

THE IMPACT OF THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE IN 2014 ON MOLDOVA, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A HISTORIAN

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Abstract: *This paper is an in-depth analysis of Moldova's relations with Ukraine, Russia, the European Union (EU), and the United States (US) during the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 to show the serious political impact and consequences the crisis had on Moldova by further polarizing an already highly polarized Moldova, which has been largely ignored by scholars. Moldova's pro-EU, pro-Western government, the Coalition for Pro-European Governance (CEG), initialled the EU Association Agreement (AA) in Vilnius in November 2013, along with Georgia. In order to prevent Moldova from signing the association agreement, Russia has resorted to the economic weapon, threatening to block imports of food and beverages from the Republic of Moldova and to deport a large part of the 500,000 Moldovans working in Russia and bringing money to the state budget. Despite these threats, Moldova signed the association agreement with the European Union on June 27, this being ratified by the parliament on July 2, 2014. Russia later retaliated with the support of two pro-Russian political parties, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova and Renato Usatîi's "Patria" (Home-land) party. By their actions and official statements, these parties have embarrassed and continue to embarrass the pro-European and pro-Western policies of Moldova.*

Keywords: *Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, geopolitical dichotomy, EU Association Agreement, Eastern Partnership, Customs Union, Transnistria.*

Rezumat: Impactul crizei din Ucraina (2014) asupra Moldovei, din perspectiva unui istoric. *Lucrarea reprezintă o analiză aprofundată a relațiilor Moldovei cu Ucraina, Rusia, Uniunea Europeană și Statele Unite ale Americii în timpul crizei ucrainene din 2014, care arată impactul politic serios și consecințele pe care criza le-a avut asupra Moldovei, polarizând în continuare o țară deja extrem de polarizată, situație care a fost în mare parte ignorată de către cercetători. Guvernul pro-Uniunea Europeană și pro-occidental al Republicii Moldova format de Coaliția pentru Guvernare Proeuropeană, a inițiat la Vilnius în noiembrie 2013, împreună cu Georgia, Acordul de asociere cu Uniunea Europeană. Pentru a împiedica Moldova să semneze acordul de asociere, Rusia a recurs la arma economică, ame-*

nințând cu blocarea unor importuri de alimente și băuturi din Republica Moldova și cu deportarea unei mari părți a celor 500.000 moldoveni care lucrau în Rusia și aduceau bani la bugetul de stat. În ciuda acestor amenințări, Republica Moldova a semnat acordul de asociere cu Uniunea Europeană pe data de 27 iunie, ratificat de parlament pe 2 iulie 2014. Rusia a ripostat ulterior cu sprijinirea a două partide politice pro-ruse, Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova și partidul „Patria” a lui Renato Usatfi. Prin acțiunile și luările de poziție publice, aceste partide au stânjenit și stânjenesc în continuare cursul pro-european și pro-occidental al Republicii Moldova.

INTRODUCTION

For the past six years, a global hot spot has been the crisis in Ukraine. Caught up in the middle of all of this is the former Soviet Republic of Moldova. Moldova, both halves, is one of the three principal historical homelands of the Romanian people in the northeast Balkans on the European end of the Eurasian steppes, along with Wallachia, and Transylvania. Modern day Moldova, to its present Western border, the Prut River, was first conquered by the Russians in the early nineteenth century (renamed Bessarabia) and remained part of Tsarist Russia until the end of the First World War. United with Romania during the interwar years, Moldova was reconquered by the victorious Soviets toward the end of the Second World War and remained a part of the Soviet Union until the USSR collapsed in 1991, when an independent Republic of Moldova was proclaimed. The resulting fusion of Romanian roots with a century and a half of Russian-Soviet rule, along with a wide-variety of minorities speaking their own languages and fluid political frontiers over the centuries, has resulted in a polarized country. This paper is an in-depth analysis of Moldova's relations with Ukraine, Russia, the European Union (EU), and the United States (US) during the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 to show the serious political impact and consequences the crisis had on Moldova by further polarizing an already highly polarized Moldova, which has been largely ignored by scholars. To date scholars and publicists have dealt with particular aspects of Moldova during the Ukrainian crisis overlooking the political impact the crisis had on Moldova that this study intends to rectify.

BRIEF EXPLANATION ON MOLDOVA'S GEOPOLITICAL DICHOTOMY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

In order to understand Moldova's polarization a brief explanation of Mol-

dova's identity problem is necessary. "Who are the Moldovans" is a central question Charles King attempted to answer in his classical study *The Moldovans*.¹ Not surprising, being a new country, having only proclaimed independence in August 1991, Moldova has not yet developed its own distinct sense of national identity. According to Lucan Way, a scholar well-versed in Moldovan politics and history, Moldova has a confused, bipolar national identity, "divided between Russophile and more pro-European, Romanianist identities."² Because of Moldova's confusion over national identity, Oazu Nantoi, Moldovan political commentator, analyst, and politician, in an interview called Moldova "an artificial state."³ In the November 2017 Barometer of Public Opinion (BPO) poll of the Moldovan Institute of Public Policy almost 22% of the respondents said they would vote for Moldova's union with Romania while 33% of the respondents would vote for Moldova's union with Russia.⁴ A recent study of Moldova's national identity by Vladimir Baar and Daniel Jakubek concluded: "that there is no clear vision or political agreement in relation to national identity. The discourse of national identity is polarized between the theses of "Moldovanism" and "Romanianism," which are based on entirely different thoughts.... In the public domain these serve for political mobilization as well as for political agendas and political goals."⁵

Reflecting this dichotomy, Moldovans are divided over the country's geopolitical orientation. In a survey of Moldovans in 1998 by Jerry Hough and David Laitin roughly a third of Moldovans favoured closer ties to Russia, roughly a third opposed closer ties to Russia, and a third were neutral.⁶ Moldova is a classic example of a Janus-faced country, part of the population face east the other west. According to BOP polls taken during the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 about forty percent of the respondents support joining the Russian led Customs Union (CU), since

¹ Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*, Stanford, Hoover Institute Press, 2000, p. 5.

² Lucan Way, *Pluralism by Default*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, p. 3.

³ Tomasz Grzywaczewski and Tomasz Lachowski, *A Playground between the East and West*, Interview by Grzywaczewski and Lachowski, in "New Eastern Europe", no. 1 (2016), p. 94.

⁴ *POB: More Moldovans are for entry into EU than into Eurasian Union*, IPN Society, December 14, 2017, in www.ipn.md/en/arhiva/88231, accessed December 14, 2017.

