

# Victor Chirila: Why do we need Transnistria? Info-Prim Neo. 21.12.2011.

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The question of the title is undoubtedly challenging for an increasingly indifferent society towards the Transnistrian problem. According to the latest barometer of public opinion (BPO) from November 2011, the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict is No. 1 priority only for 1% of the country's population and is on the 8th place among the most important problems to be solved in the Republic of Moldova. On the other hand, the consensus and solidarity of political class on the provisions of the special legal status of the Transnistrian region, as defined by the Law No. 173 from 22 July 2005, are no longer certain.

After more than five years, on November 30 – December 1, in Vilnius, was held the first round of negotiations in the "5 + 2" format. The Vilnius meeting did not produce remarkable results, on the contrary, they have revealed, one more time, the entirely opposite positions of Chisinau and Tiraspol on the negotiations final goal. "Presidential elections" in the Transnistrian region could speed up developments at the table of negotiations. The results of the first tour seem to indicate the political sunset of Igor Smirnov and the rise to the power of a new leader favored not only by Moscow, but also by main European capitals, including Brussels.

Where is Russia rushing to get to after 20 years?

Igor Smirnov's removal will certainly be a positive factor, however we must not get too excited. Changing the leader does not necessarily mean changing the regime. Moscow pressures on Smirnov and on his clan reveals Russia's haste to make superficial changes, which would hide the essence of the authoritarian and anti-European regime in Tiraspol. Where does Russia hurry to after the 20 years of status-quo? Did the Russian geopolitical priorities change in our region? Is Russia concerned about the negotiations between Chisinau and Brussels regarding political association and economic integration? These are the questions that we should all think about and, particularly, our politicians.

The Republic of Moldova also needs to move forward, but carefully, without endangering its supreme goal: European integration accompanied by its economic, social and political modernization, using the models of the EU Member States. Negotiating without delay a special status for the Transnistrian region is of course an imperative. At the same time, not less important, is to make sure that the future special status will benefit a democratic Transnistria and in no case an anti-European one. It is neither an easy task, nor an impossible one, if, of course, we will avoid a new Kozak Memorandum, even with an European face, and we will be able to promote, together with our European partners, a genuine opening of the Transnistrian region to dialogue, joint projects, democratic and economic reforms.

Although they are apathetic, most citizens of the Republic of Moldova are not subscribing to the idea of abandoning the Transnistrian region. Yet, reintegration will have financial and socio-economic costs, which may affect the welfare of each of us. Therefore we must frankly answer the question: why do we need the Transnistrian region? The question does not aim to reason the potential surrender of the region, but rather to help us to understand better the stakes of our sacrifices, as well as the challenges of reintegration.

Moldova cannot afford reintegration by itself

At present, the obvious costs of reintegration are worth at least 3 billion USD, which are nothing but gas debts accumulated by Tiraspol for 20 years. In the case Republic of Moldova will agree to pay to Gazprom Tiraspol's gas debts, Moldovas public debt per capita will exceed 1100 USD.

Now, the public debt for each Moldovan is estimated at 514 USD in 2012.

Since 2006, 136 thousand pensioners on the left bank of the Dniester have received from the Russian Federation a supplement of 15 USD to their basic pension. In the period 2007-2011, the total volume of humanitarian assistance provided by Russia for the payment of pensions was around 75 million USD. If Tiraspol would pay pensions and salaries only from its own resources without loans and humanitarian aid from the outside, the salaries of budgetary employees would decrease twice, and pensions by 40%. In addition, payments for public utilities would increase at least twice, if the consumed natural gas would be paid at its real price. According to the high ranking representatives of the Transnistria administration, the situation may further deteriorate in 2012. The budget deficit of the region for next year stands at 49% and the budget deficit of the local pension fund constitutes 46%. Clearly, the reintegration of the region will require Moldovan Government to assume a whole range of social responsibilities, including payment of pensions for those 136 thousand pensioners.

Currently, natural gas in the region is sold at a price of 92 USD per 1,000 cubic meters, while the price on the right bank of Dniester is 400 USD per 1,000 cubic meters. Because of this price discrepancy, the major Transnistrian industrial enterprises that are technologically outdated and energy inefficient can export their products at competitive prices. Reintegration of the region in the Republic of Moldova will put an end to this artificial advantage. Transnistrian enterprises will have to comply with the rules imposed by the market economy and the World Trade Organization (WTO) and, of course, they will have to purchase natural gas at the price agreed by Gazprom and Moldovan Government, which is going to be no less than 400 USD per 1,000 cubic meters. Without the subsidy for purchasing natural gas, the Transnistrian enterprises are likely to stop functioning, and this will involve massive layoffs of workers, increase of the unemployment rates and possible social convulsions with political implications. Moldovan Government will have to either subsidize the price of natural gas for Transnistrian enterprises, which would breach the WTO rules, or negotiate an advantageous price with Gazprom, which is impossible without economic and political concession.

It is well known that the current Transnistrian regime is heavily militarized. The regime of the so called "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic" has at its disposal the army and the Ministry of Defense"; Ministry of State Security" with the border guard troops, Cossacks and special operations battalion Delta"; and Ministry of Internal Affairs" with special operations brigade Dniester". Overall, Transnistrian regime has over 20 thousands of military and paramilitary troops. Reintegration of the region without its demilitarization, will jeopardize the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. In order to avoid those dangers, the process of reintegration must be accompanied by reconversion of the Transnistrian enterprises, discharge of the majority of military and paramilitary troops, retirement and/or re-specialization of ex-officers. These changes will require an enormous financial effort of several hundred million US dollars, which the Republic of Moldova cannot afford by itself, unless at the expense of our well-being that is already very wobbly.

