

The change of Transnistria's leader offers Moscow an opportunity to reinforce its influence in the region

Witold Rodkiewicz

The first round of presidential elections was held on 11 December in Transnistria. Igor Smirnov, who had been the head of this unrecognised country for twenty years, received third largest support (24.8% of the votes) and thus lost the chance for a fifth term in office as president. Yevgeny Shevchuk (38.5%) and Anatoliy Kaminski (26.4%) qualified for the run-off. Shevchuk ran for the presidency as a candidate opposing the existing political and economic system. In 2009, as parliamentary speaker and the head of the Renewal party (a political project of Transnistria's strongest business structure, Sheriff), he made an unsuccessful attempt at limiting Smirnov's power. However, since he lost Sheriff's support, he relinquished his functions. Then he was replaced as the parliamentary speaker and party leader by Anatoliy Kaminski, who was openly supported by the Kremlin throughout the election campaign.

Commentary

- The Russian factor played an essential but not decisive role in the election campaign. Moscow's open repudiation of Smirnov (the negative campaign on Russian television, the critical opinion expressed by Sergey Naryshkin, head of the Russian presidential administration and the investigation launched by Russia's prosecution authorities against Smirnov's son) was the main reason for the decrease in support for him among the Transnistrian electorate. Russia, using its influence in the Transnistrian security structures, also thwarted Smirnov's attempt to invalidate the first round. However, the Kremlin's candidate, Anatoliy Kaminski, achieved a much worse result than the independent candidate, Yevgeny Shevchuk.
- The outcome of the run-off (25 December) is not clear. While Shevchuk has shown that he is able to capitalise on the public dissatisfaction in Transnistria resulting from the dramatic economic situation and the lawlessness and corruption in the government, Kaminski is backed financially by Sheriff and can count on support from part of Smirnov's conservative electorate and also from the state apparatus.
- Whatever the final outcome of the election, the removal of Smirnov from power will reinforce Russian influence in Transnistria. Smirnov, owing to his long rule in Tiraspol and skilful playing on the differences within Russian government structures, developed a

certain degree of autonomy in dealings with the Kremlin. Over the past few years, he blocked the Russian project for resolving the conflict between Chisinau and Tiraspol, aiming at maintaining total independence from Moldova. In turn, neither Shevchuk, nor Kaminski will be able to conduct a policy for resolving the conflict that will be autonomous from Moscow.

- The removal of Smirnov from power is opening up the opportunity for Moscow to settle the Transnistrian conflict according to rules which would guarantee Russian domination in the whole of Moldova. The pro-European government coalition in Chisinau is unlikely to elect a president (the deadline for which is 16 January 2012), which will bring about the need to hold early parliamentary elections. The elections are likely to be won by pro-Russian parties, which have declared their readiness to sign an agreement with Tiraspol on conditions similar to those proposed by Russia in the 'Kozak Plan' in 2003 (a federalisation of Moldova and the granting of the right to veto all vital issues to Transnistria).