⁵ Vladimir Baar and Daniel Jakubek, *Divided National Identity in Moldova*, in „Journal of Nationalism, Memory, and Language Politics”, 11 (1/2017), pp. 88, 82.

⁶ Ivan Katchanovski, *Cleft Countries: Regional Political Divisions and Cultures in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova*, Stuttgart, *ibidem*-Verlag, 2006, pp. 25, 181.

2015 the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), while about the same percentage support joining the European Union (EU).⁷ “In a time of multiculturalism, when nationalism is starting to prevail,” warned Baar and Jakubek, “the problem of national identity divided into two camps is very dangerous.”⁸ Moldova’s polarized identity provided Moldovan political parties a golden opportunity to win over their support. As Maia Sandu, the former Prime Minister of Moldova (June 2019–November 2019) and leader of the Party of Action and Solidarity explained: “It should come as no surprise that parties have long internalized this ethno-political cleavage and are exploiting it to the full extent ever since.”⁹ According to Baar and Jakubek “the main factor in the formation of political parties is the antagonism of national identity.”¹⁰

MOLDOVA AND THE EU ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT

The attention of the media at the Eastern Partnership meeting of the EU in Vilnius on November 28–29, 2013, centered on Ukrainian’s President Viktor Yanukovich’s sudden, unexpected refusal to sign the long, contentiously negotiated EU Association Agreement (AA), and within it the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement (DCFTA). Yanukovich, a powerful, wealthy, corrupt Ukrainian oligarch, was under intense pressure from both the EU and Russia to either sign the AA and become more closely tied to the EU or not sign and join Vladimir Putin’s Customs Union (CU). Although the EU stressed that the AA was essentially a geo-economic agreement, it was abundantly clear that it was geopolitical as well. A week before the meeting in Vilnius, Russian threats of a severe reduction in Ukrainian exports to Russia finally forced Yanukovich to cave in. Although Yanukovich only agreed not to sign the AA in his bargain with the Russians not join the CU, several hours after his refusal to sign became public in Vilnius demonstrators began milling around in central Kiev’s Maidan (Independence

⁷ For an excellent recent study of polarization and the danger to democracies internationally see, Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue, eds., *Democracies Divided, The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2019.

⁸ Baar and Jakubek, *Divided National Identity*, p. 84.

⁹ Maia Sandu, *What Next for a Divided Moldova?* in „Moldovan Politics”, November 29, 2015, <http://moldovanpolitics.com/2015/11/29/what-next-for-a-divided-moldova/> accessed November 30, 2017.

¹⁰ Baar and Jakubek, *Divided National Identity*, p. 89.

Square), the site of the Orange Revolution in 2004. Popular discontent with Yanukovich had been growing for several years; his refusal to sign the AA was “the last straw.” Ironically, Yanukovich had lost his first bid to become Ukrainian’s president in the hotly disputed 2004 elections, as a result of the Orange Revolution; ten years later lightning struck again-Orange Revolution 2!

Unlike Ukraine, Moldova’s pro-EU, pro-Western government, the Coalition for Pro-European Governance (CEG), initialed the AA in Vilnius in November 2013, along with Georgia. For Moldova, the timing could not have been better. Suddenly, Moldova was bathing in the limelight of a grateful EU and Western media for standing up to the Russians. “Tiny” Moldova now became the “poster child” of the EU’s shaky Eastern Partnership. The refusal of Yanukovich to sign the AA was a tough setback for the EU in its bitter zero-sum game with Putin. Moldova and Georgia provided a fall back. German Chancellor Angela Merkel lauded the initialling by Moldova and Georgia “a very brave step,” while Jose Manuel Barroso, European Commission president, hailed it “an important milestone-it marks the start of a new phase in our relationship.”¹¹ Moldova’s enhanced status “was implicitly acknowledged” by a “brief, but high profile” visit by US Secretary of State John Kerry two weeks later. To drive the point home, Kerry skipped a long-anticipated visit to Kiev to fly to Chişinău to offer congratulations for initialling the AA.¹² The sting of Vilnius made the EU and the US all the more determined to prevent the Eastern Partnership countries, including Moldova, from succumbing to Russian pressure and hegemony.

Not everyone was happy about the Moldovan government initialling the AA. In spite of Putin’s “jubilation” in keeping Yanukovich from signing the AA and the Russian media proclaiming we “won,” Moldova, like Ukraine, also came under strong pressure by Moscow not to sign. In addition to the usual assortment of stepped up propaganda and threats of territorial dismemberment, in September 2013 Russia banned Moldova wine exports to Russia on allegedly “health grounds,” reverting to the strong-arm tactic on Moldovan wine the

¹¹ *EU chides Russia, Moscow claims win*, in „Deutsche Welle News”, November 29, 2013, <http://www.dw.com/en/eu-chides-russia-moscow-claims-win/a-17262037>, accessed February 22, 2017. *Opening remarks by President Barroso at initialing ceremony of the Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova*, European Commission -PRESS RELEASES, November 29, 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-996_en.htm. See also Dominik Tolksdorf, *Die Ostliche Partnerschaft nach dem Vilnius Gipfel November 2013*, in „Sudosteuropa Mitteilungen”, 53 (6/2013), pp. 70-84.

¹² Congressional Research Service, Steven Woehrel, *Moldova: Background and U.S. Policy*, April 23, 2014, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21981.pdf>.

Kremlin used from 2005-2007. To aid Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe, the EU finally abolished its restrictions on Moldovan wine entering the EU, but Russia still remained the main market for Moldovan wine.¹³ Moldova's reaction to the initializing of the AA reflected the country's increasingly polarized society. Opposing the pro-EU, Pro-Western CEG government, the opposition Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), dwarfing the rest of the opposition in size, took the lead. The Communists led opposition demanded that the AA be renegotiated, with Russia and Transnistria also invited to participate, or the country would suffer "serious economic, political, and cultural consequences." Also, the opposition insisted that the renegotiated agreement would need to be approved by Moldovans in a referendum. Not surprising, the Moldovan government "strongly criticized" the proposal. Ironically, Vladimir Voronin, the head of the PCRM and former president of Moldova, took the first serious steps to tie Moldova into the EU, topped off with the signing of a three-year Moldova-EU Action Plan in February 2005, as a result of his falling out with Putin.¹⁴ By the end of Voronin's first term in office in 2005, European integration ranked as the primary goal of the Communist government.

