

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT  
Smart Women, Smart Power  
**“A Moldovan Minute”**

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FEATURING  
**Natalia Gavrița,**  
*former Prime Minister of Moldova (2021-2023)*

CSIS EXPERTS  
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Kathleen  
McInnis: This is Smart Women Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world's most powerful women.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: We have seen that this experience of working together, applying soft power and not hard power, prioritizing dialogue over discord actually can bring more sustainable peace and stability, and we hope to achieve that as quick as possible for our region.

Kathleen  
McInnis: We feature thought leaders at all career levels where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations. This Smart Women, Smart Power episode is supported by Thales.

I really am honored to welcome former Prime Minister of Moldova Natalia Gavrilița to the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast today. Natalia, we love to start these conversations with origin stories. How did you get into politics? How does a woman find herself to be the prime minister of Moldova? What shaped your path?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: First of all, thank you for the invitation. It's great to be here. And what a great question. I'm here in Washington D.C. to attend a anniversary of a flex program, which is an youth exchange program for students from Europe and Eurasia, and I was a high school exchange student in an American school in 1994.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Oh, wow. Where was the school?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: I was in Ohio in a school called Highland High School in a part of Ohio. And I was reminiscing just preparing for this trip. About 1994 after the fall of the Soviet Union, Moldova was very poor, the future was very uncertain. People from the former Soviet Union didn't travel before 1991 outside of the borders of the Soviet Union. Well, they did, but very few and with special permission. So, to me, I think that was a formative year. I was 16, and this is really when I saw how a society based on democratic institutions can function. But I think most importantly that year truly set the tone for my great passion in public service. So in my master's degree, I later studied public policy. I have, several times in my career, left a well-paying job abroad to go back to Moldova and work in various levels of government. And I always knew that for me, living life with purpose means contributing to the transformation of Moldova to bring to Moldova not only prosperity, but a respect for the individual,

for individual rights and freedoms, for human rights, for democratic institutions, rule of law, fair competition, everything that allows a person to truly realize their potential because it's not just important for a country to be prosperous. It's important for every individual in that country to feel free and able to realize their potential. And so really all the decisions that I've taken were driven by this passion, this desire, and when I felt like there were sufficient people who would create a party that is very close to my values, that's when I joined politics. Previously, I had only worked as a public servant, so more of a technocrat.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Sure.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: When Maia Sandu, who I have worked with in the Ministry of Education, decided to create her own party. I joined and later returned from London to Moldova to take up positions in government.

Kathleen  
McInnis: That gets us to what I was really hoping we could focus on today, which is-- I was recently in Moldova as part of a delegation, and I was really struck at how Moldova is at, what appears to me, to be a strategic inflection point with everything going on in the region. And for the benefit of our listeners, for those that don't know, Moldova sits just to the west, southwest, of Ukraine. So there's been a tense relationship with Russia over the years actually--

Natalia  
Gavrilița: Putting it diplomatically.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Yeah, okay. So, what is your view on Moldova's political situation and strategic situation? That's where I want to get to in this conversation, but I want to start with what was it like being the prime minister when Russia invaded Ukraine?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: I remember very well, 24th of February, I will never forget it. I woke up at 4:00 AM because I actually heard blasts. And even though not many people heard, I think that because I knew all of the intelligence and I was still very surprised because it just didn't make sense for a lot of people that Russia would invade Ukraine and to the last minute, we could not believe that such a full scale invasion would happen. We, of course, knew about the intelligence and the buildup of troops, and there was discussions about it. So we were very diligent about preparations for consequences. So for example, we planned a lot for increased number of refugees. We thought about our energy system because we had already been even before the war, subject to blackmail by Gazprom and the Russian Federation. So we did all this contingency planning, but I think we just really hoped that this scenario would not

be realized. Of course, we then had to deal with all the consequences of the war, and our entire society rose to the occasion. So we saw every part of the society mobilized to support the refugees.

Kathleen  
McInnis: And how many refugees came into Moldova?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: So we have approximately 700,000 who passed through Moldova. At the highest point, we were hosting 125,000, and now we still have over 70,000 refugees. But this number 125,000 that we hosted in Moldova at the highest point was actually five times more than our total estimated capacity by UNHCR. So yeah, UNHCR did an analysis and said, Moldova can only host 25,000, and we hosted five times more. And this was because we saw virtually every layer, every stakeholder in the society mobilize. So immediately we saw volunteers who were providing food, transportation, information. We had a lot of families hosting refugees, we had companies donating. We saw our international development partners come and support us. So we were able to receive all the refugees. Of course, at the highest point, it was really helpful that we also had a green corridor to Romania where refugees would just pass to Romania, and then in Romania they were processed. And then of course we had European countries offering to help. But I think that a lot of refugees relied on the generosity of regular people, and I'm very proud that that made Moldova known as a small country, but with a big heart. And per capita, we received the most refugees in Europe.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Wow. So you described how it was even to the last minute, it was hard to believe that Russia was going to conduct this invasion. My impression was, and correct me if this is an inaccurate characterization, but my impression was that prior to Russia's invasion in Ukraine, that Moldova had a more sympathetic policy or foreign policy towards Russia. I mean, given its historical ties and economic ties and so on and so forth, that there was more tensions building because of democratic activism, but overall there was an ambivalence maybe or an ambiguity, something like that. Is that right?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: So just to give a bit of a background, in Moldova, we still have a large proportion of Russian speaking population, they are not just in Transnistria, across Moldova. So about 25 to 30% speak Russian, even though they are of different ethnicities. So Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Gagauz--which is a Turkic population in the south of Moldova. So we still have a lot of people who culturally and informationally are influenced by the Russian speaking world. At the same time, we of course have the frozen conflict in the Transnistria region where there are so-called peacekeeping troops from the Russian Federation. And also before the war, we had a large dependency on

