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A photograph showing three men in dark suits and coats walking along a path in front of the red brick walls of the Kremlin. The man in the center is Vladimir Putin, flanked by two other officials. They are all wearing red Order of Patriotic War medals. In the background, the Kremlin's towers and a flag are visible under an overcast sky.

More than a Frozen Conflict: Russian Foreign Policy Toward Moldova

William H. Hill

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Cover photo: May 9, 2017. Russian President Vladimir Putin, Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev seen here prior to the military parade marking the 72nd anniversary of Victory in the 1941-45 Great Patriotic War on Red Square, Moscow. Left: President of Moldova Igor Dodon. Dmitry Astakhov/Sputnik via Agence-France Presse.

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FOREWORD

Roughly speaking, the countries that emerged from the Soviet Union have faced two sets of problems, domestic and external. Domestically, most of these nations still struggle with the powerful vestiges of the authoritarian society and command economy that they inherited from the Soviet Union. These vestiges include: the control of the state and exploitation of public resources by a small elite; related corruption; the absence of independent institutions; non-transparent governance; elite-controlled media; and, in some countries, ethnic tensions.

Externally, these nations have faced a powerful neighbor, Russia, that under President Putin has not hidden its demand for a sphere of influence, which would circumscribe their security and even their foreign economic policies. Moscow has exploited all of these vestiges above to extend its influence in the “Near Abroad.”¹ In the countries where ethnic tensions loom, the Kremlin has developed the policy of “frozen conflicts.” The Kremlin has chosen to champion the ethnic minorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Ajaria, Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia and Transnistria as a means to apply pressure on the governments in Baku, Chisinau, and Tbilisi.

This policy has meant support for the minorities, including advisers and weapons; and the provision of peacekeepers to control the situation on the ground and to prevent the central government from restoring their authority in the contested areas. In the case of Georgia in 2008, it involved regular military provocations throughout the 2000’s culminating in the war of 2008.

It is important to recognize that the “frozen conflict” policy appeared in the first days of the post-Soviet period, well before people began to talk about possible NATO enlargement. In other words, it was not fear of

an “encroaching” NATO that led the Kremlin to pursue an explicitly imperial course.

The status of the lands between NATO/EU and Russia is a serious source of instability in Europe and beyond.

This area has been described as a grey zone. Moscow claims a sphere of influence in the region and has twice resorted to war to assert its primacy there: Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014. In the process, Moscow has set out its objective upending the post-Cold War security system established in Europe. It is consistent with US values and interests to block this Kremlin effort and to support the right of the countries in this area to choose their own domestic institutions and foreign policy.

With this in mind, the Eurasia Center has moved beyond its extensive work on Ukraine to explore the broader problem of the “Grey Zone.” We published a paper on Georgia in the spring—*Georgia’s Path Westward* by Ambassadors (Ret) William Courtney, Daniel Fried, Kenneth Yalowitz—and now two papers on Moldova. Here we present the first of the two papers, *More than a Frozen Conflict: Russian Foreign Policy Toward Moldova* by Ambassador (Ret) William Hill. Ambassador Hill, who at one point ran the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Moldova, is one of the West’s foremost experts on Moldova. He presents here a nuanced analysis of the circumstances and challenges of Chisinau’s national security policy.

No work can be done without resources. We would like to thank Trans-Oil International for its generous funding of our Moldova programming.

Ambassador (Ret) John E. Herbst
Director of the Eurasia Center

1 “Near Abroad” is usually used to describe Russia’s neighboring states that were republics in the Soviet Union.

MORE THAN A FROZEN CONFLICT: Russian Foreign Policy Toward Moldova

INTRODUCTION

Moldova is one of the smallest and poorest countries in Europe. Nonetheless, as part of the post-Soviet space, or “Near Abroad,” it is a top regional foreign policy priority for Russia.² Moldova sits on the dividing line between the Mediterranean and the Slavic worlds, and thus has both geopolitical and cultural importance for Russian policy makers and the Russian public. Present-day Moldova has historically been part of the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Romania, and the Soviet Union, before it finally achieved independence in 1991. Since then, Moldova’s unresolved conflict with the breakaway region of Transdniestria has divided the country.³

Today, Moldova is the site of a competition between two groups, vying for the country’s domestic and geopolitical orientation; Russia on the one hand and the United States and European Union on the other. Recent Russian policy documents, such as the Foreign Policy Concept released in 2016, all identify the post-Soviet space as one of Moscow’s top priorities.⁴ Moldova does not top of the list in this region, but it is far more significant for Russian policy makers than most Western interlocutors realize.