TRANSNISTRIA, A GREAT GEOPOLITICAL TOOL OF RUSSIA AGAINST MOLDOVA

When Voronin and the PCRM first came to power in February 2001, East-West relations were still fluid and collaborative enough on some issues to convince Voronin he could reach a solution with Putin to reintegrate Transnistria, the breakaway, unrecognized, self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR), with Moldova that would be agreeable to both Moscow and Chişinău. Especially tricky was the "near abroad," made up of independent states formally part of the Soviet Union, where Russia claimed a "privileged interest." This included Moldova. At the time Voronin took over the reins of government in Moldova, another sensitive issue involving Moldova, Russia, and Transnistria, going back to

¹³ Tessa Dunlop, *Why Russian wine ban is putting pressure on Moldova*, BBC News, November 21, 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24992076, accessed November 24, 2016; Denis Cenuşă and others, *Russia's Punitive Trade Policy Measures towards Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia*, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) Working Document, no. 400 (September 2014), <http://regulation.gov.ru/project/17072html>.

¹⁴ Paul D. Quinlan, *A Foot in Both Camps: Moldova and the Transnistrian Conundrum from the Kozak Memorandum*, in „East European Quarterly”, 42, no. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 135-136.

the early 1990s, appeared to reach a settlement. In November 1999, at the Istanbul summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Russians finally agreed to a compromise whereby they would remove their troops, weapons, and munitions from Transnistria by the end of 2002. Despite numerous delays, as 2003 was coming to a close, with several stages still left, the Istanbul accord appeared a success. Enter the Kozak Memorandum!

In November 2003, Voronin stood on the verge of accomplishing his long-promised goal to reunite Moldova and Transnistria by signing the Kozak Memorandum, drawn up by Dmitry Kozak, a top adviser to Putin at Voronin's request, which would create an asymmetrical federated Moldovan-Transnistrian republic. But with the late addition to the memorandum by the Russians allowing them to keep their troops in Transnistria until 2020, having already conceded to giving Transnistria and Găgăuzia considerable autonomy and a veto that had the potential of leading to dire consequences for the functioning of the Moldova state, Voronin began to have second thoughts about signing the memorandum. He also came under intense pressure from EU and US officials not to sign. At the last minute, as Putin was getting ready to board his plane in Moscow to fly to Chişinău to witness the signing, Voronin refused to sign. According to William Hill, the head of the OSCE mission to Moldova at the time, the "Kozak Memorandum and the manner in which the process played out did near-irreparable damage to the fraternal relationship between Moscow and Chişinău." Putin was furious. For the Russians, it was not only "a personal affront to their president" but also "a denial of Russia's right to play an independent political and diplomatic role in a part of the world that had been theirs exclusively." For many Russian politicians and analysts, these events "remain an early and important part of a pattern they claim to discern in Western behaviour, which they find to be evidence of an internal campaign to weaken Russia and displace its influence even in Russia's neighbours, former imperial possessions, and traditional friends."¹⁵ The fiasco of the Kozak Memorandum also brought an end to Russia's willingness to complete the Istanbul accord. On the heels of the Kozak Memorandum, the Rose Revolution in Georgia (November 2003), the Orange Revolution in

¹⁵ William H. Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad, and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, XII, p. 161. An excellent study of the Kozak Memorandum and the events surrounding it. Fedor Lukyanov, *Konservatory i revizionisty* [Conservatives and revisionists], *Gazeta.ru*, July 30, 2015, <http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/lukyanov/7662353.shtml>, accessed July 28, 2016.

Ukraine (December 2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (April 2005), a zero-sum option tragically settled in as the only solution for rectifying major geopolitical disagreements between East and West.

Toward the end of February 2014, as the clashes between the Maidan protesters and the authorities became more violent and riot police began deserting their posts, Yanukovych fled Ukraine. Although Yanukovych was the democratically elected president, the US and the EU were jubilant when he fled. Prior to this, the EU and the US tried to work out a compromise settlement between Yanukovych and the protestors but to no avail. For Putin, the above events called for a bold stroke similar to Georgia in 2008. Over the next several weeks, Russian troops, in unmarked uniforms, took over the Crimea. This was quickly followed on March 16 by a dubious 96 percent referendum vote declaring separation from Ukraine. The next morning the Crimean Parliament requested "accession" to the Russian Federation, which was duly granted by the Kremlin on March 18.

The Moldovan government was especially worried with the country's entire northern, eastern, and southern frontier bordering Ukraine, including a sizable part under the control of Transnistria. With the takeover of Crimea, Russia became almost a neighbour of Moldova. The Moldovan government sympathized with the Maidan protesters and publicly criticized Russia's taking over the Crimea, but many Moldovans did not agree reflecting the country's polarization. According to the March-April 2014 BPO poll, to the question do you support the Maidan protesters in Ukraine, 37 percent of the respondents said yes while 36 percent said no, with 18 percent supporting the protesters "to a small extent." To the question, do you support incorporating Crimea into Russia, 40 percent answered yes and 43 percent no.¹⁶ Although census figures show Moldovans make up 76 percent of the population, and the official language of the country is Moldovan (a dialect of Romanian), the population speak Moldovan or Russian or both, helping to explain why the Russian mass media, especially television, plays such an influential role in Moldova. According to the above poll, the chief source of information for the Moldovan population is television, with a whopping 82 percent rating.¹⁷ The same poll rated the mass media as the second most trusted institution in the country with a rating of 61 percent, surpassed only by the church's 85 percent, and among the mass media television has the highest trust rating.¹⁸ Next to the Moldovan me-

¹⁶ Institutul de Politici Publice, *Barometer of Public Opinion*, March-April 2014, pp. 85, 89.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 30. According to polls, 80 percent of Moldovans are Orthodox Christians.

dia, the Russian mass media is the most trusted in Moldova, especially among minority groups, adding to the sharply contrasting political views of Moldova's population.¹⁹ Transnistria's media also adds to the anti-EU, anti-West spin on current events.

Transnistria has been the dominant threat to Moldova's territorial integrity since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Transnistria was not part of the historical homelands of the Romanian people. In Tsarist time, Bessarabia only extended to the western banks of the Dniester River, although many Romanian settled in territory east of the river, often referred to as Transnistria over the centuries. In the 1920s, Moscow sliced off a long sliver of land along the eastern banks of the Dniester River from Ukraine, officially dubbed it the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), as a jumping-off point for the eventual Soviet takeover of Moldova from Romania. Looped onto the rest of Moldova at the end of World War II, the MASSR (Transnistria), reflexing its highly diverse cultural and ethnical historical background, developed into Moldova's industrial heartland.²⁰ In 1990, the Russian Transnistrian elite, with their dominance endangered with the emergence of Moldovan sovereignty concurrent with the rise of a Moldovan elite, were able to hang on to popularity and power in Transnistria. In the spring of 1992, thanks to massive amounts of Russian military equipment and direct intervention in the fighting by the Russian 14th Army stationed around Tiraspol, Transnistria succeeded in holding onto its de facto independence. Today much of the population still work in heavy industry, unlike in agriculture on the other side of the Dniester.

