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Panel: “The Republic of Moldova – Foreign Policy and Security Strategy under Imminent Threat”,

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On September 1, 2022, in a television interview, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov warned that any action that would threaten the security of Russian troops in Transnistria would be considered as an attack on Russia, and would receive a military response. He also said Russia would defend Russian speakers in Moldova, reminding that apart from Transnistria, the region of Gagauzia was also seeking special recognition in the country. Several hours earlier, Lavrov had accused Moldova's President Maia Sandu of blocking talks to resolve the Transnistria conflict. Moldovan authorities responded to Lavrov's comments by reminding that the country was committed to a peaceful resolution of the Transnistria conflict aiming to consolidate statehood, restore territorial integrity and complete reforms throughout the country. They also rejected claims that the rights of Russian speakers would have been infringed upon.

This short piece of news displayed at least two new geopolitical realities in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

- 1) Moldova is facing an imminent security threat from Russia;**
- 2) In response, Chisinau could either keep freezing the Transnistrian conflict to reassure Russia of its neutrality or side with Ukraine (and the West) and get sucked into the war.**

Other options are largely irrelevant in the context of the currently acute phase of Russia-West confrontation. Given the Ukrainian experience so far, I'd suggest choosing strategic prudence over sanguine adventurism while keeping Moldova on the European integration course. Ultimately, it's not for Moldova to solve the East European geopolitical conundrum, while protecting its sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity should be on top of Chisinau's security

priorities. Unlike Romania and other Central European neighbours, Moldova is not covered by Western security guarantees under NATO or EU law which makes it exceedingly vulnerable to possible Russian aggression.

I'd focus this presentation on two issues, which I believe might help Moldovan foreign and security planners to define the most appropriate strategy to allow the country to sail over the current geopolitical and strategic uncertainties in the Wider Black Sea:

- 1) What are the likeliest futures in Eastern Europe in the wake of the Ukraine war?**
- 2) How could Moldova survive, on the short term, the turmoil emerging from the “geopolitical storm” on the Black Sea?**

What are the likeliest futures in Eastern Europe in the wake of the Ukraine war?

As repeatedly signalled for, at least, the last six years, the post-Cold War European order is in tatters, while a new European order is yet to be born, and there seems to be little appetite to imagine and negotiate a new one. Nevertheless, at least over the medium and longer term, this would be the only alternative to regional war in Eastern Europe.

To make a long story short I'd recall the findings of my PhD research on “Western Confrontation With Russia: Security Scenarios Planning In The Geopolitical Area From The Baltic Sea To The Wider Black Sea (Inter-Marium)” defended at the NSPAS in autumn 2019. That doctoral research started from the assumption of four empirical scenarios being most likely for Eastern Europe in 2025-2030:

- 1. An Inter-Marium Alliance (against Russia): a simmering, managed confrontation between Russia and the West.**
- 2. The Buffer Zone: Power Sharing and Limited/Controlled Stand-off.**
- 3. Western Decline: European and Trans-Atlantic Unity broken.**
- 4. Regional Chaos: Turning Confrontation into Regional War.**

In the PhD thesis, they had been developed and their validity tested by means of the scenario planning method combined with geopolitical analysis. I have

reviewed this scenario planning exercise while taking into account various experts' assessments on how the Ukraine war might end:

If Russia won in Ukraine, further regional escalation would become likely, as explained by Chivvis and Haass. This might head Eastern Europe towards the Regional Chaos (Regional War) scenario. Meanwhile, the “Cold Peace” scenario suggested by Sushentsov and the neutral de-militarized “peaceful buffer” Ukraine scenario, suggested by Karaganov, might lead to the Inter-Marium Alliance scenario, or a variant of it, in case the EU and NATO survived a potential geopolitical defeat in Ukraine.

In case of a military stalemate in Ukraine, as suggested by Haass, Eastern Europe might be heading towards the Inter-Marium Alliance scenario with the possibility for a medium term escalation towards the Regional Chaos scenario, that is again regional war.

Finally, in case Ukraine wins as suggested by Haass, Eastern Europe might be moving towards the Inter-Marium Alliance scenario. This scenario might also emerge in case Ukraine collapsed under the socio-economic and humanitarian burdens of war, and new political leaders agreed to submit the country to Russian dominance. The latter might include a *de facto* (and possibly also *de jure*) disappearance of the Ukrainian state.

Irrespective of the outcome of the Ukraine war, the Buffer Zone scenario might only come up in case the Trans-Atlantic relations broke down either due to the emergence of a new Trumpian leader in Washington, due to the emergence of a strategic distraction of the US towards another region of the world, or as a consequence of a breakdown of the EU. The latter might be possible if, under strong domestic socio-economic pressure, older Western European members might reconsider their current position against Russia, while some of the new Central and Eastern European members might choose to remain aligned with the US, in a conflictual posture, for fear of Russian Western expansionism. In case an agreement on a Buffer Zone security arrangement with Russia failed, Eastern Europe might shift towards the Western Decline (i.e. European and Trans-Atlantic unity broken) scenario in the former two cases, whereas in the latter case the Inter-Marium Alliance scenario might best describe the future geopolitical order of Eastern Europe.

