

Moldova and the war

Caught between caution and the abyss

Russia's invasion of Ukraine which was launched on 24 February has far-reaching consequences for Europe and countries in the European Neighbourhood. This is the case for Moldova, a State wedged between Romania and Ukraine which gained independence in 1991. While displaying solidarity with Ukraine and championing the principle of territorial integrity, Moldovan leaders have also attempted to err on the side of caution in their relations with Russia, for both domestic and external reasons.

Ukraine and Moldova share a border stretching over 939 km and have much in common, starting with having been part of the USSR and having the geopolitical ambition of a rapprochement with the European Union as soon as possible. Traditionally, each

State is home to minorities from the other (Romanian-speakers in Ukraine and Ukrainians in Moldova), while the current war has forced Moldova to welcome many refugees coming mostly from the South and East of Ukraine.

It was therefore with great concern that the Moldovan authorities learned at the end of April of the declarations made by the deputy commander of the Central Military District of Russia, Rustam Minnekayev, who brought up the possibility of taking control over the breakaway Moldovan region of Transnistria if the entire Black Sea shore were to come under Russian control.¹ Will Moldova's caution enable the country to escape Ukraine's fate, or is the conflict set to expand in the near future?

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-it-plans-full-control-donbas-southern-ukraine-ifax-2022-04-22/>



**EUROPE IN THE
WORLD**

**POLICY BRIEF
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**#ukraine
#moldova
#migrations**

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MAP 1. Moldova and Ukraine



▲ Source : Durrieu J. & Parmentier F. 2019. *La Moldavie à la croisée des mondes*, Paris : Non Lieu, p.90.

I. Moldova attempts to adapt to the war

For Moldova, adapting to the new situation of war means dealing with three priorities: addressing the humanitarian issue, adjusting its foreign policy and avoiding the risks of domestic polarisation.

I ADDRESSING THE HUMANITARIAN ISSUE

The massive influx of Ukrainian refugees in Moldova was an immediate consequence of the war²: some 5.2 million people have passed through the countries sharing borders with Ukraine in the space of a few weeks. While Poland has welcomed the largest number of Ukrainian refugees in absolute terms (more than 2.5 million), Moldova has hosted two times as many in relation to its population (around 100,000 people remaining for 2.6 million inhabitants, i.e. the equivalent of 4% of the total population), while the per capita income is four times lower.

Yet hosting refugees, half of which are children, requires human and financial resources in addition to water, medication and food. Admittedly, the donor conference held in Berlin on 5 April, sponsored by France, Germany and Romania, enabled Moldova to obtain €695 million in assistance pledges. This assistance is necessary to counter inflation which already existed prior to the war and is strongly linked to energy prices. This effort is particularly commendable as Moldova has been a country of emigration for several decades. A considerable portion of its working population is employed abroad, and the country lacks a tourism capacity that would facilitate the hosting of refugees.

I ADJUSTING FOREIGN POLICY: NEUTRALITY AND WEAKNESSES

In addition to the influx of refugees, the Moldovan government has had to take a cautious stance, given its European aspirations and its vulnerable points.

2 <https://theconversation.com/la-pressante-question-des-refugies-ukrainiens-en-moldavie-178793> (in French)

Against the current backdrop, Moldovan foreign policy upholds the importance of the principle of neutrality, enshrined in article 11 of its Constitution. This entails two major ideas. Firstly, Moldova cannot be part of a military alliance, i.e. its Constitution prohibits it from becoming a member of NATO. Secondly, it implies that no foreign troops can be hosted on Moldovan territory, which underscores that the Russian forces present in Transnistria are supposed to leave the territory. In other words, **Moldova's neutrality model may be beneficial to Ukraine, that is unless Chisinau comes under Russian attack.**

The reminder of neutrality as a foreign policy principle comes alongside diplomatic solidarity with Ukraine, in the major international fora. Moldova took part in voting the various United Nations resolutions, including the resolution requiring Russia to stop the war in Ukraine³ and Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council⁴. Suspended between 2014 and 2019, Russia has been excluded from the Council of Europe, in the context of the procedure launched under Article 8 of the body's Statute⁵. The Assembly stated that the leadership of the Russian Federation poses a blatant menace to security in Europe, as a power occupying the region of Transnistria since 1991, where Russian diplomacy claims to be a "peacekeeping force". The Moldovan foreign minister Nicu Popescu had to explain that this was the opinion of the Parliamentary Assembly and not a decision made by Moldovan authorities. However, despite taking a position on many occasions, **Moldova has not followed the sanctions decided by the EU against Russia:** the Moldovan President Maia Sandu justified this by stating the danger of no longer receiving gas from Russia in retaliation, although a move from Chisinau to join the sanctions would have no effect on Moscow.