energy. We were buying a hundred percent of our gas from Gazprom and a hundred percent of our electricity from the Transnistria region, which produced electricity based on Russian gas. Previously we had trade dependency as well, but Russia imposed two embargoes on our wine, which was the main trading good at that time.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Quick plug real quick. If you haven't tried Moldovan wine, you got to try Moldovan wine. It is incredible stuff.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: Absolutely.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Okay, keep going.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: But also a plug here. This is a great success story because the Russian embargoes actually led to much better quality of Moldovan wines.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Really?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: Yes. So when we faced the embargo, including with support, our wine makers completely restructured their production. And now we have not only flourishing wine industry. Last year we took a lot of medals in international competitions, and even in Brussels, we had a Moldovan wine declared the best red wine in the world. It's called Negre.

Kathleen  
McInnis: I believe it. It's such good stuff. It blew me away.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: But this is a story of resilience, right?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: And how sort of a crisis can actually turn into a positive ultimately, and unfortunately with sacrifices, it can turn into sort of a better situation. So we not only have a wine industry which can attract tourism, but we have the development of connected industries. The creative industries are really taking off in Moldova, and this is what I told people during the crisis. We had the price of gas increase a lot, by seven times, and remember we had a hundred percent dependency, but we faced this blackmail and this crisis actually was an impetus for us to change legislation, build capacities, and go to the market. And it's very unfortunate that we had to diversify when the market was absolutely, I would even say insane. I mean, we've never seen such prices on the international markets. And yes, we did a targeted cash transfer program and compensated the most vulnerable, but in one year, we changed the a hundred percent dependency on Gazprom gas to

consuming gas on the right--so on Moldova proper without the Transnistria region, a hundred percent from alternative sources.

Kathleen  
McInnis: That's incredible.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: In one year.

Kathleen  
McInnis: That's incredible. That's incredible.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: I mean, unfortunately, we paid for it economically, and people have to realize that this comes at a great sacrifice and great cost for our people because we had quite a severe stagflation. So we had a 6% decrease in growth when we had 35% inflation. And growth is still being affected by all the consequences of the war in Ukraine. And as you can understand, investors are not very keen to come in right now. But this was probably the last pillar of sovereignty for us to rid ourselves of this dependency and to be able to take decisions on our own and to go the direction that our people want to go, which is European integration.

Kathleen  
McInnis: So looking forward at Moldova's foreign policy, national security outlook, what trajectory do you see Moldovan foreign policy going in and what do you see as the key obstacles to getting there?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: So of course, first and foremost, we are a democracy. So we followed the will of the people. So the whole time we responded based on the extraordinary mandate that was given by the people in the last elections. And we have a large pro-European majority in Parliament. And for the first time in Moldova's history, we actually have the president, the prime minister, and the parliament all looking in the same direction, all working towards the transformation of Moldova and the European integration of Moldova. So if you look at what we have achieved in the last several years, it wasn't just crisis management, it was profound structural reforms that we were elected to implement. We've moved quite a bit. I think we were the best performer on Media Freedom Index. We changed the electoral code in line with Venice Commission, European Venice Commission recommendations. We also progressed on indicators like perception of corruption, rule of law, and so on. So we are undergoing a very, very difficult justice reform, and we are taking a lot of steps to combat corruption. And the foreign policy is going in line with us. I mean, we are aligning to EU foreign policy as much as possible. We are working hard to be not only a beneficiary of European security, but a contributor to European security. So we had a security hub in Moldova established, we now have a civilian mission--

Kathleen  
McInnis: What the security hub is? Would you mind explaining that?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: So it was a hub to coordinate security and law enforcement response and policy to the Ukraine crisis. And then we do have a civilian mission that cooperates with the European Union on defense and security issues. So even if Moldova is not member of NATO and is not seeking to become NATO member because of the Constitution and the neutrality principle that is enshrined in the Constitution, still in the last several years, we are collaborating very, very actively with the European Union as part of the European peace facility and on initiatives like the civilian mission. So it was not just our response to the refugee crisis, but also we consider ourselves as a country that helps provide European security by guarding our borders and being very good partners on defense and security issues.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Holding the line.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: Indeed.

