

Moldova, Abkhazia, Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria – all crisis zones where the heavy hand of the Kremlin can be felt. The Kremlin appears to be incapable of establishing normal political and

# Frozen conflicts and Russia's revanchist policy

POLITICS

by Fernando Orlandi

economic relations with the neighbouring countries that aspire to democracy. Hence Russian television blames the European Union and has kicked off a violent and aggressive media campaign.

**Z**apping channels on Russian television in the second week of March was a truly disconcerting experience, offering impressions that help to get a better understanding of the country and measure the distance that separates us. The weekend was given over to disproportionately large coverage in news and commentary of the death of the former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic. In the days leading up to his death, the leading news item was the crisis in the region of Dniester caused by the Ukrainian authorities' decision to install standard customs checks at the border with secessionist Moldova.

## **The death of Slobodan Milosevic**

Russian State television made a great to-do about the death of Milosevic, with programmes repeatedly emphasising how the international war crimes tribunal for the former Yugoslavia had refused him permission to be treated in Russia and alluding in this context to the possibility that he had not died of natural causes. With macabre irony, a Channel One journalist noted that cases involving Serbian leaders "often have a lethal ending" – a few days earlier, Milan Babic, the dentist who had

become President of the self-proclaimed Serb Republic of Krajina and was sentenced on appeal last July to a 13-year prison term for crimes against humanity, had committed suicide in his Scheveningen prison cell. These overt allusions were backed up in news bulletins and programmes by an openly hostile view of the tribunal and its chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte and a derisive attitude towards the West's interpretation of recent Yugoslavian history. All in all, the tone of these declarations made it appear that the tribunal itself, rather than Milosevic, was the guilty party. From Channel One's point of view, the tribunal had simply discredited international justice. Former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov added that the death of Milosevic would remain "on the tribunal's conscience", while Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia "has the right not to trust" the court. Mikhail Gorbachev's voice also made itself heard amidst the chorus. Interviewed by Ekho Moskvyy radio, he said that the treatment to which the former leader of Belgrade had been subjected "stinks of inhumanity". According to General Leonid Ivashev, former chief of staff of the Russian Federation's armed forces, the

Hague tribunal itself was in fact an “inhuman institution”.

Drawing up Milosevic’s biography, Russian State television adopted an openly sceptical attitude towards the crimes he had been charged with and Channel One went so far as to question whether crimes had in fact been committed in Yugoslavia.

Russian public opinion and the ruling class had always expressed their opposition to the NATO military operations in 1999 to try and stop the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo in 1999. The news of Milosevic’s death was now skilfully used to rekindle anti-American and anti-Western sentiment among the population as part of the increasingly overt authoritarian direction the Kremlin has adopted.

\_The death of Milosevic was widely reported in the Russian media, which turned it into an opportunity to stoke the population’s anti-American and anti-Western feelings

### The Transnistria crisis

During the first half of the week the crisis in the region of Dniestr was the lead item, even more so than the death of Milosevic. Transnistria has been a serious problem for over 15 years for Moldova as well as the European Union (EU). The process of disintegration in Moldova had begun before independence, when the socialist republic had undertaken a process of “Moldovification” to counter the Russification imposed by Moscow and rebuild the national identity – a process perceived as a threat by the minorities, especially the Russian and Turkish-speaking ones. In Transnistria, the province that lies to the east of the Dniester river, identity and linguistic issues intertwined with political ones, leading to secession and the constitution of an entity that proclaimed itself a State, that enjoyed and continues to enjoy Moscow’s benevolent protection but lacks international recognition. Hence this is



a real “black hole” in the heart of Europe, “governed” by veterans of the Soviet empire: a “black hole” that escapes the control of rights and laws, suspected by Western police and security forces to be a market for every possible illegal traffic – from arms and fissile material to money laundering; from contraband drugs, alcohol and combustibles to traffic in human beings. Together with the conflicts and secessions of Abkhazia and southern Ossetia in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Transnistria is one of four “frozen conflicts” in the territory of the former Soviet Union. In these crisis zones the hand of the Kremlin can clearly be seen moving over the different chessboards to keep the State structure of these young neighbouring countries, intent on strengthening their independence and acquiring an autonomous role on the international scenario, in a state of chronic weakness.

