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AT THE 2020 ANNUAL SECURITY REVIEW CONFERENCE**

24 June 2020

**Working session II: Conflict and crisis situations in the OSCE area:  
building security and confidence**

Mr. Chairperson,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I should like to inform the participants in this very high-profile forum of the Russian Federation's view on the current status of the Transdniestrian settlement process.

The positive developments of recent years with regard to Transdniestria meant that it was quite justified to talk of a gradual "thawing" of the settlement process. Unfortunately, I am obliged to note that the situation has taken a turn for the worse in the period since the last Annual Security Review Conference.

There are several reasons. First of all, there was the effect of the electoral and associated domestic political processes taking place on the right bank of the Dniester in the second half of 2019. Owing to acute divergences between the positions of the Sides and in spite of all the efforts by international mediators, the Sides were ultimately unable to agree on a protocol as the outcome of the only official meeting in the "5+2" format to be held last year (in Bratislava in October). It also proved impossible to accomplish that task on the margins of the OSCE conference on confidence-building measures that, after a two-year hiatus, was convened in Bavaria.

The state of affairs has been aggravated this year by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which has sorely tested both Sides. A tendency has emerged to exploit the challenging public health situation in the region in order to try and resolve existing problems to one's advantage.

What do we see today? The tone and the very atmosphere of the dialogue between the Sides have reached a level of animosity that is without precedent in the past few years. Direct contacts between political representatives of the Moldovan Government and the authorities in Tiraspol have effectively dwindled to nothing. There has been a reduction in the number and, most importantly, in the substance (i.e., quality) of the meetings between Moldovan and Transdniestrian experts. Moreover, there has been backsliding in the fulfilment by the Sides of commitments on a number of issues they had previously agreed on, and in some cases even attempts to revise existing agreements. For example, possession of a driving licence issued by the Republic of Moldova is now suddenly being invoked as one of the requirements for receiving and being

entitled to use neutral vehicle registration plates, even though nothing of the sort had been mentioned when developing the relevant agreement.

Although the decisions on Moldovan farmers' access to lands in the Dubăsari district and on schools teaching in the Latin script were indeed implemented on time, no progress has been made so far on the review of politically motivated criminal cases. In that respect, it is the Moldovan Government that has the ball in its court.

The mutual public recriminations by the Sides have not been conducive to the co-ordination of their actions in combating the coronavirus. At a time when international humanitarian aid – sent by Russia, among other countries – is entering the region, it is remarkable that attempts are being made, using formal pretexts, to impose additional conditions for the delivery of medicines, medical equipment and other essential goods to the left bank of the Dniester.

A cause for concern is the growing divergence between the Sides' perceptions of priority issues for co-operation and also between their approaches to the settlement of existing problems. The Republic of Moldova cites insufficient co-operation in efforts to curb the spread of the coronavirus, a lack of information on the actual situation on the left bank, and restrictions on the movement of healthcare personnel living in Transdnistria but working on the territory of Moldova.

Matters related to people's freedom of movement have acquired fresh relevance. Thus, the Moldovan Government is concerned about the fact that the administrative border has been closed by the authorities in Tiraspol since 31 January 2020 and that these have set up additional checkpoints in the Security Zone.

The authorities in Tiraspol, for their part, point out that all the restrictions introduced are of a temporary nature and are necessary to combat the transmission of the coronavirus. They in turn accuse the Moldovan Government of applying not only economic pressure but also using banking-related coercive measures. Thus, Visa and Mastercard payment terminals in Transdnistria have been blocked since the end of January this year.

As the problems continue to mount, there have been calls for an official meeting in the "5+2" format to be convened urgently (even using online arrangements). I wish to clarify our point of view. The Russian Federation's position remains unaltered. We continue to support this unique international legal platform for negotiation. In our view, one or two meetings a year in the "5+2" format are not enough. The negotiation process should follow a steady rhythm. That process plays an important role also with regard to monitoring the implementation of existing agreements and identifying opportunities for making further headway on a settlement.

However, meetings in the "5+2" format must be well prepared. If the urgent need does arise to discuss issues that are beyond the format's remit, such as combating the pandemic, then it is essential that the discussions should be able to draw on thorough preliminary work on those issues carried out by experts from the Sides. It is precisely this, though, which causes difficulties.

For example, the Moldovan side for a long time made its acceptance of the proposal by the authorities in Tiraspol to hold expert working group meetings on banking issues conditional on a meeting being held on healthcare. In the end, when after much procrastination a meeting on banking issues was finally convened, its sole outcome was to confirm the serious discrepancy between the Sides' approaches to tackling the existing problems.

We are convinced that a policy of confrontation will not lead to positive developments in the Transdnestrrian settlement. The interaction between the Sides needs to return to the constructive channel of step-by-step implementation of the “tactic of small steps”. It is important for the Sides to fulfil the commitments they have made both in a bilateral and in an international format.

We are in favour of maintaining the dynamic of contacts between leaders, for in our view such contacts can facilitate the normalization of dialogue between the communities on both banks of the Dniester. We hope that the forthcoming new electoral cycle – a presidential election is due to be held in the Republic of Moldova on 1 November, with the preparatory campaign starting on 1 September – will not have a negative impact on the dialogue between the Moldovan Government and the authorities in Tiraspol or affect the rhythm of work in the “5+2” format.

In general, we are by no means sceptical about the future of the Transdnestrrian settlement process. We consider there to be no grounds for linking its future prospects to the formal absence of a signed protocol on the outcomes of the “5+2” format meeting held in Bratislava. Although the unresolved issues are piling up, the draft protocol that was prepared at the time of that meeting can and should serve as a reference point for subsequent work. Some rather interesting projects are already in the offing – for example, plans to establish a new trolleybus line in the city of Bendery.

We share the attitude of the OSCE Chairmanship and of Mr. Thomas Mayr-Harting, Special Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office, concerning the need to remedy the situation. We hope that it will prove possible to overcome the impediments that have arisen.

It is important to understand that, irrespective of the formula ultimately chosen to solve the problem, no one side can carry off an absolute victory. Therefore, it is necessary to search tenaciously for a compromise – that is, a solution based on the Sides abandoning maximalist demands and overblown expectations for the sake of drawing up a settlement model that proves acceptable to the communities on both banks of the Dniester.

We hope that such a balanced and responsible approach towards “frozen” conflicts can be backed by Moldovan politicians and indeed by the whole global community. With regard to the Transdnestrrian settlement in its current phase, it seems to me that our common task is to prevent what has “thawed” from “freezing” again. I am confident that the prospects for achieving this are very good.

Thank you for your attention.