

Moldova between Russia and the West

Internal Divisions behind the Commitment to European Integration



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- “Unexpected Breakthrough: ‘Significant Progress in More than a Decade’ in the Transnistrian Settlement Process”, *Yearly annual of the Laboratory for the Analysis of the Transnistria conflict*, Romania, 2017.
- “Respublika Moldova—zalozhnik geopolitiki ili ‘failed state?’” [The Republic of Moldova—hostage of geopolitics or “failed state?”], *Pathways to Peace and Security Journal*, Russia, 2016.

Abstract

The traditional characterisation of Moldova as a bridge between two civilisations, Russian Orthodox and the West, seems to have become outdated. Moldova is an example of a society divided between different geopolitical preferences and the conflict over Transnistria continues to reinforce the perception of uncertainty about the country's future. It is quite natural, that the geopolitical stand-off between Russia and the West—which worsened after the start of the conflict in Ukraine and the war in Donbass and evolved into a broad-based confrontation—has become almost the main item on Moldova's domestic and foreign policy agenda.

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Introduction

Events in Ukraine have acted as a catalyst for public discussion and decisive action by the Moldovan elite to define the country's foreign policy direction once and for all. Differently from Georgia after 2008 and Ukraine after 2014, it was impossible for Moldova to build a public consensus about its foreign policy. Moldova is a unique example of a country where European ideas have become progressively less popular despite a pro-European government and parliamentary coalition in power. Interestingly, public support for European integration reached its zenith (76.2%) in November 2007 under the Communist party rather than under the current pro-Western coalition.¹ After a change of government in 2009, support for European integration not only declined but periodically fell behind support for integration in the Eurasian Economic Union (formerly, the Customs Union). In April 2017, according to the Barometer of Public Opinion in Moldova, "Eurasianists" exceeded "pro-Europeans" by a proportion of 49% to 45%.²

This reversal of fortunes is largely explained by the authorities' utter failure to combat corruption, which has significantly worsened in recent years. They have not succeeded in raising living standards, or in eliminating poverty and preventing the exodus of the working-age population. Since 2009, the repeated failures of the governing coalition (in its various party incarnations) have been the main reason for the declining popularity of European ideas because the Moldovan population associates its pro-European government with European integration in general. Nevertheless, the European Union (EU) is still perceived as the most attractive option when it comes to employment, training and other opportunities. It is especially promising for those Moldovans who possess Romanian passports as well—according to some estimates, about 800,000³ out of 2.9 million people (results of the 2014 census, presented in 2017)⁴.

Translated from Russian by Cameron Johnston.

1. "Barometer of Public Opinion", Institute for Public Policy, November 2007, <http://ipp.md>.

2. "Barometer of Public Opinion", Institute for Public Policy, April 2017, <http://ipp.md>.

3. L. M. Dorin, "Un milion de Moldoveni cu cetățenia Română" [A million Moldovans with Romanian], Bloguri, 1 April 2017, <http://adevarul.ro>.

4. "Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Moldova, May 12-25, 2014", Statistica Moldovei, 2014, www.statistica.md.

According to a poll taken in 2017 by the International Republican Institute (USA), 78% of Moldovan respondents believe that the country is going in the wrong direction. In addition, respondents indicate corruption, unemployment and low wages and pensions as the three most serious social problems. Equivalent figures for past years were lower, suggesting that the mood in society has soured. In such circumstances, the executive and the parties making up the governing coalition resort to the rhetoric about “Russian tanks” to compensate for the lack of better options.

Setbacks and Failures under Cover of European Integration

Despite the failures of Moldovan establishment, Western governments have continued to offer their support, with the result that the Moldovan population holds them jointly responsible for Chisinau's failures. Yet, Western diplomats are also disappointed: last summer, for instance, the US ambassador to Moldova James Pettit expressed surprise on Moldovan TV that Western governments should continually support a country in which "half the population looks at Russia".

"The United States has given Moldova more than a billion dollars for economic and democratic development. The European Union has given a similar amount, while Russia has not only not helped your country but punished it by introducing an embargo. That is why it surprises us that, according to all the polls, over half the Moldovan population is pro-Russian"—said the American ambassador.⁵

In response, the Moldovan President Igor Dodon said that the Americans ought to support the people of Moldova, not its corrupt government.

