Moldova: towards the EU, despite the war

Description

More visible on the map of Europe since the accession to power of President Maia Sandu at the end of 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022, Moldova is striving to draw closer to the European Union and resist the destabilizing effects of war.

In addition to its European ambitions, demonstrated by the recognition on 23 June 2022 of its status as a candidate for membership, the country faces numerous challenges, both internal and external. In addition to the social unrest that has been exploited mainly by Russia – to the point of sometimes sparking political protest – there is the fear that the war raging in the neighboring country could spill over into Moldova. Since February 2022, Moldova has also shown unfailing solidarity with Ukraine, notably by allowing the most significant number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe to pass through its territory and by welcoming them.

A history of isolation

A landlocked country, Moldova shares its borders with Romania and Ukraine and has an international river port at Giurgiuleşti on the Danube, giving it access to the Black Sea. With a surface area of 33,700km² (comparable to that of the Normandy region – 30,100km²) and a resident population of 2.6 million (it is estimated that at least 900,000 Moldavans live outside the country's borders), Moldova has one of the most modest GDPs in Europe. Moldovans and Romanians make up 80% of the country's population, but the minorities present are varied: Ukrainians, Gagauz (an Orthodox Turkic-speaking people with their autonomous region), Russians, Bulgarians, Gypsies... The official language is Romanian, but Russian is still widely spoken.

Moldavia was formed in the 10th century between the Carpathians and the Black Sea, and it was Stefen Cel Mare (Stephen the Great) who consolidated this state in the 15th century against the Hungarians, Poles, Tatars, and Turks. From the outset, the country was a disputed area on the borders of the empires bordering the Black Sea. Moldavia's history has been deeply marked by foreign domination. In the 16th century, Moldavia was an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire before Austria annexed Bucovina, the original nucleus of Moldavia, in the 18th century. The Russo-Turkish wars at the end of the 18th century ended with the annexation of Bessarabia (comprising the territories of present-day Moldavia and the Ukrainian zone to the southeast, giving access to the Black Sea) by Russia in 1812. The province proclaimed its independence during the Russian Revolution of 1917, a short-lived independence as, a few months later, Bessarabia voted for union with Romania. In 1940, the region was ceded to the USSR under the German-Soviet Pact, then taken over by the Romanian army, a Nazi ally, in 1941, before falling into Moscow's hands at the end of the war, becoming one of the fifteen republics of the USSR under the name of Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR).

In 1991, independent Moldova had to deal with the declaration of independence by Transnistria, where, in 1924, the Soviet authorities had established an autonomous Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic under the Ukrainian SSR. After the Second World War, Transnistria became part of the Moldavian SSR. From December 1991 to July 1992, a war pitted the Moldovan army against the Transnistrian forces. It ended in a ceasefire, creating one of the many frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, Gagauzia, where the memory of the Romanian occupation is strong, threatens to secede, fearing a rapprochement between Chisinau and Bucharest.

In 1994, to secure its autonomy without arousing Russia's concerns and to avoid the risk of irredentism, Moldova enshrined neutrality in its Constitution (Article 11, paragraphs 1 & 2)(1).

Is the EU enough of an attraction?

Today, Moldova appears divided: while a large part of the urban and young population is in favor of the European project led by Maia Sandu, the neglected countryside, the older people, and specific territories historically and culturally favorable to Russia (Gagauzia) are contesting this project. Despite the threats posed by Russia in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and, even more, since 2022 with the invasion of neighboring Ukraine, this division persists. In February 2023, a poll showed that if a referendum had been held, 53.5% of those polled would have voted in favor of the country joining the EU, but 23.8% in favor of joining the Eurasian Economic Union, dominated by Moscow. 55.5% of those polled said they did not think the country should have joined NATO, and 52.2% said they were against a union with Romania. Although Maia Sandu's European project is gaining ground, public opinion is not unanimously in favor.

It is true that the deterioration of the economic situation, which is essentially the result of the war (energy supply difficulties, high inflation in particular), has primarily damaged the government's popularity. The few advances made on the European path (connection to the European electricity grid in March 2023, alignment with EU telephone roaming rules, for example) are still insufficient. And while Chisinau's organization of the European Political Community (EPC) summit on 1 June 2023 went some way towards celebrating Moldova's full membership of the European family, it was not enough to reassure Moldovans about a future they see as uncertain.

A country shaken by the war in Ukraine

Indeed, the consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine are far from insignificant for Moldova. First, the country had to cope with the end of its energy supplies from Ukraine (mainly gas) and the redirection of part of the flows from Romania. Electricity hooked up to the European grid, rapid though it was, came at a price not lost on Moldovan consumers. This has not prevented Moldova from showing unfailing solidarity in welcoming Ukrainians fleeing the war. By March 2022, the country had opened its doors to more than 200,000 displaced persons, 96,000 of whom were present (including 40,000 minors).

The war has reignited long-standing questions about Moldova, pitting supporters of a European future for the country (even if it means resolving the fate of Transnistria at a later date or even abandoning it to its fictitious independence) against advocates of closer ties with Moscow, arguing in particular against the risk of an attachment to Romania, which would lead to a loss of this identity. In the middle are those, often more moderate, who understand that Moldova's fate is partly linked to the war's outcome in Ukraine. While Russian troops have not succeeded in taking Odessa and linking up with Transnistria, which was Chisinau's greatest fear at the beginning of 2022, the uncertain outcome of the war argues in favor of a cautious policy to avoid escalation and reprisals.

Moldova is now at the crossroads of tensions: to the east and south, particularly in the Black Sea, war is raging, while Transnistria is keeping a low profile. In the west, Romania welcomes NATO troops to reinforce its eastern flank. In the Black Sea, the termination by Russia in July 2023 of the agreement allowing Ukrainian grain to leave the country could offer Moldova a compensatory role, thanks to the port of Giurgiuleşti, which could facilitate the passage of cargo from Ukraine to Romania. Russia, on the other hand, is stepping up its destabilizing, which has been overflown by Russian missiles on several occasions and has even inherited fallen debris. Chisinau (like Bucarest) is concerned about the recent increase in attacks on Ukrainian ports.

While Moldova remains committed to its neutrality, this does not prevent it from cooperating with NATO and welcoming the new interest shown in this pivotal country by Washington, Brussels, and European countries. With a budget that barely covers its current expenditure, the Moldovan army now has access to various forms of financial aid, such as the European Peace Facility (EPF) and national assistance. Economic support for the country follows the same logic, especially as Russia, in reaction to Chisinau's apparent support for Ukraine, is now imposing an embargo on imports of several Moldovan goods, including wine, a primary agricultural product.

Note:

(1) « Article 11: *The Republic of Moldova, a neutral State:§ 1 The Republic of Moldova proclaims its permanent neutrality. § 2 The Republic of Moldova does not admit the presence of military troops of other States on its territory*".

Thumbnail: 24 August 2023, Chisinau celebrates Ukraine's Independence Day (photo: website of the Presidency of the Republic of Moldova).

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Link to the French version of the article

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