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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

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News in Brief



EU Ambassador to Chisinau Peter Michalko said in an interview with the Radio Chisinau on May 6 that it is very important for the Republic of Moldova to credibly support a new government that will be able to carry out important reforms, so that people's lives improve. "It is very important that the new parliament credibly supports a government that will be able to carry out these important reforms, so that people's lives improve. This is in line with our relations based on the Association Agreement. We hope that we will see the implementation of the Association Agreement in the future, in partnership with the institutions of the Republic of Moldova, with a new government, with a new parliament, as desired by the Moldovan citizens", said the European diplomat. Michalko added it is very necessary that the July 11th parliamentary elections be free and fair, transparent and credible and bring results in accordance with the will of the citizens.



The President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, paid an official visit to Berlin on May 19-20. According to a press release issued by the Presidency, the visit took place at the invitation of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "aimed at giving a new impetus to bilateral relations between the two states." On the first day of the visit, Maia Sandu had meetings with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and in the afternoon of the same day, President Sandu had an online discussion with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Also, during the official visit to Berlin, Maia Sandu participated in discussions related to the Republic of Moldova in the Foreign Affairs and European Affairs Committees of the German Bundestag and had meetings with deputies from the CDU/CSU, SPD, Green Party factions of the Bundestag. Sandu discussed several topics, such as: how bilateral relations between Germany and the Republic of Moldova can be improved, the political and security situation in the country and the region, the support Moldova needs to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic, a stronger cooperation for economic development, improving conditions for the Moldovan diaspora in Germany.



The leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), Igor Dodon, and the leader of the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), Vladimir Voronin, signed on May 12 the official document for the creation of the Electoral Bloc of PSRM and PCRM in anticipation of early parliamentary elections which will take place on July 11. Igor Dodon also launched the first ideological elements of the new bloc, relying on a speech against the West. "Foreign factors with the help of their political instruments in Chisinau want to impose on citizens a set of pseudo-values, anti-family, anti-Christian, unsuitable for our nation. It also seeks to liquidate the Moldovan identity, including by banning the Moldovan language. The aim is to transform our country into a colony, which will become a source of cheap labour, cheap land sold to foreigners, etc." wrote Dodon on his Facebook page.

Republic of Moldova on the line of the Moscow-Kyiv security threats



Russian troops during their peacekeeping mission

Mădălin Necșuțu

The turbulent regional context in the region caused by the political and military tensions between Moscow and Kyiv should somehow put the Moldovan authorities on their guard. Although not directly on the line of potential military threats between Ukraine

and Russia, the Republic of Moldova will have to closely monitor the troop movements in the Transnistrian separatist region, obviously being guided by the "better safe than sorry" saying.

Despite a relative relaxation on the surface, pressure on the Kiev authorities from Moscow

remains constant. Only about 20 percent of the Russian troops massed near Ukraine's borders last month have been withdrawn, so Ukraine is still with the sword of Damocles hanging over its head. President Volodymyr Zelensky's internal disputes with the Russian political elements

► and oligarchs behind them are additional sources of tension.

At the same time, Zelensky's increasingly visible desire to run for a second term in which he shows signs of not wanting to take a conciliatory stance with regard to Moscow, as it was the case until recently, is complicating matters even more. Regarding elections, this time speaking about elections in Russia, the autumn parliamentary elections will further exacerbate the tensions in the region amid a decline in the popularity of Vladimir Putin to somewhat 60 percent.

Sure, for a true democracy this is a dictatorial score, but for an autocratic regime, as it is in Moscow, this score is rather worrying, compared to Putin's score after the 2008 Georgian War and the annexation of Crimea, when the popularity rate of the Kremlin leader had risen to 80-90 percent.

The history of the last two decades has shown that Putin has used armed power abroad to raise his political rating domestically, which is also taken into account in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in the Russian Federation in the autumn of this year.

In the above-mentioned context, the Republic of Moldova has been witnessing these manoeuvres impassively. Given that about 11 per cent of its territory is a separatist region and Russia is still maintaining around 1,500-2,000 troops on its territory should put Chisinau on guard in such turbulent times. Instead, the authorities in Chisinau are rather concerned about the current political issues domestically and pay minimal importance to the issues happening on the international arena, but also in the region it belongs to. It remains to be seen what impact these Russian-Ukrainian tensions will have on Moldova.

The increase of the Russian presence in the Black Sea is guaranteed in the coming years

Leonid Litra, senior researcher at the New Europe Centre in Kiev, Ukraine



Leonid Litra, an expert in international relations and post-Soviet space, spoke in an interview for our newsletter about what the Russian military threat in the region means today, in the context of an increasingly visible Russian militarism. We have discussed the stakes for which Russia is pressing Kiev today and what Western support for Kiev means in this dangerous landscape. The security of the Republic of Moldova through the prism of Russian troops from the Transnistrian separatist region has also been a central topic of our discussions. We are inviting you to read in detail the conclusions of

the expert regarding the current security challenges in the region:

■ **What is the current situation in eastern Ukraine? What would mean a viable agreement for Kiev in the negotiations with Russia over the eastern part of the country controlled by pro-Russian separatists?**

■ The current situation is worrying because Ukraine, in the last two years of the current President Volodymyr Zelensky's term, has made great efforts to stabilize the conflict in the eastern part of the country.

