

Moldova is increasing the pressure on Transnistria

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Oleg Serebrian, the deputy prime minister for the reintegration of Moldova, and Vitaly Ignatiev, the self-proclaimed minister of foreign affairs of Transnistria, met on 16 January. The meeting was aimed at addressing the growing tension between Chişinău and Tiraspol in recent days caused by the cancellation of customs duty exemptions for Transnistrian entities as of 1 January, but it did not lead to any binding conclusions. The decision to withdraw the exemptions met with a sharp reaction from Tiraspol. Vadim Krasnoselsky, the so-called president of Transnistria, called it a “path of escalation”, appealed for the parties to “get off the path of aggression” and threatened that retaliatory measures would be taken.

Commentary

- Until the end of 2023, companies operating in Transnistria were exempt from the obligation to pay import and export duties to the Moldovan budget for goods imported into the region and exported outside Moldova (they paid the duties to the Transnistrian treasury, in accordance with local regulations). Chişinău’s decision to end this is groundbreaking, and fits in with the increasing assertiveness which the Moldovan government has demonstrated in its contacts with separatist Transnistria in recent months. In August 2023, for the first time in history, Chişinău imposed the obligation to pay a (symbolic) fee for carrying out customs procedures on Transnistrian companies, and in November of the same year it announced that it would deprive them of some tax breaks. According to the government’s logic, these moves were intended to guarantee equal rules for all enterprises operating in the country (Moldovan companies were not eligible for these tax breaks). However, the imposition of the tariffs does not appear to be part of a broader reintegration strategy.
- Moscow (the protector of Transnistria) and Tiraspol will exploit Chişinău’s moves for their own propaganda purposes. They will argue that the pro-Western Moldovan government is seeking to escalate tension. On 12 January, the leaders of the separatist region claimed that groups of saboteurs were being prepared in Moldova to launch terrorist attacks on Transnistria. This poses the risk that simulated ‘sabotage attacks’ might be repeated in Transnistria in the coming months, similar to those in April 2022, when a radio tower was damaged due to an explosion in the village of Maiac and the building of the security ministry was attacked with a grenade launcher, amongst other incidents. Such acts would be intended not only to put pressure on Chişinău, but also to intimidate Moldovan public opinion and turn it against the incumbent government, something which is particularly important in the face of the presidential elections which will be held in late October or early November this year.

- Chişinău's firm stance on Transnistria is an effect of the new political and economic situation caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Previously, Moldova had refrained from exerting too much pressure (especially economic or energy pressure) on Tiraspol because it was afraid of retaliation from Moscow. However, since 24 February 2022, the government has made a number of groundbreaking decisions, including securing the country's independence from Russian gas supplies and synchronising its electricity grid with that of Europe. This has deprived the Kremlin of some of its instruments for putting pressure on Chişinău, and provoked the Moldovan government to take more assertive steps towards Tiraspol (for more on this, see '[Transnistria in the new international reality](#)').