

Reported Transnistria deal is unlikely

Oxford Analytica, Friday, April 27 2007

EVENT: The EU special representative in Moldova had an emergency meeting with President Vladimir Voronin on April 25 over the secret deal reportedly struck with Russia over Transnistria.

SIGNIFICANCE: A deal between Moscow, Chisinau and Tiraspol would be embarrassing for Moldova's relationships with the four other parties to the '5+2' discussions: the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Ukraine, the EU and United States. After pressing hard last year for increased Western involvement, it would be surprising if Moldova now cut these parties out of negotiations.

ANALYSIS:

Western diplomats are in a frenzy over rumours of a settlement between Moscow and Chisinau over the secessionist region of Transnistria (see MOLDOVA: Tiraspol line hardens ahead of negotiations - December 21, 2006). The rumours were sparked when Munich-based analyst Vladimir Socor leaked details, which were then picked up by The Economist newspaper:

The EU's special representative in Moldova, Kalman Mizsei, flew to Moscow over the weekend, but was unable to confirm the agreement.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana raised the subject with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in a meeting in Luxembourg on April 23.

US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Kramer discussed Transnistria with President Vladimir Voronin in Chisinau on April 26.

However, no one has been able to confirm the details of the settlement, how serious the discussion is or what the outcome will be. A spokesperson from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission to Moldova could only say that the OSCE had not seen an agreement, and therefore could not comment on it. Voronin assured Kramer yesterday that no "written" plan had been received from the Russians, and Kramer told journalists afterwards that he had received no indication of a plan during a visit to Moscow three weeks ago, although he admitted that this did not rule out its existence.

Reported details. The settlement is said to include:

Voronin and Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov signing a political agreement; dissolving the legislatures on both sides followed by new elections (as early as November, according to Moldovan news agency Infotag); 20% of seats in the new Moldovan parliament, the post of deputy minister in every ministry and the first deputy premiership set aside for representatives from Transnistria (reports differ here); firm guarantees of Moldova's neutrality; and the Russian military's continued presence for at least two-three years, or until the parties deem the situation stable enough for withdrawal. Doubtful elements. It is difficult to discern how serious talk of such a settlement is. Some sources treat the discussions as though they are close to approval. However, according to Infotag, a closed-door meeting was held two weeks ago between Voronin and several opposition leaders, where the proposals were characterised as draft documents.

Many aspects of the rumoured settlement are not new. They are very close to the 2003 'Kozak Memorandum', which Voronin rejected after large protests in Chisinau in the days following its publication.

While a couple of EU and OSCE diplomats have confirmed the existence of a proposal, there are several who doubt whether this amounts to a settlement:

At least one EU official has said it was difficult to believe that such a strongly pro-Russian deal exists.

The Transnistrian reaction has also been confused. Returning from Moscow, Transnistrian official Valery Litkai said that he had not been told about a settlement, and that the rumours were an attempt by Voronin to influence next month's local elections.

Practical problems. The frantic EU response suggests that diplomats are taking the reports seriously. However, it is difficult to see how the settlement would be implemented:

In all the agreements proposed by Russia, including this one, Transnistria would have a veto over major state decisions. This might block several of the current government's policy objectives, including greater EU integration.

Reintegrating with Transnistria would mean dealing with the rampant cronyism and corruption in the Smirnov regime.

There is some doubt whether the Transnistrian government, which has increasingly pushed for independence, is amenable to joining a unified government.

Setting up the new parliament would require amending Moldova's constitution, but Voronin's Communist Party is well short of the necessary two-thirds majority. It is unlikely that the Communists' coalition partners, the pro-Romanian Christian Democrats, would go along with a proposal that allows Russian peacekeepers to stay in Moldova and places closer relations with the EU on hold.

Socor has suggested that Voronin might dismiss the current government and instruct the Communist majority to refrain from confirming a new government or passing legislation for three months. He might then dissolve parliament and see to the election of a new parliament that would accept the necessary changes. However, such a move is hardly consistent with Voronin's record of pragmatism.

Timing. Several explanations have been suggested why Russia wants a deal now:

Russia may be using Transnistria to establish itself as a viable and trusted international mediator, with President Vladimir Putin wanting to leave office with a reputation as an international peacemaker.

Russia may also be attempting to establish a model that can influence a Kosovo settlement (see GEORGIA/RUSSIA/UN: Simmering conflicts may escalate - April 16, 2007). Putin has suggested several times that the situations in Kosovo and Transnistria are comparable. An agreement on Transnistria might bolster Russia's case against independence for Kosovo.

Moldova too has several incentives for finding a solution now:

Russia has dragged its feet on lifting the ban on Moldovan wine that was supposed to end in January (see MOLDOVA/ROMANIA: Visa row may result in looser ties - March 30, 2007). Moldova's industrial production was down by 11.5% year-on-year in the first quarter. With much of last year's crop due for processing, further delay would deepen Moldova's economic recession. Voronin may be bowing to Russian pressure on Transnistria in the hope that Putin will alleviate the economic pressure on Moldova.

With the economy in decline, Voronin needs to show progress on some front before the local elections in May and the parliamentary elections next year. Some Moldovan officials think that only Putin has the authority to deliver on a reintegration deal. They therefore want a deal before the Russian presidential campaign begins.

Low-profile issue. However, it is difficult to see the politically astute Voronin, or his allies in the Communist Party, following through on this proposal, much less dissolving parliament or resorting to unconstitutional measures to make the necessary changes. In a recent poll by the Moldova Institute for Public Policy, only 17% of respondents listed Transnistria as one of their top three policy concerns, and only 3.7% as the most important. Yet several polls have suggested that 60-63% of Moldovans would vote to join the EU, making it one of the few areas of general policy consensus. It is therefore hard to believe that Voronin would sacrifice other policy goals for an uncertain solution to the Transnistria conflict.

CONCLUSION: It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the proposed settlement or its status without public statements from either the Russian or Moldovan side. However, it seems clear that a solution along the lines proposed by Russia, both in the Kozak Memorandum and in the draft proposal and in the draft proposal now being reported, would prove difficult, both practically and politically, for Moldova to implement.
