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RUSSIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN MOLDOVA – A SENSITIVE ISSUE FOR THE FUTURE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN CHIȘINĂU AND MOSCOW

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The presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova are barely over, and the first divergences between the future President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu – on one hand, and the Kremlin administration – on the other hand, are already foreshadowed. Some statements by Sandu regarding the presence of Russian military troops, illegally stationed on the left bank of the Dniester, and which statements in fact reiterated Chisinau's official stance on this matter, as it was known before the Ion Chicu government, disturbed Moscow and provoked its negative reaction.

The statements of the president-elect Maia Sandu

Shortly after winning the presidential term on November 15, 2020, Maia Sandu, stated in an interview with the Ukrainian daily Evropeiskaya Pravda, that resolving the Transnistrian conflict presupposes the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Moldova. These statements by Sandu have immediately provoked negative reactions in Moscow. Russian officials have labeled the scenario proposed by the future president of the Republic of Moldova as a return to the year 1992, and as something to which those in Tiraspol will never agree. The outgoing president of the Republic of Moldova, Igor Dodon, also reacted to Maia Sandu's statements, which he stated were a serious mistake¹.

Later, on November 30, 2020, at a press conference, Maia Sandu came with clarifications of her position on the Russian military presence on the left bank of the Dniester. Asked by the NTV Moldova correspondent whether, as a president, she will opt for the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers, Sandu specified that the Russian army, deployed on the left bank of the Dniester, is divided into the Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria (OGRF), whose presence on the territory of the Republic of Moldova has no legal status, and the peacekeeping mission, stationed in the Transnistrian region in accordance with the Moldovan-Russian agreement of July 21, 1992. Sandu reiterated that OGRF troops must be withdrawn by Russia. She also expressed the position that as there has been no danger of a return to armed conflict for a long time now, the military peacekeeping mission should be transformed into a civilian one, under the auspices of the OSCE. Russia's Foreign Ministry and the Kremlin' have reacted negatively to these clarifications issued by Sandu, stressing that changing the status quo of the conflict could destabilize

¹ Dodon, despre declarația lui Sandu privind Transnistria: O mare greșeală. / Sputnik Moldova, 21.11.2020. / <https://ro.sputnik.md/moldova/20201121/32592754/dodon-declaratii-maia-sandu-transnistria.html>

the situation in the Transnistrian region². Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov allowed himself to label as "irresponsible" Maia Sandu's demands concerning the Russian troops on the left bank of the Nistru³.

History of the presence of Russian troops in the Republic of Moldova

The issue of the Russian army, stationed on the left bank of the Nistru, is an essential one for the political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. The transition from the military phase of the Transnistrian conflict to the post-conflict phase of regulation was kicked off by the signing of the Moldovan-Russian agreement of July 21, 1992. Article 4 of the agreement refers to the former 14th Soviet Army and stipulates that the status, order, and timing of the gradual withdrawal of the Russian army were to be determined during the negotiation process between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Moldova. In accordance with Article 2, par. 3 of the Agreement, a Russian military unit of the 14th Army was deployed in the Transnistrian region as part of the Joint Control Commission (JCC), and as a guarantor of compliance with the agreements of 21 July 1992.

The subsequent evolution of the Transnistrian issue will showcase the fact that, in this way, the Moldovan-Russian agreement of July 21 1992 legalized the stationing of a part of the former 14th Army on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, attributing to it a peacekeeping role, while the rest of the Russian army units (later transformed into OGRF), due to the ambiguity of Article 4 of the document, were not withdrawn by Russia, and they lack any official legal status for their deployment on the left bank of the Nistru.

Subsequently, Chişinău made several efforts to obtain from Moscow the withdrawal of its troops illegally stationed on the left bank of the Nistru. For example, on October 21, 1994, the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation signed the *Agreement on the legal status, procedure, and schedule for the withdrawal of military formations of the Russian Federation temporarily stationed on the territory of the Republic of Moldova*. It is a document with contradictory elements. On one hand, in accordance with point 2 of the Agreement, Russia undertook to withdraw its army from the territory of the Republic of Moldova within three years. On the other hand, the document stipulates that Russia will synchronize the process of withdrawing its army with the political settlement of the conflict and with the determination of the legal status of the Transnistrian region (the so-called "synchronization principle"). The Moldovan-Russian agreement of 21 October 1994 did not enter into force because it was not ratified by the Russian Federation.