AN UNCLEAR LEGACY

Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moldova last existed as an independent state in the early sixteenth century. What was the Kingdom of Moldova at that time includes territory in present-day

Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine. At one time or another, Turkey, Russia, and Romania have each ruled substantial portions of present-day Moldova.⁵

In the modern era, after retaking Bessarabia—the territory between the Prut and Dniestr rivers, the bulk of present-day Moldova—in 1944, Soviet policy sought to deny or repress any connection of the region’s Romanophone population with Romania. As political restraints eased under perestroika, a Moldovan national movement emerged in the Moldovan SSR, on the right, or western, bank, pushing for separation from the USSR, either through independence or unification with Romania. The Slavic, Russian-speaking population—in particular, economic elites on the left, or eastern, bank of the Nistru/Dniestr River (Transdniestria)—resisted, pushing to remain in the USSR or with Russia. Gorbachev’s Soviet opponents and Russian nationalists supported the Transdniestrian separatists.

Due to internal Soviet practices, many of the Soviet troops stationed in the Moldovan SSR were ethnic Russians, and many of them sided with the separatists. With the support of units from the 14th Army, Tiraspol won its brief war with Chisinau in 1992, consolidated its foothold on the left bank of the river, and has enjoyed de facto independence ever since.⁶

A small detachment of Russian troops remains in Moldova, over the unremitting objections of that country’s population and its successive governments. However, the troops do not pose a threat to either Ukraine or Romania, Moldova’s neighbors.

2 See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), accessed at http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptiCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

3 The Romanian language name for the eastern region in Moldova, on the left bank of the Nistru River, is *Transnistria* (literally “across the Nistru”); the Russian language name for the region is *Pridnestrov’e* (literally “by the Dniestr River”). Since the deployment of the Mission to Moldova in 1993, the OSCE has used a compromise version – *Transdniestria* – which I have chosen to use throughout this paper.

4 For example, see *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, 2016.

5 For background on Moldova’s history from the earliest times and foreign relations, see Charles King, *The Moldovans* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2000) and Rebecca Haynes, “Historical Introduction” in *Occasional Papers in Romanian Studies, No. 3: Moldova, Bessarabia, Transnistria*, edited by Rebecca Haynes (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, 2003), 1-141.

6 For the background to and history of the Transdniestrian conflict, see King, *The Moldovans*; also, Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 129-163; also see my own work, William H. Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad, and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transdniestria Conflict* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), especially chapter 4.



Moldovan President Igor Dodon (pictured), and leader of the pro-Russian Moldovan Socialist Party, has supported closer ties between Moldova and Russia, obtaining observer status of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) for Moldova shortly after entering office. *Photo Credit: ziarul de garda*

The real threat is to the rule of law and enforcement of international norms and regimes that comes from the ongoing division of the country and the central government's lack of control over all of its recognized territory. Leaders and elites in many countries of the region—particularly Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, Turkey, and Russia—have benefitted from the opportunity afforded by the so-called “black hole” of Transdniestria to conduct illicit or tax-free trade. Moscow has generally used its military presence and role as a mediator in the Transdniestrian conflict settlement process to maintain its political influence in Moldova and the region.

Although the Moldova-Transdniestria standoff is generally presented as one of the “frozen conflicts” on the post-Soviet periphery, the Transdniestrian question has evolved continuously since the conflict began in 1990. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea and intrusion into the Donbas in 2014 dramatically changed the regional security and political environment, and Chisinau and Tiraspol are still adjusting to that change.

Since 2014, Moscow has continued to seek predominant influence in Moldova, particularly through its support of President Igor Dodon and his Socialist Party (PSRM). At the same time, while continuing its political support for the Transdniestrian government, Moscow has reduced its financial subsidies. In international bodies, Russia continues to recognize Transdniestria as a part of Moldova and has remained within the international consensus in the OSCE-managed political settlement process.

Some of the recent noisy run-ins between Moscow and Chisinau can be explained as political positioning and preparation for elections, elections, which are now scheduled for February 2019.. Russia also clearly hopes for a favorable government in Chisinau that might maintain Moldova as a barrier to the further expansion of Western geopolitical influence and institutions such as NATO and the EU.

RUSSIA AND INDEPENDENT MOLDOVA: MAIN DIRECTIONS

The main elements of Russian policy toward Moldova have remained remarkably consistent since 1992, although tactics and emphases have changed with events and the regional and international contexts. Moscow has provided sufficient material, financial, and political support to enable the Transdniestrian entity to survive.

At the same time, Moscow has consistently refused to recognize Transdniestrian independence, adhering to the international consensus that Transdniestria is an integral part of Moldova, but should have a special political status in the reunited country. As a mediator in the political settlement negotiations, and through financial, energy, and trade ties, Russia has sought to achieve predominant or exclusive influence over all of Moldova, not just the breakaway left bank.

