

Transnistria energy storage

Since gaining independence in the 1990s, Moldova has been locked in a frozen conflict with Moscow over Transnistria, a Kremlin-backed separatist region near Moldova's eastern border with over a quarter of a million people.

The face-off has been tense, but maintained by a powerful connection: Moldova gets cut-rate Russian energy via Transnistria, which gets hundreds of millions of euros a year in return. The link allowed Russia to preserve control over the strategic strip of land along the Ukrainian border, where its troops are stationed despite Moldova's objections.

That dynamic is changing, however. Moldova in recent years has integrated with Europe under pro-EU President Maia Sandu. Brussels has offered millions of euros and more links to its energy supplies as part of a yearslong process to get the country, one of Europe's poorest nations, ready for EU membership.

"Moldova is no longer dependent on Transnistria," Moldovan Foreign Minister Mihai Pop?oi told POLITICO. "When it comes to gas, we buy gas on the international market. On the electricity side, we are building high-voltage lines to connect ourselves to Romania."

The switch is a problem for Transnistria, but also for the Moldovan government. Stopping payments to Transnistria would collapse the separatist state's budget and leave hundreds of thousands of people there without incomes and basic services -- a challenge that, for a country Moldova's size, would be akin to the reunification of Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"The elites in Transnistria acknowledge already that we buy electricity from the region not because we have to but because the alternative is to throw the region into a humanitarian crisis," Moldovan Energy Minister Victor Parlicov said in an interview.

"There is a strong incentive now for us to reintegrate the country peacefully," said Pop?oi, who was appointed foreign minister in January. "Solving the conflict means full reintegration and Moldova taking control of its sovereign borders."

From the bridge over the river Dniester, you can see the Russian soldiers. Wearing camouflage uniforms, they huddle together against the rain at a checkpoint emblazoned with the Soviet hammer and sickle.

Over the years, Transnistria has developed its own armed forces, public services and pension schemes -- all funded through marked-up sales of cheap Russian energy to Moldova.

"The entire region is dependent on free gas like it's drugs," said Parlicov, the energy minister, speaking from

the imposing government building in Chişinău's central square.

Moldova, too, has been hooked on the discount energy. The Russian-owned Cuciurgan power plant in Transnistria is Moldova's largest energy source, supplying around four-fifths of the country's power in exchange for hundreds of millions of euros a year. Moldova also relies on high-voltage cables running through Transnistria, giving the region -- and its Russian partners -- even more leverage.

"The beauty of it for the Russians was that by buying electricity from the Transnistrian region, we were basically financing the separatism in our own country," Parlicov said.

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