

Foreign Policy Synthesis and Debates

Biweekly Bulletin, Nr. 55, from 11.09.2011

The Evolution of the Transnistrian Issue after 20 Years of Independence

**Transcript of a radio broadcast, from September 11th 2011, produced by the Foreign Policy Association (APE) in collaboration with Imedia News and Analysis Agency and with the assistance of the German Foundation Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). The broadcast is aired on Radio Vocea Basarabiei every Sunday.*

The main topics of the show:

1. To what extent is Russia ready to support Igor Smirnov?
2. Does the acceleration of the R. Moldova's reintegration depend on Smirnov or not?
3. Expectations from the 5 +2 talks on the Transnistrian conflict issue at the end of September 2011

Corneliu RUSNAC, moderator Imedia: *Good day, dear listeners! I am Corneliu Rusnac and I welcome you to a new broadcast of discussions on topics of foreign policy, produced with the support of the „Foreign Policy Association” and financed by the „Friedrich Ebert” Foundation.*

Our guests today are *Mr. Victor Chirila, Executive Director of the APE and Mr. Radu Vrabie, Programs Director at the same Association.* Hello and welcome to our radio programme!

Today's broadcast will be dedicated especially to the transnistrian conflict. On September 2 this secessionist region marked 21 years of so-called independence. On this occasion Tiraspol leader Igor Smirnov stated that Transnistria has chosen the path of development alongside the Slavic world, as he said, the United Russia would have become an obstacle to global restructuring plans promoted by the West. With this occasion he thanked Russia for “the efforts and support to ensure a safe life of the people of Transnistria through its military presence in the region”. To what extent is Russia ready to support Igor Smirnov? I ask this because it seems that lately Moscow's favorite became the head of the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet, Anatoly Kaminski and Igor Smirnov seems to be neglected, Mr. Vrabie?

1. To what extent is Russia ready to support Igor Smirnov?

Radu VRABIE, APE Program Director: I will start with a rather interesting fact, if we look at the celebration of 21 years will see that Transnistria has declared independence one year before R. Moldova and then the question is 21 years of independence from what, since Smirnov said repeatedly that they have never left the Soviet Union. It is one of the questions I noticed some time ago and to which Transnistrians theoretically still have no answer. Coming back to your question regarding the fact that Smirnov lost support in favor of Anatoly Kaminski I don't think that things are so simple mainly because in the recent years Russia supported also other opponents in recognized or unrecognized countries. Here we have the example of Ukraine when Yanukovich was openly supported by Russia. We have also the example of the separatist region Abkhazia where Russia had another candidate. The R. Moldova could be an example too, because in 2009 Vladimir Voronin and the Communist Party were very clearly supported by the Russian Federation. Still, this has not always counted in the elections and that is why to talk about the fact that Anatoly Kaminski will win the so-called election in December is too early

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especially since Anatolii Kamiski is not a charismatic person and has no influence to overthrow Igor Smirnov.

Another thing that for me personally raises a question mark is whether Russia really wants to change Igor Smirnov or by supporting Anatoly Kamiski tries to make him more conciliatory and more cautious to statements coming from Moscow. It is known that the recent failure of the Russian Federation in June 2011 when Russia spoke out loud about the resumption of the 5+2 negotiations format that never took place due to the intransigent position of Transnistria disturbed certain circles in Moscow. At the same time, we must realize that there is no unity in Moscow. Of course, there is a much tougher force which does not accept a transfer of the Transnistrian region and treats any step made by Moscow towards a possible resolution of the Transnistrian conflict as a betrayal. Do not forget that so-called elections in the Transnistrian region come shortly before the Russian Duma's elections and elections in March of Russian President. Such a scandal would not have been accepted the Kremlin. In general, if we make a forecast, Igor Smirnov has now the best chance to win the so-called elections in Transnistria just that he will probably get a new mandate with big compromises and I do not exclude that it may be the last term, maybe not a complete term but a kind of Yeltsin model held in order to find a successor. This is one of the scenarios that would save Russia, the Russian image in the eyes of Russians from everywhere and at the same time would make a concession to European partners, this being one of the scenarios that are discussed most often now.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Mr. Chirila, from where these dissatisfaction of Moscow, whether they are invented, real or speculative?