Military Presence

Russia's military presence in Moldova is part of its effort to achieve predominant political influence in the country. According to Soviet military officers at the time, Moscow assumed responsibility for the 14th Army in April 1992 to ensure control of the large stocks of weapons and equipment in the country, lest the separatists sell or dispose of them to others, such as Chechens. About eight hundred troops remain in the present-day Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), the descendant of the 14th Army in Moldova. A majority of the 14th Army troops went over to the Transdniestrian army; although Russia still provides some officers, these units are not reliably under Russian command. Under the 1992 ceasefire agreement, Russia deployed several thousand peacekeepers from the Volga Military District to Moldova; today, only about eight hundred Russian peacekeepers remain.⁷

⁷ Both King, *Moldovans*, and Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, offer accounts on this subject based on interviews with participants from all sides; see also Edward Ozheganov, “The Republic of Moldova: Transdniestria and the 14th Army” in Arbatov, Chayes, Chayes, and Olson, eds., *Managing Conflict in the Former Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 164-183. For a dated, but representative example of the Moldovan position on this subject, see Mihai Gribincea, *Trupele Ruse in Republica Moldova: Factor stabilizator sau sursa de pericol* (Chisinau, 1998).



Peacekeeping forces have been in Transdniestria since the 1992 ceasefire and will remain until a political settlement is reached.
Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Moldova has consistently demanded that Russia withdraw its troops, and Moscow has ostensibly agreed. Russia and Moldova signed a treaty on Russian withdrawal in October 1994, in which Moscow agreed to remove all Russian troops from the country “in synchronization with achievement of a political settlement.” Moldova ratified the treaty; but after the 1995 Duma elections, Moscow shelved the pact as unlikely to be ratified. While the treaty never entered into force, Moscow maintains that peacekeepers must remain until a political settlement is reached.

As part of the overall deal in the Adapted Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty signed at the 1999 Istanbul OSCE Summit, Russia agreed to remove all its arms, ammunition, and troops from Moldova in two stages. Moscow met the first deadline, in 2001, for CFE treaty limited equipment, and made great progress in removing its vast stores of ammunition in 2002-2003. Despite this progress, ammunition withdrawals stopped after the prospective settlement under the Kozak Memorandum fell apart in November 2003. Moscow insists that its small contingent of troops must stay to guard the remaining ammunition, while the peacekeepers must remain in place until a settlement is reached. The collapse of the CFE regime after 2007 has essentially removed the main source of international leverage on Moscow to complete its withdrawal from Moldova.⁸

Mediation with Transdniestria

The Russian troops remaining in Moldova are now a bargaining chip at Moscow’s disposal in its role as mediator in the Transdniestrian political settlement process. Moscow has generally used this role and its status not only to seek or facilitate a political settlement, although it has done this on occasion, but also to maximize its influence throughout Moldova and to include and retain Moldova within its sphere of influence. Moscow has done this by offering continuing support for Transdniestria while simultaneously offering incentives and exerting pressure through its bilateral relationship with Moldova.

Personnel Support

Russia provides continuous consultation and guidance to Transdniestria through a special Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) section in the foreign ministry. Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), and Ministry of Defense have routinely assigned personnel for varying lengths of time to posts in Transdniestrian security and military units. In addition, since the retirement of Igor Smirnov, the longtime original leader of the Transdniestrian separatist enterprise, Moscow has supplied a “prime minister” for the government in Tiraspol.⁹ It is not clear to what extent these factors determine Transdniestrian behavior, but any analysis certainly needs to consider them.

Economic Assistance

For the first fifteen years of its existence, the de facto independent Transdniestrian government did not receive overt financial or economic assistance from Russia. There was some Russian investment in the Transdniestrian region, but earnings from the trade of a number of large left bank enterprises with Western Europe and North America provided sufficient funds to keep the region and its government afloat. After the crisis of 2006-2007, during which Moldova and Ukraine attempted to assert control of the border, Moscow has provided direct and indirect payments to the regime in Tiraspol, particularly to cover increasing social welfare expenses for an aging population.

However, for reasons that are not entirely clear, Moscow has recently curtailed such cash outlays to

⁸ For more detail on the history, see my own, William H. Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad, and the West*; see also the website of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, accessed at <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova>.

⁹ Moldovan, Russian, Transdniestrian, and OSCE officials to the author, various dates.



Russia has provided free energy to Transdniestria for years, but Moldova is billed for its natural gas consumption and purchases its electrical energy from plants in Transdniestrian-controlled territory, such as from the Moldova GRES, pictured here. *Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

Transdniestria. There has been speculation that the cut-off is due to local corruption, or to the increasing costs to Moscow of the war in the Donbas.¹⁰ In 2016, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin hinted that Moscow desired to foster local development and self-sufficiency.¹¹ Whatever the cause, it has resulted in increased budgetary hardship for Tiraspol.

Energy Issues

Free energy is the major Russian economic support to Transdniestria. Gazprom has delivered natural gas to left bank residential and industrial customers but has never credibly demanded payment from Tiraspol. Indeed, Transdniestrian authorities for years have collected utility payments from residential customers but have used those funds for the Transdniestrian budget. However, since the turn of the century, Gazprom, and therefore Moscow, has billed Moldova for natural gas consumed on the left bank; the bill, including penalties and interest,

is now \$6 billion. From time to time, Moscow has used gas cutoffs to pressure Moldova; but since the major gas pipeline to customers in the Balkans runs through Moldova, Moscow has generally been reluctant to resort to this measure.

