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Renewal of Negotiations on Resolving the Transnistria Conflict

Jakub Pieńkowski

On 27–28 November, after a year and a half break, international talks on a resolution to the Transnistria conflict took place in Vienna. They were preceded by the signing of technical agreements facilitating everyday life for the inhabitants of the region which includes the Republic of Moldova and separatist Transnistria. Although the agreements do not guarantee a political settlement is forthcoming, their implementation may build trust between the parties. At the same time, Russia can use them to demonstrate it is an effective guarantor of peace in the post-Soviet area.

Transnistria is internationally unrecognised but is in fact a Russian political, economic, and military protectorate. Moscow's long-term goal is not to annex Transnistria but to achieve a kind of reintegration that ensures Russian control over a united Moldova. For now, Russia uses Transnistria as an instrument to pressure Moldova. The only official forum for peace negotiations is the "5+2" format, which includes Moldova and Transnistria as the belligerents, Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE as mediators, and the European Union and the United States as observers.

Technical Agreements. Talks on the political status of Transnistria have been at an impasse since 2003. Then, under pressure from the U.S. and the EU, Chişinău rejected the so-called "Kozak memorandum," a Russian plan for the federalisation of Moldova, which would have led to paralysis of the central state authorities through the autonomy of Transnistria and Gagauzia. In 2014, the Moldovan government signed an Association Agreement with the EU, which reduced the Russian and Transnistrian readiness to negotiate further. In 2016, Germany's chairmanship of the OSCE led to the "5+2" format after a two-year break in the negotiations. Lacking prospects for a political agreement, in June 2016 it was agreed that Moldova and Transnistria would engage in direct talks to solve technical issues that hinder the daily life of their residents. It was also hoped the negotiations on these matters would increase the level of trust between Chişinău and Tiraspol. Although consensus on the issues was expected within six weeks, by then only the secondary aspect of hydrometeorological cooperation had been agreed. Further talks only floundered after Moldova requested solving the problems symmetrically, four on each side.

The signing of agreements on the most serious technical matters in a dozen years was possible because of Russian pressure on Tiraspol to withdraw on some issues. On 18 November, Prime Minister of Moldova Pavel Filip and President of Transnistria Vadim Krasnoselsky inaugurated a bridge over the Dniester on the international M14 Chisinau-Odessa roadway. It had been destroyed in 1992 and was rebuilt in 2002, but it had not been open to traffic because of objections from Tiraspol. On 25 November, Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration Gheorghe Bălan and Transnistrian Minister for Foreign Affairs Vitaly Ignatiev signed four agreements. Farmers from seven villages situated on the left bank of the Dniester and under Moldovan jurisdiction would have access their fields cut off by the M4 and controlled by Tiraspol. Schools subordinated to the Moldovan Ministry of Education but located in Transnistria would operate freely. These schools teach

in Romanian written in the Latin alphabet. Repeatedly they had been subject to repressions in Transnistria, which requires that the Romanian language be written in Cyrillic and called Moldovan. Also, Moldova would certify diplomas from the university in Tiraspol, which would allow Transnistrian students to participate in international exchanges. Telephone connections between both banks of the Dniester also would be restored and the Transnistrian mobile operator would receive a Moldovan concession.

Reactivation of the “5+2” Negotiations. Mechanisms guaranteeing the implementation of the technical agreements were not included, which means that this will depend on both parties’ goodwill, but Austria, which chairs the OSCE this year, conditioned the next “5+2” meeting on resolving the technical issues. In its capacity as chair, Austria eventually recognised the progress as significant and called the parties to negotiations in Vienna. Conclusions of the meeting indicate significant rapprochement of the parties to the conflict and willingness to resolve additional problems, including the goal of concluding a deal by February 2018 on the issue of cars with Transnistrian number plates so they can travel abroad.

The current aim of Russia’s involvement in the talks on the conflict is to increase Tiraspol’s financial self-sufficiency. With Russia’s budget affected by the EU and U.S. sanctions, Moscow is looking for savings, and eyeing its support for Transnistria of up to \$1 billion a year. Meanwhile, the Transnistrian economy is in recession. In the last three years, its GDP has decreased by 7%. In 2016, its budget deficit was about 10% of GDP, and Krasnoselsky’s efforts in Moscow to obtain \$130 million to cover the gap, even as a credit, were ineffective. The opening of the bridge on the M14 as well as the expectation of international road traffic could significantly contribute to a revival of the Transnistrian economy, especially since 80% of its exports goes to Moldova and the EU.

