



# Moldova's Security Dimension after Russia's Aggression in Ukraine

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## The effect of Russia's aggression

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of this year has had a number of security repercussions for the Republic of Moldova. The invasion revealed that Russia's cost threshold for overt military aggression is significantly lower than had previously been believed. In other words, the likelihood of Russia's resorting to military means to solve existing issues with its neighbours has dramatically increased. Russia's actions also confirmed that its attacks against Georgia in 2008 and the indirect aggression (by way of proxy war strategies and hybrid measures) aimed at Ukraine since 2014 were not "merely" single-issue escalations that spiralled out of control. They have also validated previously existing fears that Russia's military presence in post-Soviet countries, including that of troops stationed under the guise of "peacekeeping", represent additional pools of troops for use in a military invasion, and in particular to better explore the surprise factor.

These repercussions caught the Moldovan government by surprise. While the various governments that have held power since Moldova attained independence have differed significantly in terms of their internal politics, there was one thing common to all of them – the firm conviction that Russia had little or no interest in attacking Moldova militarily. In fact, immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moldovan authorities at many levels sent a strong message across multiple channels that the likelihood of similar aggression by Russia against Moldova was close to zero. In early March, Moldova's president, Maia Sandu, stressed that there was no risk that the war in Ukraine could spread over into Moldova. Sandu was still putting forth this message in late April, although by then it had been slightly reframed in response to public criticism: Sandu argued that "there was no imminent risk for Moldova's citizens". This message was widely echoed by cabinet members in their media activities at home. Thus, the governing authorities in Moldova did not see Russia's aggression in Ukraine as necessitating any reassessment on their part of Moldova's security risks, preparedness and postures.

What is more, this position on the part the political leadership was reflected in their policy actions. Thus, it was no mere lip-service intended to reduce the potential for irritating Russia while gaining time for them to consolidate the country's national defence and security capabilities. The

incumbent authorities genuinely seemed to believe that if they placated Russia in this way, Russia would see no grounds for aggression against Moldova. A case in point: Moldova's top officials announced publicly that Moldova would not join the first set of EU sanctions imposed against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. Natalia Gavrilita, the prime minister, even implied that the risk of Russian aggression was limited due to the fact that Moldova is "a neutral country that never wanted to join NATO".

Thus, Moldovan authorities refused "lethal" military assistance from the United States and the European Union, stressing to both the domestic and international publics that they would only be acquiring "non-lethal" assistance, such as engineering, medical and communications equipment. Throughout May and June, Moldova's president, prime minister and foreign minister either denied that Moldova had requested military assistance from its Western partners or repeatedly evaded public requests for clarification in this regard. This, although US officials had clearly stated that Moldova would be provided with military assistance if Chisinau requested it. Even the initiative for the aid packages that the USA provided to Moldova early on to help the country cope with the impacts of the war in Ukraine was more that of the USA than of the Moldovan government; the packages consisted of funding to support border management, addressing refugee flows, and targeting corruption and justice reform.

All of this can be explained by the embryonic strategic culture of the current Moldovan authorities, including their fear of relying on military tools for national defence as well as the lack of the relevant systemic technical knowledge. This is despite the fact that Moldovan defence minister acknowledged the catastrophic state of affairs in the country's national defence sector, whose equipment largely consists of Soviet equipment from the 1960–1980 period. It is no wonder, then, that Moldovan military could do nothing but look on helplessly when, on 10 October, three cruise missiles passed through Moldovan airspace before striking Ukraine. In fact, Moldova's defence minister acknowledged that at least one similar incident had already occurred in May.

### **Gradual change of policy**

Several months elapsed before the Moldovan authorities adjusted somewhat their positions vis-à-vis Russia. The rhetoric towards Russia has slightly hardened, and various officials started to talk about the need to strengthen Moldova's defence capabilities. The new presidential advisor for defence and security policy even made statements questioning the utility of neutrality status for Moldova, which is unheard of officials to do. Nevertheless, the slight change of position is mostly evident in their words rather than in their deeds. The reasons for the change are not entirely clear, but based on observable actions and events, it seems likely to be the result of the additional reassurance and support from the EU and US received by the Moldovan government. The government had also been under also tremendous pressure from the public, and in particular from civil society, which supported its ascent to power.

