

Opinion – Moldova and Romania's Unification is Not on the Horizon

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez

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WILDER ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ, FEB 12 2023

Since the War in Ukraine commenced, a critical ally of the Republic of Moldova has been neighboring Romania. This partnership is not solely based on a shared border but on a shared language, culture, and history. Unification is a topic that is not often discussed in international relations nowadays, as there is a greater tendency for countries to break apart than to unite. However, more than a century after the 1918 merging of Moldova and Romania unification sentiments in both countries still exist. While a reunification between Chisinau and Bucharest is unlikely, these pro-unification sentiments should be discussed as they continue to influence bilateral relations.

Before the conflict, a unification hypothesis had historical reasons (the same nation, language, and culture) or strategic and economic benefits (Romania as an EU and NATO member). Moldova's application to the EU, with the country having gained candidate status in June 2022, is a more coveted objective for Chisinau than joining another state, even if this goal can only be achieved via strong partnerships. Specifically, Romania has supported its neighbor's EU application and has also helped Moldova address its ongoing energy security challenges. Understanding the history between these two states, will help us better understand this partnership's future.

Moldovans and Romanians have historical ties that date back to the 14th century. One of the earliest figures that united these territories was Dragoș Vodă or Dragoș the Founder, a Romanian landowner who became the first ruler of nowadays Moldovan territory. The land eventually became a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire from 1538 until 1812, when the Russian Empire gained its control via the Treaty of Bucharest. Five decades later, on 24 January 1859, the principalities of Moldova and Wallachia united into the so-called Little Union and would serve as inspiration for the secessionist events of 1918.

Pro-independence sentiments in the territory that occupies modern-day Moldova were stirred via the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Due to the ongoing turmoil in Russia, the territory then known as Bessarabia declared independence in 1918 and joined the Kingdom of Romania. The unification of Moldova and Romania lasted two decades and ended due to World War II and the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, as Berlin and Moscow created their short-lived spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. In 1940, following an ultimatum to the Romanian King Carol II, Romania was forced to cede some of its territory, namely Moldova, North Bucovina, and Hertsa, to the Soviet Union. Russian troops entered the Kingdom and occupied Moldova, gaining control once again. As a result, the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) was established on 2 August 1940 and would exist until the dissolution of the USSR. When Moldova claimed its independence from the USSR in August 1991, it sought to also maintain control over Transnistria.

In both countries, supporters of unification are not a small minority. According to a 2021 poll by iData, around 44% of Moldovans support unification; thus, it is no surprise that senior Moldovan policymakers routinely discuss this topic. For example, during a late December 2021 television interview, Moldovan President Maia Sandu acknowledged the iData results but noted that many Moldovans are also against it. During the interview, the Moldovan President explained, "such a major project can only be done with sufficient majority support in society. When asked, 'would 50% plus 1 be enough?' President Sandu's response was "more likely because such a project must be supported by the overwhelming majority of citizens". Still, it is unclear what amount would constitute an "overwhelming majority."

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A Romanian poll in 2018 conducted by the Romanian Bureau of Social Research showed that as many as 74% of Romanians would vote in favor of unification in a hypothetical referendum. On the other hand, 15% would vote against it, while 11% would not vote at all. Furthermore, Romanian authorities routinely praise and support bilateral relations with Moldova. As a case in point, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the unification, the Romanian Parliament passed a resolution in 2018, which pledged to unify the two countries in the future.

There are practical reasons why both governments support this idea. A hypothetical merger would mean an expansion of territory and resources and an influx of new citizens. The latter issue deserves more analysis: Romania's population is steadily declining – the country had approximately 19 million citizens in 2020, compared to 23 million in 1990 – due to migration and low birth rates. Moldova is in a similar situation as its population is around 2.5 million, down from 2.9 million when independence was gained three decades ago. Curiously, part of the problem is that many Moldovans, particularly high school and university students, have migrated to Romania to continue their education and acquire Romanian citizenship.

While about the half of Moldovans and Romanians support unification, they also believe it should not be a priority for either government. The 2018 Romanian BSR poll showed that only 27% of Romanians “considered the union necessary or very needed.” Moreover, polled Romanians do not believe this union will occur anytime soon due to Transnistria and to a lack of unification plans by Moldovan and Romanian policymakers.

