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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

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News in Brief



The gas bills for Moldovan citizens will increase by 37%, after the National Agency for Energy Regulation (ANRE) accepted on January 29th the request of Moldovagaz, a subsidiary of Gazprom, to increase the price of one cubic meter of gas from 11.08 to 15.18 MDL. Given this increase, the experts also anticipate a rise in the cost of goods, services, fuel, and electricity. On the other hand, the Gavrilita Government promised to pay new compensations to the citizens. Thus, the Executive will compensate for the household consumers 79.8% of the difference resulting from the price increase for the first 50 cubic meters consumed per month, and for the next 100 cubic meters - 69.5% of the difference, so that the price paid by the population remains 6.8 MDL for the first 50 cubic meters, and 7.9 MDL for the next 100 cubic meters consumed.



On February 1st, the head of state, Maia Sandu, proposed amending the current legislation to make it possible to implement the mechanism of extended confiscation of assets acquired through acts of corruption. In this regard, the Presidency sent to the Legislature an initiative aimed at improving the legal framework in this area. “Our efforts to improve legislation to fight corruption will continue. Efforts to reform the judiciary will continue so that the legal norms are applied for all, without exception”, said Maia Sandu. In Maia Sandu’s view, the current law contains obstacles that complicates the procedure of confiscating the property of those who got illicitly enriched and gives them the opportunity to keep their fortunes. Thus, those who have committed illegalities in the sense of illicit enrichment remain in possession of assets through their transfer to third parties.



Moldova wants to join the Three Seas Initiative, a platform that brings together 12 EU member states between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas, stated the Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu at a news conference with his Croatian counterpart Gordan Radman, on a visit to Chisinau. The official mentioned the objective of modernizing the Chisinau - Ungheni railway section, considering its passage on the European gauge, but also projects on roads, energy, renewable energy development, bridges over the Prut River, telecommunications infrastructure. “So that our citizens have faster and easier access to the European space. Through this prism, we want to join any initiative that allows us to improve the infrastructure, make people’s lives easier with a view to a more modern and prosperous country. We are interested in participating in everything related to infrastructure development in Central and Eastern Europe”, underlined the minister.

Republic of Moldova, an unarmed spectator on the eve of a possible war



Ukrainian soldiers in a combat training.
Photo credit atlanticcouncil.org

The volatile security situation on Ukraine’s borders, where Russia has brought in military and heavy weapons, remains a nebula in which military and political analysts and experts are still trying to anticipate what will

happen next. What is certain is that the Kremlin administration is trying a game of force with the army at the door and a sheet of demands on the table. The West does not seem at all flexible to Russia’s demands to be repressed

at the table of the world’s great powers at the expense of a former satellite – Ukraine – seen as Russia’s lifeblood.

Beyond these threats, Ukraine is positioning itself as a state that does not want to be

► negotiated in this political-diplomatic game of poker between the world's leaders and is waiting for any scenario that the future might offer. One thing is certain, however – given the military adventure of recent years, Kiev's relationship with Moscow will never be the same.

In all this turmoil, the Republic of Moldova, with Russian troops on its territory, stationed in the Transnistrian separatist region, is powerless and poorly prepared to witness this deployment of forces. The military option is by no means a solution for Chisinau. The Moldovan army has been for 30 years the prey of a total disinterest on the part of the political class to ensure a minimum security. The army is underfunded, the military equipment is extremely old, and the training of the military is rather precarious.

The Republic of Moldova hopes for a diplomatic scenario in which reason and peace will triumph. The multiple problems facing Chisinau this winter due to high gas prices are causing more and more unrest among citizens. Russia has a range of means by which it could create a significant destabilization not only in Ukraine, but also in the Republic of Moldova.

Despite calls for calm, there is a latent anxiety among the population. What the Republic of Moldova must carefully analyse during this period is its vulnerabilities in such situations. It should try to take some prophylactic measures in the future. It is very clear that not only domestic challenges and reforms must be in the hands of the authorities, but also resilience to external factors.

