

Russia's War on Ukraine: Consequences for Georgia and Moldova

Jakob Hedenskog & John Zachau, analysts SCEEUS

18 March 2022

Russia's unprovoked and illegal large-scale invasion of Ukraine has already had significant repercussions for the other two Eastern Partnership states with association agreements with the European Union. Moldova, which borders Ukraine, has been directly affected by a huge inflow of Ukrainian refugees, but Georgia is also feeling the impact of the war, among other things, through heightened tensions in an already polarised political field. In response to the war, the two fragile countries have been forced to make tough decisions and recalibrate their relationships with Ukraine, Russia and their western partners. If Russia manages to establish control over Ukraine or large parts of the country, both Georgia and Moldova will find themselves in even worse geopolitical and military-strategic positions and, potentially, further targeted by Putin's neo-imperialistic ambitions.

Georgia's Reaction to Russia's War on Ukraine

Russia's war on Ukraine reminds many Georgians of the Russian invasion of their own country in 2008, serves as a foreboding of potential further harm and risks changing the military power balance in the entire wider Black Sea region. The Georgian government has condemned Russia's actions and expressed solidarity with Ukraine and has also sent humanitarian aid. Moreover, it has supported initiatives for Ukraine in the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and joined the call for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate alleged war crimes.

On 3 March, Georgia also took the big symbolic step of applying for EU membership, following Ukraine's application a few days before. This marked a surprising U-turn, since the government had insisted only two days previously on sticking to its plan to apply in 2024. It is likely that the shift was influenced not only by developments in Ukraine, but also by pressure from the opposition led by the United National Movement (UNM).

The government, however, has not introduced any bilateral sanctions to reflect the western ones on Russia and Belarus. Reportedly, it has also obstructed volunteer fighters who want to leave for Ukraine. Prime minister Irakli Garibashvili of the ruling Georgian Dream party has explained this caution by claiming that Georgia is under "no danger" from Russia's attack on Ukraine, and that sanctions are ineffective and would have a negative impact on Georgia's economy.

The UNM-led opposition does not buy these arguments and is critical of the government for being too acquiescent, appeasing Moscow or even being pro-Russian. Thousands of demonstrators have repeatedly gathered to show solidarity with Ukraine, but also their disapproval of the government's approach. The ruling party has in turn accused the opposition of acting irresponsibly, including with references to the 2008 war, and of attempting to drag Georgia directly into the ongoing war. The crisis has thus intensified the already sharp polarisation of politics in Georgia.

President Salome Zourabichvili has used her largely ceremonial position to criticise both camps and call for support for Ukraine and unity within Georgia. The government has reacted to this by announcing that it will take the president to the Constitutional Court, arguing that she has overstepped her powers, among other things in recent political talks in Paris and Brussels that were not sanctioned by the government.

In response to the Georgian government's perceived lack of solidarity, Ukraine has recalled its ambassador in Tbilisi for consultations. Even before this, there were tensions between the two countries, among other things because Georgia has jailed its former president, Mikheil Saakashvili of the UNM, who is now a Ukrainian citizen, and because of the work that he and individuals linked to him have done and are doing for the Ukrainian government.

Moscow has welcomed Georgia's decision not to join with the West's sanctions. Coincidentally, Russia has also cancelled part of its trade sanctions against Georgia, which has led Ukraine's foreign ministry to call on Tbilisi to distance itself from the decision and refrain from doing business with Russia. There have also been some more critical notes from Russian officials, however, such as when the unfounded Russian accusations of US-Ukrainian biological weapons programmes also dredged up old Russian claims that a strain of African swine fever that began circulating in 2007 was developed in a Georgian laboratory, supposedly under the direction of the Pentagon.

Another aspect of the ongoing crisis is the issue of Russian émigrés relocating to Georgia to escape Russia as a new iron curtain descends around the country. This has triggered irritation and fears of further tensions with Moscow. Reports that some Russian citizens, including journalists, have been turned back at the border have been added to previous cases of denial of entry to Russian opposition politicians. The government has tried to downplay the risks and cautioned that discrimination against Russians is illegal and could have adverse effects on Georgians in Russia and the Russia-controlled parts of Georgia.

In Georgia's Russia-controlled regions, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, the supposedly independent local leaders who have in reality been instrumentalised by Moscow have welcomed Russia's actions in Ukraine. The so-called Republic of Abkhazia has followed Russia's suit and recognised the independence of the "people's republics" in eastern Ukraine, as the so-called Republic of South Ossetia had already done in 2014. These and other Russia-controlled territories abroad are heavily dependent on financial support from Moscow, however, and over time are likely to suffer significantly from the economic havoc that Putin's war is causing the Russian economy. Moreover, unconfirmed reports suggest that military assets have left the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia to Russia for further transit towards Ukraine.

Reactions in Moldova to Russia's War on Ukraine

Moldova's President Maia Sandu condemned Russia's act of war soon after the invasion began on 24 February, adding that her country, which neighbours south-western Ukraine, stands ready to assist Ukrainian citizens in their humanitarian needs. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Moldova welcomed 350,000 refugees from Ukraine between 24 February and 16 March, the largest share by any country compared to its population size. Some two-thirds have proceeded to Romania or further into the EU. Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu has warned that his country, which is one of the smallest and poorest in Europe, is "approaching breaking point", noting

the enormous influx as well as the massive economic impact of stalled trade with Ukraine and collapsed investor confidence.

As in Georgia, Moldova's pro-European government applied for EU membership on 3 March. Also like Georgia, it has not introduced any bilateral sanctions on Russia and Belarus. Popescu recalled that Moldova had already declined to enact sanctions against Russia in 2014, and thus Moldova's current abstention was a continuation of that policy. Unlike Georgia, however, Moldova has not joined the call for the ICC to investigate alleged war crimes.