On March 20, 1998, in Odessa, has been signed the *Agreement on confidence-building measures and the development of contacts between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria*. According to point 1 of this agreement, within two months, the number of peacekeeping forces in the security zone was to be reduced to about 500 soldiers from each side. The 3rd point of the Agreement tasked the JCC to put forward, within a month, an analysis of the implementation of the agreement signed on 21 July 1992, with a view towards ensuring its full implementation and avoiding military confrontation in the area, while envisaging its stage-by-stage demilitarization. Based on this perspective, the parties supported the proposal to accept Ukrainian peacekeepers in the security zone. With the 6th point of the Odessa document, the parties agreed to contribute quickly to the withdrawal of the additional Russian military arsenal from the Transnistrian region. Ukraine has offered to ensure its transit through its territory.

In the 1990s, after the end of the "Cold War," the subject of the former Soviet armies in Europe was on the political agenda of international meetings. The Russian Federation undertook at the OSCE Summit in Istanbul on 18-19 November 1999, and within the framework of the commitments under the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, to withdraw completely and unconditionally, by the end of 2002, its troops and armaments from the territory of the Republic of Moldova. Russia has only partially fulfilled its commitments made in Istanbul in November 1999.

On 7 December 2002, the OSCE Ministerial Council in Porto adopted a new decision on the Republic of Moldova extending the deadline for the Russian Federation to withdraw its troops and armaments from

² *Санду потребовала вывести из Приднестровья российских военных.* / РИА Новости, 30.11.2020. / <https://ria.ru/20201130/voennye-1586935281.html>; *В Кремле ответили на заявление Санду о выводе военных из Приднестровья.* / РИА Новости, 30.11.2020. / <https://ria.ru/20201130/status-1586942265.html>

³ *Лавров назвал безответственной идею Санду вывести войска из Приднестровья.* / Деловое информационное пространство РБК, 01 дек. 2020. / <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/01/12/2020/5fc65b159a79472e79b94dc3>

the Transnistrian region until 31 December 2003. The decision taken in Porto, at Russia's insistence, contains some differences from the one in Istanbul, stipulating the provision of *full withdrawal*, instead of that *unconditional withdrawal*. Another difference is that the withdrawal had to take place by 31 December 2003 at the latest "*provided that the necessary conditions exist*". Moreover, the Porto declaration stipulates only Russia's *intention* to withdraw its troops and weapons, and not its assumed *obligation*, as stipulated at the Istanbul summit in 1999. These differences were a step back for Chişinău from the declaration in Istanbul and, at the same time, a very clear signal that Russia is not interested in withdrawing its military contingent from the Republic of Moldova within the deadline agreed in Porto in 2002.

The problem of the presence of the Russian army in the Transnistrian region was essential in the case of the *Kozak Memorandum* of November 2003, following the implementation of which the Republic of Moldova was to become a federation. Article 17 of the federalization draft stipulated that the two sides addressed the Russian Federation for military guarantees of compliance with the political provisions of the memorandum. Following Chişinău's refusal to sign the *Kozak Memorandum*, Russia has halted any withdrawal of weapons from the territory of the Republic of Moldova, withdrawals stipulated in the Istanbul and Porto commitments. Since 2007, when the Russian Federation decided to suspend its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, Moscow has refused to address the issue of withdrawing its troops from the Republic of Moldova in the Moldovan-Russian bilateral dialogue, but also at official international meetings. On the contrary, Russia has made efforts to strengthen the legal status of the presence of Russian troops on the left bank of the Dniester. Before the parliamentary elections of April 5, 2009, on March 18, 2009, in Moscow, in the presence of the President of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, Vladimir Voronin, and Igor Smirnov issued a *joint statement* in which they recognized the stabilizing role of the Russian peacekeeping mission in the region and expressed gratitude to Russia for its efforts as a mediator engaged in resolving the Transnistrian issue. The essence of that declaration was that the Russian military contingent had a peace-keeping mission and will be stationed in the Republic of Moldova until the final settlement of the Transnistrian conflict.

Following the resumption of negotiations in the "5 + 2" format, on 17-18 April and 13 July 2012 in Vienna, the official agenda for the negotiation process was set. The issue of the Russian presence in the Transnistrian region was included in the last basket on security issues. Since then, any attempt by the Republic of Moldova on the issue of the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Transnistrian region, whether it is OGRF, or the transformation of the Russian military peacekeeping mission into an international civilian one, has been blocked from the start by both Moscow and Tiraspol. The Russian Federation considers that this issue cannot be discussed until a solution to the political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict is identified. The UN General Assembly resolution of 2018 on the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory of the Republic of Moldova is a welcome one and of utmost importance for Chişinău, but for the time being without legal and practical consequences, because Russia's position is that this resolution bears a provocative character and is dangerous for the stability of the region.

