

# A National Identity Crisis?

Moldova in Flux Between East and West

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, StratMon 2016-2017



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### A National Identity Crisis? Moldova in Flux Between East and West

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HCSS assists in formulating and evaluating policy options on the basis of an integrated approach to security challenges and security solutions.



## Introduction

“Wake up Moldova, you have had enough!” has become the slogan of what were the largest demonstrations since the former Soviet republic gained independence in 1992. Europe’s poorest country has been in economic and political turmoil since public anger erupted over the biggest corruption scandal in Moldovan history. An estimated 1 billion dollars – or approximately 15% of Moldova’s gross domestic product (GDP) – vanished from three major banks in 2014.<sup>1</sup> This led to a bailout by the National Bank, resulting in the depreciation of the national currency, a rise in prices and tariffs and a further decline in living standards.<sup>2</sup> The IMF shortly thereafter evaluated Moldova’s near term outlook as “difficult”.<sup>3</sup> Besides imposing a heavy toll on the already troubled economy, the banking fraud has also revealed the wider deficiencies of Moldova’s domestic politics.

**Corruption and the perceived partiality of the justice system and state administration have been deep-rooted problems since Moldova became independent.**

Corruption and the perceived partiality of the justice system and state administration have been deep-rooted problems since Moldova became independent (see Figure 3.34).

**Figure 3.34 Control of corruption (100= maximum control; 0= minimal control). Source: World Bank Governance Indicators.**

Control of Corruption	1996	2000	2005	2010	2015
<b>Country/Territory</b>					
Netherlands	97,56	97,56	95,61	97,62	94,71
Estonia	57,56	74,63	80,49	79,05	87,02
Poland	72,68	71,71	60,98	70,00	70,67
Romania	49,27	39,51	49,76	51,90	57,69
Moldova	50,73	32,68	31,22	28,57	17,31
Russian Federation	15,61	16,59	23,90	14,29	19,23
Ukraine	13,17	7,80	29,76	17,14	14,90

Figure 3.34 shows that the governing coalition, the Alliance for European Integration – despite coming to power over seven years ago – has failed to effectively address these issues. Corruption has actually deteriorated in the 2000s and 2010s. Former prime minister Vlad Filat himself was

1. Lydia Tomkiw, “Moldova Economic Crisis: How Banking Scandal, Political Corruption Led To Protests In Europe’s Poorest Country,” *The International Business Times*, June 2, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.com/moldova-economic-crisis-how-banking-scandal-political-corruption-led-protests-europes-2295822>.

2. Vasile Ernu, Vitalie Sprinceana and Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, “Moldova’s Movement From Below,” *Jacobin*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/moldova-chisinau-protests-russia-eu-ukraine/>.

3. The International Monetary Fund, “Press Release: IMF Executive Board Concludes 2015 Article IV Consultation and Third Post-Program Monitoring with Moldova,” *The International Monetary Fund*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2016/pr1616.htm>.

involved in the banking fraud alongside a close circle of oligarchs.<sup>4</sup> Following Filat’s dismissal, Moldova sank into political instability; the cabinet was reshuffled several times, leading to four new prime ministers in just two years. The current pro-European government headed by Pavel Filip enjoys low domestic support. To many Moldovans, the coalition he belonged to is pro-EU in name only.<sup>5</sup> This public attitude stems not only from the fact that Filip is allegedly influenced by Vladimir Plahotniuc, the most powerful businessman in Moldova, but also from the years-long inability of the pro-EU coalition “to initiate the most needed (and painful, for both society as well as the oligarchs in power) structural reforms”.<sup>6</sup>

The current cabinet’s disputed legitimacy has led to an increase in societal support for pro-Kremlin opposition parties. As was already observable in opinion polls over the past few years, the so-called Our Party, the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova, as well as the Socialist Party came to be considerably favored among Moldovans over the governing coalition cabinet.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the general perception of Moscow has become more favorable; in the very same survey, 59% of respondents regarded the Russian Federation as an appropriate political ally, whereas 64% stated that Russia should be Moldova’s primary economic partner, slightly outnumbering the EU in both respects.<sup>8</sup> Even though Moldova was once perceived as the “star performer in the EU’s Partnership Program”, “[t]he turmoil in Chisinau raises fears that ordinary Moldovans are losing confidence in the reform process.”<sup>9</sup> The outcome of Moldova’s recent presidential election in October 2016 has captured the way in which these fears have dramatically altered Moldova’s political landscape and set the nation on an all but certain path into the future.

However, despite these ongoing dynamics it would be a step too far to conclude that Moldova’s European integration process has failed. Since the Association Agreement came into force, Brussels has offered Moldova considerable access to the EU market, visa-free travel as well as substantial funding.<sup>10</sup> Although support for Moldova’s Eastward orientation has undeniably risen among the population, the EU project itself has not been completely abandoned. This has also been well reflected in the symbolism of various demonstrations where the EU flag was a regular sight. In response to the political situation at the time, the EU suspended its financial support and urged the Filip government to implement much needed structural reforms in order to soothe the growing distrust in the governing political class strongly associated with the European road map.<sup>11</sup> Brussels, however, also pledged to support Moldova in carrying out reforms. In turn, it has stated it wants to see real results, especially in the

**Although support for Moldova’s Eastward orientation has undeniably risen among the population, the EU project itself has not been completely abandoned.**

4. BBC News, “Moldova Ex-PM Vlad Filat Held over \$1bn Bank Scam,” *BBC News*, June 29, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34569887>.

5. Max Seddon, “Outrage over Moldova Bank Scandal Threatens Reforms,” *The Financial Times*, January 26, 2016, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b582ad2c-c424-11e5-b3b1-7b2481276e45.html>.

6. BBC News, “Moldova Political Crisis: Protesters Break into Parliament,” *BBC News*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35366194>; Michal Skala, “Is Moldova Turning Away from the West?,” *Globsec Policy Institute*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/moldova-turning-away-west>.

7. Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey Residents of Moldova*. (International Republican Institute, March 2016), [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri\\_poll\\_presentation-moldova-march\\_2016.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_poll_presentation-moldova-march_2016.pdf).

8. Ibid.

9. Tony Barber, “Why Delinquent Moldova Matters,” *The Financial Times*, October 29, 2015, <http://blogs.ft.com/the-world/2015/10/why-delinquent-moldova-matters/>; Charles Recknagel, “Explainer: What Can Moldova’s Crisis Teach The EU?,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, November 22, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/moldova-crisis-eu-lessons-explainer/27380231.html>.

