

A MOLDOVA'S FRAGILE SECURITY SITUATION

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Abstract:

The Official relations between Moldova and NATO began in 1992 when Moldova joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. However, as Moldova's neutrality is enshrined in its constitution, there are no official plans for Moldova to join the organization. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has upended not only the post-Cold War European security order but also the foundations of the European Union's eastern Neighborhood Policy. The way forward for the EU will build on two significant policy shifts that happened in 2022. First, the decade-old red line of not extending enlargement further east was crossed. As a result, the future EU will be bigger and more Eastern European than before, which for some member states, such as France, is a historical turning point. Second, the separation between enlargement and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was overcome and the two will now be intertwined. **Fourth**, as Russia's power and dominance in the post-Soviet region continue to diminish in the long run, the EU will need a Wider Eastern Neighborhood Policy that includes Central Asia.

The protracted regional conflicts (in Moldova and the South Caucasus) require a more active EU engagement as existing OSCE formats continue to be blocked, and Russia's role and military presence weaken. New openings for conflict resolution mean higher demand for the EU's diplomatic, monitoring, and peacekeeping capacities.

Moldova's security and future are closely linked with the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine. This is a decisive year for the country and its government with local elections approaching, in which manipulation by Kremlin proxies is expected, and an economy affected by the energy crisis and rising prices due to the war. In February a new prime minister and government were appointed – a move meant to address security concerns, hybrid threats, and energy dependence on Russia and Transnistria. The government seems prepared to address the threats, yet Moldova strongly depends on EU support. While the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria is often mentioned as the main potential source of destabilization, hybrid threats and the role of Kremlin proxies, such as Ilan Shor's party, are much more of a threat to stability than the Tiraspol authorities.

Key words: Moldova; security; conflict; threats; stability

1. Introduction

Transnistria is relevant here not so much as a military staging post as in its role as a hub used by Russia to spread panic and disinformation. President Vladimir Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, recently described relations with Moldova as quite tense and, in response to a statement by Recean on the demilitarization of Transnistria, told the government to be "quite careful" as Russia "remains a responsible party" in that region. Russian statements that Ukraine was plotting a false-flag operation in Transnistria have been debunked by the Moldovan and Ukrainian authorities. Russia could also aim to diminish support for Ukraine among the population and to spread the idea that the government wants to drag Moldova into the war.

High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrel has said that the EU is looking into establishing a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission in Moldova in order to "enhance the country's resilience against foreign interference and destabilization efforts." This would be in addition to the existing EU border mission and other operations in Moldova. It would be a positive development to strengthen the justice, police, and customs sectors, hence improving the security of the country. With Moldova having faced its highest number of cyberattacks in 2022, a CSDP mission should have a strong focus on

cybersecurity and hybrid threats. The EU could also take a more active role in the negotiations between Chisinau and Tiraspol as this would help maintain stability in the region and prevent any spillover effects from Russia's war against Ukraine.

The Moldova–Ukraine border, the official border between Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, was established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The length of the inland border is 1,222 kilometres (759 mi), of which 267 kilometres (166 mi) is fluvial (i.e., along rivers) and 955 kilometres (593 mi) is land border.

President of Moldova Maia Sandu has declared that she condemns the aggression of Russia against Ukraine in the strongest terms. Moldova signed a UN Resolution condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. On 3 March 2022, Moldova followed Ukraine and applied for EU membership. During the summer of 2020, the Chişinău International Airport was repeatedly forced to be evacuated after fake bomb threats; some of the threats were traced back to Russia. Hundreds of cyberattacks have been conducted against Moldovan computer systems.

Moldova was almost entirely dependent on Russian energy supplies. In 2022, Russia delivered less than half the amount of natural gas promised in contracts and instituted a 4-fold price hike for gas supplies to the country, leading to a sharp spike in inflation.

2. The final decisive step towards the EU and NATO

On 14 December 2023, the European Council took the historic decision to open accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine. The European path of both countries has been closely intertwined since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Both countries applied for membership in March 2022 and were together granted candidate status in June the same year. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a direct threat to Moldova. Statements by Russian generals and political leaders confirm that Russia's original military aim was to carve out a land corridor to Moldova by occupying the coast of Ukraine to the Black Sea and link Transnistria to Russia's occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea.

Moldova stands to advance its path towards European integration in 20 October and 03 November 2024 presidential election and referendum, but Moldova will likely remain a battleground state into the 2030s as Moldova's European Union (EU) membership negotiations continue. The possible reelection of pro-Western Moldovan President Maia Sandu and passing of the pro-EU referendum in October 2024 will not set Moldova's EU path in stone, but it would secure a Moldovan executive branch that is committed to furthering Moldova's EU accession process for another four years. The Russian Federation has recently been trying to sabotage Moldova's EU accession and destabilize Moldovan democracy and will continue these efforts in the coming decade. Support for EU membership is growing in Moldova, but the Kremlin is unlikely to cease its influence operations and may instead increase its efforts to reverse pro-EU trends in the coming decade. Moldova's presidential election is of central importance to the Russian Federation's grand strategic effort to maintain its influence over former Soviet states. The reelection of Sandu in 2024 Russia is likely prepared to pursue several lines of effort in the future to derail Moldova's EU path, such as attempting to influence and capture Moldovan state institutions, economic, and political ties to the pro-Russian Moldovan regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia and conducting reflexive control campaigns to shape EU member states' decision-making regarding Moldova's EU accession. The threat of a Russian invasion of Moldova through Ukraine is currently extremely low, but the current conditions may change in the future, allowing Russia to invade and occupy more of Moldova than what it currently does in Transnistria.