The political context in the Republic of Moldova

The natural and logical question arises as to why Russia has reacted so disproportionately to what Maia Sandu said about the presence of Russian troops on the left bank of the Dniester. The explanations would be as follows:

1. The November 2020 presidential election loss of Igor Dodon, a politician with strong pro-Russian valences, to Maia Sandu, oriented towards the West, was considered by Moscow as a geopolitical loss in the Republic of Moldova, and one to the advantage of the US and the EU. After the 2010 episode with Naryshkin, the Kremlin's geostrategists changed the political strategy in the Republic of Moldova, acting in stages. Initially, new pro-Russian-inspired political projects were created (Dodon and Usaty). Subsequently, one of these political projects (PSRM) became a parliamentary party. At the next stage, Moscow gained political influence over one of the most important institutions in the state (the presidency). In the final phase, through its political intermediaries (Dodon and PSRM), Russia aimed to gain political control over domestic political processes in the Republic of Moldova. Basically, the control of Moscow over Chişinău was achieved in 2019, with the coming of the PSRM to power. The 2020 presidential election could have consolidated these gains, provided that Dodon won a second term.

2. The Russian Federation needs political control in Chişinău to strengthen its geopolitical positions both in the Republic of Moldova and in the region. The screen behind which the Kremlin is attempting to strengthen its geopolitical positions in the Republic of Moldova is the Transnistrian conflict. Having achieved political control in Chişinău, Moscow's ultimate goal is to impose a political plan for the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict, after which it will have legal guarantees ensuring its control over the entire territory of the Republic of Moldova. This plan is to be implemented through a document such as the *Kozak Memorandum*, which would lead to either "*transnistriization*" (a scenario in which Tiraspol would have a veto on decisions taken by the government in Chişinău) or "*Finlandisation*" of the Republic of Moldova (following the model of Finland during the "Cold War", which was foreign policy-wise dependent on the USSR). Before this scenario unfolds, the ground must be "prepared" in Chişinău for the *de facto* federalization of the Republic of Moldova by adopting a set of laws among which would be provisions for the right of veto given to ATU Gagauzia in relation to decisions taken in Chişinău, and for the strengthening the state of the pro-Russian vector through a return to the linguistic situation from the Soviet period as well as through the insurance of the total domination of the Moldovan information space by the Russian media. Most likely, this geopolitical package of laws was to be enacted in Dodon's second term. It is this package of laws with a geopolitical substratum that, on December 3, 2020, was voted in a hurry, scandalously, and in violation of all procedural norms by PSRM.

3. The armed forces are Russia's main element of hard power in foreign policy. Russia's geopolitical revenge, led by Vladimir Putin against the West, is based on military force, which has been constantly used by Moscow since 2000. In the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine, Russia intervened with its troops in the most direct way. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, Moscow insists that stability in the Transnistrian issue is guaranteed by Russian troops deployed on the left bank of the Nistru, which it presents as peacemakers and overlooking the fact that the OGRF has no legal right to stay on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The presence of its military troops on the left bank of the Nistru is a powerful tool of Russian influence over the Republic of Moldova, with the prospect of expanding Russian geopolitical influence in the region. Russia conditions the withdrawal of its troops from the left bank of Nistru with the political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict ("the synchronization principle"), although we cannot be sure that any commonly agreed identification of the region of Transnistria as part of the Republic of Moldova will lead to the withdrawal of Russian troops from the left bank of the Nistru. For example, point 17 of the Kozak Memorandum, stipulated that the parties addressed the Russian Federation to provide them military guarantees, through the presence of Russian troops on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, regarding those politically agreed in the treaty that was to be signed between Chişinău and Tiraspol.

Conclusions

Moscow's disproportionate reactions to the statements of the future president of the Republic of Moldova regarding Russian troops on the left bank of Nistru, which is the official point of Chişinău in resolving the Transnistrian issue, are an obvious indication that, in the future, any constructive dialogue in the Moldovan-Russian relationship will depend directly on position of the Republic of Moldova on this subject. Moscow implies that the good relations with Russia which Maia Sandu wants, namely the achievement of unblocking the access to the Russian market of the exports of Moldovan agricultural products, and the provision of social insurance for Moldovan citizens who worked there, but also other topics of interest to Chişinău - will depend on Chişinău's tolerance of the presence of Russian troops on the left bank of the Nistru. Dodon's defeat in the November presidential election is painful for Russia, but Moscow will agree to work with any politician in Chişinău who shows indulgence over the presence of Russian troops in Moldova. The presence of the Russian army on the left bank of the Nistru guarantees the geopolitical influence of Russia in the Republic of Moldova and in the region. Under these circumstances, the future President will have to show a complex approach in the management of the Moldovan-Russian relations, perseverance in domestic policy, and consistency in the dialogue with external partners.