10. Recknagel, “Explainer: What Can Moldova’s Crisis Teach The EU?”

11. Rayhan Demytrie, “Moldova Anger Grows over Banking Scandal,” *BBC News*, September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34244341>.

fight against corruption.<sup>12</sup> Indeed as a result of the Moldovan government achieving some results on this front, on December 21, 2016 the European Union resumed its budgetary support for the Moldovan government.<sup>13</sup>

Based on a detailed empirical analysis of the economic, diplomatic and military ties between Moldova, the EU, US and Russia we take a closer look at Moldova's geodynamic positioning between these great powers over time. States other than the above-mentioned great powers are grouped together in a category called 'other countries'. In addition, we are particularly interested in notable events that have affected Moldova's positioning – both in the distant, as well as more recent past – and what this spells for Moldova's future alignment, regional stability and existing European foreign and security policy.

On the basis of the new Pardee Center for International Futures' Global Influence Index<sup>14</sup> we first take a look at the 'big picture' by assessing which of the great powers under investigation in this case-study have exerted the most influence on Moldova in economic, diplomatic, military and cultural terms between the early 1990s and 2016. Second, we zoom in on a more recent period (2008-2016) based on our event data series. The reason for choosing this particular period is that during these eight years numerous major events took place within the region: wars erupted in Georgia and Ukraine and the EU signed Association Agreements with a number of former Soviet states, including Moldova. Towards the end of the observed period the bank fraud scandal comes to light, which has had a damaging effect on the reputation of the ruling elite. We are keen to see what effects these events have had on Moldova's geodynamic adjustments and what this may tell us about future security challenges involving Moldova.

## Trends in Geo-Strategic Alignment

### Big Picture Trends: 1990-2016

Figure 3.35 depicts the influence – in economic, military, diplomatic and cultural terms – that especially the EU, Russia and US have exerted on Moldova from the early 1990s until 2016.

As is observable in Figure 3.35, Europe's influence in Moldova picked up steam after the latter gained independence and has increased significantly throughout the observed period. Europe's growing influence in Moldova amplified significantly in the period 2013-2014, which can be attributed to the signing of the Association Agreement, marking a strong impetus for Moldova's deeper political cooperation with and gradual economic integration into the EU. After the corruption scandal broke out in 2014, however, it can be seen that the rate of the EU's increasing influence slightly slowed down in lock-step with the reputation of the ruling coalition. In light of the resulting political troubles the EU has moved towards a more pragmatic approach vis-à-vis Chisinau, emphasizing the urge for implementing the proposed reforms as a condition for its support.<sup>15</sup>

12. The European Union External Action Service, "EU and Moldova Meet to Discuss Relationship and Reforms," *European Union External Action*, March 15, 2016, [http://eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/2016/150316\\_eu\\_moldova\\_meeting\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2016/150316_eu_moldova_meeting_en.htm).

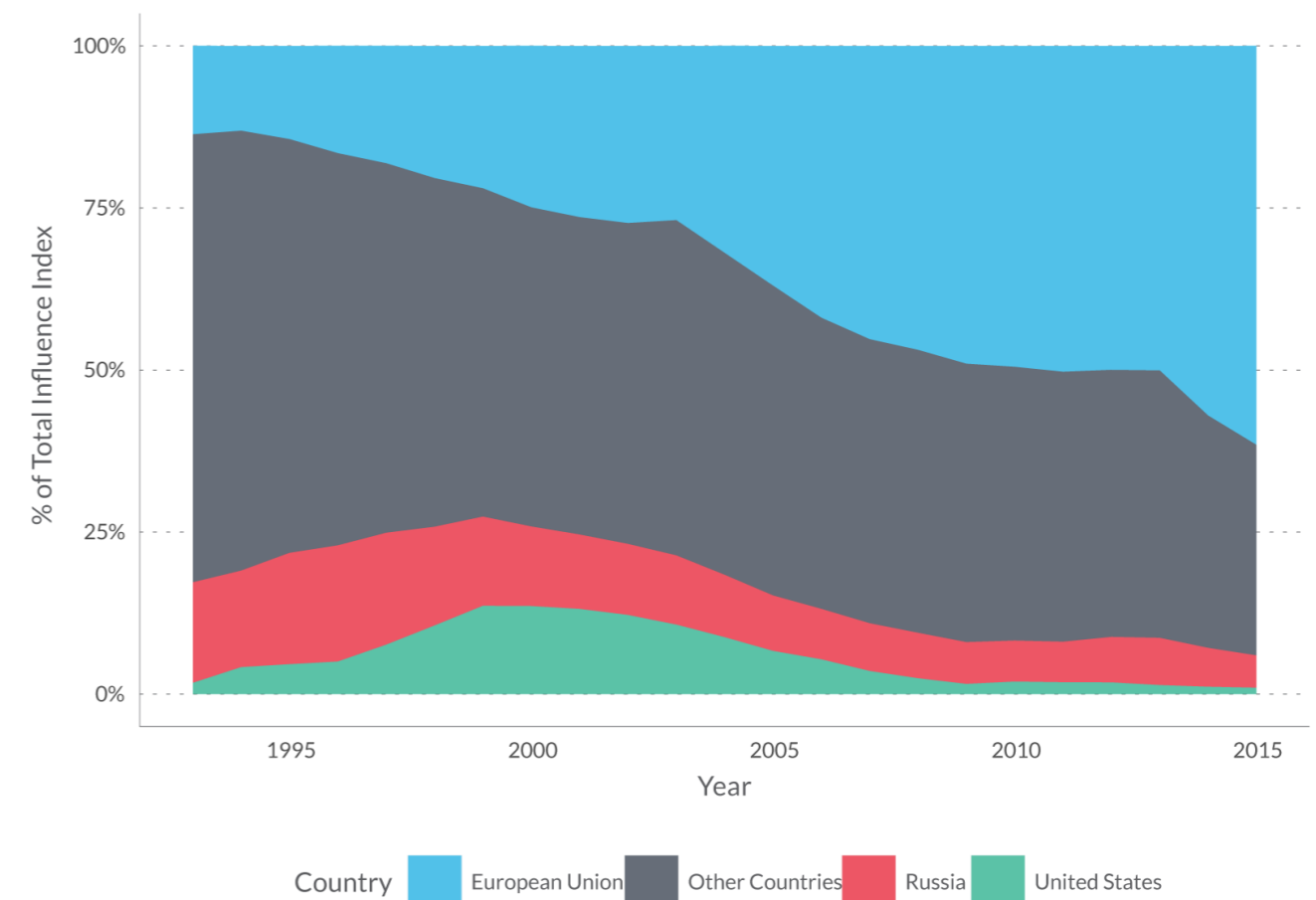
13. The European Union External Action Service, "The EU Is Resuming Budget Support Assistance to the Republic of Moldova," *European Union External Action*, December 23, 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/moldova\\_en/18141/The-EU-is-resuming-budget-support-assistance-to-the-republic-of-moldova](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/moldova_en/18141/The-EU-is-resuming-budget-support-assistance-to-the-republic-of-moldova).

