
MOLDOVA: EUROPE'S POOREST NATION TORN BETWEEN RUSSIA AND EUROPEAN UNION

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By Elle Hardy in Moldova

A young boy wearing a military uniform looks into the camera while holding an old photo of a soldier.

As the nations of the former USSR mark Victory Day on May 9, the presence of US troops in the capital of the former Soviet republic of Moldova, Chisinau, has highlighted the deep divide in Europe's poorest country.

On Sunday pro-Russian sympathisers in Chisinau attempted to provoke US troops as they displayed military hardware ahead of Monday's parade to commemorate the Soviet Union's role in the defeat of Germany in 1945.

Known as the Immortal Regiment for the soldiers who fought in the anti-Nazi campaigns, the day is celebrated as Victory Day in Russia and the former Soviet republics.

Former president and current Communist Party leader, Vladimir Voronin, warned the US its troops' presence would have "incalculable repercussions", while the leader of the pro-Russian opposition Socialist Party, Igor Dodon, called it a "military occupation".

Pro-Western President Nicolae Timofti tried to dampen anxieties over the US forces, stationed just outside of Chisinau for two weeks of joint military exercises.

"The presence of the American military is the continuation of the traditions of the Allies, who were a part of the [anti-Nazi] coalition, and who are commemorating the victims of the Second World War," he said.

US presence a 'provocation'

His words were of little consolation to Lena Zhenevskaya, 39, who spent last week manning an anti-NATO stall on Chisinau's main boulevard.

"The ninth of May is our military day and we consider this a big provocation," she said.

"Many children of the soldiers of WWII will be here. How can we allow this action in our country?" Ms Zhenevskaya asked.

Wedge between Ukraine and Romania, Moldova's politics are usually divided by allegiance rather than ideology. Its territory also contains two Russian-backed breakaway republics, Gagauzia and Transnistria.

Further muddying the region's complex allegiances, Moldova's powerful pro-Russian oligarch, Vlad Plahotniuc, visited Washington last week, upsetting many ordinary citizens.

"This humiliation will not be easily forgotten," said political commentator Alex Cozer, after photos emerged of Mr Plahotniuc meeting with US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland.

"Confidence in the US, the West and the EU will decrease," he said.

According to Moldova's Infotag newsagency, Ms Nuland promised Mr Plahotniuc, a senior official of Moldova's Democratic Party, US support for democratic reforms.

Pressure, meanwhile, is increasing on Moldovans to decide which of the economic and political blocs dividing Europe they will join.

A movement to unify Moldova with its former countrymen in Romania has the support of about one-fifth of the population, but Mr Dodon has declared the push a US-backed "unification plot".

In 2007, about 70 per cent of Moldovans supported EU integration, but recent polls showed support had ebbed, while Moldovans in favour of closer ties with Russia had steadily increased to

47 per cent.

"Until recently, EU integration had no alternative," said Moldovan political analyst Mihai Popoi.

"But now Russia is strongly pushing its project of a Eurasian Union."

Corruption behind falling support for EU

Eleanor Knott, a London School of Economics expert on the region, said Moldova's endemic corruption had been the catalyst for the change in public sentiment.

"Support for Europeanisation is waning because it's become associated with corrupt, self-enriching parties that are unwilling and unable to reform," she said.

A popular anti-corruption movement sprang up overnight in November 2014, after \$US1 billion, one eighth of Moldova's finances, was siphoned to offshore bank accounts on the eve of the national election.

The ensuing protests against the political elite, including Mr Plahotniuc, momentarily unified Moldovans across the East-West political divide, a feat all but impossible since independence in 1991.

"Down with the mafia!" became a catch-cry of the protesters.

Yet today, 18 months after it began, that movement is a memorial to its own failure. Encampments outside the state assembly and parliament are mostly empty tents, with more signs than occupants.

"It is not Maidan, it does not even smell like Maidan," said Olya Marko, 21, echoing the despair of many who had hoped for change in the image of Ukraine's 2014 Maidan revolution.

But issues closer to home have proved more important.

"The price of gas has gone down 10 per cent, people are still getting paid despite the rumours all

winter that they would not," Mihai Popoi explained.

"When things aren't really falling apart, it gets harder and harder to stage mass protests. The anti-corruption movement has no meaningful strategy."

The failure of the anti-corruption movement to translate its mass appeal to political power means Moldovans are returning to thinking about the nation's strategic outlook as a way of raising living standards and reducing unemployment.

"Any sane person would agree that Moldova needs relations with both the Eurasian Union and the European Union, yet you can't be a member of both," said Eleanor Knott.

Perhaps more attention should have been paid to Mr Dodon's ominous warning in his February interview with Russian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda.

"Nobody wants blood, but the clock is ticking," he declared.

Kaynak/Source: