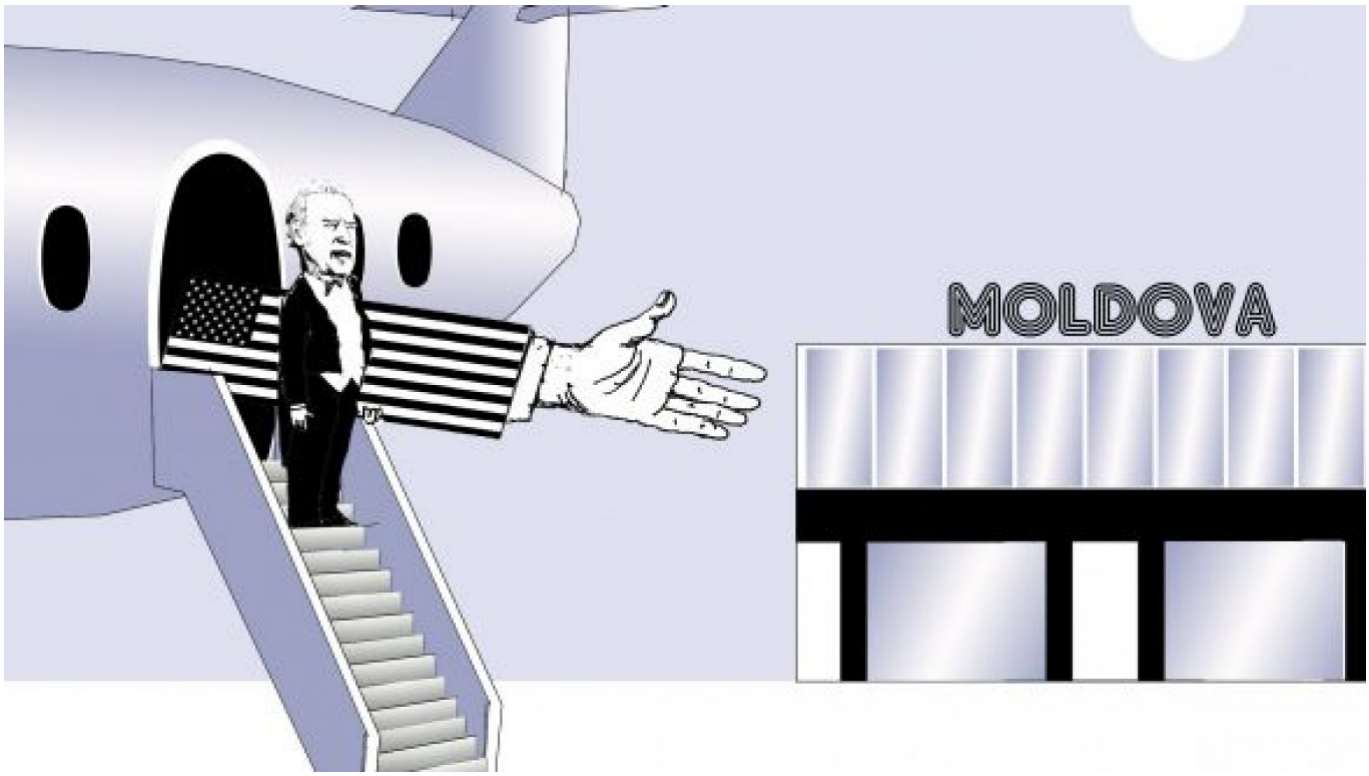
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Moldova's Moment

By Matthew Rojansky

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When Vice President Joe Biden arrives in Chisinau on Friday, he will be the highest-level U.S. official to set foot in Moldova in its nearly 20 years. A former republic of the Soviet Union, landlocked between Romania and Ukraine, Moldova is the poorest nation in Europe, but it is strategically important for the United States. Biden's visit can send a strong message of support for Moldova's economic and democratic development and European ambitions.

The visit comes now because Moldova has taken on far greater symbolic significance as one of a handful of Eastern European states concerned about their place among Washington's competing priorities after Washington's reset with Moscow. It is also a potential example of successful post-Soviet political, social and economic reform — a yardstick for the European Union's willingness to extend the benefits of integration to the full European community. What's more, Moldova is a test case for the creation of a fully inclusive Euro-Atlantic security order.

Moldova's long-frustrated European aspirations took center stage in 2009 with the ascendance of the Alliance for European Integration, an unlikely coalition of Romanian-speaking Moldovan nationalists, business-oriented pragmatists and the reform wing of the

Russian-speaking old guard. Despite the inability to overcome parliamentary gridlock and select a president, the alliance has brought Moldovans together by articulating a vision of the country's future that does not require a stark choice between Moscow and Brussels.

The alliance has advanced the country's EU prospects by implementing many of the reforms required for compliance with EU norms and making some painful sacrifices to secure International Monetary Fund support during the economic crisis. It has also taken pragmatic confidence-building steps to reduce tensions with the separatist region of Transdnestr, recognizing that this protracted conflict is a further obstacle to Moldova's European aspirations.

Biden's visit to Moldova can be a clear signal that Washington supports the alliance's reform agenda and European aspirations.

While the visit itself is a vote of confidence for the alliance, Biden should address all Moldovans with a message that the country's challenges — its complex and multiethnic identity, its location at a historic crossroads and its far flung population of labor migrants — can become the pillars of a strong democracy and a prosperous market economy.

Biden should remind Moldovans that for the country to achieve its full potential, they must commit to fighting endemic corruption, improving the quality and availability of basic government services and combating the country's acute problem of human trafficking. These challenges are interrelated because it is precisely the lack of economic opportunity and reliable services that induces many Moldovans to seek employment abroad, often falling prey to transnational criminal networks.

The visit also comes at a unique moment of opportunity for advancing regional security by bringing together all of the stakeholder parties to the Transdnestr conflict. In the past year, Russia, Germany and France have devoted a great deal of high-level attention to the conflict, while both Ukraine and Romania have for the first time identified conflict resolution in Transdnestr as a top national security priority. The United States should encourage the Moldovan government to fulfill its responsibility to all of its citizens by advancing a clear vision and delivering real evidence of how people on both sides of the Dnestr River can benefit from a solution to this territorial dispute.

Biden also needs to demonstrate Washington's readiness to help Moldovans make progress by offering a basket of specific incentives.

First, as a bipartisan group of senior U.S. legislators has agreed, it is long overdue to "graduate," or permanently exempt, Moldova from the Jackson-Vanik amendment and allow for permanent normal trade relations between Moldova and the United States. (Under the current arrangement, Moldova receives only termporary exemption on a year-to-year basis.) This move can be strengthened by signing a bilateral free trade agreement that will open U.S. markets to Moldova's goods and services.

Second, Washington should offer enhanced funding for existing exchange programs and enable new educational and cultural contacts by making Moldova a candidate for the visa waiver program.

Third, Washington and Chisinau should sign an agreement to combat human trafficking.

Fourth, Washington can push Brussels to maintain the momentum of Moldova's European integration process, thus acknowledging that Moldova's primary Western partner must be Europe.

Although this visit can do much to highlight Moldova's potential and to support progress already under way, the solutions to the lingering problems that could hold the country back will depend on political will and creative thinking from Chisinau. The United States, working with its European partners, can provide targeted incentives, but only Moldovans themselves can supply the motivation to make the country's third decade of independence a transformative one.

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