Although Ukraine is not responsible for generating this conflict, big effort

has been made, including concessions on its part on certain issues in order to predispose Russia to a more constructive dialogue.

There were a few months of ceasefire which was a relatively stable period. I'm saying relative, because throughout this period there have been victims on the demarcation line. And we have seen lately an escalation of the situation, which is very worrying because, to a certain extent, those efforts that have been made in the last two years are no longer visible because of this situation.

And we also have seen a concentration of forces on the border with Ukraine, which is adding even more tension and nervousness in the conflict resolution process.

■ **How much has changed since the announcement of the Russian troops' withdrawal from around the borders of Ukraine? Is there still pressure on Ukraine from a military point of view, given that the USA has estimated a withdrawal of only about 20 percent of Russian troops, from 100,000 to some 80,000 soldiers remaining in position?**

■ Yes, such fears exist, the data of Ukraine's partners showing that a large part of these Russian troops remain in positions of potential risk for Ukraine. The only calming thing is that these troops are missing some elements that are part of the attack plan.

One such element is special communication and all sorts of other military elements that are usually part of a plan of attack and are now not visible. However, I think we cannot

be reassured about this, because the lesson of 2014 made it clear to us that everything can change very quickly, therefore we need to be vigilant.

This is not just about Ukraine, but about the entire Black Sea area, because there is a very high probability at the moment that the EU and NATO will be directly affected in this area. Because, as you know, Russia has blocked access to the Sea of Azov. It has also strengthened its fleet in the Sea of Azov, bringing 15 attack ships from the Caspian Sea. Therefore, a big part of the coast that de jure belongs to Ukraine is now controlled by Russia. Pressure here is growing and Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey are needed for maintaining a balance of power in the Black Sea region.

■ **Both Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin want to grow in the polls. In Russia, by the way, the parliamentary elections are taking place this autumn. Do you think Putin could push and escalate the tensions over Ukraine? Maybe even militarily - directly or indirectly through the pro-Russian rebels that Russia is controlling in the Eastern Ukraine? Is there a danger here?**

■ I think Vladimir Putin has an image problem, even though he is the most popular politician in Russia. He has an approval rating of about 60 percent, which is a lot for a democratic state, but which is very little compared to what we've seen in previous years, when this rating accounted for 75-80 percent.

This has changed after the "Navalny case", especially in the sector of

young voters who are more flexible in political views. Here, Putin will have to calculate very well whether a potential escalation could bring more benefits or not.

I think that what has happened recently was an action with multiple projections in which they wanted to see a few things as a result of the concentration of forces. The first was to test the USA commitment to Ukraine, namely for Russia to see how the new White House administration reacts to possible escalations of tensions in the region. Then, Russia wanted to make Ukraine more flexible in the negotiations with Moscow and also to test domestically how the Russian public opinion reacts to a possible new military campaign in Ukraine. And everyone has realized this time, unlike in 2014, that an attack in Ukraine can no longer take place in an opaque way with unidentified forces.

Now, Russia has to show its cards because otherwise it will not be able to carry out this attack, as Ukraine is no longer the country of 2014. So, many things have evolved a lot.

Regarding Zelensky's political rating, he has consciously promoted a policy of conciliation, even though from my point of view, this is too early to put into practice an electoral slogan of his campaign, namely the end of the war. But that did not add to his image, because concessions were made, but they were not very successful in the way he wanted. Now, as Zelensky's struggle for a new presidential term is being foreshadowed, his steps are becoming more determined.

I am referring here to the case of Viktor Medvedciuk and the attempt to destabilize the Russian network of influence in Ukraine. And not only the case of Medvedciuk, there are several other cases that we can see in the decisions of the Security Council of Ukraine and this has brought a very big plus to Zelensky. If we look at Zelensky's rating before the Medvedciuk's episode, it has now increased by about 15 percent, which is a very good performance in such a short time.

■ **How do you see Russia's military presence in the Black Sea region? Can we expect an increased military presence in the coming years or not? What does this mean for Ukraine?**

■ The increase in the Russian presence in the Black Sea is guaranteed in the coming years. Russia has tried to put pressure on Ukraine through the two major Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov - Mariupol and Berdyansk. Ukraine is exporting a lot through the Mariupol port, which is an important industrial center. The inability to export by sea is a pressure making Ukraine more vulnerable to Russia.

I suspect that Russia has the same intention towards the Odessa port, which is the largest maritime center in Ukraine. The stakes are very high, because this is at present the only functioning channel of Ukraine by sea, which presents a great advantage at the moment.

Therefore, I believe that Russia will try to intensify its presence and here Ukraine will need the support of Western partners, because without joint patrols in the Odessa and the

adjacent areas we cannot talk about security in this region.

It will be very good if the NATO summit, which is to take place next month, will be attentive to this issue too. I remember Romania's attempts to focus on this subject, which were not always successful, but now NATO will have to take these aspects into account.

