

Russia's Hybrid War in Post-Soviet Space; A Case Study of Moldova

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Abstract

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Russia, once being the superpower power, stills bear the imprints of great power status. Therefore, after the collapse of great USSR, and the emergence of 15 new states on the world map, pushed Russia into an unprecedented power struggle to regain the power status once lost. To achieve the status quo, Russia has undermined the sovereignty and national interests of the states once were the part of USSR. To exercise its influence and regain its control over the lost territory of Moldova, Russia use every hard and soft power tool at hand, to contain the Europe's influence on the Republic of Moldova. This paper is designed to reflect the Russia's hybrid warfare in Moldova and its control over the Transnistrian region, which is used to create instability in Moldova. Moreover, this paper prescribes possible policies towards the ongoing conflict and a way to escape another war like Ukraine.

Keywords: Hybrid, Post War, USSR, Russia, Moldova, Hybrid War, Ukraine

1. Introduction:

Moldova, an eastern European country hailed from Soviet disintegration shares border with Ukraine and Romania. The unrecognized breakaway region of Transnistria is being looked after by Russian peacekeeper forces. The country has long been caught in ethnic divisions. Moldova has very complex internal dynamics. Third-fourth of population are ethnic Moldovans with small portion of population being Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauz, Roma and Bulgarians. The country is so entailed in these issues that there exist political parties on the purpose of independence or reunification with either Romania or Russia, only on the ethnic basis. Moldova was also the first country from post-Soviet states to return an unreformed communist party to power in 2001 and 2005. Following the communist ideology, the government of the time drew close linkages with the Russian government. But in 2005 the party signaled a shift away from Russia and close to Europe. Moscow felt betrayed over these steps from the Moldovan government. Later, the coalition government of "Aligned for European Integration" in 2010 led to more improved ties with EU. (Britannica, 2023) The relations drew so close that following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014, Moldovan parliament ratified the association agreement with EU. This was a significant step towards the full membership of Moldova in European Union.

Following such events, the Moldovan and Russian government did not enjoy good relations. Many rifts such as trade issues were witnessed between both states as Moldova is heavily reliant on the products imported from Russia. Moldova like most of the other European countries fulfill its energy demand from Russia. Moldova is reliant on Russian supplied natural gas and consumed 100% of Russian supplied natural gas only. Following the Ukraine war and increase in gas prices of Gazprom – Russian state-owned multinational energy corporation and cut in the percentage of supply, Moldova started taking steps to become independent of its reliance on Russian gas. Prime minister of Moldova on May 18, 2023, made an announcement that unlike history Moldova is no longer reliant on Russian supplied gas in fact it will now fulfill its energy needs from European energy network. (Donaldson, 2023) Following these types of events Russia is realizing that it is losing grounds in Moldova, so it has started using tactics of hybrid warfare to maintain its influence. These hybrid warfare tactics are meant to specifically punish Moldova for defying against Kremlin's will. Moscow has banned different imports from Moldova including its farm produces. Moscow is also involved in spreading disinformation to propagate fake propaganda by using his proxies, state media and other social media plate-forms. One of the proxies, the Shor political party of Moldova sponsored protests against the pro-European government. ("At Ukraine's edge," 2023) In the paper we will analyze that how are these tactics serving the interests of Moscow and disturbing Moldova's nation-building.

2. Historical Background:

Moldova was one of the early beneficiaries of “glasnost” and “perestroika” reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev. These reforms brought political pluralism. Following these changes brought by reforms, loyalties among the population divided. Nationalist movements started proliferating in the country. After the disintegration of USSR, Moldova declared its independence. Conflicts erupted between Russian speaking ethnic minorities and propagators of Romanian unification. Amid the possible threat of Romanian integration and upset about disintegration of USSR Transnistria declared its own independence in 1992. A war was started between Transnistrian and Moldovan forces. However, the local Russian forces present from the Soviet time decided the fate of the war. The Russian forces helped separatists in this conflict and the situation remains unchanged till now.

In 1992 there was a ceasefire signed between Moldovan and Russian forces Transnistria was declared independent, but Moldova still do not recognize independent Transnistria. Neither country in the world recognized the independence of Transnistria nor Russia – major supporter. However, Russia gives major support to Transnistria both economically and also politically till today. Since the independence of Transnistria Russia helped in the form of foreign aid, shaped gas, and through major military and economic assistance.

