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Russia is playing harder for Moldova

Kamil Całus, Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga

During his talks with Barack Obama on 28/29 March and with Angela Merkel on 31 March President Vladimir Putin spoke of the alleged economic and transport blockade of Transnistria resulting from actions taken by Chisinau and Kyiv, and emphasised the need to find a "fair and comprehensive" solution to the problems posed by this breakaway republic. In turn, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, following the conversation between Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry, announced on 30 March that the two parties had agreed that it was necessary to grant Transnistria special status as part of the single, sovereign and neutral Moldovan state. International formal talks concerning the Transnistrian issue are planned to continue on 10–11 April as part of the 5+2 format (Russia, the USA, the OSCE, the EU and Ukraine plus Moldova and Transnistria). Simultaneously, Moscow has taken action to strengthen separatist tendencies in the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia, a pro-Russian region of Moldova which forms around 5% of the country's territory. 98% of Gagauzia's residents expressed their support for Moldova to be integrated into the Customs Union on 2 February in a referendum rejected by Chisinau. On 25 March, delegates representing the Gagauzian government travelled to Moscow to meet Russia's most senior officials, including Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. This region has been recently granted economic privileges which bypass relations between Moscow and Chisinau. These privileges include the exclusion of Gagauzian wines from the embargo imposed on wine from Moldova and a promise of preferential prices for Russian gas.

Commentary

- The alleged economic and transport blockade of Transnistria to which top Russian officials have been referring recently is merely a propaganda tool. In the first two months of 2014 when, according to Transnistrian government's claims the blockade was already in place, the region's exports increased by 47%, and imports by 4%. In turn the rate of rejected entry from Transnistria to Ukraine in March was as low as 0.12%.
- By fomenting separatism in Moldova's regions and raising the issue of their status, Russia wants to prevent Moldova from signing an Association Agreement with the EU scheduled for May. The most recent initiatives indicate that Moscow wants to force Moldova to transform itself into a federation with Transnistria, and to broaden the special status of Gagauzia. If talks on changing the country's political system commence, Moscow could counteract Moldova's integration with the EU; this being one of its primary

goals in relations with Chisinau. These moves will continue, even if the Association Agreement is signed. Moscow will fuel separatism temporarily as a tool against the present pro-European government in the context of the upcoming parliamentary election, scheduled for November.

- Raising the issue of how to determine the status of Transnistria is an instrument of pressure not only on Moldova but also on Ukraine and the West. This is intended to make them more willing to accept the Russian stance on the geopolitical order in this region. Russia has thus gained another possibility to employ blackmail: the possibility that the talks could fail will entail the need for Russia to take more decisive action to remove the alleged blockade of the breakaway republic, potentially by annexing Transnistria or intervening militarily.
- Pressure from Russia, including the threat of Moldova losing Transnistria, will certainly not convince the Moldovan government to decide against signing the Association Agreement. The government in Chisinau will firmly reject the pressure to federalise the country, since federalisation would be contrary to its interests and is viewed as a tool which would facilitate Moscow to retain long-term influence over Moldova.