Moldova does have many economic weaknesses, which more specifically concern energy. **Chisinau is entirely reliant on gas imports from Russia**, as it does not have direct access to the sea and the main power

plant is located in Transnistria. The war in Ukraine is a major external crisis for Moldovan economic players, as the collapse of Ukraine's economy compounds the fact that it can no longer export to Russia for logistical reasons and exports can no longer transit through Odessa.

THE RISKS OF DOMESTIC DESTABILISATION

Russia has an established reputation of using cyber technology, information and intelligence to destabilise political regimes. Moldova is not immune to this prospect.

Since independence was proclaimed, Moldovans' electoral choices have fluctuated between pro-European and pro-Russian stances. There is a high risk of domestic polarisation that would weaken society's resilience. Igor Dodon, president from 2016 to 2020, had pro-Russian political orientations and many contacts with the authorities. In contrast, the current president Maia Sandu clearly focused her 2020 presidential campaign on the need for internal reforms, in particular to combat corruption. Her first international trip was to Kyiv, and she has not travelled to Moscow as Head of State. Since the start of the war, the Moldovan government has declared a renewable 60-day state of emergency and also decreed the **blocking of several influential pro-Russian websites**, www.sputniknews.md and www.gagauznews.md.

Certain regions and segments of the population are more vulnerable to Russian strategies of influence, such as the autonomous region of Gagauzia, which often supports candidates who are more favourable to Moscow. The war is also having an impact on commemorations: the politicisation of the 9 May events (date the armistice was signed in Berlin) has been underway. The President enacted a law to prohibit people from wearing the Ribbon of Saint George (a tsarist then Soviet symbol, used by Donbas separatists post-2014) and the symbols Z and V (which demonstrate support for the war against Ukraine). In other words, accor-

3 <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/guerre-en-ukraine-lassemblee-generale-de-lonu-condamne-loffensive-de-la-russie-et-appelle> (in French)

4 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>

5 <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/portal/-/the-russian-federation-is-excluded-from-the-council-of-europe>

ding to Maia Sandu, “speculation on the 1945 victory to promote Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is unacceptable”⁶. However, these prohibitions have received mixed results in Gagauzia, among Russian-speakers and left-leaning voters more generally, and also in Transnistria.

II • The war: a risk for Transnistria and an opportunity for greater European integration

The war in Ukraine has far-reaching consequences for Moldova, with the prospect of the conflict in Transnistria being revived, and in equal measure an important step being made towards European integration.

I TRANSNISTRIA: A NEW STAKE IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE?

As Commander Minnekayev’s statements show, the war in Ukraine places Transnistria in an entirely new geopolitical situation.

Between March and July 1992, the clash between troops from Chisinau and from Tiraspol resulted in the deaths of more than one thousand people. The July 1992 ceasefire paved the way for a negotiation format focused on conflict settlement: the OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Transnistria have since been attempting to find a political solution to the conflict, with the USA and the European Union becoming subsequent observers. Given the situation, this 5+2 negotiation format is obviously not going to be carried forward in the coming months.

In terms of military capacity, the region’s fate is closely linked to Southern Ukraine and the city of Odessa, as Transnistria is located in its hinterland. The local presence of the Russian army has continued since independence. Around 1,500 servicemen and women are still stationed there today. Beyond the local presence of Russian troops, there is also a large-scale ammunition depot inherited from the USSR in Cobasna, only two kilo-

metres from the border with Ukraine. **Given the power balance, Moldova will make no attempt to recover Transnistria by force**, as its army is poorly equipped. Moldova, which had thirty Mig-29 aircraft upon independence, has sold most of them and declined to sell its remaining ones to the Ukrainian army at the start of the war, fearing a risk of regional escalation.

The situation of Russian-speakers in Transnistria, and also in Moldova, may well be seen as a pretext for a potential military intervention, but is not based on tangible facts: Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians are all found on both sides of the Dniestr, and many forms of cooperation exist. In 2021, during the COVID-19 crisis, Moldova and Transnistria worked together to vaccinate the population, with transfers of medical equipment received from international donors to Tiraspol (more than 400,000 doses redistributed until February 2022)⁷.

