

Can Transnistria be reintegrated?

Victor Chirila
Executive Director
Foreign Policy Association

Resume

Transnistria's reintegration with a special status within the Republic of Moldova is one of the fundamental priorities of the Moldovan constitutional authorities¹. To achieve this goal, the Government of the Republic of Moldova is determined to plead for the full withdrawal of the Russian military forces from the territory of the country, replacing peacekeeping forces with an international civilian mission and the settlement of the conflict in the 5 + 2 format, respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. In turn, the secessionist Transnistrian administration rejects from the very beginning any discussions or negotiations with respect to the reintegration of the Transnistrian region with a special status within the Republic of Moldova. The transfer of power in the region that took place in December 2011 didn't change anything in this respect. The new Transnistrian leader, Evgeny Shevchuk, intransigently rejects, as well as his predecessor, Igor Smirnov, the idea of reintegration. However, unlike the latter, Evgeny Shevchuk and his team are doing it much more skilfully, using diplomacy, dialogue with foreign partners, making use of the new tools of communication and distribution of information on the Internet and agile exploiting civil society capacity to promote/inoculate arguments, opinions and interests of the Transnistrian region in Western capitals, etc.. Moldovan authorities hope that European integration will increase the attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova for its citizens from Transnistrian region. Their hopes are contradicted by a number of adverse political, economic and social realities in the region. Can Republic of Moldova change those realities? In the current conditions, it is almost impossible. Small steps policy promoted by Chisinau suffers from a number of deficiencies that make it less credible both on the left and on the right bank of the Nistru River. What is the solution? The solution is just one, regaining our citizens' confidence in the Transnistrian region.

Step by Step, but in opposite directions

In 2012, Republic of Moldova and the Transnistrian region have agreed to initiate small steps policy in order to rebuild confidence through the settlement of common socio-economic problems. The new approach has created a favourable background for organizing regular meetings in the 5 + 2 format, favoured the agreement on the agenda and the principles of the negotiations, diminished the dialogue between Moldovan and Transnistrian administration and contributed to the resumption of cargo rail traffic through the Transnistrian region. At the same time, Chisinau and Tiraspol failed to reopen the bridge over the Nistru River at Gura Bacului for local and international traffic, the situation of the schools with teaching in Latin script in Transnistrian region remains uncertain, direct telephone links were not resumed, and the Tiraspol administration has reimposed the 100% fee to the "imports" of a range of goods from the Republic of Moldova. These and other problems, such as lack of consensus regarding the recognition of Transnistrian registration plates of vehicle or the opening of a Russian consulate in Tiraspol, have drawn out the existence of contradictory objectives behind the small steps policy.

From the point of view of the Moldovan authorities, small steps policy should contribute to the development of practical cooperation with the administration, business and civil society environment in the Transnistrian region, creating thus the prerequisites required for the initiation of negotiations on the future status of Transnistria within the Republic of Moldova. Thus, Chisinau's optics doesn't

¹ Programul de activitate al Guvernului Republicii Moldova Integrearea Europeană: Libertate, Democrație, Bunăstare 2011-2014, <http://www.gov.md/lib.php?l=ro&idc=445>

coincide with that of Tiraspol, which considers that Transnistria has accomplished itself as a distinct political entity, and now must ensure its economic viability. In addition, the Transnistrian leader Evgeny Shevchuk believes that the Region already has a statute, just that, so far, it lacks international recognition². Therefore, it is not by chance that the Transnistrian administration insists that the small steps policy should focus solely on resolving the socio-economic problems of the region, refusing categorically to initiate negotiations on its future political status. In this way, it hopes to normalize relations with Chisinau on the basis of good-neighbourliness and legal equality, to bring the region out of economic and political isolation, assuring in this way, a greater degree of sympathy and understanding on the international arena for the "right to self-determination". However, the immediate goal of Tiraspol is ensuring stability and economic security of the Transnistrian region by maximum reducing control of the Republic of Moldova on the development of its foreign economic and trade relations³.

