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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Moldova Urges Russian Withdrawal From Transdnestr

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Moldova's acting president risks drawing fire from Moscow again after renewing a call for Russian troops to be pulled out of the country's breakaway Transdnestr region.

Russia has had a peacekeeping force of about 1,200 soldiers stationed since 1992 in the rebel territory, a mainly Russian-speaking sliver of land bordering Ukraine.

Parliamentary Speaker Mihai Ghimpu is acting head of state because of a political stalemate that is blocking the election of a president. He made the call at an international conference in Geneva on Tuesday, his press service said.

"Why have we become the poorest country in Europe? Not only because we did not carry out democratic reforms at the right time, but also because today on the territory of Moldova, part of an occupation army and its equipment continue to be stationed," he said, according to a transcript issued by his press service.

Ghimpu, who heads a center-right party in a four-party pro-Western coalition, angered

Moscow last month when he issued a decree setting June 28 as "Soviet Occupation Day."

That was the day in 1940 when the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia from Romania, most of which has since become known as Moldova, under a deal with Nazi Germany.

Russia, in references to the period, tends to focus only on its subsequent war against Nazi Germany and portrays the Soviet army as a liberator in Central and Eastern Europe.

Ghimpu's decree caused an uproar in the State Duma, and Russia's consumer watchdog has threatened a ban on imports of Moldovan wine.

Ghimpu, in his comments to a conference of parliamentary speakers in Geneva, accused Russian forces in Transdnestr of directly supporting the region's breakaway policies, which he said had created a "zone of instability not only for us but for the whole of Europe."

He referred again to the occupation of Bessarabia by Soviet forces on June 28, 1940.

Ghimpu first called for Russia to withdraw its forces from Transdnestr when he signed the decree on "Soviet Occupation Day," a commemorative day that the country's Constitutional Court has subsequently ruled as unconstitutional.

Moldova wants to install an international peacekeeping force in Transdnestr, a region of 600,000 people. The Russian force is mainly charged with guarding some 20,000 tons of Soviet-era weaponry and ammunition.

Russia, Moldova and Transdnestr reached an agreement for an international force to replace Russian peacekeepers once a peace deal was reached, but there is no sign of a breakthrough on an accord.

Transdnestr broke away from Moldova in 1990, fearing that the country would unite with Romania, with whom Moldovans share linguistic and historical ties. That never happened, but the region continues to insist on independence.

(Reuters, MT)

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