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## Taking Stalk of What's at Stake in Europe's Frozen Conflicts on the First Anniversary of Russia's War in Ukraine

### Part I: Russia seeks to destabilise Moldova and its separatist region of Transnistria

#### Background

For the past three decades, Moldova has remained in a frozen conflict with pro-Russian separatist, who remain to this day supported and protected by Russian "peacekeepers" (estimates between 1,700-2000 troops) in the Transnistria region, home to a predominantly Russian speaking population situated to the east of the country. Prior to the dissolve of the Soviet Union, efforts were already underway to make Moldovan the official language, a move that alarmed people in the Transnistria region. In response, the region declared independence in 1990 causing an eruption of clashes to break out between supporters loyal to the Moldovan government and pro-Russian secessionist. Fighting intensified in March 1992 after the former Soviet 14th Guards Army joined secessionist forces. Several months later, a cease-fire between the Moldovan government and secessionist was reached that entailed Russian troops remaining in the Transnistria region as peacekeepers. Although Russia guaranteed in 1999 the removal of its troops by 2002, they have remained there ever since.

#### Why Transnistria is important

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine one year ago, Transnistria has strategically become more important. Transnistria represents a potential opening of a western front in Ukraine for Russia, a move that would not only provoke domestic chaos in Moldova, but also create a new crisis for NATO on its southeastern border – a scenario the Ukrainian and Moldovan military are both readily aware of and one that western allies are increasing paying attention to. As previously mentioned, Russia already maintains a large number of troops in the region. However, only one third of them have the legal mandate to be in Moldova as part of a peacekeeping mission. The remaining two-thirds are stationed there without authorization and are there under the pretext of guarding the old-Soviet ammunition depot near the Transnistrian village of Cobasna, one of the

largest arms deposit in Europe with an estimated 20,000 tons of ammunition and military equipment.

#### Why Moldova fears it could be next

When the war first broke out in Ukraine, Moldova feared that the conflict would spill over into its country and that Russia might also seek to invade it too. Although, President of Moldova Maia Sandu and her pro-European government condemned Russia's invasion in Ukraine, they have sought to avoid any direct confrontation with Russia by maintaining Moldova's military neutrality as enshrined in its constitution. Nevertheless, Moldova has sought to more aggressively protect itself by increasing its defense capabilities. Reportedly, Moldova's defense budget has already increased by 70 percent since 2022, equating to nearly 85 million euros.

At the same time, Moldova, along with Ukraine and Georgia applied for a fast-track EU membership a week after the war started to reaffirm their desire to be part of the EU bloc. From the onset, Russia has showed its disdain for the pro-EU government of Moldova who came into power in 2021. Russia has since then sought to undermine the government by destabilizing the country's domestic political situation, by cutting its gas supplies and supporting pro-Russian opposition parties. After Russia's Gazprom decided to hike up gas prices and slash its supply to Moldova, the country faced an energy crisis that caused inflation to skyrocket and public unrest. Moldova's situation has further escalated as it has been forced to face multiple crisis since the war broke out – inflation, high energy prices and an influx of Ukrainian refugees.

Tension in Moldova has been at an all time high in recent weeks. Earlier this month, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky warned EU leaders at a recent summit in Brussels that his intelligence had intercepted plans by Russian security services of an alleged plot to destroy Moldova. These threats were later confirmed by Moldovan Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), who shared that they too had identified subversive activities aimed at undermining the state of the Republic of Moldova, destabilizing and violating public order. Alongside of these unsettling findings, the Prime Minister of Moldova Natalia Gavrilita announced her resignation after facing 18 months of political and economic turbulence, sparking further political unrest and chaos as the government temporarily

collapsed. Her announcement came just hours after Russian missiles reportedly flew over Moldovan airspace.

The Moldovan President has since then sought to restore political and economic stability, putting forth Dorin Recean, her former defense adviser, who has since then been sworn in as Moldova's new prime minister. As Recean continues to follow a pro-EU course of action, pro-Russian protests have continued to take place in the capital, backed by a fringe, pro-Russian party. Sandu has accused Russia of trying to use saboteurs to overthrow Moldova's leadership and prevent the country from joining the EU.

In response, Russia has accused Moldova's leaders for pursuing an anti-Russian agenda. Russia's defense ministry has further proceeded to make baseless claims that Ukraine is seeking to attack the pro-Russian territory in Moldova where Moscow has a foothold, representing a "direct threat to Russian troops in the Russian speaking region". Russia's defense ministry further stated, "The armed forces of the Russian Federation will adequately respond to the impending provocation of the Ukrainian side." Russian deputy foreign minister Mikhail Galuzin was also cited by the Tass news agency of accusing the west for instructing Moldova's government to end all correspondence with Transnistria's Moscow-backed authorities.

Russia's increasingly aggressive rhetoric and stance towards Moldova's government has heightened fears that Putin is seeking to use the same tactics as he did in Ukraine, creating a pretext for a Crimea-style annexation in 2014. After immediately dismissing Russia's groundless claims, the Moldovan government stated in a press release that "The purpose of these actions is to overturn the constitutional order, to change the legitimate power from Chişinău to an illegitimate one that would put our country at Russia's disposal to stop the European integration process, but also so that Moldova can be used by Russia in its war against Ukraine."

Deeply concerned by Russia's recent vamped up threats and efforts to further destabilise Moldova, U.S. President Joe Biden made a special point of meeting with Moldova's president recently during his visit to Poland just ahead of the one year anniversary of Russia's war in Ukraine 21 February. During his meeting, he expressed the U.S.'s continued solidarity and support of the Moldovan government and its people.

Perhaps as part of a retaliatory move, Russia announced the day after, on 22 February its decision to annul its former 2012 commitment with Moldova to resolve the Transnistria issue. Previously, Russia had promised to respect the country's "sovereignty, territorial integrity, and neutral status of the Republic of Moldova in establishing a special status for Transnistria". Russia's recent change in foreign policy has stoked fears that Putin, after nullifying

the agreement, may seek to recognize Transnistria's independence. Additionally, Russia announced 24 February that it would view any attack and/or actions taken towards its peacekeepers in Transnistria region an attack on itself. As of now, the Moldovan Foreign Ministry has stated it will "continue to demand the withdrawal of Russian military forces from the territory of Moldova following its commitments."

Considering Russia's lack of military progress in its war with Ukraine, it seems unlikely that Russia would decide to launch a new offensive in Moldova's east. However, Russia's more belligerent tone and stance towards the Moldovan government this past month suggests that the country remains at high risk, especially since Moldova is a small and relatively weak country that is not a member of NATO, making it all the more vulnerable. Meanwhile, western leaders remain on high alert, as many have found Russia's recent baseless claims eerily similar to those made last year about Russians unfairly being targeted in Donbas that Putin used to justify his invasion in the eastern part of Ukraine as a matter of self-defense.