Reintegration through European integration: theoretically possible, but practically uncertain

Moldovan Authorities are aware of the mentioned difficulties. However, they consider that these could be overcome through the process of European integration, which will enhance the attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova for the Transnistrian region. It relies in particular on the opportunities and benefits that will be provided to the Republic of Moldova through the Association Agreement, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement and the liberalization of the visa regime with the European Union (EU). Although in theory this hypothesis is credible, its practical materialisation is by no means certain. The current political, social and economic realities in the Transnistrian region counter the Moldovan officials' optimism, for example:

- Transnistrian economic and political elite, regardless of the ethnic origin of its representatives are by excellence pro-Russian and pro-Eurasian. There is no politician, no political party or political movement in Tiraspol which would promote the idea of European integration. Customs Union Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and the future Eurasian Union are the integration models to which the Transnistrian elite is aspiring to, and certainly not the EU⁴.
- Transnistrian elite is concerned above all with its own security, protecting its privileges and ensuring total control over the region. In this regard, the resources allocated for defense, maintaining internal order and security are quite relevant. Thus, in 2012 the cumulative budget for those areas was 549 million Transnistrian rubles (\$ 49 million) or 17% of the total Transnistria's budget of 3.1 billion Transnistrian rubles (\$ 282 million)⁵. For comparison, in 2012 the Moldovan Government allocated to the same areas 1.6 billion Lei (\$ 136 million) or 7% of the national budget of 22 billion Lei (\$ 1.8 billion)⁶.
- Legal and institutional approximation to the Russian Federation legislation, policies and institutional system is the main goal of the Transnistrian political elite⁷. Namely this

² Для обсуждения политических вопросов с Молдавией пока не созданы условия – Евгений Шевчук, ITAR TASS, <http://mfa-pmr.org/engine/print.php?newsid=2499>

³ In 2012, the Transnistrian region's exports reached the amount of approximately 690 million US dollars, out of which 250 million US dollars were carried out on the right bank of the Nistru River (Republic of Moldova), 204 million US dollars in the EU, 154 million US dollars in the Russian Federation, 59 million US dollars in Ukraine. / Внешняя торговля ПМП по основным странам за январь-декабрь 2012 г. <http://customs.tiraspol.net/content/view/1196/148/>

⁴ Концепция внешней политики Приднестровской Молдавской Республики, <http://mfa-pmr.org/engine/print.php?newsid=453>

⁵ Закон «О Республиканском бюджете на 2012 год» (на 23 июля 2012г) <http://www.minfin-pmr.org/index.php/info-doc/kodexzakony/237-zakon-o-respublikanskom-byudzhete-na-2012-god-na-23-iyulya-2012g>

⁶ [Legea Republicii Moldova privind bugetului de stat pe anul 2012](http://www.mf.gov.md/ro/actnorm/budget/projectact/2012/), <http://www.mf.gov.md/ro/actnorm/budget/projectact/2012/>

⁷ Гармонизация приднестровского и российского законодательства станет темой международной конференции, Новый Регион, <http://www.nr2.ru/pmr/423036.html/print/>; Эксперты помогут гармонизировать приднестровское законодательство с российским, Новый Регион, <http://www.nr2.ru/pmr/423287.html>

harmonisation, in parallel with the self-identification of Transnistria as part of the Russian world, is ensuring legitimacy to Transnistrian elite in Moscow, Russian unconditional political, economic, financial and military support, without which it would not be able to survive.

- The Tiraspol administration has currently more political-institutional prerogatives than the Republic of Moldova is offering through its reintegration project or its policy of European integration. It has at its disposal and unlimited control all political, administrative, economic and security leverages essential for promoting separatism and the preservation of its privileged status. European integration implies, as it is known, political reform, economic and social development which would entail the transfer, diffusion and ceding of various powers from Tiraspol to Chisinau or Brussels. Seen from this perspective, it becomes as clear as possible that the European integration in tandem with Republic of Moldova is rather an existential threat to the current Transnistrian elite.
- Republic of Moldova has no real partner in the Transnistrian region who'd fight for the reintegration of the country and European integration. Although, Moldovans constitute one third of the population in the region, and 250 thousand of inhabitants in the region have citizenship of the Republic of Moldova, Chisinau didn't do almost anything to convince them to support its policy of reintegration and European aspirations. Worse than that, they are demoralized, apathetic or guided by associations and individuals supporting separatism and promoting a Transnistrian identity or nation⁸.
- Winning elections in 2012, in the context of several political alternatives and fierce competition, has provided the current Transnistrian leader Evgeny Shevchuk and his team with the representational credibility in the eyes of Western partners. The expression of this reality is increasingly frequent visits to Tiraspol of European officials. From January 2012, and so far, Transnistria was visited officially or unofficially by Jean-Claude Mignon, Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Lamberto Zannier, Secretary general of the OSCE, Knut Vollebaek, OSCE High Commissioner for national minorities, Lucinda Creighton, Minister of State for European Affairs of Ireland, Carl Bildt, Sweden's Foreign Minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, Polish Foreign Minister. At the same time, meetings of the European diplomats with representatives of the Transnistrian administration have become a habitude. This change of attitude on the part of many States and European organizations inspires confidence to the Transnistrian elite that recognition of Transnistria as a separate political entity is an achievable goal, and just little patience and persistence is needed. Their hopes are not without reason. The repetition of similar elections in the future could lead to the gradual transformation of the representational credibility in the representational legitimacy, not only of the leader, but of the entire legal, political and administrative system build in the region, and this fact will make practically inevitable, including recognition of the existing status of the Transnistrian region. By the way, incidentally or not, but the conclusions and recommendations of the recent report of the OSCE mission "Schools with teaching in Latin script run by Moldova in Transnistria", as well as of the report prepared by Thomas Hammarberg, the UN expert on human rights, with regard to respect for human rights in Transnistrian region, are based on accepting de facto the institutional realities in the region in the areas covered by them.
- Although the Transnistrian economic community enjoys for almost five years the advantage of autonomous trade privileges offered by the EU to the Republic of Moldova, it has not become an active supporter/promoter of Transnistrian region participation to the set up of the deep and comprehensive free trade area with the EU. On the contrary, it is dominated and controlled mostly by Russian capital which has privatized strategic enterprises of the Transnistrian

