

STABILITATEA POLITICĂ ȘI SECURITATEA NAȚIONALĂ A REPUBLICII MOLDOVA ÎN CONDIȚIILE CONFLICTULUI REGIONAL DE PROXIMITATE

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Republica Moldova este o țară mică situată la proximitatea războiului Rusiei cu Ucraina. Țara noastră este vulnerabilă și guvernul sau proeuropean are nevoie de sprijin. Sigur, în aceste condiții se poate spune că fără ajutorul extern și solidaritatea cetățenilor țării, guvernul s-ar fi prăbușit sub presiunea afluxului de refugiați din Ucraina. Mai mult, există criza inflaționistă, prețurile la energie și produse agroalimentare crescând din cauza presiunii asupra piețelor energetice mondiale și a întreruperilor din lanțurile de aprovizionare, acestea fiind cauzate de război. Una dintre disputele teritoriale care au izbucnit odată cu colapsul URSS, Transnistria a evoluat până la termenul de „conflict înghețat”. În Transnistria nu a existat aproape nicio violență de la războiul de acolo încheiat în urmă cu treizeci de ani, dar acum în contextul războiului dintre Rusia și Ucraina, s-a înregistrat o creștere a incidentelor violente, cu o serie de explozii misterioase și atacuri asupra infrastructurii. Atât Chișinăul, cât și Tiraspolul au folosit canale diplomatice pentru a atenua tensiunile. Moldovenii au fost nevoiți să-i calmeze pe unii oficiali impetuoși care au folosit un limbaj mult mai inflamator despre Transnistria, reitând că ei caută doar o soluționare pașnică a conflictului.

Cuvinte-cheie: război, invazie, instabilitate, neutralitate, asistență, criză, amenințare militară.

POLITICAL STABILITY AND NATIONAL SECURITY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE CONDITIONS OF THE REGIONAL PROXIMITY CONFLICT

The Republic of Moldova is a small country located near the Russian war with Ukraine. Our country is vulnerable and its pro-European government needs support. Of course, in these circumstances it can be said that without the external help and solidarity shown by Moldovan citizens, the government would have collapsed under the pressure of the influx of refugees from Ukraine. Furthermore, there is the inflationary crisis, with energy and food prices rising due to pressure on world energy markets and disruptions in supply chains caused by war. One of the territorial disputes that broke out with the collapse of the USSR, Transnistria evolved to the term “frozen conflict”. There has been almost no violence in Transnistria since the war ended thirty years ago, but now in the context of the war between Russia and Ukraine, there has been an increase in violent incidents, with a series of mysterious explosions and attacks on infrastructure. Both Chisinau and Tiraspol have used diplomatic channels to alleviate tensions. Moldovans have had to calm some impetuous officials who have used a much more inflammatory language about Transnistria, reiterating that they are only looking for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Keywords: war, invasion, instability, neutrality, assistance, crisis, military threat.

STABILITÉ POLITIQUE ET SÉCURITÉ NATIONALE DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE DE MOLDOVA DANS LES CONDITIONS DU CONFLIT RÉGIONAL DE PROXIMITÉ

La République de Moldova est un petit pays situé à proximité de la guerre de la Russie avec l'Ukraine. Notre pays est vulnérable et son gouvernement pro-européen a besoin de soutien. Bien sûr, dans ces conditions, on peut dire que sans l'aide étrangère et la solidarité manifestées par les citoyens moldaves, le gouvernement se serait effondré sous la pression de l'afflux de réfugiés en provenance d'Ukraine. De plus, il y a la crise inflationniste, avec la hausse des prix de l'énergie et de l'agroalimentaire en raison de la pression sur les marchés mondiaux de l'énergie et des perturbations des chaînes d'approvisionnement causées par la guerre. L'un des conflits territoriaux qui a éclaté avec l'effondrement de l'URSS, la Transnistrie a évolué pour devenir le terme "conflit gelé". Il n'y a eu presque aucune violence en Transnistrie depuis la fin de la guerre il y a trente ans, mais maintenant, dans le contexte de la guerre entre la Russie et l'Ukraine, il y a eu une augmentation des incidents violents, avec une série d'explosions mystérieuses et d'attaques contre les infrastructures. Chisinau et Tiraspol ont toutes deux utilisé les voies diplomatiques pour apaiser les tensions. Les Moldaves ont dû calmer certains fonctionnaires impétueux qui ont utilisé un langage beaucoup plus incendiaire à propos de la Transnistrie, réitérant qu'ils ne cherchent qu'un règlement pacifique du conflit.