Russia will not invade Ukraine, and if it does make a minor incursion, that will aim at Ukraine's domestic policy

Vladimir Socor, foreign policy analyst, Jamestown Foundation



In an interview with the political expert on East Europe, Vladimir Socor, we have tried to decipher Russia's intentions and interests in relation to Ukraine and the extended negotiations with the West. Vladimir Socor argues we can no longer talk today about spheres of influence in Europe like in the Cold War, because Russia is much more economically connected to Europe that it is trying to influence politically through proxy politicians, who, in one way or another, agree with its ideas. We are inviting you to read the interview with Vladimir Socor below:

■ **Should the Moldovan authorities be concerned about the current volatile security situation on the Ukrainian**

border, where Russia has massed important military forces?

■ The Moldovan authorities, of course, need to be concerned as well as all European states, but it is not directly endangered by what is happening in Ukraine. The Republic of Moldova is in a safe corner. As long as Ukraine remains stable and reliable, the Republic of Moldova will be safe from Russia.

■ **How do you see the US-Russia negotiations in recent weeks and how do you assess the Russian demands from the West? Are they acceptable to some degree or is Russia playing bluff?**

■ First of all, I think these negotiations shouldn't have taken place. I believe

the United States should have rejected the negotiations with Moscow under the conditions defined by Russia itself.

The demands published by Russia on December 17th, the two draft treaty and agreement respectively, are not only unacceptable content-wise, but are also unacceptable in form. They are deliberately insulting and the US should have rejected any negotiations on these 'drafts' containing such vocabulary.

Interconnection versus 'spheres of influence'

■ **Can we still talk today about spheres of influence like during the Cold War or the states' mentalities have changed after the fall of the USSR?**

■ One can no longer speak of spheres of influence in the same way as one spoke after World War II, between 1945-1990. The situation has changed radically. The international system has changed. Since the end of World War II, the Central and Eastern European states, which had been sacrificed to Russia, had already been under Russian occupation when the United States and Great Britain agreed to divide their spheres of influence. Therefore, those countries could only be recovered from Soviet rule by war. Today's situation is completely different. The countries Russia wants to return to its sphere of influence are part of NATO. This is a fundamental difference. Why is then Russia hoping to return its hegemon position in this part of Europe and why does it want to establish a zone of influence?

■ The answer is the following: Russia does not want a sphere of influence like the one the Soviet Union had in the 1945-1991 period. That sphere of influence was more or less homogeneous. The countries in this region were more or less, to varying degrees, subordinate to the Soviet Union. They all had communist parties in power,

so the ideology was homogeneous throughout the area.

Currently, Russia wants to establish a sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe with different levels of influence. In the case of Ukraine, Russia simply wants to absorb Ukraine in a neo-imperial construction. In the case of the countries west of Ukraine - we are referring here to the Baltic states, Poland and Romania - Russia wants these countries to be virtually neutralized by the withdrawal of NATO troops. Russia's basic requirement is that NATO troops withdraw from the geographical lines before 1997.

Thus, the countries mentioned above would become unprotected countries. Even if they didn't have the neutrality status, they would be a kind of buffer zone between Russia and what would remain of NATO. So, there are already two different levels of Russian influence - in Ukraine we talked about absorption, while in the area between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea we could talk about Russian domination over unprotected countries. Another difference is that between 1945 and 1990, there was a clear demarcation line, the so-called Iron Curtain, which in the last period of the Cold War was no longer impenetrable. There was though a clear demarcation line - from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

Now, such a clear demarcation line no longer exists, because Russia is present in many ways in Western Europe. Between 1945 and 1990, Russia did not penetrate Western Europe, and the demarcation line worked. Now it no longer exists, because Russia is very actively present in the West, while the West is not present in Russia. Russia has all kinds of allies in the West, most of them non-ideological. We are talking about allies in business, fellow travellers among political parties, allies in banking and financial circles. Much

of the wealth generated by the Russian economy is stored in the West and plays, among other things, the role of corrupting Western elites.

Major social groups in Western Europe have become co-interested in cooperating with Russia. All these forms of Russian presence did not exist during the Cold War. It would be an illusion for anyone to imagine that we can draw a firm line that sacrifices Central and Eastern Europe, but saves us Westerners from Russian domination. No, this is no longer possible.

