

European Union presses for association agreement with Moldova

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The 28 European Union (EU) heads of government intend to sign a comprehensive association and free trade agreement with Moldova in Brussels on June 27. The requirement for Moldovans to have visas to travel within the Schengen zone has already been abolished.

EU commission President José Manuel Barroso and Moldovan Prime Minister Iulia Leanca met in Brussels last Thursday to discuss Moldova's future relations with the EU and the political situation in the region. Leanca noted that his country was seeking full EU membership by 2019. Barroso promised that the signing of the association agreement was not "the end of the road."

The German and French foreign ministers had previously assured Moldova of closer cooperation with the EU at the end of April. On a visit to the capital, Chisinau, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Laurent Fabius confirmed that the goal was closer ties between Moldova and the EU.

Moldova is situated between Ukraine and EU member Romania and has around 3 million inhabitants. Until 1991 it was part of the Soviet Union. After independence, Transnistria broke away. The small but highly industrialised strip of land on the eastern bank of the Dniester river, with a third of its population made up of Russians and Ukrainians, has been practically independent ever since, but is not recognised by any state in international law. It is protected by Russia, which has around 1,500 soldiers stationed there.

With the Ukraine crisis, the conflict over Transnistria is once again threatening to erupt. Although it remained unresolved, it had been viewed as a "frozen" conflict. In this context, the concluding of an association agreement with Moldova is a deliberate provocation against Russia.

Barroso used his meeting with Leanca as a platform

to threaten Russia. He warned Moscow against attempts to prevent Moldova's accommodation with the EU. "Such possible action by Russia against our eastern partners would be unacceptable," stated the commission President. "Moldova is a free and independent country to reach its own decisions."

Barroso promised the government in Chisinau financial assistance of €160 million this year and signed an agreement for financial support of €25 million. For the preparation of the free trade agreement, €30 million has already been set aside.

In addition, both parties have agreed on closer cooperation in the energy sector to reduce energy dependence on Russia. To this end, further projects in the energy sector are to be initiated and collaboration with Romania deepened.

Russia has warned of consequences if the EU expands its ties with Moldova. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin warned that economic relations between the two countries would be reviewed if Moldova signs the EU association agreement. "Then the previous relations would be no more," he told the newspaper *Kommersant*.

The question was posed as to why Moscow should maintain the status quo when Moldova was no longer a "close, friendly, or even neutral state towards Russia," said Rogozin. He commented he was convinced that after the association with the EU, Moldova would join NATO as well, because this was the "norm" with EU membership.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov told Bloomberg TV that Russia had assured Moldova of its territorial integrity if it maintained its constitutionally-anchored neutrality and granted Transnistria "special status."

The massacre on May 2 in Odessa, only 60

kilometres away, where Ukrainian nationalists murdered more than 40 pro-Russian opponents of the Kiev regime, has provoked concerns among the Russian population in Transnistria. In March, the Transnistrian parliament officially sought acceptance to the Russian Federation. During a two-week petition campaign by the association of Russian communities in Transnistria, 186,000 out of a total population of 500,000 backed the idea of joining Russia.

NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen immediately condemned Lavrov's demand that Moldova remain neutral. NATO considered any assurances from Moscow about the state territory of other eastern European countries as not credible, he said during a visit to Romania. "After what we have seen in Ukraine, no one can rely any more on Russia's so-called guarantees concerning the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states," he stated.

Romanian President Traian Basescu had earlier accused Russia of intending to intervene militarily in Moldova. The Romanian government feared that Russia would seek to expand the territory it controlled up to the Danube delta, the old border of the Soviet Union, a statement from the President declared. "We believe that this is one of the goals," said Basescu. Russia's ambassador in Bucharest swiftly rejected this provocative claim.

Moldova has since deployed its armed forces to the Ukrainian border on the highest state of alert and strengthened border controls. For this purpose, President Nikolai Timofti held an emergency meeting at the beginning of May with the President of parliament, Igor Corman, Prime Minister Leanca and leading military representatives. Shortly thereafter, the Russian ambassador was called into the foreign ministry.



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