Despite the democratic appearances of the recent presidential elections", the Tiraspol regime is authoritarian, deeply corrupt and undemocratic. The cases of Vardanean and Cazac revealed plentifully the regimes total lack of respect for basic human rights. Absolute majority of the local media are strictly censored and subordinated to the official ideology of the regime, which portray the Republic of Moldova as a neighboring country and an aggressor. Local opposition and civil society are strictly controlled by the Ministry for State Security", which plays the role of political police and maintains the atmosphere of fear and docile obedience to the regime.

Abandoning Transnistria is possible in theory, yet not in practice

Why would we need such a region, tremendously indebted, economically and socially bankrupted, authoritarian, heavily militarized and anti-European? Do we have to abandon it? It may be possible in theory, but in reality? Those who support this alternative must take into account a

series of downside risks that cannot be neglected. First of all, giving up the Transnistrian region that constitutes 12% of the territory of the Republic of Moldova would have to be based on a solid and plausible argument. It does not suffice to declare that voluntarily, unilaterally and without anyone's pressure we give up the Transnistrian region. Such a decision must have a legal justification based on international law. Frankly, it is very difficult to imagine an honorable and credible explanation, if such a decision would be taken. What could we say to the international community, that we are tired, that we cannot settle this issue, that Transnistria is a burden on our way towards the EU, that we wish to join NATO, that we wish to unite with Romania, etc.? All these explanations would be interpreted, rather as lamentations of a failed state, irresponsible and unable to solve its own security problems and even worse, transfers them to others.

Instead, it is very easy to guess the reaction of the Tiraspol regime in case the Republic of Moldova would give up the Transnistrian region unilaterally. In order to obtain international recognition of the newly formed Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic", they will not hesitate to refer to one of the fundamental principles of the international law, the right to self-determination. The eventual recognition of the independence of Transnistria, as well as by the Republic of Moldova, will be made specifically on the basis of the aforementioned principle, regardless of our interpretations and objections. By accepting the principle of self-determination, Chisinau will inevitably recognize also the existence of a new identity on the left bank of the Nistru River, the "Transnistrian Moldovans" that will not hesitate to declare themselves the "true heirs of the medieval Moldavian State".

The creation of a new Moldovan" state on the basis of the right to self-determination, will produce a legal precedent in the Community of Independent States, worthy to be followed" by Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and, why not, by the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. Will our neighbors and GUAM partners, be delighted with this gift"? It is unlikely. On the contrary, they will be really upset, especially Ukraine.

We could assume also that Tiraspol will not waver to request either to unite with the Russian Federation or to join the Customs Union Russia-Belorussia-Kazakhstan, Eurasian Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (OTSC), composed of Russia, Belorussia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The inclusion of the new state within Russia or its membership to the above-mentioned organizations will change the geopolitical context in our region, strengthening the geostrategic positions of the Russian Federation at the expense of our Western partners. As a member of the OTSC, Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic" will become the strategic outpost of Moscow interests in Eastern Europe.

In the conditions when Russia suspended its participation to the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, Moscow will be free to send on the left bank of Dniester River a much bigger and better equipped military contingent, that would ensure the protection of airspace and the Eastern border of the OTSC. Furthermore, in case the Russian-American cooperation on missile defense will fail, Russia will be able to install here, unhindered by anyone, Iskander missile complex, to counter the American missile defense shield in Europe. These hypothetical developments could jeopardize not only the security of the Republic of Moldova, but also the security of our neighbors, as well as NATO and EU partners.

We'll be Europe's pariah

What would we do, if we find ourselves in such a situation? Will we request NATO membership? We will unite with Romania? What will be our moral right to request protection from the North Atlantic Alliance, after behaving irresponsibly by creating major challenges to the safety of NATO members? No one will pay attention to us. We will be a pariah of Europe. As concerning unification with Romania, is it an achievable solution in the current context when 60.5% of Moldovans consider that Russia should be the main strategic partner of Moldova, and, at the same time, only 4% consider that Romania must play this role? It is almost impossible to imagine.

Instead, the massive presence și political, military and economic – of the Russian Federation on the left side of Dniester will encourage even more pro-Russian sentiments and strengthen pro-Russian parties on the right bank. Furthermore, Moldovas membership to Customs Union of Russia-Belorussia-Kazakhstan, Eurasian Union and OTSC, will no longer be speculative alternatives to European integration, but practical options. By the way, according to the latest barometer of public opinion, 45.6% of Moldovans favor Republic of Moldova joining the Customs Union of Russia-Belorussia-Kazakhstan. No comment.

Developments described above are hypothetical, but not unlikely. They show us how limited our choices are. In fact, the only realistic option and, probably, the most difficult one is the reintegration of the region with Moldova. Irrespective of our wishes, we have to do it, if we want to have a mature, modern and respected state. Yet, above all, we need a Transnistrian region which is democratic, prosperous and open to the world. Only such a Transnistria deserves our effort and sacrifice. Otherwise, it is too hazardous to rush.

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