

Russia's strategy towards Moldova: continuation or change?

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The nomination on 21 March of deputy prime minister Dmitri Rogozin to the newly created post of the Russian president's special representative for Transnistria and to the post of co-chairman of the Russian-Moldovan intergovernmental committee demonstrates the Kremlin's increased interest in Moldova, and may be a sign of a change in Russia's strategy towards this country. Other developments which may suggest a revival of Russia's policy towards Moldova include the appointment on 5 April of Farit Mukhametshin as Russia's new ambassador in Chisinau. Mukhametshin is a high-ranking official who had previously headed the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rosstrudnichestvo*), which is one of the major instruments of Russia's 'soft power' policy towards the post-Soviet states. The Kremlin's growing interest in Moldova has further been confirmed by an unprecedented visit by Russia's defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov to Transnistria on 12 April, and a two-day visit by Dmitri Rogozin to Chisinau and Tiraspol on 16–17 April.

So far, the major aim of Moscow's policy towards Moldova was to permanently include this country into Russia's zone of influence. This was to be achieved by promoting a solution to the Transnistrian conflict that would guarantee the pro-Russian Transnistria a right to veto in matters of key significance concerning the united country and legitimise a Russian military presence in the separatist region. The nomination of Rogozin, who in the past has repeatedly argued that Russia should recognise Transnistria's independence, should mainly be seen as a form of pressure on Chisinau and its Western partners, to convince them to accept a solution to the conflict on Russian conditions. Should this pressure prove ineffective, the Kremlin most probably would not rule out an alternative scenario – to recognise Tiraspol's independence and contribute to the country's permanent split. In the upcoming months, however, Moscow will try to achieve a 'Taiwanisation' of Transnistria, that is, provide the region – which from the point of view of international law is a part of Moldova – with the opportunity to develop trade relations independently of Chisinau. This is probably why Russia agreed last autumn to resume negotiations in the 5+2 format (Moldova and Transnistria as the two sides of the conflict, with Russia, Ukraine and OSCE as intermediaries, the US and the EU as observers). At the same time, Russia will strive to tighten the institutional and economic links between Transnistria and the Russian Federation.

In its policy towards Moldova, Moscow wants to use the current favourable international situation, including the EU's focus on its internal crisis, a decline in American interest in the situation in Eastern Europe, and the growing willingness on the part of Germany to solve

the region's problems, as a significant precondition for deepening the relations between the EU & Berlin and Russia.

Moldova in Russia's foreign policy

The aims of Russia's policy towards Moldova relate to two main areas which, according to the Russian elites, are of key importance for Russia's international position: to establish the basis for the country's relations with the West in the field of security, and to permanently include Eastern Europe's post-Soviet states into the Russian zone of influence, which at the same time would mean winning the geopolitical rivalry with the European Union in the region. In pursuing these goals, Russia is attempting to achieve two things:

1. Maintain its military presence in Moldova to guarantee that the country remains outside NATO. Moscow is thus also trying to establish the informal principle that it is entitled to unilaterally decide about its military presence in post-Soviet states. The installation in Romania of elements of the American anti-missile shield has made Russia yet more interested in maintaining its military presence in Transnistria, as this creates a possibility for installing its own military systems there in 'response' to the U.S. missiles in Romania.

2. Prevent Moldova's integration with the EU. Russia is trying to change the direction of Moldova's integration strategy from EU-oriented to Eurasian, and thereby to prevent

Rogozin's nomination should mainly be seen as a way of putting pressure on Chisinau and its Western partners to accept the conflict solution on Russian terms.

the implementation of the Association Agreement currently being negotiated between Moldova and the EU. Russia is also attempting to block Chisinau's plans to implement the Third Energy Package. Moscow is trying to convince the Moldovan elites to join the Common Economic Space¹. The successful realisation of these

aims would demonstrate to Brussels and the post-Soviet states that any attempts to implement integration projects in the CIS area without Moscow's consent are doomed to fail.

3. Solve the Transnistrian problem according to the formula contained in the so-called Kozak Memorandum of 2003, whose main idea was the 'asymmetric federalisation' of Moldova, aimed at maximising Transnistria's impact on the policy of the federal authorities and minimising the influence of the federal authorities in Transnistria, while simultaneously ensuring the continued presence of the Russian troops as the guarantors of the conflict's settlement. Such a solution would shift the political balance in the Moldovan state in favour of the pro-Russian forces.

