

European issues

n°671

May 30th 2023

With war next door, Moldova accelerates towards the EU

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Russia's ruthless invasion of Ukraine has upended the existing order in Europe and the world, and with it the security architecture, global energy, trade, and financial systems.

Since the end of the Cold War, technological progress and economic growth had led to stronger cooperation and an unprecedented level of connectivity between countries.

Growing interdependence of the world's economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade and flows of investment, people, and information have promoted reconciliation and prosperity.

Dictatorships fell, one-party rule ended, democracy prevailed. The Republic of Moldova declared independence in 1991^[1].

Like us, the newly independent states had great expectations.

We embraced this new beginning as a chance for peace and democratic development.

We committed to being part of the free world. A world where states are sovereign and equal; where borders are respected; where states cooperate, settle disputes peacefully and fulfil obligations under international law; where respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is at the heart of governance.

And like others, Moldova hoped that buffer zones, spheres of influence and land grabs were a matter of the past. Above all, we wanted to live freely and choose our own future.

But our aspirations to make our own choices were met by Russia's imperialist response. Its encouragement and support for secessionist rebels on the left bank of the Nistru river gave birth to a frozen conflict.

Frozen conflicts, like the one in Moldova's Transnistrian region, have become one of Russia's foreign policy tools to destabilise its neighbourhood, prevent democratic consolidation and to simply hold back our development. Fast-forward a quarter of a century and a similar toolbox is applied to keep the EU-hopeful Ukraine part of the Russian sphere of influence. First Crimea, then Donbas, and eight years later – on that grim morning of 24 February 2022 – a full scale invasion of Ukraine.

This ruthless, unjust, illegal war has unleashed an unimaginable tragedy on the Ukrainian people, generating shock waves across Europe and beyond the continent.

As the first bombs fell on Ukrainian soil, Moldova has vigorously condemned the war, opened its borders to hundreds of thousands of refugees and has firmly stood with Ukraine ever since.

Watching the suffering from across the border with sorrow and horror, we have been wondering if Moldova will be next.

I am grateful to Ukraine, its military and citizens, for their fierce resistance. As they are fighting for their land and freedom, they are fighting for ours, too. We are safe thanks to Ukraine.

THE COST OF WAR

And while nothing compares to the suffering in Ukraine, the devastation of its cities and the horrific crimes against its people, the war on our doorstep has been significantly affecting Moldova, too.

Our security is at risk from the Russian missiles violating our airspace as well as debris landing on our territory. Russia's bombardment of Ukraine's

[1] This text was originally published in "Schuman report on Europe, State of the Union 2023" - Marie B edition, Paris, April 2023

energy infrastructure, which is connected to ours, is also affecting Moldova's energy security.

The breakaway region of Transnistria, where Russian troops are stationed illegally, remains a source of instability.

Gas blackmail caused energy prices to increase seven-fold, with inflation reaching almost 35% last year. Trade routes have been disrupted and investor confidence weakened. As a result, the economy contracted in 2022, and it is likely to see only modest growth in 2023. Meanwhile, Russia's proxies and criminal groups have joined forces to exploit the energy crisis and fuel more social discontent. They hope to foment political turmoil. Using the entire spectrum of hybrid threats — including fake bomb alerts, cyber-attacks, disinformation, calls for social unrest and unconcealed bribery — they have been working to destabilise the government, erode our democracy and jeopardise Moldova's contribution to Europe's wider security.

So far, they have failed.

PICKING UP THE PACE TOWARDS THE EU

We are moving decisively towards membership of the European Union.

Since 1950, the European Union and its forerunners have achieved great things for its citizens and the world.

First, it has transformed Europe from a continent of war to a continent at peace.

For over seven decades the EU has contributed to the advancement of reconciliation, social cohesion, democracy, and human rights in Europe.

It has brought about freedom for its citizens to live, study or work anywhere in the EU; created the world's biggest single market; it has provided aid and development assistance for millions of people worldwide.

For the past twenty years, the EU has been an anchor for the peaceful, prosperous, and democratic development of Moldova.

We formally applied to join the Union on 3 March 2022, against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The choice was clear: democracy over authoritarianism, freedom over captivity, and prosperity over suffering. Our plea to the EU member states was to renew their

commitment to peace at a time when the war returned to Europe. Enlargement is the most effective instrument that the EU can use to foster peace and bring stability to fragile eastern Europe.

Article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union establishes that any European state which respects human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights, and which is committed to promoting them, may apply to become a member of the Union.

MOLDOVA LIVES BY THESE VALUES.

We are committed to the rule of law and to building fully functional democratic institutions.

And we are prepared to enact further reforms and other measures necessary to join.

In addition, we have already implemented significant parts of the *acquis communautaire* since the signing of the Association Agreement in 2014, and we are now accelerating the process.

All 27 EU member states have acknowledged that Moldova has demonstrated a firm commitment to reforms and granted it the status of candidate country for membership past June.

The European Commission has set out further steps that we need to take before launching accession talks. So, we rolled up our sleeves.

