



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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Moldova - The Ukrainian Crisis in the Moldovan Media

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on Moldovan media.

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In Moldova, the latest developments in Ukraine have been a major news story. The Moldovan media and civil society groups are concerned about the implications that Russian military action in Ukraine will have for their country's national security and political autonomy.

Buffer Zone

The media discussions tend to view the events in Ukraine in the context of the imperial legacy of the hegemonic Russian policy that has operated for decades in both Moldova and Ukraine. In Ukraine, Putin is seen to follow his agenda of bringing former communist countries under Russian influence and resurrecting a twenty-first-century version of the Russian Empire. It has been emphasized that Moldova and Ukraine play very similar geopolitical roles between East and West, representing a buffer zone between Europe and Russia. Many commentators have argued that European Union countries will find themselves close to Putin's sphere of influence should Moldova or Ukraine align themselves with Russia.

Media reports in Moldova underline the pro-European position of the country. The statements of the Moldovan government also show that the leaders of the country are determined to integrate with the European mainstream. Moldova's Prime Minister Iurie Leancă talked to BCC World about the urgent need to resolve the Ukrainian crisis, predicting that otherwise "the sickness of Russian separatism will become a dangerous and contagious problem, not only for Moldova, but also for the European Union."^[1]

Moldovan Concerns

In November 2013 Moldova signed an association agreement with the European Union at a summit in Vilnius, thus taking the first step in a ratification process leading to further EU association agreements. The prime minister has set an optimistic target of 2019 for the country to join the European Union. He also wants to consolidate Moldova's position as a NATO ally, despite its official policy of being militarily neutral.^[2]

The pro-Russian voices of the communist opposition in the Moldovan Parliament had only an informative character in the Moldovan media. Reporters mentioned that the communist opposition in the parliament demanded that the recently signed association agreement with the European Union be revised. They claim that the agreement will bring serious consequences not only for the economy of the country, but also for the politics, culture and history of Moldova.^[3] According to communist deputy Sergiu Stati, the latest events in the Ukraine show that the European Union's Eastern Partnership Project has failed because the specific circumstances of individual countries have not been taken into consideration.^[4] The proposal by the Moldovan Communist Party to invite the EU, Chişinău, Tiraspol and the Russian Federation to participate in further negotiations about the association agreement and to hold a referendum to find out what development course the majority of Moldovans prefer was strongly criticized by the government. It emphasized that the ruling parties have the people's support precisely because they promote European integration.

The issue of the military threat from Russia was raised in the media in the context of the territorial

integrity of the country. The majority of the population in the autonomous republic of Gagauzia and the conflict zone of Transnistria are Russian-speaking and generally of anti-Western orientation. This issue was once again brought to light after a recent referendum in Gagauzia (denounced as illegal by the central government) in which voters expressed overwhelming support for the Eurasian Union versus closer integration with the EU. Moldovan analysts are worried about Transnistria, as they believe that if Russian 'peacekeeping' forces located in that breakaway region were given the order, they could take over Moldova's capital city in a matter of hours.

After Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree making Crimea part of Russia on 18 March 2014, Moldovan media commentators became very concerned about the fate of Transnistria and Gagauzia. Putin's statement on the Transnistrian conflict settlement and the expression of the will of the people at a press conference on 17 April was listened to carefully. The next 5+2 meeting is planned for May and the Moldovan side is prepared to engage in the discussions, since the Russian side wants to include this issue on the agenda. It has been stressed that while Moldova may not face the immediate threat of direct military invasion that Ukraine now faces, the country is particularly vulnerable to a possible worsening of relations with its breakaway regions that Russia could help escalate.

Rapprochement to the European Union

Another important issue discussed in the Moldovan press is the economic pressure the Ukrainian crisis puts on the country.^[5] Much like Ukraine, Moldova finds itself in a precarious position, torn between forging closer ties with the EU and maintaining its traditional economic relationship with Russia. As Europe's poorest state, which relies heavily on agriculture and remittances from abroad, Moldova is especially susceptible to Russian coercion. The threats to introduce more economic sanctions, in addition to a wine embargo, have raised concerns with regard to the country's energy supply, as Moldova relies heavily on energy imports from Russia.

Discussions of Ukraine and Russia in the Moldovan press are full of references to the role of the EU and NATO. Both the independent news media and official statements from the Moldovan government advocate a diplomatic solution. Major Moldovan news sources like IPN and Tribuna reiterate phrases like "respecting sovereignty" and "territorial integrity" when condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, and they champion the principle of international law in any crisis.

Several political parties have spoken out against Russia's actions, with the Green Ecologist Party going as far as calling the Kremlin "fascist", and several news sources have criticized President Timofti's statements on the situation as being "sterile" and not nearly as critical or as assertive as they should have been. Moldovan officials are walking a fine line and realize that, despite their recent progress, the long-coveted closer integration with the EU and the West could easily be jeopardized should Russia get involved.^[6]

Some political experts suggest that Moldovan fears won't be assuaged until the Ukrainian crisis has been resolved. However, they hope that if the West shows a commitment to making the EU integration process irreversible the country will be less prone to falling under Russian influence. For the present, however, Moldova appears to be closer to the EU than ever before. At the end of April, the majority of Moldova's population celebrated the European Parliament vote, which has already come into effect, to end visa requirements for Moldovans travelling in Europe. Yet some commentators stressed that the successes that Moldova has had in integrating with the EU are easily reversible, and that is a

vulnerability that the West should remain keenly aware of.

The Functions of the Commonwealth of Independent States

Another issue discussed in the Moldovan media was the role and functions of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) in the light of the events in Ukraine. It has been underlined that, unfortunately, the CIS as an organization was not able to convene an extraordinary foreign minister meeting in order to discuss the situation. Moldovan Foreign Minister Natalia Gherman explained that Moldova participates in only two decision-making blocks in the CIS: in the economic/trade area and in the humanitarian field. She stressed that the country has never participated in decision-making in the political, military or security fields, because here Moldova decides in its national capacity and aligns itself very closely with European Union policies. Some journalists have referred to government discussions about leaving the CIS should trade experts evaluate the results and the usefulness of the CIS free-trade area for the purposes of Moldova's growth and development.^[7] The news platform publica.md has held online public debates on the issue of CIS membership.

The media reports in Romanian and Russian in the Moldovan press do not present different positions and deliver the same information in the respective language. The propaganda spread by the Russian mass media - mostly television - is not reflected or supported by the local press. Moreover, on 17 April the media reported that the National Audiovisual Council in Moldova would be monitoring the content of Russian programmes very strictly and that the Council would come up with its own assessment. This monitoring will be carried out by a group of independent experts, who will recommend further actions. Most analysts viewed this decision as the right approach.

Not only Ukraine's Territorial Integrity is at Stake

Moldovan society is divided on the Ukrainian crisis. The pro-Europeans are indeed concerned about the latest developments in its neighbouring country, just as the pro-Russian population prefers Moscow's explanation of the Crimea scenario.

In *Gazeta Libera* Anatol Taranu claimed that the Ukrainian crisis can mark the "Roman time". But the option of reunifying with Romania to guarantee the country's security is not supported by the majority of Moldovans.

The degree of anxiety regarding the situation in the Ukraine is very high in Moldova. While the West should stand up to Russia's challenge for Ukraine's sake, it should not forget that much more than Ukraine's territorial integrity is at stake. The challenges Moldova and other Eastern European countries face in the context of the Ukrainian crisis remain the responsibility not only of the country's themselves, but also of the international community.

Footnotes

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