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AN UNSETTLED NATION

Moldova in the Geopolitics of Russia, Romania, and Ukraine

With a foreword by John-Paul Himka and David R. Marples

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To my parents and my family

Foreword

John-Paul Himka and David R. Marples

Moldova is a small country, slightly larger than Belgium and slightly smaller than Taiwan; it has a population somewhat larger than that of any of the three Baltic States and is roughly equal to that of Utah (in the USA). It is essentially landlocked, except for a single port on the Danube, which can take in vessels from the Black Sea. Although the Soviets liked to call it "Sunny Moldavia," it is sunny primarily by comparison to Moscow; Chisinau does not enjoy as much sunshine as, say, Rome or Madrid. And, as the excellent text that follows makes clear, it is still Moscow, not Europe, that makes the weather in Moldova.

In this book Eduard Baidaus analyses post-Soviet Moldova, and its breakaway republic of Transnistria, at a depth not hitherto achieved, but certainly warranted. He uses a large manifold of sources—the press in several languages, interviews and surveys, the programs of political parties, schoolbooks, archival documents, memoirs, and books and articles in English, Romanian, Russian, and Ukrainian. He examines his subject from many different angles and from the viewpoint of multiple stakeholders in the ongoing crisis that is called Moldova.

It is useful to think of east-central European political geography as a palimpsest. Differences in contemporary political cultures often reflect an underlayer of old borders. It makes a difference whether a particular region was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the Russian Empire, of the Ottoman Empire or Habsburg monarchy, or—as is really very common—of different polities over time, as states expanded, contracted, or were partitioned. In the case under examination in this monograph, the most relevant buried border is that produced by World War II and its aftermath.

As a result of its alliance with Nazi Germany in 1939, the Soviet Union acquired new territories to the west, and the border between the old Soviet territories and the new ones remains salient in several cases. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were incorporated into

the USSR in 1940. Today these states are the only post-Soviet countries that have been accepted into NATO and the EU. In 1939, the Soviets took the Ukrainian-inhabited regions of Galicia and Volhynia from dismembered Poland. And in every post-independence election, these regions of Ukraine have voted differently from the rest of the country; there are also religious, linguistic, cultural, and memory issues that differentiate these regions from the rest of Ukraine. Moldova also has a cleavage along the same border. Most of Moldova was acquired by the USSR from Romania in 1940, but part of it, on the left bank of Dniester, had been a part of the Soviet state from the beginning. It is this latter part that formed the basis of Transnistria, the breakaway republic that made war with the rest of Moldova and remains a wound in the Moldovan polity and society to this day. The unpacking of the latter sentence is what this book is about.

The continuing power of the World War II border suggests some interesting points. One is that it helps explain the continuity of Russian policies in the region even when different leaders have been at the helm in Moscow. As Eduard was handing in the chapters of the dissertation on which this book is based, major events were unfolding in Moldova's neighbor, Ukraine—the Euromaidan, the invasion and annexation of Crimea by Russia, the "Russian Spring," and the outbreak of war in eastern Donbas. What struck us as we were reading Eduard's texts against the background of the Russian intervention was all the similarities between what happened in Moldova in the early 1990s and the history unfolding in Ukraine in the mid-2010s. Russian tactics and policies were strikingly similar, and even some of the same military personnel were involved in both cases. Yet, in the Moldovan conflict, Boris Yeltsin—the politician who had shortly before dissolved the Soviet Union—headed the Russian state, and in the Ukrainian conflict, it was Vladimir Putin.

The similarities in policy and tactics indicate that, aside from the political ideas of individual leaders, structural reasons have to be taken into account in order to understand what was happening. One of these is clearly the division between old-Soviet Moldova and Moldova that was incorporated into the Soviet Union after

World War II. Different former Soviet borders have also been a major factor in other post-Soviet conflict situations, notably the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the wars over Nagorno-Karabakh, most recently in 2020.

The division between the two Moldovas also indicates how important the interwar period was for shaping political cultures. The bulk of what is Moldova today spent the interwar period within Romania, a state that espoused nationalism and a unified Romanian identity. But breakaway Transnistria was originally forged under the direction of the 'Man of Steel.' Stalin wanted to create a new Soviet man and managed to succeed in producing many copies of the *homo sovieticus*. It must be these differing experiences, lasting only two decades, that created such different political cultures in what later became our contemporary state of Moldova. Although all of Moldova had spent fifty years together in the Soviet Union before the land became independent, it was not enough to erase the distinct political cultures.

