

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

# NEWSLETTER

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## Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

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### Știri pe scurt:



President Maia Sandu declared, on February 23rd, during a visit to Bucharest, that Romania has been supporting the Republic of Moldova both politically for the European course and in dealing with the multiple overlapping crises in the last two years in the Republic of Moldova. "Today, more than ever, we feel Romania's strong support for the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. We know that blood is thicker than water and our relationship is the best proof. As Minister Aurescu jokingly said, the Republic of Moldova is probably the only country in the world that has two Foreign Ministers at the same time. We thank Romania for being our friend and advocate", said Maia Sandu. She added that the strategic partnership with Romania means concrete benefits in many fields, and there is close cooperation on the external level. "We are getting closer to Romania, to the European Union, to our family. Unfortunately, everything is overshadowed by the tragedy of a cruel war. Russia invaded our neighbouring country. Ukraine is resisting the invasion thanks to the heroism of Ukrainians and the help of friendly countries," she added.



The head of the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office, Veronica Dragalin, stated on February 23rd, during a televised show on TVR Moldova, that, regarding the financing of the protests organized by the Ilan Shor Party, the law enforcement officers are still accumulating evidence on some ongoing actions and that cases could soon be sent to court. Veronica Dragalin says that the possibility of convicting the people involved in fraudulent schemes will discourage the phenomenon of organizing paid protests. According to the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office, in recent months, with the help of special technical means, it was possible to document several cases in which members of the organized criminal group transferred over MDL 3.3 mln, EUR 61,000 and USD 55,000 to members and activists of the Shor Party.



On February 22nd, in Warsaw, the Head of State Maia Sandu had a meeting with the President of the United States, Joe Biden, during which they discussed about the impact of the Russian war in Ukraine on the Republic of Moldova and issues related to national security. The White House leader reaffirmed Washington's strong support for Chisinau. In this context, Maia Sandu invited Joe Biden to visit the Republic of Moldova. The American official was also in Chisinau in March 2011, when he held the position of vice president of the United States. During the discussions, President Maia Sandu declared that the Republic of Moldova values freedom and is committed to remaining part of the free world. At the same time, she expressed his gratitude for the support provided by the USA. "I conveyed to President Biden that Moldovans want to remain part of the free world, to live in safety and to realize their dream of joining the European Union, and I thanked him for the important support provided by the USA for the economic development and democratic transformation of our country", declared Sandu.

## Republic of Moldova and the security risks in the new phase of the Russian invasion in Ukraine



The Moldovan army received the first three Piranha armoured personnel carriers from Germany.

The new stage of the Russian invasion in Ukraine brings also a series of security risks for the Republic of Moldova. They have already been publicly expressed through the voice of President Maia Sandu, who provided details about how Russia is already planning destabilization in Chisinau, the main vehicle being the paid protests of a political party led by a

fugitive oligarch outside the country.

If the classic military scenario is unlikely, thanks to the bravery and determination of Ukrainian soldiers to defend their country and the failure of the Russians to break through the Ukrainian front in the Odessa area, Moscow has changed tactics. The Russian

Federation is following the scenario of using the "fifth column" in the attempt to overthrow the pro-European power from Chisinau and replace it with a pro-Kremlin puppet regime.

Until now, the competent institutions of the Republic of Moldova have shown vigilance, but the danger is still there. That is

► precisely why the representatives of the Republic of Moldova have intensified their efforts to strengthen military capabilities and increased the defence budgets, demanding from the Western partners defensive military equipment to repel any attempted attack on the country.

On the other hand, Russia is already trying to press the pressure points it controls in the Republic of Moldova. First, Russian propaganda works intensively with a narrative aimed at dividing society by artificially promoting the division of society along ethnic lines. Also, Moscow is trying to politically blackmail Chisinau through the Transnistrian case, where it is trying to induce the idea that the negotiations will end because of Chisinau and its pro-European course.

Last but not least, Moscow tried to present the change of the government in Chisinau and the new Prime Minister Recean as a sign of weakness of the current pro-European cabinet. Taking over the position of prime minister by a person with organizational experience and knowledge in the area of security and defence cannot be to the liking of Moscow.

Russia has not reduced its propaganda through the media it controls in the Republic of Moldova and has already targeted the new cabinet of ministers in Chisinau. On the other hand, the West once again showed its support for the Republic of Moldova by inviting President Maia Sandu on February 21<sup>st</sup>, in Warsaw, for the historic speech given by the head of the White House, Joe Biden, on the

occasion of the anniversary since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Joe Biden expressed his support for Moldova and its ambitions to join the European Union and the Republic of Moldova's membership in the democratic world. The signal was a very strong and dissuasive one to Russia's ongoing attempts to destabilize the political situation in the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, Chisinau received public assurances from the leaders of Poland and Romania that they will support Moldova in the face of these destabilization attempts. Therefore, the Republic of Moldova was placed in a protection zone from the West, a fact that will not stop Moscow from trying to overthrow the legitimately and democratically elected power through the vote of the Moldovan citizens in the elections held in recent years.