■ ***In order to stop the possible aspirations of some ex-Soviet countries on the way to the Euro-Atlantic space, Moscow has made it a practice in the last three decades to open conflicts that are today either frozen or in a latent phase. The question is whether NATO should further support Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and strengthen ties with these countries, even before accession, despite this Moscow game?***

■ Indeed, this is one of the recommendations we have made in a recent study that we have published here at the New Europe Center in Kiev. This would somehow discourage Russia from using this tool to prevent NATO and EU accession, as Moldova has no ambitions to become a NATO member. But that is not convincing enough for Russia to withdraw its illegally stationed troops in the Transnistrian region.

There is a manual published by NATO, a kind of policy guide from the 1990s, which says that countries that have conflicts on their territories are not eligible for NATO integration. I believe that this decision needs to be reviewed and would even create a strategic ambiguity throughout this discussion.

At the same time, I would like to say that the subject of NATO accession must be treated with the utmost delicacy, because, if we imagine a situation in which Ukraine receives a MAP (Membership Action Plan - a roadmap for accession) and the day after Russia attacks Ukraine, then this MAP is not going to help much, because Article 5 cannot be triggered (also called "the principle of musketeers in which all NATO member states intervene if one of them is attacked).

There must be a well-developed strategy and that is why Ukraine, as you have mentioned in your question, needs support. First, naval support in the Black Sea and then air defense capability as these are Ukraine's weaknesses at the moment.

■ ***Moving to the issue of the Republic of Moldova, the Moldovan Minister of Defense, Victor Gaiciuc, said last month that Moldova has nothing to worry about the tensions in the region with Russia. He also said that the Russian-Transnistrian military exercises in the separatist region of Moldova should not be a concern. How do you appreciate this relaxation of the military authorities in Chisinau in this troubled regional context?***

■ I find this statement at least strange; I don't even know if it could fall under the Criminal code or not, but I want to draw a parallel with Ukraine here. Now, Ukraine is investigating the case of the Kharkov Agreement (an agreement signed in Sevastopol between Ukraine and Russia in 2010 granting Moscow this port for 25 years starting with 2017) which were signed by former President Yanukovich.

It is now being investigated whether or not the deputies who voted and then the government that decided to sign that agreement were involved in the betrayal of the country. I think that in recent years, since the independence of the Republic of Moldova from 1991, we have had many such statements that can qualify under this term.

But, beyond the legal qualifications, the Republic of Moldova should be very attentive to what is happening and bother about the illegal Russian forces on its territory. Even the fact that Russia, which claims to be a mediator and a guarantor in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, is participating together with the Transnistrian forces in military exercises raises very big questions, including the peacekeeping mission that Moscow claims to be a success. Here, in practice, Russia is doing itself a disservice, because its role as a peacemaker in the region has been very much rumbled by this situation.

■ ***How big is the danger coming from Transnistria today for the Republic of Moldova with regard to the security dimension?***

■ It is very difficult to estimate now. And the Russians have big problems in the region, including the fact that the Russian Army is hiring soldiers from the Transnistrian region. The Russian military is also heavily underfunded in Transnistria.

However, even though the capacity of these forces in Transnistria is not good enough, their ability to cause possible damage is very high. Therefore, Moldova needs to think

very carefully about limiting the damage in the region.

Also Ukraine is thinking about this. Kiev understands the increase in the military forces in Transnistria and this is only a small danger though very distracting. Ukraine needs to have troops in this area too, in order to prevent the “worst case scenario” coming from the Transnistrian region.

■ ***Even the Ukrainian Army has moved troops to the Transnistrian border segment last month, as shown in the pictures.***

■ This seems justified to me. Ukraine has about 3,000 kilometres of land border with Russia and a few hundred kilometres of sea border. In addition to the immediate risk from Russia, there are also troops in the Transnistrian region.

There are also joint troops for exercises in Belarus and Ukraine is in an uncomfortable position. It is virtually surrounded from all sides except for the northeast.

■ ***Is there a need for closer cooperation in the military sector between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine? If so, why and how could this be done?***

■ There is a collaboration between the two countries. It has gained more meaning than until 2014 (annexation of Crimea). Ukraine did not really understand the Republic of Moldova until then, but it understands it very well now. Moreover, if until now the Republic of Moldova could give advice to Ukraine, now it is Ukraine which can give advice to Moldova.

The first and most important step that was taken was to ban that transit for the supply of Russian troops in the Transnistrian region.

Both Ukraine and Moldova should be interested in ensuring that there is no military outbreak in the Transnistrian region. The Transnistrian elites are making money in this region and are interested in maintaining the status quo, although it is Moscow that has the last word. I hope that this region will remain peaceful, but at the same time, I believe that the Republic of Moldova needs a broader defence programme.

If you look at the defence budget (about 0.39 percent of GDP), it looks like a joke, but it's not. This pays for the salaries and possibly the painting of several walls.

Given that we have such a tense situation in the region, Moldova needs to think more about the expenditures for its defensive capabilities. Moldova does not have them now and that is a big problem. Ukraine and Moldova can now participate in military exercises.