14. Pardee Center for International Futures, "Global Influence Index (V11-E28)" (Denver: The Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, 2016).

15. Francesco S. Montesano, Tony van der Togt and Wouter Zweers, "The Europeanisation of Moldova: Is the EU on the Right Track?" (The Hague: Clingendael, July 2016).

Russia's influence in Moldova has remained consistent throughout the observed period, despite lagging significantly behind that of the EU. During the early 1990s, Russia's influence increased when the former Soviet 14<sup>th</sup> Guards Army entered the Transnistrian conflict and forced it to a standstill. In the face of their decreasing influence in Moldova over the past several years, Pro-Russian sentiment in Moldovan society has grown as a result of the banking fraud tainting the public perception of the ruling pro-European coalition.<sup>16</sup> Considering the trends observable in Figure 3.35, the extent in which Russia stands to profit from this change in public perception is clear, most notably in how changing public perceptions of Russia and the European Union came to affect the 2016 Moldovan Presidential elections held in October last year.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 3.35 Global Influence Index with Moldova as a target country 1990-2015



US influence in Moldova since independence consisted mainly of economic and military assistance. Since 1992 the US has provided Moldova with approximately \$1.4 billion in financial assistance. A notable peak can be observed in 1999; the year when a special partnership was established between Moldova and the state of North Carolina, working closely in areas of civil emergency, expansion of markets and cultural, scientific and academic exchanges.<sup>18</sup> Figure 3.35 furthermore

16. The Economist, "Moldova on the Edge: Small Enough to Fail," *The Economist*, November 21, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21678831-year-after-colossal-bank-fraud-country-imploding-small-enough-fail>.

17. Reid Standish, "Moscow Looks to Gain in Moldova's Election Amid Anger Over Corruption," *Foreign Policy*, September 26, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/26/moscow-looks-to-gain-in-moldovas-election-amid-anger-over-corruption/>.

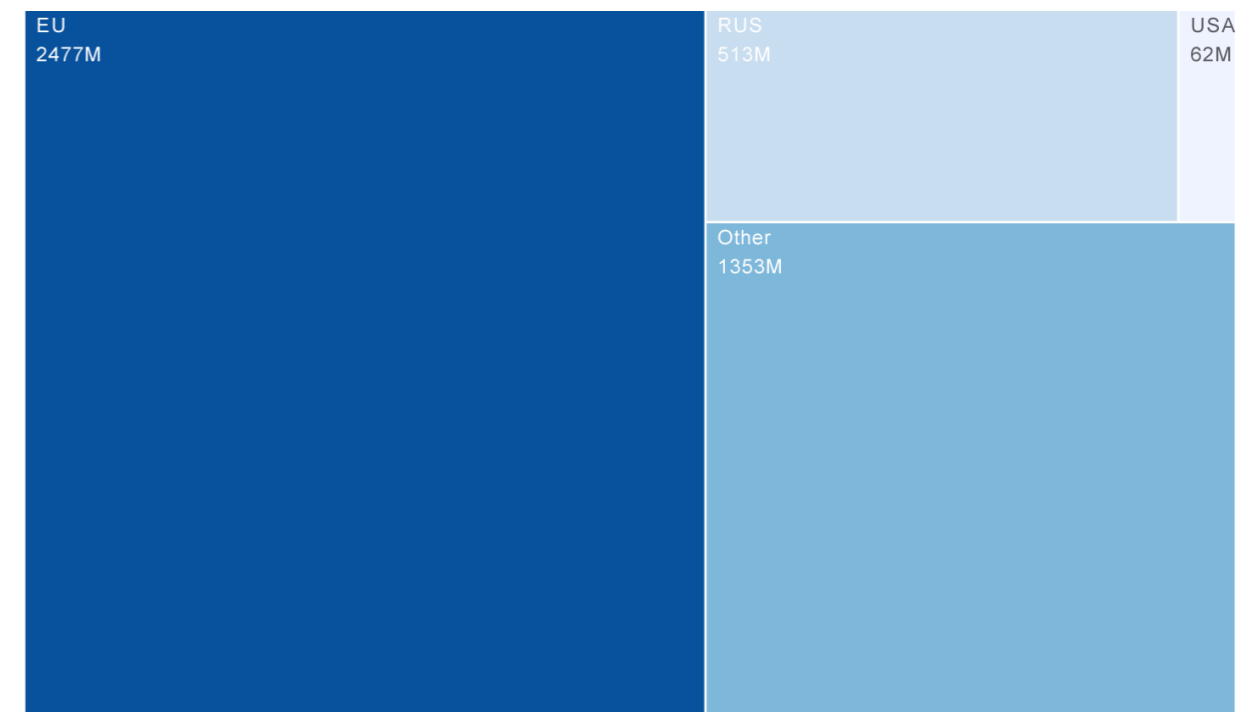
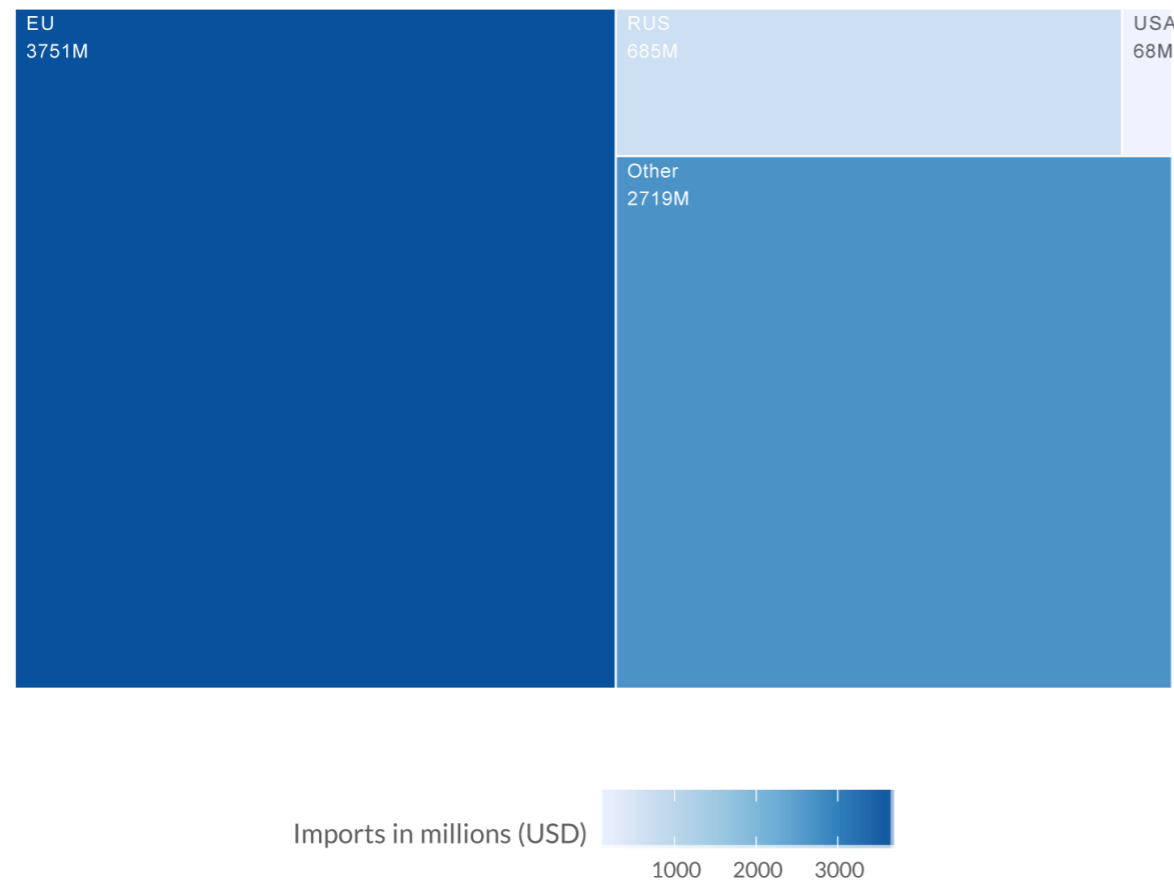
18. Steven Woehrel, "Moldova: Background and U.S. Policy" (Congressional Research Service, April 23, 2014), <https://www.fas.org/spp/crs/row/RS21981.pdf>.

