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Moldova's Crisis: More than a Local Difficulty

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To most of Europe, the Republic of Moldova has been a zone of unhappiness rather than interest. It is Europe's poorest country, but whilst some of its migrants are unwelcome, they are hardly a flood. It is the venue of the most dormant of the former USSR's notoriously misnamed 'frozen conflicts', but until the Russia-Georgia war of August 2008, the conventional wisdom inside the EU was that the prospects of conflict resolution were improving. Its breakaway territory on the left bank of the Dniester, the so-called Transnistrian Moldovan Republic, represents the typical post-Soviet amalgam of politics, security services, business and crime, if in an atypically uncompromising form. Nevertheless, the work of the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) and its cooperation with neighbouring Ukraine has persuaded all but the congenitally sceptical that the pathology – and Transnistria's black market trade – is containable. Transnistria is also host to a 1,200-strong Russian military contingent, but it is a shadow of the former 14th Army and despite Russia's OSCE commitment to withdraw the contingent by 2002, its presence has been implicitly legitimised by the three-party (Moldovan-Transnistrian-Russian) Joint Control Commission and the so-called 5+2 process, which institutionalises the participation of the key external players, the OSCE, the EU, Russia, Ukraine and the United States in the process of conflict settlement.

Since the election of Moldova's Communist president, Vladimir Voronin, in 2001, the dominance of governing clans has further corroded the country's political and economic life, but not in a way to make Europe question the government's pluralistic and democratic credentials. And so it was after the parliamentary elections of 5 April 2009, when the qualified endorsement of the international electoral mission (OSCE, Council of Europe and EU) was, despite the blocking role of the Russian delegation, read without a murmur by almost everyone except the political opposition in Moldova itself.

The violent disturbances on 7 April in Moldova's capital, Chisinau, have shattered this complacency. Claims by the three principal opposition parties that electoral rolls were inflated by 400,000, including children and the deceased, might themselves be inflated. But conditions needed to be more scrupulous than they were, given the weighted system for allocating parliamentary seats. After two terms, President Voronin is obliged to leave office on 7 May. In Moldova's parliamentary republic, a new president must be elected by no fewer than 61 of parliament's 101 deputies. Neatly, the Central Election Commission awarded 60 parliamentary mandates to the Communists on the basis of a highly disputable 49.48 percent of the vote.

Yet possible vote rigging is now the least of the problems that Moldova faces. Was it the opposition, *agent provocateurs* or both who instigated a storming of Parliament and the Presidential Administration by a fraction of over 10,000 protestors and, within yards of police, the hoisting of the Romanian flag atop Parliament itself?

With no apparent pause for reflection, President Voronin on 7 April branded the country's opposition leaders 'putschists' embarked on 'crimes against Moldova' and an 'anti-constitutional coup'. On the following day, after charging 'certain political forces' in Romania with instigating the protest, he expelled the country's ambassador and imposed a visa regime that effectively sealed the Moldovan-Romanian border. As if by telepathy, the Russian State Duma passed a resolution on the same day echoing each of these accusations, which in turn were reinforced in a blunt interview given by Foreign Minister Lavrov on the 9 April.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the opposition fears that the storming of Parliament, like Germany's Reichstag fire of 1933, will provide the state with a pretext to impose an authoritarian regime. Neither is their fear that the stigmatizing of Romania betokens a new and more ominous international course. The mystery is why these dynamics changed and so swiftly.

A Fragile State

Lenin's dictum about the absurdity of distinguishing internal and foreign policy has a grim pertinence to Moldova. In contrast to the Baltic states, which lost their independence under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, most of the territory that forms modern Moldova was detached from Romania by that very agreement. The exception, the sliver of territory on the left bank of the Dniester, joined to the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic by Stalin in 1940, had been part of the Russian Empire since 1792, but was established as a rump Soviet Moldovan republic in 1924 as part of a bid to annex the very Romanian territory ceded by Hitler 15 years later. When Moldova became an independent state in 1991, this left-bank territory, backed by Russian arms, reasserted its supposedly Russian character and established itself as the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. By guaranteeing Transnistria's de facto independence, whilst recognising Moldova's de jure borders, the Russian Federation has established a political, economic and military presence well to the west of its current border, astride the western border of Ukraine and inside Moldova itself. It also has made itself an indispensable party to any discussion about Moldova's future.

Faced with these realities, the Romanian authorities need to tread carefully. Yet they have not always done so. Any step that can be portrayed as Romanian 'irredentism' is used by Transnistria's bad cops to entrench their claim to independence and by Russia's good cops to press Chisinau to grant greater concessions. Hence, Transnistria's Foreign Minister on the 9 April: '[t]he current events have vividly demonstrated that our main task is to strengthen our own statehood' - and Lavrov the same day: if Moldova 'loses its identity, then the Transnistrians will have to decide independently what they are to do with their own future'. President Traian Basescu's 14 April call to facilitate mass distribution of Romanian passports to Moldovan citizens plays right into the hands of Romania's opponents.

The emerging situation is attractive to Russia in five ways. It strengthens the hand of Transnistria, deepens Voronin's dependency upon Moscow, drives wedges between Romania and its EU partners, takes the wind out of the sails of the EU's Eastern Partnership, and provides oblique support to Russia's 'privileged' claims in the former USSR. If Romania is entitled to protect its 'co-nationals' in Moldova, how can Russia be denied similar rights in its 'near abroad'?

For his part, Voronin has no wish to connive in a process that diminishes the EU, embitters Romania, rewards Transnistria's obduracy and strengthens Russia. But he will. He devoted his entire first term to enhancing Moldova's European prospects. Yet having willed the end, he could not bring himself to will the means: the dismantling of the opaque, economically debilitating, clan based relationships that maintain the system of power in the country. And the half-hearted policy of the EU hardly gave him much incentive. For Voronin, as for most of his post-Soviet counterparts, 'the question of power' has a way of overshadowing all others. In today's tough geopolitical climate, power depends on Moscow rather than Brussels, let alone an American administration 'resetting' relations with Russia on the basis of an agenda well removed from Europe. Yet power comes at a price. To pay for Medvedev's support, Voronin signed a declaration on 18 March that tore up almost three years of carefully crafted Moldovan policy on Transnistria. To guarantee a seamless succession, Voronin seems prepared to create new internal enemies and external ones as well.

Even if the EU awakens from its languor, it is unclear how it can reverse this latest step in a geopolitical shift underway since the Russia-Georgia war. As in Georgia, it is debateable whether Russia instigated the events that proved so useful to its purpose. But its exploitation of these events is not debateable, and its sense of purpose is increasingly hard to deny.