Notwithstanding the EU membership application, Chisinau's attitude to Moscow can be described as cautious, which can be explained by the country's several vulnerabilities in its relations with Russia – first and foremost connected to the protracted conflict over Moldova's Transnistria region. Even more than in the case of Georgia, Russia plays a dual role in this conflict. On the one hand, Russia is a supposedly neutral mediator in the formal settlement process, which depicts Moldova and Transnistria as the sole parties to the conflict. On the other hand, Russia is the crucial supporter of the separatists in Transnistria, if not the actual aggressor against the Moldovan state. In addition to its "peacekeepers" legally deployed in the conflict area on the basis of previous agreements, Russia also has the so-called Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), which comprises approximately 1,500 soldiers that more clearly are deployed in violation of Moldova's constitution, the principle of host nation consent and, more generally, international law and the European security order.

Another vulnerability for Moldova is its almost 100 per cent dependence on gas from Russia and electricity from power plants in Transnistria. In October 2021, Moldova extended its gas contract with Russia's Gazprom following a bitter stand-off over price hikes. Moldovagaz, the national energy company half-owned by Gazprom, made the outstanding payment of a 74 million USD gas debt to Gazprom at the same time. Russian gas to Moldova is transferred through Transnistria, whose own consumption is added to the Moldovan bill. In addition, the Kuchargan Power Station, located in Transnistria and operated by the Russian-owned Moldavskaya GRES, currently provides more than 80 per cent of the electricity consumed in Moldova. On 16 March, however, after years of preparatory work and in the middle of the war, the electricity grid of Ukraine and Moldova was successfully linked to the continental European network on a trial base. This will allow both Moldova and Ukraine to import electricity from the EU.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also renewed fears of a more direct security threat to Moldova. As long as Russia's war in Ukraine was limited to the Donbas, the rest of Ukraine served as a buffer zone for Moldova and a military threat to the country was unlikely. After 24 February, however, as Russian troops captured Kherson in southern Ukraine and advanced westwards to Mykolaiv, seemingly preparing to encircle or launch an assault on Odesa, the threat to Moldova is real. The Russian military operation could be extended towards Moldova and, if successful, link up Transnistria (perhaps with Moscow recognising its "sovereignty") in the west and the Ukrainian Black Sea coast, including the illegally annexed Crimean Peninsula, to the Donbas and Russia in the east. This would create a Russia-controlled land corridor through Ukraine, possibly as part of the previously promoted "Novorossiia project", and effectively block Ukraine's access to the Black Sea, which would have a severe economic impact. An indication of this ambition is the map displayed by Belarus' dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko in a Belarusian Security Council briefing on 1 March, which disclosed plans, possibly inadvertently, for an amphibious landing near Odesa that

would advance towards and into Transnistria. Should Russia gain control of the Odesa oblast, its forces could be joined not only by the Russian forces deployed in Transnistria, particularly the OGRF, but also by the separatist Transnistrian armed and security forces.

Russia's ongoing aggression towards Ukraine can be expected to further increase the number of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Moldova and transiting the country on their way to the EU. Moreover, significant emigration of Moldovans into the EU cannot be excluded, especially since about 40 per cent of the population already have Romanian passports that allow them to settle anywhere in the EU, where many are already working on a temporary basis. If Russian or Russian-controlled troops were to cross Moldova's border with Ukraine in either direction, the ongoing crisis would drag Moldova into the conflict and lead to additional complexity, especially if the fighting were to spread to Moldovan territory. Even short of that, Moldova risks being the target of various Russian hybrid threats aimed at further undermining its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

On the one hand, Georgia and Moldova have few illusions about Russia's aggressive behaviour, outside of the Moscow-friendly opposition in Moldova, some smaller circles in Georgia and the Russian-controlled areas of both countries. Even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, there was a relatively clear understanding of the risks the two countries faced from the Kremlin's ambitions for a new security order and a Russian sphere of influence. Consequently, the governments have been trying to escape Russia's orbit by explicitly – if not ambitiously enough – striving for membership of the EU and, with regard to Georgia, also of NATO.

On the other hand, both governments subscribe to de facto policies of “not irritating” Russia, at least to a certain degree, and have hoped pragmatically to strengthen or at least maintain trade links with the country. In Moldova, this policy is less controversial given the country's significant dependence on Russia and more Moscow-leaning opposition. In Georgia, where there are fewer dependencies and memories of the 2008 war are still fresh, the result is increasing friction between the government and the opposition and, in a more recent development, also the president.

For the EU and other parts of the democratic international community, the immediate focus should not be to try to influence the two countries' stands on sanctions or to take any definite stance on their EU membership applications. Instead, the door to the EU should be kept theoretically open and creative ways explored to upgrade current relationships. As part of this, efforts must be made to support the two countries' continued stability during the economic downturn that looms. The refugee situation in Moldova is especially acute, which adds an additional burden to a socio-economic situation that had already become more precarious because of the still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Crucially, the countries' resilience to cyber and other hybrid threats need to be further strengthened, ideally also with increased cooperation on improving defence capabilities. Moreover, continued pressure for reform is needed in the areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, especially in Georgia, the once “forerunner” in the Eastern Partnership region which has recently backtracked on these issues and now suffers from unfortunate and unnecessary political tensions, both within the country and in relation to Ukraine. Last, but not least, pressure should be increased on Moscow to comply with international law and the European security order in the two countries, as it must also in Ukraine and elsewhere.