In a quarter century or more since Moldova's independence, Western governments have indeed given the country several billion dollars in financial aid of various sorts, wittingly or unwittingly providing coverage for the poor performance of the Moldovan authorities in order to prevent Russian influence in the country from growing. Ambassador Pettit told another national TV channel that the Moldovan people are disillusioned with the governing coalition. "The disillusionment started after Vladimir Voronin left power. People have been very hopeful since 2009. But there can be no question of patience any longer. People have waited eight years

5. "Dodon posovetoval poslu SShA podderzivat' moldavskij narod, a ne korrumpirovanoe pravitel'stvo" [Dodon advised the US ambassador to support the Moldovan people, not the corrupt government], *Moldavskie Vedomosti*, 12 June 2017, www.vedomosti.md.

for improvements but are now leaving the country, disillusioned”, the US ambassador lamented.⁶

In this way, the Europeans and Americans are now considered jointly responsible for the failures of recent years. Ordinary Moldovans and the expert community both believe that Western governments—principally Romania, the European Commission and the USA—act as guardians for Moldova’s ruling elites to prevent the pro-European government from failing. This opinion has become particularly popular since the events in Ukraine in 2014 took place. “Everyone is sick of Moldova and its excesses are only tolerated so that it doesn’t fall to the Russians”—people say in unofficial conversations.

In November 2014, a few days before parliamentary elections, around \$1 billion—equivalent to about 15% of Moldova’s gross domestic product (GDP)—was withdrawn from the reserves of the National Bank of Moldova and funnelled through three offshore banks.⁷ The money was stolen by state-aligned oligarchs with the connivance of the then-President Nicolae Timofti, Prime Minister Iurie Leancă, head of the National Bank of Moldova Dorin Drăguțanu and the security services. The theft delivered a heavy blow to Moldova’s economy: the Moldovan leu collapsed due to a shortage of currency, initially losing half its value before recovering and ending up around 40% down. This, in turn, increased the price of petrol and electricity, which pushed up the price of nearly all goods. This billion-dollar theft was the largest embezzlement of state funds ever recorded in Moldova. International financial institutions, European bodies and the international community in general expressed grave concern about the crime and the fact that the perpetrators were not punished.⁸ The numerous Western publications devoted to Moldova and the “theft of the century” pointed to corruption as the country’s greatest evil.⁹

According to unofficial sources in Western diplomatic corps, foreign diplomats—including Western ones—knew in autumn 2014 about the impending operation by Moldovan officials to steal money from the state

6. “Posol SShA Dzhejms Pettit: Dempartia, prodvigaia reform izbiratel’noj sistemy, khochet ukrepiť svoiu vlast” [US Ambassador James Pettit: by putting forward reforms to the electoral system, the Democratic Party wants to reinforce its power], Newsmaker, 2 July 2017. <http://newsmaker.md>.

7. E. Vardanian, « Kak ukrast’ milliard » [How to Steal a Billion], Radio Europa Liberă, 5 February 2015, www.europalibera.org.

8. “Council conclusions on the Republic of Moldova”, Council of the European Union, 15 February 2016, www.consilium.europa.eu.

9. Even the General Secretary of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, wrote an article: “Bring Moldova Back from the Brink”, *The New York Times*, 10 August 2015. www.nytimes.com.

reserves. They raised warning flags and advised their governments to intervene and thwart the crime. However, the diplomats' advice went unheeded, and for the usual reason: Western governments preferred to turn a blind eye because their main goal was, and still is, to prevent pro-Russian forces from taking power in Moldova. The approach of Western ruling elites towards the "specificities" of Moldovan democracy compromises the country's European choice in the eyes of its population.¹⁰

Polls indicate that opposition to Moldova's policy of concealing its domestic problems behind the screen of European integration is widespread among the expert community and the population. An article by the Centre for European Policy Studies states that "Since 2009 the EU [has] supported the rule of the Alliance for European Integration, which was led by corrupt oligarchs who proclaimed themselves to be pro-European".¹¹

Even pro-European Moldovan experts recognise that European institutions are negatively disposed towards Moldova, especially since the "theft of the century" from the banking sector was widely publicised in the Western press. "Moldova's negative image in Europe...means that the Moldovan project frequently generates criticism about the Moldovan government or is not discussed at all"—argues Moldovan political scientist Dionis Cenuşa.¹²

Criticism is not only directed at corruption but also at weak democratic institutions, a politically compromised judiciary and the influence that oligarchical groups wield over the state. Off-the-record, the European establishment has proposed replacing corrupt Moldovan officials with European emissaries to ensure the independence of public bodies from financial and political clans, and guarantee that judicial (and other) reforms are carried out.

"For a country sharing a direct border with the EU, but also with a war-torn Ukraine, Moldova is too vulnerable to both domestic and foreign vested interests"—states an article by Chatham House. "A concerted effort by the EU to drive reform is needed, or the Union might have another [crisis] to add to the myriad crises it is facing."¹³

10. Author's conversation with a member of the Western diplomatic corps in Chisinau, 23 December 2016.

11. H. Kostanian, "Why Moldova's European Integration Is Failing", CEPS, 3 March 2016. www.ceps.eu.

12. D. Cenuşa, "Otnoshenie Shvetsii k Vostochnomu partnerstvu i k Moldove" [Sweden's approach towards the Eastern partnership and Moldova], IPN, 25 April 2016, <http://ipn.md>.