## ***It is important that the financial resources be directed towards the equipment that is paramount for the defence battle***

***The three-star reserve lieutenant-general of the Romanian Army, Virgil Balacheanu, former commander of the multinational brigade in Southeast Europe, gave an interview for the FES/APE foreign policy newsletter about the scenarios we could expect in the second phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, after one year since the begging of the war. The reserve general carefully analyzed Russia's moves on the Ukrainian front and the military solutions that Ukraine could offer at this stage. We have also discussed the implications for the Republic of Moldova of the ongoing war in its neighbourhood. We are inviting you to read the interview in the lines below:***



■ **Mr Balacheanu, we are preparing for the second phase of the Russian invasion in Ukraine. Both sides are seeking to strengthen their positions. What can we expect?**

■ We can expect a concentration of Russian efforts that is obvious in relation to the Donbas region. It is their intention to capture the city of Bahmut, and then open the tactical directions towards Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. It is possible that the city of Liman is also targeted to open another direction from this city to Sloviansk.

The Russians are also moving towards Donetsk to control the crossings in that region. Apart from the battle for Donbas, an axis of effort is emerging in Donetsk, towards the city of Kupiansk, which the Russians left and the Ukrainians managed, in a successful counter-offensive, to capture it.

The Russians also brought forces to strengthen the defence. An offensive axis in the Svatovek-Kremina direction, which is currently controlled by the Ukrainians, is also possible. The Russian army will most likely try to capture Luhansk, I mean the area between Donetsk and the Oskil river, and the target is to capture Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. Current indications show that they will go in the direction of conquering Donbas.

■ **General, how persuasive was President Zelenskiy on his diplomatic tour of Europe? Should we expect more help from the European big capitals? Or more types of weaponry?**

■ Not necessarily to more types of weaponry, as these are already described in Ukraine's requests. Whether we are talking here about what Zelenskiy is requesting or what Oleksi Reznikov (former Minister of Defence) requested. We know what types of military equipment are needed. Here we are talking about

tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, self-propelled and towed howitzers, or aviation. Requests continue along the lines of anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence, and we could certainly add, although it does not obviously come up, the issue of drone requests. We are referring here to either strike or reconnaissance drones.

There have also been ideas of providing missiles with a range of more than 70 kilometres, respectively one of 150 kilometres. The extremely serious problem now is that of the quantities, only if the states publish this data. Others will not do it, applying the principle of discretion. For now, the promised quantities are not capable of generating a strong counteroffensive capability for the liberation of the territories. Depending on the progress of the planning and the success of the Russian offensive discussed earlier, such deliveries may be considered in order to strengthen the defence.

For example, Canada sent the first tank. This country will deliver four tanks. Usually such deliveries take place at the level of a tank company (up to 200 units). There is talk of *Challenger* tanks from Great Britain, tanks from Poland and Germany. In addition, the USA will deliver, at the level of a tank battalion, the famous *Abrams*. At the level of infantry fighting vehicles, other deliveries are taking shape. The USA is preparing two battalions of *Bradley* vehicles, two battalions of *Stryker* vehicles and one battalion of *Marder* vehicles. However, this is not enough, because the infantry have the greatest need for combat vehicles. Initially there was talk of 500-600, but now of 600-700 pieces. There is an equally great need for howitzers, about 500. Or for this equipment, there are only data from Great Britain, namely a battalion of AS-2019, which is a self-propelled howitzer. Likewise, one of the Scandinavian countries will send a battalion of self-propelled howitzers.

We will see if President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's visit to the UK and then the meeting with the EU officials will bring to a decision closer to what the Ukrainians want.

As for tanks, they must be supported by armoured personnel carriers and infantry vehicles, as well as at least medium range missile support. We should also take into account a very strong anti-aircraft defence not only for the energy system, but also for the counteroffensive forces. Then an electronic protection and air support. Without these, it is very difficult to achieve a successful counter-offensive scenario.

Defence can be strengthened, but in certain directions, counterattacks or counteroffensives can be executed with a limited objective at shallower depths and smaller areas.

■ **What kind of tactics should we expect from Russia in the second phase of this war, taking into account that the tactics of the last year were not ones that could not be countered by the Ukrainian army, which at the beginning of this war was also weakly armed and unprepared?**

■ There are scenarios where Russia has had previously success. They were successful when artillery fire, whether we're talking about howitzers or rocket launchers, in the battle for Severodonetsk and Lisitsiansk, caused those cities to fall in a relatively short time.

We expect that the offensive will continue to mean very strong artillery support and hitting of Ukrainian defensive positions. Especially on the position of the fortified lines and on the old demarcation line between Ukraine and the secessionist republics in its east.



The Russians count on the offensive in the Donbas area to not only register victories in the direction of Bahmut-Sloviansk-Kramatorsk, but also to conquer the defence alignments organized for many years on the demarcation line. In order to inflict losses on the Ukrainians, they will continue to use massive artillery and fire preparation of the offensive.

We may see stronger air support and in terms of armour and mechanized units, we may see a concentration of efforts in the main directions so that they outnumber the Ukrainian defence. With larger military forces on their side, they could be successful. We do not know whether this success will still measure a few hundred meters, as it happened in the Bahmut assault, or we will witness an advance of at least several kilometres per day.

In the planning of the operation, many years ago, when I was a student officer in the Military Academy, the pace of an offensive day was 25 kilometres. We are not talking about such a thing today, because that would mean that in a few days the Russians would reach the gates of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. However, we will probably see a higher Russian offensive pace than what they have managed before, with very heavy casualties on both sides.

