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THE RUSSIAN THREAT TO MOLDOVA



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On 2 February Russian foreign minister Lavrov claimed that the west had “already set its sights on the Republic of Moldova to play the role of the next Ukraine.” Moldovan President Maia Sandu (a former World Bank economist) was “ready for practically anything, including an alliance with Romania (a member of both NATO and the EU)”. Sandu, for her part, told EU leaders that on 9 February the Moldovan intelligence service had, with help from Ukraine, uncovered a plot to destabilise the country, replacing her and the pro EU government with a pro Russia administration. Private Eye, quoting Sandu, published some colourful detail in a “Missive from Moldova” on 3 March. At the centre of the “conspiracy” had been a UEFA Conference League football match played in the Moldovan capital (Chisinau) on 16 February between FC Partizan Belgrade and FC Sheriff Tiraspol (capital of the pro Russia breakaway region of Transnistria). Kremlin backed mobsters would enter Moldova disguised (comment: not much needed) as Partizan fans. After the match they would seize hostages and government buildings, beat up a few policemen, and instal a puppet government run by Putin’s supporters in the Moldovan parliament. Moldova would align itself thereafter with Russia. (Comment: normally FC Tiraspol play home games at the Sheriff stadium in Tiraspol, the best in the country.) Sandu had the first contingents of Partizan “supporters” turned back at the airport. Moldovan airspace was closed two days before kick-off to prevent reinforcements from arriving. Partizan won the match 1-0 but lost overall 3-2.

Game over for this attempted coup, but certainly not the last attempt. What is Moldova? Moldovan and Romanian are the same language, written in Latin script in Romania and Moldova, but in Cyrillic in Transnistria. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991 the successor states became independent within the boundaries of the former Soviet Republics, in this case the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). In 1877, in alliance with Russia, the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia proclaimed their independence from the Ottoman

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empire. A royal family of German (Hohenzollern) origin was imported. Romania entered the first world war on the side of the Entente in 1916. Its war aim was Greater Romania to include Transylvania, Bukovina (Austria Hungary), and **Bessarabia (Russia), the core of present day Moldova**. Although Romania had been defeated (Treaty of Bucharest) by 1917, it retained Bessarabia as Russia collapsed. Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia became part of Romania when the former empires were carved up in 1919 at the Paris peace conferences. However, present day Transnistria was not part of Greater Romania. In 1924 Stalin included this territory, with equal numbers of Romanians/Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians, in the Ukrainian SSR. According to the secret protocol to the Ribbentrop/Molotov pact (August 1939) Bessarabia would fall to the Soviet Union. Stalin seized it along with the Baltic states in 1940. Romania (and Hungary) joined the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Romania changed sides in 1944. The 1947 Paris Peace Treaty with Romania confirmed the loss of Bessarabia (and northern Bukovina) to the Soviet Union. Romania recovered Transylvania.

Moldova is a multinational state. 75% are Moldovan/Romanian speakers, but Russians and Ukrainians are the majority in Transnistria. Ethnic hostility is largely absent. Transnistria is a fiefdom, on the one hand of the Sheriff company which controls football, KVINT brandy, the Mercedes concession, textiles and steel; and on the other of GAZPROM which provides cheap gas to Transnistria, and has a stranglehold on supplies - at higher prices - to the rest of Moldova. Russia also controls the supply of electricity. Transnistria trades with the EU as part of Moldova. To visit Transnistria is to travel back in time. A statue of Lenin takes centre stage in front of the main government building – the Supreme Soviet. The pro Russia population – the majority - perceives itself as an outpost of the Russian empire, and not as a part of Romania.

In 1992 Moscow backed separatists started a war to prevent an Anschluss with Romania. It ended when the 14th Russian army (part of the Operational Group of Russian Forces, OGRF) commanded by a charismatic general – Lebed (who died in a helicopter crash in 2002) intervened on behalf of the separatists, defeating the newly independent republic. A trilateral (Russia, Moldova, Transnistria) peacekeeping force was established. But elements of Lebed's army also stayed behind to guard an old Soviet arms depot at Cobasna which is in Transnistria close to the border with Ukraine. Most of the soldiers were recruited locally and have no interest in repatriation to Russia. They switch between guarding Cobasna and "peacekeeping." The OSCE established a mission to lead the peace process which has been deadlocked for years, and is now defunct. There are five parties – Russia, Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine, OSCE – and two observers, the EU and the US. Moldova accepts Russian peacekeepers, but not the OGRF.

The EU focused on corruption, rampant in Romania, Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova including, especially, Transnistria. During my time as UK Permanent Representative to the OSCE, the EU

established, during our Presidency in 2005, a Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine. The objective was to put the squeeze on Transnistria and its many corrupt helpers in Ukraine, based in Odesa. Progress has been predictably slow. The Russians accused us of seeking to starve the unfortunate people of Transnistria.

Moldova is a poor country with minuscule armed forces. It suffers from population flight. A Romanian passport offers escape for some. Attitudes to both Russia and Romania are ambivalent, but there does appear to be strong support for EU membership. 675,000 Ukrainians have fled to Moldova in the last year, of whom over 100,000 want to stay. If Russia should succeed in capturing Odesa it would have little difficulty in incorporating Moldova in its reconstituted empire. Neutrality is enshrined in the constitution which does not permit the presence of foreign forces on its territory. Hence Moldovan opposition to the OGRF. Moreover, at the Istanbul OSCE summit in November 1999, President Yeltsin agreed to withdraw Russian forces from Moldova (and Georgia) by the end of 2001. President Putin reneged on this commitment preventing substantive agreement on European security at OSCE ministerial, and summit meetings ever since.

Moldova's future as an independent state depends on what happens in Ukraine. If it falls, so also would Moldova.

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