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Moldova's neutrality dilemma

As a neighbour of Ukraine and with its own breakaway region, Moldova finds itself in a changed security context where it must rethink its neutrality

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has neighbouring Moldova trembling at the thought that it could be accidentally drawn into the war. The position of the Moldovan government is considerably fragile. Externally, it depends on the efficiency of the Ukrainian resistance and the consistency of Western military supplies, as well as the effectiveness of sanctions. Internally, the Moldovan institutions depend on external financial assistance to fill gaps in the public budget and avoid political instability and possible socio-economic protests.

Recent polls show the ruling party's approval rating is below 25 per cent, despite the strong pro-EU and pro-reform stance of the ruling Action and Solidarity Party (PAS). The party leadership, the prime minister and the speaker of parliament have a mere 5 per cent of public support each. President Sandu's popularity is only 5 per cent higher than that of former President Igor Dodon, now investigated for corruption offences, who is credited with 15 per cent approval.

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The current reformist government has been in power for less than a year and was not prepared to face so many existential problems. Without external help it would be almost impossible to politically survive the pressure of all the crises that the country is going through. In the summer, the government is expected to start receiving new external assistance promised by the EU and individual Western countries, as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). If added up, the total assistance is worth over a billion euros to be delivered over the next three years. This money will serve primarily to preserve the stability of current public budget payments, and not be set aside to increase preparedness against ongoing security threats.

Despite the bleak situation in the region, both President Maia Sandu and Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita on several occasions affirmed that Moldova is not at risk of war and reiterated that the country is prepared to face any scenario. It seems obvious that the government is trying to project confidence to calm the highly alert population and preserve stability in the country.

Patchwork of challenges

There are indeed reasons for concern. The energy crisis due to dependence on Russian gas, the price of which has almost tripled, has continued since last autumn. In addition, state institutions at the central and local levels must solve problems related to the accommodation of almost 100,000 Ukrainian refugees. Without foreign aid and solidarity shown by the Moldovan citizens, the government would have collapsed under the pressure of the influx of refugees. Moreover, there is the inflationary crisis, with prices of energy and agri-food products soaring due to the pressure on world energy markets and the interruptions in supply chains caused by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the war-related sanctions against Belarus and Russia.

In April and May, occasional explosions in critical infrastructure elements across the Transnistria region had a destabilising effect on Moldova. The breakaway region is outside Chisinau's control and operates within a power-sharing formula between pro-Russian politico-military groups and economic elites bent on maintaining and increasing profits from the EU market. However, the dominant groups in Transnistria were showing restraint regarding the war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, Transnistria's situational neutrality may change if Russia's plans to advance on Odessa begin to materialise. Such negative scenarios are carefully analysed by the Moldovan side, which tries to avoid provoking Russia any further in light of the existing dissatisfaction with the Moldovan implementation of Western sanctions and the prohibition of symbols that promote Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The neutrality trap

One of the arguments of the Moldovan political elite, since the beginning of the war, was that Moldova is neutral and advocates for peace in Ukraine and in the region at large. The neutrality of the country has always been a highly politicised, contentious, and divisive issue. However, after the start of the war in Ukraine, the pro-EU ruling party has been actively supporting Moldova's neutrality status, as has the pro-Russian Bloc of Socialists and Communists that holds 32 of 101 seats in the

Moldovan parliament. While the government aims to preserve the status quo around constitutional neutrality and instead focus on building resilience, the opposition has proposed passing a law that would regulate constitutional neutrality through more detailed legislation.

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As a reminder, it was during Igor Dodon's term from 2017 to 2020 that the pro-Russian forces in the country aimed to consolidate neutrality, proposing an internationally recognised status of neutrality for Moldova, envisaged as an indispensable part of the solution to the Transnistrian conflict. Neither the US nor the EU countries supported the initiative. The whole idea was perceived as a product of Russia's foreign agenda that sought to deepen its influence over Moldova through the Transnistria region.

While rejecting the pro-Russian opposition's attempt to push the principle of neutrality towards even greater international isolationism, the ruling party took no clear steps to compensate and correct the shortcomings of the existing state of neutrality. Legally, the latter is violated by the Russia's military presence in Transnistria (up to 1,500 military personnel from the Russian Forces Operational Group). In practical terms, neutrality is at risk due to the underdeveloped national army and the precarious 16 per cent of public motivation to fight for the defence of the country.

The need for preparation

Moldova's shortcomings in the field of defence can be mitigated in cooperation with the EU and even through cooperation with NATO. The authorities have already requested the assistance of Western institutions. The EU and Romania are already ready to help with energy diversification, especially for the purchase and payment of gas. To aid the Moldovan side with border protection, the EU has deployed dozens of workers from the Frontex agency. Moldova has also benefited from substantial support to deal with the refugee crisis.

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The only assistance promised to Moldova in the military field is the EU's commitment to deliver non-lethal military equipment to improve the military health service and the capacity of military engineering groups, through the European Peace Fund of €7 million. More

national army to NATO standards.

recently, the British authorities have expressed an interest in helping Moldova raise the standards of the national army to NATO standards. This proposal was new and unexpected, causing reactions in favour of neutrality among the pro-Russian opposition in Moldova. At the same time, no detailed explanation about the current relationship with NATO came from the government, amounting to a failure of strategic communication that will translate in new episodes of disinformation.

The Moldovan authorities should use the current crises to find short- and long-term solutions to the legal and institutional frameworks that determine the weak capacity of the country to face and manage the present risks. If they are outdated and ineffective, they need to be upgraded – starting with the status of neutrality – to match current challenges. Whether Russia decides to extend the war beyond Ukraine or not, Moldova must be prepared for worst-case scenarios, showing more agency and ownership in addressing insecurities.



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