

The frozen conflict in Transnistria: a chance for agreement?

Witold Rodkiewicz

The recent intensification of diplomatic contacts over the “frozen” conflict in Transnistria, together with the altered international situation and significant shifts in internal politics of both Moldova and Transnistria suggest that in the coming months we may witness the resumption of negotiations in the so-called 5+2 format (involving both sides of the conflict, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE as mediators and the EU and the United States as observers). An analysis of the interests of the main players shows that for the first time since the failure of the Russian-proposed settlement (the so-called Kozak Plan) in November of 2003, there is a realistic, albeit very narrow, chance to finally resolve the conflict.

The fiasco of the Russian settlement plan

The Kozak Plan envisaged a privileged position for Transnistria within a federalised Moldova and Russian military presence in the region for 20 years. On the eve of the signing ceremony, the president of Moldova, Vladimir Voronin, under pressure from the West and the Moldovan opposition, rejected the already initialled agreement. As a result, relations between Moldova and Russia deteriorated rapidly. Voronin’s attempts to use Western and Ukrainian support to force Transnistria to re-unify with Moldova proved unsuccessful. As a retaliatory measure, in 2005 Russia substantially increased the price of gas and closed its market to Moldovan agricultural products, and in March 2006, embargoed Moldovan wines, which were Moldova’s main export commodity¹. In autumn 2006 Voronin returned to the idea of solving the problem of Transnistria through an agreement with Russia. Chisinau proposed to Moscow a settlement draft roughly similar to the “Kozak plan” (minus the presence of the Russian troops)² and adopted a multi-vector foreign policy. In 2007 Russia, rewarding Voronin’s policy shift lifted the embargo on fruits, meat and wine. However, Voronin failed to persuade the Kremlin to abandon its policy of keeping the conflict “frozen” while gradually strengthening Russia’s position in the separatist republic³.

The intensification of diplomatic activity around Transnistria

Since approximately mid-December 2007, there has been an increase in diplomatic activity around Transnistria. The intensity of contacts, their multi-directional character and the rank of the participants indicate that the parties are increasingly interested in finding a solution. This may be a sign of a possible resumption of negotiations in the 5+2 format.

¹ For which Russia was the main market. According to Moldovan commentators, this caused losses of around US\$300 million for the Moldovan economy (where the GDP is around US\$2.8 billion).

² In April 2007, the main elements of the proposed solution were leaked to the public.

³ Through the role of Russian capital in privatisation, and by cultivating contacts with the Transnistrian political establishment and by strengthening ties between the local population and Russia (granting Russian citizenship and organising federal elections on Transnistrian territory).

An important impulse was provided by Finland when it identified the resolution of the conflict in Moldova as the priority of its OSCE presidency in 2008. In mid-January 2008, the Finnish foreign minister Ilkka Kanerva visited the region, and appointed Heikke Talvitie as a special envoy for the regulation of the Transnistrian conflict. Kanerva's visit was preceded in late December 2007 by the talks held by the Ukrainian deputy foreign minister

The recent intensification of diplomatic contacts over the “frozen” conflict in Transnistria, together with the altered international situation and significant shifts in internal politics of both Moldova and Transnistria suggest that in the coming months we may witness the resumption of negotiations in the so-called 5+2 format.

in Tiraspol and Chisinau, and by a proposal from Tiraspol to increase the size of the Ukrainian contingent in the peace force overseeing the conflict area. The Russian-Ukrainian commission for the regulation of regional conflicts met again for the first time in a long period. In January, President Voronin discussed Transnistria with the European Commission president José Manuel Barroso, the EU's special representative for Transnistria Kalman Mizsei, the US diplomat Philippe Remler, who had been newly appointed as the head of the OSCE mission

to Moldova, and the deputy assistant secretary general of NATO Robert Simmons. Representatives of the OSCE, the EU and Russia also held meetings with the Transnistrian leadership. In late January Voronin discussed the Transnistrian problem directly with the Russian president Vladimir Putin. The outcome of these talks seems to have been positive, as suggested by the visit to Moscow in late January and early February by Voronin's closest aides for Transnistrian affairs, political advisor Mark Tkaciuk, the minister for reintegration Vasile Sova and the head of the Treaties Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dumitru Socolan. They held talks with the Russian officials in charge of the Transnistrian problem, deputy secretary of the Security Council Yury Zubakov and ambassador Valery Nesterushkin. According to a semi-official Chisinau daily *Moldava Suverana* (31 January 2008), the consultations in Moscow were held in the spirit of “building on the agreements” reached during the preceding Voronin–Putin meeting. The fact that an expert on treaties was involved in the talks suggests that the parties had already discussed specific wordings. In addition, it can hardly be considered a coincidence that the speaker of the Transnistrian parliament Yevgeny Shevchuk, who is regarded as the leader of that part of the Transnistrian establishment which has not ruled out an agreement with Chisinau, was present in Moscow at the same time.

