

BRINGING THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA TO THE ATTENTION OF WESTERN POLICYMAKERS. TRANSNISTRIA AND THE SEPARATIST CAUSE

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For the Republic of Moldova, often ranked as the poorest country in Europe, the last two years were both the worst and best years. Against the backdrop of Russia’s brutal and inhumane war against Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova faces challenges at numerous levels, ranging from a fragile economy to having foreign military forces illegally stationed on its territory. Furthermore, having not one, but two separatist regions on its land, both controlled, de facto, by the Russian Federation, adds considerable pressure on the current pro-European government. The Russian Federation employs a wide range of hybrid instruments to intervene in the Republic of Moldova’s internal affairs. Having witnessed Russia’s aggressive actions in Ukraine, but not only, the international community is now paying considerably more attention to the Republic of Moldova. One self-explanatory reason would be that the Republic of Moldova hosted the European Political Community Summit, the largest and most important international event in its history. Consequently, the goal of this article is to highlight that the Republic of Moldova can only secure prospects for development, stability and democracy through broader integration into European community.

Key words: *Republic of Moldova, Transnistria, Russian interference, EU, NATO, soft power, peaceful settlement.*

1. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Against the backdrop of the Russian brutal war against Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova’s internal situation was greatly disturbed. Being already in a difficult economic situation, Moldova, a country with a population of 2.6

million people, took more than one hundred thousand Ukrainian refugees [1] almost instantly. The influx of refugees has resulted in additional financial costs, consuming resources from other budgetary priorities. As a result, inflation was rampant and the economy was worn out, its resources being close to collapsing. Supported

by external donors, especially by the European Union, Moldova managed to liberate itself from Russian gas dependence. However, being completely dependent on one source has its costs, and diversifying overnight soared the utility bills. Moreover, Moldova was dependent on mainly two electricity providers, Ukraine as the main source and Transnistria as a secondary one. The war damaged the main power line and provoked major power blackouts all over the territory. Also, Transnistria attempted to blackmail Chisinau to provide free-of-charge gas in return for low-priced electricity. Furthermore, leveraging the military element generated serious security concerns, even more than before the war. This assessment is well reflected in Moldovan Strategic Documents (National Defence Strategy [2] and National Security Strategy [3]) the Transnistrian frozen conflict represents the main threat to Moldova's security, sovereignty, and stability.

Broadly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine starkly exposed the vulnerabilities of the Moldovan socio-economic architecture, which was already weakened by the pandemic and energy crisis. Starting with October 2021, the newly appointed Moldovan government had to face simultaneous crises on many levels and domains, being

energetic, economic, social, and military. Moldova is currently one of the most affected countries by the war in Ukraine, not only because of its geographical proximity but also because of its inherent vulnerabilities as a small and conceptual divided country, with close linkages to both Ukraine and Russia.

However paradoxical it may seem the internal situation took on a new spin after the war and all governmental efforts to redress the economy were bolstered by the European Council's decision to grant European Union Candidate country status to Moldova and subsequent financial support.

2. BRIEF HISTORIC VIEW OF THE TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT AND ITS IMPACT ON MOLDOVAN SOCIETY

Following the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, around 170 conflict zones broke out in the perimeter of its former space, 30 of which took an active form, and in 10 cases armed conflicts took place, most of them of a separatist nature. Secessionism, either fuelled by geopolitical, economic, and security interests, or aiming at the restoration of the Soviet state, is one of the perpetual problems faced by the Republic of Moldova (De Waal, 2023).

The Transnistria separation occurred following a violent conflict, which erupted based on so-called concerns about Moldovan nationalism and possible unification with Romania. Against the backdrop of Moldovan Socialist Soviet Republic (SSR) demanding political and social reforms, as well as the recognition of the Moldovan language as the official language of the state, the separatist leaders from Tiraspol generated a series of violent actions. Supported by Russia, on September 2, 1990, the Dniester Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic was proclaimed and the process of consolidating the enclave began. Then the Provisional Supreme Soviet of the self-proclaimed republic led by Igor Smirnov, was elected. In 1990, 3,000 officers and over 12,000 conscripts and contract military were stationed on the left side of the Dniester, constituting the 14th Army of the USSR armed forces, equipped with an enormous amount of military equipment and ammunition.