Mots-clés: guerre, invasion, instabilité, neutralité, assistance, crise, menace militaire.

ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ СТАБИЛЬНОСТЬ И НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ БЕЗОПАСНОСТЬ РЕСПУБЛИКИ МОЛDOVA В УСЛОВИЯХ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОГО КОНФЛИКТА

Республика Молдова - небольшая страна, расположенная в непосредственной близости к военному конфликту между Россией и Украиной. Наша страна уязвима и ее проевропейское правительство нуждается в поддержке. В этих условиях, можно утверждать, что без иностранной помощи и солидарности граждан Молдовы, правительство рухнуло бы под давлением притока беженцев из Украины. Помимо этого, наблюдается инфляционный кризис, сопровождающийся резким ростом цен на энергоносители и агропродовольственные товары в связи с давлением на мировые энергетические рынки и сбоями в цепочках поставок, вызванными войной. Среди территориальных споров, которые вспыхнули во времена распада СССР, конфликт в Приднестровье обрел значение «замороженного». После войны в Приднестровье, которая закончилась тридцать лет назад, практически не было насилия, но в последний период, в контексте войны между Россией и Украиной, наблюдался всплеск насильственных инцидентов, с серией загадочных взрывов и нападений на инфраструктуру. И Кишинев, и Тирасполь используют дипломатические каналы для ослабления напряженности. Молдове пришлось успокаивать некоторых импульсивных чиновников, которые использовали гораздо более подстрекательские формулировки о Приднестровье, вновь заявляя, что они стремятся только к мирному урегулированию конфликта.

Ключевые слова: война, вторжение, нестабильность, нейтралитет, помощь, кризис, военная угроза.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine made Moldova worrying at the thought that it could be accidentally drawn into the war taking into consideration the conflict over Transnistria. The position of the Moldovan government is considerably fragile, as

Moldovan institutions depend on external financial assistance to fill gaps in the public budget and avoid political instability and possible socio-economic protests.

The current reformist government has been in power for more than a year and was not prepared to face so many existential problems. Without external

help it would be almost impossible to politically survive the pressure of all the crises that the country is going through. In the summer 2022, the government started receiving new external assistance promised by the EU and individual Western countries, as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). If added up, the total assistance is worth over a billion euros to be delivered over the next three years. This money will serve primarily to preserve the stability of current public budget payments.

Patchwork of challenges and the need for preparation

There are indeed reasons for concern. The energy crisis due to dependence on Russian gas, the price of which has almost tripled, has continued since last autumn. In addition, state institutions at the central and local levels must solve problems related to the accommodation of almost 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, 95,000 of Ukrainian refugees have stayed in Moldova. Without foreign aid and solidarity shown by the Moldovan citizens, the government would have collapsed under the pressure of the influx of refugees. Moreover, there is the inflationary crisis, with prices of energy and agri-food products soaring due to the pressure on world energy markets and the interruptions in supply chains caused by the war.

In April and May 2022, occasional explosions in critical infrastructure elements across the Transnistria region had a destabilizing effect on Moldova. The breakaway region is outside Chisinau's control and operates within a power-sharing formula between pro-Russian politico-military groups and economic elites bent on maintaining and increasing profits from the EU market. However, the dominant groups in Transnistria were showing restraint regarding the war in Ukraine [2, p. 2].

