

MOLDOVA BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST: A DELICATE BALANCE

EUGENE RUMER

The demise of the post-Cold War security order in Europe as a result of the March 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of the undeclared and still unfinished war in eastern Ukraine has resulted in a new, Cold War-like division of Europe. On one side of the divide are the security, political, and economic structures of NATO and the EU with their capital in Brussels. On the other side is Russia. Left between them are several countries in Eastern Europe: Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. All of them are former parts of the Soviet Union. All of them have struggled with the challenges of post-Soviet transition. All are now caught up in a geopolitical tug-of-war between Russia and Europe. And for all of them, their post-Soviet transition has become vastly more challenging as a result of the breakdown of Europe's post-Cold War security order.

With Russia pursuing its own integrationist scheme and the EU seeking ways to sustain its engagement with these states in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, these three countries are trying to navigate a safe course between the two competing centers of gravity. The pull in each direction is strong and entails more than simply geographic proximity to Europe and Russia. In addition, it involves shared history, culture, religion, economic ties, and domestic political circumstances unique to each country. No state in Eastern Europe combines all of these factors in a more challenging tangle than Moldova.

A COMPLICATED LEGACY

In a region where borders have been drawn and redrawn by advancing and retreating empires, no country's frontiers owe their current configuration more to that legacy of imperial ebb and flow than Moldova's. The Russian, the Ottoman, and even the Austro-Hungarian empires have left their imprint on modern-day Moldova.

Notwithstanding such deep historical roots of Moldova's geopolitics, the most important features of Moldova's present landscape are relatively recent. Modern-day Moldova was established when the Soviet Union broke up and owes its current shape to both that momentous event and the secessionist conflict that flared up in its wake.

Today's Moldova is the successor state to the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. Moldavia was a product of Soviet ethnopolitical-administrative experimentation, which first included Moldavian autonomy within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in the 1920s and 1930s. The entity was transformed into the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic after Stalin's 1940 land grab of parts of Romania following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and post-World War II Soviet-imposed arrangements in Eastern Europe.

This Soviet-era ethnopolitical-administrative experiment entailed both redrawing borders and moving populations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugene Rumer is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program.

Many Moldovans and Romanians were exiled upon Soviet occupation, some were massacred (many Jews had been killed during the war), and more Russians and Ukrainians moved into the newly Soviet republic after World War II, in addition to those who had resided on the right bank of the Dniester River prior to the formation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. The result was a country with borders that would be challenged as soon as the imperial bonds fell off, and a divided population whose component parts were eager to preserve ties to their historical homelands.

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, independent Moldova experienced strong gravitational pulls from Romania and Russia. Their political, cultural, linguistic, and economic influences have manifested themselves throughout the first quarter century of Moldova's independence, and every indication is that these influences will continue to play a major role in the country's future development.

Internal frictions in Soviet Moldavia had existed even before the Soviet Union broke up. The loosening of the ideological constraints during the late Soviet period and Mikhail Gorbachev's campaign of glasnost opened doors to the process of rewriting the record of Communist rule and misrule across the entire Soviet Union. Soviet Moldavia was no exception to this change in ideological and political landscape. As in other parts of the Soviet Union, the relaxing of the ideological and political climate led to the rise of long-suppressed nationalist sentiments from the republic's majority ethnic Moldovan-Romanian population.¹

The suppression of Moldovan-Romanian nationalism in the Soviet era included efforts to forge a new Soviet-Moldavian identity, distinct from the Romanian identity, with its own Moldavian language separate from the Romanian language and written in the Cyrillic, rather than the Latin, alphabet. This fiction quickly dissipated during the increasingly permissive atmosphere of the late 1980s, and a strong Moldovan-Romanian nationalist movement emerged as a major political force. Embracing the theme of historical injustice caused by Soviet occupation and redrawing of borders, which divided the same—Romanian—people, the movement called for the injustice to be corrected, the Soviet-era borders to be erased, and the two parts of the same people to be reunited.

This agenda in due course triggered a backlash among the ethnic Russians, other Russophone residents of Soviet

Moldavia, and the Turkic Christian Orthodox Gagauz minority. Apprehensive about losing their status, having their ties to Russia severed, and being relegated to second-class citizens in what would essentially become greater Romania—and encouraged in their fears by reactionary propaganda from Moscow—they launched their own secessionist movements.

The result was the establishment in 1990 of the self-proclaimed separatist Transdniestrian Republic, mostly on the east bank of the Dniester, with its capital in Tiraspol. In a separate development, after a protracted negotiation, the Gagauzia autonomous territory within Moldova, with its capital in Comrat, was established in 1994.

