectively communicated to the public is not only a practical but also a psychological argument for citizens to support the government).

In the short run, though, and especially until the AA signing, the real challenge to the association process will be pressure from Moscow. Russia has various means for inducing economic strain, such as trade restrictions (a ban on Moldovan pork imports was introduced on 8 April and an embargo on alcoholic products has been in place since last September), curbing Moldovans' access to the Russian labour market (currently an estimated 200,000 Moldovans work in Russia on a permanent basis), suspension of gas deliveries,¹ higher gas prices (from 2011, the gas contract had to be renewed every year), or cutting electric power (half of which is provided by the Cuciurgan power station in Transnistria, run by a subsidiary of a Russian company).

Russia can also incite further acts of separatism inside Moldova. A referendum on 2 February organised in the autonomous region of Gagauzia stirred much international attention, as 98.5% of the voters supported Moldova's

¹ A. Sobják, "The Romania-Moldova Gas Pipeline: Does a Connection to the EU Mean a Disconnect from Russia?," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 93 (546), 9 September 2013.

integration with the Russian-led Customs Union and 98% voted in favour of independence for Gagauzia should Moldova lose sovereignty. The region represents only 4.4% of Moldova's population (mainly Gagauzians, an Orthodox Christian, Turkic-speaking ethnic group) and lacks sufficient political power to influence the course of policy in Chisinau. It is also not in the local political elite's interest to secede: as the poorest region in Moldova it would condemn itself to high economic dependence on Russia. Yet, the Gagauzian leadership will not miss a chance to mobilise their electorate using pro-Russia slogans prior to the November election. They could also decide to boycott the election. What is sure is the political elite there will definitely use Russia's interest to destabilise Moldova to gain higher fiscal autonomy for Gagauzia.

Scenarios for Transnistria. Of more danger to EU association, however, is Transnistrian separatism. Recently, Tiraspol has been increasingly looking to integrate with Russia. It could claim to rationalise this demand using the results of the 2006 referendum in which 97% of Transnistrians voted for unification with Russia. Meanwhile, Russian troops in Transnistria are on high alert and Moscow has started to communicate an urgent need to clarify the status of the region. Such rhetoric is now being built on information spread by Russian media about a Ukrainian trade and communication blockade of Transnistria. In fact, Ukraine only strengthened border controls. But the accusation fits well with Moscow's narrative of abuse of Russians' rights that it employed in Crimea and which could be used to justify increased engagement in Transnistria, too.

Despite such parallels with Crimea, the essential difference is that Transnistria itself presents less strategic value for Moscow than Crimea. Absent an existing geographical connection, geo-strategic significance or natural resources (such as Crimea's offshore gas reserves), Moscow's interest in Transnistria lies primarily in ensuring political leverage on Chisinau. So far, this has been best served by preserving the *status quo*. Yet given the quickly approaching signing of the AA by Moldova, as well as the ongoing turmoil in eastern Ukraine, the Russian strategy for Transnistria could change unpredictably. This is especially true if Russia goes so far as to seize control over more of southern Ukraine, thus creating a land link between Transnistria and Russia. While currently it is eastern Ukraine under direct threat of occupation by Russia, expansion along the Black Sea cannot be ruled out. Such a move would make sense militarily, as after the Crimean crisis the main operational base of the Ukrainian Navy was moved from Sevastopol to Odessa. It would also have an economic rationale: being a key transport junction, the port in Mykolaiv, and more specifically the functionally Russian-controlled port of Oktyabrsk in the city, is a hotbed of Russian and Ukrainian weapons exports to such countries as Syria.

Even if the situation does not escalate as far as annexation, it is certain that Russia will continue to destabilise the region in order to circumvent Moldova's dialogue with the EU. The orchestrated escalation of tensions between Tiraspol and Chisinau in the course of 2013 is a cautionary tale about what to expect. Last year, Tiraspol took significant steps to strengthen its hold on Bender, a city in the buffer zone along the Dniester River under the nominal authority of the Joint Control Commission) but *de facto* mainly controlled by Transnistria. In June 2013, Tiraspol issued a law on the borders of the region, claiming an enlarged territory. Legal approximation with Russia through constitutional changes was also initiated. Furthermore, Romanian-language schools in Transnistria have been increasingly under pressure by loss of funds and access to Moldovan-owned agricultural fields situated in areas controlled by the separatists is being denied. Along with follow-up to these incidents, further provocations may also come in the form of blocking the rail line to Ukraine. Additionally, Russia will reinvigorate diplomatic pressure to settle the Transnistrian conflict through the federalisation of Moldova. This would effectively halt the association process, as Chisinau would lose full control over its European policy. Presently, Moscow does not have sufficient incentive to push the Moldovan government into federalisation at the price of relations with the EU, yet this might change with the elections in autumn.

Foregoing Destabilisation of Chisinau–Tiraspol Relations. It is essential to keep the situation on the ground under control. Similar to the U.S., which provided \$10 million to Ukraine and Moldova to strengthen the border between them, the EU should also step up its efforts in this respect. In response to Russian forces massing on the eastern borders of Ukraine, NATO should continue deterrence efforts by moving more of its forces geographically closer and holding exercises in Member States in the region.

Cooperation between NATO and Moldova should be deepened. Contrary to public concerns, Moldova's neutrality fixed by its constitution would be no obstacle to this, there are workable patterns of NATO partnerships with other non-member states, such as Austria and Finland. This could imply continued cooperation on issues such as research, destruction of pesticides formerly used in agriculture, or cybersecurity, and could be extended to assistance in reforming the security and defence sector. All this should be set up through a revised NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan for Moldova, to be finalised by the end of April. Besides that, further bilateral military cooperation agreements should be signed with separate NATO members, such as Romania, Italy and the U.S.

While a U-turn in Tiraspol's stance is highly unlikely, the EU should leave the door open for a change and work out a scheme by which Tiraspol could profit from advantageous trade conditions with the EU beyond 2015, when the current Autonomous Trade Preferences System will be replaced by the DCFTA. Tiraspol refuses to implement the DCFTA, and if no alternative system is agreed, that will mean economic disaster for Transnistria (70% of the regions' exports go to the right bank of the Dniester and the EU), making it even more dependent on Russia to survive.