

Centre-region Relations and Neutrality

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1. Neutrality is about international status that comes with certain rights and obligations, codified, for example, in the 1907 Hague Conventions as well as in specific international treaties, such as the 1921 Aland settlement or the 1991 Paris Accords on Cambodia. Neutrality, in this sense, is declarative, requires recognition by other states. But it is also a political practice, both in a domestic sense and in the conduct of foreign relations. As such, practicing neutrality necessitates a minimum political consensus at home and a permissive international environment in which neutrality is possible and sustainable.
2. This, of course, is where the challenges for Moldova begin:
 - Lack of political consensus.
 - Territorial division.
 - Location in the contested EU/Russia neighbourhood in which great powers compete for influence.
3. These challenges are not only closely related but also mutually reinforcing:
 - Great powers exploit political and territorial divisions to advance their own interests.
 - Different local actors use their relationships with competing great powers to entrench their hold on power and control of economic assets.
4. This means that these three challenges can only be overcome by all stakeholders together and as part of a comprehensive package.
5. Where does this leave the issue of neutrality? Several conclusions can be drawn:
 - Neutrality needs to be a ‘net contributor’ to security within Moldova and at a regional and European level, i.e., it needs to address security concerns in Chisinau and Tiraspol, in Moscow, Brussels, Kyiv, and Washington.
 - As such neutrality is intricately tied to a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, and the impact of that on the status of Gagauzia, and in turn on the relations between Tiraspol, Komrat, and Chisinau. So, any settlement of that conflict requires not only a viable state in terms of its institutions but also one that is viable as a permanently neutral state that practices neutrality in what will remain a challenging regional and global environment.
 - In my view, the external environment is unlikely to become more permissive for a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict anytime

soon. So, what can Moldova do in the meantime until a settlement becomes more likely?

- Consider neutrality as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem.
- This could mean establishing neutrality as a principle around which different political parties and their constituents could rally, a core component of a national identity, similar to the 'constitutional patriotism' embraced by (West) Germans after the Second World War. Such constitutional patriotism cannot rest on permanent neutrality alone, but will require strong, complementary and well-functioning institutions of governance, including courts, police, tax authorities, etc.
- It also means to take account of the security implications of permanent neutrality for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. How can you achieve the country's sustainable reintegration if that would also mean an end to the CIS PKO and a withdrawal of the operative group of the Russian army currently stationed in the Transnistrian region? This is not impossible to achieve, but it will require careful consideration of what settlement is feasible and viable under such conditions and to develop a vision of that which is supported by a large cross-section of the political class and population on the right bank and can serve as a basis for negotiation with the left bank.
- Finally, it means that there is a need to think about a strategy of how this concept of neutrality can be developed and communicated in the context of the multiple challenges that Moldova faces. To put it differently, before you can explain what Moldova's permanent neutrality means, you first need to know what it is. And what it can be in the context of Moldova will not simply be a decision to be made in Chisinau, however difficult this might already be, but one that will have to take into account the views of Tiraspol and Komrat, as well as in Moscow, Brussels, Kyiv, and Washington, but to do so without losing sight of Moldova's interests in the process.