



BULLETIN

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Will Transnistria Be Cast in the “Novorossiya” Project?

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Parallel to the expansion of violence in the east of Ukraine, anxiety is rising along the country's border with Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria. Along what used to be an ill-guarded, yet mutually beneficial shared border, the seeds of distrust were sown by the clashes in Odessa on 2 May. With Russia's “Novorossiya” policy gaining shape both in rhetoric and action, unease has returned to the region. As such, the emergence of a new flash point for violence is an all too realistic prospect, be that as part of a grand geopolitical design or an incidental explosion of local tensions. To prevent such a scenario, careful monitoring is needed on the ground, particularly before and during the elections in Moldova and Ukraine, as well as discouragement of the strategic use of military force.

Suspicion on the Rise in Odessa. Among the triggers of tension in Ukraine are the still unclarified circumstances of the 2 May clashes between pro-unity and pro-Russia supporters in Odessa, which, according to Ukraine's police and security services, left 48 people dead. Tentative findings of the on-going official investigation published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Office of the General Prosecutor are often contradictory, and a conclusion to the investigation has been postponed by five months, until December. Given that a separate independent investigation places responsibility for the tragedy on the poor performance of local law enforcement agencies, it is clear that there is little political will to unveil the truth. With such a lack of transparency, and with no justice in sight, the already nervous public mood is being ramped up further, and trust in the authority of the post-Euromaidan political leadership is diminishing. At the same time, even though pro-Russian voices have waned since May (most of the leading activists were either arrested or fled the region), there are fears of renewed provocation, which law enforcement bodies could yet again fail to control. Such provocation could come from Transnistria, as there is a popular belief—though there is no clear evidence—that some of the activists during the 2 May incidents arrived from this region.

Hard security threats have added to the anxiety since August. On one hand, Tiraspol is sending repeated signals of military readiness. On the other hand, war in the east of Ukraine is spreading beyond Luhansk and Donetsk, along the Sea of Azov. Actions on the ground are gaining ideological foundations as well: in an official address to pro-Russia insurgents in late August, Russian President Vladimir Putin resuscitated the historical concept of “Novorossiya.” As he outlined earlier in April, his interpretation of “Novorossiya” includes Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa. This gives grounds for suspicions that the end goal of the war could be for Russia to gain control over the entire territory of southern Ukraine, an operation in which adjacent Transnistria could play a role.

Correspondingly, the Ukrainian authorities are taking measures to increase security along the 453.4 km Transnistrian segment of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. Since mid-July, trenches of between three and four metres wide and four metres deep have been dug in selected locations along the border. By the end of August, the trenches measured approximately 14 km overall. Border control installations are also being reinforced. Male citizens of the Russian Federation between 18 and 60 years of age entering Ukraine must routinely undergo second-line checks, and all vehicles have to be subject to a more thorough examination. As the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) reports, the cases of refusals of entry tripled from July to August.

Repercussions of Instability in Ukraine on Transnistria. On the other side of the border, tensions are also rising. The increasing instability in Ukraine adds to the long-standing security concerns of Transnistria (regarding a possible attack by Chişinău). On the political level, this has translated into various forms of demonstration of strength. On 7 August, the Transnistrian army was put on full alert, and on 26 August military mobilisation started, along with a month-long army training session, conducted by the Russian peacekeeping forces stationed in the region.

At the same time, anxiety is also felt in Transnistrian society, not least as a result of the local and Russian media portrayal of Ukraine as a country governed by fascists. Afraid of the allegedly deteriorated security and heightened hostilities against Russians in the neighbouring Odessa oblast, border crossings are being kept to the necessary minimum. This has implications not only for tourism and family links, but also the local economy. Previously, many Transnistrians used to commute to Odessa for work, but now they face obstacles in doing so.

