

**Editorial Team:** Beata Surmacz (Director of ICE), Tomasz Stępniewski (Deputy Director of ICE), Agnieszka Zajdel (Editorial Assistant), Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, Jakub Olchowski, Konrad Pawłowski, Agata Tatarenko

**No. 832 (80/2023) | 21.04.2023**

ISSN 2657-6996  
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Piotr Oleksy

## **Ukraine and Moldova: toward a viable partnership**

**Keywords:** Moldova, Transnistria, Sandu, Ukraine, Zelenski

**The Russian invasion highlighted the importance of Ukrainian-Moldovan relations for the development and strategic situation of both countries. For Chisinau, Ukraine has become a key security guarantor. In turn, Kiev recognized the strategic importance of its neighbor in the military, social, transportation, and logistics spheres. At the same time, there have been signs of divergence in policy toward Transnistria. However, there is no indication of fundamental dimension, which could impact the development of relations between the two countries.**

**Moldovan-Ukrainian relations before 2022.** Despite the neighborhood and numerous common interests, relations between the two countries after 1991 did not have the character of a genuine partnership. Their most important driving force was usually the interests of the oligarchs on the two sides of the border. It had a crucial impact on the reality of policy toward Transnistria, for decades allowing the separatist republic to function effectively economically (by using Ukrainian roads and port infrastructure). The first sign of a possible qualitative breakthrough in mutual relations was President Mai Sandu's visit to Kiev in January 2021. A common point for the Moldovan leader and President Volodymyr Zelensky was the desire to reduce the role of oligarchs in their countries as well as Russia's influence in the region. During this visit, the most important tasks in the sphere of bilateral cooperation were defined; announcing the establishment of a permanent presidential dialogue, cooperation on the development of regional security, and a number of practical measures such as the construction of the Chisinau-Kiev highway, increasing electricity exports from Ukraine to Moldova, eliminating environmental problems related to the operation of Ukraine's hydroelectric power plant on the Dniester River, and resolving controversies over ethnic and linguistic minorities.

**The increased importance of relations after February 24, 2022.** The Russian invasion of Ukraine has made the issue of mutual relations particularly important for both sides. Representatives of the Moldovan ruling camp repeatedly stressed that they believe Ukrainian society and its military were also defending the security and independence of their state. For Ukraine, on the other hand, it was particularly important – especially during the first period of the war – to ensure calm and security on the country's southwestern borders. Moldova's strategic importance in the social, transportation, and logistics spheres also soon became apparent. In the first five months, some 460,000 Ukrainian refugees arrived in Moldova. Thus, it became the country that received the largest number of refugees per population (about 2.6 million). Moldova also played a significant role as a transportation corridor, allowing grain to be shipped to Romanian ports at a time when Russia was blockading Ukrainian ports. Other commodities, including diesel and gasoline, are also transported in the opposite direction – that is, to Ukraine.

Both countries were granted EU candidate status at the same time. At the first moment, when Ukraine announced its intention to apply to receive it, Moldovan diplomacy kept its distance, suggesting that it would not join the Ukrainian initiative. In the end, however, the applications were submitted at similar times, putting the two countries in a similar position in the EU enlargement policy.

**Controversies.** Moldova stands in solidarity with Ukraine on a verbal and symbolic level. However, it has not joined the European Union's sanctions on Russia, nor has it allowed the transport of military equipment through its territory to Ukraine. The first fact was explained by the country's extremely difficult economic situation and numerous economic ties with Russia. According to the Moldovan government, joining the sanctions would have caused a serious crisis and even a collapse of the Moldovan economy, severely strained by rising energy prices and the burden caused by the refugee crisis. The refusal to allow the transportation of armaments across the

country's territory stemmed from international neutrality, which is enshrined in Moldova's constitution and has become an important part of the public's vision of the country's character and its place in the world. This restraint by Moldova has provoked noticeable criticism on the part of some Ukrainian commentators and columnists. Nevertheless, this was not mirrored by official state representatives.

There have also been voices of dissatisfaction on the Ukrainian side regarding Moldova's cautious policy toward Transnistria. They suggested the need for more decisive action in the economic field (a trade blockade) as well as a quick, military solution to the problem through the intervention of the Ukrainian military. Again, these were primarily statements by commentators and columnists rather than government officials. The most apparent difference of opinion on the Transnistria issue at the formal level was revealed by Oleksij Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, who, in an interview with Interfax-Ukraine (20.03.2023), criticized Moldova's policy of gradually reintegrating the separatist republic. He stated that the problem should be "solved in one go," and that creating a "political process" out of it is a "huge mistake." Moldovan government representatives, however, did not directly address this opinion.

**Moldova's assertiveness and increase in cooperation.** Since December 2022, there has been a noticeable change in the rhetoric of the Moldovan authorities. Russia is explicitly described as a security threat, and a desire to join EU sanctions and withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States was signaled. Maia Sandu took up the theme of the need to bind Moldova with military international alliances in the media. It has begun to speak publicly about the need to develop defense capabilities, defense spending has increased, as has the government soliciting foreign support in this area. This assertive rhetoric on the issue of Russia and regional security, made possible by the diversification of energy supplies ("IES Commentaries," No. 755), coincided with an apparent strengthening of cooperation with Ukraine. In February 2022, President Zelenski publicly reported on the threat of a political coup in Moldova by Russia and a possible attempt to seize Chisinau airport. This information was later confirmed by Moldovan services and President Sandu. The leaders met on the occasion of the EU summit they hosted as well as Sandu's visit to mark the anniversary of the Buča massacre.

## Conclusions

- Kiev's rhetoric and Chisinau's position on security issues have grown very close. Joint statements warning of possible Russian diversions in Moldova indicate coordination in this sphere and intelligence cooperation.
- Cooperation in transportation and energy has great development potential. In the event that Russia breaks the grain agreements, Moldova will again become an important transit country. Transport routes there – primarily railroads – will also be important for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. The potential of the Trans-Balkan Gas Pipeline is also pointed out – for several months now, crude has been pumped through it from the south to the north, supplying Moldova with gas coming from Azerbaijan and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from ports in Greece. This route could also be used in the future to supply Ukraine.
- The EU's enlargement policy toward Moldova and Ukraine further brings the two countries closer together. Their issues are seen as interrelated and are often dealt with jointly. Representatives of Moldova and Ukraine also make joint appearances at the Union. On the other hand, strengthening cooperation in other fields – especially in the social, infrastructural, and internal security spheres – will promote their rapprochement with the EU.
- A different optics on the Transnistrian problem may manifest itself in Ukraine's public life for a long time. This is related to emotions about security issues and the Russian threat. However, there is no basis for assuming that there is a fundamental contradiction on this issue that has an impact on the reality of cooperation between the states. Ukraine's military intervention in Transnistria, called for by some commentators, would not be possible without Moldova's consent. Such a situation, on the other hand, would put the country's pro-Western power camp in a very bad light – as incapable of acting and exposing its own citizens to the threat of a foreign military. It cannot be ruled out that the difference of

opinion on how to solve the Transnistrian problem – which manifests itself in the media field rather than in the political or diplomatic field – is part of a broader political game aimed at putting pressure on the Transnistrian elite.