The Moldovan government has undertaken a laborious path of liberalization, but the country finds itself in a major economic crisis. President Vladimir Voronin emerged the winner of the March 2005 elections. Despite being a Communist he announced several reforms, but has unfortunately managed to carry out very few. The Moldovan Communists are at loggerheads with Moscow precisely because of the Transnistria issue, and the country has rapidly converted to the cause of EU membership.

Chisinau has embarked on a new road to find a solution to the Transnistria issue – the so-called 3D strategy: democratisation, decriminalisation and demilitarization. The EU has responded to some extent, first with the signature on 25 February 2005 of a joint action plan and then on 16 March 2005 with Dutch diplomat Adriaan Jacobovits de Szeged being named EU special representative to Moldova.

### **The EU's mission**

Small steps have been taken in the course of the last 12 months to find a solution to the issue of illicit traffic, which is undoubtedly the mainstay of Tiraspol's economy (Gangsters concerned, was the headline of the 2 July 2005 issue of “The Economist”). In October 2005 the EU launched a two-year

border assistance mission on the Ukraine border, sending 50 experts to monitor traffic along the Moldova-Ukraine frontier (i.e. the 450 km border with the territory controlled by the Transnistria secessionists).

The mission was very fruitful. Brussels' active role was backed up by a clearer and less oscillatory attitude on the part of the Kiev authorities. The fact that Chisinau holds a power of veto over Kiev's access to the World Trade Organization (WTO) may have had influenced Ukraine's new attitude to some extent: control of traffic from Tiraspol would appear to be the price that Kiev had to pay.

On 3 March, therefore, after a three-month information and preparation period, Ukraine introduced new rules of control over goods originating in Transnistria. In fact these are not so much “new rules” as the usual procedures adopted at any border: goods must be accompanied by the required administrative, fiscal and customs documents and these can only be customs documents from the sole legitimate and recognised State, Moldova, as Ukrainian Prime Minister Yuri Yekhanurov made clear on 6 March.

The same day, speaking in Chisinau, Moldovan Prime Minister Vasile Tarlev added that the norm was also meant to have Tiraspol businesses registered in accordance with Moldovan law, the aim being to legalise their foreign trade activity. Chisinau also simplified the company registration procedure and guaranteed customs exemption, thereby also giving companies registered in Tiraspol the opportunity to draw the benefits deriving from Moldova's membership of the WTO.

Practical and concrete action had finally been taken to combat the dreaded illegal traffic. Javier Solana, High Representative for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and Adriaan Jacobovits de Szeged publicly expressed Brussels' approval and support.

### **A violent media campaign**

This news item, which was largely ignored by all the Western media, received dozens of minutes of coverage on Russian television, turning it into the most important event on news bulletins in the second half of March. Instead of appreciating the

fight against illegal traffic, the media – the state networks in particular – unleashed a violent campaign against Kiev and Chisinau. Ukraine was accused of imposing an economic blockade on Transnistria and there were suggestions that unidentified “external forces” were behind the event. All the news bulletins then hosted numerous reports on the suffering of the local population. The position that the State adopted only added to the excessive and over-excited reactions on the television news. The Russian Foreign minister sees Kiev using economic means to obtain political concessions. On his *Realnaya politika* show, Gleb Pavloskii, a well-known commentator and advisor to president Vladimir Putin, said Moscow would offer “humanitarian aid” to

the Transnistrians and should reflect on ways to “repay Kiev and Chisinau for this dangerous provocation”.

Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov was in Washington at the time to ask the U.S. to speed up Russia’s entry into the WTO. But how can protecting this “black hole” of illegal traffic in the heart of Europe and violently opposing the introduction of ordinary norms and customs checks co-exist with entry into the WTO, which is founded on rules?