Moldova's future as an independent and sovereign state is directly tied to the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine and affects NATO's planning for the defense of its eastern flank. Western aid to both Ukraine and Moldova is vital to these states' abilities to resist Russian malign influence and aggression and keep Russian forces from threatening NATO. Moldova in 2024 is similar to Ukraine between 2014 and February 2022, and the Kremlin has enacted elements of its hybrid war playbook in both states as part of its long-standing, strategic-level efforts to reshape the governance and geostrategic orientations of Ukraine and Moldova.

The Russian Federation may exploit its military and security ties to Transnistria to influence future negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict to establish long-term influence over Moldovan domestic and foreign policies or to invade and occupy all of Moldova, but the threat of a Russian invasion of Moldova through Ukraine is currently extremely low. Russia will likely continue to wield influence over Transnistria's negotiating position in any future negotiations even if Russia is not itself party to those talks. Russia's ability to militarily threaten Moldova may change in the future depending on the development of the battlefield situation in Ukraine. Russia may be able to launch a large-scale offensive in southwestern Ukraine towards Moldova while continuing to fight in eastern Ukraine.

Moldova's future as an independent and sovereign state is directly tied to the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine and affects NATO defense planning. Russia could exploit a possible ceasefire in Ukraine to establish lines of communication to Transnistria by resuming flights from Russia over Ukrainian airspace, allowing Russia to build up its forces and means in Transnistria for future military operations against Moldova. A Russian invasion of Moldova becomes even more likely should Russia occupy Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts in the future, let alone the entirety of Ukraine.

NATO is currently expanding what will be its largest base near Constanta in southeastern Romania, demonstrating the importance NATO places on this region in its defense against Russia. A Russian occupation of Moldova would increase these already strained defense requirements by forcing NATO to defend Romania's border with Moldova.

Moldovan and Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity would allow NATO to focus on its northeastern border with Russia and Belarus and would keep Russian forces further from the NATO base in Romania. Western partners have recently increased their military support to Moldova, but Moldova remains militarily weak. In Transnistria the presence of Russian troops is often mentioned as the main potential source of destabilization, hybrid threats. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced that Ukraine's security forces had obtained Russian plans to "destroy Moldova" using hybrid means, which was confirmed by Moldova's Information and Security Service. The government is aware of potential threats to stability and is working on building resilience in the security arena. Hybrid operations conducted by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Moldova in the political, economic, energy-related and social fields, including information and cyber operations, with the aim of undermining the constitutional order, derailing the European course of the country and/or disintegrating the state. The illegal military presence of the Russian Federation in the Transnistrian region and its control over the separatist entity and the war against Ukraine, Russia has on several occasions launched cruise missiles aimed at western Ukraine from the Black Sea, crossing Moldovan airspace. This also undermines Moldova's neutrality and has been condemned by Moldova as a violation of international law. Transnistria is relevant here not so much as a military staging post as in its role as a hub used by Russia to spread panic and disinformation. A potential weakening of Ukraine's independence and sovereignty as a result of a hypothetical military defeat against Russia poses an existential

threat also to Moldova's survival as an independent, sovereign and democratic state. The war creates a risk of disruptions to gas transit through Ukraine. The war has increased food and energy prices, which will fuel Moldova's already high inflation.

The Russian hybrid warfare against Moldova includes various forms of pressure, disinformation, support for riots and anti-government protests, illegal financing of political parties and opposition politicians, and even attempts to organize a coup d'état. In addition, Moscow still controls the separatist region in Transnistria, where it maintains a military operational group against Chişinău's will.

The Moldovan authorities have recently been relatively successful in taking steps to strengthen the country's resilience, notably by abandoning dependence on Russian gas and redirecting its energy imports, with the help of funding from Western institutions. Moldova is also in the process of adopting a new national security strategy, which will include a more realistic assessment of Russia. However, to strengthen Moldova's resilience against both Russia's military and hybrid threats and to ensure progress in Moldova's coming EU membership negotiations, more western support must come in the form of financial support, technical assistance to support public administration, support for various reforms, and for capacity building of Moldova's armed forces.

3. Conclusions

A Moldova in 2024 is similar to Ukraine between 2014 and February 2022, and the Russia has enacted elements of its hybrid war playbook in both states as part of its long-standing, strategic-level efforts to reshape the governance and geostrategic orientations of Ukraine and Moldova. Moldova has a frozen conflict with a Russian military exclave occupying a part of the country illegally. Moldova's security and future are closely linked with the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine. This is a decisive year for the country and its government with local elections approaching, in which manipulation by Kremlin proxies is expected, and an economy affected by the energy crisis and rising prices due to the war. In February a new prime minister and government were appointed – a move meant to address security concerns, hybrid threats, and energy dependence on Russia and Transnistria. The government seems prepared to address the threats, yet Moldova strongly depends on EU support. Russia has always interpreted Moldova's neutrality as meaning that it cannot have any contact with NATO and should have no military capability of its own. The EU institutions and individual member states should also help to support the revitalisation of Moldova's stalled financial decentralisation reform. Most importantly, the EU and western institutions must continue to support Moldova financially. Moldova will need additional funding to continue its energy diversification strategy, and in order to overcome Russia's hybrid threats to critical infrastructure and support Moldova with countering the negative effects of Russia's war in Ukraine.