⁸ Молдаване Приднестровья: Мы сохранили молдавский язык и культуру, Новый Регион, <http://www.nr2.ru/pmr/420711.html>

industry, as Metallurgical Factory from Ribnita, owned by the Russian Metalloinvest Corporation, the Moldovan Hydroelectric Station in Cuciurgan, which belongs to Inter RAO EES, Cement Factory from Ribnita, purchased also by Inter RAO EES, Machine and Construction Plant (Mashinostroitelny Zavod) from Bender, taken over by the Russian Corporation Salyut, Pumps Factory in Ribnita and Moldavkabeli Plant from Bender.

- Transnistrian stability and viability as a separate political entity, including the preservation of the privileges of the local elite, are dependent entirely on the political, economic and financial support granted by the Russian Federation. In the past five years, Moscow has granted financial assistance to Transnistria, in the form of non-refundable grants, or the accumulation of debts for natural gas consumption, amounting to \$ 2,29 billion US dollars or \$ 4580 US dollars per capita in the region. For comparison, in the same period, the EU has allocated to the Republic of Moldova financial assistance of around \$ 600 US million dollars, or about 164 US dollars per capita. As of 2008, the Transnistrian debt for natural gas imported from Russia has grown by over \$ 2,2 billion US dollars, reaching a total figure of \$ 3.7 billion US dollars⁹. Of course, this happens with the tacit indulgence of the Russian authorities. At the same time, using the humanitarian assistance, Russia provides regular financial support directly to the Transnistrian region. As of 2008, Moscow transferred to the region over \$ 90 million US dollars or \$ 590 US dollars per capita. In 2012, the Transnistrian administration received two instalments of grants worth over \$ 30 million US dollars, plus \$ 30 million US dollars for expanding foreign exchange reserves of the Central Bank in Tiraspol. About 137 thousand Transnistrian retirees receive monthly from the Russian Government a pension worth \$ 15 US dollars. Russia is the main economic and commercial partner of the Transnistrian region. In 2012, the region's foreign trade with Russia reached the figure of \$ 1 044 398 595 US dollars, which represents 42% of the total volume of imports and exports done by Transnistrian economic agents over the past year. During the same period, external trade of Transnistria with the EU Member States plus Croatia amounted to \$ 483 408 173 US dollars or 26,8% of the total amount¹⁰.

As long as these realities will persist, it is unlikely that the European integration of the Republic of Moldova will have any significant impact upon the Transnistrian region. At present, the political class and the Moldovan authorities are not prepared to deal with these challenges, they have no common vision, no political support, no resources, no levers of action in the region, and the politics of small steps is not able to rise to the level of a credible and attractive policy of reintegration of the country for several reasons:

- Tiraspol administration was able to limit the small steps policy just to "promote trust" between Vladimir Filat, Prime Minister of Moldova and Evgeny Shevchuk, Transnistrian leader, although not even this is certain at the moment. In addition, Tiraspol had reduced to minimum the involvement of local authorities and business community, and civil society in Transnistria is subject to strict monitoring by the security structures of the new administration.
- Small steps policy agenda has been reduced by Tiraspol and Moscow to resolving selectively first and foremost, some essential economic problems key for ensuring the security and economic independence of the elite and the Transnistrian region from Chisinau. In the meantime, Tiraspol is refusing to address political, security and human rights issues in the region.
- Small steps policy promoted almost exclusively by Prime Minister Filat and his party, the Liberal Democratic Party, no longer enjoys unconditional support of the pro-EU parties, the