We now have an unfavourable government, with crooked statements, but the situation could soon change a lot. Much will depend on the future political configuration in Chisinau, because in Ukraine there is sympathy for Maia Sandu and a great deal of distrust for existing government. Cooperation is needed at the level of all institutions in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

■ ***Thank you for the interview!***

Editorial

The explosive situation in eastern Ukraine and its consequences for the regional security

The escalation of tensions in eastern Ukraine as a result of the dislocation and concentration of the Russian military equipment and personnel near Ukraine's borders, which have been observed since early 2021 and intensified in the spring, has exacerbated the militaristic sentiments and further aggravated the regional security. The lack of clarity about Moscow's plans and its subsequent actions have significantly destabilized the situation and created good reasons for fears about the growth of a conflict centre as a result of Russia's actions.

The degree of tension in eastern Ukraine is reaching its peak

After the annexation of Crimea, this has been the peak phase of escalating tensions in the region. Russia, under the pretext of preparing the "West 2021" military exercises, has deployed two armies and three air troops at the western borders of the country. It remains unclear whether this was an act of geopolitical intimidation or a rehearsal for a large-scale invasion of Ukraine. The explosive situation in Donbass could not leave the international actors and world leaders indifferent.

Warnings against Russia from Washington, the EU and OSCE representatives were expressed throughout



***Natalia Stercul,
expert of the Foreign Policy
Association of Moldova (APE)***

the escalation period until Russia's statements about the withdrawal of its troops. The international partners have expressed assurance of unconditional support for Ukraine. Thus, the degree of confrontation between Russia and the West has raised to an unprecedented level.

The armed confrontation in Donbass has become a kind of underlying factor that hinders any regulatory process in the region. This is good for Russia, which is trying to keep its traditional influence here.

The presence of local conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Transnistrian region offers Russia additional advantages of control and influence over the

course of events.

Thus, the escalation of the conflict in Donbass and the tensions in eastern Ukraine have an impact on the dynamics of these conflicts, delaying the process of settlement, de-occupation of territories and withdrawal of Russian troops.

Risks of finding an alternative to the Minsk Agreements

Six years have passed since the signing of the Minsk Agreements aimed at easing the conflict in eastern Ukraine. However, peace has not been achieved in

Donbas. Russia's position is quite categorical on this issue, as it considers the Minsk Agreements to be the only basis for overcoming the crisis in Ukraine, which has no other alternative.

Given this, there is a clear understanding in the West that the involvement of the four countries in the Normandy format and the preservation of the Minsk Agreements prevent Russia from recognizing the popular republics of Donbass. For this reason, during the escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, French President Manuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel stressed the importance of implementing the Minsk Agreements and continuing negotiations in the Normandy format. Ukraine is in favour of changing the Minsk format, not fully understanding all the risks of this step. In his attempts to stabilize the situation, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, is looking for possible ways to meet with Vladimir Putin.

Russia has repeatedly stressed that it is not a party to Ukraine's internal political conflict and that the discussion about the Donbass issues should take place with the leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that are not controlled by Ukraine.

Such statements indicate clearly that the possibilities for the reintegration of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine depend to a large extent on the actual existence of the Minsk Agreements. Ukraine's direct denial of these is prone to irreversible consequences, which will have a direct impact on the process of resolving other local conflicts in the region.

The NATO Accession Action Plan, a path to security for Ukraine and the region

Moscow's statements on the withdrawal of troops from the Ukrainian border have somewhat eased the tensions. However, Russia's demonstration of its clearly defined "red lines" does not rule out the possibility of using military force in the future.

Understanding this has greatly contributed to Ukraine's support for NATO.

The action plan for joining NATO, according to Kyiv, could be a signal to Russia, as this is the only way to end the Donbass war and ensure the security of Ukraine and Central Europe. At the Brussels summit on 14 June 2021, the representatives of NATO member states will discuss the so-called "roadmap" for Ukraine's admission.

Russia's reaction is obviously the tightening of militaristic rhetoric, the challenges and support in local confrontations that may increase in order to destabilize the situation in eastern Ukraine. This is also confirmed by the current intelligence reports according to which the vast majority of Russian military forces remain close to Ukraine's borders.

Ukraine is part of the Black Sea region, which is extremely unstable today, especially given the blockade of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, and the partial blockade of the Black Sea. Ongoing processes in the Black Sea region are extremely important for regional security. Under the current conditions, a synergy of the actions of the countries in the region is needed, as well as support from the West.

This refers, first of all, to the problems of patrolling the Black Sea, the conduct of joint military exercises in the Black Sea basin and the modelling of actions in situations aimed at preventing the blockade of the Black Sea.

Under the current conditions, Ukraine is trying to lay the foundations for preventive and sustainable resistance actions to Russia in all directions - on land, at sea, in the air, in the information and cyber spaces. Mobilizing the joint efforts of the states in the region to maintain peace, security and stability is a priority in the current conditions. Deepening security and defense cooperation should be based on the synchronization of joint actions with regard to interaction and operational-strategic response.

Russian troops in the Transnistrian region are relevant only to the Republic of Moldova

Iulian Fota, general director of the Romanian Diplomatic Institute (IDR) in Bucharest and former presidential adviser on security issues



The Romanian expert in international relations and security issues, Iulian Fota, gave us an interview in which we discussed a wide range of issues related to the security of the Republic of Moldova and its position in the troubled geopolitical context of the region. The Russian troops in the breakaway region of Transnistria, the game that Moscow is playing in the Republic of Moldova, as well as the position of President Maia Sandu regarding the relationship with Russia were the topics addressed in our discussions.