Till now the situation seemed that Russia wanted to mediate some sort of unification agreement between Moldova and Transnistria. This was a part of major strategic thinking of Russia. Russia wanted to mediate an agreement in which Transnistria was given a special status under Moldova. Russia thought that this would prevent Moldova from joining NATO and West while the Russian influence would be maintained. However, both Moldova and Transnistria never wanted this sort of unification. For Moldova it was meant to be an everlasting Russian influence. As for Transnistria is concerned, they were never interested in reunifying with Moldova instead they always wanted to become part of Russian Federation.

In 2014 after the Crimean annexation by Russia, Transnistria petitioned to join Russian Federation

however it was ignored. (Duffy, 2021) Moreover, the situation in Russia changed after the 2014 Crimean annexation because of the sanctions on Russia. Russia was always a major trade partner for Transnistria but the sanctions from West on Russia after 2014 decreased the ability of Moscow to export towards Transnistria. Transnistria started fulfilling its needs by trading with EU with the ratio of 70%. Transnistria and Moldova also started building up their relations in context to trade. Since then, the ties seemed to become enhanced. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine changed the scenario. (Perkins, 2023) The future of enhanced relations between Moldova and Transnistria changed. Moldova once again showcased his willingness to join EU and applied for full EU membership in March 2022. Whereas Transnistrians are still the propagators of unification with Russia.

3. Russia in post-Soviet states:

After the disintegration of USSR, Russia for certain period of time remained preoccupied with many challenges at the domestic level. The country performed tasks like economic survival and domestic stabilization. Amid these challenges the country was reluctant to assume the leadership role in the post-soviet space. (Anon., n.d.-d) Right after the domestic stabilization Putin reassumed its globalism efforts. Alike EU and US promotion of their democratic values, Russia started spreading its own norms in the region. Moscow's efforts for regional leadership intensified in the first decade of the 21st century. Still there were many efforts done before like the establishment of Commonwealth of Independent States CIS following the disintegration of USSR. The OSCE Minsk Group was also established to mediate different conflicts in the post-soviet states i.e: that of Azerbaijan and Armenia with help of France and US.

USSR's disintegration resulted in the formation of 15 post-soviet states. These efforts were being taken to maintain the USSR's time interests in the post-soviet states. However, many of these states started trying to divert their orientation towards West. The use of word "Newly Independent States" instead of post-soviet states is one of many indications. Many politicians and researchers used the word newly independent states more likely. The Commonwealth of Independent states tried to preserve soviet time ties and Russian influence instead of focusing over current problem solving. Such policy orientation of the organization led to its failure from time to time. The failure of CIS, color revolutions and reorientation of countries policies led to the limited ties between Moscow and many newly independent states. To overcome these complex regional scenarios and growing Western orientation, Moscow used the tool of launching new regional organizations. The Collective Security Treaty Organization was established in 2001 against NATO after many efforts of military alliance by Moscow and CIS. Another major regional organization, Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was established in 2014 again to balance the European Union (EU).

The region of Eurasia is occupied with many frozen conflicts. Countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan are facing territorial conflicts along their ethnic lines. Russia is trying to maintain its strategic hold vis-a-vis these conflicts directly or indirectly. Many separatist parts in the region are being assisted by Russia economically, socially and militarily e.g: Transnistria of Moldova etc. At the same time Russia is playing a key role as mediator to exert its influence. One of the key examples is the conflict of Azerbaijan and Armenia in which Russia along with France and US mediated in OSCE Minsk Group. At the same time Moscow is also supplying both of the states with arms and weapons. (Ibid)

The interest seeking scale of Moscow places different conflicting region of these states at different

domains of behaviors. The case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as compared to Transnistria is a notable example. Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent regions after the war in Georgia in 2008 but did not recognize Transnistria till now. Another example is the region of Nagorno-Karabakh which is not recognized by Moscow. Yet Armenia has deep security relations with Moscow, so an indirect influential relation is also exerted here as Nagorno-Karabakh is highly dependent on Armenia. Moreover, Moscow uses many other tactics of soft power like debt agreements, energy relations and migrants as a tool to exert influence. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the two countries which are most vulnerable to the migrant tactic for their heavy dependance on the remittances. But in many cases these tactics do not get the desired results such as the case of emergency loan to Belarus in 2009. The loan was provided with the instructions of recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia according to some reports, but the result was nil. These efforts highlight that the focus of Russian foreign policy was and will be on the post-Soviet space. (Korolev, 2015)

