

Opinion – Momentum in Transnistria's Geopolitics?

Written by Lucia Leontiev

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LUCIA LEONTIEV, MAR 26 2024

The end of February was particularly intense in the Moldovan political landscape. All eyes were on Transnistria which on February 28 organized its seventh in thirty-four years of existence extraordinary congress of deputies of all levels. There were many signs of concern regarding the organization of such an extraordinary session. History says that this kind of events usually precede the adoption of major decisions as was the case of the declaration of independence in 1990, the approval of the constitution and state symbols in 1991, as well as the call to Moscow to recognize Transnistria's independence in 2006. So, organizing such a congress in the context of the neighboring Russian-Ukrainian war – immediately after Russian military forces occupied Avdiivka and a day before President Putin's address to the parliament – and very tense relations with Moldovan governmental authorities, raised many questions. The common question mouthed by commentators was whether Transnistria would search again for annexation to Russia. The Institute for the Study of War went even further by designing grim scenarios in the aftermath of the deputies' congress.

Yet, despite the complexity of the situation, Transnistria's congress concluded on an – apparently – uneventful note: the adoption of a moderate declaration that first, calls on Russia to protect Transnistria and Russian citizens living there in the face of increasing pressure from Chişinău, and second, on international and regional organizations to determine Chişinău to stop violating the human rights of people residing in Transnistria and to restart an appropriate dialogue for the conflict resolution. One could not avoid but wonder whether Transnistria's declaration is as defensive as it seems to be, or whether there are some geopolitical layers beneath the pacifist rhetoric. It is argued here that there are geopolitical connotations that, looked at in a bigger picture, are part of the current geopolitical conundrum of Moldova.

Transnistrian Secessionism Amidst the War in Ukraine and Moldova's EU Integration Quest

Readers are probably familiar with the Transnistrian *dossier*. To give some context, Transnistria – geographically located in the Eastern part of Moldova, at the South-Western border of Ukraine – is a territorial non-state entity that seceded from Moldova, and which over time developed and consolidated state-like features. In legal terms the Transnistrian region falls within the jurisdiction of Moldova, being located within the internationally recognized borders of Moldova. Factually, however, the Transnistrian authorities regulate life in the region. It is also widely acknowledged that Russia exercises effective control over the region through military, economic, political, and financial means. Since 2005 the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict has been sought within the 5+2 negotiations process, with Chişinău and Tiraspol as parties, Russia, Ukraine, and OSCE as mediators, and the US and EU as observers. In the current Russia-Ukraine war, this formula is not functioning despite Tiraspol and Moscow's calls to resume the talks in the 5+2 format. It is welcomed however the effort of the parties to continue the negotiations in the format 1+1.

With the war in Ukraine, the Transnistrian question regained attention for different, but equally valid reasons, and rightly so. First, Transnistria might be considered an important military hub. The region is the home of the largest ammunition depot in Eastern Europe where the, already, outdated and expired Soviet Union ammunition is stored. It also hosts the Operational Group of the Russian Forces that guards the depot and the Russian peacekeeping mission dislocated in the demilitarized zone. Second, it raises security concerns. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, there have been several attempts at destabilizing the peaceful situation in the region. The most recent one

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was on March 17 when a military object located in Transnistria was destroyed by a drone. Chişinău calls these actions provocations, whereas Tiraspol speaks about terrorist attacks and calls on the actors involved in the 5+2 negotiation process to prevent the escalation of the situation in Transnistria. Third, a pro-Russian administration in Tiraspol which in general is supportive of Russia and maintains strong political, military, economic, and financial ties with Russia. A recent example of this is the unauthorized opening of voting polls in Transnistria for the presidential elections in Russia in violation of Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity (on the illegality of such practices see an earlier post here).

Transnistria between the EU and Russia. A Geopolitical Move?

The declaration adopted in the aftermath of the deputies' congress in Transnistria despite its moderate tone, hints at a geopolitical alignment with the East (i.e. Russia). This geopolitical choice is not new. Transnistria has looked towards the East since its creation. Russia's support for Transnistria speaks loudly about it. So why is Tiraspol seeking attention now? Chişinău's policies, including toward Tiraspol, could be the answer. Apart from the blockade in which Transnistria finds itself due to the war in Ukraine, Chişinău enacted a series of policies that arguably put Transnistria in an unfavorable situation. To begin with, in February 2023 Chişinău amended the Criminal Code with provisions criminalizing separatism. As I wrote somewhere else, the adoption of such amendments in a state that faces secessionism is applauded. Yet, the question of effectiveness remains open. To date, no prosecution of Transnistrian leaders occurred on Moldovan soil, although legal premises exist.

