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Moldova: living at the edge of war

A bloody war is ravaging Ukraine. But its echoes can be heard in neighbouring Moldova as well

When precision rockets hit the outskirts of the Ukrainian port city Odessa on 24 February, the smell of artillery shells and the sounds of missiles even reached Moldova's capital Chisinau. Subsequently, apocalyptic images from war-torn Ukrainian cities created a powerful mixture of shock and horror across the country.

Moldovans responded with full and overwhelming compassion. 370.000 Ukrainian refugees arrived in the country, one third intends to stay here. Authorities stated they will do whatever is possible to provide all the necessary support, and thousands of Moldovans followed suit.

Moldovan citizens overwhelmingly view the war a heinous crime and they clearly lay the blame at the Russian leadership's door. A recent survey found that 61 per cent of respondents see the war in Ukraine as a Russian aggression, with only 26 per cent stating that it could be a 'special operation' as described by the Kremlin. In poll from 10 March, 51 per cent of respondents indicate full support for Ukraine, against 20 per cent which see the Russian 'special operation as legitimate', while 21 percent refused to respond. Both polls indicate that Volodymyr Zelenskyy is by far the most popular foreign leader (50 per cent), outscoring Vladimir Putin (with only 25 per cent), who lost his previous top position.

Moldova's restricted room for manoeuvre

The Moldovan people's distress, anger, and pain have had profound effects on the political landscape, turning the war into a sort of benchmark for political actors. Some of them took principled positions, calling Russia the 'aggressor' whose war crimes must be investigated. This is a common line among the mostly pro-EU, national, pro-reformist parties. While they agree on their condemnation of the war, they disagree on the path forward for Moldova. For instance, some of these parties would see a shorter path towards European integration by joining

Romania, which is fully integrated in both the EU and NATO. Others would support accession to the EU, but without shortcuts and only under the condition of consistent reforms.

There are also striking differences with regards to how Moldova should adapt to avoid a Russian attempt to occupy its territory by force – or by a combination of external and domestic measures. Some of them, like the ruling party (PAS) advocate for keeping the line of strict neutrality, which imposes self-restraint on political statements, a prudent foreign policy, and a sort of embargo on everything that would provoke Russia. This is the main reason why the ruling party decided to not align Moldova with the international sanctions policy on Russia, claiming that there are unbearable 'economic costs' that must be averted.

However, standing out of the sanction policy casts doubts on Chisinau's true intentions in the West. The so-called 'risk-averse policy' of the incumbent Moldovan President Maia Sandu reveals a certain contradiction between earlier statements and the 'urge to conduct balanced foreign and security policy' that would give no direct grounds for Russia to attack Moldova.

At the same time, the Russian military invasion in Ukraine has re-activated several pro-Kremlin networks in Moldova. There are multiple 'gate-keepers of the Ruski mir' in Moldova, which clearly feel a certain renaissance with Putin's idea of re-collecting the pieces of the former empire.

One of the main pillars for the Russian influence in Moldova is the Russian Orthodox Church (Mitropolia Moldovei), which is the largest denomination of the Christian Church as it includes almost 80 per cent of all parishes and 90 per cent of all monasteries in Moldova. The second group of 'gatekeepers' is associated with the pro-Russian media networks, covering almost 60 per cent of media outlets, Radio, TV, news portals, and media agencies in Moldova. Some of them present the view of the political parties (Accent TV, TV6, TNT), others are financed by some groups from various offshore jurisdictions, while the third group is fully subsidised by the Russian state, such as – 'Russia Today' and 'Sputnik', but also news agencies and outlets like TASS, KP, AiF.

The issue of Transnistria

The majority of Moldova's citizens would prefer Moldova to be a neutral state. This complies with the current provisions of the Constitution adopted in 1994 and reflects the mindset of ordinary people – over 56 per cent of citizens prefer neutrality against 16 per cent who be in favour

of joining NATO according to a poll from January 2022. Nevertheless, using neutrality to deter Russia is not a watertight option. In spite of the self-assigned statute of permanent neutrality, Moldova was unable to persuade Russia to withdraw its regular military forces in the country.

Russian troops are stationed in the breakaway region of Transnistria, an eastern region of Moldova, as a result of the 1992 war staged by Moscow. In fact, Russia uses the separatist region as a leverage to keep Moldova under its political control, offsetting its European ambitions. Moscow is ready to force Moldova to recognise Transnistria as an equal subject to a federal Moldovan state and, thus, employ its proxy Transnistria to block a Moldovan Association Agreement with the EU.

On March 15, 2022, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a resolution on the war in Ukraine, which blames Russia for war crimes and full-scale destructions. The resolution also included a separate amendment that recognised that 'Transnistria is an occupied territory' by Russia. This has been met with bickering disagreement in Moscow as well as by several of its local proxies in Chisinau – the church, the Moscow-controlled media, and the two parties currently sitting in the parliament associated with Russia. The resolution is not only a 'political declaration', as some stated, but a powerful political instrument that will not allow the government in Moldova to accept to surrender under Russian terms and conditions.

The economic consequences

At the same time, Moldova has suffered economically from the war. First, it has to accommodate the vast inflow of Ukrainian refugees. Second, the full blockade of Black Sea ports – Odessa, Mykolayev, and Kherson – has affected supply chains, capabilities, and networks accessible to Moldova. Many goods imported earlier through the ports of Ilichevsk and Odessa – including oil products and liquefied gas – will not be sold to Moldova at least until the war ends. This led to a spike in prices, but could also boost alternative markets and suppliers that must ensure market stability in the decades to come.

One of the positive externalities that emerged out of the war is related to the fact that both countries, Ukraine and Moldova, finally connected to the ENTSO-E energy market. This way, a decision that could have been delayed for decades was made swiftly, allowing Moldova to fully integrate into the EU electricity market. Adaptation will take some time and money, but Moldova in particular will benefit greatly. The country can diversify and undermine the electrical monopoly of Kuchurgan in Transnistria, a power plant owned by the Russian company RAOES.

Recently, the Moldovan Minister of Infrastructure announced that Moldova is already connected to the Romanian electricity market and one third of its consumption already comes from the EU market, thus fixing one of the most painful tenets of the country energy vulnerability.

On March 1, 2022, Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a letter to apply for EU membership, expecting that accession to the EU could strengthen the spirit of European solidarity with the Ukrainian citizens. It would be a big mistake to dismiss this moral appeal on technical grounds that accession cannot be shortened or accelerated. For obvious reasons, Ukraine is a brilliant example of national cohesion and deterrence. For years, Ukraine served as a solid argument to resist against militarist adventurism and authoritarian rule. Therefore, already now, the Ukrainians clearly deserve to be granted EU membership.

The same is true for Georgia and Moldova. In order to alleviate people's fears, their national governments need to inspire their people with trust, visionary leadership, and prowess to resist hostile actions. This is the political investment to build up a resilient European legacy across the region.



Igor Munteanu
Chisinau

Igor Munteanu is a lecturer at the Academy of Economic Studies (ASEM) in Chisinau, where he teaches public policy and European institutions. He is a former Member of Parliament and served as Moldovan Ambassador to the US, Mexico, and Canada.