For much of the post-Soviet era, right bank, Moldova has purchased much of its electric power from the Moldova GRES, the massive gas-fired generating plant in Transdniestrian-controlled territory on the border with Ukraine. Like other enterprises in Transdniestria, the GRES does not pay Gazprom for gas deliveries, and so remains highly competitive in local energy markets. Currently under Russian ownership, the GRES has been a continuing source of revenue for interests in Ukraine and Moldova, as well as in Transdniestria. An attempt to shift Moldova's electric power contract to a Ukrainian firm in spring 2017 was ultimately reversed, and after a number of non-transparent actions, the Moldova GRES resumed its role as chief supplier to the right bank.¹²

Trade, Migrants, and Exchanges

Historically, and somewhat counterintuitively, Moldova's right bank has been more dependent upon trade with Russia than the Russia-friendly left bank of Transdniestria. Moldova's agricultural products have gradually found markets outside Russia, but for a long time, Russian embargoes, "sanitary inspections," and the like, make Moldovan wines, fruits, vegetables, and meat exports vulnerable. Meanwhile, Transdniestria retained many of the large Soviet-era manufacturing enterprises, namely steel, tools, and textiles, which successfully penetrated Western European markets. For a long time, over half of the left bank's exports went to the West; even now, that figure is close to fifty percent.

Moscow has resorted more often to trade embargoes than to energy cutoffs as a means of exerting economic and political pressure on Chisinau. In 2006, Russia responded with an overall wine and produce embargo following a joint Moldovan-Ukrainian effort to close the border with Transdniestria. Since 2012,

¹⁰ Moldovan officials to author, October 2017.

¹¹ "РОГОЗИН: «МЫ НЕ ДАЕМ РЫБУ, МЫ ДАЕМ УДОЧКУ»," *Novosti PMR*, July 6, 2016, <https://novostipmr.com/ru/nwews/16-07-06/rogozin-my-ne-daem-rybu-my-daem-udochku>.

¹² Much of this segment is based on extensive conversations with Moldovan, Russian, and Transdniestrian officials over the years. For recent commentary on energy issues in Moldova, see Sergiu Tofilat, "Schema Energokapital explicata pe intelesul tuturor," Aug. 3, 2016, available at <https://sergiutofilat.wordpress.com/2016/08/03/schema-energokapital-explicata-pe-intelesultuturor/>; Michael Bird, Andrei Cotrut, "Moldovan Energy Intermediary Company Linked to 'Billion Dollar Bank Theft' Scandal," March 14, 2016, available at <http://www.theblacksea.eu/index.php?idT=88&idC=88&idRec=1228&recType=story>; Victor Parlicov, Tudor Soitu, and Sergiu Tofilat, "Energy and Politics: The Price for Impunity in Moldova," IDIS Viitorul, April 2017, available at <http://viitorul.org/files/library/Policy%20Paper%202017%20-%20Impunitate%20si%20%20%20intelegeri%20rentiere%20sectorul%20energetic%20-%20Disclaimer%20Nou.pdf>.

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Russia has resorted to trade embargoes and “sanitary inspections” of Moldovan exports, such as wine, as a means of exerting economic and political pressure. *Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

Moscow has resorted several times to selected, often extended embargoes or slowdowns on Moldovan wine and produce exports to Russia. The selective use of sanitary standards has become an apparently favored supplement or alternative to outright embargoes.¹³

The large number of Moldovans working in Russia is also a potential source of leverage and influence for Moscow. Currently, almost 500,000 Moldovans work in Russia, temporarily or permanently. According to the most recent data, almost 30 percent of Moldova’s GDP can be attributed to remittances; one of the largest sources of these financial flows is Moldovans working in Russia. Periodically, Russian authorities have reminded Moldova of this situation, and have hinted at more vigorous enforcement of Russian immigration and labor laws.¹⁴

Politics, Information, and Culture

Russia starts with a substantial advantage in exercising “soft power” in Moldova. For long periods, the country

was part of Imperial and Soviet Russia, and many historical traces remain. The Russian-speaking portion of the population is significantly larger than the figures for Russian, Ukrainian, and Gagauz minorities in the country would suggest; for a number of reasons, a substantial number of families with Romanian or Moldovan surnames speak Russian at home as a primary or secondary language. Russian-language films, shows, and concerts still have a ready audience in Moldova.

Russian media and information sources remain extremely important in Moldova, due as much to the weakness of indigenous Moldovan media as to any special efforts from Moscow. Large segments of Moldova’s population still receive a substantial portion of their news, sports, and entertainment from Russian language channels, through cable, direct broadcasts, or rebroadcasts. Given these circumstances, it is difficult to discern whether specific information or disinformation efforts from Moscow are a primary means of seeking influence, or simply icing on the cake.

