

## **RUSSIA-WEST STANDOFF IN TRANSNISTRIA: OVERALL POST-SOVIET ORDER AT STAKE**

*by Vladimir Socor*

Russia has chosen Transnistria as the scene of an unprecedented, head-on confrontation with the European Union. Moscow wants to force a reversal of the border and trade regulations corresponding to international law and norms that were introduced on March 3 on the Ukraine-Moldova border. The new regulations aim to close Europe's largest black hole, the 460-kilometer Transnistria segment of that border. The EU had insisted that Ukraine cooperate with that move and is monitoring its implementation through its recently deployed EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM). The EU regards this initiative as an early, crucial test of its European Neighborhood Policy and, more broadly, of its ability to sustain a common foreign and security policy, at least on the soft-security issue of border management, which the EU touts as one of its special vocations. The United States is firmly supporting this EU initiative.

Moscow is now launching countermeasures to deny the EU any such first success in the "post-Soviet space," even as the Kremlin openly seeks to restore a sphere of predominance throughout that space. Russia seeks decision-making rights (both directly and through its Transnistria proxies) on a border that is not Russia's border. This is one large stake in Moscow's challenge to Brussels in Transnistria.

By the same token, Russia strives to preserve its own model of post-Soviet conflict management, designed to keep the conflicts frozen and the secessionist leaderships thriving, thanks in part to lawless borders under secessionist control. Russia is acutely aware that this model can now unravel through EU-inspired and EU-monitored border management by Ukraine and Moldova in Transnistria. The Kremlin's collateral goal is to exploit the political struggle in Ukraine (which will continue unabated after the March 26 parliamentary elections) by inducing President Viktor Yushchenko to yield again to Russia over this issue.

From the Kremlin's perspective, Moldova is only a minor target in this campaign. This pro-West country has now become the scene of a Russia-EU contest over the international order in the EU's immediate neighborhood. Russia's Ambassador to Moldova, Nikolai Ryabov, explicitly challenged the West in a March 20 news conference in which he claimed special rights for Russia in Moldova and the "post-Soviet space" generally:

"Russia by virtue of its great-power status has legitimate, indisputable interests in the post-Soviet space as guarantor of stability. Russia has a legitimate right to reassert these interests and to demand through any means that they be observed. The intervention of the EU or the United States in support of Moldovan-Ukrainian actions on the border cannot cause Russia to renounce its interests and its foreign policy. The new customs regime on that border infringes directly on Russia's legitimate interests. The economic blockade is a planned political action by Chisinau and Kyiv and some Western

policymakers . . . Chisinau and the West are trying to revise the agreements signed earlier during the negotiating process" (a reference to the "federalization" plan and similar documents).

Ryabov's reference to Russian business enterprises in Transnistria suffering from a "blockade" seems an added excuse for asserting Russian state "interests" there. In fact, Russian business has unlawfully "privatized" several enterprises there in recent years.

Ryabov jibed at the "United States, which only yesterday found Moldova on the map after a long search" and at "irresponsible European bureaucratic headquarters who could not realize the potential consequences of their steps." And he dismissed the European Parliament's March 17 resolution, which demands the withdrawal of Russian weaponry and troops from Moldova, by commenting in stride that the Russian military only keeps tractors and graders there (Basapres, Infotag, Interfax, March 20). The Moldovan government has forwarded to the Russian government the audio and video recordings of Ryabov's remarks, requesting explanations.

Moscow's prescriptions -- as Ryabov repeated them in his press conference -- are:

- a) Officially suspending the new customs and border regime (Kyiv is already backing down tacitly), thus in practice reverting to the situation that prevailed from 1992 to March 3, 2006;
- b) Convening a "crisis conference," preferably in Moscow, with "all interested parties" to agree on a permanent regime for Transnistria's export-import operations, under "guarantees" from Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE, and possibly even from the EU, United States, and Moldova if these play along with Moscow;
- c) Re-launching the "negotiating process" based on Russia's September 2005 plan (unacceptable to the Western participants and Moldova, accepted by Tiraspol and Kyiv); and observing the 1997 Primakov Memorandum (which called for a "common state" of two co-equal sides, Moldova and Transnistria, and "authorized" Transnistria to conduct its own foreign economic relations).

On March 23 amid heavy publicity, a truck convoy from Russia's Ministry of Emergencies set out for Transnistria, carrying humanitarian supplies collected at the initiative of Russia's Duma, the ruling United Russia party, and Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. The convoy should reach the Ukraine-Moldova border on March 25 and show on live television how Russian uniformed personnel break Ukraine's alleged "blockade" and enter Transnistria as benefactors. The timing seems calculated for immediate impact on Ukraine's March 26 parliamentary elections. The Party of Regions and other pro-Russia groups have attacked Yushchenko for supporting the customs and border regime that was introduced on March 3. Tiraspol is also attacking Yushchenko scurrilously, openly endorsing Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions in the elections.

Those critics have chosen not to notice that the Ukrainian president began backtracking

on the March 3 move only ten days later; and his National Security and Defense Council, Customs Service, and parts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began punching holes in the new regime by March 16. The only official who seems to hold firm is Prime Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov, as does the Orange opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko. As of March 22, road transport was entering Transnistria freely from Ukraine, without being de-toured to Moldovan customs checkpoints on the way to Transnistrian-controlled territory. Quantities recorded at checkpoints clearly exceed Transnistria's consumption requirements, indicating a resumption of the familiar practice of smuggling the goods back into Ukraine or via Ukraine to other destinations.

The new regulations' aspect that seems to hold is the requirement for Moldovan customs clearance of exports from Transnistria to or via Ukraine. The Ukrainian customs enforce that rule. Tiraspol authorities fear losing control of tax revenue and banking transactions if Transnistria-based companies register with Chisinau in order to obtain Moldovan customs clearance. Moreover, Tiraspol authorities are being hit by the stop to their outright smuggling activities (those that did not go through any customs in the first place). Consequently, Tiraspol authorities stage their "blockade" spectacle to discourage companies from registering with Chisinau, instigate pro-Russia parties in Ukraine to attack the authorities in the electoral campaign, and help Moscow to press for rolling back the EU from this border.

(Interfax-Ukraine, Channel Five TV [Kyiv], Moldpres, March 20-23; see *EDM*, March 8, 9, 10, 23)

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