The tremendous economic and political pressure that Russia put on the incumbent authorities in Moldova certainly also plays a role. Russia began by playing its favourite card – natural gas blackmail – in an attempt to stir up popular unrest in Moldova. This was after Moldova applied for EU candidate status, although it is highly probable that Russia would have acted in the same manner even if Moldova had not made this request. Russia had used the same trick in autumn of 2021, when it put off the re-negotiation of the gas contract with Moldova until the very last moment and then used it as a bargaining tool during negotiations. Russia had another trump card to play as well though: it used its local proxies, the Party of Socialists and the Sor Party – a political project of a fugitive Moldovan tycoon – to promote political messages that shifted the blame for Russian

gas blackmail onto the incumbent authorities, and exploited popular dissatisfaction to increase the pressure on the government. Russia also used its control over the political elites of Moldova's Gagauz, the largest ethnical minority group, to pressure the incumbent authorities into yielding to Moscow and giving diplomatic support to Russia's positions on Ukraine.

However, these minor change of political positions towards Russia did not carry over into changes of policies. For instance, following Russia's violation of Moldova's airspace with cruise missiles aimed to strike Ukraine, Moldovan government limited itself to the minimal formality of summoning the Russian ambassador to come to the Moldovan foreign ministry for explanations. The Russian diplomat reacted in the manner typical of Russian diplomats in such conditions, disparagingly demanding more details of the incident, and denying any knowledge of it. Given Moldova's self-declared neutrality and Russia's repeated violation of it, Moldova could have used the incident to initiate internal and external discussions on the dysfunctionality of its neutrality, its revision, and the identification of alternative national defence mechanisms. It did not do so, however. Similarly, the defence minister's response to the repeated missile incidents has been to state that acquiring air defence capabilities would be excessively costly. He even went so far as to express a hope that the increasing effectiveness of Ukraine's air defence might be sufficient to shield Moldova from Russian air strikes.

The range of defence policy options available to any country include arming themselves, forming alliances, and combinations of those two. Moldovan authorities refuse to avail themselves of any of these options, offering only verbal explanations of little substance that are aimed solely at sowing confusion in domestic public opinion and covering up their failure to act in any substantive manner. Two things are revealed by this: First, the Moldovan authorities, realising that the domestic political price for inaction is rising, have increased the sophistication of their verbal responses, in the attempt to obscure inaction. Secondly, they have begun to take some superficial steps, primarily involving Western assistance, because Moldovan authorities continue to see only a very low risk of military aggression from Russia. There has been little meaningful increase in Moldova's defence and security capabilities since Russia invaded Ukraine in February. Moldovan authorities have even refused to take steps to prepare for an effective mobilization of the population in the event of an attack on Moldova. Rather than engaging in a public communication campaign and starting to prepare the population psychologically and technically for a potential mobilization, the Moldovan defence ministry has been denying the need for any such action. It is important to point out that Moldova's mobilization system has degraded significantly over the last decade, to the extent that it is highly likely to be totally dysfunctional and may, in fact, exist only on the paper. However, the authorities seem to be afraid to pursue the matter of this national defence mechanism, presumably because they are afraid that doing so would disturb the population. The authorities are usually quick to refute the frequent reports of ongoing mobilization; these false reports are very likely Russian influence operations, with the aim of diminishing the effectiveness of a possible future military mobilization of Moldova's population.

### **Faulty threat assessments**

Despite the fact that Russian military aggression, either direct, or under the cover of its local proxies, represents the largest and most serious threat to Moldova's sovereignty, Moldovan authorities view the risk that such a scenario could occur as insignificant. The growing evidence suggesting that Russia might be very concerned about a potential consolidation of Moldova's defence capabilities has not seemed to shake their confidence in this regard. Instead, the incumbent authorities in Moldova seem more concerned about domestic disturbances incited and exploited by Russia and the possibility of a coup by Russian political proxies exploiting political unrest.

This latter scenario is highly unlikely, however, as there would be no way for the Russian proxies to seize power by force, under the cover of popular disturbances, unless they were assisted by an armed group. And even if this were to happen, it is hardly possible that the Russian proxies could retain a hold on power without the backing of the Russian military. Therefore, the sole critical factor in this scenario – loss of control over the country to Russia or to its proxies – is the activity of a Russian military group, likely disguised as “local militia”. The failure of Moldova’s authorities to prepare the population, psychologically and technically, for popular resistance makes it more probable that such a scenario could play out successfully.