Encouraged by Russia's swift, forceful takeover of Crimea, on March 17, the day after allegedly 97 percent of Crimean voters supported Crimea joining Russia, the Transnistrian parliamentary speaker, Mikhail Burla, went to Moscow with a request to join the Russian Federation as well. Drawing on the Crimean referendum as justification, Burla pointed to Transnistria's similar vote in 2006 that also claimed a 97 percent vote favouring accession to Russia! To join the Russian Federation, in April the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet formally asked the Russian government "to recognize the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic as a sovereign independent state," to be followed by Transnistria's accession to Russia.²¹ To further

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁰ King, *The Moldovans*, chaps. 4, 5.

²¹ *Obrashcheniia Verkhovnogo Soveta PMR k Prezidentu, Gosdume, Sovetu Federatsii RF, OON, OBSE, Prezidentu PMR* [Appeals of the Supreme Council of the TMR to the President, State Duma, RF Federation Council, UN, OSCE, President of the TMR], Sait

justify joining Russia, Burla argued that the Moldovan authorities had introduced “restrictive economic measures” against Transnistria and that the Association Agreement posed a potential economic threat to Transnistria’s “living standards.”²² To show Transnistria’s “massive” support for accession, the Transnistrian nongovernmental organization (NGO), Soiuz russkikh obshchin (Union of Russian Communities), collected over 185,000 signatures in two weeks for a petition urging Putin to recognize Transnistria’s independence. As the plane containing the lists of signatures, being personally carried to Moscow by Dmitrii Rogozin, deputy prime minister of the Russian Federation, stopped over in Chişinău, Moldovan authorities confiscated most of the lists after a search of the aircraft. Tiraspol also emphasized that Transnistria was part of “New Russia” (“Novorossiia”), name designating areas of the former Tsarist southern Russia conquered by Catherine the Great that Putin resurrected in 2014.

Given the geopolitical situation of Moldova and Ukraine, it was inevitable that Moldova would be caught up in the vortex of events in Ukraine in 2014. In March, Ukrainian authorities began cracking down on the entry of Transnistrians and Russian citizens from Transnistria along the lengthy Ukrainian-Transnistrian border fearing some intended to aid Ukrainian separatists. Transnistria’s exports also came under tighter border control, especially goods headed for Odessa, the hub for Transnistria’s international trade. Furious, both Russia and Transnistria denounced Ukraine as imposing a “blockade” against Transnistria, allegedly to “change the current format” or at “least make some major adjustment” to the “5+2” negotiation committee of the Moldovan-Transnistrian peace settlement, charged with maintaining peace and negotiating a final settlement between Moldova and Transnistria.²³ At the beginning of May, a bloody clash broke out in Odessa, a predominantly Russian speaking city, between pro-Russian and pro-Kievan demonstrators, with an assortment of local thugs on both sides, that left forty two dead. Moldovan and Ukrainian officials discovered

Verkhovnego Soveta Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki April 16, 2014. <http://www.vspmr.org/News/?ID=8843>, accessed September 21, 2014.

²² Virgiliu Bîrlădeanu, *The Annexation of Crimea and the Secessionist War in Eastern Ukraine: A View from the Republic of Moldova*, in “Sudosteuropa”, 62 (3/2014), p. 364.

²³ Sergey Markedonov, *3 reasons why Moldova could become the next Ukraine*, in “Russia Direct”, April 21, 2014, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/3-reasons-why-moldova-could-become-next-ukraine>. The committee was made up of Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which chair’s the negotiation process. In 2005 the EU and the US were added, but with the status of “observers.”

that armed agents from Transnistria not only had been trying to destabilize Odessa but also involved in attempted assassinations.²⁴ In spite of the potential damage to Transnistrian-Ukrainian relations, which Transnistria's basket case economy could ill afford, the seemingly endless procession of "freedom fighters" from Transnistria to southern Ukraine continued throughout the spring and summer of 2014. Among them were such local luminaries as Vladimir Antyufeyev, a creator of the Transnistrian KGB, who became the deputy prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) between July and September, along with two of his colleagues from the ministry of state security, Andrey Pinchuk and Oleg Bereza, also appointed to high positions in the DPR, and Alexander Karaman, vice president of Transnistria 1991-2001. Speculation also abounded about Crimea and Odessa being part of Putin's "New Russia" scheme to connect Transnistria with Russia via southern Ukraine, creating a "corridor" cutting Ukraine off from the Black Sea. On the positive side of Russia's takeover of Crimea for Moldova, Moldovan-Ukrainian relations rapidly warmed, which had been perennially lukewarm at best, ultimately giving the young Moldovan republic more control of its own borders.

At the time, few in the West believed Putin would be satisfied just annexing Crimea. Several days after Crimea's accession to Russia, and Transnistria's similar request, US Air Force General Philip Breedlove, both US European commander and NATO's supreme allied commander, warned the German Marshall Fund that Russia has amassed a "very sizable" force on the eastern Ukrainian border and is "very ready" to make a "run" to Transnistria, and "that is very worrisome."²⁵ A G7

²⁴ Simion Ciochină and Robert Schwartz, *Das explosive Erbe der Sowjetzeit*, in "Deutsche Welle News", December 1, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/de/das-explosive-erbe-der-sowjetzeit/a-18886510>, accessed May 21, 2016; Kamil Calus, *The Ukrainian Crisis: A New Context for a Transnistrian Settlement*, in "Turkish Policy Quarterly", 13 (Fall 2014), pp. 71-78; *Grenades Found in Odesa on Anniversary of Deadly Clash*, RFE/RL, May 2, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/odesa-ukraine-commemoration-grenades/27711221.html>, accessed May 8, 2016. According to officials of the Moldovan Prosecutor-General's Office money was the "main incentive" for Moldovans to fight on the side of the Russian backed separatists in Ukraine in 2014, who were hired as mercenaries by Russian backed separatists and paid in Russian rubles. *Moldova Indicts, Sentences Individuals Who Fought as Mercenaries in Ukraine*, RFE/RL, February 12, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/moldova-mercenaries-fighting-in-ukraine-sentenced/27549194.html>, accessed February 16, 2016.