Attempts by the Chişinău government to bring Transdniestria under its control led to a brief conflict in 1992 and proved unsuccessful when the Russian Fourteenth Army deployed on the east bank of the Dniester intervened on behalf of the separatists. The conflict has been frozen since a ceasefire was signed in July 1992.

The split within Moldova, however, was not along simply ethnic lines. The legacy of successive occupations before, during, and after World War II, accompanied by persecution by both Romanian fascists and the Soviets, has left many bitter memories among those whose families were purged. This includes ethnic Moldovans as well as Russians, Ukrainians, and other minorities.² As a result, opposition to Moldova's unification with Romania came not only from ethnic Russians and other Russian speakers but also from ethnic Moldovans. The population of Transdniestria is officially estimated at some 500,000 but is likely to be considerably smaller—400,000 or even less.

Transdniestria was the largest of the unrecognized separatist states of the former Soviet Union until the conflict in eastern Ukraine that began in 2014. Although the exact figures of the Transdniestrian population are not available, ethnic Moldovans reportedly make up over 30 percent—a plurality—of the population there. Ethnic Russians and Ukrainians account respectively for 6 percent and 8 percent of the population of Moldova (excluding Transdniestria).³

Although it is occasionally brought up in political campaigns, the idea of Moldova's formal unification with Romania has for all practical purposes been quietly shelved since the freezing of the conflict. It continues to have some appeal in Romania but appears to have very little support in Moldova.⁴

Moldova's connections to both Russia and Romania and the absence of tensions between ethnic Moldovan-Romanians and ethnic Russians dilute what otherwise could have been a stronger sense of national identity. That identity is further weakened by the record of the past quarter century, during which governments of all leanings—pro-Russian and pro-Romanian (or pro-European)—have been implicated in various scandals and discredited, leaving the country at a perennial crossroads in its geopolitical orientation.

Despite the legacy of conflict and the fact that repeated attempts to reconcile the parties to that conflict have produced no result, Moldovans and Russians do not share a legacy of ethnic tensions. The Russian language is spoken throughout Moldova. Economic and people-to-people contacts between Transdniestria and Chișinău-controlled Moldova have been in effect normalized. Unlike some other frozen conflicts of the post-Soviet era, there appears virtually no likelihood of the conflict becoming unfrozen and hostilities resuming. Also unlike other post-Soviet frozen conflicts, the effect of the Transdniestrian conflict on Moldova's development is—in relative terms—marginal. The principal challenges facing the country lie elsewhere.

OPPOSITES ATTRACT

Most frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space emerged at least in part from long-standing tensions originating in ethnic and religious differences that predated the actual conflicts. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has its roots in the nineteenth century, when Armenia and Azerbaijan were parts of the Russian Empire. In addition, that conflict cannot escape the shadow of Armenian-Turkish relations. The war between Georgia and Abkhazia had its own complicated historical roots. Many, if not all, of these grievances were suppressed during the Soviet era but not resolved. In both these instances, the legacy of previous tensions, rivalries, and recriminations has been aggravated and even given a new life or a new dimension by the conflicts.

The conflict in Transdniestria was different. It did not have a prehistory of Moldovan-Russian interethnic relations. The Soviet regime's efforts to suppress most expressions of Moldovan-Romanian nationalism in Soviet Moldavia and forge a distinct Moldavian identity, ostensibly different from the Romanian identity, do not appear to have translated into a lasting postconflict animosity toward ethnic Russians and vice versa.

But if the legacy of the conflict between the two parts of the former Moldavia is not the decisive factor in Moldova's present and future, what is? It appears that the country's proximity—in every sense of the word—to Romania, and thus to the EU, is the most significant driver of its development. Closeness to Romania, Moldovan-Romanian nationalism, and a drive toward unification with Romania were critically important in sparking the Transdniestrian conflict. Proximity to the EU via Romania has been a major factor in Moldova's economic and political development since then and is likely to remain so in the future.

At the same time, the history of association with Russia, Moscow's political influence and military presence in Transdniestria, and the economic ties of both Chișinău-controlled Moldova and Transdniestria with Russia mean that Moscow, too, will remain critically important to Moldova's future development. Moldova's ability to balance between these two poles of attraction is also likely to be a major factor shaping its future.