Moscow has also long sought direct political influence or involvement in Moldovan politics. When former President Vladimir Voronin campaigned for his second term, after explicitly turning away from Russia and toward the European Union (EU), Moldovan authorities arrested, deported, and blocked “political technologists” sent from Moscow to organize and finance opposition to Voronin. Russian presidential administration officials such as Vladislav Surkov and Modest Kolerov sponsored pro-Russian youth groups in Transdniestria and right-bank Moldova.¹⁵ In 2014, Chisinau authorities blocked the recently-founded, extremely popular, pro-Russian group “Our Party,” *Partidul Noastru*. The party leader, Renato Usatii, was later elected mayor in the Russophone stronghold of Balti. Usatii was connected to, and allegedly financed by, Russian Railways Chief Vladimir Yakunin; many believed the party to be a Kremlin project.¹⁶

Overtly, the Kremlin, and President Vladimir Putin specifically, cast its support for Igor Dodon, back when he

13 For a good, brief summary of the bases of Transdniestria’s economy and the 2006 crisis, see International Crisis Group, *Moldova’s Uncertain Future*, Crisis Group Europe Report No.175, August 17, 2006, available at <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/moldova-s-uncertain-future.pdf>. On more recent Russian embargoes, see for example “Why Has Russia Banned Moldovan wine? To punish Moldova for its interest in joining the EU,” *Economist*, Nov 25, 2013, available at <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/11/economist-explains-18>; see also Amie Ferris-Rotman, “Winemakers in Moldova Eye Thirsty Russian market: Moscow is easing its embargo on Moldovan wines, and wineries in Europe’s poorest country hope to cash in,” *Politico*, May 4, 2017, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/winemakers-in-moldova-eye-thirsty-russian-market/>.

14 For recent statistics on Moldovan migrants in Russia and remittances, see for example Dorin Lozovanu and Igor Rosca, “Răspândirea moldovenilor în lume,” *GeoInformStory*, Aug. 7, 2017, <https://geoinformstory.blogspot.md/2017/08/raspandirea-moldovenilor-in-lume.html>; “Topul țărilor de unde vine cel mai mare volum de transferuri bănești în Moldova,” *Diez.md*, Aug. 7, 2017.

15 Moldovan officials to the author, January-February 2005.

16 There was extensive press coverage in the West of the Moldovan elections, and specifically Usatii’s disqualification. For a good example of the coverage of Usatii, See Vladimir Socor, “Net Setback for Moldova and Its Reforms in the Latest Elections (Part Three)” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 12 Issue: 124, July 2, 2015, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/net-setback-for-moldova-and-its-reforms-in-the-latest-elections-part-three/>.



Several Russian politicians and oligarchs have supported or financed pro-Russian politicians and organizations in Moldova, including Russian Railways Chief Vladimir Yakunin. *Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

was the leader of the Moldovan Socialist Party; Dodon met Putin personally and used photos of himself and colleagues with Putin in the 2014 parliamentary election and 2016 presidential election campaigns. In the 2014 vote, the PSRM achieved the single largest number of seats at that time. Since assuming the presidency, Dodon has met with Putin several times, and remains favorably inclined to Moscow, although not necessarily in lockstep.¹⁷

Gagauzia

In 1994, Moldova reached an agreement granting limited autonomy to its Gagauz region in southern Bessarabia, with a primarily Orthodox, largely

Russian-speaking ethnic Turkic population. Gagauzia had resisted Moldova's separation from the Soviet Union in 1990-1991 and remains highly sympathetic to Russia and wary of possible closer association between Moldova and Romania. There have been problems in the interpretation and implementation of this autonomy agreement from the very beginning, and from time to time, Moscow has attempted to use Gagauz discontent to exert political pressure on Chisinau.

The most notable recent case was a controversial 2014 referendum in Gagauzia on joining the EU or CIS Customs Union, and leaving Moldova if it joined Romania, timed to coincide with Moldova's adoption and implementation of the EU Association Agreement. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has made considerable progress in helping to improve relations between authorities in Gagauzia and Chisinau, but the autonomous area still contains a large concentration of pro-Russian voters.¹⁸

Geopolitical Orientation

From the very beginning, Moldova has remained a part, albeit unenthusiastic, of Russia's orbit. Moldova joined the CIS at its inception; despite grumbling and some public discussion, it has never pulled out. Yet, even Voronin in his most pro-Russia period resisted Moscow's attempts to include Moldova in the Customs Union and Eurasian economic integration project. At the end of Voronin's first term, Moldova became explicitly pro-European, a shift that was captured in the 2005 Moldova-EU Action Plan. Since the installation of a pro-European coalition in 2009, Moldova has remained oriented toward European integration, much to Moscow's dismay and disapproval.