Battle scenarios and hypotheses

■ **What are the risks for Moldova if Russia invades Ukraine? How exposed is it given that it has Russian troops on its territory in the Transnistrian region?**

■ Here it depends on how we define a Russian invasion of Ukraine. If by invasion we mean a massive entry and occupation of a large territory of Ukraine - and such a scenario does exist - there would be two possible definitions. However, I do not believe in this scenario, although there is a lot of discussion in Washington, where there is a real hysteria regarding such a scenario.

I don't believe in it. I ventured to predict that Russia would not invade Ukraine. I have been saying this since the crisis began in October, that Russia will not invade Ukraine in this way.

Although unlikely, I don't rule out another type of Russian attack on Ukraine. A kind of 'territory bite'. For example, Russia could push the Donbas demarcation line further inside Ukraine a few kilometres. Or it could advance from Azov to Mariupol for a distance of 30 kilometres and thus directly threaten Mariupol, maybe even conquer it. These would be the kind of incursions. If we were to quote US President Joe Biden,

they would be 'minor'. I don't rule them out, but they seem unlikely.

Why am I ruling out an invasion and finding a minor raid unlikely? Because Russia would lose much more than it would gain through such acts. First of all, negotiations between the West and Russia on transforming European security would end. Russia has now a unique opportunity with the Biden administration to seriously try to transform the European security system, taking advantage of the weaknesses and incompetence of the Biden administration. It is a unique situation that I think Russia is aware of, and I think that explains the moment chosen by Russia for this politico-diplomatic offensive with military support. Russia's long-awaited negotiations, from which Moscow hopes to gain much, even some historic gains, would stop. So, Russia would lose a lot.

Second, the United States would certainly tighten Western economic sanctions against Russia. I have no doubt that these sanctions would be tightened. In Ukraine, Russia would defeat the Ukrainian army in a relatively short time, but in the long run it would face a national guerrilla resistance that would make the Russians "bleed". If the conventional military victory against the Ukrainian army was a short stage, then the guerrilla resistance would be a long stage that would cost financially, and the human losses would be very big for Russia. If prolonged, this would severely undermine Putin's internal position, because it would no longer be a small victorious war, it would be a long guerrilla war from which Russia will suffer.

For all these reasons, I believe, Russia will not invade Ukraine, and if it does make a minor incursion, that will aim at Ukraine's domestic policy. Namely to provoke indignation and revolt against the Zelensky administration over the loss by Ukraine of a small part of the territory again.

■ How prepared is it today the Republic of Moldova in terms of human and military resources to cope with the security of the country?

■ The Republic of Moldova has virtually no army. It is much more inferior even to the Transnistrian forces. There, in the separatist region, there aren't only Russian troops, but also Transnistrian troops of about one division that are much better trained compared to the Moldovan forces.

So, there is no security solution for the Republic of Moldova. This is a situation that has lasted for 30 years. There is no security solution in case of a Russian attack. Fortunately, such a Russian attack is ruled out. I'm ruling it out. However, I'm not ruling out the possibility of a Russian amphibious landing, either with boats or with helicopters in Crimea, or somewhere in the Odessa region. This would be the scenario I was talking about earlier, when the Russians would "bite" a piece of Ukrainian territory.

Even in this scenario, the Russians would certainly not cross the Dniester River on the right bank. Maybe they would make the connection with Transnistria, but they would not cross the Dniester on the right bank, I am sure about this. We can rule out the idea that the Russians are crossing the Dniester. However, this does not mean that there is no need to prepare a security solution for the Republic of Moldova to deal with the hypotheses. And this solution does not yet exist.

Connecting files in the pro-Russian separatist republics

■ Finally, could you help us please to decipher this pressure and insistence of both Moscow and Tiraspol on the Transnistrian file in the last month? Why are these negotiation proposals

coming now, after Tiraspol has refused any dialogue for about two years? Why now?

■ The negotiations have stalled due to political instability in Moldova. Now that a government has come promising to be stable, it will probably take a full legislature and a full four-year presidential term. The Russians believe that political stability has returned to the Republic of Moldova, so negotiations on the Transnistrian dossier can be resumed.