■ ***Does the Republic of Moldova matter in any way in this equation of regional tensions created by Russia's military manoeuvres around Ukraine's borders?***

■ It matters for Romania. Beyond Romania, the Republic of Moldova does not have a very high geopolitical importance. Moldova is very important for Romania, because it is one of our neighbours and because in a natural way, we all want settled, prosperous, stable and democratic neighbours. The second element that is binding us is the sentimental one. We in Romania and in the Republic of Moldova are to a large extent

the same people with a common history. We have this element of blood that cannot be ignored.

The Republic of Moldova is a small country and not being, geopolitically speaking, located on any major route of pipelines or trade routes, and so on, has a much lower importance than Ukraine, which at this time is clearly one of the big stakes of Europe and the West. It is the same in comparison with Georgia, a country located at the foot of the Caucasus and on the route of certain pipelines and transport corridors to the Caspian Sea. So also Georgia has a higher geopolitical value.

So, from the former USSR or CIS states, I think that the Republic of Moldova is one of the countries with the lowest geopolitical weight. I would not want it to sound disrespectful towards Moldova as a country, but Moldova in itself is not a stake, unlike Ukraine, which is a stake.

I think that the Republic of Moldova also understands this. Chisinau has sought all kinds of associations, such as GUAM, in order to increase its visibility.

■ *In a statement for the Balkan Insight recently, the Moldovan Defense Minister, Victor Gaiciuc, said Moldova has nothing to worry about the tensions in the region and that the intensified military exercises in the Transnistrian separatist region pose no threat to Chisinau. Does the Republic of Moldova have any reason to worry about it or not?*

■ I don't see any threat either. The only ones who could look for a military tool to be used in the Republic of Moldova could be the Russians. Evidence of that is the fact that they have all those contingents in Transnistria. The Russians used military force when they needed it, as happened in Georgia and Ukraine.

I do not see why they would do this in the Republic of Moldova. One thing seems strange to me, but also interesting, namely that the Republic of Moldova is the only country, at least in the European area of the USSR, which has a pro-Russian party. Neither Georgia nor Ukraine has such parties. The same goes for Belarus, where Lukashenko did not allow for any party to emerge, because he wants to monopolize the relations with Moscow.

In such circumstances, the question arises why use military force in a country that has a pro-Russian party? To alter its electoral weight and influence? That would be just one aspect.

Also, the Republic of Moldova does not seem concerned about the issue of territorial integrity. So, I don't see the Moldovan population to be concerned about the Russian military presence in Transnistria, in general, in comparison with Georgia or Ukraine.

So, in the Republic of Moldova you can make concessions to Transnistrians, I mean the "small steps policy" here, and the population has nothing to say. In Ukraine and Georgia, no politician would dare to do such a thing.

Any politician in Georgia or Ukraine who would think of making concessions to the pro-Russian separatists would end up into a huge political scandal. While in the Republic of Moldova, car plates were given to the Transnistrians as well as other all kinds of facilities and sovereignty prerogatives that, by international law, belong to the central government in Chisinau. And the population did not protest.

In such a context, why would the Russians spoil such an atmosphere of sympathy for Moscow, a more pro-Russian one than in any other Black Sea country?

In addition, the Transnistrian leaders are only instruments of Moscow. So the question is: would it make sense for Russia to use military force in Transnistria? I don't see why!

Russian troops in Transnistria, a guarantee for Moscow

■ *The Russian troops stationed in Moldova numbers about 1,500 - 2,000 soldiers. Their role is to watch the large ammunition depot in Cobasna of the Transnistrian region. However, studies monitoring the activities of the Russian troops in Transnistria show that they are constantly training for offensive and not necessarily defensive exercises. Could we trust Russia that these troops have only a watching role in the Transnistrian region?*

■ Those Russian troops from the Transnistrian region are relevant only to the Republic of Moldova. Their relevance consists in being positioned, not used. Those troops have neither operational nor strategic force. They alone do not pose a threat to either Ukraine or the Republic of Moldova. They are relevant to the situation of the Republic of Moldova. They are there as a guarantee, but I don't see why they would be used, because I don't see a categorical anti-Russian political reaction in the Republic of Moldova to justify the use of those troops.

At the moment, I would not characterize the Republic of Moldova as an anti-Russian country because it is not. In the Republic of Moldova, even the pro-European forces, including the well-defined ones, don't have anti-Russian feelings or develop such attitudes. Again, why use Transnistrian military troops?

■ **According to the Constitution, the Republic of Moldova is a neutral country. In recent years, the public perception of NATO has steadily improved, though not much, but it is no longer the scarecrow promoted by the Russian propaganda. How far is Chisinau from NATO today?**

■ It's light-years away. First of all, at present, less than 30 percent of Moldovan citizens want to join NATO. It is the lowest percentage of all states in the Black Sea region. In Ukraine and Georgia, the public support for NATO is significantly higher than in the Republic of Moldova. So Moldovans do not want NATO.

When Romania joined NATO, it had over 70 percent support. Therefore, that issue of neutrality enshrined in the Constitution is natural, not a forced one. At this moment, the Republic of Moldova wants a relationship with the EU and even accession into the European space, but not into NATO.