Kathleen  
McInnis: So as a NATO nerd, I have to ask, you mentioned that there's the constitutional restrictions on NATO's accession, but do you think that there could be any constitutional changes? Do you see any path forward for Moldova in NATO or not so much?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: I mean, who would've thought just two years ago that Sweden and Norway would seek to join NATO? So of course the sentiments are changing based on people's experiences and their analysis and support for NATO integration increased dramatically in the last two years. It is still not a majority. I think that this neutrality principle, which really was enshrined in the Constitution to protect us from the Russian troops being in the country, it's now so enshrined in the consciousness of the population that it will be a process to change this awareness of what an alliance for a small country like Moldova means. But I think that there are many opportunities to cooperate. I mean, Moldova has had an individual action plan with NATO for a while. Moldova provides peacekeeping troops in a number of countries and through different sort of missions on the UN and EU. So at the same time, as I said, we have this cooperation on our defense capability, communication capability, medical capability, and so on. So building resilience and building cooperation can be done even ahead of such a decision.

Kathleen  
McInnis: You mentioned the Russian "peacekeepers," and as Moldova moves further and further along this democratic path, one also hears about how Russian disinformation and influence campaigns are ratcheting up

more and more in Moldova. How are you, how is your party preparing to handle that or handling that?

Natalia Gavrilița: So first of all, let's call them Russian troops. I think we have to use the word "peacekeepers" with air quotes.

Kathleen McInnis: Air quotes, air quotes, heavy, heavy air quotes.

Natalia Gavrilița: Although we are not directly involved in the military conflict, we are definitely seeing a hybrid war with Russia. And this is expressed by these energy blackmail, the financing of political parties or specific people. We have seen an extraordinary number of cyber attacks of intensity that we haven't seen before. And a big part of this hybrid war is actually propaganda and disinformation, and we saw this on T.V., but we also see it on a lot of online resources, telegram channels. And because in Moldova, the population is Russian speaking, these channels penetrate the society quite massively. So I think this is part of why some of the transformation that we were talking about earlier in terms of how Moldova can best ensure security as part of an alliance or as a neutral country and so on. This transformation is so much more difficult to make and sort of unity around the main objectives for the development of the country are so difficult to keep because there is this constant bombardment with false information or half-truths that are being framed in a very manipulative way. And we have taken actions. So I mentioned earlier that we made a lot of progress on media freedom, but at the same time, we actually fortified our council for audiovisual, and it has been able to take decisions to ensure a more balanced approach to broadcasting in Moldova. And based on some of the actions and analysis of the audiovisual council, we actually closed six Russian channels in Moldova at the same time when the European Union also stopped the broadcasting of many of these channels. Unfortunately, this means that a lot of this disinformation migrated to online channels, which are very, very difficult.

Kathleen McInnis: Push it down here, it pops up there.

Natalia Gavrilița: And also it's very difficult even to monitor because now we are seeing sort of social media and this telegram channels being able to provide information or to analyze the human psyche so profoundly and to provide the information that confirms some of the biases or keeps providing this false information or these half-truths and the manipulative information. So it's a constant fight. I think it's a constant fight, not just in Moldova, it's also the same in developed democracies. I think it's one of the biggest threats to democratic systems and democratic institutions, and we are ramping up our capacity. So for

example, we have a new center to combat disinformation that was created that will look at how this information affects the national security and what are the different tools that can be applied. So we have a new law and a new center that was just created.

Kathleen  
McInnis: So to wrap up our conversation, I'd love to know, do you feel like your gender as a woman has impacted how you've approached these enormous challenges for Moldova? And so why? If not, why not?

Natalia  
Gavrilița: I'm actually very proud to say that Moldova dealt with the most severe and most complex overlapping crisis in its history when it was one of the few countries in the world where both the president and the prime minister were women. And even though we faced security issues, we were able to manage them very effectively, in my opinion.

Kathleen  
McInnis: I think so.

Natalia  
Gavrilița: I told you about how we handled the refugee crisis, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which was the main authority that handled this crisis, was also led by a woman at that time with a background in combating trafficking. So if anything, I think that our gender helped us think about the multiple repercussions that these crisis can have. So I talked about, for example, that we knew that to make sure that the most vulnerable are not impacted, we very quickly implemented energy vulnerability compensation program. We also, for example, paid a lot of attention to what happens to unaccompanied children and who are vulnerable groups who have special vulnerabilities. We talked a lot about reproductive rights, for example, for refugee women. We have many Ukrainian children who were born in Moldova and women who have been helped by our health system. We open up our educational institutions, afterschool programs to children. So yeah, if anything, I think that this was plus where we did not just approach the security issues head-on, but also thought about the impact on children and families, on vulnerable groups. And we applied all our experience to make sure that we have the best outcome possible under these dire circumstances. And at the same time, as I said, implement the mandate of the people. We are very, very happy that we received candidate country status to the EU. And we are working very hard on reforms to make sure that we are able to open negotiations with the EU and bring our people peace and stability because we have seen that this experience of working together, applying soft power, not hard power, prioritizing dialogue over discord actually can bring more sustainable peace and stability, and we hope to achieve that as quick as possible for our region.

Kathleen  
McInnis:

Thank you so much for joining us today.

Natalia  
Gavrilița:

Thank you.

Kathleen  
McInnis:

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