There are many OSCE diplomats who are doing harm to the Republic of Moldova and who are insisting, for bureaucratic and career reasons, to patronize another round of negotiations so that there is a negotiation process. They have to justify their existence. The Russians connect the issue with the two special statutes they want. A special status for Donbas, according to the Minsk documents, and a special status for Transnistria.

■ So, do you see a correlation between the two files that Russia would try to make?

■ Yes, Moscow is connecting these two files. They are aware that having special status on one of these issues creates implicit pressure and thus a model emerges to move forward with the other special status.

OSCE diplomats do not think about this, they have their own narrow departmental and institutional considerations.

The Presidency and the Government of the Republic of Moldova have stated the Transnistrian issue cannot be resolved in the near future and that Moldova should focus on domestic reforms. I completely agree with this position. I applauded this position when it came from the Chisinau authorities.

Indeed, the Republic of Moldova is not ready to reintegrate Transnistria in the coming years, because Moldova does not have the necessary institutions to achieve this goal.

First of all, there is no rule of law in the Republic of Moldova. Return of Transnistria to the Republic of Moldova, without rule of law and necessary institutions in place, would be very dangerous. Reintegration under these conditions would only add to the disorganization of the Moldovan state, not to mention the fact that it would completely change the balance of political forces by returning the Transnistrian electorate to the electoral field of the Republic of Moldova.

Chisinau needs to focus on domestic reforms and the rule of law. Only then could it start thinking about how to reintegrate Transnistria, but in no case for a special status.

This special status is a Russian invention. The Republic of Moldova has accepted this notion for almost 30 years due to its weakness and inconsistency. The special status is an illegitimate Russian notion. Nothing obliges the Republic of Moldova to accept such a solution. It is inconsistent with international law and the Moldovan Constitution. I've noticed that the notion of special status has disappeared from the vocabulary of the Moldovan government. The government continues to talk, rightly, about the withdrawal of Russian troops, about human rights in Transnistria, democracy, about the interests of the people on both banks of the Dniester, but the notion of special status has disappeared from the government's discourse.

I've noticed the same thing in the discourse of the Romanian government. And I've mentioned above that I'm welcoming these developments.

■ Thank you!

Editorial

Under the spectre of war: reason for the panic or an opportunity for Moldova?

By Madalin Nescutu,
journalist,
Balkan Insight correspondent

The situation on the borders of Ukraine, where Russia has already massed more than 100,000 troops and heavy military equipment, may raise at least some concern in Chisinau. These days, the West, led by the United States, is in tough negotiations with Russia. These do not seem to converge in a satisfactory outcome for either party. While the West speaks of an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine, Moscow denies any plans to invade Ukraine. Analysts are divided, and no one can accurately predict the Kremlin's intentions. Thus, the buffer states between Russia and the rest of Europe are concerned about the unstable security climate in the region.



Although they started on the same path in 2014, when the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine both signed the Association Agreement with the EU, the paths of the two states had different developments. In the case of Ukraine, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 through the "green men" who occupied the Black Sea region and supported the separatist movements of pro-Russian rebels in the eastern regions of Ukraine - Lugansk and Donbas.

This was followed by about eight difficult years for Ukraine, which, on the one hand, could not focus on the

domestic reforms needed for a later accession to the EU, and on the other, saw itself in a permanent state of war of all kinds, with Russia as the main driving force creating all sorts of problems for the Kiev government.

The Republic of Moldova has also experienced, for already 30 years, the situation in Ukraine, except that the classic military war no longer exists. However, the deterrent force of the 1,500-2,000 Russian troops deployed in the Transnistrian region, as well as the existence of a paramilitary force across the Dniester River, are able to create at least some unrest in Chisinau. ►

► Moreover, the Republic of Moldova has invested almost nothing in defence in the last 30 years. With about 0.4 percent of GDP allocated to the defence sector, the Republic of Moldova remains a very vulnerable state in the face of any military threats. Also, the total energy dependence on Russia, as well as the existence of important pro-Russian political forces, make the Republic of Moldova an extremely vulnerable state to any kind of political, economic or military aggression.

