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The security issues and negotiations concerning the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict

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The military-strategic security issue represents the great unknown in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. When the negotiation agenda was established in the "5 + 2" format, on April 18, 2012, the security issues were camouflaged in the untouched "basket 3", according to the philosophy of "small steps" which does not allow complex discussions on military security. Recent events in the eastern part of the European continent where Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community are involved in the re-drawing of the European security architecture, Russia's intention to liquidate the expired ammunition stored in Cobasna, the tensions related to the non-signing of the Bratislava Protocol, or the "powerful autonomy" announced by President Igor Dodon for 2020, all of these issues demand an increased attention towards the security regime in the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova.

The security dimensions and the Transnistrian conflict. The military-strategic security becomes once again relevant for the European continent, in the context of the operationalization of the American Missile Defence Complex in Europe, the withdrawal of the USA and Russia from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the consolidation of the conventional military infrastructure on the "flanks": Russia - mainly in the Black Sea Area; NATO - mainly in the Baltic Sea Area. No less important is security in the context of the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. Beyond the complex approach on security formulated by the Copenhagen School, in the case of the Republic of Moldova the military security is in itself a complex topic, defined by at least three interconnected dimensions: the Security Zone and the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPF); The Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria (OGRF) and the ammunition from Cobasna; the military and paramilitary structures of the Tiraspol administration. Basically, the military contingent of Russia and that of Tiraspol within the JPF, OGRF and the military and paramilitary structures of the secessionist administration constitute a homogenized and coherent military structure, with a single command center, organizing joint military exercises and constitute the main obstacle to the final and peaceful solution of the conflict.

Russia has succeeded not only in defining the three dimensions as separate issues but has put aside a part of them in the "basket 3" of the "5 + 2" format, while other security issues have remained an almost exclusive prerogative of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) or are being negotiated periodically and in a fragmentary manner in the Moldovan-Russian bilateral talks. Following the adoption by the OSCE Ministerial Council in Porto on December 7, 2002, of a Statement in accordance to which the withdrawal of Russian troops and armaments from the Transnistrian region will be possible only under certain conditions – *provided necessary conditions are in place* – , Russia has no longer negotiated the withdrawal of the OGRF. Russia has never discussed the evacuation/liquidation of ammunition from Cobasna after the rejection of the Kozak Plan in the autumn of 2003, while the change of the peacekeeping mission has also never been discussed by Russia, despite the modest and episodic demands from Chisinau or international partners.

Cobasna ammunition and the content of "basket 3". In the context of repeated failures to reach a consensus on the text of the Bratislava Protocol, which mainly contains issues from baskets "1" and "2",

President Igor Dodon has announced the preparation of a special status for the Transnistrian region, while Russia is negotiating with the Republic of Moldova the terms of disposing of the Cobasna ammunition. Russia's intention to liquidate 11,000 tons of ammunition from Cobasna, announced in August 2019 by the Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and recently reconfirmed by Maria Zaharova - the press officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Moscow, is one of the security dimensions in the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova. Beyond the enthusiasm with which he was received in Chisinau or in many Western capitals, this initiative of the Russian diplomacy raises a number of concerns.

First, the technical procedure and the related activities are not clear. Russian officials have not yet responded to the availability of partners in the "5 + 2" format to participate with money and/or logistical aid in the destruction of ammunition but said that the preparation of the works will take 1.5 years and that the works will be carried out in compliance with the rules and regulations of the Russian Army. Under the pretext of installing the infrastructure needed to destroy the weaponry, Russia can build all kinds of military infrastructure on the left bank of the Dniester or request the reopening of Tiraspol or other airports in different areas of the country. **It is certain that starting with October 2019, two heavy-duty trucks transport light weapons (grenades, vending machines, cartridges, etc.) from Cobasna to Tiraspol every week!** The Russian delegation to the UCC invents all kinds of excuses so as not to respond positively to Chisinau's request to allow military observers to check these transports.

Secondly, the liquidation announced is even more suspicious now when the spectre of federalization is haunting Eastern Europe, and the President of the Republic of Moldova declares his readiness to provide a special status for the Transnistrian region. Russia has only once accepted the withdrawal of the ammunition from the territory of the Republic of Moldova. It happened in 2003, in the months leading up to the emergence of the Kozak plan. At the meeting with the former head of the Moldovan diplomacy in September 2019, Sergei Lavrov, Foreign Minister of Russia, recalled that: "... when the settlement process was very active, in 2003, that is when the Transnistrian authorities have agreed to the evacuation of ammunition ... ". Vadim Krasnoselski's statement that the destruction of ammunition in Cobasna is only a matter between Russia and Transnistria does not significantly change the overall picture.

Last, but not least, worrying is also the fragmentation of the security file and, in particular, the fact that negotiations on security issues are being further held in a bilateral format or in the JCC, but not in "5 + 2" format. The Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Alexandru Flenchea, is the first official to reveal, in a recent interview, the lack of content (at least in terms of security issues) of the "third basket" (the most anticipate of all!), when he stated that: "The 5+2 format does not have on its agenda the topic of the withdrawal or in general that of the presence of foreign military forces on the territory of the Republic of Moldova". At the same time, while European diplomats are organizing the Europe Day at the Tighina Fortress, where they attend classical music concerts with Vadim Krasnoselski, the Tiraspol administration has set up a military training center in the same Fortress and establishes "border guard" posts in the Security Zone, aspect which concern (mainly) Moldova's at the JCC.

The risks of decoupling. The statement that the withdrawal of the Russian military is not within the competence of the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration and, even more so, is not within the competence of the "5 + 2" format, is at least uninspired, while the approach itself is very risky for the Republic of Moldova. If the (potential) negotiations on the status of the Transnistrian region in the "5 + 2" format will not address the issue of security in its complexity, then the risks are not (only) linked to the federalization of the Republic of Moldova, anticipated by experts and politicians alike, but they are linked in particular with the possibility of negotiating the status of the Transnistrian region without coherent and feasible provisions related to OGRF, JPF and the militarized structures of Tiraspol, such as the non-paper promoted by Igor Dodon since 2018. A negotiated political solution with the assistance of euro-atlantic diplomats is unsustainable if the security issue is decoupled from the document, after which Chisinau would undertake bilateral measures to obtain the guarantee of military neutrality (as required by Russia), the withdrawal of the OGRF or the replacement of the JPF with a civilian mission with a UN mandate. On the contrary, the insertion of the security issues in the agenda of the "5 + 2" format, together with the participation of the US and EU representatives in the meetings of the JCC and/or in the Group of Military Observers, must precede or accompany any request for political resolution of the conflict.