Thus, the dysfunctionality of the current government’s policies makes it all too likely that the majority of the Moldovan population would stand by passively and observe if Russian proxies, such as Party of Socialists or Sor Party, attempted to take over political power through violent means. Another development of a violent nature that appears possible, even probable under certain conditions, is a repetition of the Donbas scenario in Moldova’s Gagauzian region. The risk of such a scenario is, in fact, U-shaped: it is most likely in conjunction with Russian military success in Ukraine, less likely if Russia’s military situation in Ukraine is moderately unsuccessful or stagnates, and its probability increases again in conjunction with a significant deterioration of Russia’s positions in Ukraine. Both the first and the third possibilities would tend to encourage greater risk-taking on Russia’s part. As Russia comes under pressure in Ukraine, it is more likely to explore additional options for escalation, with the aim of increasing the pressure on both Ukraine and the West.

In light of all this, the most accessible source of Russian military force is Moldova’s Transnistrian region. This region hosts Russian-trained, armed troops in numbers sufficient to support an indirect model of aggression, thus negating to a considerable extent Moldova’s biggest military advantage – the lack of a border with Russia. There is a widely held belief in Moldova that local elites in Transnistria would act to prevent such a scenario. However, this belief fails to take into account the vulnerability of all Transnistrian elites to the coercive mechanisms of the Russian state, either military or civilian. Should the Kremlin apply significant pressure, only minimal resistance could be expected from Tiraspol. Under these conditions, another national defence aspect that Moldova should be exploring is the idea of using Russia’s status as the aggressor in Ukraine to dismount the current Transnistrian negotiations format. It then should prepare the diplomatic ground for proposing down the road an alternative that removes Russian control over negotiations.

### **Policy recommendations for actors in the EU**

Moldovan authorities, for a host of reasons (some of which are mentioned above), are unable currently to offer effective resistance against Russian aggression of either a direct or indirect nature. The government is also unlikely to be able to build up the relevant capabilities within the next few years, unless it changes its current policies. Therefore, the most effective way to protect the country against the highest-impact risk (indirect military aggression) would be to secure EU involvement at two levels.

The first area of involvement would need to be assisting Moldova to defend itself. The EU would do well to invest more resources and training to prepare Moldova’s rapid reaction military capabilities to block Russian armed groups that might come in to support political proxies exploiting public upheaval. The EU should also assist Moldova to use the current situation as an opportunity to reconsider its dysfunctional and artificial neutrality, including by building long-term and nation-wide information campaigns targeting groups affected by Russian influence operations. Furthermore, the EU should provide Moldova with technical expertise and diplomatic support to discontinue the current Transnistrian conflict negotiations framework and format, and prepare a single alternative to take its place. The alternative will involve an international civilian observation mission and a res-

structured negotiations mechanism, will exclude the Russian proxy in Tiraspol and will bring in the United States. US participation is necessary to balance against Russian coercive mechanisms; the EU has not yet produced good workable solutions for countering these.

Secondly, alongside an EU-Moldova vector, the EU involvement should encompass its actions to directly block actions and measures on the part of Russia in Moldova. A substantial technical EU presence and involvement would discourage certain types of illegal activities by Russia, reducing the pressure on the Moldovan government. This involvement could take the form of assisting and even guiding Moldova's efforts in identifying and halting the money laundering operations being used to fund Russian activities in Moldova or those of the local Russian proxies. For instance, tracking down and seizing the funds of fugitive Moldovan oligarchs and former corrupt officials would reduce the operational freedom in subverting the government currently enjoyed by the Russian proxies. An EU advisory mission in support of institutional resilience would give the EU a direct presence on the ground, allowing it to gain a better understanding of Russian hybrid aggression activities and the ability to act quickly and effectively to block them. Given Moldova's virtually non-existent capacity in this domain, the mission would need to fundamentally produce effective capabilities enabling it to actively resist Russian activities on behalf of and in tandem with Moldovan authorities.

The key precondition to the success of any EU or German<sup>1</sup> assistance to Moldova is that all parties involved reject the old notion that Moldova's current situation (in terms of indirect Russian aggression) is very different from the situation in which Ukraine found itself prior to February 2022. For the two situations are largely identical but for the fact that the problems in Moldova are more entrenched and more challenging, partly due to the flawed approach that the EU and Germany have taken towards Moldova up to now.

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<sup>1</sup>Given the German policies towards Moldova, the biggest help it can offer is to not obstruct or block the listed policies. This author believes it is unlikely for Germany to change its current position on Moldova in the near future. However, it can at least abstain from insisting on its current and faulty policies, which basically view Moldova as a conceptually different case than Ukraine, implying genuine secessionism in Transnistria rather than an older version of Russian proxy war.