4. The Growing EU and Moldova relations:

The EU's economic growth and successful cooperation among its member states have made it an alluring offer for CEE states, enabling the EU's ongoing eastward expansion to include nations like Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in 2004 as well as Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. Moldova is currently undergoing the process of Europeanization both politically and socially like many of the Central and East European (CEE) states. The orientation of Moldova towards EU and the European standards is decades old. Moldova started its journey towards the European Union right after its independence. Moldova took its first and the most important step towards the EU membership in 1994. A partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA) were signed between the Moldovan government and the EU in 1994. Along the PCA agreement, an Action Plan by EU-Moldovan Cooperation Council was also given. PCA was the first agreement between EU and Moldova to shape a legal framework for the economic collaborations in future, partnership for legislative harmonization and trade liberalization and opened up an opportunity for the political dialogue between both the actors. In 2008, to expand this collaboration the Action Plan Moldova created National Commission for European Integration, later supplemented by some national and international organizations. A major success towards the journey was made in 2014 when Moldova joined the Association agreement which created Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area DCFTA. This step made the import and export easier and provided Moldovans with a visa-free travel to the Schengen Area countries. Such achievement made the Moldovan path towards EU membership easy and smooth. With time Moldova became biggest trade partner of EU with 58.7 exports and 45% imports from Moldova, according to the stats of 2022. Such achievements have contributed to improved Moldovan economy, promoting EU standards and fighting many domestic issues such as corruption and many other. Moreover, EU initiated several initiatives such as promoting universal norms of peace, democracy, liberty, human rights and rule of law in Moldova. However, corruption remained one of the major hindrances in this path. To fight against this menace, Moldova established many institutions at national level such as the anti-corruption prosecution office, National anti-corruption strategy and national integrity society. The institutions worked to decrease the ratio of bribery in the country but in 2014 the biggest incidents of money laundering happened at a massive scale on governmental level. In 2016 EU association agreement was signed through which serious prosecutorial reforms were done.

Recently, the government of Moldova has increased its efforts towards the membership. Since the presidency of Maya Sandhu in 2020 the government has contributed to promoting dialogues between the EU and Moldova. After the war in Ukraine, the European commission came up with a decision of

granting Moldova alongside Ukraine the status of candidate country. A series of political, legal and economic guidelines which all EU members have to ratify for the membership named “Copenhagen Criteria,” are given to Moldova. In order to get full membership, the country would have to institute the Copenhagen criteria.

5. Hybrid War in Moldova:

Absence of a global governing body, lust for power, overlapping interests of the states, survival of the fittest, all these elements come together to make the international system vulnerable to conflicts and wars. Russia, once being the superpower, still bears the imprints of great power status, thus thrive in the international system to acquire the status quo, meanwhile undermining the national interests and sovereignty of other states. The collapse of the great USSR and the emergence of 15 post-soviet states on the world map, pushed Russia into an unprecedented geo-political and geo-strategic competition. Russia has shifted its policies since then, and thus exercise its influence in the post-soviet states, using both hard and soft power tools.

Russia’s President Vladimir Putin statement about Russia’s determination to safeguard the interests of Russian ethnics in the region, confirms its ambition of exercising its influence in ex-soviet states.

Russia possesses 18% of world’s gas reserves and 5% of world’s oil reserves. After getting its independence in 1991, the state of Moldova was wholly depending on Russia for its energy requirements. This dependency undermines the sovereignty of the state, as Russian authorities were involved in the state’s domestic affairs to great extent, consequently influencing the decision-making body of Moldova. As an element of hard power, Russia used oil and gas as an instrument of negotiation to exercise pressure on Moldova. (Cebotari & Gutu, 2015)

Moldova Gaz, a monopoly who dominates the gas authority in the state, is currently 51% in possession of Russian federation owned Gazprom, giving Moscow a tool to exercise pressure by embargoes and gas delivery. When Russia realized in 2013 that Moldova is heading for partnership with European Union, which goes against their interests, using bad quality as an excuse Russia immediately halted Moldovan wine imports. Later in 2014, after the Association Agreement with European Union was signed, Russia extended the economic sanctions and stopped the Moldovan fruits imports. The sanctions proved to be a setback on Moldova’s economy. According to reports, Moldova and Transnistria debts to Gazprom reached \$709 million and \$7 billion, correspondingly. This huge debt gives Moscow an upper hand to threaten Moldova with cease of gas supply if they do not obligate. Moreover, the due bills of the gas resources delivered to the pro-Russian breakaway region-Transnistria, is claimed by Gazprom to be paid by MoldovaGaz because TiraspoltransGaz, the official company which manages gas supply in Transnistria is not officially involved in the sale purchase contract between MoldovaGaz and Gazprom. (Reuters, 2023) Whereas the authorities of MoldovaGaz claim that MoldovaGaz is not responsible for the debts of Transnistria. MoldovaGaz according to legal perspective claims that the debt of Transnistria is to be paid by TiraspoltransGaz. Where on one hand, Moscow back the pro-Russian authorities in Transnistria to exercise political pressure on Moldova. On the other hand, the federation of Russia does not officially recognize the state of Transnistria and thus put the burden of Tiraspol's debt on Chisinau’s shoulders to exercise economic pressure on Moldova on basis on legalities. (Cebotari & Gutu, 2015)

In 2022, Moscow lessened the gas supplies to Chisinau by 36.67% over the dispute of due bills. On the

other hand, the Russian attacks on Ukrainian power sectors and its initiative of decreasing gas supplies to Transnistria, left Moldova in dark due to electricity outage.