⁹ <http://www.timpul.md/articol/datoria-transnistriei-pentru-gazul-rusesc-a-crescut-cu-600-milioane-de-dolari-40379.html>

¹⁰ <http://customs.tiraspol.net/content/view/1196/148/>

Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. In the last six months, Marian Lupu, President of the Parliament and leader of the Democratic Party, and Mihai Ghimpu, leader of the Liberal Party, criticized implicitly or explicitly the results of small steps policy promoted by the Government. In the opinion of the head of the Parliament from Chisinau, Moldova hasn't made progress in the conflict resolution process, and at the time being things are not moving forward in the 5 + 2 format¹¹. In turn, the leader of the Liberal Party consider that all the actions taken so far by Prime Minister Vlad Filat didn't do anything than to present Evghenii Shevchuk as an important leader in the South-Eastern Europe, and the attempts of the Government and of the European partners have brought only benefits to Russia and financial disadvantages to the Republic of Moldova¹².

- Chisinau doesn't have a short and medium term plan of action, which would guide ministries in the implementation of small steps policy. Moreover, in the absence of updated analyses, ministries are far from the existing sartorial realities in the Transnistrian region. Under these conditions, most of them have a reactive behaviour, without vision and initiative in the sectorial dialogue with the Transnistrian administration.
- Financial resources allocated by Chisinau and the EU in order to achieve small steps policy are insignificant in comparison with the Russian financial and economic assistance of tens of millions of dollars received annually by Tiraspol. In the past four years, the Government has allocated annually approximately \$ 800,000 dollars (10 million MDL)¹³ for reintegration activities implemented solely in the Security Zone localities which are under Chisinau's authority. Also, the EU and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has granted 13 million Euros to promote measures to strengthen confidence between the two banks of the Nistru River in the period 2011-2013, most of which go on the right bank of the Nistru River.
- Small steps policy is not supported by a constant strategy of information and communication with citizens on both sides of the Nistru River. As a result, both sides are apathetic towards the idea of reintegration and know very little, almost nothing about the special status which Republic of Moldova grants to the Transnistrian region¹⁴. Also, according to the Public Opinion Barometer carried out periodically by the Public Policy Institute in Chisinau¹⁵, just one percent of Moldovan citizens on the right bank of the Nistru River consider the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict as a major State priority.
- The Office for Reintegration of the State Chancellery has no institutional capacities, necessary technical and financial resources to fulfil efficiently its mission and functions. In accordance with the rules of the Organization, the Office is responsible for implementing government policy for territorial, political, economic and social reintegration of the Republic of Moldova; to conduct consultations and negotiations for settlement of the Transnistrian conflict; the development of the legislative framework dictated by the implementation of reintegration policy; coordination of the activity of public administration bodies in order to implement reintegration policies; develops and promotes confidence building and security policies;

¹¹ Lupu suggests a new approach for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, Publika TV, http://www.publika.md/lupu-propune-oua-abordare-pentru-solutionarea-conflictului-transnistrean_1110931.html

¹² Unfortunately, attempts of our Government and Europeans brought only benefits to Russia (...) and financial disadvantages to the Republic of Moldova. Radio Free Europe Liberty <http://www.europalibera.org/content/article/24881586.html>

¹³ For 2013, 15 million MDL were allocated by the Government of the Republic of Moldova

¹⁴ Law Nr. 173 from 22.07.2005 regarding the main provisions of the legal special status of the localities situated on the left bank of the Nistru River (Transnistria) <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=313004>

¹⁵ Public Opinion Barometer – November 2012, IPP, <http://www.ipp.md/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=624&parent=0>