Clashes between the government forces of the Republic of Moldova and those of the Transnistrian Republic began at the end of 1990. Tensions increased as soon as the Republic of Moldova declared its independence in August 1991 and degenerated into an armed conflict in July 1992. On the side of the separatists, Russia became involved

militarily and politically through the 14th Army, stationed nearby. Over 1,000 people were killed and 4,500 were injured (Klimenko, 2018, p. 11-12). The Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict ended on June 21, 1992, following the agreement signed between the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, and the Moldovan one, Mircea Snegur.

The Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict, like many others in the ex-Soviet space, can have its cause in the Soviet legacy - in particular, "political nationality, the illegal division of resources within the Moldavian SSR, but also the consequences of perestroika and glasnost", all of them part of the policy promoted by the last president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev (Klimenko, 2018, p.11-12).

The international community does not recognize Transnistria's status as a self-proclaimed state, nor the de facto leadership in Tiraspol, which continues to aggressively advocate its right to independence, exerting constant pressure on the government in Chisinau. The main factor fuelling the tensions between the parties remains the Russian Federation, which supports the region economically, politically, and militarily.

At the same time, to this day, Russia maintains approximately 1,500 soldiers illegally deployed in Transnistria, divided into

"peacekeepers" and the Operative Group of Russian Troops (OGRT), who guard the ammunition depot at Cobasna, despite Moldovan authorities' repeated demands to withdraw them. However, since its independence, Moldova has had different opinion-oriented leadership and some of those regarded the presence of foreign troops as useful in maintaining peace in the region. These approaches varied and alternated throughout Moldova's existence as an independent state. Jeff Chinn stated that the Republic of Moldova is one of the first ex-Soviet republics that claimed new relations with Moscow, showed intransigence during the consolidation of independence, and carried out reforms comparable to those applied in the Baltic States, but not without showing ambiguity and hypocrisy in promoting its policies (Chinn, 1997, p. 43-51).

The conflict became a frozen one and the Russian-led operation turned into a permanent positioning of Russian troops on the front line. The peace negotiation process was taking place in the "5+2" format: Transnistria and Moldova, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Russia, and Ukraine as mediators, plus the USA and the European Union (EU) as observers. However, after the Russian brutal and unprovoked war against Ukraine, even the settlement

negotiation was frozen for obvious reasons.

The Transnistrian conflict remains one of the most representative frozen conflicts in the ex-Soviet space. Its evolution always depended on external factors such as Chisinau's leadership orientation (pro-East or pro-West), Ukraine, or international organizations' involvement.

From a political perspective, the process of settling the Transnistrian conflict, in a broad sense, represented the resignation of the leaders in Chisinau to the support given by Russia to the Tiraspol regime. The leaders from Chisinau were forced, in the absence of consistent support from the international community, to accept the demands of Russia and Tiraspol to sign official documents together with the leaders of the unrecognized Transnistria regime. Mircea Snegur signed, in 1994, a Joint Declaration with the leader of the separatist regime, Igor Smirnov, and the Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation regarding the legal status, manner, and terms of withdrawal of the military formations of the Russian Federation temporarily stationed on the territory of the Republic of Moldova (Medar & Savu, 2005). Snegur's signing of the Joint Declaration was criticized by the political opposition who considered

the declaration to mark yet another stage in the process of enslaving the country to Russian interests. President, Petru Lucinschi, is the one who approved, in 1997, the conclusion of the Memorandum on the principles of the normalization of Moldovan-Transnistrian relations, but there were no concrete mentions regarding the resolution of the conflict, nor whether the conflict should be resolved by maintaining the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova (Racheru, 2020).