²⁵ Adrian Croft and Aleksandar Vasovic, *NATO commander warns of Russian threat to separatist Moldova region*, "World News", March 24, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-idUSBREA2M09920140324>, accessed November 25, 2016.

group meeting of industrial nations was “hastily convened” for the next day. In Washington, President Obama met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Ukraine also feared that Russia might be planning on using Transnistria as a staging ground to invade Ukraine.²⁶ A recent study shows that the Transnistrian army had “considerable military potential”: a roughly 7,500 Russian trained military force, plus various paramilitary units, along with about 2,500 members of the Russian military, 400 as peacekeepers.²⁷ Russia had also launched a new military exercise near Ukraine’s border shortly before involving 8,500 artillery men.²⁸ “Moldova’s fate, or maybe even its existence as a sovereign state, is literally hanging in the balance,” warned Dimitri Trenin.²⁹ Although Transnistria was now the center of attention, others speculated that Putin had southeastern Ukraine in his sights with its sizable Russian speaking population and directly bordering Russia. Ironically, much of the speculations about Putin’s future goal seemed to see him as following some kind of a blueprint, and not as a practitioner of Realpolitik, a tough, shrewd statesman with many arrows in his quiver and ready to pick the one best suited for the moment, which also included doing nothing. Polls in recent years have no longer ranked unification with Transnistria a dominant issue for Moldovans. In the March-April 2014 BOP poll, to the question of ranking priorities for Moldova, the settlement of the Transnistrian conundrum tied for sixth out of eleven options.³⁰ Evidently, one reason why the Moldovan government still rated settling the Transnistrian dispute a top priority was pressure from the EU, determined to avoid another Cyprus.

Moscow’s bold gambits involving Transnistria during the winter and spring of 2014 forced the Moldovan government to formulate “more reserved policies”

²⁶ Marcin Kosienkowski, *Ukraine and Transnistria: A Troubled Borderland*, in „New Eastern Europe” (September 29, 2014), <http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1342-ukraine-and-transnistria-a-troubled-borderland>, accessed November 14, 2016.

²⁷ Klemens Buscher, *The Transnistria Conflict in Light of the Crisis over Ukraine*, in Sabine Fischer (ed.), *Not Frozen!*, Berlin, SWP Research Paper, September 2016, pp. 31-32, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2016PO9_fhs.pdf.

²⁸ Ari Rusila, *Pridnestrovie and Gagauzia in the Context of Ukraine*, in “Voltaire Network”, April 4, 2014, <http://www.voltairenet.org/article183141.html>, accessed November 25, 2016.

²⁹ Dmitri Trenin, *Russian-Western Confrontation: Prepare for a Long Haul*, Carnegie Moscow Center, April 4, 2014, <http://carnegie.ru/2014/04/04/russian-western-confrontation-prepare-for-long-haul/h72z>, accessed April 16, 2014; Pal Kolsto, *Transnistria is a bridge too far for Russia*, oDR, June 11, 2014, www.opendemocracy.net/odrussia/pal-kolsto/Transnistria, accessed May 5, 2016.

³⁰ *Barometer of Public Opinion*, March-April 2014, p. 23.

towards the EU and the West.³¹ As usual, the US strongly backed Moldova, although it centred primarily around economic aid and programs to further Moldova's democratic development. Moldova's road to democracy has had its ups and downs; in 1999, President Clinton described Moldova "as a model" of democracy in Eastern Europe. Not considered crucial strategically, in the spring of 2014, Moldova's geopolitical significance suddenly shot up as a result of the widespread fear that Russia intended to grab the entire Ukrainian Black Sea littoral.³² To the beginning of March 2014, the US gave Moldova over 1 ½ billion dollars in aid. In 2012, the US Congress upgraded Moldova's trade with the US to the status of "normal trade relations" by exempting Moldova from the old Cold War Jackson-Vanik amendment. In March 2014, Prime Minister Iurie Leancă visited Washington, where he met with President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden and other high US government officials, making clear that his government was "deeply concerned" with the situation in Ukraine. "We are in a very difficult situation," Leancă told Bloomberg News.³³ In addition to the US promising Moldova more aid under a ray of programs, along with trying to restore stability to the region, the US reiterated its pledge of strong support for Moldovan membership in the EU. For a small country, somewhat out of the way, the coming and going of high governmental officials between Washington and Chişinău seems rather surprising. At the end of March 2014, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland visited Chişinău again, followed by a sizable US Congressional delegation, including Senator John McCain, who, several weeks before, had called for "faster integration of Georgia and Moldova" into NATO.³⁴ In May, Vlad Filat, the head of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Moldova's largest pro-Western party, visited Washington.

³¹ *Moscow's aggression forced Government of Moldova to formulate more reserved policies, opinion*, IPN Politics, January 14, 2017, <http://www.ipn.md/en/politica/81526>, accessed January 14, 2017.

³² Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014: Is Moldova Next?* May 6, 2014, www.worldcat.org/title/georgia-2008-ukraine-2014-is-moldova-next-may-6-2014-briefing-of-the-commission-on-security-and-cooperation-in-europe/oclc/921883199, accessed July 7, 2016. Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018, p. 405.

³³ *U.S. offers over \$7m in transition assistance to Moldova*, in „Moldova's news”, March 4, 2014, <http://www.allmoldova.com/en/moldova-news/1249057741.html>, accessed March 4, 2014; Palash Ghosh, *To Russia With Fear: Ukraine's Tiny, Impoverished Neighbor Moldova Also Worries About Moscow's Incursions*, in „International Business Times”, March 6, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/russia-fear-ukraine-tiny-impoverished-neighbor-moldova-also-worries-about-moscows-1559887>, accessed January 17, 2017.

³⁴ McCain, *Wants Faster NATO Integration of Georgia, Moldova*, RFE/RL, March 12, 2014,

As in the past, Russia turned down Transnistria's plea for accession; Russia apparently gave no answer at all. The TMR could do virtually nothing about Russia's decision. Due to Russia, Transnistria *de facto* statehood continues to exist. For Putin, the TMR is a pawn in Russia's zero-sum game with the West over ultimate control of the "near abroad." Leaving Transnistria in its "frozen" state is central to Putin's overall strategy of establishing Russia's sphere of influence over all of Moldova, perhaps by updating the Kozak Memorandum. In a recent article, Klemens Buscher pointed out that "Moscow appears to exercise decisive influence in questions of strategic importance, while leaving other matters largely to the local actors."³⁵ In 2014, Moldovans numbered 32 percent of Transnistria's population, Russians 30 percent, and Ukrainians 29 percent.³⁶ Transnistria has a semi-authoritarian presidential regime and is dependent economically and financially on Russia to keep the country afloat.³⁷ In spite of the cost to Russia of providing Transnistria, in essence, with free natural gas, numerous Russian financial and social services to help keep the Tiraspol government and military running and Transnistria on a par with the living standards in the rest of Moldova, or higher, along with overlooking local corruption, and the almost complete lack of foreign direct investments in the TMR, except by Russians, Russia feels the gamble worth it.³⁸

**RUSSIA, MOLDOVA'S ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT WITH THE EU
AND THE RISE OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY
OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA (PSRM)**

Hoping to prevent Moldova from signing the Association Agreement, since

<http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/25294893.html>, accessed March 30, 2014.