reveals a gradual decrease in US influence between 2001 and 2009, the period when the Moldovan Communist party was in power. This downward trend was halted – but not reversed – after the April 2009 parliamentary elections. Opposition parties claimed the elections – which were won by the then ruling Communist Party – were rigged. Young people took to the streets demanding a better future, oriented toward Europe. In the process, the parliament building was stormed and set on fire.<sup>19</sup> In the period that followed the unrest, the Moldovan parliament failed to elect a new president, causing parliament to be dissolved and snap elections to be called. The July 2009 parliamentary elections saw the Communist Party win 48 out of the 101 seats with the remaining 53 going to the opposition. The four opposition parties then subsequently created the ‘Alliance for European Integration’, thus forcing the Communist party into opposition.

**Trade Relations**

Trade relations serve as an important factor in shaping a country’s geostrategic orientation. In the case of Moldova, the occasional trade rows involving Russia have acted as a check on the country’s political integration with the EU. In this section, we take a closer look at the development of Moldova’s trade relations over time.

**Figure 3.36 Trade relations of Moldova with selected countries in 2015 (US\$)**



In 2015, the Moldovan economy measured a modest \$6.4 billion in GDP. This means the country ranked as Europe’s poorest nation, with a per capita income of just over \$1800 (measured in current US dollars). By comparison, neighboring Romania had a GDP per capita in 2015 that was approximately five times higher at just under \$9000.<sup>20</sup>

When looking at trade, Europe serves as Moldova’s main import and export partner. In 2015, around 52% of total imports came from the EU, against only 9.5% from Russia and less than 1% from the US. Exports show a similar pattern with 56% of Moldovan exports going to the EU and only 11.5% of total exports destined for Russia. A mere 1.3% of total exports were shipped to the US (see Figure 3.36).

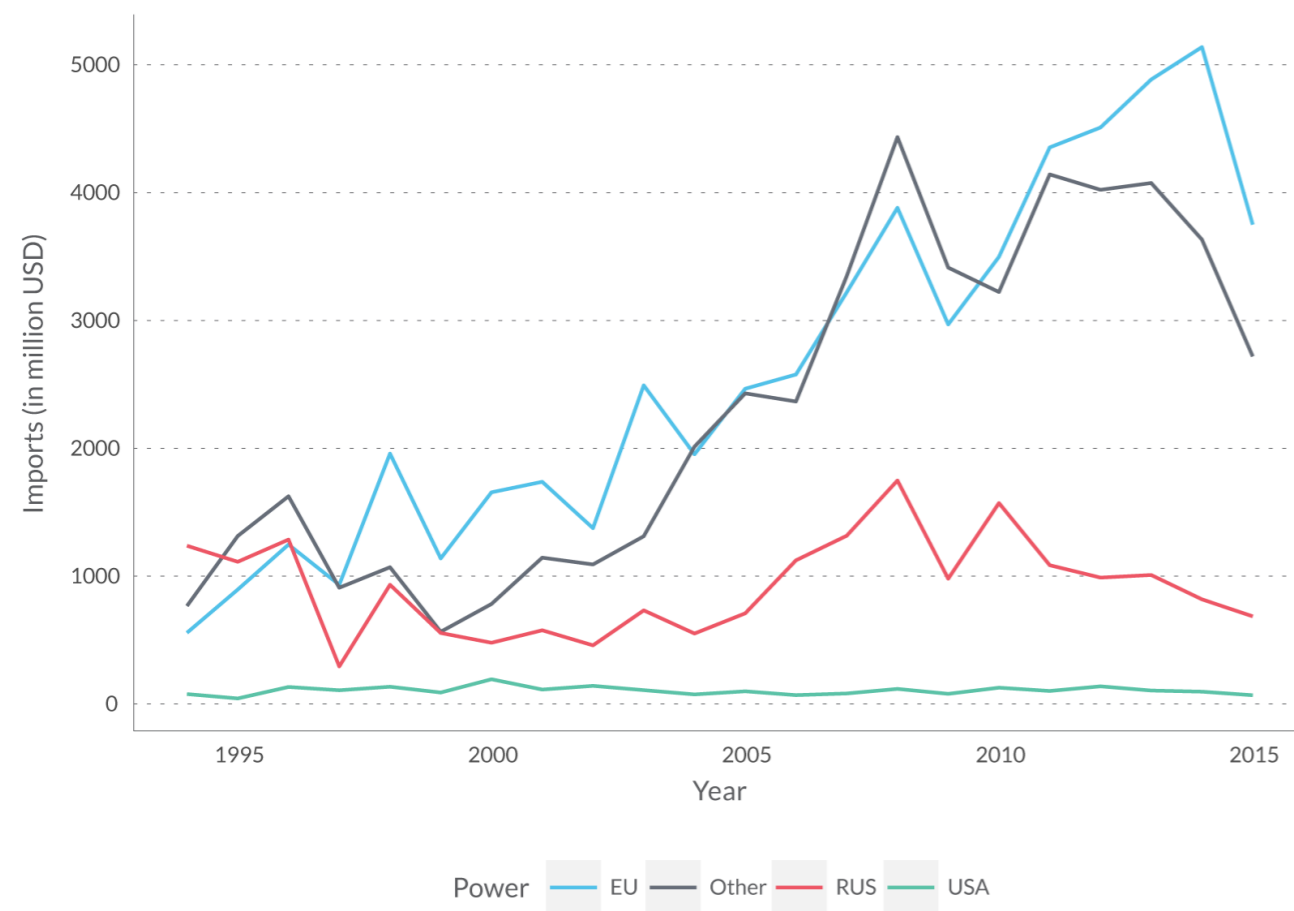
In economic terms, Moldova is far more integrated today with the EU than it is with Russia or the US. The only period when this was not the case was in the first half of the 1990s in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse (see Figure 3.37). Today, major imports from Russia are mineral oils, mineral fuels and other by-products of their distillation. Other notable products coming from Russia are fertilizers, various edible preparations and nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances.

