

German chancellor visits Moldova

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On August 22, German chancellor Angela Merkel visited Moldova and raised the issue of the impoverished country's accession to the European Union (EU). According to the Moldovan newspaper *Tribuna*, the meeting took place at the express request of Merkel. She is the first German leader to ever visit the country, which lies between Romania and Ukraine and was officially part of the Soviet Union until 1991. The country has just 3.5 million inhabitants.

Merkel said she supported the country's rapprochement with the EU and noted that the state had initiated extensive reforms and aligned itself with the West. The convergence process with the EU must take place "step by step", she said.

The first step would be an association and a free trade agreement as well as visa facilitation.

Together with Belarus, Armenia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia, Moldova is a member of the so-called "Eastern Partnership", which the EU launched in 2009 to increase its own influence in the region and undermine Russian influence. In recent years, however, both Belarus and Ukraine have once again strengthened their ties with Moscow.

On Wednesday, Merkel told Prime Minister Vlad Filat and President Nicolae Timofti in the capital city of Chisinau that the "Eastern Partnership" was founded "very much with an eye on the European perspective."

She also urged the government to make progress on settling the Transnistrian conflict, which is considered a prerequisite for joining the EU. Transnistria, with 555,000 inhabitants, split off from the Republic of Moldova in 1992 and is backed by Moscow. Since 2011, a series of international negotiations have taken place on the issue involving the Republic of Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE.

So far, Western officials have largely avoided advocating closer integration of Moldova into the EU. The country is politically and socially highly unstable, and Merkel is clearly positioning herself against the interests of Russia, which has determined the political

orientation of Moldova for almost 20 years,

Moldova is the poorest country in Europe; the average monthly wage is €180. About 60 percent of the working population work abroad. The real unemployment rate is estimated to be at least 30 percent. Due to the international financial crisis, the economic situation has worsened significantly since 2008. The prices of food, oil and gas have risen by up to 25 percent.

Under these circumstances, Merkel's offer of a "European perspective" is utterly cynical. The EU is itself in deep crisis, and its reactionary nature is becoming ever clearer. The brutal austerity dictates imposed by Brussels on Greece and other EU countries have resulted in widespread poverty. In neighboring Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, salaries in the public sector have been reduced by up to 25 percent following pressure from Brussels, while the country's social security system has been totally undermined.

The political situation in Moldova is dominated by bitter conflicts between different political factions over influence, power and money. There have been no fewer than nine presidential elections since 2000. The country was without a president for three years following a parliamentary stalemate between right-wing forces and the long-time dominant Communist Party.

The ruling Coalition for European Integration headed by Prime Minister Filat enjoys little popular support. Corruption is widespread, and the government is pressing ahead with a massive programme of the privatisation of public enterprises.

By pronouncing her support for EU membership for Moldova, Merkel is stoking conflict in the region and threatening to ignite a powder keg.

In advance of Merkel's visit, Moldovan nationalists had drafted a letter requesting her support for a merger between Moldova and Romania. Then, Russian and Ukrainian associations in Moldova and Transnistria addressed their own appeal to Russian president Putin to speak out clearly against the annexation of Transnistria by Moldova.

The conflict between Moldova and Transnistria goes back to the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The year 1989 witnessed the formation of the so-called Popular Front, a movement involving a number of extreme right-wing organisations, which sought the secession of Moldova from the Soviet Union. Coupling promises of freedom and prosperity with anti-Russian chauvinism, the Popular Front was able to bring together half a million people in Chisinau in August 1989.

Opposition to this movement came in particular from industrial workers in the east of Moldova. After a general strike in the summer of 1989, the vast majority of the population in Rybnica and the subsequent capital city of Tiraspol voted in a referendum for an independent “Soviet Republic of Transnistria”. In the summer of 1990, the Moldovan leadership in Chisinau also declared independence from the Soviet Union but refused to recognise Transnistria.

The conflict then grew into a full-scale war, in which more than 1,000 people lost their lives by the spring of 1992. Transnistria defended itself with the help of the Russian army, stationed in Tiraspol, but the conflict is still simmering today. Russian troops in Transnistria maintain an uneasy ceasefire in the region. Despite this, there have been repeated attempts to affiliate the territory of Moldova. Two thirds of the industrial output of the entire country is centered in Transnistria.

The ruling pro-European government in Chisinau signed a trade agreement with the EU in June aimed at improving trade relations in 2013. Moldova’s exports to the EU increased by 35 to 50 percent between 2000 and 2011, while exports to Russia fell by 20 percent. Russia responded by raising the price of oil. While Transnistria receives Russian oil virtually free, Moldova is expected to pay prices often higher than those paid by EU countries.



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