Moreover, many Moldovans likely do not want their country to unify with Romania due to cultural and language barriers. During the Soviet-era, many Russians migrated to Moldova and never learned Romanian. As such, many Russian-speaking Moldovans sympathize with Russia, as they speak the language and travel there for seasonal work. Moreover, even some Moldovans who recognize and support strong relations with Romania do not want to lose their country's independence. In other words, they prefer Moldova to remain an independent state, with a seat in the United Nations and other international rights that states enjoy, rather than becoming a small part of a bigger state.

As for Transnistria, in 1990 some of its citizens led by Igor Smirnov sought to become independent and separate themselves from the MSSR; as a result, the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed on 2 September 1990. Fighting between Moldovan and Transnistrian troops commenced in early November 1990, with the Moldovans unable to cross bridges across the Dniester river to regain control. The conflict lasted until July 21, 1992, when separatists won with the vital assistance of Russian troops.

Since 1992, Transnistria has operated as a separatist region across the Dniester River. However, the region is not recognized as independent by any country, surprisingly even by Russia, Transnistria's vital benefactor and critical supporter. While Moscow has refrained from recognizing Transnistria not to affect relations with Moldova, Russian troops remain stationed in Transnistria. The Kremlin argues that these “peacekeepers” protect Transnistrians and the peace between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Moreover, from a geopolitical perspective, a Moscow-friendly Transnistria allows Russia to control Moldovan foreign policy, monitor regional developments, maintain a military presence in Southeastern Europe, and create another flank from which Moscow can observe Ukraine.

The famous 2003 Kozak proposal by the Russian government suggested the creation of a federal state in Moldova. In such a scenario, pro-Moscow Transnistria would have had veto power over any foreign policy decision by Chisinau, including potential pro-European policies like joining the EU. While Chisinau has attempted to convince the separatist leaders in Tiraspol about the benefits of closer bilateral relations, Transnistria has no particular interest in returning within Chisinau's orbit. Similarly, Moscow is not interested in Transnistria improving ties with Moldova. Moreover, Transnistria held elections in December 2021, where pro-Russian President Vadim Krasnoselsky won, de facto unaffected the current status quo.

Throughout April and May 2022, there were various explosions in the separatist region, including some close to the offices of the security ministry in Tiraspol, while a radio antenna was destroyed in the village of Maiac. However, no entity has taken credit for the blasts, nor have Chisinau or Tiraspol officially blamed an individual or organization. Nevertheless, these incidents could be utilized as a pretext by Tiraspol to justify future actions.

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Russia's control over Transnistria also serves as a tool to prevent the unification between Moldova and Romania. Given that Moscow and Tiraspol justify the Russian military's presence in Moldova to "protect" Transnistrians, a hypothetical unification plan would be used to validate their arguments. Case in point, as recently as December 2021, Konstantin Zatulin, first deputy chairman at the Russian State Duma Committee on Commonwealth of Independent States' affairs, argued that Moldova is "attempting to seize Transnistria," thereby justifying Russian military presence in the breakaway region under the banner of "peacekeepers." Apart from Transnistria, there is another area of Moldova that would reject unification: Gagauzia. The Orthodox Turkic-speaking Gagauz people live in Southern Moldova, maintaining close relations with Turkey and Russia. In 2014, the region organized an unrecognized referendum in which they rejected Moldova's plan to develop ties with the European Union.

State unification may sound like a bizarre idea, as since the end of the Cold War there have been only two instances of countries unifying into one state: the creation of the Republic of Yemen and the reunification of Germany. On the other hand, separatism, via peaceful or violent methods, has been much more common. The Moldova-Transnistria "frozen conflict" is a mix-bag of different objectives and sentiments, with some international actors, namely the Russian government, intensely involved in this decades-old situation. Moreover, while most of Moldovans want the country to remain an independent nation, unification with neighboring Romania is still important to many. A unification between Moldova and Romania will not occur anytime soon, as there is no official ongoing process, but only occasional statements by policymakers and poll results.

About the author:

Wilder Alejandro Sánchez is president of Second Floor Strategies, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. He is an analyst who monitors defense, geopolitical, and trade issues across the Western Hemisphere, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. He has monitored Moldovan affairs for over a decade.