**In economic terms, Moldova is far more integrated today with the EU than it is with Russia or the US.**

19. Luke Harding, “Moldova Forces Regain Control of Parliament after ‘Twitter Revolution,’” *The Guardian*, April 8, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/08/moldova-protest-election-chisinau>; Ellen Barry, “Protests in Moldova Explode, With Help of Twitter,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/08/world/europe/08moldova.html>.

20. The World Bank, “GDP per Capita (Current US\$),” *The World Bank*, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.

Figure 3.37 Moldovan imports from selected countries 1994-2015 (US\$)



The EU overtook Russia as Moldova's dominant import partner in 1995 and this has remained so ever since. Primary goods that Moldova imports from the EU are machinery and appliances, mineral products, transport equipment and chemical products.<sup>21</sup> Imports from the US have been at a much lower level compared to the EU or Russia throughout the entire period. In 2014, after the emergence of the banking fraud (see the introduction to this chapter), the Moldovan economy shrank considerably, which caused imports to drop across the board.

Exports show a slightly different picture; with the Russian market serving as the prime destination for Moldovan products well up until 2003 (see Figure 3.38). However, the share of Moldovan exports to Russia decreased significantly over the past few years due to the introduction of duties and import bans on Moldovan agriculture and alcoholic products, ostensibly justified by the alleged violation of Russian safety regulations and consumer protection laws.

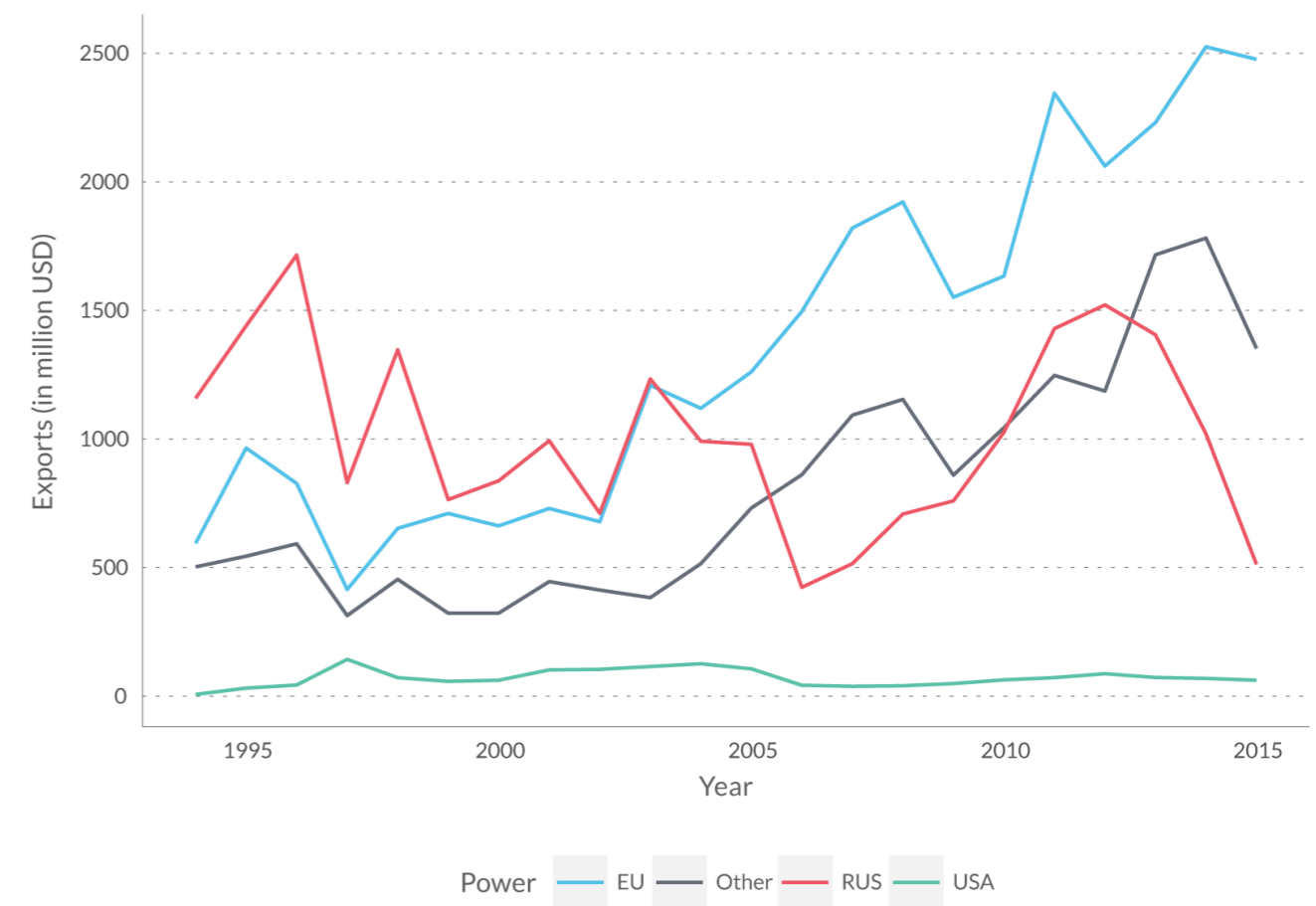
That said, the Russian market still remains among the most important destinations for Moldovan goods. Meat and dairy products as well as turbo propellers, jets and turbines are currently the key goods exported to Russia.<sup>22</sup> The most significant export destinations in the EU for Moldovan products (textiles and textile articles, machinery and appliances, agricultural products and wine) are Romania, Italy and Germany.<sup>23</sup>

21. The European Commission, "Trade" *European Commission*, September 26, 2016, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/moldova/>.

22. Ana Popa, "Moldova and Russia: Between Trade Relations and Economic Dependence" (Chisinau: Expert-Grup, April 2015), [http://www.expert-grup.org/en/biblioteca/item/download/1348\\_10771108a3d22488655de8186bfb918](http://www.expert-grup.org/en/biblioteca/item/download/1348_10771108a3d22488655de8186bfb918).