Victor CHIRILA, Executive Director of APE: Well, there are some complaints against Smirnov. Probably that these complaints are related to how, in the last three years, the financial resources that Russia has disbursed to Transnistria were spent. Many of these resources are not accounted and have not reached their destination, so there are question marks. Also, you mentioned here that Smirnov said that Transnistria has been an obstacle to restructuring the system of regional security by the West. Indeed, Transnistria is an obstacle in establishing much closer relations regarding regional security between Moscow and Brussels, Moscow and Berlin. Berlin wants to build a stable, strategic relationship with the Russian Federation based on several priorities including regional security cooperation or, conflicts such as Transnistria prevents from establishing confidence between Berlin and Moscow and between Moscow and Brussels.

Moscow also wants a change in the Transnistrian region that would contribute to the establishment of a strategic relationship with the EU, particularly EU capitals: Berlin, Paris and Rome. Such a relationship should be based on specific examples of cooperation and in Berlin's view Transnistria can be a positive example.

I also believe that Moscow understands that in the last 20 years many realities have changed in the Transnistrian region. Mr. Smirnov's power is not anymore solid as it was 10 years ago. There is still a fragile civil society, but it has increasingly an anti Smirnov voice which expresses dissatisfaction with

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economic and social realities in the region. Economic elite emerged and it becomes stronger and more influential in the region. It also has its party, the Party Obnovlenie which controls the legislature. This new economic elite seeks to dominate, to have a greater role in the political sphere. So far, Smirnov and the security institutions that are under his control do not allow the new elite to assert in the realm of politics too much. All these facts undoubtedly are also known in Moscow. Moscow wants to establish a closer relationship with these new elites; it wants to control changes in this region, but in such a way that would allow maintaining the power. I would not be so categorically saying that Moscow is fully behind Anatoly Kaminski. Yes, it supports him financially and propagandistically in the Transnistrian region, but I would like to support here my colleague Radu Vrabie who is saying that Moscow is trying to create a counterbalance pole to Smirnov. Smirnov has undoubtedly the best chances to win the Presidency of the Transnistrian region, but perhaps Moscow wants to obtain as many concessions as possible, make him more vulnerable in order to be better handled in future Transnistrian settlement scenarios in which will participate also the European Union and Berlin, and United States.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Replacing Igor Smirnov with any other person, be it Anatoly Kaminski or somebody else would bring Chisinau benefits? Such a change would accelerate the process of reintegration of R. Moldova or not necessarily, Mr. Chirila?

2. Does the acceleration of the R. Moldova's reintegration depend on Smirnov or not?

Victor Chirila: Like I said, in the Transnistrian region, in the last 10 years, emerged new elite of businessmen who have enriched greatly, are influential in the Transnistrian legislature, but are still controlled by the Tiraspol's administrative institutions. Through these institutions Smirnov can influence the new economic elite. I think these economic elites will eventually come to power. Anatoly Kaminski is just an instrument to gain power. The economic elite as opposed to former Soviet business executives are more willing to discuss with R. Moldova and the West on specific issues of economic cooperation and trade, certainly not at the expense of the Russian Federation on which they rely in order to gain political power in the Transnistrian region. That is why I believe that once Anatoly Kaminski will come to power, if this will happen, gradually is going to change the bases of the regime in Tiraspol. The Tiraspol regime currently controlled by Smirnov is based on several pillars and they are: "Customs Department", "Ministry of Interior" and the "Ministry of State Security". With the win of the President's office by Kaminski the basis of the regime will consist of this new class of businessmen, who enriched with the support of several businessmen from R. Moldova with whom they cooperate intensively be it on legal or illegal ways. In addition, now they need to expand beyond the Transnistrian region; now they need stability. This means not only levers of power in the region, but a certain official status recognized regionally and internationally. They also need financial assistance, access to credit resources, cheap and stable credit resources. This can happen only if they enter into dialogue with the West, with the European Union and will normalize relations with Chisinau because this will be the precondition of an eventual opening of the West for the region, of greater openness not only politically but also economically and financially. This is why I think that if Kaminski wins, some gradual changes in relations Tiraspol - Chisinau, Tiraspol - the European Union will occur and changes will undergo Tiraspol's speech in this case too.