**■ There are signs of the beginning of a Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine, and it looks like that will be the main front, but could we soon expect Ukraine to also launch an offensive to retake Crimea? What would be the ingredients for success there?**

■ In this regard, the issues are quite complicated. To get to Crimea, you need to conquer Kherson or at least develop the counter-offensive on the Zaporozhye-Melitopol axis, to cut the land connection between Crimea and Donbas and force those who are on defence of Kherson, especially what means the defence on the Dnieper and the depth of the Dnieper. As such, it is assumed that until the Crimean alignment is reached, which could also be a red line regarding the use of tactical

nuclear weapons, it will be quite difficult to register a successful counteroffensive, if the Ukrainian force group does not have equipment in the quantities required by Ukraine and there is no adequate military training.

The Russians focused, on the one hand, on the offensive in Donbas that they started and will amplify in the next period, and on the other hand, they strengthened their defence by carrying out fortification works. We call these, not only metaphorically, but also in reality, real "Maginot lines". These are areas of contact with Ukrainian forces. They also strengthened their communication lines and anti-tank obstacles as well as prepared the defensive lines against mechanized combat.

**■ Mr Balacheanu, does the Republic of Moldova have anything to worry about with this strong offensive in Ukraine? Do you think Moscow will try new destabilization in the Republic of Moldova that could come from Transnistria and UTA Gagauzia?**

■ An information warfare and activation plan in Transnistria and Gagauzia should not be ruled out, but I am starting from the premise that the Russians are now focused on the south-east of Ukraine, specifically on the Donbas area. I do not think they now need to create a state of instability in the Republic of Moldova, which would only be an outing that they have started an action to create instability in the two mentioned regions.

As a rule, you create a state of instability when that area is at the tip of the arrow where you pass the main offensive direction. Now there are no conditions for opening an operational condition in the southwest. We are talking here about Odessa and then the mouths of the Danube, and then Transnistria. Russia currently does not have the forces necessary for a double envelopment maneuver to hit Kiev and then open the road to Lviv, and another direction to come from Odessa to Lviv.

This scenario cannot be taken into account because they do not have the necessary forces. Russia will not give up what it has planned in the Donbas region and will not give up the strengthening of the Kherson defence, and then the Lugansk and Zaporizhia directions, to develop an offensive in the southwest area. Neither the northern direction is yet ready by offensive. The territory of Belarus is massively used for the training of reservists who were mobilized and entered into the battle for Donbas.

**■ How do you see Chisinau's efforts to get armaments from international partners - the EU or NATO countries - as well as this 70 percent increase in the defence budget in 2023?**

■ Increasing the defence budget was absolutely necessary. For example, Romania had such an experience, because the defence budget had been underfunded for years, until the invasion of Crimea and the enclavation of Donbas.

It was only then that the political pact appeared in Romania that allowed a 2 percent budget of GDP. That started in 2017. Although a lot has been allocated in Romania during this period, there are still many programmes that have not yet been addressed or have not been completed. Therefore, the increase in the defence budget in the Republic of Moldova is welcome, but the endowment of the army takes a very long time because it is very expensive. For example, we consider only the purchase of the respective equipment, but being modern high-tech equipment, this takes a relatively long time regarding the operationalization of the units that receive such equipment.

It is important that the financial resource be directed towards equipment that is necessary for the defensive fight, at least from the point of view of conducting the defensive fight on contact. Because, for example, the success of the Ukrainians was related to what they were able to demonstrate in the case of contact

combat. That was their ability to stand up on defence.

■ **What can Romania help the Republic of Moldova with in the military field at this moment and could we expect an intensification of this aid in 2023? We know that Moldova is demanding anti-aircraft systems, could Romania offer such systems in the conditions in which Bucharest has such new HIMARS or Patriot systems?**

■ It is hard to believe this because the respective systems (Patriot and HIMARS

in Romania) are delivered with a certain phasing. Let's hope that the delivery of the Patriot and HIMARS systems will comply with the terms of the contract, because the demand at this time is very high.

Romania does not foresee such a situation, without the Romanian army ensuring such a capability that is integrated into the NATO anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence system, or NATO's deterrence capability through the HIMARS systems.

Along these lines, however, Romania

should do much more for economic support for the Republic of Moldova. In terms of defence training, joint training should be accelerated – and these exercises are currently underway.

For example, if Moldova received Piranha 3 armoured personnel carriers, these vehicles are also in the equipment of the Romanian Army and the training on such carriers regarding maintenance-related activities may be a subject of cooperation between the two armies.

■ **Thank you!**

## ***The Republic of Moldova, under the threat of the Kremlin also in 2023***

*Editorial by Mihai Isac, political analyst politic and editor-in-chief of the politicaexterna.ro*

Entering the second phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will involve new and old threats for the security of the Republic of Moldova. They will remain on the same coordinates of classic threats, as well as hybrid ones. Moreover, the statements of the Moldovan President, Maia Sandu, regarding the threat posed by the Russian Federation to the constitutional order in Chisinau has brought back to the public discussion the threat represented by the tactics of the total hybrid war unleashed by the Kremlin. The consistent political and financial support received from the member states of the European Union and NATO helped the authorities in Chisinau to resist the hybrid assault intensified by the Russian Federation simultaneously with the actual military offensive in Ukraine.

The fact that Moldova is invited to the high-level European security forums indicates a changed interest on the part of the West in Moldova. Maia Sandu and a delegation from the Republic of Moldova participated in the most important security conference



in Munich. The current Moldovan officials play an important role in managing the security crises threatening the country, in the conditions of the entry into the new phase of the Russian military offensive in Ukraine.