23. The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), "OEC - Moldova (MDA) Exports, Imports and Trade Partners," OEC,

Figure 3.38 Moldovan exports to selected countries 1994-2015 (US\$)



A notable deterioration in Moldovan-Russian relations that is reflected in the trade data came in the period 2003-2006. It was in this year that Russia presented its vision for settling the Transnistrian conflict. The 'Kozak Memorandum' as it became known did not include specific provisions on military guarantees, yet Russia intended to deploy 2000 'peacekeeping forces' in Transnistria.<sup>24</sup> The Memorandum proposed a new constitution for what would in the end become the Federal Republic of Moldova, consisting of a federal territory and two 'subjects' of the Federation – the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (Transnistria) and Gagauzia.<sup>25</sup> The proposed constitutional reforms would have led to a strong overrepresentation of the Transnistrian republic and Gagauzia in Moldova's upper house, prompting Transnistrian senators to require cooperation from only a few Gagauz and/or Transnistrian colleagues to veto federal laws.<sup>26</sup> This plan proved unfavorable to Moldova and was ultimately rejected. What followed was a sharp decline in relations between Russia and Moldova with Moscow placing the blame on the EU for

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2016, <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/mda/#Destinations>.

24. Igor Botan, "'Kozak plan' Implications," *E-Democracy*, November 30, 2003, <http://www.e-democracy.md/en/monitoring/politics/comments/200312031/>.

25. Ionas Aurelian Rus, *Russian Draft Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the State Structure of a United State in Moldova*, 2003, <http://www.stefanwolff.com/files/Kozak-Memorandum.pdf>.

26. Ibid.

having 'thwarted' the Kozak Memorandum.<sup>27</sup> The parallels between the Kozak Memorandum and what Russia is currently trying to do in eastern Ukraine through similar calls for "federalization" are striking.<sup>28</sup>

### 2008-2016: Conflict Erupts On Europe's Eastern Flank

Figure 3.39 represents Moldova as a target country based – in this case – on our event datasets. What we see here are all inter-state events whereby Moldova was the object of actions that were initiated by either the EU, US, or Russia between 2008 and 2016. Events are classified according to five categories; material conflict, material cooperation, verbal conflict, verbal cooperation and events that are considered neutral.

Figure 3.39 Event data analysis with Moldova as a target country 2008-2016



27. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Transcript of Remarks and Response to Media Questions by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at Joint Press Conference after Meeting of Weimar Triangle Foreign Ministers, Paris," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, June 23, 2010, [http://archive.mid.ru//brp\\_4.nsf/0/F4A74167A7284734C325774D00304330](http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/0/F4A74167A7284734C325774D00304330).

28. Kathy Lally, "Kiev Sees Russian Federalization Plans as Attempt to Destroy Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kyiv-sees-russian-federalization-plans-as-attempt-to-destroy-ukraine/2014/04/05/a5ed291c-fd65-4a3b-bf4f-5c83f2574944\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kyiv-sees-russian-federalization-plans-as-attempt-to-destroy-ukraine/2014/04/05/a5ed291c-fd65-4a3b-bf4f-5c83f2574944_story.html).

Concerning Russia's position towards Moldova, a sharp dip can be noted in the third quarter of 2008 with verbal cooperation decreasing significantly and verbal conflict on the rise. This can be explained by the onset of the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, after which the Kremlin warned Moldovan authorities of a similar response in case the Moldovan government were to resort to military power to reintegrate the separatist region of Transnistria.<sup>29</sup> The second quarter of 2009 also shows a clear deterioration in bilateral relations. After protests broke out over the April 2009 parliamentary elections the Russian foreign ministry claimed the riots in Moldova were a plot aimed at undermining the sovereignty of the former Soviet state, hinting forces that favor a reunification with Romania were behind the unrest.<sup>30</sup> After the Alliance for European Integration came to power in July 2009, forcing the Communist party into opposition, verbal conflict between Moscow and Chisinau notably increased.<sup>31</sup>

Interesting is the increase in verbal cooperation after 2011. It was in 2011 that negotiations on settling the Transnistrian case restarted after a 5-year long halt. In 2013 however, this upward trend was reversed. Cooperation decreased and there was a sharp increase in material conflict as well; Russia increased its military presence in Transnistria and introduced import bans on certain Moldovan goods, arguably due to its discontent with Moldova's initiation of the Association Agreement with the EU earlier that year.<sup>32</sup> The graph demonstrates how verbal cooperation between the two countries has declined further since then.

A notable increase in material conflict can also be observed in the third quarter of 2016. In August 2016 Russia claimed it had foiled a Ukrainian terrorist plot in Crimea.<sup>33</sup> Kyiv was quick to deny such events took place and also the EU found no evidence to support Russia's claims.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, amid the increase in tensions, Russia engaged in joint military drills in Transnistria with the separatist power structures and built up its forces around Ukraine. The Moldovan authorities condemned the military drills as illegal.<sup>35</sup> Shortly after, in September 2016, the president of Transnistria issued a presidential decree endorsing a 2006 referendum in which 97% of the population opted for independence and unification with Russia. The decree stipulated that the legal system in Transnistria should be synchronized in accordance with Russian law. The move came ahead of Transnistria's presidential elections held on December 2016. Moldova condemned the announcement as stemming from an illegal referendum and called on its international partners to state their positions on the decree and avoid further deteriorations in the negotiation process on Transnistria.<sup>36</sup>

29. Denis Dyomkin, "Russia Warns Moldova against 'Georgian Mistake,'" *Reuters*, August 25, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-moldova-transdnistria-idUSLP59197620080825>.

30. Oleg Shchedrov, "Russia Says Moldova Riots Undermine Sovereignty," *Reuters*, April 8, 2009, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-moldova-election-russia-sb-idUKTRE5371NP20090408>.

31. Tammy Lynch, "Moldova's Alliance for European Integration Meets the CIS," *The Jamestown Foundation*, October 8, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/moldovas-alliance-for-european-integration-meets-the-cis/>.

32. Kevin Liffey and Richard Balmforth, "Russia, Unhappy with Moldova's EU Drive, Bans Its Wine and Spirits," *Reuters*, September 10, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-moldova-russia-wine-idUSBRE98916M20130910>.

33. Shaun Walker, "Putin Raises Stakes over Alleged Ukrainian Terror Plot in Crimea," *The Guardian*, August 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/10/russia-accuses-ukraine-of-armed-crimea-incursion>.

34. Cynthia Kroet, "Donald Tusk: Russia Is 'unreliable' on Crimea," *POLITICO*, August 18, 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/donald-tusk-russia-is-unreliable-on-crimea/>.

35. UNIAN Information Agency, "Moldovan Authorities: Russia's Military Exercises in Transnistria Illegal, Inadmissible," *UNIAN*, August 18, 2016, <http://www.unian.info/world/1475786-moldovan-authorities-russias-military-exercises-in-transnistria-illegal-inadmissible.html>.