A YEAR OF CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Driven by the desire to consolidate our democracy, improve lives and the economy, and bring Moldova into the EU, we are taking forward a comprehensive justice system reform, stepping up the fight against corruption and organised crime, and are working to eliminate the influence of oligarchs.

We are also boosting the administrative capacity to deliver reforms and improving the way public finances are managed.

Work is underway to strengthen the protection of human rights, particularly of vulnerable groups, and sustain our commitments to enhance gender equality and fight violence against women, including with the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

Reforms – and our determination – are bearing fruits.

From a captured state only several years ago, Moldova has come a long way.

Last year we were named “a democratic bright spot” by the Global State of Democracy report published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Moldova is now among the top 25% states globally in areas such as social rights and equality or media integrity, according to the report.

We jumped 49 ranks on the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index and our anti-money laundering rating was upgraded in 2022 by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL).

Moldova moved up 5 places in the 2022 Rule of Law Index of the World Justice Project and is seen as a top improver while the rule of law has been declining globally for the fifth year in a row.

We work day-in-day-out with our partners to limit the influence of fugitive oligarchs who for decades have been depriving Moldovans of resources and hindering the development of the country.

We have launched a Security Hub to boost cooperation on internal security and border management between the EU, its agencies, the member states and the Moldovan authorities to address risks to the EU and Moldova.

On the energy front, the authorities have shown great resourcefulness to find alternative sources of energy and create gas reserves. Last winter, for the first time, Moldova’s right bank of the Nistru river could say ‘no’ to Russian gas.

We have also created social schemes to protect the most vulnerable population and cushion the impact of high energy prices this winter.

We are not being naïve about the next cold season either and are investing in energy resilience.

Moldova is now connected to the EU’s electricity and gas networks which will gradually enable us to wean off Russian gas completely.

We are also working to decarbonise the economy, boost energy efficiency and create an enabling regulatory environment for investment in renewables. The plan is to increase the share of renewable electricity supplies from 3 to 30 percent in the next 3 years.

In addition, we stepped up efforts to modernise our economy, cut red tape for local and foreign investors and explore new export markets. We have taken steps to gain a firmer foothold in the EU market. Exports to the EU grew by 32.3% 2022 compared to 2021. About 2/3 of Moldovan exports now go to the EU.

Reforms, modernisation and deeper integration with the EU have helped us hold the line against a full spectrum of hybrid techniques deployed by Russia including the weaponization of energy and refugees, cyber-attacks, sabotage, paid protests, and controlling political parties and media outlets to promote disinformation and destabilise the country.

HELPING HANDS

We didn’t do this alone. We couldn’t have done this alone.

Friends and partners have been providing support to the best of their abilities.

Gathered under the umbrella of the Moldova Support Platform – an initiative led by France, Germany and Romania – our many supporters have mobilised funds throughout a challenging year.

The assistance has helped us provide strong humanitarian response in the wake of Russia’s war on Ukraine, maintain stability and social cohesion, and, crucially, it has given us breathing space to advance reforms and accelerate towards the EU. It has also helped us overcome a precarious winter.

Romania, our good neighbour, friend and strong supporter, has stepped in with electricity exports, replacing the flows we lost, and provided invaluable diplomatic support.

The European Commission has committed funds to help ameliorate the energy crisis, support border management, and modernise the defence sector. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has thrown a life-line to finance emergency gas supplies.

A REGIONAL SECURITY PARTNER

But supporting Moldova is not a one-way street. Supporting Moldova is an investment in the shared security, stability, and prosperity on the continent.

With war next door, Moldova accelerates towards the EU

While Ukraine is fighting a military invasion, Moldova is on the frontline of a hybrid war.

And just as Russia must not be allowed to win in Ukraine, its hybrid techniques must not be allowed to succeed in Moldova.

With the help from partners, Moldova is building resilience and is ramping up its role as regional security partner.

We secure Ukraine's second-longest border, after the one it has with Russia. Across these 1,222 kilometres, Moldova is tackling the increased risk of weapons, drugs and human trafficking.

Since the beginning of the war, we've worked hard to maintain stability in the Transnistrian region, which shares a 450-kilometre-long border with Ukraine, where nearly 1,600 Russian troops are a source of risk. So far, we have managed to keep the situation calm.

We are also providing essential supply routes to and from Ukraine. The Solidarity Lanes support the Ukrainian economy, provide livelihoods for farmers, and help ensure that essential foodstuffs reach countries in the Middle East and Africa.

Additionally, our country has sheltered more than

700,000 refugees since the first days of the Russian invasion. Over 80,000 of them have chosen to stay, and we are prepared to host more should they need to flee a military escalation, a nuclear accident, or lack of heat, electricity and water.

Moldova's contribution to regional and global security also includes participation in peace-keeping missions including the ones in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Kosovo and Lebanon. The stronger Moldova is, the more it can contribute. And we are committed to growing stronger.

Europe needs a strong Moldova to contribute to the European Union. A strong neighbour to Ukraine.

Strong to shelter refugees.

Strong to become a hub for the reconstruction of southern Ukraine. Strong to maintain peace and stability in the region.

And strong to defend and foster a rules-based international order.

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President of the Republic of Moldova (since 24 December 2020)

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