### A self-imposed “economic blockade”

The violent and aggressive media campaign centred above all on the fact that the economic blockade on illegal traffic that would be imposed at the border would suffocate Transnistria. Besides the fact that Kiev acted in conformity with the country’s international obligations, the total blockade on transit is actually the work of Tiraspol, which wants to stop the passage of goods

\_The situation in Transdnistria is incandescent. Tiraspol citizens hail the arrival of a Russian humanitarian convoy with signs thanking Moscow for its help



and merchandise belonging to companies registered with the Moldovan authorities and hence in possession of the required customs documents. The self-imposed blockade is therefore intended to dramatise the situation – a contrived dramatisation that has garnered the support of the Kremlin and the propagandistic megaphone on Russia's television channels.

As a result, voices can be raised in Moscow on the need to intervene with "humanitarian aid". Andrei Kokoshin, chairman of the Duma's committee for CIS affairs, has repeatedly maintained that Russia must defend the "interests of its compatriots" in Transnistria.

The Kremlin in its turn sent a worrying delegation to Tiraspol, led by officials who were involved in the past in fomenting tensions in the zones of the so-called "frozen conflicts" in Georgia (Abkhazia and southern Ossetia). The group was led by Valery Kenyaykin, the Russian Foreign Ministry's special envoy, Vladimir Kolesnikov, deputy secretary of the National Security Council and Gennady Bukae, special assistant to Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov. These high-ranking officials supported the claims of the secessionists in Transnistria and baselessly accused Ukraine of massing troops on the border on their return to Moscow.

### The "frozen conflicts"

Are the "frozen conflicts" on their way to being fluidified? Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has linked developments in Transnistria to Georgia's attempt to free itself from Moscow's control in southern Ossetia. The pressure exercised by Russia and the imminent 26 March elections have caused the re-emergence in Kiev of the pendulum that has been so typical of Ukrainian politics: Ukraine is starting to backtrack on the customs checks and also reneging on the commitments made to the EU. The lack of transparency witnessed at the beginning of the year on the energy issue has now been added to these ambiguities, which can only lead to questions on Ukraine's ability to adopt a coherent policy.

Negotiations on the future of Kosovo began in Vienna on 20 February. It is obvious that Pristina will be accorded some form of independence, notwithstanding Belgrade's

opposition. This is an exceptional solution, but Moscow has grasped an opportunity in the process. In the course of his State visit to Azerbaijan, Putin compared Abkhazia and southern Ossetia to Kosovo, suggesting that the formula to be decided in Vienna be applied to these two "frozen conflicts" as well. The declarations of the Russian president deeply embarrassed Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and strengthened the determination of the secessionists. It remains to be seen what Moscow's next concrete steps will be.

### Where is the Kremlin heading?

At the beginning of March an independent Council on Foreign Relations task force released a significant report on Russia titled *Russia's Wrong Direction*. There is considerable concern and a consensus among most analysts on the future evolution of the country and the process of strong involution that marks the Putin presidency. The Kremlin has started along a path of increasing opposition to the West and support for dubious regimes and personalities. The situation in Belarus is getting worse by the day and the Kremlin's support for Aleksander Lukashenko is incoherent with its aspiration to play a leading role together with the democracies. Moscow appears not to understand how its strategic interests can combine with democratic developments in other countries such as Belarus, Georgia and Moldova.

Opposition to the West is also taking on a particularly worrying aspect. Documents discovered in Baghdad reveal that Moscow not only transferred classified military information to Saddam Hussein on the eve of the attack on Iraq but also expressly infiltrated or recruited spies in the American military command. Another difficult chapter in the history of relations between Moscow and Washington is likely to open. In this context it is more opportune than ever to hope that the EU will draw up a precise political agenda as regards Moscow – and perhaps also define a common energy policy for Europe. The risk is that each EU country will move independently and that the EU itself will not be in a position to carry out its role. ■