Due to the Russian military invasion in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova is in the attention of the international community, and the officials from Chisinau should use every opportunity to strengthen

institutional and personal relations as part of “peer-to-peer diplomacy”. Most of the time, the amount of financial assistance also depends on the good relations between the officials of the states involved, and the Republic of Moldova has nothing but to gain out of that.

Officials from Chisinau have already announced that Moldova aims at operationalizing the European Union's security hub in Chisinau as quickly as

possible. These ambitions are normal considering that the Republic of Moldova is gradually becoming a state producing security for the European space, including by strengthening the security belt at the EU border, in the conditions of the devastating military invasion launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022.

### **Direct military threat**

In the current regional context, Moldova remains with the same security problems. The presence of the Russian military troops in Transnistria, the important ammunition depot in Cobasna and the illegal Transnistrian military formations represent direct threats to the security of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

The quality of the Russian military and Transnistrian paramilitary forces is questionable, despite the frequent drills announced with bells and whistles by the Russian and Transnistrian media. Grouped under the name of the Operative Group of Russian Troops (GOTR) and peacekeepers, the Russian military, mostly recruited from among the local population, are used as a method of pressure against the authorities and the population of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Kiev is obliged to maintain important military contingents on the border with the Republic of Moldova to prevent the use of Transnistria as a launching pad for an offensive that can threaten the Odessa and Bugeac port area. A similar role of pressure is played by Belarus, with the Lukashenko regime allowing the use of Belarusian national territory to launch the Russian invasion that threatened Kiev.

The Ukrainian forces from the immediate vicinity of the Transnistrian region are estimated at about 12-14,000 soldiers, including elite military units, which cannot be used on the Donbas front. Any Russian military success in this regard would lead to the collapse of the southern Ukrainian

front and the march of the Russian army to the border of the Republic of Moldova.

Another permanent threat to the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania is represented by the use of Transnistria as a safe zone for the intelligence services of the Russian Federation. The SVR, GRU, FSB and other Russian federal security services have active units in Transnistria, which are fully participating in the Kremlin's hybrid warfare.

### **Dangerous precedent**

Even though on paper the Russian military group in Transnistria and the Transnistrian paramilitary forces can be easily defeated by Ukrainian military forces in a direct confrontation, the diplomatic precedent is dangerous for Kiev. Moscow will use this pretext in its propaganda war against Ukraine to justify the annexation of entire regions, as it is trying to do in the case of regions where illegal referendums were held in the autumn of 2022.

Such a precedent would not only affect Ukraine, but also other states, such as the Republic of Moldova, Kazakhstan or Georgia. Tbilisi has already lost de facto the control of the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They are in an accelerated process of annexation into the Russian federal political, economic and legislative space, with repeated attempts for their direct annexation by Moscow.

It is easy to imagine the organization in certain regions of the Republic of Moldova, if not even at the level of the entire republic, of a referendum aimed at legalizing a possible Russian military occupation or changing the constitutional order.

### **Gagauz stronghold**

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia is another area with strong pro-Russian tendencies, requiring a special strategy by the Moldovan authorities to reintegrate the region into the national informational and political space.

Moscow regularly uses Russian and regional media to exacerbate ethnic and political separatism in the south of the Republic of Moldova. The security situation in the region is volatile amid the developments on the front in Ukraine, with the local population believing that the leadership from Kiev and the Western states are to blame for the conflict.

The upcoming elections for the post of governor of the autonomy from April 2023 heats up the regional political atmosphere even more, with the main candidates trying to get electoral dividends by playing the Russian card. In practice, the candidates are trying to prove that they are the most faithful supporters of the policies promoted by the Russian Federation and of the close relations between Gagauzia and the Russian elder brother.

However, the proactive measures taken by the authorities in Chisinau and the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) in recent months prevented the organization of violent actions in Gagauzia.

### **Weapons for Ukraine and for Moldova**

Kiev is constantly asking its Western partners for the delivery of high-performance weapons systems, especially heavy tanks, large-calibre artillery, long-range missile systems, and fighter and ground attack aircraft. Political pressure and public opinion, as well as the reality on the ground, forced recently Germany to agree to send *Leopard* tanks to the front, alongside British *Challengers* and American *Abrams*. To these are added *Stryker* armoured personnel carriers and *Bradley* fighting vehicles, necessary to complete the armoured and mechanized formations of the Ukrainian army. The actual number of units to be delivered is not made public for security reasons, but is expected to be close to the number requested by Kiev. The training of Ukrainian soldiers is carried out at an accelerated pace in Great Britain, the United States, but also in other countries.



The Ukraine Defence Contact Group in Ramstein tries to manage the resources needed by Ukraine as best as possible, a process complicated by the restraints of the political circles in some NATO member states, such as Hungary.

Benefiting from new combat systems as quickly as possible, Ukraine has the ability to maintain the current front, and the next step will be the delivery of aircraft, most likely *F-16* or *Gripen*. Gaining air supremacy on the battlefield is the key to a full military victory for Ukraine, as NATO states do not agree to impose a no-fly zone patrolled by NATO aircraft.

For its part, Chisinau has frequently requested the delivery of air defense systems, such as anti-aircraft missiles, amid frequent violations of Moldovan

airspace by missiles fired by Russia against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.