13. C. Gherasimov, "Moldova: The Captured State on Europe's Edge", Chatham House, 8 March 2017, www.chathamhouse.org.

The European and Euro-Atlantic Project in Moldova: Evolution and Prospects

Moldova's foreign policy towards the West can be divided into three elements: bilateral cooperation with European and North American countries; the much-vaunted model of integration into EU structures¹⁴ and a step-by-step alignment with NATO without actually joining the alliance, which would violate the country's neutral status enshrined in its constitution.¹⁵ In light of the first element, Moldova is cooperating actively with Romania (in many fields), France (as for culture, education, economy), Germany (as for economy, trade, investment) and the United States (the issue of Transnistria, investment, infrastructure projects and education). As for the second and third element, progress has been variable but much has still been achieved, particularly in aligning with the European Union.

On 28 November 1994, the first President of the Republic of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, signed a partnership and cooperation agreement with the EU, which entered into force on 1 July 1998 for a period of ten years. Moldova continued to look towards Europe under the leadership of Vladimir Voronin, the ostensibly pro-Russian President who governed Moldova from 2001 to 2009 and who still leads the Communist Party which he founded in 1993. In May 2004, Moldova joined the European Neighbourhood Policy and on 22 February 2005, Chisinau and Brussels signed an Action Plan. An Autonomous Trade Preferences (ATP) regime came into force on 1 January 2008 for Moldovan economic actors, including those in Transnistria. At the same time, the EU introduced a simplified visa regime for Moldovan citizens. By 2009, when the communist government was replaced by centre-right pro-European parties, Moldova had notched up real successes in its cooperation with the

14. "Association Agreement", Ministerstvo inostrannikh del i evropejskoj integratsii RM [Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration], www.mfa.gov.md.

15. "Moldova – NATO Relations", Ministerstvo inostrannikh del i evropejskoj integratsii RM [Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration], www.mfa.gov.md.

European Union: in January 2010, Moldova and the EU officially began talks to prepare an Association Agreement.

The Association Agreement and the bilateral agreement on Moldova's accession to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Zone (DCFTA) was initialled by Moldova's Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Natalia Gherman, at the "Eastern Partnership" summit in Vilnius on 28 November 2013. The document was signed by the Moldovan Prime Minister Iurie Leancă in Brussels on 27 June 2014, ratified by the Moldovan parliament on 2 July of the same year and, after being ratified by the parliaments of all 28 EU member states, entered into force on 1 July 2016. A visa-free regime for Moldovan citizens with biometric passports also commenced on 28 April 2014. In any 180-day period, they can spend up to 90 days in EU countries but they do not have the right to work.

Under a Communist President (2001-2009), European integration suited the prevailing political trends and satisfied popular expectations, as well as providing a counterweight to Russia's considerable influence (through the Transnistria issue, dependence on Russian gas supplies and the Russian market, the problem of 600,000 Moldovan migrants in Russia) and making up for the deterioration in Moldovan-Russian relations following the failure of the "Kozak memorandum".¹⁶ Under the current coalition government, however, this orientation towards the EU has become completely dominant. In fact, the Democratic Party, which is, de facto, in sole control of Moldova, intends to change the constitution in 2018 to make European integration the country's sole, central, foreign policy priority. Euro-sceptics objected, interpreting the plans as an attempt to establish a dominant state ideology contrary to the constitution.

Currently, the problems on the road to European integration—without full membership of the EU—can be divided into two groups. The first set surrounds the implementation of the provisions of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA treaty, especially in terms of exporting

16. The Memorandum "On the Basic Principles of the State Structure of a United State in Moldova", about a settlement to the Transnistria conflict, was developed by the then First Deputy Head of the Kremlin Administration, Dmitry Kozak, and bore his name. It was drawn upon the personal request of Moldovan President, Vladimir Voronin, in the summer-autumn 2003 and was meant to finally settle the conflict between the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistria region. However, Voronin himself refused to sign the memorandum under pressure from Western countries. Vladimir Putin's visit to Chisinau was cancelled at the last minute and bilateral relations went into a tailspin. See "Uil'iam Khill, byvshij glava Missii OBSE, rasskazal 'Kommersant'-MD' o tom, pochemu v 2003 godu ne byl podpisán 'Memorandum Kozaka'" [William Hill, former head of the OSCE mission, told *Kommersant Moldova* why the "Kozak Memorandum" was not signed in 2003], *Kommersant Moldova*, 30 November 2011. <http://enews.md>.

Moldovan agricultural products to the European market. Moldova must meet complex technical standards and sanitary requirements, as well as making its production more profitable and competitive. The second set of problems concerns the multilayered Moldovan-Russian relations: Moldova has faced trade problems after Russia banned imports of Moldovan produce in summer 2014 as “punishment” for its Association Agreement with the EU; the issue of information security, including the fight against Russian propaganda and the expulsion of numerous Russian journalists and experts; lastly, the line that Moldova has taken over the last three years during the Ukraine crisis and the confrontation between Russia and the West. These problems do not prevent Moldova from integrating into the West but they do entail economic difficulties and deepen the divide between “Europeans” and “Eurasianists”.