The current situation and outlook for Moldova for the foreseeable future is best told in numbers. With its GDP of just over \$6 billion and GDP per capita of some \$2,200, Moldova is among the poorest countries in Europe,⁵ sometimes even described as the poorest. Some 20 percent of the population live below the poverty line.⁶ Moldova's official population (not counting Transdniestria) is approximately 3.5 million.⁷ Unexceptionally for Eastern Europe, Moldova has experienced a decline in its population,⁸ which is projected to continue. The country's population is projected to be approximately 3 million by 2030 and 2.4 million by 2050.⁹ At seventy-one, Moldova's life expectancy at birth is among the lowest in Europe.¹⁰

Migration is currently one of the most significant factors in Moldova's development and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. It is both one of the biggest sources of income and an obstacle to the country's growth. With over one-quarter of its GDP generated by remittances from workers abroad, Moldova is the third-largest recipient of foreign remittances in the world, behind only Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹¹ Approximately 1 million Moldovan citizens work as guest workers, mostly elsewhere in Europe or in Russia.¹²

A comprehensive 2012 study of Moldova's migration situation conducted by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) underscored what the high migration and remittances numbers had already revealed: the lack of economic opportunities in Moldova.¹³ According to that study, nearly 65 percent of migrants had a high-school education; over 10 percent had a higher education—an increase of nearly 3 percentage points on 2005. The same study indicated that even though there was demand for skilled labor in Moldova, wages were more than twice as high in Romania and Russia as in Moldova.

Predictably, Romania and Russia continue to play critical roles in Moldova's development. The close ties between Romania and Moldova—even if very unlikely to lead to formal unification soon—manifest themselves in Romania's policy of granting Romanian citizenship to descendants of residents of Romanian territory that was incorporated into Soviet Moldavia.¹⁴ Since 1991, when the policy was adopted, as many as 500,000 Moldovans have obtained Romanian passports.¹⁵ In 2014, the EU granted Moldova visa-free access. However, since 2007, when Romania joined the EU, hundreds of thousands of Moldovans in possession of Romanian passports could already travel and work in the EU. It appears that Romania has served largely as a gateway to the EU rather than a destination in its own right. According to the same IOM study, the largest Moldovan community in Europe was in Italy, with some 200,000 living there and only approximately 40,000 in Romania.

Foodstuffs are at the top of the list of exports generated by Moldova's economy, in which agriculture plays a big part.¹⁶ Romania's geographic proximity makes it the biggest destination for Moldovan exports, which were worth approximately \$450 million in 2015.¹⁷

The EU is Moldova's biggest trading partner, with some \$3.5 billion in overall trade in 2016.¹⁸ However, Russia is more important than Romania as a destination for Moldovan migrant workers. Russia is—at least temporarily—home to some 500,000 Moldovan workers.¹⁹ Russia is the second-largest export market for Moldovan goods, at \$241 million in 2015.²⁰ Russia supplies most of Moldova's energy. Moldova owes Russia over \$6 billion. A large portion of that debt is owed by Transnistria to the Russian energy giant Gazprom for gas deliveries but was nonetheless apparently recognized by Moldovan President Igor Dodon as part of Moldova's overall debt to Russia.²¹

Until recently, Moldova had made little progress toward securing its energy independence from Russia and diversifying its energy supply.²² Moldova's reliance on its Transnistria-based, Russian-owned sole electricity provider has meant that its key utility was in the hands of Russia and the separatist authorities in Tiraspol. Recently, the Moldovan government signed a new deal with a Ukraine-based supplier to replace the old provider.²³ If sustained, this could be an important step toward reducing the country's dependence on Russia in one critical area.

Moldova's ties to its two principal foreign partners—Russia and the EU (directly and via Romania)—have been both an essential lifeline and a major constraint on the country's development. With few, if any external, sources of support, the key question is whether the country will be able to find domestic resources to break out of this predicament.

A CHALLENGING DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE

One of Moldova's biggest accomplishments since independence has been its ability to sustain a competitive political system. Over its quarter century of independence, despite many external and internal challenges, the country has held a series of contested elections whose outcomes were not foregone conclusions—a rare occurrence in the former Soviet states. Moldova has received a “partly free” ranking from Freedom House.²⁴ Few other post-Soviet states have achieved this rating, and none has received a “free” rating.

In 2014, Moldova signed an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU.²⁵ Along with Ukraine and Georgia, Moldova has committed to the path of European integration and necessary reforms. The agreement was an important milestone. In the face of Russian pressure to not sign the AA and instead remain in Moscow's orbit, the AA and the agreement on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) that Moldova signed at the same time signaled the country's commitment to its European course. That said, neither the AA nor the DCFTA accord offers Moldova a path to membership in the EU. They are a replacement for membership of sorts. They codify the country's commitment to more difficult reforms and offer trade advantages, assuming Moldova can take the necessary steps to meet the conditions stipulated in those agreements.