³⁵ Buscher, *Transnistria Conflict*, p. 30.

³⁶ Ministry of Economic Development Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic, *Annual Report 2014*, <http://www.mepmr.org/pechatnye-izdaniya/statisticheskij-ezhegodnik-pmr>. For an interesting article on the different views of Transnistrians' and Moldovans' on a number of issues see John O'Loughlin and others, *Divided space, divided attitudes? Comparing the Republics of Moldova and Pridnestrovie (Transnistria) using simultaneous surveys*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 54 (April 2013), pp. 227-258.

³⁷ Kolsto, *Transnistria is a bridge*, oDR, June 11, 2014, www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/pal-kolsto/transnistria, accessed May 5, 2016.

³⁸ Kamil Calus, *An aided economy: The Characteristics of the Transnistrian economic model*, OSW Centre for Eastern Studies/Commentary, no. 108 (May 14, 2013), www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-05-16/aided-economy-characteristics-transnistrian-economic-model, accessed October 4, 2016.

the fall of 2013, Russia had intensified its efforts to destabilize the political situation in Moldova and cause the collapse of the pro-European coalition government. As in Transnistria, Russian policy also included making use of the pro-Russian attitude of the Gagauz by stoking fear of Moldova becoming part of Romania and the EU. The Gagauz are an Orthodox Christian, Turkic-speaking people numbering between 150,000-160,000 thousand, who finally agreed to become part of the Republic of Moldova in 1994 in return for special legal status as an Autonomous Territorial Unit within Moldova. Găgăuzia, or Gagauz Yeri (literally “the Gagauz Land”), is the poorest region of Moldova, with an agrarian economy heavily dependent on exports to Russia, especially wine, remittances from Russia, and Russian widely spoken. On February 2, 2014, the local Gagauzian authorities carried out two simultaneous referenda, which the Moldovan government declared illegal. In the first referendum, 98.5 percent of the Gagauz supported Moldova’s integration with the Russian Customs Union instead of the EU. In the second, 98 percent voted for Găgăuzia declaring its independence if Moldova and Romania unified. Local fear that Moldova would sign the Association Agreement acted as a catalyst for the referenda, which the Russians took advantage of with propaganda and money. Certainly, Russian policy of stirring up Gagauz’ fear of Moldova unifying with Romania played a role in these events, but according to Kamil Calus, a discerning observer of Moldovan politics, the real reason to hold the referenda appeared to be “linked to a power struggle” between the two dominant Gagauz political factions that saw it as an opportunity to weaken the other.³⁹

Moldova’s precarious position continued well into the spring until it became clear that Russia’s military strategy focused primarily on south-eastern Ukraine. Undoubtedly, expressing the sentiment of many pro-Western Moldovans, in a press interview while in Washington Vlad Filat stated: “We have many challenges and most of these challenges involve pressure from Russia.”⁴⁰ On April 28, the EU abolished the visa requirement for Moldovans to travel in the Schengen zone, a

³⁹ Kamil Calus, *Gagauzia: growing separatism in Moldova?*, OSW Commentary, (March 10, 2014), <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-03-10/gagauzia-growing-separatism-moldova>, accessed November 24, 2016; *Gagauziya vozobnovila postavki vina v Rossiya*, REGNUM.ru, March 25, 2014, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1782456.html>, accessed February 18, 2016.

⁴⁰ Josh Rogin, *Is This Putin’s Next Target?*, in „The Daily Beast”, May 23, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/23/is-this-putin-s-next-target.html>, accessed November 11, 2014.

long, sought after goal of Moldova's pro-EU coalition government. This made Moldova the first member state of the six EU Eastern Partnership states granted this concession. According to the March-April BPO poll, abolishing the visa requirement was generally supported by Moldovans. In response to the questions will you travel more often to the EU and why, 40 percent of the respondents said "for sure," or "probably," with 61 percent saying for tourism, followed by 42 percent to visit parents, and 41 percent to work.⁴¹ To the question is the abolishment of the visa requirement important for you personally, 50 percent of the respondents replied "very important" or "important."⁴² Also 35 percent of the respondents gave the Moldovan government credit for getting the EU to abolish the visa requirement, including a sizable percentage of most minority groups.⁴³ An additional attestation of the popular backing for abolishing the visa requirement was the volte-face of the PCRM, which had criticized the government for trying to abolish the visa requirement only to jump on the winning bandwagon after the EU gave its approval.

Despite Russia's deepening military involvement in southeastern Ukraine, during the spring and into the summer of 2014, Russian pressure continued unabated to stop Moldova from signing the Association Agreement. A number of high Russian officials warned Moldova of the "severe consequences" if they signed, along with raising the possibility of deporting many of the roughly 500,000 Moldovan migrant workers in Russia, which would have been a crippling blow to Moldova's economy since the money they sent back home amounted to roughly 25 percent of Moldova's GDP.⁴⁴ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov bluntly warned Chişinău that joining the EU would end any chance of getting Transnistria back.⁴⁵ Russia's geopolitical arsenal also included the use of gas pricing for political purposes, and Moldova's almost complete dependency on Russian gas made Moldova an easy target that Russia had taken advantage of in the past. Although well over half of Moldova's exports in 2014 went to the EU, followed by Ukraine,

⁴¹ *Barometer of Public Opinion*, March-April 2014, pp. 70-71.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Country Report Moldova*, 1st Quarter (2015), p. 32.

⁴⁵ Lavrov justified his view by claiming that "if Moldova is changing its military-political status...from neutral, the Transnistrians have the full right to decide their future on their own, and we'll defend this basic position." *Lavrov threatened Moldova with separation*, „WORLD, Mirror Weekly”, October 20, 2014, <http://www.mw.ua/WORLD/Lavrov-threatened-moldova-with-separation-188.html>, accessed August 9, 2017.

with Russia third with 18 percent, the bulk of Moldovan exports to Russia consisted of agricultural products, many perishable, with wine accounting for 28 percent of Moldova's agricultural exports to Russia.⁴⁶ In addition to Russia, Moldova's beleaguered government was faced with the challenges of the country's own internal problems, many of the government's own making, especially with parliamentary elections scheduled for November 2014.