coordinates the activity of the sector working groups; monitor developments in the Security Zone, as well as the work of peacekeeping mechanisms; etc.. . To accomplish these tasks, the Office has a staff of 20 units. In reality only ten people are working, a third of which are young employees. In addition, it doesn't have an autonomous budget and it is at the discretion of the State Chancellery. For comparison, Nina Stanski, Tiraspol's representative at the negotiations table, has 80 employees, benefiting in 2012 of a budget of about \$ 850,000 US dollars of which 500 thousand dollars for the internal body, and approximately \$ 350,000 US dollars for international activity. In the first quarter of this year, Ms. Stanski has at her disposal a budget two times bigger than in the corresponding period of the year 2012. Thus, if in the first quarter of 2012 the budget was of 295941 Transnistrian roubles (about \$ 26,000 US dollars) in the first quarter of 2013, this represents 603372 Transnistrian roubles (about \$ 54,000 US dollars). In addition, the Bureau for reintegration doesn't have a policy of territorial, political, economic and social reintegration of the country which could be implemented together with relevant institutions. Such a policy should set clearly medium-term and long-term general and sectorial objectives, to define implementation and coordination mechanisms, establish institutional capacity and financing resources, assign responsibilities and action plans for each Ministry and field separately. The Office for Reintegration has neither human resources nor the sectorial expertise required for the preparation and implementation of such a multidimensional policy of reintegration, which should be designed, definitely, by an inter-institutional group (Government, Ministries, Parliament, Presidency), with the participation of civil society and the assistance of international experts. In addition, the Office is lacking information and communication strategy, and its internal available capacities for this area are extremely small, only one employee in the public relations department.

Conclusions and recommendations

Political and economic elite of Transnistria is concerned, primarily, of its own security and protection of its current political and economic privileges. The current status quo, politically, financially and military sponsored by Russia, is ensuring optimal conditions for the protection of its interests and the survival of separatism. In return, reintegration with Republic of Moldova on the basis of a special status represents an existential risk to its status, therefore, is rejected from the very beginning.

Tiraspol and Moscow thinks that Transnistria has developed as a separate political entity, and now it should develop as a distinct and self-sufficient economic entity. The Transnistrian administration headed by Evgeny Shevchuk intends to achieve this goal, including through small steps policy of "normalization of good neighbourhood relations" with Republic of Moldova, which, in reality, means ensuring its exclusive control on commercial-economic activities with foreign partners, excluding authorities in Chisinau.

Moldovan authorities hope that European integration will increase the attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova for its citizens from Transnistrian region. Their hopes are contradicted by a number of adverse political, economic and social realities in the region. The Transnistrian elite rejects integrationist processes promoted by the EU, as well as participation in the deep and comprehensive free trade area with the EU, advocating instead for Eurasian integration and harmonization with the legislation of the Russian Federation, declared as strategic vector of Transnistrian statehood. Recently, the Institute for Strategic Research in Moscow has committed to assist the Government in developing a strategy for Euro-Asian integration¹⁶.

¹⁶ Президент ПМР и директор РИСИ обсудили ряд проектов, которые предполагается реализовать в Приднестровье, <http://president.gospmr.ru/ru/news/prezident-pmr-i-direktor-risi-obsudili-ryad-proektov-kotorye-predpolagaetsya-realizovat-v>; Визит делегации РИСИ в Приднестровье, <http://www.riss.ru/?newsId=1037>

Can Republic of Moldova change those realities? In the current conditions, it is almost impossible. Small steps policy promoted by Chisinau suffers from a number of deficiencies that make it less credible both on the left and on the right bank of the Nistru River, such as: the lack of a conceptualized policy and action plan on short and medium term; limited political support; insignificant financial resources; the lack of an information and communication strategy; and reduced institutional capacity of coordination and implementation.

What is the solution? The solution is just one, regaining our citizens' confidence in the Transnistrian region. Small steps policy, in its present form, is incapable and inadequate to achieve this aim. It focuses almost exclusively on dialogue, negotiation and interaction with the central administration in Tiraspol, and communication with citizens, the business community and civil society in the Transnistrian region is controlled or reduced to a minimum by the same administration.

In view of the situation described above, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive long term policy of country's reintegration which would cover all areas of activity and would be designed to support simple citizens, business community, cultural and academic world and civil society. This policy should have a pro-active approach and should be implemented in parallel with political negotiations in the 5 + 2 format, trying to achieve the following objectives:

- Involve all State institutions, the most important media resources, business community and civil society in a joint, constant and coordinated effort of communication/cooperation with our citizens on the left bank of Nistru River;
- Equip the Moldovan Government with credible instruments to defend the democratic, economic, social, and cultural interests of our citizens, as well as project their influence and messages in the Transnistrian region;
- Identify the incentives and optimal economic, commercial, financial, and fiscal resources to encourage business community in the region to support the participation of the Transnistrian region in the deep and comprehensive free trade area with the EU;
- Create a National Reintegration Fund whose resources will be used to support the socially vulnerable layers, business community, the academic world, students, journalists, civil society etc.. in the Transnistrian region;
- Establish independent bridges of multi-dimensional communication with the society in the Transnistrian region.

Are the Moldovan authorities able to elaborate such a policy? Do they have the vision and the political will to do so? These are key questions to which there is no certain answer.