Another hard power tool which Russia use, for its geopolitical and geostrategic interest, is exercising its influence, with the help of fifth column, on the banking and financial infrastructure of Moldova. Russian authorities' manipulation of the state's banking system is a strategic initiative to sabotage the Moldovan economic infrastructure, leading to financial and monetary instability which in turn undermines the people's and investors trust in Moldovan economy. These coordinated efforts are aligned with a conspiracy to erode the confidence of Moldovan population in pursuing strengthening relations with European sector. These aligned efforts of hybrid war in Moldova consequently led to currency destabilization, rising inflation and poverty, migration of effective population because of disbelief. (Cirimpei, n.d.)

Whenever Russia perceives that Moldova is trying to escape Russia's hold, which goes against their geopolitical interests, the federation of Russia uses embargoes and sanctions as an economic weapon to subjugate Moldova. The economic and political relations between Moldova and Russia have always been strained due to overlapping political interests. Due to this, Russia, in 2005, banned the agricultural exports of Moldova and later in 2006 banned Moldovan wine, claiming that the reports found the presence of heavy metals and pesticides, labeling Moldovan wine as harmful to health. This was a setback to the Moldovan economy because wine export is the major branch of Moldovan GNP, and 80% of its wine was exported to Russia. Later in 2013, Russia imposed embargoes on Moldovan meat and wine, and again in 2014 on Moldovan fruits. Analysis of these sanctions directs us to the conclusion that all these are mere elements of the Russia larger campaign to achieve its geopolitical interests.

EU involvement in Moldova is driven by geopolitical interests. Lying on the borderline of Europe, any instability in Moldova will eventually affect the strategic stability of the countries in Europe such as organized crimes. Thus, the EU extends its support to Moldova and Ukraine for their association with the EU. Therefore, the state of Moldova on the Eurasian territories proves to be a buffer zone, which results in intensifying the competition between Russia and Europe for integration of Moldova. Integration with the EU will open new ways to progress, stability, and development, through external reforms and implementation of the European Union norms. Thus, Russia tries to create every other obstacle to the completion of the Association Agreement. (Ibragimova, 2023)

Along with hard power tools to exercise its influence on the post-Soviet states, Russia also keeps soft power tools in the loop such as manipulation through ideology, the orthodox church, and historical sentiments. Media, especially television, has played an important role in the propaganda of influencing the minds of the Moldovan public in favor of Russia. Channels such as Vremea and Messenger give a deep insight into the country's affairs. Similarly, during the Cold War period, Russia initiated a campaign against the West with the influence of TV news, radio stations, and websites as a part of its huge propaganda against the Western forces.

6. Geostrategic Importance of Transnistria:

Transnistria - a quasi-state, possessed all the attributes of a state except for international recognition. Positioned between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, Transnistria a tiny strip of 1350 square miles, holds a geostrategic and geopolitical implications for Russia and Moldova. (Miarka, 2020) The Transnistrian region hosts a population of about 500,000 people with a sizable population of Russian,

Moldovan and Ukrainian natives. This makes this region strategically significant for Russian national interests and so for Moldova. Political decisions are shaped by this disparity of population affecting domestic and foreign political dynamics. Historical legacy, military presence and the dilemma of power dynamics makes this region strategically important.

Transnistria backed by Russia proclaimed its independence from its mother state Moldova after the bloody conflict in 1990-1992. Yet Russia chose not to officially accept Transnistria's independence and thus leaving it in vulnerable political situation. The unresolved dispute of Transnistria feeds continued hostilities that jeopardizes stability of the region.