Moldova's shortcomings in the field of defense can be mitigated in cooperation with the EU and even through cooperation with NATO. The authorities

have already requested the assistance of Western institutions. The EU and Romania are already ready to help with energy diversification, especially for the purchase and payment of gas. To aid the Moldovan side with border protection, the EU has deployed dozens of workers from the Frontex agency. Moldova has also benefited from substantial support to deal with the refugee crisis.

The only assistance promised to Moldova in the military field is the EU's commitment to deliver non-lethal military equipment to improve the military health service and the capacity of military engineering groups, through the European Peace Fund of €7 million. More recently, the British authorities have expressed an interest in helping Moldova raise the standards of the national army to NATO standards. This proposal was new and unexpected, causing reactions in favour of neutrality among the pro-Russian opposition in Moldova.

The Moldovan authorities should use the current crises to find short- and long-term solutions to the legal and institutional frameworks that determine the weak capacity of the country to face and manage the present risks. If they are outdated and ineffective, they need to be upgraded – starting with the status of neutrality – to match current challenges. Whether Russia decides to extend the war beyond Ukraine or not, Moldova must be prepared for worst-case scenarios, showing more agency and ownership in addressing insecurities.

National security threats and Moldova's domestic politics

Moldova is in the news, as a stream of high-level visitors, such as United Nations Secretary General António Guterres, have made way to Chisinau in spring 2022. The country deserves all the international attention it can get. It's a small country precariously located at the edge of Russia's war with Ukraine. Everyone agrees that Moldova is vulnerable and its

pro-European government – which officially applied for EU membership in March 2022 – needs support. Conclusion is that there is a risk of overstating the military threat the country faces from Russia and underestimating the economic one.

The Russian military threat should never be fully discounted. On April 22, 2022 a senior general, Rustam Minnekaev, talked almost casually about Russia occupying southern Ukraine and forcing a “road out” to the breakaway region of Transnistria, where he said, that Russian speakers faced persecution [3, p. 4].

But this is a case where the Russian leadership’s imperial ambitions far outstrip its capacities, currently at least. In thi regard, the British embassy in Chisinau said in the May 2022, “we have no reason to believe that the Republic of Moldova is in imminent danger of military aggression.” A move against Transnistria is only possible if the Russians were to manage to capture Odessa, hardly likely when the Russian army can barely advance in eastern Ukraine.

A second theoretical danger is of a flare-up of the conflict over Transnistria, the separatist region on the eastern side of the Dniester river. Alone among the territorial disputes that broke out with the end of the USSR, Transnistria has lived up to the term “frozen conflict.” There has been almost no violence since the war there ended thirty years ago, but the last month has seen an upsurge of violent incidents, with a series of mysterious explosions and attacks on infrastructure without any casualties.

Both Chisinau and Tiraspol have used diplomatic channels to damp down tension. Moldovans have had to calm down some impetuous officials who used much more inflammatory language about Transnistria than they do, reiterating that they only seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Moldova President Maia Sandu told the Economist, “We are trying to do our best to keep the country out of the war,” and that Moldova

remains constitutionally neutral. Transnistria’s de facto president Vadim Krasnoselsky has also been pacific. On May 6, 2022 he said that he still seeks recognition of Transnistria’s independence but only by peaceful means through dialogue, adding that “no one needs war.”

Transnistria’s military threat to Moldova is much less than meets the eye. Almost all the 1,500 soldiers there designated as “Russian” are in fact locals with Russian passports. The more than 7,000 “armed forces” in the territory outnumbers the much smaller Moldovan army on paper but it is mainly a part-time defense force.