36. Iulian Ernst, "Transnistria's President Issues Decree on Unification with Russia," September 9, 2016, <http://www.intellinews.com/transnistria-s-president-issues-decree-on-unification-with-russia-105737/>; Cristi Vlas, "Transnistria Leader Signs Decree to Synchronize the Legislation with Russia," *Moldova.org*, September 12, 2016, <http://www.moldova.org/en/transnistria-leader-signs-decree-synchronize-legislation-russia/>.

### Russian Military Posturing

Although Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and some commentators were quick to point to the possibility that the buildup of Russian forces around Ukraine could be a pretext for a large-scale invasion, the reality looks different.<sup>37</sup> Rather, the buildup of forces and the associated military drills in Transnistria at the time appeared like they were aimed at pressurizing Ukraine in the run-up to talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Merkel and French President Hollande on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in September 2016.<sup>38</sup> The most likely logic behind such a move is to create a conflict – either real or imagined – and offer to resolve it on terms favorable to Moscow.

Although Putin did not succeed in securing concessions on the situation in Ukraine during the G20 Summit, the latest Crimean crisis is illustrative of the Kremlin's strategy. Militarily, it appears that Russia is playing a 'long game' whereby it is positioning its forces in such a way that it can dominate Ukraine for years to come. Already for a few years has Russia been moving brigades and divisions from other regions in Russia closer to Ukraine, in part with the aim of restoring the Russian military presence on its western frontiers to what it was before 2009.<sup>39</sup> The tension with Ukraine in August 2016 over the alleged terror plot in Crimea enabled Russia to create an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) zone that extends north into a large part of Ukraine and across much of the Black Sea.<sup>40</sup> Under the cover of 'heightened tensions' and 'countering Ukrainian aggression' Russia has moved tens of thousands of soldiers to newly built installations within easy striking distance of Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> What is more, the desire on the part of EU leaders to de-escalate made sure that these moves could be made without immediate consequences.<sup>42</sup>

This structural repositioning of forces fits within a longer term trend. After the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, it became clear that the Kremlin's priority lay with preventing the further integration of former Soviet states with western institutional structures, NATO in particular. Integration with the EU, however, was not by and large considered to be viewed as threatening by Moscow. The annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine have since put a dent in that belief.<sup>43</sup> When Moldova signed the Association Agreement, Moscow imposed trade sanctions. This goes to show that Russia is keen to keep its ability to keep the region's western ambitions 'in check' and that it is not afraid to resort to punitive measures in order to prove its point. In the case of Moldova, it needed not to resort to military action given that the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria already allows Russia to have this kind of leverage over Moldova's westward

**Russia is keen to keep its ability to keep the region's western ambitions 'in check' and [...] it is not afraid to resort to punitive measures in order to prove its point.**

37. Reid Standish, "Putin Visits Crimea After Ukraine Warns of 'Full-Scale Russian Invasion,'" August 19, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/19/putin-visits-crimea-as-ukraine-warns-of-full-scale-russian-invasion-kiev-caucasus-2016/>; Andrew Hammond, "Russia Is Teetering on the Brink of War with Ukraine," *The Independent*, August 24, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/russia-is-teetering-on-the-brink-of-war-with-ukraine-a7207411.html>.

38. Neil Buckley, "Putin's Bare-Knuckle Diplomacy ahead of G20," *The Financial Times*, September 1, 2016, <http://blogs.ft.com/the-world/2016/09/putins-bare-knuckle-diplomacy-ahead-of-g20/>.

39. Michael Kofman, "Putin's Military Is Playing the Long Game in Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, August 31, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/31/dont-look-now-but-russias-got-ukraine-surrounded-crimea/>.

40. Kathleen Weinberger, "ISW Blog: Putin's Gambit in Ukraine: Strategic Implications," September 3, 2016, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/09/putins-gambit-in-ukraine-strategic.html>.

41. James Marson and Thomas Grove, "Russia Builds Up Army Near Ukraine Border," *Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-builds-up-army-near-ukraine-border-1471537008>.

42. Weinberger, "ISW Blog: Putin's Gambit in Ukraine: Strategic Implications."

43. Rob de Wijk and Sijbren de Jong, "The European Union as a Geopolitical Player," in *Fit for the Future? Reflections from Leiden on the Functioning of the EU*, ed. Bernard Steunenberg, Wim Voermans and Stefaan Van den Bogaert (Leiden: Eleven, 2016), 243–64.

ambitions. At the same time, the presence of the Russian military in this region enables Moscow to exert pressure on Ukraine's southwest. By using the break-away republics in Moldova and Ukraine, Putin aims to pressure Europe into lifting the sanctions against Russia in the medium term without actually making any concessions on the Minsk II cease-fire agreement. Seen from this perspective, Moscow has no incentives to ever relinquish its foothold in Transnistria and the Donbas.

### Moldova and the West: Hesitant Integration

In contrast to Russian-Moldovan interaction around 2013, cooperation between the EU and Moldova increased around this time (see Figure 3.39). Talks on the Association Agreement intensified, leading to the agreement's provisional entry into force in 2014. Since then however the eruption of the corruption scandal has caused the EU's stance towards Moldova to change leading to a decrease in verbal cooperation. In July 2015, after more details about the banking fraud emerged, the EU moved to suspend budget support to Moldova.<sup>44</sup> Moldovan authorities then subsequently threatened to reconsider Moldova's pro-EU orientation in favor of one more focused on Moscow.<sup>45</sup> Worse for Europe, the scandal has caused the Moldovan population to lose faith in the pro-EU credentials of the ruling coalition and it has tainted the image of Europe in Moldova.<sup>46</sup> According to the latest public opinion poll, popular support for the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union is higher than it is for integration with the EU, which is a worrisome development for Brussels.<sup>47</sup>

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As far as US-Moldovan relations are concerned, Figure 3.39 shows noticeable peaks in verbal cooperation between 2009 and 2012. After the rise to power of pro-Western parties in September 2009, diplomatic cooperation intensified between the two countries, also complemented by the provision of bilateral financial and military assistance. The former primarily concerned additional economic aid on top of foreign aid the US provides. Moldova has been receiving aid from the Millennium Challenge Corporation since 2010 with the aim of upgrading its infrastructure and to facilitate the export of agricultural products.<sup>48</sup> US military support increased in 2009 in the wake of the Georgian-Russian war. US support in practice boils down to supplying basic military equipment and the provision of training to Moldovan servicemen. The peak in material cooperation following 2011 can be attributed to joint investigative efforts undertaken in order to interdict the sale of nuclear materials in Moldova as well as the counter-proliferation training provided by US experts to Moldovan police officers.<sup>49</sup>

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44. Kinga Jaromin, "EU Freezes Funding for Moldova," *EurActiv.com*, July 10, 2015, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/eu-freezes-funding-for-moldova/>.