While Transnistria is close to Moscow both politically and economically, it also enjoys long-term relations with Ukraine, which has led Tiraspol to adopt a form of neutrality⁸. The President of Transnistria, Vadim Krasnoselsky, issued a statement that neither approved of nor condemned the war⁹, a position that stands out from those adopted by the leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, fervent supporters of the war in Ukraine. Ukrainian is one of Transnistria’s official languages, Tiraspol University bears the name of the national poet Taras Shevchenko and Ukrainians expressed some support for the Transnistrian camp in the 1992 war. **Ukraine is a more important outlet for separatists than Russia**, and various corruption scandals connect Ukraine and Transnistria, with the former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko himself allegedly being implicated.

This explains that in the first weeks of the war, Transnistria welcomed many Ukrainian refugees, made it easy for employers to hire them and facilitated access to childcare and schools. Also, anecdotally, Sheriff Tiraspol

6 <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/c34e6a3b0aa158f3/simbolurile-z-v-si-panglica-negru-oranj-interzise-oficial-in-republica-moldova-maia-sandu-a-promulgat-legea.html>

7 <https://www.moldpres.md/en/news/2022/03/19/22002085>

8 <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/11/moldovas-rebel-region-stays-neutral-in-russias-war-on-ukraine/>

9 <https://pridnestrovie-daily.net/zayavlenie-prezidenta-pmr-v-svyazi-s-situacziej-na-ukraine/>

football club, which played in this year's Champions League competition, plays in the Moldovan football league. Its manager, Yuriy Vernydub, left the club in February 2022 to enlist in the Ukrainian army.

As long as Southern Ukraine, i.e. the region around Odessa, can hold in terms of military might, Transnistria has no territorial continuity with Russia, and may find itself between two hostile regions, in Chisinau and in Kyiv. Conversely, if the region were to fall to Russia, Transnistria's fate would change more than in the last three decades. Either way, **Transnistria faces the same amount of upheaval as the rest of Moldova**; the explosions at the Transnistrian Ministry of Public Security on 25 April may indicate Russia's willingness to involve the breakaway region in the conflict.

I COULD MOLDOVA'S APPLICATION FOR EU MEMBERSHIP BE FAST-TRACKED?

Moldova is one of the countries in the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004) and the Eastern Partnership (2009), which aim to bring these countries closer to the European Union. It is against this backdrop that Moldova signed its Association Agreement with the EU in June 2014. While its membership is neither guaranteed, nor ruled out, the Eastern Partnership stresses a few priorities: democracy, rule of law, a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, market reforms, sector-based modernisation and energy security. The war in Ukraine sparked hopes for fast-tracked EU accession, although this assumption entails many practical stumbling blocks. Against this backdrop, Moldova submitted its formal EU membership application on 3 March this year, at the same time as Georgia.

Unfortunately, this cannot take place as the war rages and the application may well come

up against political and geopolitical realities very quickly. When the war is over, Ukraine will have to rebuild a considerable portion of its territory and rehouse its refugees, while the presence of a large number of weapons on its territory will be a concern. In addition, offering EU membership to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia would weaken the fragile balance in the Balkans, where the promise of enlargement was confirmed back in 2003 at the European Summit in Thessaloniki.

Moldova has already redirected most of its trade to EU markets, including the breakaway region of Transnistria. **Corruption remains, however, a major challenge for the country**: in a 2019 report published by the Council of Europe¹⁰, Moldova was considered to be a "captured State". This followed on in particular from the 2014 "billion fraud" scandal, when it was revealed that around 12% of the country's GDP had been misappropriated by three Moldovan banks, which precipitated the downfall of the then prime minister, Vlad Filat, and the rise of the oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc. This scandal contributed to discrediting some of the pro-European and self-serving elite.

Moldova finds itself in a complex situation against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine: caution is not necessarily enough to avoid conflict, which means that **part of public opinion may stop supporting Moldova's independence and may look to reunification with Romania**, as the two countries share a language, a culture and some history, although this would mean deserting Transnistria. While its European aspirations are legitimate, the road to EU membership is full of obstacles, which may divide Europeans. Moreover, Russia's position is uncertain¹¹. This is another reason to monitor and support Moldova in the coming months which are set to be crucial for the regional balance on the European continent •

¹⁰ <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=28241&lang=en>

¹¹ The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko claimed to want a peaceful solution to the Transnistrian conflict on 25 April, contradicting a statement made by General Minnekayev. <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-international-25517075-rusia-sustine-nu-exista-niciun-risc-regiunea-separatista-rep-moldova-vrea-solutionare-pasnica.htm>

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