

Crisis in Transnistria: possible scenarios

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Ukraine's decision to halt the transit of Russian gas to Europe as of January 1, 2025, will most severely impact Moldova. The republic is already experiencing a serious energy crisis. Since the beginning of October 2022, Russia has almost halved its gas supplies to Moldova via the Ukrainian pipeline. The fuel shortage has affected the operation of the *MoldGRES Power Plant* in Transnistria, which provided 70% of Moldova's electricity. The remaining 30% was purchased from Ukraine, but Ukraine's energy infrastructure has been subjected to devastating missile attacks, creating a situation when Kyiv itself is facing electricity shortages.

Since the summer of this year, when it became known that Ukraine would not prolong the gas supply agreement with Russia, Chisinau began searching for alternative sources. *Moldovagaz SC* managed to arrange supplies from Europe for the entire heating season from October 2024 to March 2025. According to the company, most of the volumes were purchased on the *Romanian Commodities Exchange (BRM EST)* trading platform. However, despite the assurances from the *Moldovagaz SC* leadership that the republic had secured 100% of its European supplies and would not face any problems during the heating season, the real situation tells a different story. Rolling blackouts continue in the republic, and on December 1, the prices for “household energy services” increased by 30%. This is despite the fact that even before the active presidential election campaign (the elections were held in two rounds in October–November 2024), Moldovan prime minister Dorin Recean urged the public not to believe rumors about further price increases in the energy sector. The crisis in the energy sector and the public discontent prompted Moldovan president Maia Sandu to dismiss Energy minister Victor Parlicov on December 5, 2024, citing his “*inability to cope with the energy crisis*”. Additionally, under the pressure from Prime Minister Recean, other officials from the leadership of the country's energy companies responsible for the republic's energy supply were also dismissed. At the same time, a 60-day state of emergency was declared due to the “*energy famine*”.

Thus, it becomes clear that the assurances of the current government do not match the situation “*on the ground*”. Moldova has indeed found itself in an energy crisis, but the hardest hit has been Transnistria. Despite the proclamation of the independence of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) in September 1990 and armed clashes with Moldova, Tiraspol, due to the strong integration of its economic infrastructure with its Soviet-era metropolis, did not subsequently abandon effective ties with Chisinau. This primarily concerned the energy sector, where cooperation between Chisinau and Tiraspol outweighed the political differences. Until recently, most of the electricity consumed by Moldova was generated by Transnistrian energy facilities – the *Dubossary Hydro Power Plant* and the *MoldGRES Power Plant*. The latter operated mainly on Russian gas. These facilities met the needs of both Moldova and Transnistria, while also contributing significant financial resources to the PMR budget.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 21.12.2024.

The current situation, considering the above, has been a severe blow to Tiraspol. The cessation of Russian gas supplies through the Ukrainian pipeline threatens with a complete shutdown of *MoldGRES* unless it switches to coal or fuel oil. Given the overall situation around Transnistria, squeezed between Ukraine and Moldova, it seems difficult for the self-proclaimed republic to independently find and secure supplies of such energy carriers. The biggest problem is that Chisinau, seeking alternatives to Russian gas in Europe, did not pay attention to protect “its native” Transnistria from the consequences of the energy crisis. Considering the integrated system of electricity production and consumption, Moldova could have shown the will and demonstrated that it was now its turn to help PMR avoid a severe crisis. But this was not done and the situation caused discontent even among some Moldovan officials. In particular, Moldova's Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian, expressed bewilderment that *Moldovagaz SC*, headed by Vadim Ceban, purchased energy source materials from Romania only for the right bank of the Dniester, while the left bank – PMR – was left without financial resources, electricity, and heating in winter. According to Serebrian, Russia may find some way to deliver gas to Transnistria, but this issue is tied to political problems, and therefore “*Tiraspol will have to choose between the death from hunger or cold*”.

The presence of contradictory approaches to the energy crisis in the PMR indicates that there is no consensus in Moldova regarding the future of the region. If one part of the country's political elite believes that the most reliable way to keep the PMR within Moldova and achieve its political reintegration through the “soft means” is to pay no less attention to its economic problems than to their own, another political wing actually advocates for increased pressure on Tiraspol. It is evident that certain forces in Chisinau have decided to take advantage of the current geopolitical situation and the resulting new economic reality to deal a reputational blow to pro-Russian circles in PMR.