In the light of the endgames of the war in Ukraine suggested here above, it seems that the Inter-Marium Alliance and Regional War scenarios are the most likely futures for Eastern Europe. In contrast, the Buffer Zone scenario is the least likely for now, as it would assume that either Russia or the West would be prepared/forced to accept a geopolitical compromise on Eastern Europe. This is unlikely under the current Putin and Biden administrations, which seem determined to continue their geopolitical fight over Eastern Europe. On a short term, the Western Decline scenario is also hardly foreseeable, while its odds might grow as we approached the next US presidential elections. This might also change in case specific events might lead to a breakdown of Western unity.

How could Moldova survive, on the short term, the turmoil emerging from the “geopolitical storm” on the Black Sea?

When president J. Biden was sworn in as the new president of the U.S., in January 2021, many had wondered whether the Black Sea region was going to become a new platform for U.S. strategic re-engagement with Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Almost 20 months later, everyone would concede that this is where we are right now. Nevertheless, adverse geopolitical circumstances rather tipped the balance towards U.S. geopolitical and military Black Sea re-engagement.

Over the last months, NATO and the E.U. have strongly reacted against Russian war against Ukraine. So far, this has resulted in strengthening NATO’s military posture on the Eastern flank, and re-writing the NATO Strategic Concept to better counter possible Russian aggression against the Eastern members. The E.U. have also started implementing rounds of sanctions against Russia, and have granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, while conditionally promising a similar status to Georgia.

Meanwhile, Russian forces have expanded their control over Donbas, and over parts of Southern Ukraine, and are threatening to expand their occupation across the whole Northern shore of the Black Sea to establish a land bridge to Transnistria, the Eastern separatist province of Moldova. Ukrainian successful counter-offensive in North-Eastern Ukraine (Kharkiyv area) has somewhat complicated this strategic picture, while it is still unclear how it would impact

the course of the war. Those most recent Russian and Western strategic moves across the Northern and Western Black Sea shores, respectively, have added to setting-up a Russian-Turkish condominium over the South Caucasus, in the wake of the 44 days war over Nagorno-Karabakh. **Consequently, the Wider Black Sea regional balance of power is currently in flux** with the Northern seashore largely controlled by Russia (partly on land, and the rest from the sea), while NATO is bolstering its positions in the West. Turkey is in the South and controls the Straits, while Russia and Turkey share power in the East (although the most recent flare-up of violence on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border might affect this power sharing arrangement).

Within this “geopolitical storm”, smaller actors – such as Moldova- are struggling to adjust their policies to the changing regional distribution of power. How could Moldova survive the current Wider Black Sea turmoil?

So far Moldova has taken a more active, though moderately prudent, stance against the war in neighbouring Ukraine. Chisinau condemned the Russian invasion, largely respected the international financial sanctions on Russia, and voted against Russia in several international forums. It also welcomed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. Moldova has declared constitutional neutrality, while actively pursuing European integration and eventual E.U. membership.

However, Moldovan politics is largely split over the geopolitical orientation of the country, with the pro-Russian parties in the opposition. The former Socialist president of Moldova, I. Dodon (2016-2020), stated in May that Moldova "is a neutral country and in no way can or should participate in a military conflict between Russia and Ukraine."

Furthermore, Moscow has strong leverage on Chisinau due to its client relations with the separatist regime of Transnistria backed-up by a Russian “peacekeeping” contingent. Whenever Chisinau had attempted to take measures perceived in Moscow as pro-European or anti-Russian, the separatist regime in Tiraspol reacted negatively. This means that every pro-Western move of Chisinau is likely to be matched by a pro-Russian counter-move of Tiraspol.

Moreover, establishing a land-bridge from Western Russia to Transnistria across Southern Ukraine seems to remain a key military objective for Russia.

This is why Moldova is geopolitically caught between the indispensable need of European/Western financial and economic aid to help it keep the economy afloat throughout a multitude (energy, economic, humanitarian, and security) of crises, and Russian geopolitical manipulation of the Transnistrian regime. In such harsh circumstances, the outcomes of the Ukraine war might be decisive for the continued existence and the geopolitical orientation of the Republic of Moldova. To maintain the sovereignty and independence of the state, as well as to keep alive its European integration aspirations, Moldova might need to navigate in-between the conflicting interests of regional powers the E.U., Russia, and Turkey. This would require lots of pragmatism and minimum of illusive or impulsive reactions. Ultimately, Moldova must extensively practice strategic prudence and a careful “walk on a tight rope between the E.U. and Russia”. It might also anchor its energy and economic security to Romania with which it is sharing the bulk of history, language and culture. Ultimately, since constitutional neutrality and a very small army cannot secure national security at times of geopolitical turmoil, Chisinau might also cautiously seek security arrangements with interested countries.