Another indirect sign suggesting that an agreement on Transnistria may be in the pipeline comes from the warm welcome which Voronin received in Moscow from the Patriarch of Moscow and All-Russia Alexei II. While granting Voronin an award “for outstanding achievements in strengthening unity among the Orthodox nations”, the Patriarch opined that Moldova's rapprochement with the EU “should not in any circumstances lead either to a diminution of Moldova's sovereignty or to a weakening of its bonds with Russia”. The Patriarch also expressed his hope for “a fast and peaceful resolution of the Transnistrian conflict”. In his reply, Voronin spoke about “a common future” and “eternal friendship” between Moldova and Russia. The ceremony and its rhetoric may suggest that the Kremlin again considers Voronin to be ‘its man’ and, consequently, a potential partner to finally resolve the Transnistria question.

International development which may contribute to an agreement on Transnistria

Until recently, there were at least two issues which, while not inherent to the conflict in Moldova, were blocking its resolution: the CFE Treaty and the independence of Kosovo. Since Western states had been making ratification of the Treaty dependent on the evacuation of all Russian troops from Moldova (under the so-called Istanbul Commitments) they could not accept a solution for Transnistria which would have legalised the stationing of Russian troops there. However, after Moscow 'suspended' its implementation of the Treaty in December 2007, Western states might be prepared either to give up the Treaty or to try to save it by making concessions concerning the Istanbul Commitments. Even before Moscow signalled its intention to 'suspend' the Treaty, Germany and France had been unwilling to pressure Moscow to withdraw troops from Transnistria, irrespective of any final agreement between Chisinau and Tiraspol. After the Russians announced their intention to 'suspend' its participation also the US demonstrated a willingness to make concessions on the Istanbul Commitments. Initially, they suggested incorporating the Russian troops into the international peace force under the OSCE's mandate, and then put forward a proposal to establish an OSCE civilian mission which would supervise the Russian contingent. It is possible that in order to save the CFE Treaty, the Western signatories may in the end give up the 'Moldovan' part of the Istanbul Commitments. This would pave the way for such an agreement on Transnistria, that would legitimise a continued Russian military presence in the region.

Another circumstance which favours such a scenario is the apparent evolution of the U.S. foreign policy in the direction of greater sensitivity to the interests of those countries whose cooperation is indispensable for the United States to address effectively the main threats to its security (the proliferation of nuclear weapons, Islamic terrorism and geopolitical changes in the Far East). It is therefore increasingly likely that in order to gain Russian co-operation, the United States may be willing to make concessions on matters that are of secondary importance to it, such as the Russian military presence in Moldova.

If the West were to accept the continued presence of Russian forces in Transnistria, this would open a possibility of reaching the final solution to the conflict. So far, one of the main obstacles to an agreement with Russia was Chisinau's demand for an unconditional evacuation of the Russian troops. However, if the West changed its position on this issue, President Voronin would most probably also be willing to make concessions. He has declared on several recent occasions that if the world powers developed a common solution for Transnistria, he would be willing to accept it.

The Kosovo issue has been another obstacle indirectly blocking the settlement of the conflict in Moldova. As long as Russia sought to persuade the West to prevent Kosovo from declaring independence, it had an interest in maintaining the small quasi-state in Transnistria;

its existence enabled Moscow to pressure the West by threatening to recognise it diplomatically. After Kosovo proclaimed independence, the situation changed; now Russia would profit more from ushering in a resolution to the conflict. It could thus demonstrate its strict adherence to the principle of territorial integrity of existing states, as well as its effectiveness in solving conflicts by using methods radically different from those employed by the West. A possible compromise with the West concerning Kosovo could include a tacit

One of Russia's conditions for the regulation of the Transnistrian conflict would be the adoption of an „international legal document” in which Russia, the US and the EU would guarantee Moldova's neutral status.

Western approval of a solution for Transnistria that would allow the Russian military presence there and would ensure the predominant Russian influence in Moldova as a whole. The likelihood of such an scenario has been indirectly confirmed by the leaks which occurred during Voronin's most recent visit to Moscow, which suggested that one of Russia's conditions for the regulation of the Transnistrian conflict would be the adoption of an „international legal document” in which Russia, the US and the EU would guarantee Moldova's neutral status.

Internal political changes in Moldova and Transnistria

The results of last year's local elections in Moldova have seriously undermined the position of President Voronin and his party. The Communists lost the support of a majority of voters while the opposition parties, which took power in a majority of local governments, proved their ability for effective coalition-building.