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Corneliu RUSNAC: Mr. Vrabie?

Radu VRABIE: We now analyze some hypothetical scenarios. In my opinion we have a stick with two ends. Of course, economic agents and particularly Sheriff company needs access to cheap credit, access to the European market, extension and recognition. On the other hand there are certain things that if they happen we will have to clarify them. I cannot imagine myself what might be the rhetoric of another opponent in the election campaign on the issue of the relations with Moldova. During the 20 years, Igor Smirnov was able to infiltrate in the minds of the people from the Transnistrian region that R. Moldova is an aggressor, that R. Moldova is the one that will destroy Transnistria. At the moment, to go out in public with another message in Transnistria is political suicide. The opponents of Igor Smirnov have to be very careful on how they build their message so that on one hand it could be credible to the people on the left bank and on the other hand not damage the bridges with external partners. Another thing, to some extent the cooperation between the two sides, especially in the economic field, currently favors Transnistria over R. Moldova and here I refer primarily to the right bank of the Nistru River. Here I have in mind that energy costs in Transnistria are much lower than those of R. Moldova. There are already cases when Transnistrian economic agents who are registered in Chisinau come to the R. Moldova's market with cheaper products than those produced here on the right bank and create a kind of unfair competition. It is clear that the Transnistrian economy is sustainable only if there will be low energy prices. In case of market liberalization and payment the real energy resources costs, the Transnistrian economy will not work because it won't be able to compete. To answer your question specifically, if R. Moldova could benefit from a possible change, it could if it will be prepared to do so, if it won't leave things to develop by themselves without having any influence on these issues that I mentioned, because at some point they will struck us and we must be prepared to react. Otherwise, if we are not prepared we could cause problems in the future. R. Moldova needs a strategy to plan, anticipate certain things, maybe even have more options in order to promote and know how to react to certain messages.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Speaking of this strategy, for many years we are talking about the fact that there is a need for it. I wanted to ask if there is a draft and which is the fate of these discussions, did they materialize somehow? Mr. Vrabie:

Radu VRABIE: From what I know, a concept of reintegration is elaborated at the moment in order to be presented by the end of this year. Although a concept of reintegration is going to be elaborated we will see further what will be the future of it because to write a strategy is important but we must consider several factors. The Transnistrian conflict is full of many other factors in particular political ones. This strategy should comprise the role of the Russian Federation or R. Moldova's political elite is quite careful to everything that is said about the Russian Federation. There are parties who are closer to the Russian Federation and other more neutral. All these issues must be considered and weighed carefully because the strategy must be passed in the Parliament and if it won't have the support of the Parliament in that case another strategy may be written and left in the dust. I think that when writing this strategy and during consultations, that have to take place, the entire political elite should get involve, here I refer to: Government, Parliament, political parties so that this document become one of national importance and

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Transnistrian issue would convert from a narrow party interest in a national interest. Only in this way we can avoid some internal disagreements that don't help at all in the settlement process.

Corneliu RUSNAC: The discussion in the 5-2 format of negotiations will continue at the end of September. What should we expect from these discussions, Mr. Chirila?