To assess Moldova’s European policy more objectively, one must also examine the history of Moldova’s alignment with NATO structures, which actually began before its association with the EU.

As early as December 1991, the first Foreign Minister of the independent Moldovan Republic, Nicolae Țău, took part in a meeting of the newly-created North Atlantic Cooperation Council in Brussels. In March 1994, meanwhile, Moldova joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme that had been established at the behest of the United States. Moldova went on to participate in NATO’s “Science for Peace and Security” programme, which led to the creation of the Academy of Science’s IT network (the Academy was tasked with implementing the programme), and in 1999, NATO helped to establish the RENAM—National Research and Educational Network of Moldova—association, which provided an internet connection to educational and medical institutions, as well as museums and libraries. In addition, the 2000s saw the launch of a big programme to liquidate Soviet-era anti-personnel mines and rocket fuel, as well as reserves of pesticides and other toxic chemicals.

In 1997, the Mission of Moldova to NATO was opened and headed by Moldova’s ambassador to Belgium. In 2005, Moldovan President Voronin visited the NATO headquarters and unveiled plans to develop an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) to deepen relations with NATO. In May 2006, the IPAP was approved by the Moldovan government and the NATO Council. The document confirmed Moldova’s intention to integrate into NATO and EU structures. Finally, in 2007, a NATO Information and Documentation Centre opened in Moldova—a non-governmental organisation (NGO) designed to burnish the Alliance’s image, particularly among young people, the press and the expert community.

Moldova's cooperation with NATO intensified in 2009, following a change of government. Two of the ruling parties, the liberal democrats and the liberals, declared the entry into NATO and an abandonment of the country's neutral status to be key parts of their foreign policy agenda. Western diplomats and politicians repeatedly stressed that Moldova would be far more successful in integrating into the EU if it aligned itself as closely as possible with NATO, even without joining the Alliance. Western politicians and experts, along with their Moldovan colleagues, claim that since NATO's requirements for candidate countries overlap with the EU's—democracy, rule of law, market economy and safeguards for investment—aligning with NATO could have helped to strengthen the Moldovan economy and increased the country's chances of joining the EU.

In November 2009, the Moldovan government revised its Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO and in August 2010, the document was approved. It involves developing the 22nd peacekeeping battalion of the Moldovan armed forces, which is designed to support NATO forces in Afghanistan and Kosovo. In addition, Moldovan sappers have been clearing mines in Iraq since 2003. The Alliance helps Moldova to improve command and control, structure its forces more efficiently, update patrolling methods and secure the country's borders, deal with the fallout of natural disasters and tackle cyber-terrorism. In 2012, Moldova joined the "Global Peace Operations Initiative", a US-funded programme aimed at promoting regional and international security.

As part of the reforms of the Moldovan Armed Forces, the functions of the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff have been separated and a Directorate for Military Policy and Defence Planning has been created. In 2011, the Moldovan army switched to NATO-style marching. Moldovan officers were trained in Western military institutes and an agreement was signed to this effect in 1994 between the Republic of Moldova and the state of North Carolina. Moldova signed a military agreement with Lithuania in 2012 and Romania in 2013 and it receives active support from Germany. NATO also supports the National Army's training centres located on a shooting range near the village of Bulboaca, as well as on four smaller ranges: here, servicemen are trained in 15 different specialties. The USA had earlier contributed \$1.6 million for the modernisation of the Bulboaca shooting range. The military air field in Mărculești in Northern Moldova has been rebuilt.

NATO unreservedly supports Moldova's policy of European integration and defends the country's territorial integrity against the backdrop of the Transnistria conflict by demanding Russia to comply to the

Istanbul Agreements of November 1999 by withdrawing its troops and weaponry from the Transnistria region of the Moldovan Republic.¹⁷

In 2017, the US Naval Command decided to fund the reconstruction and modernisation of a series of military facilities in Moldova, including the shooting range at Bulboaca. These plans were interpreted by the Moldovan President Dodon, as well as Russian military circles, as an attempt to open a US military base in Moldova or, at the very least, to draw the Moldovan armed forces into the US's military-strategic plans in the region. Such a prospect is greeted with extreme hostility since the shooting range is only twenty kilometres from the town of Bender in the Transnistria region. In response, the Moldovan Ministry of Defence and the US embassy announced that those facilities were designed solely for training and are part of the plan to intensify the Moldovan army's peacekeeping activities.