### ***The mirage of neutrality***

Another anachronistic myth of the 90s that affects state security is neutrality. The Republic of Moldova is captive, from a geopolitical point of view, in the mirage of neutrality, a harsh Soviet legacy, which stopped the process of democratization of political life in Chisinau. By using this pretext, various pro-Russian political regimes, which have been in the corridors of power, have stopped the rapprochement process between Chisinau and the states of the European Union, reasoning it could drag the country into war.

NATO was constantly presented as an absolute danger to the integrity of the

Moldovan state and citizens, while neutrality as a miraculous solution.

Faced with tough electoral exercises in the coming years, the pro-European ruling party should avoid implementing actions that could benefit pro-Russian forces. The authorities should find constitutional solutions that allow the deepening of relations between the Republic of Moldova and NATO, and the EU member states. Here, a lot will depend on how much the politicians of the pro-European power will think in electoral terms and how much in the interest of the country. The need for rapprochement with NATO is obvious, but the political price is just as high without open communication on the issue. Reducing the influence of the Russian propaganda that fuels these outdated but still widely held myths is equally necessary.

## ***'I hope that the change of government will not be just an imitation of change in the country'***

***Ana Mihailov reports on Moldova's new government and its priorities as well as the threat from Russia***

■ ***The Republic of Moldova, which seemed to be a relative island of stability, is again at the centre of the news. The government of Natalia Gavrilitsa resigned at a time when President Maia Sandu announced Russia's plans to destabilise the country. What is going on?***

■ Stability has been indeed relative, as Moldova had to go through a series of crises since Gavrilitsa came to power. Gavrilitsa's cabinet had one of the most difficult mandates since Moldova's independence, marked by multiple overlapping crises – the war in neighbouring Ukraine and the humanitarian crisis caused by the influx of



refugees as well as energy blackmail exacerbated by unprecedented inflation and rising prices. Despite the fact that the government has

coped pretty well with the crises, in my opinion, it is the growing public discontent with the socio-economic situation and the erosion

of the political capital of its ruling party that were the main reasons for the resignation of the Gavrilitza government.

Dissatisfaction with the ruling PAS (Party of Action and Solidarity) also has to do with the slow progress of the justice reform and the fight against corruption. This was the main promise made by the party in the election campaign and one of the top priorities on the government's agenda. And this is exactly where progress has been extremely slow, causing public criticism and discontent.

Undoubtedly, the security situation is extremely difficult and more decisive actions were expected from the authorities. Nevertheless, I believe that all of the above contributed to the resignation of the government.

■ ***The Moldovan Parliament at its meeting on Thursday approved a new government headed by Dorin Recean, who previously served as presidential adviser on defence and national security. How has the new government changed?***

■ Personally, I did not have high expectations for the new government and the new-old cabinet voted yesterday by Parliament has confirmed this. I am calling it the new-old government because only a few ministers changed, the others remained in office, including those representing key sectors who were considered ineffective. I really hope that the change of government will not be just an imitation of change in the country.

However, the priorities announced by the new Prime Minister Recean, which refer to the restoration

of order and discipline in state institutions in addition to economic development, and peace and stability, inspire a dose of optimism.

In regards to order and discipline, it is imperative to restore effective state control as the judiciary, for example, remains captured by interest groups that have been exerting pressure. State institutions have been powerless in the face of this scourge. Criticisms regarding political interference in the judiciary and the fact that power remains tempted to control the institutions have been also valid, so the new government will have the mission of demonstrating that ensuring independence of the judiciary is part of the justice reform.

The advancement of the justice reform is going to be defining for the success of the new government and the achievement of its programme, as all other sectors will be affected by progress or lack thereof in this area. The European course of the country will also depend on this. Our development partners place their highest hopes on the justice reform and fight against corruption, which is also reflected in six of the nine recommendations of the European Commission in regards to Moldova's EU candidate status.

In the economic sphere, there is a need for a visionary approach to economic development and it remains to be seen whether the new government will succeed in this.

As for the priority of ensuring peace and security, its importance is self-evident given the extremely precarious security situation against the background of Russia's revanchism. The role of the new government is to correctly identify

the risks and threats and develop a new security and defence strategy. And here things should happen quickly.

None of the above will be possible without strong and competent state institutions as well as professional and motivated civil servants. A scarcity in human resources was one of the big problems of the Gavrilitza's Government, which could also make it difficult to achieve the Recean cabinet's programme. The ability to attract competent people to work for state institutions and make the decision-making process more transparent, inclusive and participatory will matter.

■ ***Will the change of government affect the European course of Moldova?***

■ Prime Minister Recean stated that the objective of his governmental programme is to implement President Maia Sandu's vision and the plan of the Action and Solidarity Party, with strict adjustments to current realities. Thus, European integration remains a priority and it is the ability to implement the European reform agenda which will influence the European course of the country. Both the quality and the speed with which the reforms will be carried out are important.

■ ***How real is the threat from Russia?***

■ It is a real threat that we have all been talking about and experiencing since the war in Ukraine began. However, the situation in the Republic of Moldova will depend a lot on the events in the neighbouring country. As long as the Ukrainians resist, an armed conflict in the Republic of Moldova is unlikely. However, the danger of overthrowing



power through a hybrid war that Russia has been operating in Moldova remains valid. Here, I mean the informational war and the pro-Russian political forces controlled by fugitive oligarchs who take advantage of the socio-economic problems of the country to radicalise the population and organise massive protests, thus destabilising the country. This is a fertile ground for subversive actions with the involvement of foreign elements, which is a real danger, to which also President Maia Sandu has referred to recently.

