

REGIME CHANGE IN TRANSNISTRIA, WHAT SHOULD MOLDOVA EXPECT?

Smirnov left, problems remained

The recent results of unrecognized elections in the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldovan Republic were surprising to all. It was not just surprising that Smirnov did not come in first; the biggest surprise was that Smirnov failed even to come in second and pass through to the second round, and that the “designated” candidate of Russia (Kaminski) finished second, accumulating slightly more votes than Smirnov. In this context, at least three questions appear relevant for Moldovan diplomacy: is it a democracy in Transnistria when neither the Russian candidate nor the current leader took most of the votes? What should Moldova’s expectations be towards these changes, and what should Chisinau do?

The end of the Smirnov era does not mean that democracy exists in Transnistria, or even necessarily that there is an incipient democracy. The election campaign from the left bank, and the first-round election results, show more a battle between several clans which generated a rudimentary form of pluralism. As Michael McFaul put it about some post-Soviet states, the system resembles a “democracy without democrats” – a situation which is not so different from the election campaigns in Moldova. In Chisinau, however, the various clans have legal businesses and have been “Europea-



The removal of Smirnov from power will not change much the situation of the Transnistrian dossier. However, there are chances that the future context will be more favorable to finding a solution. As the change of interlocutor from the left side of Nistru is yet to come, Chisinau should draw red lines of the future reconciliation so that the proposed format would not affect the functionality of the Moldovan state and its European integration path.

nized”, use less black PR and are not supported or criticized by Russian TV channels broadcasting programmes related to criminal investigations by Russian law enforcement agencies.

Such a form of “sovereign democracy” and its electoral results will not necessarily lead to dramatic changes in the Transnistrian settlement process. Of the two remaining contenders, both advocate for the independence of Transnistria and a “good neighborly” relationship with Moldova, thus the political space for an integra-

tionist platform in Tiraspol is equal to zero at this time. In fact, neither of them could imagine that someone would be pro-Chisinau and not necessarily for the independence of Transnistria, otherwise their credibility would have fallen dramatically. Of course the circumstances have slightly changed and Smirnov's disappearance which served as warranty to maintain the status quo will bring a little opening. On the background of Smirnov, Shevchuk seems the most reformist, in particular by the intention to liquidate the state security ministry. Kaminski seems more credible than Smirnov because he is supported by Russia, while the fact that this man is seen as "Sheriff" company guy, affects the image of Kaminski, but this could push him to make concessions, taking into account a possible pressure of business groups in the region, which actually applies to Shevchuk. In any case, the conclusion is that in Transnistria, Russia has won, regardless of the outcome of the second round, because both candidates are loyal to Russia and have no other intentions than those of "friendship" with Moldova. Moreover, unlike Smirnov, who has meanwhile tried to practice his own quasi-diplomacy, the new leader will not have his authority, while urgent need to finance the budget deficit will automatically connect him to the strategies of Russia in the region.

Perhaps the most important thing now is to try to foresee the consequences of regime change to be able to resolve the conflict. The answer to this question depends on the approach. There are two hypotheses. The first is that Russia controls the overall process and in this case it is pointless to infer too much because it becomes clear that big changes will not come unless Russia wishes so. The second is that Russia is still important but understanding must be reached between Chisinau and Tiraspol (including intermediate steps related to movement, confidence-building measures, etc.) which is a 5+2 format supported scenario. This hypothesis provides a wider field of analysis to be explored.

International context becomes less favorable

On external dimension, international environment has become a favorable one after the Russo-German understanding, but a series of events that followed put under pressure the Transnistrian conflict negotiations or even marginalize Russian-European dialogue agenda. That international environment, favorable to Transnistrian settlement was possible given the effort of European diplomacy, especially German diplomacy and apparent desire of Russia to cooperate on the Transnistrian issue especially that one circulates the idea that Smirnov's removal from office was one of Russia's promises given to Germany. Moreover, it is said that discussions have encountered a deadlock and neither Moscow nor Berlin are satisfied with how things evolve. However, the European currency crisis decreases the attractiveness of European integration of Moldova, the Russian presidential elections, U.S. elections, elections in France and other events to be held in 2012 show a greater concern towards other issues than the Transnistrian subject on a future term.

Meanwhile, the situation in Moldova is not very promising. Misunderstandings of the alliance and failure to elect the President make the whole machinery of state to be cumbersome, rigid and delayed. In Transnistria things are even more complicated, especially on the social dimension. A major part of active labor force has left abroad, the budget deficit approaching 60% and humanitarian aid offered by Russia, as far as we have seen, does not reach the destination. In Moldova there are also big problems with migration, but at least at macro-economic level we can talk about a certain level of stability.

Chişinău must draw the red lines

Under the international and local conditions described above, but also in the context of resuming official negotiations in the 5+2 format, one will most likely reach a document, a new „Kozak” to be proposed for discussion, because under the conditions when all key players (except Transnistria) are in favor of regulation, it will inevitably lead, at best, to the development of a document. This future document should be considered very carefully and Chisinau should be prepared to draw red lines of future conflict settlement. First of all, the future form of conciliation should not affect the functionality of Moldova as a state. This means first of all not allowing stationary of Russian military contingent and weapons, but possibly some other preconditions.

Second of all, reconciliation should not affect Moldova’s European approach. In practice it is about non-admission of possibility of veto over foreign policy for the Transnistrian region, otherwise we end up with “transnistriation” of Moldova.

Instead, one can negotiate forms of construction of the state: federation or unitary state, especially if future federation will follow Russian federal model. Similarly, one can also discuss the guarantee package. Probably first guarantee on the list would be permanent neutrality of Moldova and non-approximation to NATO, actually as other safeguards related to the operation of the Russian language, recognition of privatization, guarantees for those who have served the current system, etc.

The real problem exists in Moldova, not only in Transnistria. In fact many citizens of this country do not want reinstatement, as they say, our political class is not able to find consensus and is quite corrupt, and reintegration would mean the doubling of the number of corrupted people and transnistriation of Moldova. In addi-

tion, the question often made by ordinary people is what are the benefits of reintegration? Moreover, when young people are asked to choose between European Integration and Transnistrian conflict settlement, they tend to support EU integration rather than settlement of Transnistrian conflict, which does not necessarily mean surrendering. Of course, the two processes might go simultaneous, but for that you need more resources and consent of moldovan key stakeholders. At this stage, priority number one still seems to be European integration, even if one was able to resume formal negotiations in 5+2 format.

Conclusions

Change of government in Tiraspol will open few opportunities on official dimension especially that Chisinau has not, at least for now, the ability to finance chronic budget deficits of Tiraspol. This, however, does not withhold the responsibility of the Government to immediately establish contact with the new leadership of Transnistria, without focusing too much on the fact that Moldova does not recognize the elections in Transnistria. Also, there will be more opportunities on the side of human contacts that will bring Transnistria out of isolation and change things for the better, which must take place including on the media dimension. Meanwhile Chisinau should be ready to negotiate concessions, to invest in capacity of structures that would participate in this process and to foster public interest towards Transnistrian conflict settlement. Acceptance of reconciliation must take place while maintaining the functionality of the Republic of Moldova as a state and maintaining the direction of European integration.



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