In 2015, however, the Obama Administration approved a tenfold increase in the financial aid given to the Moldovan National Army in connection with regional emerging threats from Russia. Although the sums involved are not particularly impressive in absolute terms—increasing from \$1.2 to \$12.7 million—the USA's military and political cooperation with Moldova should be seen in the context of Washington's policy to deter Moscow militarily and politically. The base in Bulboaca, which is ostensibly being modernised to reinforce the UN's peacekeeping activities, is being used mostly for military exercises on Moldovan territory with the US and Romanian armies.¹⁸

Meanwhile, NATO officials and Moldovan politicians and experts are keen to show to the public that NATO membership is not an essential precondition for EU membership, as the examples of Sweden, Finland, Austria, Ireland, Cyprus and Malta prove.¹⁹ This undermines the rhetoric of left-wing parties that joining the EU is an “undercover way” of joining NATO. Since 2014, the political elite considered to do quite the opposite: using a comprehensive alignment with the EU, buttressed by the signature and ratification of the Association Agreement, to move closer to NATO.

17. Points 18 and 19 of the Declaration of the High-level Istanbul Meeting, OSCE, 1999, www.osce.org.

18. A. Deviatkov, “Partnerstvo radi mira? NATO rasshiriaet svoe prisutstvie v Moldove” [Partnership for peace? NATO expands its presence in Moldova], *Evrazia Ekspert*, 6 September 2017. <http://eurasia.expert>.

19. See, for instance, “Protsess evropejskoj integratsii ne oznachaet ob”iazatel’nogo prisoedineniia k NATO” [The process of European integration does not necessarily mean joining NATO], *Publika*, 15 May 2014. <https://ru.publika.md>.

Nevertheless, the idea of integrating into NATO is not on the country's official agenda and does not command widespread support among the population, any more than it did in the past. Polls indicate that the proportion of respondents who support NATO integration has fluctuated between 22% in October 2017 and 27% in March 2017.²⁰ Such figures dampen enthusiasm among advocates of NATO membership since the heightened cooperation with the Alliance started in 2009 has led to only a slight increase in NATO's popularity, unlike in Georgia after 2008 or Ukraine after 2014. On the other hand, this has not prevented a NATO Communications Bureau from opening in Chisinau in December 2017.

20. "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova", September-October 2017, *op. cit.*

Moldovan-Russian Relations after 2014

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbass in spring 2014 ratcheted up foreign-policy risks for Moldova: offering a counterpoint to Moldova's official policy of European integration, Russia continues to exert influence over the country's economy and internal politics, both directly and indirectly. Nevertheless, Russian influence has waned. Only 12% of Moldovan exports went to Russia in 2014, compared to 53% destined for the EU.²¹ Experts note that Russia lost its predominant position as long ago as 2012.²²

The division in society over Moldova's foreign policy widened after the victory of Igor Dodon, the leader of the Socialist Party, in the Presidential election of November 2016, the first general election in 20 years.

Despite wielding modest powers, the fifth President of Moldova promotes an alternative course, of alignment with the Eurasian Economic Union and a return to strategic partnership with Russia. The presence of Russian media, most notably TV channels, the Transnistria conflict, Moldova's dependence on Russian gas and the Russian export market for agricultural products—causes ambiguity between Moldova's domestic and foreign policy agenda.

This dissonance is seized on and exploited by left and right-wing parties, whether influential or marginal, which ratchet up the tension prior to an election by pedalling the “threat that Russian tanks will arrive” or that Moldova will be lost to Romania and/or NATO. Besides its doubtful value, this approach is harmful in that it deliberately distracts the Moldovan people from the country's real social and economic problems: the unprecedented level of corruption, the impoverishment of the population and mass emigration by the working-age population, to name but a few.

21. N. Mel'nik, N. Pakhol'nitskiy, “Torgovlia tsiframi. Chto prinesla Moldovie zona svobodnoj torgovli s ES” [Trade in numbers. What did the free trade zone with the EU bring Moldova], Newsmaker, 7 February 2017, <http://newsmaker.md>

22. “Moldova i Rossiia: mezhdru torgovymi otnosheniami i ekonomicheskoi zavisimost'iu” [Moldova and Russia: between trade relations and economic dependence], Expert-Grup, March 2015, www.expert-grup.org

As was mentioned above, discussions about the geopolitical divide in Moldova were revived after the victory of the pro-Russian presidential candidate Igor Dodon. The foreign threat is exploited for domestic political ends and therefore exaggerated. Moldova does not have a completely free hand when taking important foreign policy decisions because it is financially dependent on Western governments and international organisations. Russia, meanwhile, makes no financial investments in Moldova apart from disbursing \$100 million to Transnistria each year as financial aid to pensioners and other vulnerable citizens.²³ The European Union has become the main buyer of Moldovan goods, which mainly consist of fruit and vegetables, wine, industrial goods, machines and transport equipment. In 2016, Moldovan exports to the EU amounted to EUR 1.3 billion, compared to just over EUR 200 million for exports to Russia.

