



NATO-MOLDOVA: DEVELOPING NEW AREAS OF COLLABORATION

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On December 8, 2017 the government of Moldova, an eastern European country of three million inhabitants located between Romania and Ukraine, finally opened a long awaited NATO Liaison Office in Chisinau. NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller and the prime minister of Moldova, Pavel Filip, were present at the occasion. Moldova has been delayed for NATO membership for over two years.

The Prime Minister reconfirmed Moldova's determination to actively support efforts to promote peace and security in Europe by the participation of the military contingent of Moldova to the NATO-led operation in Kosovo. Deputy Secretary General Gottemoeller has reassured the people of Moldova that "NATO fully respects Moldova's neutrality, independence, and sovereignty." The bilateral collaboration will be developed in new areas such as cyber threats, resilience and civil emergency preparedness and will inform the citizens about the benefits of cooperation with the North Atlantic Block.¹ Further, NATO will provide support for the training of almost 2,000 Moldovans in areas such as fighting corruption in the defense sector, border security and civil emergency planning, as well as initiatives to help Moldova destroy dangerous stocks of pesticides, anti-personnel mines, surplus munitions and rocket fuel, which have received 4.5 million Euro from the Alliance. Basically an assistance institution, the centre had been opened at a request by the

¹ "NATO's Liason Office *inaugurated* at Moldova's capital", *moldpres*, December 12, 2017.www.moldpres.md

Moldovan cabinet. It is not a military base made on the model of the offices opened in other neutral states.²

However, are Moldovians actually reassured? Is it a mere coincidence or NATO is strengthening its borders after the Russians have unfolded their interests in the Eastern Europe particularly, since the Crimean invasion in 2014? It can be used to conflagrate the Transnistrian conflict. Transnistria is a small breakaway state located between Moldova's eastern borders with Ukraine having a Russian speaking population. In November 1990, limited fighting broke out between Russian-backed pro-Transnistrian forces and the Moldovan police and military. The fighting intensified in March 1992, and lasted until an uneasy yet lasting ceasefire was established on July 22, 1992. Transnistria believes that its identity would be overwhelmed by the ethnic Moldovan majority and sees the Russian military presence as protection. Moldova contends that those Russian troops violate its territorial integrity and that Moscow has repeatedly blocked any attempts to reach a settlement. For these reasons, many see parallels between this long-simmering "frozen conflict" and the ongoing situation between Crimea and Ukraine.³

Furthermore, the strains on transatlantic relationships are also intensifying. Is it a part of more assertive, securitized outlook needed for NATO's more sustainable and ambitious strategy? NATO has to protect, adapt, and advance its role in the Russian neighborhood particularly, in the absence of consensus on the scope of its political role and on the division of labor between itself and the EU. The opening of the office also raises questions on the sustainability of the neutrality of Moldova, though the status of neutrality is not affected by the opening of the NATO Liaison Office since NATO countries do not deploy their troops or military personnel on the neutral territory nor do they engage them in the supply of arms.

Recent public opinion polls within Moldova have showed rather low support for its membership in NATO, with only 15.9% responders in favor of the idea.⁴ The Moldovan politicians have avoided public discussions regarding building closer ties with NATO. President Igor Dodon, who was temporarily suspended from office for failing to swear in proposed Defence Minister Eugen Sturza" in his remarks on the social media showed concern on the opening of a NATO liaison office in Chisinau. He suggested that the entire society should be brought for discussion on the cooperation of Moldova with military blocs. President Dodon expressed his concern about the opening of the NATO office on his facebook page. He reiterates that "the haste with which the Moldovan

² "Relations with the Republic of Moldova", *NATO OTAN*, December 8, 2017. www.nato.int

³ "Moldova Transnistrian conflict" *The World Post*, December 27, 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com

⁴ "What Moldova's New Office means for Russia and the EU", December 12, 2017, *euronews*, <http://www.euronews.com>

government acts on this issue carries significant risks to the national security of the state. Such moves made by the government and the parliamentary majority are certainly aimed not at strengthening the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of the Republic of Moldova,"⁵ Similarly, the pro-Russian parties have long speculated on the matter for "sowing fear and anxiety about Moldova's relations with NATO."⁶ The pro-Russian Party of Socialists has been the most vocal opponent of the NATO Liaison Office, staging numerous protests.

Moldova is constitutionally a neutral state. It apparently seeks to draw closer to Euro-Atlantic standards and institutions. Its relations with NATO started when Moldova joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992 and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994. Moldova's program of cooperation with NATO is set out in an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), which is agreed every two years. At the NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014, Allied leaders offered to strengthen support, advice and assistance to Moldova through the new Defense and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative. Moldova has contributed troops to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) since March 2014.⁷

Similarly, the EU can take care of ensuring Moldova's energy security and settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, and the US and NATO will take care of the military and political sphere yet the three states of the Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova are still struggling between the divide of NATO's and EU's security, political and economic structures. The geographical tug of war in the post-Soviet continuing transitional period is far more threatening and challenging. Russia is pursuing its own integrationist policies while navigating a super power status and EU is looking for sustained relations with the Eastern European countries particularly, after the Crimean crisis. The weakening role of NATO in Trump's era is also equally vulnerable. The pull in each direction of the geographical proximity is more taxing for Moldova since it entails strong shared history, culture, religion, economic ties, and uniquely divided domestic political circumstances leaning towards Russia and EU. The information division thus developed would be more conflict prone.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Micheal E. O'Hanlon, "Beyond NATO: a new security architecture for Eastern Europe", *MarshalPaper*, www.brookings.edu