Moldova has a relatively competitive media environment. However, according to Freedom House, the overall media climate is affected by inadequate protection of journalists, government interference, concentration of ownership of media outlets by business and political figures, and those figures' use of media resources to advance their agendas.²⁶ The influence of business and political interests over media outlets has resulted in an atmosphere of public distrust and the proliferation of conspiracy theories.²⁷

In the course of its quarter century of independence, Moldova has seen more than its fair share of political turbulence. The list of scandals associated with a succession of governments of various political persuasions and geopolitical leanings is long and not worth recounting here. Previous scandals, however, were eclipsed by the 2014 bank theft scandal that rocked the country. It involved the theft of \$1 billion from state coffers, or approximately one-sixth of the country's annual GDP. A former prime minister implicated in the scandal is in prison serving a nine-year sentence.²⁸ The scandal was followed by further revelations that Moldova was a major link in a money-laundering scheme that originated in Russia and reportedly laundered as much as \$20 billion (possibly even more) between 2010 and 2014.²⁹

Corruption has been a major problem for Moldova throughout its quarter century of independence. In 2016, the country ranked 123 out of 176 countries surveyed.³⁰ In 2015, it ranked 103. Combined with a fractious domestic political environment, frequent government changes, poverty, and the presence of powerful business interests, corruption has been a major impediment to the functioning of the government and development of the country's private sector and investment.

Moldova's prospects for breaking through this combination of political instability, scandal, government dysfunction, and corruption are uncertain. The 2016 presidential election resulted in the victory of Igor Dodon, a pro-Russian candidate. In Moldova, the labels "pro-Russian" and "pro-European" have not had quite the same meaning as in neighboring Ukraine, where they have often been associated with anti- and pro-reform agendas respectively. In Moldova, political leaders of both geopolitical persuasions have been known to disappoint when it came to the quality of their governance and reform. However, even though the presidency in Moldova does not have strong executive authority, the newly elected head of state has promised to scrap the

Association Agreement—a move that would be welcome in Moscow and deliver a major blow to the reform agenda.³¹

Still, the pro-European, pro-reform agenda is publicly favored by the Democratic Party of Moldova, which currently holds a majority of seats in the parliament. Its leader is Moldova's most prominent businessman Vladimir Plahotniuc, who is rumored to be the most influential business and political leader in the country. Among other assets, he controls four of Moldova's five national television outlets.³² Plahotniuc does not hold any official post but has publicly embraced the cause of European integration and declared his resolve to keep the party and the country on a pro-U.S., pro-EU course.³³ The sincerity of this commitment is the subject of various conspiracy theories, which include speculation about collusion between Dodon and Plahotniuc as well as the latter's alleged motive to consolidate all economic and political power in the country in his hands.³⁴

A TRICKY BALANCING ACT

The picture of Moldova at the quarter-century mark is that of a country that has overcome a great deal of adversity in its post-Soviet transformation and achieved progress in a number of key areas. But it is also a country that still faces multiple challenges before its transformation is secure.

Although none of the challenges facing Moldova—economic, political, or geopolitical—is to be treated lightly, it is important not to lose sight of a number of advantages that Moldova has. Moldova is European, relatively homogeneous, and small. Its closeness and connection to the EU through Romania, its geographic location, and its culture make it an integral part of Europe. The EU cannot turn its attention away from Moldova under the pretext that it is not European. Its European credentials are just as valid as those of Albania, Macedonia, or Montenegro.

Size also matters. Moldova's small size is an advantage in its dealings with the EU, while Ukraine's size represents an important constraint on what the EU can do for a country of some 44 million people with a geographic area nearly the size of France. Assuming—as is almost certainly the case—that EU membership for Moldova is not in the cards for the foreseeable future, the country's small size means that EU assistance funds can have a disproportionate effect on its development and make a real difference for the population as a whole.