If the rapprochement with Russia is sealed with the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, Voronin – who would be seen as the political guarantor of Moldova's pro-Russian course – could count on the Kremlin's support in the election campaign.

The Communists face a serious threat of losing power in the parliamentary elections in the spring of 2009. A successful reunification of the country would improve their chances of averting an imminent ballot defeat. Moreover, if the rapprochement with Russia is sealed with the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, Voronin – who would be seen as the political gua-

rantor of Moldova's pro-Russian course – could count on the Kremlin's support in the election campaign. Finally, the participation of people from Transnistria in the national election would benefit the Communist Party of Moldova, as it would increasing the electorate with leftist and pro-Russian sympathies.

For Voronin, unification is also important for personal reasons, having to do with his cultural and political identity (this applies also to his political camp). It would strengthen the position of the Russian-speaking population in Moldova and thus help to decide the struggle between supporters of a 'Romanian' and of a 'Moldovan' national identity in favour of the latter.

The internal situation in Transnistria has also changed in ways which have opened up a possibility of reaching an agreement with Chisinau. There is a deepening conflict within the political and business establishment, that is, between the group of President Igor Smirnov and the Speaker of the parliament Yevgeny Shevchuk, who represents Smirnov's competitors in from the Sheriff business group. Led by Shevchuk, the parliament has overridden the presidential veto on several occasions, and Shevchuk himself has tabled a draft law to limit presidential prerogatives. The parliament has also distanced itself from Smirnov's negative position on any attempts to reach rapprochement with Chisinau; for example, it voted in favour of abolishing the charges that Moldovan residents had to pay for entering Transnistria,

as well as the 100% duty on imports from Moldova. This shows that a political camp has formed in Transnistria which seems to be ready to enter talks with Chisinau, and which might potentially become a party to a political agreement resolving the conflict.

The Autonomous Trade Preferences granted by the EU to Moldova in January 2008 is particularly enticing to the Transnistrian business, which is however well aware that without the final settlement of the conflict between Chisinau and Tiraspol it will not gain permanent access to the EU market.

Another aspect of the internal situation in Transnistria which might be conducive to an agreement with Chisinau, concerns

the growing interest that the Transnistrian industry is showing in consolidating and expanding access to the EU market. Last year, Transnistrian exports to the EU increased by nearly one-fifth over 2005, and accounted for nearly 40% (over US\$300 million) of the total value of Transnistria's export. The possibility of benefiting from the Autonomous Trade Preferences granted by the EU to Moldova in January 2008 is particularly enticing to the Transnistrian business, which is however well aware that without the final settlement of the conflict between Chisinau and Tiraspol it will not gain permanent access to the EU market.

Conclusions

In view of the recent intensification of diplomatic activity concerning the Transnistrian conflict, and of the shifts in the political interests of the parties involved, the resumption of formal negotiations in the 5+2 format looks increasingly probable. There are growing indications that perhaps the parties might even be able, eventually, to come to an agreement which would put a final end to the conflict.

Obviously a number of factors may still prevent the settlement. Firstly, acting on the assumption that it is better to hold on to what one already has, the Kremlin may choose to

stick to the current *status quo*, even if it is deficient from the point of view of international legitimacy. Secondly, the United States may prove not to be prepared to strike a 'pragmatic bargain' with Russia based on a division of spheres of interests. Thirdly, President Voronin may be

A realistic (albeit slight) chance of a permanent resolution to the frozen conflict in Transnistria is emerging for the first time in a considerable period.

afraid of a potential outbreak of massive protests in Chisinau should he accept the Kremlin's conditions. However, the cost-to-profit ratio of a potential agreement has changed in favour of the latter for all the players involved. Thus, a realistic (albeit slight) chance of a permanent resolution to the frozen conflict in Transnistria is emerging for the first time since 2003.

Centre for Eastern Studies
Koszykowa 6A
00-564 Warsaw
phone: (+48 22) 525 80 00
fax: (+48 22) 629 87 99
e-mail: info@osw.waw.pl

The Centre for Eastern Studies (CES) was established in 1990. CES is financed from the budget. The Centre monitors and analyses the political, economic and social situation in Russia, Central and Eastern European countries, the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Central Asia. CES focuses on the key political, economic and security issues, such as internal situations and stability of the mentioned countries, the systems of power, relations between political centres, foreign policies, issues related to NATO and EU enlargement, energy supply security, existing and potential conflicts, among other issues.

© Copyright by OSW

Co-operation: Jim Todd
Editor: Anna Łabuszewska
DTP: Wojciech Mańkowski