Russia's strategy towards Moldova to date

So far Russia's strategy towards Moldova has been based on combination of three elements: attempting to change Chisinau's policy from pro-European to pro-Russian; limiting Tiraspol's autonomy from Moscow; and resuming the negotiations in the so-called 5+2 format.

Russia was probably counting on such a shift in Moldova's policy taking place as a result of expected reconfiguration of the ruling Alliance for European Integration (AIE), in which its most pro-Romanian wing would be replaced with pro-Russian groupings, while its pragmatic centre would be persuaded to abandon the pro-European orientation in favour of a pro-Russian one. After the Moldovan parliamentary elections in November 2010,

¹ An economic integration structure launched in July 2010 grouping Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, originally as a customs union, and since 1 January 2012 as the Common Economic Space, to be replaced in the future by a Eurasian Economic Community.

the head of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Naryshkin paid a visit to Chisinau to persuade the leader of the Democratic Party Marian Lupu to leave the AIE and form a coalition with the Party of Communists (PCRM). A similar goal seems to have been pursued by Igor Dodon, the major PCRM politician of the younger generation and a former deputy prime minister, who had left the Party of Communists together with two other deputies in autumn 2011, and tried to convince the AIE to jointly support the candidature of Zinaida Greceanu² to the post of president. Her victory would have meant a *de facto* reconfiguration of the ruling political system at that time. The trick did not work, however, and in the end all three deputies from the so-called Dodon group, fearing early elections, helped to elect the AIE's candidate Nicolae Timofti as the new president. In this context, it seems that Rogozin's nomination was probably a reaction to the stabilisation of the pro-European government in Moldova. The election of the new president (on 16 March) eliminated the threat of early elections which, according to the latest available public opinion polls, would be won by the Party of Communists³.

Russia has used **economic tools** to try to convince the 'pragmatic' wing of the AIE (the Democratic Party, headed by the speaker of the parliament Marian Lupu, and the Liberal-Democratic Party, headed by Prime Minister Vladimir Filat) of the benefits of a possible change of orientation from pro-European to pro-Russian. In the last couple of years Moscow created favourable conditions to stimulate the growth of Moldovan exports to Russia. As a result, Russia's share of Moldovan export rose from 22% in 2009 to 28% in 2011; in the same period, the EU's share fell from 52% to 49%. Russia expanded the possibilities for wine and agricultural produce imports from Moldova. At the same time, those imports remained subject to the 'manual supervision' regime carried out by the consumer protection service (*Rospotrebnadzor*) and the veterinary and phytosanitary surveillance service (*Rosselkhozadzor*); these bodies are in able to modify the list of companies which are granted the 'privilege' of exporting their produce to Russia. Temporary

Russia is attempting to change the orientation of Moldova's integration from European to Eurasian.

limits on the import of certain goods are meant as warnings addressed to Moldovan politicians that access to the Russian market can be denied any time, as was sometimes the case in the past. Some Moldovan politicians are also active in business, and can be particularly vulnerable to such pressure from Russia.

By highlighting the opportunities provided by access to the Russian market, Moscow has tempted Moldova's elites with economic advantages (including a 30% reduction in the price of gas) in exchange for abandoning the European integration plans and joining the Common Economic Space. Russian diplomats and pro-Russian Moldovan experts hint that the creation of a deep and comprehensive free trade area with the EU may result in limits on the export of Moldovan goods to Russian markets⁴. They also suggest that Moldova refusal to sign the EurAsEc Customs Union may have negative consequences for the approximately 300,000 Moldovan guest workers in Russia, who each year send back to Moldova remittances worth about 7–8% of the country's GDP⁵.

To pressure Chisinau Moscow is also taking advantage of Moldova's total dependence on imports of Russian gas. Despite the attempts Moldova has made since mid-2011, it has failed to finalize negotiations with Gazprom on a new long-term contract (the old one expired at the end of last year)⁶. Russia wants Chisinau to give up the Third Energy Package which Moldova is legally bound to implement as a member of the Energy Community.

To convince Moldova's elites and society to change the direction of its integration drive, Russia is also using **soft power tools**. The most significant is Russian television which is the main source of information for a significant part of Moldovan society⁷. It popularises the view

² Zinaida Greceanu, considered a pro-Russian politician, was Moldova's prime minister during the presidency of Vladimir Voronin, and the PCRM's presidential candidate.

³ According to a poll conducted in January by the Moldovan Association of Sociologists and Demographers, 47.5% of the respondents said they would vote for the Communists, and 46.9% for the three parties of the governing coalition.

⁴ Such a warning was expressed on 17 March by President Dmitri Medvedev at a Eurasian Economic Community summit, attended by Moldova's acting president Marian Lupu as an observer.

