

BULLETIN

No. 113 (330) • December 16, 2011 • © PISM

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Presidential Elections in Transnistria

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On 11 December 2011, the first round of presidential elections took place in the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic. Its result marks the end of 20 years of rule by President Igor Smirnov. Russia actively engaged itself in the presidential campaign, supporting Smirnov's opponent. The final outcome of the elections will not lead to a quick resolution of the frozen conflict in this part of Europe. However, the change of Transnistrian leadership opens new possibilities for the European Union to take action in order to modify Russian concepts of Moldova's reintegration.

The Meaning of Elections. The outcome of the first round of presidential elections in Transnistria reflects a fundamental change in the political scene of the separatist republic. Two opposition candidates entered the second round: Yevgeny Shevchuk, former head of parliament and currently the leader of the opposition movement "Rebirth of Transnistria" (he received 38.53% of the votes) and Anatoly Kaminsky, the current head of parliament and leader of the pro-Russian party "Renewal" (26.48%). The current president, Igor Smirnov, obtained 24.82% of votes. Although one cannot exclude that the elections could be annulled, the situation introduces new conditions for the settlement of a frozen conflict in this part of Europe.

It should be stressed that the elections were held for the first time since the introduction of a constitutional reform in June 2011 that limited presidential power by establishing the position of prime minister. The reform was initiated by the "Renewal" party, which won parliamentary elections in 2010.

Russia's Position. Despite the lack of official recognition of the independence of Transnistria, Russia actively engaged itself in the electoral process in the separatist republic, supporting opposition candidate Kaminsky. In July 2011, Russia provided Transnistria with a credit of approximately \$10 million, which is at disposal of the parliament controlled by "Renewal". Kaminsky also received support from the Russian party in power, "United Russia", whose emblem was used in the electoral materials of the current head of parliament. It is noteworthy that the active parliamentary campaign by "United Russia" before the elections to the Russian State Duma on 4 December 2011 and its link with Kaminsky's presidential campaign was possible because a significant number of the inhabitants of Transnistria also hold Russian citizenship.

The pressure exerted on President Smirnov constituted another element of Russian direct engagement in the campaign in Transnistria. The Russian authorities openly appealed to him to withdraw his candidacy. In October 2011, the Committee of Investigators of the Russian Federation initiated a criminal case against his son, accusing him of the misappropriation of Russian subsidies provided to the separatist republic.

Russia holds a *de facto* protectorate over Transnistria and engaged itself in the presidential campaign in order to preserve its political and economic influence in the region. In the long-term perspective, this goal can be achieved by incorporating Transnistria into Moldova according to the principle of the symmetrical decentralisation of the country. It would allow Russia to control the foreign policy of a united Moldova. In the short-term perspective, Russia is interested in maintaining the *status quo*. The active support of the opposition, clearly pro-Russian candidate demonstrates Russia's efforts to strengthen control over the policy pursued by the leadership of the separatist republic.

Moldova's Position. The official position of Chisinau is non-recognition of any elections held in Transnistria. As a result, the Moldovan authorities did not interfere in the recent presidential campaign. Nevertheless, the authorities attempted to use Smirnov's weakened position to start a constructive dialogue with Tiraspol. On 21 November 2011, a meeting between Prime Minister Vlad Filat of Moldova and President Smirnov took place. As a result, a joint statement was signed on cooperation between the parties, the avoidance of actions that could destabilize the situation in Transnistria, the continuation of steps aimed at the resumption of rail traffic and the finding of solutions to problems with telephone communications, the collaboration of experts in the economic sphere as well as cooperation in combating crime.

Moldova is primarily interested in the reintegration of Transnistria under conditions that will not ensure a veto for the region on key directions of state policy, and thus free from Russian control. It is worth noting that the low activity of Chisinau in the context of the elections in the separatist republic was a result of the prolonged political crisis in Moldova. Due to the inability of the ruling coalition to elect the head of state as well as increasing disputes among members of the coalition, the problem of Transnistria is now off the list of priorities for both political elites and public opinion of Moldova.

Ukraine's Position. At the beginning of November 2011, Smirnov announced that he did not exclude the possibility of Transnistria joining Ukraine. This statement can be interpreted as an attempt to engage Ukraine in the internal political processes of the breakaway republic in order to obtain an ally in the face of the pressure exerted by Moscow. The Ukrainian authorities have consequently rejected such ideas and made no attempt to influence the electoral process in Transnistria.

Ukraine's position in the contest of the elections in Transnistria is subject to its neutral role, which Kiev has played since the beginning of the negotiations in the "5+2" format in 2002 (Moldova and Transnistria as conflicting parties; Russia, Ukraine and OSCE as mediators; EU and the U.S. as observers). Because of a common border and the ability to control the exports of the separatist republic in the eastern direction, Ukraine has considerable potential to influence the leadership of Transnistria. However, Ukraine is likely to accept any scenario for resolution of the conflict if it is accepted by both Chisinau and Tiraspol.

Conclusions and Recommendations. From the EU's point of view, the Transnistrian problem is important for at least three reasons. First, the conflict in Transnistria determines the overall stability of Moldova, which is becoming one of the major countries of the Eastern Partnership. Second, Transnistria remains a source of illegal migration, trafficking and organized crime. Third, the control of the flow of goods from Ukrainian Black Sea ports to the EU through Transnistrian territory remains an essential problem. It is thus in the interest of the EU to find a solution to the conflict through the Europeanisation of Moldova, including Transnistria as an integral part.

Smirnov has consequently promoted the idea of the independence of Transnistria. His loss of power may contribute to a strengthening of Russian influence in the region, especially if Kaminsky wins the second round of elections. The active support provided to Kaminsky by Russia can be interpreted as a signal of Moscow's readiness to take steps to finally solve the conflict. This is confirmed by Russia's agreement to resume the "5+2" negotiations in November 2011. The negotiations have been suspended for six years. However, Russia may remain satisfied even if Shevchuk wins the elections because he supports the idea of a postponement of a final settlement of the conflict.

The most important challenge for the EU is to prevent the reintegration of Transnistria with Moldova under conditions that enable Russia to block the socio-economic modernization of the country. Therefore, a dialogue with Russia on the resolution of the conflict in Transnistria should be conducted and all Russian initiatives in this sphere should be thoroughly monitored. The EU should actively participate in the "5+2" negotiations.

The post-election period will create favourable conditions for the EU to take steps to promote a better understanding among the Transnistrian leadership of the benefits of closer cooperation with the EU. The possibility of the involvement of representatives of Transnistria as observers in the implementation of projects financed by the EU in Moldova should be taken under consideration. In terms of financial support programmes implemented in Moldova, the EU should consider the possibility of the creation of instruments aimed at modernising the Transnistrian economy, which is dependent on Russian subsidies. In the long run, such measures could support the creation of business circles that would be interested in closer cooperation with the EU.