Repercussions on the economy are, however, on a wider scale. The bulk of the region's exports (including those sold in the EU) arrives first to Odessa, and is then transported farther, either by rail or by sea. Whereas Transnistria's overall export volume is reported to be rising continuously (in the first half of 2014 exports grew by 71.38% vis-à-vis the same period in 2013), it remains hard to track the dynamics of the shadow cross-border trade, which is likely to have suffered a fall-back. This consisted primarily of goods (cigarettes, shoes, etc.) that entered the Odessa port and were then smuggled through Transnistria. War also affects regular business links. A case in point is the Rîbniţa steel plant—the second largest tax contributor in Transnistria—which uses raw material from Ukrainian mines; such supplies are now less predictable.

While there are unquestionably such adverse effects on Transnistria's economy, they are by no means the sole explanation for the economic downturn of the region. This surfaced when 15% of public sector salaries were frozen until the end of the year, along with the \$15 pension supplements funded by Russia. Tiraspol put the blame for the situation on Chişinău and Kyiv, which they claim impose trade barriers on the region. As a matter of fact, the causes are deep-seated structural problems such as corruption, unstable public finances, low competitiveness and productivity (40% of the work force is employed in the public sector and the number of pensioners equals the number of those employed).

Everything Depends on Russia. Despite the increasing sentiment of mutual threat along the border, no act of violence should be expected from either Ukraine or Transnistria on their own initiative. Ukraine is clearly on the defence, rather than the offence, and Tiraspol obviously cannot afford to antagonise the new leadership of its only neighbour. For Transnistria, Ukraine remains a vital transit route for goods, passengers and gas imports from Russia. This also explains why Tiraspol has not recognised the self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. In a conversation leaked in July, the Transnistrian minister of the interior, Gennady Kuzmichev, even assured the deputy chief of the State Border Service of Ukraine that no provocation should be expected on the common border.

Another question is, what are Russia's intentions for Transnistria? Russia can use it as a springboard for possible incursions to either right-bank Moldova, or to the Odessa oblast, and has the capacity on the ground to pursue such a course. According to official data, the Russian military in Transnistria consists of some 1,500 troops of the Operational Group of Russian Forces, which are augmented by more than 400 Russian personnel in a peacekeeping mission established in 1992. This means that, together with Transnistrians holding Russian citizenship, as well as the Transnistrian military and security forces—whose salaries are also covered by Russia—more than 10,000 combat-ready military personnel could be mobilised on a short notice.

As the role of Transnistria in Russian foreign policy continues to be defined in the context of Moscow's plans for Ukraine and Moldova, Transnistria remains for the time being most useful as a tool of political pressure. At least, as long as Russia is focused on extracting political concessions in peace talks from Kyiv and establishing a land corridor to Crimea. Extending the war to the Black Sea coast would imply a much higher military cost than in Donbas, especially as the occupation would meet considerable public objection—as demonstrated by the 2 May incidents. As such, it is more likely that Transnistria will play a role in Russia's policy towards Moldova, particularly if the parliamentary elections scheduled for 30 November fail to produce the results desired by Moscow. Then, Transnistria could become a hotbed of destabilisation along with the autonomous region of Gagauzia and possibly the northern region of the country.

In this context, it is essential that the international community does not lose sight of developments in and around Transnistria in spite of developments in Donbas. A possible conflict in the Odessa oblast—neighbour of NATO member Romania—would have indisputable implications for the alliance itself. Therefore, the spread of war needs to be contained by further acts of discouragement. For instance, NATO should consider stationing vessels on the Black Sea. As a part of the CSDP mission that the EU is planning to deploy in Ukraine to advise Kyiv on reform of its security apparatus, security experts should be also sent to Odessa. It is also essential that the situation on the ground remains closely monitored by the EUBAM, the OSCE and the UN human rights missions. Their findings need to be regularly disseminated among the wider public to counter false information spread by the media and prevent the tension from spilling over into violence. The upcoming parliamentary elections both in Moldova and Ukraine need particularly careful international observation, and an especially strong presence in tense regions such as Odessa. Otherwise, even without grand geopolitical decisions, the smallest incident could become the spark that ignites the region.