There is also a flip side to this, too, namely why would you use NATO as a scarecrow in a country that does not want to join NATO? I mean, to scare the citizens with what? It would be a matter of scaring them somehow that they would lose NATO, as it once was the case in Romania, but in Moldova, where people don't want NATO, I don't see how you can scare them with this thing.

Increased military pressure on Kiev

■ **Recently, the USA said that Russia still maintains around 80,000 soldiers (out of about 100,000) and that the withdrawal announced by Moscow around the borders of Ukraine was proposed only in a very small amount. Is there still a dangerous situation or is it moving towards a relaxation of tensions?**

■ Russia has increased military pressure on Ukraine because it is pursuing several goals in the coming period. I think it wanted to create certain opportunities and give certain signals. Let's not forget that there is a process of negotiations between the USA and Russia. There is this discussion that a meeting with Mr Putin is possible on Mr Biden's next visit to Europe.

So, I think that Russia wanted to show that it has options both for cooperation and dialogue, and confrontation. Obviously, by putting pressure on Ukraine.

The more credible the threat, the more effectively this lever can be used. On the other hand, precisely because Russia wants to have as many options as possible, I don't see it using military force at the moment.

And if we look at the Russians in recent years, they have been very calculated and careful in using the military force. I'm not just talking about Crimea or the Donbas. But also in Syria, or elsewhere where

they intervened militarily, they took care to do it moderately and in small concentrations not to make it burdensome from the financial and human points of view. When your soldiers die, however, that turns into a political cost.

What I mean is that I don't see what Russia would gain at the moment by using military force, when it has to win a political war with and in Ukraine.

As in the case of Transnistria and the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine wants to have a voice and a role to play in the politics of these states. Russia lost Ukraine by annexing Crimea anyway. Moscow is going to put more pressure, the weapons will still be rattling, and it will be bringing and withdrawing troops. They have blocked the Sea of Azov and will keep it blocked until October.

They will be playing more games, but I do not see the Russians engaging in a violent military confrontation with Ukraine. This is a much stronger, much stronger country. With an army willing to fight, the costs for the Russians will be high, implicitly for Mr. Putin. And that would not correspond to Russia's desire to manoeuvre in Ukraine's domestic policy.

By the way, when Russia annexed Crimea, it removed several million pro-Russian voters from the political game in Ukraine. They used to vote for pro-Russian parties and politicians. Then they put such voters out of the game in Donetsk and Lugansk as well.

In a way, that was all for the best for Ukraine, because without these pro-Russian votes, the country had fewer pro-Russian politicians and then Ukraine was much more consistent in its domestic policy. Thus, it could consolidate better and was able to rebuild its army better.

More security through the US military presence in the region

■ ***How dangerous is it for Romania to still have Russian troops? I'm speaking here about those in Transnistria, about 100 kilometres from its borders?***

■ Those troops don't matter to Romania and pose no threat to it. They do not have the necessary power to endanger Romania on any of its segments of the border with the Republic of Moldova.

Sure, they need to be monitored, but they can't be a danger. Instead, Crimea is a problem, because there is a large concentration of troops there. It is a distance of 300 kilometres.

■ ***President Klaus Iohannis has demanded at the recent B9 summit in Bucharest, which was also attended online by the President of the United States, Joe Biden, a greater American military presence in Romania. What does an increased American presence in Romania mean for the regional security?***

■ More security. We don't officially know what the increased presence would mean in quantity, because

this is not public information, but more troops would be equivalent to more security for Romania.

The international relations theory tells us that there should be a balance between countries. Consequently, this supplementary concentration of Russian forces in Crimea and the transformation of Crimea into an ultra-armed aircraft carrier should be obviously balanced and the balance should be equal.

This balance, on the one hand, is given by the additional training and endowment of the Romanian armed troops, and on the other hand, it is the contribution of Romania's NATO allies.

All come in the context of strengthening the NATO's capabilities on the eastern flank to protect all these states.

Coherent policy in relation to Moscow

■ ***What would it mean in terms of security for the pro-European forces to come to power in Chisinau and with a future majority coalition and a government along with President Maia Sandu and her reformist agenda? Would this create increased security opportunities for Chisinau or, on the contrary, this would antagonize Russia and stimulate its involvement in the domestic policy of the Republic of Moldova?***

■ I think that Ms Maia Sandu has been very wise and acted

very tactfully so far. It was clear that she didn't close the door for Moscow and she did it very well. We could see that she is also willing to carry a dialogue with Moscow. These are important stakes for the Republic of Moldova in its relations with Russia. First of all, it is about agricultural exports.

Secondly, the Republic of Moldova has citizens working in Russia and cannot be indifferent to their situation. I understand it and I think it is absolutely correct that a pro-European oriented Chisinau should try to maintain dialogue with Moscow.

In fact, it is clear that Russia also wants this. President Putin congratulated Maia Sandu and was among the first to do it. I don't see why a pro-European government would antagonize Russia, provided it keeps dialogue with Russia, just as the West does.

In the West, when the issue of sanctions against Russia was raised, there was the issue of cooperation with Moscow, not of dialogue. Throughout this complicated period, both the biggest and smallest states have continued the dialogue with Russia. Collaboration on certain projects has stopped, but the first rule of diplomacy says direct contact should be maintained because otherwise there is no diplomatic process.