Transnistria’s (fairly open) secret is that most of its population of around 400,000 people – including those soldiers – now hold Moldovan passports and make use of Moldova’s visa-free travel to the EU. Many also have Ukrainian passports. The region is still closely politically and culturally affiliated with Russia, but in both its economy and geography its destiny lies with Moldova and Europe. The EU has played its cards well here, by incorporating Transnistria into its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area regime with Moldova. Last year 54 percent of its exports went to the EU and only 14 percent to Russia.

If the security threats are being handled well, Moldova’s domestic politics is still volatile and political polarization is still strong. The former governing party, the Socialists, led by former president Igor Dodon, is obviously seeking to exploit the current situation to its advantage. Dodon pointedly wore the St George’s ribbon – a Russian Victory Day symbol blessed by Vladimir Putin, which was banned by the Moldovan government–on a May 9, 2022 parade in Chisinau.

Surely, the biggest issues that Moldova now has to deal with are economic. Bordering southern Ukraine, it suffers badly from Russia’s blockade of the Black Sea coast and of Ukraine’s biggest port,

Odessa. Remittance payments are down, the country is struggling with refugees and the IMF says it is worried that the government is so “overburdened” by crisis management it will be diverted from the most vital piece of its reform agenda, the fight to root out systemic corruption.

The Transnistria issue can’t be separated from this economic problem, as the two parts of Moldova, though politically disconnected, are economically a single, if dysfunctional, whole. Right-bank Moldova currently gets most of its electricity from a power plant in Transnistria powered by Russian gas. In fact, Transnistria’s business model relies on gas that it gets for free or almost nothing from Gazprom. It’s not a pretty situation but one that is hard to disentangle in the short term.

So if long-term economic assistance to Moldova is a strong EU priority, then some of the aid should go to Transnistria as well. That means aid that helps to deepen the region’s integration with the rest of Moldova, facilitate a gradual transition away from reliance on Russian gas, and stave off the further impoverishment of what already qualifies as Europe’s poorest country [3, p. 5].

New challenges of Transnistria conflict

Russia’s war in Ukraine has put the spotlight on the “frozen conflict” in Transnistria, the Moscow-backed breakaway part of Moldova that borders southwestern Ukraine. Russia has raised the prospect of using Transnistria to open a second front against Ukraine and to pressure Moldova. Such a move would increase the risk of a Russian confrontation with Romania, a NATO member with close ethnic, cultural, and historic ties to Moldova, which would in turn increase Russia’s perception of a threat to its Transnistrian client. For three decades, the conflict over the breakaway region has remained without military clashes, with Russia’s military presence there serving as a tripwire to deter any Moldovan

offensive. However, the war in Ukraine has changed the calculations of all concerned in this corner of Europe.

Transnistria owes its existence as a quasi-independent entity to the brief war started in 1992 by Moscow-backed separatists who feared that Moldova would become part of Romania after the Soviet Union broke up. The war ended when Russia’s 14th Army, headquartered since the 1950s in what was the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, intervened on behalf of the separatists and defeated the forces of the newly independent Republic of Moldova. The land controlled by the separatists styled itself the “Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic,” commonly known as Transnistria, with its capital in Tiraspol. Based on the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration, signed by Russia, Moldova, and other former Soviet republics, the international community recognizes Transnistria as part of Moldova’s sovereign territory and rejects its self-declared independence.

Unlike the post-Soviet frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus, this is not an ethnic one. The population of Moldova is some 80 percent Moldovan and ethnically close to Romanians, but the population of Transnistria is diverse – about 40 percent Moldovan, 23 percent Russian, and 28 percent Ukrainian. What counts is not ethnicity but families’ attitudes toward Russia or Romania, mostly dating back to the Second World War. In 1924, Josef Stalin carved Transnistria – on the left bank of the Dniester River – out of Ukraine to form the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic as an irredentist rump state facing Romania. Moldova on the right bank of the Dniester was part of Romania between the First and Second World Wars. It was invaded and annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, then invaded by Germany and Romania in 1941, and finally re-invaded by the Soviet Union in 1944.