The military dimension

The Russian military deployed on the territory of the Republic of Moldova is grouped into two categories: the Russian “peacekeepers” which should maintain the peace in the region since 1992, since the end of the Dniester War, and the military of the Russian Troops Task Force (GOTR). The latter, officially, have the mission of guarding the ammunition depots in the village of Cobasna, which housed about 20,000 tons of ammunition in the early 1990s. The depot is located a few kilometres from the Ukrainian border and is considered to pose a real danger to the region.

While the Russian “peacekeepers” are mandated on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, GOTR has no legal reason for its presence in the Transnistrian separatist region. Moreover, the de facto “pacifiers” and GOTR are one and the same force that only performs periodic rotation manoeuvres. Thus the “peacemakers” become GOTR soldiers and vice versa. In fact, Russia does not even bring its own soldiers, but rather, for years, has been recruiting Transnistrians. This is not even very difficult, given that more than 220,000 citizens of the Transnistrian separatist region also have Russian passports, accounting for about two-thirds of the total population on the left bank of the Dniester.

GOTR reports directly to the Western District of the Russian Army and is the direct successor to the 14th Soviet Army, which was tasked with acting as a swift force for the Odessa region. Its mission is to stand as an outpost until reinforcements arrive. Hundreds of exercises take place every year with the involvement of the Russian military and Transnistrian paramilitary forces. These interoperability exercises are building de facto one and the same army.

On the other hand, the Moldovan military has neither the equipment nor the advanced training of the forces on the left bank of the Dniester. Sabotaging them for three years by underfunding, as well as by banning sporadically the training with the Western military, have created a vacuum in the continuity of training.

That is why the task of the embassies of the Republic of Moldova around the world is to inform and lobby as much as possible in order to create a current of support for what Chisinau is pleading, namely for the Russian military to withdraw from the Transnistrian region.

Scenarios and hopes

As for the current political decision-makers, they can only hope for a diplomatic solution that will defuse the enormous tensions caused by Russia’s pronounced militarism in the region. At the moment, Chisinau is only a spectator of these developments, although the state institutions, as stated by President Maia Sandu, have prepared certain scenarios in case of need. It is obvious that none of them can be of a military nature.

“We are monitoring the situation and, of course, we are very concerned. Our institutions are vigilant. We also have new scenarios that we are considering and preparing for, but we would like, as

everyone would, that peaceful solutions are identified at the regional level by international forces, so that we do not have to implement the measures we are preparing”, stated Maia Sandu recently in an interview.

The head of state is doing the right thing in the current situation, urging the population to calm down and get informed from credible sources. Another problem of the Republic of Moldova is that it is by far the least resilient country in the region when it comes to the information war waged by Russia for many years west of its borders.

Moldovan diplomacy also tries to stay connected to everything related to the security situation and get informed from first-hand sources about what is being negotiated at the high level.

Games à la russe

Unpredictability, along with false negotiation, has always been one of Russia’s favourite elements. Although a strong military force, Russia could not cope with a long-term war in Ukraine. The guerrilla warfare and a Ukrainian army that has been at war for about eight years would not be such an easy target even for Russia. In addition, a strong support from the West, which has already been announced, including modern weapons, military expertise and unconventional aid to Kiev.

On the other hand, Russia and its oligarchs close to the Kremlin would quickly fall under Western economic sanctions. Unlike during the Cold War, the Russian oligarchs, as well as Russian investments and accounts abroad, are primarily connected to Europe. This can go beyond the Kremlin’s military ambitions. Sanctioning and blocking goods or accounts in the West would create widespread anxiety among even the most loyal people of the Putin regime. ►

► In turn, the United States has extraordinary deterrent capabilities. And we are not referring here only to the military side, by far the most powerful conventional army in the world, but especially to the banking side, by decoupling Russia from the international SWIFT bank payment system.

The United States also has the ability to negotiate and the means to gradually and fairly quickly remove Russia from the European energy market through negotiations with other global players that could increase production. As Russia is a country that is heavily dependent on the sale of hydrocarbon, and Europe is still the most profitable market for these products, Moscow could suffer greatly.

Against this background, the Republic of Moldova can only be in the best possible security situation as a state that shares Western values and is in the immediate area of the EU and NATO, in the conditions in which it cannot assume alone safety tasks. However, developments in the region should allow Chisinau to start investing in security, which would indirectly strengthen the reforms in the area of justice, rule of law and, last but not least, the economy.