■ **NATO is now working on how to increase support for 'partners**

***vulnerable to Russian intervention.' What kind of support is Moldova counting on?***

■ It is not known whether Moldova will be provided with surveillance and air defence systems, as recently requested by Maia Sandu. However, Moldova can count on support in developing its military personnel and civil servants; on the means of protection of military personnel and on assistance in the field of cybersecurity.

For the next period it will be important for Moldova to obtain

military equipment, including lethal weapons from NATO, to strengthen its military capabilities and deter a possible attack from the Russian Federation.

We hope, however, that the new status of the Republic of Moldova as a candidate country to join the European Union will mark a new stage of cooperation in the field of security and defence between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, but also with NATO.

**Source: IPS International Politics and Society**

## Expert opinion

# Russia's Full-Scale War against Ukraine: A Year of Resistance

**Natalia Stercul, president of the Foreign Policy Association (APE)**

**A year after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian troops have failed to achieve both the originally set goals of the "special operation" and the plans for the second phase of the war - full control of Donbas and access to Transnistria. The Kremlin's miscalculations become more and more visible, and the statements more and more absurd, but the war continues. Moreover, its most active phase is expected in the spring. Western military support for the counter-offensive, progress on the front lines, liberation of its territories, and unconditional victory remain central issues for Ukraine. Judging by the results of the talks**

***in the "Ramstein" format and the Munich Security Conference, the international support in this direction is strengthening, and cooperation in assisting Western partners is expanding significantly.***

One day after the Kremlin launched a "special military operation" on February 24, 2022, Russian troops continue their full-scale war with Ukraine. Ukraine's armed forces are firmly holding the line and resisting Russian aggression. In April 2022, the second phase of the "special operation" was launched. The Russian Foreign Minister Serghei Lavrov stated that the goal of the second stage of the war is the



complete liberation of the territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the establishment of control over southern Ukraine

It started with an offensive in Donbass, missile attacks on eastern Ukrainian cities, in particular, Kharkiv, Nikolaev, Kramatorsk,

Slaviansk, and others. Control of Donbas should have made it possible to create a land corridor to Crimea and provide the opportunity to influence vital Ukrainian targets, including Black Sea ports through which agricultural and metallurgical products are transported abroad. However, the so-called consistent implementation of the “liberation plan” of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) has failed. Incidentally, like the plan for the first phase of the war unleashed by Russia. The heroism and dedication of the Ukrainian military is admirable, especially given the technical superiority of the Russian military over the Ukrainian armed forces on land, sea and airspace.

### ***Russia’s plans and partial mobilization for their implementation***

Encountering more and more difficulties on the front, in September 2022, Vladimir Putin announced a partial mobilization. This has been motivated by the need to involve military personnel due to the stretching of the front line during the special military operation in Ukraine, as well as the constant bombing of the Russian border territories and attacks on the liberated regions: DPR, LPR, Zaporozhye, and Kherson regions. It should be noted that Russia itself was quite sceptical about the possibility of declaring mobilization, because in this way the Kremlin would actually recognize the real state of affairs in the war with Ukraine. The announcement regarding the partial mobilization hit Putin’s regime hard enough. A wave of rallies with “No to war”

slogans swept across several Russian cities. However, the protests were suppressed brutally. More Russians were forced to leave Russia and flee to third countries.

Russia’s defeat in the Kharkiv and Liman regions of the Donetsk region, together with its inability to mobilize, convincingly demonstrates that the Russian political system is heading towards a turbulent period. Putin’s announcement from September 30 regarding the annexation of four regions of Ukraine, which he does not actually control, seemed absurd. By the end of October, the task of mobilizing 300 thousand people was completed. At the same time, the decree on the mobilisation completion has not been signed until now. The mobilization in Russia is being carried out for the first time and there is no clear plan of action, which gives the Kremlin the opportunity to manipulate the process. So far, there have not been obvious signs of the continued mobilization. Russian soldiers die in large numbers on the front, especially the mobilized ones, because they are poorly trained. Putin has no intention of stopping, and a full-scale war requires a constant influx of troops and resources. Therefore, the probability that the mobilization will be resumed is quite high. By sending more Russians to war, Putin is dragging the country into an increasingly critical situation.

The withdrawal of Russian troops from Kherson, which it had annexed, could no longer be justified by the shortcomings of the system. Since the beginning of the occupation, the liberation of Kherson remained one of the main military-political

objectives of Ukraine, which was achieved. Despite such obvious miscalculations of the Russian army, some Russian military analysts note that the main forces of the Russian troops are not yet deployed to the front, allegedly until the main reserve of mobilized soldiers is exhausted, thereby trying to somehow “save face” and justify itself. At the same time, there is a growing understanding that even if the fighting in Ukraine stops, a return to a peaceful pre-war life is impossible as long as the militant Russian regime persists. Russia’s economy is sinking into an ever-increasing stagnation, hampered by the influence of international sanctions and the departure of the country’s most qualified personnel. Putin’s miscalculations are becoming more and more obvious in all their manifestations: military, political, economic, resource, including from the point of view of human potential.

Since October, Russia has stepped up its attacks on Ukraine’s energy and other critical infrastructure targets. In November, 50 percent of the energy system of Ukraine was disabled as a result of the terror provoked by the Russian missiles. In winter, the situation has escalated even more, with Ukrainian residents expecting a total disconnection, when the power system can be completely disabled. At the same time, Ukraine managed to get back 54 percent of its lands occupied by Russia since the beginning of the war.