Diplomatically, there have been several attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully. After, more than a decade of independence, a period often characterized by a servile policy vis-à-vis Russia, in 2003, President Voronin refused to sign the "so-called Kozak plan, for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, by which the separatist region was asked to meet multiple conditions separate from the territory of the Republic of Moldova and declare its independence" (Medar & Savu, 2005). That signals the Republic of Moldova' shift towards the West..

Dmitri Kozak, the Russian Deputy Prime Minister in the Medvedev Government and special representative of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, in relations with the Republic of Moldova, presented the so-called "Kozak Memorandum" which generated

strong reactions both in Chisinau and in other European capitals. The "Kozak Memorandum" was a proposal aimed at a definitive settlement of the conflict between the Republic of Moldova and the separatist regime in Transnistria, by establishing an asymmetric federal Moldovan state. It also provided for the stationing of Russian troops on the territory of Moldova until 2023. At the same time, the memorandum proposed the creation of a bicameral parliament whose composition was disproportionate in relation to the distribution of the population on the territories. The control of the upper chamber was to be exercised by Transnistria and Gagauzia. As expected, the plan sparked widespread social movements, with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets in the fall of 2003 to oppose its implementation. The national interests and strategic objectives of the state would have been compromised if this plan were accepted [4].

President Vladimir Voronin, in an attempt to normalize relations with Moscow, argued the rejection of the Memorandum on the grounds of incompatibility with the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, which defines the Republic of Moldova as a neutral state, on whose territory foreign troops cannot be allowed to enter. However, that did not convince the Kremlin, which maintained its assertiveness through discriminatory policies and direct threats [5].

Dimitri Kozak returned to the attention of the media from Chisinau in July 2018, when Vladimir Putin appointed him as his special representative for the development of commercial and economic relations with the Republic of Moldova, thus replacing Dimitri Rogozin, who had been declared undesirable in the territory Republic of Moldova. However, Kozak was declared persona non grata in the European Union's space, having been placed on the sanctions list in April 2014, following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

In 2006, a referendum, not recognized by the Republic of Moldova, reaffirmed the desire for independence of the territory and union with Russia, and Vadim Krasnoselsky became president of the region in December 2016, being re-elected in the elections of December 2021 [6].

Some researchers believe that Transnistria "may become the new Crimea for Russia if it recognizes the independence of the separatist territory" (Klimenko, 2018, p.15). The strategic importance of Transnistria changed after the annexation of Crimea. But, at the moment, Russia's position no longer allows it to initiate a new conflict. From a military perspective, it must be emphasized that on the territory of the separatist region, there are not only Russian troops stationed illegally but also an ammunition depot, in Cobasna, near

the border with Ukraine and 120 km from Chisinau. The warehouse is the largest military warehouse in Eastern Europe, but in the last decade, there have been no control/assessment visits by any officials from Chisinau or any other relevant international organization [7]. It is estimated that around 20 thousand tons of ammunition are kept in the warehouse, de facto controlled by Russia. The central authorities of the Republic of Moldova have no access to that.

Moscow influenced politics in Chisinau by controlling corrupted people in key positions, undermining national interests, independence, and state unity. Over time, Chisinau showed some timid initiatives to involve the UN in the process of resolving the conflict in Transnistria, but the attempt was unsuccessful resulting in only two visits of UN representatives to the Republic of Moldova during the conflict to hold talks with the parties involved. In addition, the Secretary General of the United Nations sent a letter condemning Russia's actions in Transnistria, which was received with the same indifference as other international efforts to resolve the Transnistrian conflict [8].

The Moldova–Transnistria conflict remains one of the regional legacies of the end of the Cold War. It has been a frozen conflict for the past three decades and the very little information available in the public space about it created the perception of the region as

Europe's 'black hole' (Baynov, 2009, p 143). The internal situation in Transnistria remains strictly controlled: the press, many television stations are mainly owned either directly by the regional government or by Kremlin. The region has its currency, constitution, parliament, flag, and anthem. The internal situation is characterized by corruption, organized crime, and smuggling, especially of weapons, but not only.