In any crisis there may be opportunities in the relationship with Russia. After the embargo imposed by Moscow on Moldovan products in 2013, the Republic of Moldova has not only become stronger, but also more profitable. In the same vein, Chisinau must think and act quickly, immediately after defusing the existing situation, especially in the energy area.

Moldova is a testing ground for the federalization strategies that Moscow wants to implement in Ukraine

Mihai Isac, political expert and editor-in-chief of the Karadeniz Press



■ **How concerned should the Republic of Moldova be about the current volatile security situation on the Ukrainian border, where Russia has deployed more than 100,000 troops and heavy military equipment?**

■ Chisinau should closely monitor any military action by the Russian Federation and Ukraine. The presence of the Russian military contingent and Transnistrian paramilitary troops forces Chisinau to

allocate resources in order to be able to deal with the crisis situations. Let us not forget that the Transnistrian paramilitary structures are de facto a component of the Russian army and are part of any scenario that Moscow may implement. At the moment, Transnistria is more of a bridgehead and a base for the Russian and Transnistrian secret services, which are fully involved in the hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine and other states.

► ■ **How can we interpret the recent Russian-American negotiations and how do you assess the Russian demands from the West? How real are they and how much is Russia bluffing in these negotiations?**

■ The role of Russia's demands is to be rejected by the West. Moscow does not even expect them to be accepted. This is a show aimed more at the Russian audience to strengthen the 'besieged fortress' mentality.

No leader of a NATO state, especially the United States, would accept the Russian conditions as this would be a political suicide. Any acceptance of the Russian conditions in this form would mean the beginning of the end for NATO and confirmation of the Russian Federation's propaganda about the inefficiency of the Alliance. NATO's political-military elites, especially the United States, are still affected by the episode of hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and can no longer afford a major foreign policy failure in front of Russia or China.

Following the Soviet model

■ **Can we still talk today about spheres of influence like during the Cold War or the states' mentalities have changed after the fall of the USSR?**

■ There will always be spheres of influence. Only their shape changes. The Russian Federation is trying to regain its sphere of influence based on the Soviet model. This implementation model is shocking. On the other hand, China uses economic means to create areas of influence, causing economic and political dependence of certain regimes, like in Africa.

For example, the fact that Romania and other states are members of strong blocs such as NATO or EU is partially protecting them from this. They have voluntarily joined NATO or

the EU, which is deeply dissatisfying the illiberal or hybrid regimes.

■ **In the event Russia invades Ukraine, what is the Republic of Moldova exposed to, taking into account it has Russian troops in Transnistria on its territory?**

■ In case of a total war, which is highly unlikely, Chisinau will be exposed to a Russian-Transnistrian military intervention. Until then, Transnistria remains an active base for the Russian and Transnistrian intelligence services, which are waging a widespread hybrid war against the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

In the event of a general war, Ukraine is expected to intervene quickly in Transnistria, either directly to eliminate a serious threat or by a total military blockade. Any escalation of the conflict situation is dangerous for Chisinau, which has no means to defend itself.

Moscow's energy weapon at hand

■ **Should the Republic of Moldova also be concerned about energy security and gas supplies in the event of a full-blown armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine?**

■ Absolutely, any war is expected to lead to a shutdown of Gazprom's gas supply due to Ukraine's opposition and the energy embargo that Moscow will use to force the hand of EU and NATO states.

There are ways to replace gas sources, but this process will take time and cost a lot. Chisinau will need major international assistance, including financial assistance, to overcome this situation. This will also depend on the weather outside, on the "Winter General".

■ **How can we interpret the combined pressure of Moscow and Tiraspol on Chisinau on the Transnistrian issue? Are they synchronized and what are they aiming at?**

■ These are part of a well-coordinated game of Russian diplomacy. We must understand that the Republic of Moldova is a testing ground for the federalization strategies that Moscow wants to implement in Ukraine.

We are witnessing some openness on the part of Chisinau and Moscow for the resumption of negotiations, including the Transnistrian political status issue. This is a trap set for the Chisinau and Kiev authorities.