The consequences of Russian missile attacks on Ukraine are also felt by neighbouring states. In particular, by the Republic of Moldova, where for the fourth time since the beginning

of the war, remains of missiles as a result of the bombing of Ukraine fall on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The Border Police, together with the representatives of the district Police Inspectorate, have to take measures to protect citizens.

### **International support and Western military assistance for Ukraine**

On 14 February 2023, a meeting of NATO defence ministers in the „Ramstein” format took place in Brussels, which brought together 54 delegates at the discussion table. The topic of discussion was military support for Ukraine to increase its defence capacity, the start of the Ukrainian counter-offensive, military assistance from the West, and the possibility of its use (training of the Ukrainian army, repair of equipment, spare parts, and ammunition). This was the ninth meeting of the contact group on Ukraine since the beginning of the war. International support and cooperation is increasing in this direction. Following are examples of the unification of efforts at the international level: the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands will provide Ukraine with Patriot anti-aircraft systems; France and Italy will supply SAMP/T air defence systems. The European Union organized a training mission for Ukrainian soldiers, and the “coalition of tank suppliers” - Germany, Poland, Canada, Spain, Portugal, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands -

are responsible for the supply of Leopards tanks and related logistics.

Russia’s war against Ukraine is one of the central topics discussed on practically all international platforms. The Munchen security conference, which opened amid fierce fighting in Ukraine, was no exception. Representatives of 150 countries gathered in Munich on 17-19 February 2023, to discuss military support and assistance for Ukraine, the introduction of a “big new package of sanctions” on the occasion of marking one year of Russian aggression against Ukraine. They are economic in nature, target specific individuals, and are aimed at tightening banking restrictions, which will also affect third countries allowing Russia to avoid sanctions.

Ukraine rules out giving up any territory of its country, as any territorial concessions would weaken it as a state. Negotiations in this regard are simply out of the question. The most important thing for Ukraine is wider military assistance from allies and accelerating the pace of receiving it. Ukraine has repeatedly noted its dissatisfaction with the delay in the supply of weapons for defence and the launch of a counter-offensive.

### **When and how will the war in Ukraine end?**

The dynamics of hostilities continues to be high and it is still not possible

to talk about the end of the war, on the contrary, there are assumptions that the spring offensive will become the most active phase of this brutal war since the beginning of hostilities. Scenarios for the possible course of events and the subsequent dynamics of hostilities are constantly discussed by military experts, however, there is still no certainty in this matter. One thing is clear, Putin will not stop, and Ukraine will continue the selfless fight for its country.

Ukraine’s victory and the restoration of its territorial integrity depend heavily on the firm Western support and new arms supplies. Russia’s continued attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, with the aim of ultimately undermining the viability of the Ukrainian state, exacerbate the drama of the situation, as direct military action combined with a strategy of war of attrition also makes it impossible to predict the end of war in the near future. The road to Ukraine’s victory will not be easy and, most likely, not as fast as we would like. However, the dedication of the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian people leaves absolutely no doubt that Ukraine will be able to liberate its land, win this victory, and continue its development as a sovereign and independent state.



## SECURITY &amp; DEFENCE DIGEST



Platform for Security and Defense Initiatives

# The security environment in the Republic of Moldova in the context of preparations for a new Russian offensive on the Ukrainian front

**The security environment in the Republic of Moldova in recent months is characterized and influenced by the developments of the war in Ukraine. The events in the neighbouring country gave guided several high-level decisions, including the change of government in Chisinau. The latter, according to the statements of the Moldovan President, Maia Sandu, will focus on strengthening security.**

Regarding the situation in Ukraine, it should be mentioned that the Russian Federation carried out a wave of mobilization in the autumn of 2022, bringing under arms an additional of approximately 300,000 military personnel. Furthermore, the Russian Army has adjusted its combat tactics, currently relying on the tactics of small infantry units, which, in the first months of the war, was used exclusively by the Ukrainians. The attacks by the Russians relying less on heavy armoured vehicle and more on the manpower of Russian soldiers, have paid off, thus capturing the town of Solidar in eastern Ukraine, the town of Bahmut being half-encircled with a high probability of falling. At the same time, there has been much speculation since December 2022 that in the first months of 2023 the Russian Federation will launch a new major offensive in Ukraine to achieve its stated goals at the beginning of the war. Most likely the offensive the Russians were talking about is already underway, taking into account the activation of military operations along the entire front line, though the success of the Russian army so far has been quite modest.

At the same time, January and February were also characterized by a radical change

in the position of the allies regarding the delivery of tanks, missiles with a range of over 150 km and even fighter jets to Ukraine. However, the above-mentioned weapon systems are to be gradually delivered to the neighbouring country, according to the established procedure, while undergoing the mechanism of generation of Ukrainian forces. At the same time, the ammunition consumption rate and the rate of damage to combat equipment are exorbitant compared to any other conflict so far. This was also mentioned by the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Alliance, Jens Stoltenberg, on 13 February 2023, before the NATO ministerial meeting at the level of defence ministers, at which one of the questions raised was the request to nations to increase their stocks of ammunition.