The Tiraspol administration has always been an instrument of pressure on the sovereignty and integrity of the Republic of Moldova. The Russian Federation controlled the evolution and development of the Republic of Moldova through various instruments, but the Transnistrian conflict represents one of the most important pressure points, being a constant factor of instability and military threat to the Moldovan state.

3. RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE – IMPACT ON MOLDOVA

Today's security context, in which the Republic of Moldova finds itself, proves that the security sector must be approached distinctly from that of the past. The increasing global uncertainty, more sophisticated and disruptive cyber and hybrid threats, and military confrontation in the neighboring country –Ukraine- have a direct impact on Moldova's security.

In this fluid environment, the Moldovan leadership acknowledged the importance of adopting a more integrated and better-coordinated approach to resilience. With support from NATO and European Union, Moldova consolidated its state institutions and took concrete measures to counter Russian energetic coercion and malign interference in Moldovan society.

The war in Ukraine determined a reanalysis of the priorities and strategic objectives of the Republic of Moldova. As it was all too natural, in the face of a direct military threat and increased political pressure, backed by massive economic blackmail, the Moldovan government refocused its attention on the defense and security sphere. Against the backdrop of powerful Russian propaganda and disinformation surrounding the neutrality concept, enshrined in the Moldovan Constitution in 1994, defense (the military in particular) was constantly underfunded by all previous governments. The allocation of 0.38% of the GDP for defense is insufficient to sustain any procurement or endowment process. In the context of the war, for the year 2023, the allocations were considerably increased to 0.55% of GDP [9].

Moreover, President Maia Sandu, admitting the importance of having a credible and robust strategic communication architecture with an overarching approach decided the creation of the National Centre for

Information Protection and Counter-Propaganda – PATRIOT. The draft law on the establishment of the National Centre initiated by President Maia Sandu, has been submitted for public consultations allowing thus the people to have a say in the concept of this initiative

In the context of the war in the immediate vicinity of the Republic of Moldova, relations with the European Union have gained particular importance even in the military sphere, which was not a traditional area of cooperation with the EU. The entire defense and security sector is going through an extensive process of reform and modernization, currently massively supported by the EU through the European Peace Facility which allocates 40 million euros for defense expenditure. These funds are being allocated on a yearly base, first tranche consisted of 7 million in 2021, 40 million for 2022, and 40 million for 2023, as well. The funds provided through the framework of the European Peace Facility are destined for the acquisition of air surveillance equipment, mobility and transport, logistics, command and control, and cyber defense equipment [10].

In addition, the Council of the European Union decided to double the amount of macroeconomic assistance to Moldova - up to 295 million Euros [11]. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that the political and financial support given by the European Union to the Republic of Moldova is unprecedented. The

situation itself is completely atypical and almost unthinkable before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

From an economic angle, Moldova started experiencing the effects of the energy blackmail imposed by the Russian Federation in October 2021, when Gazprom drastically reduced the volume of gas delivered to Moldova. Since that time, gas prices have increased significantly in the Republic of Moldova, both due to the latest developments in the regional energy markets and against the background of the war in Ukraine (the purchase price of gas increased from 265 US dollars/1,000 m³ in 2021 to US\$1,193/1,000 m³ in April 2022). With the financial support provided by the EU and other external partners, the state bought gas from the European zone to ensure the required volume. Later, this blackmail is overcome and at the same time, legislative changes are made that allow to avoid situations of this kind in the future, by storing some reserve quantities on the territory of Romania. The change unlocks more purchasing options, which will strengthen the security of the gas supply and could help control costs for consumers [12].

There is no doubt that Moldova could acquire the entire amount of gas needed from alternative sources thus overpassing the Russian deadlock, with external support from the European partners. However, there are voices enquiring about the fate of the Transnistrian region economy in such a case. What will happen if the archaic

Kuchurgan plant will not receive its free Russian gas? The local self-governing authorities do not have the means to support the 5000 people living on the territory, many of whom are pensioners. This concern is high on Moldovan leadership's agenda, and it appears that a soft power approach is used in solving this conflict.