Finally, the EU has connected Moldova to the single energy market as part of implementing its Third Energy Packet. Theoretically, this could lead to Gazprom losing its monopoly on the Moldovan market but for now, there is still no realistic alternative to Russia.²⁴ In 2016, Moldova consumed 3 billion cubic metres of gas, with Transnistria accounting for 1.8 billion. In 2015, a gas pipeline was built between the Romanian city of Iasi and the Moldovan town of Ungheni but it is only capable of supplying the residents of this border region with 1 million cubic metres of gas. One hundred million euros would be needed to extend the pipeline to Chisinau and increase the gas supply from Romania.

If Russia trails far behind the EU in economic terms, the blame lies largely with Russia itself, which, in imposing sectoral sanctions on Moldova since 2006, has forced Moldovan exporters to send their goods elsewhere. Nevertheless, polls show that in political terms, the Europeans struggle to counteract Russian influence: half of the Moldovan population still wants integration with the Eurasian Union, not the European Union. Experts believe that the chronic flaws exhibited by pro-European governments in recent years have convinced Russia that it can achieve maximum effect with minimal interference. “Political corruption, combined with shadowy interests and strong social polarization, creates an environment in which Russian propaganda can succeed, an outcome which

23. R. Goujon, “The Logic and Risks Behind Russia’s Statelet Sponsorship”, Stratfor Worldview, 15 September 2015, <https://worldview.stratfor.com>.

24. A. Deviatkov, “Moscow’s Man in Moldova”, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 1 June 2017. <http://carnegie.ru>.

is also helped by the growing influence of pro-Russian parties, particularly the Socialist Party”.²⁵

In the face of fluctuating popular support for European integration, the Moldovan authorities have no choice but to sign up to the policy of confrontation with Russia. Moldova announced at the end of May 2017 that it was expelling five Russian diplomats but did not explain its reasoning other than to cite various reports from the secret services. Russia expelled five Moldovan diplomats in retaliation. These tit-for-tat expulsions were unprecedented, not only for bilateral relations but also for the post-Soviet space. Against this background, one can identify two main narratives about Moldova in world media: “Chisinau is constantly under pressure from Moscow” and “Moldova—a case of state capture”. In the case of the latter, experts have Vladimir Plahotniuc in mind: Plahotniuc, an oligarch, is chairman of the governing Democratic Party and the richest and most influential person in Moldova. Despite not holding any executive position, he seems to make all the important domestic and foreign policy decisions.²⁶

Plahotniuc is behind all the decisions that relate to Russia—the expulsion of Russian diplomats, the detention and deportation of Moscow-based experts and journalists, countering the pro-Russian policies of President Dodon and so on. “It makes sense [for Plahotniuc] to inflate the conflict with Russia. On the one hand, it is a way of attracting support from those members of Western elites who are convinced that Russian influence must be checked, including in Eastern Europe”, believes one Russian political scientist.²⁷

Nonetheless, the European Union is incapable of excluding Russia from the region or even of assuming as powerful a role as Russia. Despite active support from the United States, the Europeans are currently unable to offer an alternative to Russia when it comes to energy supplies—the gas pipeline from Romania will only start working in 2018 and will not meet even half of Moldova’s needs. What is more, European countries are in no position to absorb the numbers of Moldovan migrant labourers, 200,000–600,000, who currently reside in Russia.

25. D. Cenușa, “Rol’ prezidenta Dodona dlia Rossii i posledstviia dlia evropejskoj itegratsii” [The role of President Dodon for Russia and the consequences for European integration], IPN, 12 June 2017, <http://ipn.md>.

26. E. Vardanian., “Respublika Moldova—zalozhnik geopolitiki ili failed state?” [The Republic of Moldova—a hostage of geopolitics or a failed state?], IMEMO RAN, *Puti k miru i bezopasnosti*, 2016, No. 2, pp. 51–70, www.imemo.ru.

27. A. Deviatkov, “Ekstsess postsovetskosti: o chem govorit diplomaticheskij skandal mezhdru Rossiej i Moldovoj” [Too much post-Sovietism: what does the diplomatic scandal between Russia and Moldova tell us], Intersection, 13 June 2017, <http://intersectionproject.eu>.

Finally, the Transnistria conflict cannot be resolved without Russia. This dependence on Russia stands out in sharp relief because two of the guarantors of the conflict's resolution, Russia and Ukraine, are on opposite sides of the barricades following the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas. "Careful balancing between Russia and the West is key to Moldova's future, and to suggest otherwise would be fraught with dire consequences for the country"—argues Eugene Rumer, an American expert with the Carnegie Foundation. Rumer also questions the effectiveness of the "Eastern Partnership" (EP) policy since 2014, considering that only half of the EP countries—Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova—have signed Association Agreements with the EU.²⁸

28. E. Rumer, "Moldova between Russia and the West: A Delicate Balance", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 May 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

The Transnistria Conflict and the Tripartite Security Problem: Local, Regional, and International

The Transnistria conflict has remained unresolved for over 25 years, since the moment that the ceasefire agreement was signed in Moscow between Russia and Moldova on 21 July 1992. The Moldovan leadership made an error at that time which continues to have a baleful on the region to this day. In May 1992, the then-President, Mircea Snegur, stated that Moldova was in a state of war with Russia²⁹ but [his] signature of the 21 July agreement meant that Russia was suddenly transformed from a party to the conflict into a mediator and peacemaker. With Moldova's consent, Russia began to play a double game, presenting itself as a guarantor, mediator and peacemaker on the one hand but providing all manner of help to the Transnistrian administration to cover social spending.