The debate over signing the AA epitomized Moldova's polarized electorate with both the pro-EU and the pro-Customs Union respondents tied with each side getting 41 percent of the vote according to the March-April 2014 BPO poll.⁴⁷ Looking back to 2011, the March-April 2014 poll must have been especially disappointing for EU supporters-in the May 2011 BPO poll 64 percent of the respondent favoured joining the EU.⁴⁸ In analysing the EU's poor showing in the March-April BPO poll, critics, including the EU, placed much of the blame on the Moldovan government for having "done a poor job... of explaining the advantages of European integration to average Moldovans in rural areas," along with combating widespread misinformation.⁴⁹ Consequently, the EU sponsored a caravan, called "Europe for Everyone," to travel to a number of areas of Moldova from the end of April to July informing the locals of the benefits of European integration by setting up information tents in the centre of town and sponsoring public debates involving local leaders.⁵⁰ Along the same lines, the Liberal Reformist Party (PLR) also traveled around Moldova informing the locals about the AA and the EU under the slogan "I'm European."⁵¹ The Ministry of Education organized a thematic week, "Lets discover Europe," and encouraged educational institutions to organize activities

⁴⁶ Dunlop, *Why Russian wine ban*, BBC News, November 21, 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24992076, accessed November 24, 2016.

⁴⁷ *Barometer of Public Opinion*, March-April 2014, p. 62.

⁴⁸ *Barometrul Opiniei Publice*, Mai 2011, p. 122. See also Paul D. Quinlan, *Moldova's Slow, Tortuous Transition to Democracy as Seen from the Bottom Up*, in „Journal of Eurasian Studies”, 4, no. 2 (April-June 2012), p. 77. www.federatio.org/joes.html.

⁴⁹ Robert Coalson, *Tiny Moldova Faces Its East-West Moment of Truth*, RFE/RL, April 23, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/25359464.html>, accessed May 30, 2014.

⁵⁰ *EU launches 'Europe for Everyone' caravan*, in „Moldova's news”, April 30, 2014, <http://www.allmoldova.com/en/moldova-news/1249058121.html>, accessed April 30, 2014; *Reintegration of Transnistria implies acceptance of compromises, opinion*, “Moldova's news”, May 21, 2014, <http://www.allmoldova.com/en/moldova-news/1249058239.html>, accessed May 24, 2014.

⁵¹ *PLR campaign 'I'm European' covered 300 settlements*, in „Moldova's news”, April 30, 2014, <http://www.allmoldova.com/en/moldova-news/1249058127.html>, accessed April 30, 2014.

along the same line.⁵² For the pro-Western Moldovan government, it was too little too late to seriously counterbalance the “huge information campaign” Moscow organized in promoting the Customs Union, which had been going on since the summer of 2013.⁵³

In spite of the potentially dire consequences, the Moldovan government signed the AA on June 27, followed by parliament’s ratification on July 2, with a vote of 59 in favour in the 101 seat parliament, a major step in what pro-Western Moldovans hope will be full membership in the EU. The PCRM protested by walking out of the assembly hall prior to the voting.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Russian pressure continued unabated. Not wasting any time, also on July 2, Moscow announced it would begin limiting its imports of Moldovan meat. This time Chişinău retaliated by “suspending the broadcasting license” of the Russian television news channel *Rossia-24* for six months, along with sanctioning four Moldovan broadcasters for airing programs from Russian stations.⁵⁵ Several weeks later Russia announced a ban on Moldovan fruits and berries, followed shortly after by adding canned vegetables to the list. In spite of Russia’s intense pressure on Moldova, including the threat of the loss of Transnistria, which Russia only wanted as a last resort, Putin’s overall policy toward Moldova failed to achieve its goal-to stop Moldova from moving closer to the West by signing the Association Agreement. Consequently, the Kremlin changed its tactics. With the Russian led offensive in South-eastern Ukraine coming to a standoff against the rapidly rejuvenated Ukrainian forces, and Putin’s dashed hopes of having the Ukrainian prize snatched from his hands after having beaten out the EU not long before, the need to prevent Moldova from also slipping into the arms of the EU must have been intense. Utilizing the upcoming Moldovan parliamentary elections to derail the pro-EU government, Russia’s new policy centred around supporting those political parties that favoured joining the Customs Union, especially the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM). It was a risky gamble to say the least.

⁵² *Pro-European flash mob meeting at Chişinău Lyceum ‘Gheorghe Asachi*, „Moldova’s news”, April 30, 2014, <http://www.allmoldova.com/en/moldova-news/1249058125.html>, accessed April 30, 2014.

⁵³ *Moldovan Foreign Minister Says Ukraine Crisis Has Led to Reevaluation of CIS*, RFE/RL, April 19, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/25355432.html>, accessed May 30, 2014.

⁵⁴ *Association Agreement with EU ratified*, in „Moldova’s news”, July 2, 2014, <http://www.allmoldova.com/en/moldova-news/1249058371.html>, accessed July 4, 2014.

⁵⁵ Daisy Sindelar, *Moscow To Kyiv, Tbilisi, And Chişinău: EU Deals Will Cost You*, RFE/RL, July 6, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/25447256.html>, accessed July 15, 2014.

Before Igor Dodon and Zinaida Greceanii defected from the PCRM in 2011 and joined the PSRM, the PSRM was just one of numerous small political parties that dotted Moldova's political landscape, never even having enough votes to elect a single candidate to parliament since its founding in 1997. Luckily for Dodon and Greceanii, both former high-ranking members (Greceanii, prime minister) of Voronin's government, now at the helm of the tiny PSRM, Putin saw them as Russia's best hope for the November elections.⁵⁶ According to the March-April 2014 BPO poll, respondents to the question if parliamentary elections were held next Sunday, 24 percent said they would vote for the PCRM, but only 1 percent said the PSRM.⁵⁷ Asked the same question in the November 2014 BPO poll, with Russian now backing the PSRM, the PSRM jumped to ten percent, while the PCRM slipped to 21 percent.⁵⁸ Although PCRM, under Voronin, refused to vote for the AA and supported the Customs Union, because of his mercurial personality and checkered past, Voronin is not well liked or trusted by Putin. Putin made no secret of his support for the avowedly pro-Customs Union, pro-Russian PSRM in the November Moldovan elections. At the beginning of November, Dodon and Greceanii went to Moscow for a highly publicized meeting with Putin. Subsequently, the Socialists used the photo op with the Russian leader, along with the phrase, "Together with Russia," for maximum political benefit by featuring it on their political billboards. The PSRM relied heavily on Putin's immense popularity in Moldova; their "trump card" as Moldovan freelancer Veaceslav Crăciun put it. Dodon also relied on his

⁵⁶ Shortly after Dodon defected from the PCRM the Socialists elected him chairman of the PSRM. Greceanii would eventually become president of the party after Dodon was elected president of Moldova in November 2016.