This has left a lasting legacy of evenly split “pro-

Soviet” and “pro-Romanian” attitudes in Moldova. Today, this is reflected in some polls suggesting that the population is almost evenly divided between blaming Russia or the West for the war in Ukraine. In Transnistria, the population has long been overwhelmingly pro-Russian. The region seems to envision itself as the last outpost of the Russian Empire of the era of Prince Aleksandr Suvorov, the eighteenth-century generalissimo who founded Tiraspol and whose portrait adorns most government offices. Vadim Krasnoselsky, Transnistria’s current leader, claims to disdain the Communists for “destroying the Russian empire.”

Unlike in other frozen conflicts, the populations on both sides of the Dniestr river interact freely and often. Every day, thousands cross the “border” in both directions to visit family and friends, as well as for business, education, shopping, and international transit.

When the war ended in 1992, elements of Russia’s 14th Army stayed behind, forming two contingents: the Russian part of the trilateral peacekeeping force (alongside Moldovan and Transnistrian troops) and the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) guarding old Soviet arms depots in Transnistria, the largest of which is located at Cobasna. Both Russian contingents also serve as a tripwire against the unlikely event of Moldova attempting to use force to repossess Transnistria. Transnistria maintains its own armed forces, which are estimated to range between 4,500 and 15,000 personnel.

The presence of Russian peacekeepers is authorized under the cease-fire agreement of 1992. By contrast, Moldova has never accepted the presence of the OGRF, and in 1999 Russia promised to withdraw the group along with the arms depots. President Vladimir Putin halted the withdrawal in 2003, however, after Moldova’s President Vladimir Voronin refused to sign a peace deal that would have ended the conflict in exchange for accepting Russian

military bases and other rights for Moscow.

Confusion arises because the same personnel switch between the two Russian contingents. When the Western-oriented Maia Sandu became president of Moldova in 2020, she called for the removal of the OGRF. This caused a backlash from Russia [4, p. 12]. The combined number of OGRF and Russian peacekeeping troops is currently estimated at 1,500. But in reality, while these personnel are in Russian uniforms, there is little else that is Russian about them. Most of them are locals, with a sprinkling of officers from Russia. Aside from these troops serving as a tripwire against Moldovan military action to reintegrate Transnistria, their paychecks from Moscow make the Russian military a significant contributor to the region’s economy.

The Russian war scare

On April 22, 2022, when Moscow was redefined its objectives after failing to take Kyiv in the first phase of the war, Major General Rustam Minnekayev, the deputy commander of Russia’s Central Military District, stated that the aim “of the second phase” was to take a contiguous strip of land from Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, running along the Azov and Black Sea coast through Kherson and Odesa, and from there to Transnistria. Over the next few days, a mysterious string of “terrorist incidents”— including against Transnistria’s Ministry of State Security and the Russian arsenal at Cobasna—appeared to aim at dragging the region into the war.

One purely military consideration is that Russia and Ukraine are using Soviet-era munitions of the types stored at Cobasna at an alarming rate and the depot could theoretically be of value to either side. But no one really knows how much weaponry Cobasna still houses and how much of that is usable. In the early 1990s, the Soviet/Russian commanders of such depots regularly sold munitions to both sides in budding conflicts. The most useful weaponry was

presumably the first to be returned to Russia when withdrawals were taking place in 2000–2003. As to what remained afterward, a diplomat who inspected Cobasna a decade ago observed that some of the munitions appeared to be stored properly while others were heaped into pits dug into the ground and covered with corrugated tin, “like potatoes at a Soviet collective farm.”