Russia is still playing this double game and the Ukraine crisis has only aggravated the situation: Russia must now choose between the need to fulfil its role as mediator, its traditional duty as patron of the unrecognised Transnistrian Republic—in financial, military-political and media terms—and its new role as an adversary of Ukraine, which is itself a guarantor of the Transnistrian conflict's resolution process. It came as no surprise, then, that in March 2014, immediately after Moscow's decision to annex Crimea, stories appeared in Western media about a possible Russian invasion of Odessa oblast (from Crimea) and, from there, a further incursion into Moldova through the Transnistria region.

In 2014, for instance, the then-Commander of the US armed forces European Command (EUCOM) and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Philip Breedlove, believed that Russia had “absolutely sufficient force to run [from Eastern Ukraine] to Trans-Dniester...”. Similar fears were voiced by the Deputy National Security Advisor to the US President, Antony Blinken, while European diplomats

29. L. Evtushik, “Perestrelka pereshla v perepalku” [A skirmish becomes a squabble], *Kommersant*, 1 June 1992, www.kommersant.ru.

stated that Putin's plans included extending Russian influence across the whole of East and South Ukraine, connecting to Transnistria, and cutting off Ukraine from the Black Sea.³⁰

Similar fears reigned in Chisinau. Should the Russian army attack, Prime Minister Iurie Leancă said, Moldova would only be able to hold out for a few hours. "Although we are spending more on defence, we still do not have tanks", he said. "Moldova only has two light armoured personnel carriers on the border with Transnistria".³¹ A high-ranking official in the Moldovan leadership also confirmed in March 2014 that Chisinau expected a Russian invasion of Odessa to occur imminently, by airborne forces and naval infantry from Crimea, followed by a march on Tiraspol and then Chisinau. Kiev knew of these plans, according to the official, but could not do anything to thwart them.

Although these fears were not borne out, Moldova and Romania are acutely conscious of the military risk that Russia poses, especially considering its military presence in the Transnistria region. In June 2017, for instance, a roundtable was held by the Institute of Legal and Political Studies at the Romanian Academy of Sciences and NATO's Information and Documentation Centre in Chisinau: its title, "Risks and threats to the security of the Moldovan Republic: how to assess them?" A representative of the Alexandru cel Bun Military Academy, Colonel Iurie Gârneț, argued that Moldova faced various military threats: "Firstly, they come from the armed forces of the so-called 'Transnistrian Moldovan Republic' and from a Russian task force, stationed in the eastern districts of Moldova. Secondly, we are talking about the Russian armed forces on the Crimean Peninsula and those stationed in Russia's Western Military District".³²

Since transit through Ukrainian territory would be needed for these and other scenarios to come to pass, Kiev has remained highly sensitive to any such leaks and has decided to take pre-emptive measures. In May 2015, Kiev rescinded an agreement between Russia and Ukraine that had been in force since 1995 and which allowed Russian military formations temporarily stationed on Moldovan territory (in the Transnistria region) to transit through Ukrainian territory.

30. L. Harding, "Russia Ready to Annex Moldova Region, Nato Commander Claims", *The Guardian*, 23 March 2014, www.theguardian.com.

31. R. Nowak, "Moldawien: 'Nur Stunden gegen Angriff der Russen'" [Moldova: If the Russians attack, we will only last out a couple of hours], *Die Presse*, 5 June 2014. <https://diepresse.com>.

32. V. Vasiliu, "Analiză. Cum Rusia poate desfășura un război total împotriva Republicii Moldova" [Analysis. How Russia can conduct total war against the Republic of Moldova], *Deschide.md*, 28 June 2017. <https://deschide.md>.

Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, rescinded this agreement on 22 May 2015. Now, Russian servicemen stationed in Transnistria as part of the Russian task force (the former 14th Army) are rotated in and out by air, through Chisinau international airport. A paradox has therefore arisen: Moldova demands the withdrawal of Russian troops and the replacement of the peacekeeping operation on the Dniester but allows military transit, while Ukraine, which has not formally voiced these demands, has blocked the transit of Russian military formations through its territory.