■ **Thank you!**

Expert Opinion

The case of Ukraine and defining of the foreign, domestic or defence and security policy for the Republic of Moldova

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While Moldova appears to be consumed by the July early parliamentary elections and to maximize political capital for the latter, Ukraine has faced Russian military manoeuvres and challenges at its eastern border, an area Russia has direct access to unlike to Transnistria. The intensity and magnitude of the manoeuvre that animated the Western powers, being the largest concentration of Russian troops since 2014, the proximity to Moldova and the implications of the dynamics for the final settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, the domestic reform launched by the new Presidency, but also for the potential pragmatic and positive Moldovan-Russian partnership - all these circumstances raise the question of the specifics and direction of the national policy that Moldova should adopt, regardless of the outcome of the parliamentary election.

Military manoeuvres and challenges for Ukraine

Russia's military presence on the eastern border of Ukraine, near the Donbas region and in Crimea, amounting to more than 100,000 troops, involving also tanks, artillery, armoured vehicles and military equipment, following the recent intensification of hostilities between Kyiv and the pro-Russian separatists in the east, despite the 2019-2020 Ceasefire Agreement, has had inconsistent or perhaps stratified and interconnected

explanations provided by the Russian authorities.

The argument for launching exercises in the region to test the level of training and ensure the operational and defence capability of its military forces, in case of a security threat, has been coupled with a reaction considered legitimate by Russia to the so-called challenges posed by the Ukrainian authorities in Donbas that tried to escalate the conflict with the separatists in the east. And the USA and NATO incursions in Ukraine, which are turning the latter



into a "powder keg" by equipping it with weapons, is a threat that Russia claims it has to fight against.

In addition, although it does not consider itself involved in the fighting in Ukraine, Russia will not remain indifferent to the Russian-speaking population in the region that receives Russian passports and Russia's 'legitimate protectorate' therefore.

The context of these movements goes beyond a strictly domestic problem of Ukraine. Although it could be an exercise of intimidating and discouraging Ukraine by displaying Russia's military superiority over the Ukrainian forces, but also applying pressure to obtain concessions on the implementation of the Minsk Agreements and the status of self-proclaimed republics.

So also to maximize the influence that Russia will be able to exert on the domestic political and decision-making process of Ukraine or on the delay of its European course, the implications being also of regional/international character.

The USA is uncompromising and more determined to take action against Russia's slippage in terms of respect for human rights and alignment with democratic standards against its military tendencies, security policy and disinformation directions, hybrid threats or targets pursued through Nord Stream 2. Led by President Biden, it is also a promoter of Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity.

In addition, the Black Sea is an arena of conflict and increased military, economic, energy and political tensions, which includes NATO, USA, Russia and Ukraine among other actors.

Even though Russia declares that military activity in the region does not pose any threat to Ukraine (now in the process of withdrawing after the announcement by officials confirming the 'success' of the exercises started), this dynamic will remain a destabilizing factor with a potential escalation of tensions in the region, which will generate a kind of security dilemma.

Being directly exposed to a military issue, in addition to a political one, Ukraine demands certain military (defence) solutions. Even though NATO membership is considered

by the Ukrainian authorities to be the solution to the Donbas war and Russia's incursions into the country, a fact repeated in this regional context, NATO is not necessarily willing to expand and give Ukraine this status, perhaps constrained by the Russian factor, which has addressed recently the possibility of an escalation of tensions "with possible irreversible consequences for the Ukrainian state" in the event of accession.

On the other hand, although it had requested from the United States to provide advanced defence equipment and systems during the Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Ukraine, which did not result in concrete policies in this regard, the United States is seeking to strengthen the bilateral cooperation and assistance in the security area.

Ukraine has been also encouraged by the European Union's call on other states to step up its military support, as well as by the international experts' community who ascribe an important role to the increase in conventional defence and defence capabilities, and the deployment of troops from the NATO member states in the country (in addition to other diplomatic and economic measures for the West to consider) in order to strengthen resilience and ensure a certain parity in the Russian-Ukrainian relations.

An indirect alarm signal for Moldova

The case of Ukraine should also represent for Moldova an alarm

signal regarding the (non-traditional) security of the country, partially triggered by a new foreign and domestic policy agenda after the presidential elections. During this period, the Ukrainian authorities relied on securing the border with Moldova, sending armed forces and equipment against the background of military exercises carried out in Transnistria by GOTR together with the Transnistrian troops.

Being a typical practice in the region that has not caused alarm for the country's authorities (at least for the Minister of Defense), the manoeuvres are symbolic for their destabilizing potential and their role in undermining the regional security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, especially in the context in which Transnistria seems ambitious. Krasnoselski's statements on the region's capacity to respond to an (unlikely) armed attack by Chisinau, the clear-cut attitude towards the usefulness of Russian peacekeeping troops and the preservation of the current format of the mission or the continuation of bilateral dialogue with the Russian officials, including the need to protect the rights and interests of Russian 'compatriots' in the region and to provide legal means to facilitate the acquisition of Russian citizenship by the people in Transnistria are representative, the latter being a problematic policy/discourse restricting the legitimate rights that Moldova can exercise over its citizens and territory, formalized on the left bank of the Dniester and applied to Ukraine.