Notwithstanding his nostalgia for the Russian Empire, Krasnoselsky has showed no enthusiasm for Russia’s war. After the “terrorist incidents,” he raised the terrorist threat level and put Transnistria’s security services on alert. He gave a televised address in which he claimed that the “terrorist” incidents had apparently originated from Ukraine. But he assured his audience that Transnistria chose to remain neutral, that it had no plans to attack its neighbors, and that attempts to drag it into the war would fail. Significantly, Sandu showed understanding and solidarity from Chişinău, declining to take an aggressive stance on Transnistria and stating her support for “peaceful dialogue and diplomatic solutions.”

Transnistria case and economic factors

Economic factors caused Moldovan and Transnistrian interests to converge. The relationship between Tiraspol and Chişinău, as it has developed over the last thirty years, is unique among frozen conflicts. It allows Transnistria to live in the best of all worlds, a legal gray area. Its companies export to the EU by registering in Chişinău, and they benefit from trade preferences since the EU considers the region to be part of Moldova and does not want to do anything that would suggest otherwise. The value of Transnistria’s exports to the EU – mostly electricity, steel, and textiles – is now estimated to be four times greater than exports to Russia.

The facilities that produce these goods rely on Russian natural gas. Transnistria and Moldova get their gas from a Soviet-era pipeline to the Balkans,

with both getting transit royalties from their segments of the pipeline. Transnistria also derives a hefty income by selling its offtakes to industrial, commercial, and household consumers [4, p. 14]. In practice, Transnistria gets its gas almost for free, paying for part of what it takes with its share of the royalties, and Russia’s Gazprom adds the value of the rest to the debt it is owed by Moldova’s state gas company. According to some estimates, this accounts for \$7 billion out of the approximately \$8 billion debt Gazprom claims Moldovagaz owes it.

Moldova cannot complain about shouldering Transnistria’s gas debt because to do so would imply that it has lost sovereignty over the region. In effect, therefore, Russia gives Transnistria all the gas it needs to fuel its export industry and the EU gives that industry the market for its exports, a truly “multivectoral” arrangement.

The war in Ukraine has threatened this situation on both sides. Were Transnistria to engage in hostilities against Ukraine, its EU export markets would disappear overnight. The war has accelerated Sandu’s campaign for Moldova to join the EU, helping the country win candidate status on June 23, 2022 alongside Ukraine. Were hostilities to break out inside the internationally recognized territory of Moldova, which includes Transnistria, that campaign would be jeopardized.

Moldova and Romanian connection

Moldova’s newly acquired EU candidate status has rekindled old speculation in Moscow about its potential unification with Romania. On June 25, 2022 former president Dmitri Medvedev, who is now deputy head of Russia’s Security Council, suggested that Moldova might try to fast-track its membership in the EU by uniting with Romania, a member since 2007. Russian media have been flooded with speculation about Bucharest’s alleged designs, in cahoots with Chişinău and backed by

NATO's increased presence in Romania, to send troops to Moldova and occupy Transnistria.

The result of any such action would be catastrophic for Moldova and Transnistria, and would bring Russia and Romania to the brink of a direct military confrontation. After thirty years without incident, it seems improbable that the leaders in Chişinău would contemplate new hostilities, further destabilizing the situation. It is equally improbable that Romania would move to unite with Moldova and seize Transnistria. But such scenarios are part of the fever dreams of Russian nationalists, who use as evidence the decades-long political rhetoric of Moldova's "unionist" parties, which regularly attract the support of roughly 10 percent of the electorate.

At the moment, Transnistria and Moldova share an interest in staying out of the war. For Tiraspol, this may mean defying Russia, always an uncomfortable course of action, the alternative looks like military and economic colaps. Chişinău has few choices other than to try to keep tensions with Tiraspol low, to quietly support its efforts to stay out of the war, and to plead with politicians in Bucharest not to inflame the situation further. Politics makes strange bedfellows. In this instance, war does too.

Moldova political risks and stability

Now Moscow's invasion of Ukraine appears to have dashed any chances of Chisinau ever turning again toward Russia. In June 2022, Moldova was granted EU candidate status, alongside Ukraine. Any future Moldovan government will be pro-European.