Russian gas, delivered through Ukraine to Transnistria and Moldova, has been an important component of Russia's policy to maintain the *status quo* in relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol. As a fundamental part of the local economy, it balanced the complex relations between Moldova and the PMR, preventing political demands and interests from dominating economic feasibility and once again turning into a brutal confrontation similar to the 1990s. Additionally, the “Trans-Balkan” route of the “Yamal–Europe” gas pipeline, passing through Moldova and PMR, in which several Southeast European countries were highly interested, largely contributed to ensuring that the Moldovan-Transnistrian case did not become a part of the large-scale Russia–West confrontation, as was the case with Ukraine. As a result, a rather unique situation arose in which the small unrecognized pro-Russian republic located on the very border of the EU maintained its viability and relative subjectivity. The Russian peacekeeping contingent stationed on its territory, which according to various estimates numbers around 5,000 troops, has not been attacked by Moldova and Ukraine, a threat that has always existed and still exists.

However, the current reality has changed drastically. Moscow has lost its “gas leverage”, which has practically nullified Moldova's dependence on Russia, making it difficult for the latter to provide economic support to the PMR and, most importantly, to ensure its security. Along with the devaluation of the gas factor, Moscow also had to face a new political

landscape in Moldova, which formed after the fall presidential elections in this republic, as well as after the referendum on Chisinau's integration into the EU. The scandalous events related to these votes did not add confidence to Moscow that it could, as before, influence political processes in Moldova and thus keep the Transnistrian issue under control.

Moreover, the events in Romania, which seeks to finally place Chisinau under its patronage, have shown that the anti-Russian coalition in the West will actively fight against attempts by nationally oriented forces in Eastern Europe to establish a dialogue with Russia. Recall that on December 6, 2024, the Constitutional Court of Romania annulled its own decision of December 2, 2024, recognizing the results of the November presidential elections, in which the far-right Călin Georgescu was the favorite. Thus, the victory was taken away from the politician who, during the election campaign, constantly stated that he *“would not allow Romania to participate in the anti-Russian programs of the imperialist West”*. It is noteworthy that the Constitutional Court's decision was made after the alleged interference of Moscow in the electoral process became known.

In Russia, they cannot fail to understand that the scandalous turn in Romania's domestic political processes is related to NATO's unprecedented concentration of its military units and missile systems on the Romanian-Moldovan border. Călin Georgescu could have hindered these processes, which are aimed directly against Russia. In the current situation, Moscow should not hope that the coalition's plans, as before, do not include disrupting the *status quo* around Transnistria. If NATO troops enter Ukraine as a peacekeeping contingent (which is increasingly being talked about), Russia will most likely have to come to terms with the fact of PMR's liquidation. According to international sources, the US and the EU are ready to deploy up to 150,000 coalition troops to Ukraine if Donald Trump agrees with Vladimir Putin to suspend hostilities in Ukraine. In such a configuration, the West will under no circumstances allow the presence of the Russian Transnistrian group behind the NATO troops. In this case, the fate of PMR will inevitably become the subject of bargaining between Washington and Moscow, during which the Kremlin will most likely try to cede its control over the doomed small republic on the most favorable terms for itself. It can be assumed that among such conditions, in addition to the unhindered withdrawal of the Russian group from Transnistria, there will be issues related to the Ukrainian territories, as well as guarantees to prevent reprisals against the PMR residents.

And if the ceasefire in Ukraine fails to materialize, Moscow should not rule out the possibility that the ultra-liberals in power in Moldova and Romania, with indirect or direct support from NATO, will still resort to forceful methods to eliminate the PMR. One of the arguments in favor of this scenario is precisely the unwillingness of the ultra-liberals in Chisinau to prevent the catastrophic gas and energy crisis in Transnistria. In this context, parallels with the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 come to mind: economically, socially, and morally suppressed, the small republic may not withstand such trials. Especially, in the case of the PMR, where “its own” Russian army and navy are far from the banks of the Dniester.