3. Expectations from the 5 +2 talks on the Transnistrian conflict issue at the end of September 2011

Victor CHIRILA: I think we should not expect too much. However, internal and external context is not so favorable and here I refer particularly to the internal context in the Transnistrian region and R. Moldova. The external I mean, first, that the Russian Federation is preparing for parliamentary elections or during the election campaign topics such as Transnistria can be manipulated easily and exaggerated a bit so as to create some political benefits to political forces engaged in the political struggle in Moscow. I do not think anyone is seriously engaged in finding a compromise on the Transnistrian problem or is seriously involved in the resumption of formal negotiations, especially if formal resumption of negotiations would be interpreted as a concession of Moscow to the West and this risk exists for Moscow. Also, if we refer to the internal context of the Transnistrian region, as well, the region is on the verge of the so-called President elections. For sure Smirnov will not give up on its previously announced positions. He will push further the idea of "legal equality" recognition between Transnistria and R. Moldova or this is unacceptable to Chisinau. If such recognition from Chisinau's part happens I believe that we can tell now how a compromise solution will look like. This compromise solution will certainly be a federation or confederation composed of two equal subjects which one day can easily come off especially if there is subtle encouragement from outside.

Related to the internal context in Chisinau, as well, the political class here is concerned with all other issues, primarily the elections of the R. Moldova's President and while the political and institutional crisis in Chisinau is not exceeded the risk of new parliamentary elections obviously is hanging on Moldova. In such a context no one will seriously try to sit at the negotiating table and seek solutions. Today we don't have the right conditions to resume negotiations and I say that despite the optimism that is observed in some European capitals. As one German diplomat said recently, we have to solve, in the first place, internal problems here in Chisinau in order to have a single voice, united with the main European partners. It is difficult to talk about such a united voice as long as the President of the R. Moldova is not elected and we have an Alliance working behind the President or which holds a majority in Parliament. This will be exploited by Tiraspol and Moscow to show us that actually they don't have a counterpart for negotiations here in Chisinau. Probably this will be their excuse in the coming weeks when it is obvious that formal negotiations can not resume this year.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Mr. Vrabie?

Radu VRABIE: Russian diplomacy certainly wants at least on paper to show the agreement of the parties to resume the 5 +2 negotiation format, but if we make an elementary analysis to the end of September about the resumption of negotiations: in early December "elections" in Transnistrian region,

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the Russian Duma elections, elections in March next year in the Russian Federation plus our very unclear situation which also means that until April, March of next year there will be no practical actions concerning the political process. Then the question that emerges is what the purpose it has, which will be the next steps and what will be the message for this round of negotiations, consultations. Is it that we just want to resume the 5 +2 format and then have discussions about what are we going to talk about or we will have a clear discussion on certain points? If we start the negotiation process being confident that Tiraspol wants independence and Chisinau broad autonomy within the R. Moldova is clear that in six months Tiraspol will find an excuse to say that R. Moldova has not fulfilled its obligations and because of that it doesn't continue the negotiation process. Another thing is if R. Moldova will be able to convince its partners that we discuss about the status of Transnistria within R. Moldova united. In this case there is a basis to resume negotiations and to have clear discussions because the role of the 5 +2 format is to be a political format where political issues could be discussed. Tiraspol and the Russian Federation would like to transform this format in a "working format" where current issues can be discussed, this limiting its importance and recognize Chisinau and Tiraspol as equal parts in conflict. For us this is unacceptable, even more so, this will throw the negotiation process many years behind and will split even more the two banks. For us it is important that before a decision will be taken to have the clarity that this process is one that will help to unfold negotiations under normal conditions and to identify a viable solution to the conflict and not one that will harm Chisinau and will oblige it to become equal part in the conflict with Tiraspol.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Unfortunately, our show has come to an end. Thank you very much for your presence. Dear listeners, I am Corneliu Rusnac, and remind you that you have listened to a show of synthesis and debates on foreign policy issues, the show is supported by the Foreign Policy Association and financed by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Till next time!