Both the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will have to pay for any major political concession made to Tiraspol.

Developments in Transnistria, directly linked with Ukraine

■ **How real is the danger of armed provocations from Transnistria against the Republic of Moldova? Could there be similar moments in the UTA Gagauzia?**

■ The situation in Transnistria depends very much on the situation in Ukraine. I do not think there will be major incidents coming from the Transnistrian side, without there being a tension in the situation of Ukraine. We can witness the installation of new checkpoints, organization of military exercises in Transnistria, banning the access of the residents in the area to their own land. Transnistria is dangerous in terms of the presence of intelligence groups capable of waging a hybrid war against its neighbours.

As always, there will be political measures against Chisinau in ATU Gagauzia, but they will not escalate

beyond some political statements and demonstrations. The prolonged political crisis in Comrat represented by the non-election of the chairperson of the People's Assembly for several months does not allow the coagulation of a united opposition to Chisinau.

The Comrat elite will just agitate in order to give a certain image to the media, but will not be able to provoke movements similar to those in Transnistria. First of all, there are no Russian paramilitary or contingent forces in Gagauzia. I cannot rule out the appearance of small outbreaks, but the authorities in Chisinau will be able to cope with that.

■ **How prepared is the Republic of Moldova today in terms of human resources and military technique to deal with the security of the country?**

■ The Republic of Moldova is not able to cope, in terms of neither human resources nor military capacity. Chisinau would not fight against Tiraspol; it would fight against the Russian Federation. Let us not forget that in recent years, the previous political regimes have invested more in the system of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Security and Information Service, both of which being repressive and directed against political opponents. Whatever happens, in the event of a Transnistrian intervention against Chisinau, at least Ukraine is expected to intervene to eliminate the Transnistrian threat behind the Russian-Ukrainian front.

The possible intervention of certain troops under the auspices of an international organization should not be ruled out either. Romania must be aware of the large wave of refugees that will arrive as a result of any conflict in Ukraine or Moldova.

■ **Thank you!**

Expert opinion

Dark clouds of war over Ukraine: main consequences for regional and international security

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



With the escalation of tensions in eastern Ukraine, which have been observed throughout 2021 and have intensified at the beginning of January 2022, the risk of Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised the alarm in the region. The massive buildup of Russian forces along Ukraine's border triggered the worst crisis during the past decades between Russia and the West.

The tense situation around Ukraine and the growing militarization of

the region are of great concern to the Moldovan authorities, especially given the Transnistrian issue and the illegal presence of the Russian military troops in this region.

Russia has long resisted Ukraine's move towards European institutions, and NATO in particular. After the amendments, which were introduced in the Constitution of Ukraine on 21 February 2019,

► the norms on the strategic course of Ukraine for the European Union and NATO membership are enshrined in the preamble of the Basic Law, three articles and transitional provisions.

This is Ukraine's right to make its own sovereign choices, however, for Russia it's a question of another loss of its 'sphere of influence'.

In an effort to prevent NATO's eastward expansion and deployment of offensive weapons in Ukraine, Russia has demanded an expansive set of 'security guarantees' from the United States, including a prohibition of further expansion of NATO and a cessation of all military activities by the alliance in the Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Such conditions exclude further expansion of the Alliance to the east and the deployment of strike weapons systems in the immediate vicinity of Russian borders.

Moscow's demands

This could be an ideal solution for Russia's revisionist policy. However, the series of talks with the Western countries did not bring any results. There is a clear understanding within the international community that any concession to V. Putin will only whet his appetite for more. Washington and Brussels are not going to guarantee a waiver of NATO enlargement.

Moreover, at the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council held on 12 January 2022, the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Alliance urged Russia to withdraw troops from the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Commenting on NATO's appeals to Moscow to withdraw troops from the Ukrainian border, Presidential Press Secretary D. Peskov pointed out that the Alliance cannot dictate to Russia "how and where to move its military forces on its own territory. Russia does not shift its armed forces on the territory of other states. This is a fundamental point".