45. Montesano, van der Togt and Zweers, "The Europeanisation of Moldova: Is the EU on the Right Track?"

46. Seddon, "Outrage over Moldova Bank Scandal Threatens Reforms."

47. Institutul de Politici Publice (IPP), "Barometer of Public Opinion - Republic of Moldova" (Institutul de Politici Publice, November 2015), [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/Brosura\\_BOP\\_11.2015\\_first\\_part\\_ENGLISH\\_V1.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/Brosura_BOP_11.2015_first_part_ENGLISH_V1.pdf).

48. Woehrel, "Moldova: Background and U.S. Policy."

49. Ibid.



### Nuclear Trafficking

Also worth noting is the increase in material conflict between the US and Moldova and the EU and Moldova in the third quarter of 2015. That year, during a sting operation, Moldovan police working with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation were offered a large amount of radioactive cesium.

The resultant bust was the fourth attempt in five years to smuggle nuclear material to extremists in the Middle East using Moldova as a transit corridor. Earlier cases in 2010, 2011 and 2014 saw smugglers attempting to sell uranium in various grades.<sup>50</sup> In an investigative report by the Associated Press, Moldova has been described as a 'thriving black market in nuclear materials'.<sup>51</sup>

Illicit nuclear trafficking through Moldova flourishes given that Transnistria, as an internationally unrecognized entity, serves as a choke point for law enforcement; the Moldovan police holds no jurisdiction and criminal records are not shared with international law enforcement agencies. The biggest problem, however, is that the 411 km-long border separating Moldova from Transnistria is not formally administered. This leaves more than a quarter of Moldova's borders virtually unattended.<sup>52</sup> It thus should not come as a shock if more of these cases present themselves in the future.<sup>53</sup> A factor seen as complicating the threat of nuclear smuggling is the breakdown of intelligence sharing between the US and Russia following the events in Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>

This is not to say that the threat posed by the unadministered borders has not been recognized by the Moldovan authorities. On the contrary, measures have been taken in order to strengthen border management in the east of the country. The European Commission established the European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine in 2005 with the aim of enhancing effective border control through the provision of training, operational advice and monitoring.<sup>55</sup> At the same time the OSCE established a 'project office' in Chisinau. Although its mission to Moldova is primarily responsible for facilitating the peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, its mandate also extends to arms control activities.<sup>56</sup> In 2011, the Moldovan government requested the support of the OSCE in the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1540, the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention, as well as the 1925 Geneva Protocol, whereby the Mission provided assistance to combat illicit trafficking of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear material.<sup>57</sup> The February 2015 incident, however, shows that supporting the Moldovan authorities on this matter remains a persistent priority.

50. BBC News, "Nuclear Smuggling Deals 'Thwarted' in Moldova," *BBC News*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34461732>.

51. Kathy Gilsinan, "Why Moldova May Be the Scariest Country on Earth," *The Atlantic*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/moldova-nuclear-weapons-isis/409456/>.

52. Eliza Gheorghe, "After Crimea: Disarmament, Frozen Conflicts, And Illicit Trafficking Through Eastern Europe," Working Paper (Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, July 2015).

53. Desmond Butler and Vadim Ghirda, "AP INVESTIGATION: Nuclear Black Market Seeks IS Extremists," October 7, 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/urn:publicid:ap.org:6fd1d202f40c4bb4939bd99c3f80ac2b>.

54. Roland Oliphant, "Russian Gangs Trying to Sell Radioactive Material to Isil Terrorists in Moldova," *The Telegraph*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11916040/Criminal-gangs-attempting-to-sell-nuclear-material-to-Islamic-State.html>.

55. The European Union External Action Service, "Integrated Border Management," *European Union External Action*, (2016), <http://eubam.org/what-we-do/integrated-border-management/>.

56. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "Arms Control," OSCE, 2012, <http://www.osce.org/moldova/104945>.

57. The Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Moldova 1540 Reporting," *The Nuclear Threat Initiative*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/moldova-1540-reporting/>.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis conducted in this chapter shows that the influence of the European Union on Moldova remains significant – higher than that of Russia and the US. That said, of late, also due to the banking fraud scandal, Moldovans have started to lose faith in the pro-EU credentials of their current government – and perhaps in the EU itself, as we witness signs of increasing Russian influence in Moldova. With support for EU integration estimated to be shaky at best, the stage was all but set for the 2016 presidential election to act as a critical litmus test for Moldova's future geostrategic orientation.

Indeed, the growing public distrust of European values contributed directly to Igor Dodon's eventual victory in Moldova's 2016 presidential elections. The former leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova defeated the pro-European candidate Maia Sandu for the presidency and – in great contrast to the previous president – holds a cold attitude towards cooperation with western allies. In this new context, the constitutional neutrality of the Moldovan Republic might be significantly adjusted to favor pro-Russian interests. Despite rejecting his label as a pro-Russian politician, Dodon's politics – supported by his first acts enacted as president – present him as a proponent of normalizing Moldovan cooperation with Russia and renewing full-scale trade relations and strategic cooperation between the two countries. In particular Dodon's shift in economic and trade policy to favor the Eurasian Economic Union over the European Union Association Agreement is certain to have significant implications for Moldova in the near future. Perhaps in a further demonstration of what is yet to come, only shortly after his presidential inauguration on December 23, Dodon dismissed Moldovan Defense Minister Anatoly Salaru – who had shown support for Moldovan accession to NATO in the past – and settled on a trip to Moscow as his first formal international visit as president. Although time will surely tell exactly how Moldova's orientation will change as a result of the elections, President Dodon's most recent policy changes foretell great transformations in the Moldovan Republic's political landscape.

Overall, several things should be borne in mind when assessing Moldova's geostrategic positioning. Moldova is constitutionally neutral and has – as of yet – no formal ambition to join NATO. If it were to do so, or if it were to resort to military action to reclaim Transnistria at any point in the future, Russia will immediately turn up the heat in the separatist republic. In that respect, Russia's security interests in Moldova are clear. Moscow uses the separatist republics to keep the westward ambitions of Moldova and Ukraine in check by intermittently stoking conflict or holding military drills.

Thus, given that Russia is bent on keeping a presence in the region, a sustainable resolution of the Transnistrian conflict is unlikely. It is more expedient to focus valuable resources on those threats that are a clear danger to both the West and Russia and for which a mutual interest to tackle them ought to exist. In light of Moldova's porous border with Ukraine and the numerous incidents involving the trafficking of nuclear materials that have occurred in recent years, it is recommended to focus on countering the threat of nuclear proliferation instead. Given that both the US and Russia are members of the OSCE and the threat of proliferation affects both countries, cooperation on this issue could potentially act as a bridge in enabling (limited) progress in intelligence sharing in the area of arms control.

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#### Cover Picture

Protest riot in Chisinau. Author: VargaA.