To reinforce the soft balancing Moldovan approach, the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, present at the inauguration of the European Union Partnership Mission headquarters said: *"The Republic of Moldova independently decides what happens with the Transnistrian region. Cyprus became a member of the European Union having a territorial issue. Moldova can also do this"*. The EU civilian mission in the Republic of Moldova (EUPM Moldova) was initiated at the request of the Republic of Moldova to strengthen its resilience, security, stability, and economy and to help it on its way to accession.

Nicu Popescu, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the same occasion, stated *"It is a very important step for strengthening our capabilities and strengthening our state, for strengthening our resilience, which will allow us to continue to ensure stability, peace and calm. (...) We know we are not alone. We benefit from the support of our friends"* [13].

Indeed, Moldova is not alone, and the European Political Community Summit, a pan-European governmental forum serving as a platform that brings together European leaders to discuss and identify solutions for Europe's most pressing issues, has been hosted on 1-2 June 2023 by the Republic of Moldova, proved the unity and solidarity of the European space. Maia Sandu and Vladimir Zelenski had a common press statement on this occasion. President Zelenski delivered a message from the Ukrainian people: "We support Moldova, we are ready to walk historically together, shoulder to shoulder. We thank the Moldovans for hosting all our people, all the refugees from the large-scale war, we will not forget that" [14].

4. SOFT BALANCING APPROACH OF NATO AND EU

The pretext of neutrality has been used, ever since the adoption of this statute in 1994, as a shield against any threat, a policy that has proven ineffective in the current context. Recently a redefinition of the concept of neutrality in the public space is noticeable. In this sense, the Minister of Defense, Anatolie Nosatîi mentioned in an interview that "the status of neutrality has left us alone in the face of challenges, with a defense system that is not

relevant in the present context". According to the minister, discussions regarding the revision of the neutrality status are the prerogative of politicians, and a possible decision regarding joining a military alliance must be made after an extensive consultation process with citizens. The Minister of Defense also mentioned that the Republic of Moldova is not ready for joining NATO, and the controversies created around this topic are part of the hybrid war [15].

President Maia Sandu recently stated that "neutrality does not mean we shouldn't invest in the defense of the country". When asked about a potential NATO accession, the president said in an interview with the publication Politico that her country is still analyzing the next step and that a constitutional amendment would be needed to do so. "We're having a serious discussion these days ... about our ability to defend ourselves, whether we can do it alone or whether we should be part of a larger alliance." Additionally, the president noted that "if we're reaching, at some point, the conclusion, as a nation, that we need to change neutrality, that should happen through a democratic process" [16]. Analyzing the public statements of the two most important people in the state, from a political-military perspective, we understand that neutrality is a

concept that is undergoing a process of reanalysis, at least from a conceptual point of view. In this context, it should be mentioned that the Republic of Moldova is a long-standing and valuable partner of the Nord Atlantic Alliance: bilateral cooperation began in 1994 when Moldova joined the Partnership for Peace program and has never been interrupted, regardless of the political affiliation or orientation of the leadership from Chisinau.

The cornerstone of the cooperation was the 2022 Madrid Summit when the Allies agreed to step up political and practical support for partners facing pressure and threats from Russia. In practice, this means that Moldova benefits from a tailored package of support measures to help state institutions strengthen their capacity to defend themselves, national resilience, and civilian preparedness [17].

Moldova is also a valuable contributor to international security through its participation in peacekeeping missions. Since 2014 Moldova is participating in a NATO-led mission to Kosovo – KFOR. It is very important for Moldova to continue to contribute to a stable and peaceful Europe, according to the Foreign Minister Popescu' comment on the recent clashes in Kosovo, where Moldovan military personnel were also injured [18].

From a political-military perspective, cooperation with NATO is beneficial in achieving the national strategic objectives, the assistance provided being mainly intended to ensure national security. Cooperation relations are carried out in accordance with the fields stipulated in the framework document that regulates bilateral cooperation between the parties - the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) [19]. However, it should be noted that at this moment it is premature to discuss membership, this being in contradiction with the constitutional provisions of neutrality. In addition, according to opinion polls, NATO is not a trusted organization, on the contrary, it is considered a strictly military Alliance with a destabilizing potential. Furthermore, only 10% of the population believes that NATO can ensure their security and 26% are in favor of a possible future accession [20].