Russia has unsuccessfully attempted to dissuade Moldova from signing the Association Agreement with the EU and instead to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Despite this, Dodon sought and received observer status for Moldova in the EAEU soon after assuming office. Recent polls suggest that the Moldovan population is almost evenly split between advocates of the EU and of the EAEU. Given this divide, Russia will likely maintain its policy of disapproval toward

17 Again, the Moldovan and western press contained many examples of Dodon's use of Putin's support in the 2014 and 2016 elections. For one example, see Petru Clej, "Will Moldova Elect Putin Fan Igor Dodon As President?," Chisinau, Moldova, *BBC News*, November 12, 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37948154>.

18 On the Gagauzia referendum, see for example "Gagauzia Voters Reject Closer EU Ties For Moldova" *RFE/RL*, February 3, 2014, accessed at <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-gagauz-referendum-counting/25251251.html>. For basic background on Gagauzia, see Kamil Calus, "Gagauzia: Growing Separatism in Moldova?" *OSW Commentary*, March 10, 2014, accessed at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-03-10/gagauzia-growing-separatism-moldova>.

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Moldova's growing association with the EU and hope for reorientation toward the EAEU.¹⁹

Moscow remains far more opposed to Moldova's closer association with NATO. Moldova is explicitly neutral, a provision of its 1994 constitution. For some time, a small, but vocal minority, in Chisinau has called for NATO membership, but all polls show a large majority opposed to such a step. Nonetheless, Moldova is an enthusiastic Partnership for Peace member, and has fashioned a relatively close military-to-military relationship with the US, much to Russia's vocal discomfort. Romania actively advocates for NATO in the region, a fact often used by Moscow in information campaigns designed stir up anti-NATO advocates in Moldova.²⁰

Fallout from the Donbas

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, particularly the war in the Donbas, has had less effect on Moldova than might have been expected. Most importantly, the conflict has ended Russia's overland access to Transdniestria. With the outbreak of war, Ukraine immediately cut off Russian and Transdniestrian use of Odesa Airport for Moscow-Tiraspol traffic, while Moldova quickly stepped up its control of traffic from Russia through Chisinau Airport, especially given fears that Moscow might send special forces through Transdniestria to fight in southwestern Ukraine.

In 2015, Kyiv abrogated its agreement with Moscow that allowed Russian military equipment and troops to transit Ukraine for resupply in Transdniestria. Meanwhile, Moldova has steadily refused to allow Russia to use Tiraspol Airport for military resupply flights, and at times has even closed Chisinau Airport for transit of Russian military personnel heading to Tiraspol. Despite Moscow's complaints that these actions have made it



In mid-2017, Moldova and Ukraine jointly deployed border posts along their borders with Transdniestria to enforce Moldovan customs regulations. *Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

harder for Russia to maintain the units stationed in Transdniestria, its military presence has remained.²¹

Russia's other issue of concern is joint Moldovan-Ukrainian control of the Transdniestrian segment of the border with Ukraine. Earlier attempts by Moldova to enlist Ukrainian cooperation to control or close this border, particularly in 2006, led to vehement protest and swift action from Moscow. Following the outbreak of war in Donbas, it took until mid-2017, an unexpectedly long time for Chisinau, for Moldova and Ukraine to begin deploying joint border posts and enforcing Moldovan customs regulations and control along the Transdniestrian segment. So far, Moscow has been quiet; Transdniestria has actually cooperated.

During close informal work with the EU, Tiraspol has adjusted its legislation and practices to European norms, and Transdniestrian enterprises have continued

¹⁹ The EU/Moldova Action Plan is available at https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/moldova_enp_ap_final_en.pdf; Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU can be found at <http://dcfta.md/eng/association-agreement-between-the-republic-of-moldova-and-european-union>. On Dodon and the EAEU, see for example "EU Warns Moldova To Honor Trade Pact As President Looks To Russia," *RFE/RL* April 19, 2017, accessed at <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-eu-warning-trade-pact- Eurasian-Union/28439766.html>. On Moldovan polls, see *Barometrul de opinie publice. Republica Moldova, Noiembrie 2017*, Institute for Public Policy, Chisinau, accessed at <http://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rezultate-sondaj.-Partea-I.pdf>.

²⁰ This paragraph on NATO draws on extensive conversations with Moldovan, Russian, and NATO officials over many years. For another good summary of Moldova's relationship with NATO, see Eugene Rumer, "Moldova Between Russia and the West: A Delicate Balance" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 27, 2017, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/23/moldova-between-russia-and-west-delicate-balance-pub-70056>; on Dodon's attitude toward NATO, see a joint press point with Deputy SG Gottemoeller during a visit to NATO headquarters, February 2, 2017, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_140774.htm.