According to the Western estimates and forecasts, the situation in the region is heating up, which could lead to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moscow has denied plans for military action, but tens of thousands of troops have amassed on the border. At the same time, Russia is in the process of deploying 'quite a sizable formation' in Belarus from its Eastern Military District (EMD). This formation appears to include troops, logistics and communications resources as well as military equipment. According to the official Moscow's statements, the force is there for a Russian-Belarusian training exercise. It is obvious however that these are strategic military maneuvers of the troops movements with a view to providing flexibility of offensive operations in case of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Unpredictable outcome

Grave challenges face regional security and the clouds of war gather on the horizon, promising evil, grave and unforeseeable consequences and repercussions. Ukrainian political authorities have discussed various scenarios for the development of the situation, not just the threat of military invasion. "We see a scenario of destabilization of Ukraine and that scenario is imminent, it's already taking place by spreading panic, by putting pressure on Ukraine's financial system, by conducting cyber-attacks against Ukraine," mentioned the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

Britain has started withdrawing staff from its embassy in Ukraine, amid growing fears of a Russian invasion. The US has ordered relatives of its embassy staff to leave, considering that an invasion could come 'at any time'. All of these are significantly destabilizing the situation in Ukraine, creating grounds for panic sentiments and fears.

The tightening of militaristic tensions has negative consequences for the whole region, intensifying security challenges and instability in Eastern Europe, harmful effect on world economy, energy supplies, and force a shift in geopolitical influence. The EU is working on significant economic sanctions, which would include a "wide array of sectoral and

individual sanctions” in case of further Russian aggression.

The response declarations from Moscow were focused on the personal sanctions against President Vladimir Putin: “the imposition of sanctions against the head of state will be followed by an inevitable adequate response that can be seen as a complete breakdown of Russian-US relations”.

Energetic crises in this context would have new stage of its intensification. Taking into account the fact that Russia is one of the biggest energy suppliers in the world and Ukraine a major transit country to the rest of Europe, the impact on energy market will be significant.

In recent time Russia has exploited and exacerbated the problems of global energy supply and higher prices, contributing to an undersupply of gas in Europe by reducing its exports. The Russian monopolist “Gazprom” has put supply pressure on Moldova as well. The rise in prices on the gas and other energy markets will trigger a new shock wave.

If existing paradigm of international relations is

broken, the European Security Architecture will inevitably be revised. This process will be accompanied by an increase in even greater tension at the regional and international levels, which will lead to a new round of hybrid struggle, burdened by the use of the achievements of recent years in this area and will push for the emergence of new forms of multilateral interaction.

The commonality of the international agenda in the near future will be focused on maintaining regional security with greater involvement of potentially strong players, increasing the defense capability of states, cybersecurity and countering hybrid threats.

High risks

The Transnistrian conflict remains one of the most serious problems. Hypothetically, in the event of escalating tensions and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the consequences could be far-reaching, affecting Moldova. The territory of unrecognized Transnistria, which is in fact completely under Russian control, can be used by Moscow against Ukraine. There is a high probability that the military forces of Transnistria will be involved in this.

As a result, this frozen conflict may become the most volatile dispute in the region. The issue of territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova is fraught with higher risks amid the escalation of the conflict in the east of Ukraine. This risk is doubled in case of possible Russian invasion of Ukraine. In such conditions the withdrawal of the Operational Group of Russian Forces from the territory of the Transnistrian region, removal of ammunition, replacement of the Russian peacekeepers with an OSCE civilian observers’ mission are fundamental tasks. Moldova has strong position in this issue and stands for comprehensive discussions on strengthening security in Europe, taking into account the interests and concerns of all interested states. Pro-European political authorities are in favour of peaceful solution of the Transnistrian conflict. There is a need to suspend the long pause in the “5+2” negotiations process in order to intensify the constructive and result-oriented approach towards the Transnistrian settlement, including political and diplomatic tactics, and thereby reduce the risk of making a decision on the fate of Moldova without the participation of Moldova itself.

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Foreign Policy Association (APE) is a non-governmental organization committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the country Europeanization. APE was established in fall 2003 by a group of well-known experts, public personalities and former senior officials and diplomats, all of them reunited by their commitment to contribute with their expertise and experience to formulating and promoting by the Republic of Moldova of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy.



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