In 2000 Moldova became a parliamentary democracy making it clear that the prime minister was the head of the executive branch of the government and not the president, who was now to be elected by parliament and not by popular vote as previously. In April 2001, following a landslide electoral victory by the PCRM giving them a commanding seventy-one seats in the 101-seat parliament, the Communists elected their leader Voronin president of the republic. Voronin, who had tight control over the party, treating it as his own private fiefdom, preferred to use the title president instead of prime minister. For the office of prime minister, he simply filled it with one of his top lieutenants.

In 2009 a coalition of parties opposed to the Communist came to power forcing Voronin to step down as president. The new prime minister became the head of state per decree of parliament in 2000. In 2016, however, the Constitutional Court ruled the law adopted in 2000 unconstitutional reverting to the direct election of the president.

⁵⁷ *Barometer of Public Opinion*, March-April 2014, p. 48.

⁵⁸ *Barometrul Opiniei Publice*, Octombrie-Noiembrie 2014, p. 50.

“Russian friends” in helping him devise his strategy for the elections. How significant Russia’s involvement on the side of the PSRM would be for the Socialists in the election was a topic of much debate in the Moldovan media.⁵⁹ Some writers claimed Dodon was a “Russian agent.”

Adding to the intrigue of the upcoming parliamentary elections, billed as a “decisive election for the future of Moldova, absolutely and unquestionably,” was the entry of a new pro-Russian political party, “Patria” (Homeland), set up in April 2014 by political newcomer Renato Usatîi, a Moldovan who returned home after making his fortune in Russia. Usatîi conducted a Western-style campaign with his chief focus on fighting corruption and the political establishment, highlighted by concerts featuring some of Russia’s biggest pop stars like Iosif Kobzon. Critics labelled him a Russian tool and agent.⁶⁰ Usatîi’s popularity skyrocketed overnight. According to an unpublished poll by the US National Democratic Institute, 18 percent of the electorate said they would support him, while according to the November BPO poll, 10 percent said they would vote for Usatîi.⁶¹ In any case, suddenly Patria was scratched from the ballot. Several days before the elections, the Moldovan Central Election Commission asked that the party be removed from the race for using foreign (Russian) funds (\$530,000) in its campaign, which is illegal, but common in Moldova.⁶² The Appeals Court formally disqualified Patria the next day. The pro-Russian forces lambasted the government for its underhanded tactics, with the EU also sharing the blame, which the opposition saw working hand-in-hand with the government. Actually, the disqualification surprised and embarrassed the EU, suspecting the hand of the government being behind it. The degree of Russian involvement with Patria remains unanswered. The Moldovan government also came under sharp criti-

⁵⁹ Veaceslav Crăciun, ‘Euro-integrationists’ Dodon and Putin, IPN, November 5, 2014, <http://www.ipn.md/en/integrare-europeana/65566>, accessed November 5, 2014.

⁶⁰ Valentina Ursu and Robert Coalson, *East or West? Divided Moldova’s Tense Election Season Comes Down to The Wire*, RFE/RL, November 27, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/26713779.html>, accessed March 27, 2015.

⁶¹ Marc Champion, *Russia’s Project Moldova*, in „Bloomberg View”, November 24, 2014, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2014-11-24/russias-project-moldova>, accessed November 28, 2014.

⁶² Valentina Ursu, *East or West?*, RFE/RL, November 27, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/26713779>, accessed March 27, 2015; Zarina Alimbaeva, *Moldova’s Elections as Tug-of-War*, “Transitions Online (TOL)”, November 27, 2014, <http://www.tol.org/client/article/24581-moldovas-elections-as-tu>. Accessed December 2, 2014.

cism for ignoring perennial problems. Leading the list was the government's alleged stalling in the adoption and implementation of reforms, especially judicial reforms, according to many because the government itself was corrupt. Critics also attacked the government for the bitter infighting among the leaders of the member parties of the pro-Western coalition government, government scandals, and the endless low standard of living of many Moldovans, especially those living in rural areas where grinding poverty was common. In many ways, the Moldovan government was its own worst enemy.

While the PSRM were expected to do well in the November parliamentary elections, the winning of more votes than any other single political party was a surprise. The PSRM recorded 20.5 percent of the vote, giving them 25 seats in parliament, slightly better than the LDP that received 20.2 percent of the vote and 23 seats in parliament. The PCRM went from being the largest political party in Moldova to placing third with 17.5 percent of the vote. The PSRM picked up a sizable number of votes from the banned Patria, along with many former PCRM supporters. The "Russian factor," no doubt, was a crucial reason behind the PSRM success. Nevertheless, the pro-Western government (including the pro-Western Liberal Party) still managed to receive a plurality of the popular vote and 55 seats in parliament, a loss of 4 seats in parliament won in the previous parliamentary election in 2011, allowing the pro-Western parties to continue their control of parliament. In addition to the PCRM, the EU also suffered a setback, especially as the PSRM openly supported the Russian Customs Union, rejecting the EU, in spite of the enormous amount of money and effort the EU had spent on Moldova over the previous decade.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the unexpected size of the vote for the PSRM, making them the largest political party in Moldova, was a political "game changer," in that it marked not only the resurgence of the pro-Russian forces, but also a party led by a new pro-Russian political elite. Russia was a big winner. The Russians now have a political party they are counting on to eventually enable them to achieve a sphere of influence over Moldova, perhaps by updating the Kozak Memorandum, which they have referred to on a number of occasions since 2003 as the way to settle the Transnistrian conundrum. The Russians are no fools, and will adjust and differentiate their policies based on the reality of the situation on the ground at any given time. The PSRM is beholden to Russia, markedly more pro-Russian than

Voronin, as well as dependent on Russian support in the future. Concurrently, despite intense pressure and threats from Moscow and Moldovan pro-Customs Union supporters, the pro-EU Moldovan government stuck to its guns and signed the Association Agreement. By the end of 2014, with a rejuvenated pro-Customs Union party taking the lead, and the reenergized pro-EU forces after achieving a major victory with the signing of the Association Agreement, both sides were optimistic of their ultimate victory. As shown, the Ukrainian crisis had a serious impact on Moldova politically by further polarizing an already highly polarized Moldova. Polarization is dangerous, and should not be shrugged off as somewhat normal for a country, especially a new country, at least in the short run.

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