²¹ Moldova and Ukrainian officials to author, various dates, 2015-2017.

to register in Moldova, all to maintain the substantial flow of exports from the left bank to EU countries. This process continues, quietly but steadily, in 2018.²²

RECENT RUN-INS WITH MOSCOW

Very few of the current issues and disputes between Moldova and Russia are new. Moscow's desire to include Moldova in its "Near Abroad" sphere of influence, and Chisinau's desire for independence from Russia, have been evident since 1991; they have always been hard to reconcile, and sometimes have been cause for open conflict. However, trade ties, labor migration, and cultural affinity have limited the options of even Moldovan governments highly suspicious of Moscow, such as that of Prime Minister Iurie Leanca in 2013-15. Given these circumstances, it is not always evident whether Moscow's periodic spats with Chisinau reflect new developments or just continued jockeying for advantage in international positions or domestic Russian or Moldovan politics.

In this light, the causes of a considerable sharpening of relations between Moscow and Chisinau since 2017 are not entirely clear. The Russian press and individual officials joined Dodon in complaining about Moldovan troop participation in NATO-sponsored exercises in the region, and the participation of US troops in a bilateral military exercise in Moldova in the spring of 2017. Moldova complained about the mistreatment of Moldovan officials and citizens traveling to Russia by Russian authorities. In May, Moldova expelled five Russian embassy officers for alleged spying and recruitment of Moldovan citizens, often specified as Gagauz, to fight in the Donbas. Moscow responded by announcing a reciprocal action against Moldovan embassy personnel.²³

In July, Moldova escalated the dispute by refusing entry to Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, Moscow's leading official in charge of relations with Moldova, to participate in a ceremony celebrating the



Moldova declared Dmitry Rogozin, Russian Deputy Prime Minister (pictured), *persona non grata* due to escalating political tensions regarding the Russian peacekeeping forces in Transdniestria. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

twenty-fifth anniversary of the Russian-led peacekeeping operation in Transdniestria. After refusing entry to a Russian military aircraft, Chisinau barred Rogozin from arriving on commercial flights. In early August, Moldova formally declared Rogozin *persona non grata*, barring him even from flights through Moldovan airspace.²⁴

In early August, Russian troops from the OGRF, a distinct unit from Russia's peacekeeping detachment, participated in an exercise with Transdniestrian troops, drawing criticism from Chisinau as an escalation of Russian military activities in the region. Moldova

22 On Transdniestrian cooperation with the EU, see for example Stanislav Secrieru, "Transnistria Zig-zagging towards a DCFTA," *PISM Policy Paper*, January 2016, available at https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=21295; see also Andrey Devyatkov, "Enhancing compliance: Transnistria's advance in fulfilling DCFTA provisions," *Laboratorul Pentru Analiza Conflictului Transnistrean*, June 3, 2017, available at <http://www.lact.ro/2017/06/03/andrey-devyatkov-enhancing-compliance-transnistrias-advancein-fulfilling-dcfta-provisions/>. On Moldovan-Ukrainian joint border posts, see for example "Ukraine, Moldova to open new border checkpoints on Transdniestrian section," *Kyiv Post*, November 29, 2017, available at <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/ukraine-moldova-open-new-border-checkpoints-transdniestrian-section.html>; see also coverage from Russia: "Moldova, Ukraine open 1st joint checkpoint at Transdniestrian border sector," *Interfax*, July 31, 2017, available at <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/425348.html>.

23 On the expulsion of Russian diplomatic personnel, see Alexander Tanas, "Moldova Government Expels Five Russian diplomats, President Furious," *Reuters*, May 29, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-moldova-russia/moldova-government-expels-five-russian-diplomats-president-furious-idUSKBN18PIQP>.

24 On the Rogozin saga, see for example "Moldova Declares Russian Deputy PM Rogozin *Persona Non Grata*," *Reuters*, August 2, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-moldova-rogozin/moldova-declares-russian-deputy-pm-rogozin-persona-non-grata-idUSKBN1A1IMZ?il%3DO>.



Vladimir Plahotniuc, leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova, has advocated for greater integration between Moldova and the European Union, resulting in Moscow's support for his political rivals. *Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

subsequently announced its intention to raise the issue of Russian troop presence at the UN General Assembly that fall, an elevation on Chisinau's part of its usual manner and forum of protest. Following further complaints of Russian military activities in Transdniestria, Andrian Candu, Speaker of the Moldovan Parliament, publicly speculated about presenting a bill to the Russian Federation for costs and damages incurred by twenty-five years of "Russian occupation."²⁵

In January 2018, Moldova's parliament adopted a highly publicized and controversial law requiring all news and public affairs programs rebroadcast on Moldovan media to come from countries that are party to the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. The bill obviously targeted Russian programming, the only broadcasts in Moldova affected by the legislation. Moldova's Constitutional Court approved parliament's temporary suspension of Dodon, who refused to sign the law, so that Candu could promulgate the measure.²⁶

The Russian reaction to most of these disputes and actions has been a mixture of official protest and unofficial commentary couched "more in sorrow than in anger," expressions of continued support for Dodon, and attribution of the actions to Dodon's political opponents for electoral purposes. Moscow has responded remarkably mildly in comparison with the past, with one notable exception: Russia attempted to file an Interpol warrant for the arrest of Vladimir Plahotniuc, head of the Moldova Democratic Party (PDM), for his alleged ordering of the murder of a Russian businessman in London in 2012. Plahotniuc has so far blocked Moscow's efforts with Interpol.²⁷

WHAT COMES NEXT?