Back in the spring 2022, when few could imagine that the Ukrainian armed forces would be able to stop the advance of Russian troops, never mind launch their own counterattack, it seemed that once Ukraine was defeated, Transnistria and Moldova would be next [5, p. 3]. Russian Major General Rustam Minnekaev even said publicly that Transnistria was one of the targets of Moscow's

"special military operation." At that time, it seemed entirely possible that Russia might take control of all of southern Ukraine, giving it a corridor right up to Moldova's borders. In September 2022, following Russia's retreat from the Kharkiv region, there is no longer any talk of Russian troops taking Odessa and reaching the Moldovan border.

For now, Ukraine hasn't taken any concrete steps toward Transnistria: the most it has done is privately ask Moldova to open a second front against Russia in the breakaway region, which Chisinau declined to do. But there are signs that Russia is planning to stage a coup in Chisinau, which could provoke Kyiv to take action.

Despite being held under house arrest since May, 2022 on treason and corruption charges, the Russia's longtime partner in Moldova, former president Igor Dodon, regularly calls for mass protests that could bring about a snap presidential election in Moldova, something the Communist Party led by former president Vladimir Voronin would also like to see.

The fugitive politician and businessman Ilan Shor has gone one step further. Having fled abroad to avoid a jail sentence for a fraud conviction, he has organized an ongoing anti-government rally that began on September 18, 2022 in the center of Chisinau. With claims that 50,000 people will turn out, complete with tents and a stage for speeches, the protests should have all the trappings of a revolution.

The Shor is relying on to bring people to the streets is the cost of Russian gas, which is currently an unprecedentedly high \$1,800 per thousand cubic meters in Moldova, and has caused prices for pretty much everything in the impoverished country to rise. Shor, Dodon, Voronin, and their supporters argue that the country is facing the prospect of a very uncomfortable winter, and all because Moldova's pro-EU government led by President Maia Sandu

has fallen out with its strategic partner Russia, and is neither willing nor able to reach an agreement with Moscow on an affordable gas price. If they were in charge, there would be no such problem, as they affirmed.

Russia has done its best to support such claims. A delegation of Moldovan deputies from the Shor party and the Communist Party visited Moscow on September 9, 2022 and met with Leonid Slutsky, head of the Duma's foreign affairs committee. According to the Shor party, the topics of discussion included finding a solution to provide Moldova with gas at an affordable price.

No sooner had the Moldovans departed than Slutsky sent an official letter to Shor inviting them to return to discuss a roadmap for solving existing problems. The signal was clear: Russia is prepared to compromise, but the current Moldovan government is not, and should therefore be traded in for one that is according to them.

There is every chance that destabilization in Moldova incited by Russia will prompt Kyiv and its allies to deprive Moscow of all its levers of influence there once and for all by purging the self-proclaimed Transnistria republic of Russia's military presence there [5, p. 5].

Conclusions

As the war in Ukraine passes its eight-month mark, the return of conflict to the European continent continues to shock. Unfortunately, the war shows little prospect of ending. The violence may subside at times, but the absence of any sort of resolution will mean that it could reignite at any moment. The conflict, moreover, has already transformed much of what the world thought it knew about not only military operations and strategy, but also diplomacy,

intelligence, national security, energy security, economic statecraft, and much more issues.

At the moment Transnistria and Moldova share an interest in staying out of the war. For Tiraspol, this may mean defying Russia, always an uncomfortable course of action, the alternative looks like military and economic colaps. Chişinău has few choices other than to try to keep tensions with Tiraspol low, to quietly support its efforts to stay out of the war, and to plead with politicians not to inflame the situation further.

Despite the bleak situation in the region, both President Maia Sandu and Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita on several occasions affirmed that Moldova is not at risk of war and reiterated that the country is prepared to face any scenario. It seems obvious that the government is trying to project confidence to calm the highly alert population and preserve stability in the country.

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