In this context, the Republic of Moldova also benefited from military assistance from the partner countries. The first *Piranha* combat vehicles were delivered, and other military equipment was to be delivered. Also, it should be highlighted that both NATO and the EU came up with an unprecedented military aid package for the Republic of Moldova, but also with civil defence assistance. This was mentioned by numerous foreign officials during the visit of the ex-prime minister Natalia Gavriliță to Brussels, between 04-08 February 2023, but also by Moldovan officials. More than that, the NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg stated that the assistance package for the Republic of Moldova was on the agenda of discussions at the NATO ministerial from February 14-15. Likewise, in 2023, the defence budget of the Republic of Moldova

was also increased, which now accounts for approximately 0.55 percent of GDP. This increase is obviously not sufficient for the defence needs, but it is an important step in the development of the National Army and shows the commitment of the authorities to invest in the country's defence system.

## Constant threats

As for the threats to the security and defence of the Republic of Moldova, they have not changed essentially. As expected, Russian cruise missiles continued to fly over the country's airspace. In connection with this, the Russian ambassador to Chisinau, Oleg Vasnetsov, was repeatedly summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration. These measures are certainly not enough and highlight de facto the limits of the authorities in finding a military or preventive response to the actions of the Russian Federation, which flagrantly violate the Moldovan airspace.

Military threats for the coming months depend on the developments of the war in Ukraine. The situation on the Ukrainian war theatre will not affect Moldova in the immediate future, because, even if the forces of the Russian Federation succeed in launching the offensive, it will probably have as its main objective only the conquest of the illegally annexed Ukrainian regions within their existing borders. On the operational direction "Nicolaev – Odessa" it is unlikely that the Russian forces will launch an offensive, since neither the geographical environment (the presence of severe natural obstacles) nor the available forces and means allow it to be launched. According to

the statements of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made on the sidelines of the meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (Ramstein 9) on 4 February 2023, Russia has lost the war at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. At the same meeting, the US Secretary of Defence, Mr. Lloyd J. Austin stated that “we are on the verge of a Ukrainian counter-offensive, which will begin in a few weeks, and now the final preparations are being made to train and integrate the Ukrainian units, which have been equipped with western combat vehicles and tanks”.

At the same time, according to the statement of the Moldovan President, Maia Sandu, made on 13 February 2023, Russia is in the process of preparing a coup in Moldova, with foreign citizens from Serbia and Montenegro as executors. They would infiltrate the country to occupy government buildings, take hostages, and support protesters organized by dubious political forces with the aim of taking over power in the state. From a military point of view, a large-scale operation would require much more resources; however, vigilance at the country’s border requires taking preventive measures. Thus, Serbian citizens who were supposed to attend the football match between the *Partizan (Belgrade)* and *Sheriff (Tiraspol)* teams were not allowed to enter the Republic of Moldova on 15 February 2023.

### Different opinions

At the same time, there are different opinions on this issue both at the level of society, experts, foreign officials, not to mention the opposition. The NATO Deputy Secretary Mircea Geoană stated that Russia does not have the necessary military power to conduct such an operation now. On

the other hand, the American officials are concerned about the situation, although the information has not been verified by an independent source.

However, regardless of whether the information is true or not, the scenario of a coup in Moldova based on subversives in support of some pro-Russian political forces is not new and deserves special attention. This is the most serious threat to the country’s security now, which could divert the country’s European integration course.

Thus, the Russian policies in Moldova will continue to be designed together with the other instruments of power and with the support of the elements of its fifth column on the territory of the country with a view to subversive actions such as:

- Exploitation of the vulnerabilities of the state administration, the economy and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Moldova;
- Encouraging the dissatisfaction of the country’s population with the Moldovan central authorities and their unpopular decisions/policies in the social-economic field;
- Consolidation of local separatist movements and amplification of ethnic, religious, and social tensions;
- Establishing contact with oligarchs and local businessmen, as well as with the fugitive ones hiding abroad, being made offers by the Russian Federation;
- Establishing contacts with local criminal groups and using them to cause mass disorder, including military action.

### Exploiting the vulnerabilities

Russian propaganda will continue to exploit the vulnerabilities of Moldova’s information

space, while the cyber-attacks will remain. However, both propaganda and cyber-attacks do not present kinetic methods, respectively their impact will be insignificant for the population, it could be fully felt though by the government in Chisinau through opinion polls.

In order to counter these threats, the authorities and the law enforcement structures should, as a matter of priority, monitor the situation in order to prevent any subversive attempt that would lead to changing the European course of the country. It is also necessary to intensify diplomatic and military efforts in order to stop the violation of the airspace of the Republic of Moldova. Additionally, Moldova should continue to strengthen its defence sector and the acquisition of modern weapons, but also the training of the military to operate the new weapons systems. It is obvious that the fight against propaganda has to continue, however, not only by banning certain media sources, but by adopting a systemic approach. An important factor in this fight against propaganda is avoiding mistakes and actions that compromise the current government and create premises for disinformation.

As for the military threats for the coming months, they depend on the developments on the Ukrainian front. The Russian ballistic missile overflights will most likely continue, if Moldovan military and mainly diplomatic efforts do not achieve their goal. At the same time, the threat of subversive actions on the part of Russia will remain, which under favourable circumstances could lead to attempts to change the political power in Chisinau. Likewise, provocations are also possible in the Transnistrian region, as a reaction to the approval of the Law on Separatism.

The opinions expressed in the newsletter are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) or of the Foreign Policy Association (APE).



**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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