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Ukraine and Moldova initiatives on Transnistria

At the request of the East European Security Research Initiative, Moldovan experts commented on the practical implications of Kyiv decision of May 2015 to ban transit of Russian troops; prospects for the Ukrainian initiative to replace Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria with the international mission, and perspectives of the Chisinau initiative to adopt a reintegration timetable for Transnistria.

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Kyiv decision to terminate the transit of Russian troops and military equipment took Chisinau authorities by surprise. Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Moldova's territorial re-integration Victor Osipov stated that the Moldovan side would not hinder the supplementation of Russian military; on the contrary, it will make sure that the troops are accordingly supplied. Mr. Osipov explained such position with argument that the dialogue between parties has improved recently.

After Kyiv decision, Russian peace-keeping forces began openly recruit for service the local residents with Russian citizenship. According to some sources, Russian military contingent in Transnistria at 70% consists of the locals, who have Russian citizenship. As for the ammunitions, the Colbasna warehouses store enough of it and do not urgently require replenishment. Hence, Kyiv decision did not have any significant negative impact on the Russian military in the region. Actually, it is Moldova that could be regarded an accidental victim, for it had to assume additional commitments to provide supply for the Russian military.

The perspectives of changing the peacekeeping format in the nearest future are close to zero. A number of Moldovan officials and opinion leaders required such change, but their position has not been supported by the main mediator – the OSCE Mission.

Kyiv actions to enhance security on the Ukrainian-Moldovan border were used by the Transnistrian propaganda to make population feel itself inside a “besieged fortress”. Military exercises carried out in Transnistria in mid August 2015, with the participation of about 1/3 of the whole Russian military contingent in the region, simulated the rejection of subversive attacks from Chisinau and from Ukraine. Given that the Transnistrian population is infected by the Russian TV anti-Ukrainian propaganda, any proposal from the Ukrainian side to change the peace-keeping format will be rejected and regarded as an aggressive plan.

The Chisinau reintegration initiatives have so far remained on paper only. After the elections of November 2014, the long negotiations to establish a Government coalition lasted till the end of the summer 2015. Although the Moldovan Prime-Minister Valeriu Strelet stated in his inauguration speech that resolution of the Transnistrian issue would remain among the Government's priorities, the governing parties do not have clear common approach to the issue of reintegration. The only common position is that the reintegration plan should be correlated with the European integration objective of Moldova. But the process of European integration is being destabilized by corruption and tergiversation of important reforms, in particular in justice sector. Therefore, it seems that the reintegration plan presented by the Prime Minister will remain on paper only, without any concrete actions.

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In light of the Kyiv decision to denounce its military cooperation agreements with Russia, Moldova becomes the only route to resupply the Russian peacekeeping contingent and the Operational Group of Russian Forces stationed in Transnistria. Technically, Russia could also make use of the military airport in Tiraspol, but it would still have to enter either Ukrainian or Moldovan airspace. Both Moldova and, particularly, Ukraine have indicated that unauthorized breach of national airspace will have grave consequences. Nonetheless, Moldova remains more lenient towards Russia and is unlikely to follow suit and terminate its own agreements on the transit of Russian troops and supplies. Unlike Ukraine, Moldova is trying to play ‘the good cop’, yet so far it remains unclear how much cooperation/coordination is there between Kyiv and Chisinau on the Transnistria front.

Unfortunately, there is little chance for success with regards to the new Kyiv initiative to replace Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria with the international mission. Moldovan side has been pushing for this for quite some time. Almost everyone in the 5+2 welcomes the idea;

expect, unsurprisingly, Transnistria and Russia, which have blocked any potential discussion of the issue. Recently, Moldova began talks with Romania to set up a joint peacekeeping battalion, envisioned to also include Polish and Ukrainian soldiers. Albeit a step forward, the move is unlikely to create real momentum required to chance the peacekeeping mechanism on the Nistru. It is only EU and, more importantly, US who can ‘persuade’ Russia to accept such a change, most likely under the auspices of OSCE.

Prospects for the Chisinau initiative to adopt a schedule for integration of Transnistria appear rather dim. Even if Chisinau was successful in putting forward such a schedule, it would remain by en large a paper tiger. However, given the increasing political and economic instability in Moldova, decision makers will find it more and more difficult to concentrate on forward looking policy making. Instead, they will be consumed by short-sighted political bickering, ultimately succumbing to a damage control type of governance, which leaves little hope for producing realistic, comprehensive, and sustainable integration plan. Communists failed when they had full control over the process. Nowadays, with a rather heterogeneous three party coalition – prospects are slim.

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East European Security Research Initiative (EESRI) is an informal discussion, analytical and information-sharing international platform aimed at uniting efforts of the experts and researches from various countries to find effective ways for strengthening security in the Eastern Europe as the most vulnerable region of the contemporary Europe.

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