After the truce was declared in 1992, about 1500 Russian forces remained in Transnistria. Moreover, the military presence raised rumors and worries about Russian political goals. The deployment of Russian troops since 1990s is intensifying tensions affecting the geostrategic landscape of the region. (The Economist, 2022)

Transnistria acts as a bridge between Ukraine and Moldova and thus serves as buffer zone between two influencing trade, economic and political dynamics. To Russia it is crucial to indirectly influence the Transnistria region to control the domestic political dynamics of Moldova, which compliments its hegemonic ambitions in the political arena. Moreover, to Moldova it is significant to contain Russian influence in Transnistria to protect its sovereignty and its national interests from Russia's hegemonic endeavors. (Miarka, 2020)

Natural gas resources are transported from Russia to the European countries via Transnistria, making it a vital trade route. The importance of Transnistria comes from its ability to act as a strategic route alongside the Black Sea and a channel for supply chain support, which qualifies it as a pivot point for military operations. Possessing the strategically important location it is of great significance to command systems in both Russia and NATO and thus Russian ambitions for supremacy collide with NATO's strategic objectives. Indicating its complex significance, the term "Geostrategic Gateway" best defines Transnistria, as the region embraces the Eastern Europe geopolitical interests. (Vakhtang, 2022)

In a nutshell, Transnistria's strategic positioning on the map, the overlapping interests, the presence of Russian armed forces, its role as trade route, diversified population, and wider political ramifications contribute to its geostrategic significance. The status of Transnistria must be settled in order to protect stability in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the conflict also has ramifications in geopolitical arena of world, especially considering unacknowledged statehood status and conflict settlement processes.

7. Policy Prescriptions:

Moldova has taken a holistic approach to resolve the dispute with Russia, especially in relation to Transnistria. A pillar has been diplomatic talks, where Moldova has participated in discussions with global arbitrators like the OSCE in an effort to find a resolution that all parties may agree upon. In an attempt to resolve overlapping interests, diplomatic measures by the European Union, the United Nations, and various nations have tried to encourage discussions between Moldovan and Transnistrian authorities. Although it remains a sensitive topic in discussions, the deployment of peacekeeping forces—mainly made up of Russian troops—has been a component of a conflict resolution plan since the start of the 1990s. In order to close the disparity between the two entities, Moldova has also

concentrated on economic and confidence-boosting initiatives. These have included trade promotion and cooperative efforts. Transnistria has been granted autonomy within Moldova's constitutional structure through the development of reintegration programs and legislative procedures. Furthermore, Moldova has made an appeal to the global community to back its efforts to resolve the Transnistrian dispute in accordance with principles of autonomy and territorial integrity, as well as seeking acknowledgment and backing for its territorial integrity. Due to the region's political powers, conflicting interests, and complicated historical context, a durable solution is still difficult to achieve regardless of these attempts. Following are the prescribed policies for the current dilemma:

1. EU to limit its objectives and encourage settlement between Moldova and Russia.
2. Moldova to learn from Russia-Ukraine war and be wiser in every step.
3. A demilitarized zone should be forged between Moldova and Transnistria to portray a friendly gesture.
4. Public to public contact should be encouraged by both both Moldovan and Transnistrian authorities in order to ensure peaceful coexistence.

8. Conclusion:

Russian authorities carry out a hybrid war against the Republic of Moldova, to eventually contain NATO forces presence in its neighborhood, the EU influence and Ukraine's accession with Europe. Therefore, the economic and political pressure which Russia is inflicting on the Republic of Moldova will ultimately cause the collapse of Moldova if Western states cease to provide economic and political assistance to Moldova.

Unless the dispute of Transnistria is resolved, it is nearly impossible for Moldova to go forward for its integration with EU. The current policy that Chisinau is carrying towards Tiraspol is of sticks and carrots to exercise influence on Tiraspol. Currently, there exists two camps in Transnistria: one with which there is a possibility of future negotiations, this includes the current leader Vadim Krasnoselski, and the other camp is majorly influenced and controlled by Russian authorities. (Geopolitical Futures, 2023)

The war in Ukraine, Transnistrian dispute and the hybrid war in Moldova, all these are interlinked. If Ukraine defeats Russia with the western support, the Russian influence and control will collapse. However, if Russia comes out victorious, it will be a danger for the Republic of Moldova. Russia influence in the neighborhood will soar and ultimately it will undermine the sovereignty and national security interests of Moldova. Russia will have a stronger ground to pressurize the Moldovan federation, for its integration plans with European Union.

However, if Moldova accelerates the process of integration with European Union at this point, it will to some extent undermine the Russian influence as Russia is already engaged in the war with Ukraine. But if Russia came out victorious from the war it will be having more influence and control to stop Moldovan integration with EU.

Nevertheless, the Republic of Moldova has a secondary option to make a union with Romania, as Romania is already a member of European Union, Moldova will be benefiting from the security umbrella of NATO.

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