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Pull Russian Troops Out of Moldova, New President Says

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Maia Sandu said the Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria should be replaced by OSCE civilian observers. **Valery Sharifulin / TASS**

Russia should withdraw its peacekeeping force from the self-proclaimed Transnistria republic, Moldova's pro-European president-elect said Monday.

Maia Sandu, who defeated Moldova's pro-Russian incumbent earlier in November on a platform of balancing the ex-Soviet country's ties between Moscow and the West, said the Russian troops should be replaced by civilian observers from Europe. Russia deploys around 1,500 troops in Transnistria, which has not been recognized internationally since its brief civil war following the Soviet Union's collapse in the early 1990s.

"Russia says that the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) guards ammunition depots here, but there are no bilateral agreements on the OGRF and on the weapons depots," Sandu told Russia's RBC news website.

"These weapons depots are a big problem for us. It's dangerous," she said in the sit-down

interview with RBC. “These weapons need to be removed and the OGRF needs to be withdrawn.”

Around 1,000 Russian troops are guarding more than 20,000 metric tons of ammunition at a decommissioned depot in Transnistria, RBC estimates. This is in addition to a small contingent of around 400 Russian peacekeepers deployed in a demilitarized zone as part of a Moldovan-Transnistrian-Russian monitoring commission.

“There’s a 1992 agreement on peacekeepers. We believe that there’s no threat of renewed military operations on our territory,” Sandu, whose inauguration is expected on Dec. 24, told RBC.

“We believe that this mission should be transformed into an OSCE civilian observer mission,” she added, referring to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The Kremlin warned later Monday that “changes in the status quo” in Transnistria could “seriously destabilize” regional security.

“We hope that all of this will be discussed and there won’t be any sudden moves,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, according to the state-run TASS news agency.

The United Nations passed a Moldova-backed resolution in 2018 calling for an immediate and complete withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Transnistria.

Transnistria has sought to join Russia after breaking away from Moldova in 1990.

Around one-third of the region's population of 500,000 is ethnically Russian and another one-third is Moldovan.

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