Meanwhile, the way in which the crisis in the Donbass has evolved is very reminiscent of the Transnistria conflict in its first, post-war, period. As in the Donbass, the sluggish negotiation process between Chisinau and Tiraspol started with documents signed by the parties to the conflict which drew no distinction between the "metropole" and the "rebels" and which granted the status of intermediary to a third party to the conflict, Russia. The similarities between Transnistria and Donbass even extend to the stages of the post-conflict process:

- Russia, which starts off as a de-facto participant in the conflict, becomes a mediator and peacemaker;
- Russia's backing of the unrecognised separatist entity is obvious though not overt, turning the conflict and its aftermath into a source of leverage over the "metropole";
- Crucial clauses in the documents, referring to the conflict-resolution process and post-conflict reconstruction (status, division of powers, financial problems etc), are made directly dependent on the results of the resolution process itself, creating conditions in which the negotiations can drag out indefinitely;
- Bringing foreign powers into the resolution process does not guarantee that it will end successfully. Indeed, it forces the "metropole" to recognise the position of the unrecognised entity, thereby giving that entity the status of a full-blown party to the negotiations.

The Transnistria conflict, which, until the summer of 1992, was a domestic problem for Moldova, took on an international dimension in the same way as other "frozen conflicts" in the post-Soviet space and helped to destabilise the region. So things stayed until 2014 when a drastic escalation in Ukraine, first in Crimea and then in the Donbass, turned Transnistria from Russia's "deep strategic rear" into a possible second front against Ukraine, or a bridgehead for incursions into Moldova and Romania.

Since the broad confrontation between Russia and the West shows no signs of abating, Moldova and the breakaway Transnistria region are being bundled up with Ukraine in international relations. In other words, any movement over Donbass and/or Crimea may have consequences for the Transnistria settlement, as well as for Moldovan-Russian relations and domestic Moldovan politics. The greater the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine, the worse will be the conflict in Moldovan society over which way the country should lean. This conflict is already partly visible in the law on countering Russian propaganda which was passed recently by the Moldovan parliament and which entered into force on 12 February 2018.³³ Geopolitics will once again take centre stage during the next set of parliamentary elections in Moldova, to be held in autumn 2018.

33. See for instance: N. Pakhol'nitskij, "Otkliuchenie sleduet. KSTR raz"iasnil, kogda vstupil v silu zakon o rossijskoj propagande" [Disconnection to follow. KSTR explained when the law on Russian propaganda will take effect], Newsmaker, 12 February 2018, <http://newsmaker.md>.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The idea of European integration has been greatly discredited by the coalition of centre-right parties that have governed Moldova since 2009. As before, any attempt to carry out significant reforms has been sabotaged by the Moldovan authorities, with the responsibility of the Chairman of the Democratic Party Vladimir Plahotniuc, Moldova's richest and most powerful man.

Extensive political and financial support from Europe and the United States has not eliminated these problems. Slogans about European integration provide cover for ongoing problems in government and society, with the result that citizens and experts hold Moldova's Western partners responsible for what is happening in the country, the culmination of which was the theft of a billion dollars from the national banking system.

Playing up geopolitical problems has been a convenient tactic for the Moldovan authorities, especially since 2014: they seek to divert the public's attention from the country's social and economic problems—corruption, poverty, migration—and fix it instead on speculative discussions about the Russian military threat. On its side, the opposition has mimicked the government's tactics, dwelling on the supposed threat from Romania and NATO.

In view of the Transnistria conflict, the more or less real scenarios under which the Russian military might present a threat should be treated with the utmost seriousness when strategic decisions of a military or political nature are being made.

The trenchant pro-Russian and Eurosceptic views of roughly half the Moldovan population should be taken as facts, although they have developed partially under the influence of Russian media. The Moldovan authorities have charted the wrong political course. This, combined with an unprecedented spiralling of corruption, falling living standards and mass emigration, creates fertile ground for anti-European sentiments amongst a significant portion of Moldovan society.³⁴

34. A public opinion poll taken in October 2017 showed that, for the first time in three years, supporters of European integration (49%) exceeded supporters of the Eurasian direction (38%).

To reverse these negative trends, a programme should be developed to nurture trust in the authorities among this section of society. The programme ought to include objective information about the advantages of European integration, without integration being tied to the Moldovan authorities. In other words, success in European integration should not be attributed to the Moldovan government, or the European Union associated with the Moldovan authorities.

In order to implement the last point, serious pressure must be applied to the governing coalition—that is, the executive and parliament—to make it implement real, not cosmetic, reforms. Reform of the judiciary is the number one priority. The Moldovan population will only place more trust in the idea of European integration if real European reforms are carried out. These should be tangible to the population: a real anti-corruption drive, increasing people's incomes in order to stem further emigration and so on.

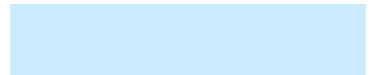
European countries and the United States must recognise that supporting Moldova's governing coalition at any price is a ruinous strategy. Western partners must put structural reforms ahead of geopolitical expediency. A captured state who enjoys EU and US support is an open goal for Russian propaganda and cancels out Western investments in Moldova.

In March 2017, however, there were fewer "Europeans" than "Eurasianists", at 42% to 43%. Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova, September-October 2017, *op. cit.*

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