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Moldova - Is Europe ready for Ukraine 2.0?



Moldova has been experiencing what Ukraine did exactly one year ago. Everything points to the fact that it may soon be a victim of Russian aggression, while Moscow denies preparing to invade.

If an invasion really happens, it will just be the start of analogies with Ukraine.

The Moldovan region of Transnistria, a narrow strip along the border with Ukraine, with a majority Russian population and a Russian military presence, will declare a state of independence based on a previously conducted referendum, and Moscow will immediately recognise that independence.

This scenario seems to be under way. When Moldova's pro-European president Maia Sandu announced on Monday that Moscow wanted to stage a coup, not many were surprised.

"The plan included sabotage and militarily trained people disguised as civilians to carry out violent actions, attacks on government buildings and taking hostages", Sandu told reporters on Monday.

Since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Moldova has feared that it was next.

A small country, with about 2.5 million people, a weak economy and still on the periphery of major Western integrations, Moldova seemed like an easy and logical prey in Russian occupation plans to round off its mythical concept of "historical Russia".

Thawing frozen conflicts

As a rule throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union, Russia has long planted the seeds of its future invasion of Moldova, in the form of an unresolved territorial problem and a frozen conflict.

What Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been in the case of Georgia, or Donetsk and Luhansk in the case of Ukraine, Transnistria has been in Moldova.

In an area populated mainly by Russians, Moscow has had around 1,500 soldiers since the 1992 ceasefire, but also "the largest ammunition depot in Europe", as described by one of the senior Moldovan military officials.

Russia has a double problem with Moldova. The first is political. After several decades of rule by pro-Russian presidents and governments, the pro-European government and president Sandu, who want to lead their country towards the European Union, are in power in the capital, Chisinau.

Their efforts bore fruit during the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and Moldova, together with Ukraine, received candidate status for membership of the EU last June. In peacetime it would have taken many years, or would never have happened.

For the same reasons, Russia triggered a conflict in the east of Ukraine in 2014 and annexed Crimea, wanting to stifle Ukrainian pro-European ambitions. Moldova has taken the same path, which angers Moscow, because it considers it part of its "historical area".

Not a question of "if", but "when"

From a military point of view, a Russian attack on Moldova was considered possible in a context of strong and rapid Russian advance in Ukraine, or in the completely opposite case - when nothing goes as planned.

At the moment, the latter circumstances prevail, although this is of no consolation to Moldova.

"The question is not whether the Russian Federation will attack the territory of Moldova, but when it will happen: either at the beginning of the year, in January, February or later, March, April. But, according to our information, the Russian Federation intends to go further", the head of the Intelligence and Security Service, Alexandru Musteata, said on Moldovan TV last December.

The destabilisation of the internal situation in Moldova, which serves as a precursor to a possible military intervention, has been ongoing for months.

Taking advantage of the crisis that Moldova has fallen into due to its huge dependence on Russian energy, pro-Russian forces have launched protests, demanding the departure of the pro-European government and President Sandu.

The leader of this movement, Ilan Shor, commands from exile in Israel, and has been assuring Moldovans that with the change of government, the country would receive cheaper gas and regular electricity supplies from Russia.

The FSB has funnelled tens of millions of dollars from some of Russia's biggest state companies to cultivate a network of Moldovan politicians and reorientate the country toward Moscow, reported the Washington Post last October, based on intelligence documents and interviews related to the situation in Moldova.

The European response is not enough

Russia's operation to destabilise Moldova internally succeeded up to one important point, which was the fall of the government and the resignation of Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita last Friday. Dorin Recean, former Minister of the Interior, was appointed as new Prime Minister, by the decision of President Sandu.

He announced that he will continue the European course of the previous cabinet, even though he will become head of a government that will need his experience in security affairs.

Apart from a few occasions during the first months of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, there has been no serious discussion in the West about sending military aid to Moldova.

Recently, Minister of Defence Anatolie Nosatii confirmed that Moldova asked its Western partners for anti-aircraft systems, which signalled the abandonment of the previous policy of neutrality and non-procurement of weapons in the West.

It is an even greater hint that Moldova expects military intervention, and for Moldovan ambitions to strengthen its arsenal in the West. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin said that it could turn into a "disaster".

Russia has a very clear military and political goal to carry out a new aggression against a sovereign state. Apart from the fact that it will try to relax its military positions on its priority, Ukrainian front, with a new conquest, Russia would try to raise the weakened conquering morale, both amongst its army and amongst its population.

The reluctance of the West, and above all the EU, to respond more decisively to Chisinau's constant warnings that it is in direct danger from Moscow, does not give Moldova much hope that it would be protected.

Its candidate status for EU membership is a ceremonial, political message without any particularly tangible content.

If Moldova is indeed the next victim of Russian aggression, regardless of whether it remains in Transnistria or not, it would be a blow to the Western allies who have left the country suffering because of its sincere intention to join them.