The unresolved Transdniestrian conflict is widely seen as one of the biggest challenges facing Moldova. That, however, is a misperception. The conflict has been de facto settled. While the prospect of its formal resolution appears remote at best for the time being, the two parts of the former Soviet Moldavia have learned to co-exist peacefully, and there is no perceptible reason to suggest that hostilities between them are likely to resume. Perhaps not everyone in Moldova will admit to it publicly, but the status quo seems to suit most if not all parties. Tiraspol's decision to sign on to the DCFTA agreement was further evidence of the close relationship between the two parts of the country.³⁵

None of this is to say that Moldova is free of major challenges. On the country's foreign and security policy agenda, no challenge is greater than its relationship with Russia. The annexation of Crimea, the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine, and the now-familiar tools of hybrid warfare have cast a long shadow over all former Soviet states. Moldova has the advantage of not sharing a border with Russia, but Transnistria remains Russia's outpost and home to a residual Russian military presence that no government in Chișinău can afford to ignore. Russia's determination to keep Moldova in its orbit continues to manifest itself in periodic threats to use economic leverage against its impoverished partner,³⁶ attempts to bring Moldova into Moscow's integrationist schemes,³⁷ and even an recent alleged assassination attempt of Plahotniuc.³⁸

Relations with Russia remain an essential element of Moldova's economic, political, and security equation. Moldova can ill afford bad relations with Russia and needs to carefully manage them. The EU, let alone the United States, is not in a position to step in and displace Russia in that equation. 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.

Aside from Russia, another major challenge to Moldova is its own domestic political and economic environment. Corruption, government dysfunction, and a lack of prospects make up the main reasons behind the country's loss of population to emigration to other countries in search of a better future. In a recent survey, corruption and unemployment were cited by the highest number of respondents—38 and 35 percent respectively—as the biggest problems facing Moldova. Low wages and pensions were the third-biggest problem, at 34 percent.³⁹

Combined, these are also the reasons behind Moldova's projected significant population decline for decades to come. None of these problems can be solved quickly, and all require a long-term commitment from the country's political establishment and its foreign friends and partners. Whereas Plahotniuc's stated resolve to pursue European integration is to be welcomed, real change calls for a more institutional approach to dealing with the country's challenges than a personal commitment from its leading businessman and political figure.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP MEETS ITS MATCH

Moldova's signing of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA accord with the EU was undoubtedly a major step forward. Reversing them, as Dodon has pledged, would be an even bigger step backward.⁴⁰ The AA and DCFTA accord contain the blueprint for the country's progress, and implementing them is the way to tackle its biggest problems.

This suggests priority areas for Western engagement with Moldova. The relatively benign and stable equilibrium in relations between Moldova and Transnistria indicates that the status quo has to be maintained, including with continued support from the international community and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission to help manage the relationship. However, a more vigorous effort by either side to seek a formal resolution to the conflict is hardly needed and could even prove destabilizing.

Moldova has been a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace program and has participated in the peacekeeping effort in Kosovo. Moldova's relationship with NATO is contained by the fact that neutrality is written into its constitution, and the question of joining is thus not on the agenda. NATO's efforts with Moldova are aimed at helping the country create "modern, mobile, high-readiness, well-equipped and cost effective forces that are interoperable with those of other countries." Further, according to NATO, "key reform projects include improving command and control structures, military logistics, personnel management, training and strengthening Moldova's border patrol capabilities." Most of these are undoubtedly productive and much-needed areas of support for Moldova's armed forces, especially if they help its national security establishment use its scarce resources more efficiently.⁴¹

That said, while peacekeeping operations are a source of useful interoperability experience with NATO, the utility of Moldova's participation in them and the relevance of interoperability with NATO are open to questions for several reasons. First, Moldova's scarce resources are probably best applied to perform missions at home rather than in peacekeeping operations elsewhere. Second, it is hard to imagine that Moldova will participate in a coalition operation in the foreseeable future. In the event of renewed conflict in Transnistria, Moldovan armed forces are likely to face a coalition of separatist and Russian troops, but it appears highly unlikely that NATO or any of its members will come to Moldova's rescue. Thus, although reforming and building an effective and efficient defense force designed to meet the needs of the country's national security is undoubtedly a priority for Moldova, its mission appears to be far more likely inside rather than outside the country's physical environment.

Key areas for U.S. and EU assistance to Moldova include sustaining ongoing efforts aimed at police reform and at reform of the judiciary; support for civil society; assistance with Moldova's implementation of the AA and DCFTA agreement with the EU as the critical channels for its European integration; and overall political and diplomatic engagement to signal that Moldova remains an important partner to both Washington and Brussels and is not being relegated to the Russian sphere of influence.⁴²

Since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and upended the entire post–Cold War European security system, the utility and effectiveness of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy has been in doubt. The crisis in East-West relations has made that policy, whose aim is not membership in the EU for the countries caught in the tug-of-war between Russia and the West but their gradual adaptation to EU norms and practices, even more important than it was before 2014. No country is a better candidate for engagement through the EU's Eastern Partnership than Moldova.

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NOTES

1. This issue is treated in detail in this section and draws heavily on William H. Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad, and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

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