Both the EU and NATO have greatly expanded efforts to support the Moldovan authorities to address the frozen conflict in Transnistria in the last few years. These efforts fall into the category of 'soft balancing' actions that imply the application of non-military methods, against Russian influence in the conflict and in Moldova more generally. One can argue that recent developments in Ukraine demonstrate the limitations of this strategy. Precisely because the application of this soft power has done little to change the incentives for

separatist leaders or their Russian backers. However, the EU and NATO, and other actors contributed greatly to augmenting Moldova's ability to face the challenges posed by the conflict (Kennedy, 2016).

The concept of soft balancing was developed as a method to explain why secondary powers did not engage in either internal or external balancing against the hegemony of one state. While there have been several proposed definitions of soft balancing, most of them comprise at least two key aspects. First, soft balancing actions place a constraint on the field of action of another actor. Second, they accomplish this using tactics that are more 'tacit' or non-confrontational. This is in contrast with more traditional views of balancing, which usually include an explicit military aspect (Schweller, 2004, p. 159-201) [21].

The results of this strategy adopted by both the EU and NATO have been mixed. There is undoubtedly a quantifiable positive impact of these soft-balancing actions, especially when it comes to stimulating reforms and democratic values. NATO and EU soft power methods have changed Moldova's foreign relations substantially by sustaining the transformation of the country from within. Through various capacity development projects targeting both state institutions and civil society organizations, NATO and the EU

stimulated the development of national resilience and European identity. While enabling partnerships and boosting practical cooperation in a fundamentally changed security environment the soft power methods proved their power to support free democratic nations around the world to be able to make their own sovereign choice.

Even if there has been little indication that the political calculations of the leadership of Transnistria have changed over the years, international support has profoundly changed the economic landscape in the region, making it less dependent on Russia's market and more compatible with European standards. The economic exchange and trade with the European area are on an ascending trend. For example, over 67% of goods exported from Transnistria reached the European Union in 2022, with a significant increase of approximately 10% in contrast to 2021 [22].

Assistance in training and mentoring the Moldovan institutions to cope with the challenges imposed by the breakaway region has helped the Moldovans to distance themselves from Russian dominance and interference. By doing so Moldova became relevant for Western policymakers who invested further economically and politically in Moldova.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The war in Ukraine has saved Moldova, at great costs and that should not be taken for granted. The war threat receded as the Russians could not take the Odessa region and connect the Russian forces with the ones in Transnistria. The cornerstone of the separatist cause is the Russian Federation, which serves as the region's patron. As long as Transnistria's future remains unclear, tensions will continue. Moldova's prime minister has prioritized demilitarising the area, and the foreign minister has said it will continue to seek a peaceful solution. But Russian President Vladimir Putin has pointedly revoked a 2012 decree committing Russia to find a solution for Transnistria based on respect for Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

While Russia maintains its hard power influence in the region, in contravention of its obligations under the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit Decision, the EU and NATO are promoting capacity building, inter-institutional cooperation, economic and social well-being of people, and diplomatic solutions for settling the conflict. The decision of the EU and NATO to support Moldova's soft balancing efforts, rather than taking a more hard power approach, proved to be expedient for all parties involved as Chişinău —alongside Kyiv —received something precious it might have

waited decades for in less extreme circumstances: EU candidate status.

Moldova's pro-European president, Maia Sandu, and her government want to build on that and open EU accession talks by the end of 2023. It is irrefutable that today Moldova's political autonomy vis-à-vis Russia is considerably higher than it was a few years ago. The European Political Community Summit held in Moldova, only 20 kilometres away from the ongoing war, on 1-2 June 2023, certified the European community's support for Moldova, while sending a powerful message of unity and peace to the Moscow regime.

ENDNOTES

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