

Russia is pushing for a change of power in Transnistria

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In connection with the presidential elections in Transnistria planned for 11 December, Moscow is pushing for the incumbent Igor Smirnov to withdraw his candidacy. The idea that he should give up was directly expressed on 13 October by the head of Russian Presidential Administration Sergei Naryshkin. A campaign against Smirnov is also being waged in the Russian media, popular in Transnistria. On 28 October, the Russian Investigation Committee initiated a criminal case against Smirnov's son Oleg, accusing him of misappropriating grants from Moscow; on 7 November, a spokesman for the Committee announced that Oleg would be brought before a hearing by force.

Meanwhile, Moscow's favoured candidate in the election is Anatoly Kaminsky, the current speaker of parliament and head of its largest party, *Obnovlenie* (Renewal). He has received support both symbolic (in the form of a letter of greeting from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and an invitation to United Russia's party congress) and financial; in September the first tranche (100 million roubles) of a loan of 300 million roubles was put at the disposal of parliament, which is controlled by Kaminsky's party.

Commentary

- Russia's activities are aimed at a change of power in Transnistria. Moscow wants to increase its control over the para-state, which is its instrument for keeping Moldova as a whole permanently dependent on Russia.
- Smirnov, who has ruled Transnistria for 20 years, has demonstrated his autonomy from the Kremlin's policy towards the region. His tough stance on maintaining Transnistria's independence, and his refusal to negotiate with Chisinau on the status of the region, has impeded the Kremlin's use of Transnistria as an instrument of its influence on Moldova. Moscow wants to step up negotiations on settling the conflict, in which it will seek to reintegrate Transnistria with Moldova on conditions which will give Russia the power to blockade Chisinau's pro-European course.
- Moscow wants Transnistria to be ruled by a politician who can overcome the para-state's internal difficulties. The deep political conflict which has come to light in recent years has shown that Smirnov has ceased to function as a factor which can integrate the ruling elites of Transnistria. He has not coped well with the deepening economic problems. The Kremlin hopes that a new team will overcome the crisis, which would

allow the size of Russian subsidies to be reduced.

- Russia has not yet had the final say in influencing the presidential elections in Transnistria. The Kremlin will continue to increase pressure on Smirnov; however, it will be difficult to strike at him in such a way so as not to destabilise Transnistria, which would not be in Russia's interest. So it cannot be ruled out that, despite the Kremlin's wishes, Smirnov will decide to participate in the elections, which he would almost certainly win. This would be a defeat for Moscow, and would impede its use of Transnistria as a tool to inhibit Moldova's pro-European course. However, this would not mean that Moscow would give up its continued support for Transnistria, much less that Transnistria would give up its pro-Russian orientation.