The fifty years was enough, however, to disperse Russophones throughout the new territories acquired as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and World War II. Jobs in the communist and state apparatus brought Russians into these territories, and sometimes the dispersion of Russians and Russophones was a direct result of Soviet population policy. Russians account for a quarter of the population of Latvia and Estonia. Russophones still make up about 20 percent of the population of Lviv, the city considered to be the bastion of Ukrainian nationalism. In Moldova, about 15 percent of the population uses Russian for everyday communication. Language spoken does not directly translate into particular political opinions. However, Russophones read, listen to, and watch—in addition to local Russian-language media—media produced in Russia, media that advocate pro-Russian political and geopolitical positions. To some extent, these Russophones are like the *Pieds-Noirs* of revolutionary Algeria, and the Russian state understands them to be a form of geopolitical capital.

But what interest would Russia have in little Moldova, some seven hundred miles west of the current Russian border? The answer has little to do with the sunshine in the republic, and more to

do with its strategic location. During the Russian Spring in Ukraine, Putin advanced the idea of "Novorossiya," a territory carved out of Southern Ukraine that would connect Russia with the Crimean Peninsula and beyond, to the border of Transnistria. Ukraine would have been deprived of a sea coast and reduced drastically in size. Both Ukraine and Moldova would be demoted to client states. After all, how could Moldova stand up for itself against a neighbor like Russia, boasting a population over forty times as large, a GDP over a hundred times as large, and a land mass close to five hundred times as large? The Novorossiya project would have given Russia access to the mouth of the Danube and also closer to that long-time lodestar of Russian geopolitics, the Bosphorus.

As we write, relations between Russia and the West are at a low point, and they make no secret of being geopolitical rivals. There are many pro-Western Moldovans and Ukrainians who look to North America and the European Union to help them withstand Putin's neoimperialist designs. But there are no pro-Moldovan forces in the West, and the USA and Canada are the only Western countries that can be characterized as, to a certain extent, pro-Ukrainian. From the perspective of the European Union, both countries are solidly in the Russian sphere of influence, as is Belarus. Membership in the European Union is not on offer to any of these countries. The EU offers verbal support of movements championing Western values in these countries, but it does not want to sour relations with resource-rich Russia any further.

At the start of 2022, the situation in Russia's 'Near Abroad' appeared to be reaching a crisis point. One report suggested that there was a Russian plan to stage provocations in eastern Ukraine as a premise for a Russian invasion. Over 100,000 Russian troops had massed behind the border, equipped with modern tanks and missiles. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov issued an ultimatum that NATO must state unequivocally that Ukraine would never be admitted as a member. He expressed his anger that there had been no response to the Russian terms and that the Russian leadership "would not wait forever." Similar reports were coming

out of Georgia, and also Moldova. The effrontery of such an ultimatum notwithstanding, it offers an indication of how important these territories remain to the current Russian government.

In 2021, the geographical region that Russia sought to control was facing a new phenomenon, namely a refugee crisis that was clearly initiated in one of Vladimir Putin's dominions, namely Belarus, still under the *de facto* leadership of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, despite his failure to win the presidential election held on August 9, 2020. Having repressed several mass protests, Lukashenka has in a very real sense become Putin's vassal. Dependent on Russian support with military aid and even national media, as well as large-scale loans, Lukashenka announced his decision to allow would-be migrants to come to Belarus with short-term visas and migrate to the EU through the border with Poland. A human crisis was created when the Poles refused admission for the migrants to enter and sent 10,000 troops to guard their border, leaving many Kurds, Iraqis, and others to roam the Belavezha forest for weeks in search of food.

This book is a clearly written and incisive analysis of the nature of the 'Russian World' that relies not only on brute force but also propaganda and hybrid warfare disseminated through social media. Russia has several advantages. First of all, all the involved countries were formerly part of the Soviet Union until 1991. Second, except for Ukraine, they can be categorized as small states, and third, they depend to a greater or lesser extent economically on the Russian resources of oil and gas. Lastly, as the wars in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine between 1992 and 2015 demonstrate, the governments are very much at the mercy of the Russian Army if they are unable to reach an agreement with Moscow. In December 2021, before his summit with Putin, US president Joe Biden affirmed that the United States would not aid Ukraine if the Russians cross the border. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are not members of NATO.