And yet, the Moldovan authorities are increasingly discussing with Western partners the creation of conditions for the final settlement of the conflict: the withdrawal of Russian troops, ammunition from Cobasna and the involvement of the OSCE in ensuring a transparent process in addition to resolving sectoral issues. It is suggestive that, relying on the organization of a 5 + 2 meeting with the OSCE this year, President Maia Sandu ascribes an important role to the domestic political stability in advancing the Transnistrian negotiations and resolution process.

Moldova's experience with Russia or Transnistria does not necessarily have to do with a military problem and solution or with a direct USA, NATO or EU presence in the country. The problem is, first of all, a (geo) political one, and the presence of the West is noticeable through development programmes, financial support, political dialogue and statements addressed to political class and authorities that undermine the rule of law and democratic processes in the country. The latter has been categorized recently by Russia as an interference in Moldova's internal affairs. In addition, compared to Ukraine, Moldova does not aspire to NATO membership.

A foreign policy, domestic policy or a defense and security policy for Moldova?

The West has had a less imposing reaction to the events in Ukraine - diplomatic positions condemning

military manoeuvres and calling for the withdrawal of armed forces, joint dialogue initiatives or new sanctions imposed by the USA on Russia, which, although not addressing the events in the region, they reflected the attitude of the American authorities towards the Russian challenges.

Not being on the agenda of great powers or a member of the European Union and NATO, with a less important domestic issue requiring the attention of the West and a deep involvement in the country's affairs, Moldova will have to become self-sufficient and act largely autonomously.

The advantage is that the Transnistrian issue is not necessarily connected to wider external disputes, such as the case of Ukraine with Nord Stream 2 or the tensions in the Black Sea, with Moldova having the opportunity to focus on the internal process. The fact that the USA is also discussing not only Ukraine's defence capabilities in such a situation, but also the fight against corruption that the Ukrainian authorities must assume, is even more representative for Moldova. Given the challenges facing the country that make it susceptible to external incursions that do not serve the national interest, Moldova needs non-traditional defence mechanisms. The foreign policy promoted by the new presidential institution, internalized and adjusted to the domestic policy, the citizens' welfare, the fight against corruption, strengthening

democracy and the rule of law, the quality of the institutional or judicial process in the country, but also the need to ensure integrity and sovereignty of the country- all aim at ensuring the proper functioning and, thus, the state resilience through an open, constructive and advantageous interaction with all cooperation partners.

On the other hand, it is also about reducing/ combating the pressure exerted by Russia through the Transnistrian issue, trade barriers, Russian gas and previously politicized bilateral relations; solving these problems and building as non-conflicting, positive and pragmatic parity relations as possible, which would allow Moldova to develop by aligning with European standards (democracy, the rule of law, etc.).

The opportunity for domestic reforms is on the bilateral agendas with the USA or the EU, while solutions for stabilizing and securing the country lie in absorbing the financial, technical and operational support provided by the West for economic development, financial sector transparency, judicial reform, good governance, building the non-traditional defence capacities used by some states (the fight against hybrid threats, cyber and information security) and projects to promote trust between the two banks of the Dniester.

In the case of Transnistria, major importance is attached not only to the withdrawal of Russian military force and equipment, but also to the expansion of

domestic and regional reform, the decriminalization and removal of the political, economic and social instruments that fuel the conflict.

Strengthening the dialogue in the Transnistrian case

The dialogue between Chisinau and Tiraspol as parties to the conflict (and not Moldova and Russia) is an already established practice. However, Maia Sandu seems to want to move further, relying on the revival of the broad format of negotiations and previous failures (2019 negotiations in Bratislava). All this aims at maximizing Chisinau's share in the negotiations and its ability to ensure compliance with the commitments made by the parties, such as those at the 1999 OSCE Summit.

The military aspect is not to be neglected, but it is probably not the first means and tool that Moldova

would use in its security policy. Updating the national security strategy, adequate funding of the army and its participation in military training and exercise programmes - policies promoted by Maia Sandu, coupled with programmes aimed at modernizing and reforming the national army and strengthening the good governance in the defence sector, implemented in partnership with NATO - all aim at creating a security/ defence institution in the country that serves the national interest in order to resist attempts of external interference and hybrid threats, to support the building of a democratic state and thus to contribute to the regional security.

In the case of Moldova, foreign, domestic, defence and security policies are not excluded, being not only synergistic, but based on the same objective - ensuring a good and independent functioning of the state, as a form of national security. Although there has been little public

reaction from Ukrainian officials to the events in Ukraine, such speeches may not be very useful in the run-up to the early elections, the position of political actors such as PAS, Maia Sandu, or PSRM can be inferred from previous statements on Crimea and recognition of the Ukraine's integrity and sovereignty.

Early elections will define the direction of national policy, how Moldova will address and perceive national insecurities, how it will react to regional events and cooperate with its partners. It is important that the state does not find itself in a state of uncertainty, given that the Western partnership, but also the regional one (Eastern Europe) need to be strengthened. By acting in good faith and in the direction of a democratic path, Moldova could gain more international support for the creation and maintenance of a secure and developed internal environment.

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