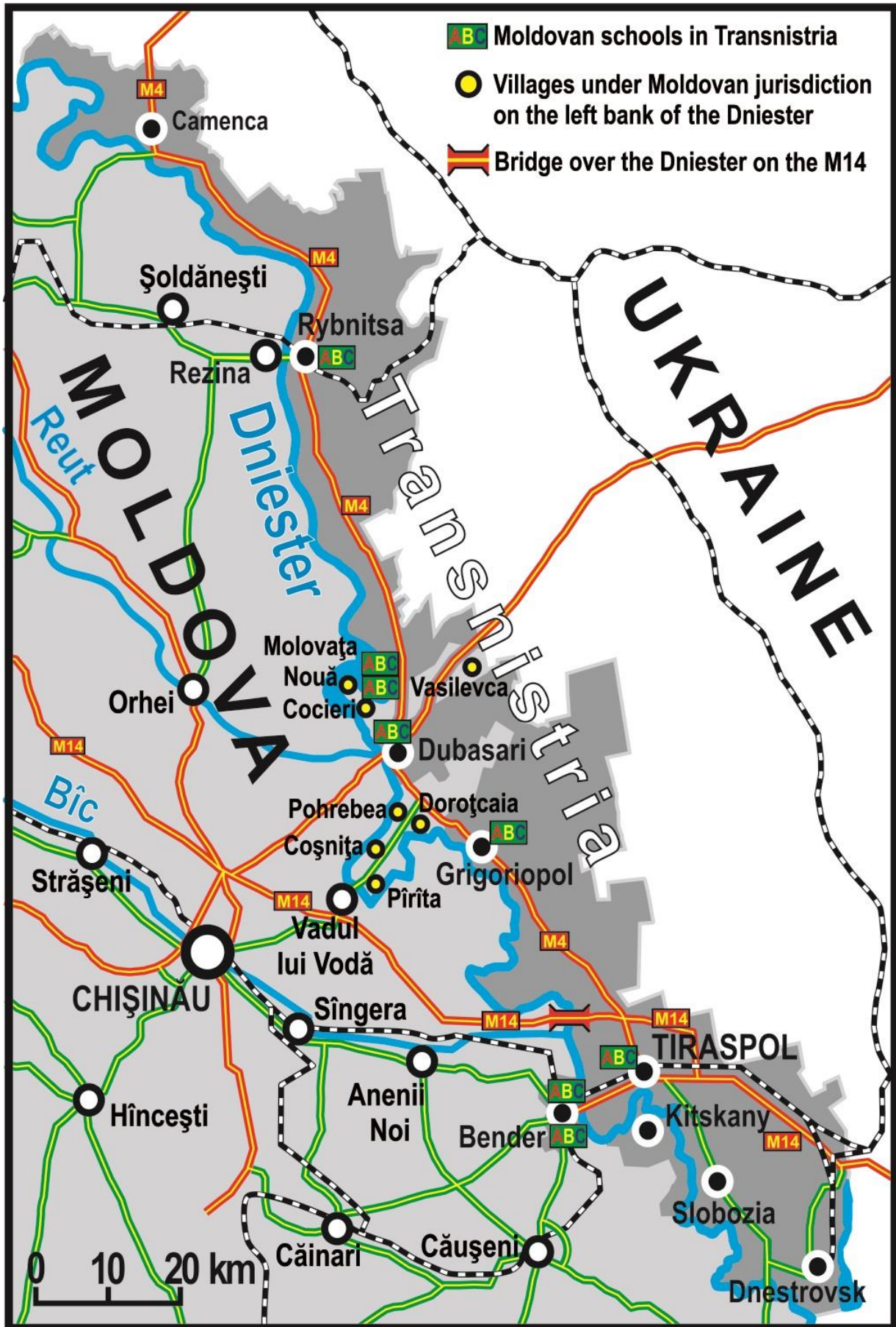
Impossible Reintegration. The revival of the “5+2” talks in the short term will not translate into the reintegration of Transnistria into Moldova. The technical agreements are presented by Transnistria only as a preview of the normalisation of relations with Moldova. It rejects the possibility of returning under the control of the authorities in Chişinău, citing the results of the 2006 referendum in which 97% of Transnistrian inhabitants favoured independence and rapprochement with Russia. This position was unequivocally confirmed in March 2017 by Krasnoselsky after meeting with Igor Dodon, the pro-Russia president of Moldova, who promised federalisation of the state and reintegration of Transnistria, though he does not have any prerogative in the matter.

Moreover, the technical agreements deprive President Dodon of a monopoly on raising the issue of reintegration. The government of the Democratic Party, led by oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, is supposedly the only political force capable of solving citizens’ problems in the Transnistria region. This may be important during the parliamentary elections in autumn 2018, but Democrats who portray themselves as the only guarantors of Moldova’s pro-European course are not really interested in near-term reintegration. Confirmation of this view is found in the government’s treatment of writing a plan for settlement of the conflict. Prime Minister Filip has announced this plan, called “Vision,” will be written soon. Its aim is to provide Moldova’s EU partners assurance that the government has not given up on reintegration. In practice, the goal is also to transfer the responsibility for rejecting this plan to Tiraspol and its patron Moscow because the conditions would be unacceptable. The “Vision” would grant autonomy to Transnistria within a unified Moldova. However, the level of its autonomy would be lower than that granted to Gagauzia, which is much smaller than Transnistria. The plan would require the removal of Russian troops from Transnistria and would replace them with an international civilian mission. What is more, Romanian with a Latin alphabet would become the official language in Transnistria, not the version written in Cyrillic and called “Moldovan.”

Conclusions. The resumption of the “5+2” negotiations does not mean an acceleration of the reintegration of Transnistria into Moldova because both parties really are not interested in it. However, the technical agreements may increase the level of trust between Chişinău and Tiraspol, which would reduce the tensions and risk of conflict. The agreements were achieved because they do not limit Russia’s influence in Transnistria and can improve its economic situation, which should reduce costs to the Russian budget.

Thus, the resumption of negotiations is a diplomatic success for Russia, because the “5+2” format is one of only a few tools that can make it a credible guarantor of peace in the post-Soviet area. Moscow wanted to achieve its goals before the end of the Austrian chairmanship of the OSCE because the authorities of that country are more favourably disposed towards Russia than most of its EU partners. The dedication of Sebastian Kurz, then-foreign minister and now the new Austrian chancellor, to the success of the “5+2” negotiations is aimed at increasing the willingness of the new government in Vienna to ease the EU sanctions against Russia.

In addition, Russia—which in fact is a belligerent in the Transnistrian conflict—applies similar strategies to increase its influence by causing and participating in resolving other disputes. This can be found in Russia’s commitment to talks in the Normandy format on Donbas (Ukraine), as well as its draft UN resolution filed in September calling for the deployment of a peacekeeping mission to the line between the separatists and Ukraine, which in practice would strengthen the division and lead to freezing the conflict.



Source: Jakub Pieńkowski.