Though it has not offered membership, the European Union is interested in the future of these states and has been prepared to cooperate with them since 2009 through the Eastern Partnership project (EP), which also includes Armenia and Azerbaijan, two countries that continue to cross swords over the status of Nagorno-

Karabakh. Potentially, at least five of the six EP members could apply at some point for EU membership—Belarus is probably too close to Russia for such an application to be realistic. It was the promise of Association Membership in the EU and the refusal of then Ukraine president Viktor Yanukovych to sign it that brought Ukrainians to the Maidan in the center of Kyiv in November 2013. Moldova is a very complex case since it is also linked closely with Romania, as this book shows. Romania was accepted as an EU member in 2005 with formal membership starting on January 1, 2007. In 2020, Moldova elected a pro-European president Maia Sandu. Just a year later, it finds itself in an energy crisis, with a 65.8 million Euro debt to Russia's Gazprom and price hikes that threaten to cause national upheaval. The crisis once again illustrates Russian leverage through energy resources.

But what are the Russian goals in the region it considers its neighborhood and legitimate area of control? To what sort of future can "Sunny Moldova" aspire? Its breakaway region, Transnistria has been 'independent' from Moldova for more than three decades. It is not recognized by a single UN member, and two of the three countries that recognize it (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) are themselves breakaway states from Georgia that also lack international validity. The other is Artsakh, formerly the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan. Transnistria is a territory that exists through Russian collusion and support but Russia has not sought outright incorporation, just as it has not sought to annex South Ossetia or the breakaway regions of the Donbas. Thus, the truculence often displayed by Putin coexists with caution and limited goals.

On the other hand, as Eduard Baidaus shows, there are limits to what can be achieved through negotiations. Russia has undermined the stability of the EU states, it has used energy resources as a weapon, and it has resorted to outright threats when faced with the expressed wishes of these states to seek the defensive security of NATO membership. Thus, the future of Moldova depends very much on two factors.

First of all, the leadership of Vladimir Putin in Russia will not last forever. The anti-Western rhetoric emanating from Moscow

and Russia's focus on both its military and mercenaries to intimidate its neighbors is of relatively recent origin. Between 1992–1995, after Russia became independent, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev attempted to orient the country toward the West. Even in 2001, just a year into the Putin presidency, there were signs of US-Russian cooperation in the fight against terrorism following the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. Putin made comparisons with Russia's war in Chechnya and embraced a common enemy: militant Islam. The current impasse dates back to 2008 with the war in Georgia and the severing of relations with Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko (under the 2008–2012 presidency of Dmitry Medvedev in Russia). The 2013–2014 Euromaidan in Ukraine that removed a pro-Russian president was a culmination point. The Russian leadership perceived the uprising as Western-initiated and funded and as one of a series of "color revolutions" that would eventually be expanded to Russia.

Since then, the position of the Russian leaders has become increasingly entrenched and obdurate. The hard-line position extends beyond politics: indeed Putin, Lavrov, and others appear to regard the entire democratic West as degenerate and weak, from "Gay Evropa" to Donald J. Trump, Me Too, and Black riots. The practice is to probe constantly for weaknesses in the armor of democracy while espousing bold and angry narratives about NATO expansion into traditional Russian enclaves and announcing red lines that cannot be crossed.

But herein also lies a concealed weakness: Russia is not an economic power. It is a military state with a relatively small economic base and is run by a near-dictator and his security forces are backed by powerful oligarchs. Moreover, the Russian economy is heavily dependent on nonrenewable oil and gas. Living standards outside the two major cities are low. The ruble plummets every time there is an international crisis, and an invasion, say, of Ukraine would likely result not only in another currency fall, but also in a bloody conflict, thousands of casualties, and deeper Western sanctions that would destroy any possibility of economic growth. The world is global, and no state is autarkic. Russia depends on exports of energy to Europe, particularly Germany, its closest partner. It cannot

isolate itself from economic partners and the EU is vastly superior to the Russian Federation as an economic power. In short, it is weaker than it appears.

For any authoritarian leader, a key area of concern is an exit strategy, yet Vladimir Putin does not appear to have one. Instead, he has amended the Russian Constitution so that his potential term expires only in 2036 when he would be 83 years of age. It is unlikely that he will remain for so long. We have seen major anti-Putin protests in 2012 and 2020, and mass protests in both Belarus and Kazakhstan between 2020 and 2022 against long-standing leaders who are close to Putin. But the possibility of a more democratic leadership also seems remote, so one cannot anticipate major changes in the approach to the neighborhood.

The future of Moldova therefore will be dependent on its actions and the response of the United States and European Union to Russian aggression. A viable response may require recognition of the reality: Russia is no longer a Great Power and relies heavily on threats, bluster, and media propaganda to create an image of a regional colossus that has legitimate concerns in independent states of the former Soviet Union.

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