⁵ According to the World Bank in 2010, one-third (US\$ 440 million) of the total sum of US\$ 1.3 billion transferred to Moldova by Moldovan guest workers was sent from Russia.

⁶ Gazprom has agreed to temporarily extend the contract until June.

⁷ For 25% of Moldovans Russian television is the primary source of information, for 22% the secondary source, while the corresponding figures for Moldovan television are 24% and 16% respectively. Data compiled by Institutul de Opinii Publice, *Barometrul Opiniei Publice*. Republica Moldova Noiembrie 2011, p. 27.

that the prospects for the country's integration with the EU are an illusion, and real benefits can be drawn only from Eurasian integration. Similar views are propagated in Moldova by Russian-language newspapers owned by both Russian (*Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove*, and the Moldovan edition of *Kommersant*) and local publishers (*Moldavskie Vedomosti*, *Panorama*), as well as by some of the experts collaborating with the Russian-funded *Priznanie* Foundation, the opinion-forming Internet portal *ava.md* and the RIA *Novosti Moldova* press agency.

An important role in influencing the views of a significant part of Moldova's society in favour of Russia is also played by the **Russian Orthodox Church**, of which the Metropolis of Chisinau and all Moldova is a part. The Church promotes the idea of the so-called 'Russian world', i.e. a community of all Orthodox Christians in the post-Soviet area based on the common civilisation and culture.

Russia's policy towards Transnistria

In 2011 Kremlin's strove to remove Igor Smirnov and his team from power in Transnistria. Smirnov has headed the separatist region since 1991 and even though Transnistria was economically and militarily dependent on Russia, Smirnov had managed to achieve a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the Kremlin. While his rule ensured that Tiraspol would follow a pro-Russian orientation, there were two reasons why Kremlin ceased to consider him as a convenient figure. Firstly, by his refusal to negotiate with Moldova he became an obstacle to the implementation of a Russian vision for settling the conflict. Secondly, he proved unable to solve Transnistria's economic problems, and that increased for Russia the cost of subsidizing

the region. This is why Moscow insisted that the December 2011 presidential elections in Transnistria should not be rigged in favour of Smirnov, as it was counting on the victory of the speaker of the parliament Anatoly Kaminsky, whom it supported. To put pressure on Smirnov and discredit him, Russian officials accused his family

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of corruption, and Russian television (widely watched in Transnistria) criticized him repeatedly. Even though Moscow failed to ensure the election its favourite candidate, its attacks on Smirnov facilitated the victory of the deputy and former speaker of the local parliament Yevgeny Shevchuk. The new leader turned out to be fully acceptable to the Kremlin, as he is ready to negotiate with Chisinau, while at the same time is reliably pro-Russian. The new Transnistrian leader has o shown enthusiastic support for the Eurasian Union project, and suggests that the conflict between Transnistria and Moldova could be solved by accession of both to the Russian-led Common Economic Space. Shevchuk's position vis-à-vis the Kremlin is weaker than Smirnov's, which opens for Russia a possibility to exploit the divisions within the Transnistrian ruling establishment in order to maximize its influence. Moreover, facing a 70% budget deficit and a lack of hard currency reserves, the new 'president' is in no position to bargain with the Kremlin. In January this year representatives of the Russian Federation's customs service and the Central Bank of Russia paid visits to Transnistria to inspect their local analogues. Transnistria also hosted Valery Golubev, the deputy CEO of Gazprom, who came to start talks on Transnistria's gas debt (which stands at around US\$2.5 billion). On 16 March Russia decided to grant to Transnistria a US\$150 million subsidy, thereby demonstrating its support for the new president and its readiness to bear the costs of supporting the Transnistrian para-state⁸.

⁸ S. Gamova, 'Moskva vosstanavlivayet opeku nad Pridnestrov'iem', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 19.03.2012.

Furthermore, as announced by Dmitri Rogozin during his visit to Tiraspol on 16–17 April, Russia will strengthen institutional links with Transnistria by opening the office of the Russian president's special representative for Transnistria and establishing joint boards with Transnistrian economic ministries.

Resumption of the 5+2 negotiations

In 2011 Russia succeeded in unblocking the so-called 5+2 negotiations concerning the possible solution of the conflict in Transnistria. After a five-year break, in November 2011 the first round of talks took place, followed by another on 28–29 February 2012. However, the participants failed to settle their dispute on the negotiation principles. The bone of contention is the 'equal status' rule which Tiraspol, supported by Russia, is trying to interpret very broadly in order to achieve a status equal to Chisinau's. Chisinau, for its part, fears that any concession on this seemingly minor formal issue would be used by Russia and Transnistria to push through a federal model as a basis for the final resolution of the conflict.