Another move of Chişinău was the adoption of a new Customs Code according to which Transnistrian companies must pay import and export duties to both Chişinău and Tiraspol. Of course, these were upsetting news for Tiraspol. Some modest protest actions were organized in the region, however without success. The abolishment of differential treatment for Transnistrian companies is welcomed. Yet, one can only regret that these measures are adopted in a very complex and tense context which could eventually deepen further the tension between Chişinău and Tiraspol.

The militarization policy followed by Chişinău is seen by Tiraspol as a concerning factor capable of destabilizing the relations between Moldova and Transnistria. Indeed, recently Moldova increased its military spending to enhance its military capabilities. It also deepens its military cooperation with France and the conclusion of a security agreement between Chişinău and Paris is reflective of this. It is relevant to note the population of Moldova is not supportive of the idea of joining NATO, a fact which was also recently acknowledged by the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of Moldova.

All these factors undoubtedly affect the relationship between Chişinău and Tiraspol. Thus, Transnistria's call for help, especially to Russia, is unsurprising. Moreover, Tiraspol is playing the protection of 'Russian citizens' card. Indeed, more than 200.000 Russians are living in Transnistria, and according to the Russian Foreign Policy Strategy, Russia is committed to ensuring the effective protection of the rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and organizations abroad, protection which materialized in Ukraine and Georgia.

Some voices claim that economically Transnistria is more aligned with the EU than Russia. This might be well true since Transnistria's economic relations with the EU steadily evolved after the implementation of the DCFTA. Moreover, this economic alignment with the European Union could bring Transnistria closer to the EU integration path, therefore President Sandu's statement that first Moldova will join the EU, and afterward Transnistria, could have some merits. Yet, it is argued here that joining the EU without Transnistria should not be an option. Moldova should be part of the EU with all its regions included, i.e. Transnistria and the Autonomous Region of Gagauz-Yeri, regions which currently share a pro-Eastern geopolitical agenda.

Outside the Transnistrian Dilemma. The Geopolitical Conundrum of Moldova

The war in Ukraine – as a catalyst of change – undoubtedly affected Moldova's geopolitics. Moldova's EU accession bid is due to the war in Ukraine. The fact that Moldova is in the package with Ukraine in the accession process speaks for itself. In a survey from June 2021, 59 % of Moldovans were in favor of EU integration. To strengthen the EU path of Moldova, Moldovans are expected at voting polls in October 2024 to vote in a constitutional referendum

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regarding the EU integration project. Organized on the same day as the presidential elections, the political and legal premises of the referendum are criticized by pro-Western and pro-Eastern parties alike. Without delving into the reasons for these critiques, it is relevant to observe that the Moldovan political class and therefore society, are somehow divided on which geopolitical stance Moldova should choose. Is it the EU integration the only way forward, or perhaps non-alliance is the right way – respect for the neutrality enshrined in the Constitution -, or maybe the pro-Eurasian Union is the place to look at? The upcoming referendum might bring some clarity on this matter. But it may also open the 'Pandora-box' of Moldova's geopolitical conundrum.

Apart from the Transnistria dilemma discussed above, the Autonomous Region of Gagauz-Yeri through the voice of the region's president (başcan), expresses its pro-Eastern geopolitical preferences. It is argued here that special attention should be paid to Gagauz-Yeri. According to Article 111 of the Constitution of Moldova Gagauz-Yeri has a wide autonomy which is further developed in the 1995 organic law on the legal status of Gagauz-Yeri. Article 1 (4) of the law provides that in the event of a change in the status of the Republic of Moldova as an independent state, the people of Gagauzia have the right to external self-determination. Of course, triggering this article is an extremely difficult task, and any such attempt should be vehemently avoided as it would lead to another separatism movement within Moldova which in a worst-case scenario case might result in the dismemberment of the Moldovan state. So, the upcoming referendum might be a chance but also a failure. It might lead to the consolidation of the population of Moldova around the EU integration project, which is the most desirable outcome, but it may also bring into the spotlight Moldova's mere existence as a unitary and indivisible state. Therefore, Moldovan politicians should play the geopolitical game very cautiously to avoid unexpected outcomes.

About the author:

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