To date, Russia has remained within the international consensus at the OSCE as Chisinau and Tiraspol signed, and implemented, a string of unprecedented agreements in their political settlement negotiations in late 2017 and early 2018. For the second year in a row, Moscow joined its OSCE partners in Vienna in December 2017 to make a ministerial statement on Moldova/Transdniestria reaffirming the long-time OSCE position that Transdniestria should remain a part of a unified Moldova, but with a special political status.²⁸ In comparison with its positions on Ukraine, Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Donbas, Moscow's recent positions and actions on the

25 On Russian troop exercises in Transdniestria, Moldovan complaints, and demands for compensation see inter alia Madalin Necsutu, "Russia Dismisses Compensating Moldova for 'Occupying' Transnistria," *Balkan Insight*, January 24, 2018, accessed at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russia-slams-moldova-s-demand-for-compensations-in-transnistria-01-24-2018>.

26 On the Moldovan media law, see for example "Moldovan Parliament Speaker Passes Law Against Russian Propaganda," *RFE/RL*, January 11, 2018, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-parliament-speaker-approves-russia-media-law/28966975.html>.

27 For examples of Russian reactions, see among others remarks by Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mariia Zakharova on the first anniversary of Moldovan President Igor Dodon's election, November 9, 2017, available at http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2943560#12; also "State Secretary and Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin's Interview With the Interfax News Agency," December 25, 2017, available at http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3009606. For the Interpol warrant on Plahotniuc, see for example "Interpol Rejects Russian Request to List Moldova Leader," *Balkan Insight*, December 27, 2017, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/interpol-rejects-russian-request-to-list-moldova-leader-12-27-2017>.

28 For the 2017 OSCE ministerial statement on Moldova/Transdniestria, see Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "MINISTERIAL STATEMENT ON THE NEGOTIATIONS ON THE TRANSDNIESTRIAN SETTLEMENT PROCESS IN THE "5+2" FORMAT," Ministerial Council, Vienna, December 8, 2017, accessed at <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/361586?download=true>. For accounts of recent progress in the political settlement process, see the OSCE Mission to Moldova, <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova>.

Transdnestrian question have been relatively moderate and accommodating.

Meanwhile, parliamentary elections will be occurring in Moldova at the start of next year, most likely in February 2019, and Russia remains outspoken in its support for Dodon and his PSRM. Plahotniuc's Democratic Party has the lead in the current pro-European parliamentary coalition and government. However, as of mid-2018 the PD's poll numbers are dramatically lower than those of the largest non-parliamentary pro-European party, and

Plahotniuc is eager to burnish his European integration credentials.

Due to domestic Moldovan electoral politics this year, and the fact that Moscow clearly has a preferred victor, it is likely that the general subject of Russia's relations with Moldova will become increasingly politicized. At the time of writing, the choices in the race are quite distinct, the stakes for Moldova's future very high, and the likely result absolutely unclear.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE US GOVERNMENT

- Stay actively interested and engaged in Moldovan security, foreign policy, and democratic governance issues. An ongoing, active US presence continues to be vital for Moldova's geopolitical stability and domestic development.
- Provide continuing economic and technical assistance for Moldova's economic, social, and political development, but with appropriate conditions to ensure that the assistance is used properly and not misappropriated. Make clear that US support will require more than simple lip service to US principles and ideals.
- Focus special attention on the development of Moldova's free and independent media, with attention to both the growth and sustainability of outlets of all kinds and their capacity to provide content in all of Moldova's major languages. This will bolster Moldova's ability to withstand disinformation and destabilization.
- Continue active involvement and cooperation, when possible, with all participants in the OSCE-managed Moldova-Transdnestria political settlement process. Seek to build on recent successes of the "results-based approach" to encourage further reconciliation and cooperation between Chisinau and Tiraspol and in the region.
- Re-affirm the principles of the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris and with it the right of Moldova to choose its own political and economic institutions, foreign economic relations and foreign policy.

The opinions and judgments expressed in this paper are the personal views of the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



William H. Hill is a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. A retired Foreign Service officer, Dr. Hill is an expert on Russia and the former Soviet Union, east-west relations, and European multilateral diplomacy. He served two terms - January 2003-July 2006 and June 1999-November 2001 - as Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, where he was charged with negotiation of a political settlement to the Transdniestrian conflict and facilitation of the withdrawal of Russian forces, arms, and ammunition from Moldova.

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