It seems that Russia's primary goal in the 5+2 negotiations is the 'Taiwanisation' of Transnistria – that is, providing the region with the possibility to legally engage in international economic cooperation⁹. This would strengthen Tiraspol's position towards Moldova, albeit with no full sovereignty for the region. Moreover, it would offer better prospects for improving the condition of the Transnistrian economy, and thereby easing Russia's burden of supporting the region (to the tune of around US\$20–30 million per year, plus *de facto* free gas supplies). This is also the underlying goal of the 'small steps' strategy announced by Tiraspol, focused on postponing the question of the region's status and concentrating on unblocking its economic relations with Moldova. Currently, Tiraspol's main aim is to negotiate a package of customs regulations which would enable Transnistrian companies to export their goods without any formal control on the part of the Moldovan authorities. This would generate direct economic benefits, but at the same time create an additional obstacle to Moldova signing the DCFTA.

At the same time, Russia and Tiraspol are consistently refusing to participate in the talks on changing the format of the peacekeeping operation in Transnistria, which is dominated by Russian troops. This has become particularly evident since the incident on 1 January, when a Russian officer shot and killed a Moldovan citizen in the so-called security zone. Following the incident, Chisinau repeated its proposal to transform the Russian military peacekeeping

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operation into an international civil operation. This was the first time that the proposal had won the support of Kyiv and Berlin. However, Moscow and Tiraspol refused to engage in any talks on this issue.

The attempts at 'Taiwanisation' do not necessarily mean that Moscow has given up the plans of using the region to 'tie' Moldova to the Russian zone of influence. This is evidenced by Moscow's diplomatic pressure on Chisinau last year concerning the lifting of the 2005 law which excludes federalisation as a model for regulating Moldova's relations with Transnistria. In this context, the nomination of Dmitri Rogozin increases the pressure on Chisinau (and its Western partners) by hinting at a possibility of the 'Caucasian' solution of the Transnistrian conflict, i.e. a formal recognition of the separatist republic's independence. This is further confirmed by the fact that similar posts have been created for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

⁹ It is worth noting in this context that Russia's special representative for the conflict's settlement, Sergey Gubarev, used to work as the Russian Federation's diplomatic representative in Taiwan.

Conclusions

1. Russia is implementing an extensive and multifaceted policy towards Moldova, aiming at a permanent change in the country's geopolitical orientation from a pro-European to a pro-Russian direction. The recent revival of Russia's activity towards Chisinau and Tiraspol is a part of the general revival of Moscow's policy towards the CIS. We should expect this to be one of the priorities of Vladimir Putin's third presidency. Russia expects that success in Moldova would be a sign to other post-Soviet states that the Kremlin would not accept any other choice than pro-Russian orientation on their part.

2. Chisinau's pro-European orientation is the subject of an intensive political fight, encouraged by Moscow, between the Alliance for European Integration on one side and the Communists and socialists on the other. Russia seems to back those political forces which favour new elections, as they know that the most probable winner would be the pro-Russian Communist party. While not giving up (despite the election of a new president) attempts to foster changes on Moldovan political scene, Russia will use economic tools to put pressure on the current government.

3. Russia will use the 5+2 negotiations to convince Chisinau to gradually eliminate those obstacles hindering Transnistria's economic activity which are due to the region's lack of formal

international recognition. Moreover, Moscow will continue to press Chisinau to cancel the law blocking the possible federalisation of the Moldovan state. At the same time, Russia will try to avoid any concessions in the matters related to Transnistria's formal status or the Russian military presence in the region. There is a risk that in the context of a lack of clear position on the part of its Western partners, Chisinau, exposed to Russian pressure, will gradually accept the solution proposed by Russia, whose implementation (particularly

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concerning customs-related issues and the principles underlying the economic relations between Moldova and Transnistria) may hinder or even block the establishment of a deep and comprehensive free trade area between Moldova and the EU.

4. The 'Caucasian' model of conflict-solution will be used by the Kremlin as a means of putting pressure on Chisinau to accept the federal model for Moldova. Should Chisinau resist, however, it is to be expected that the Kremlin will abandon the idea of using the reintegration of the two parts of Moldova as a tool for drawing the country into its zone of influence, and will opt for a 'legal divorce', i.e. achieving some form of international recognition for Transnistria.

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