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# In Odesa's Shadows: What Is Russia's Strategy in Moldova?

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## Summary

An old Moldovan joke goes that the best sight to visit in Moldova is Odesa: a legendary Ukrainian port city on the Black Sea, just a few dozen kilometers from the Moldovan border, that has been publicly coveted by Russian President Vladimir Putin. In February 2022, the joke acquired sinister undertones when that proximity turned Moldova into another potential victim of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Throughout the war, there have been intermittent worries that Russian forces fighting inside Ukraine might seek to join up with the approximately 1,500 Russian troops stationed in Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria to open a new front against Ukraine, destabilizing Moldova's pro-Western course in the process.

As of this writing, the danger appears to have receded. Thanks to Ukraine's resistance, the Russian army is bogged down in eastern Ukraine, allowing Moldova's pro-European leadership to recalibrate its strategy. Instead of trying to placate Russia and get some breathing space to build ties with the EU, as it did in 2020–2021, since 2022 Chişinău has moved decisively to cut ties with Moscow. It has weaned itself off its dependency on Russian gas and expanded its EU accession track by adding a security and defense partnership with the bloc. Although neutrality is part of its constitution, Moldova has also strengthened cooperation with NATO and elaborated a new National Security Strategy that defines Russia as the key threat.

Incensed by these developments, Moscow has routinely criticized Moldova's current pro-European leadership as Western puppets whose treacherous policies risk turning the country, in the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, into the "next Ukraine."<sup>1</sup> Russia has also brazenly meddled in Moldova's politics, trying to undermine pro-European reforms with a range of tactics, including a plot to disrupt the 2024 presidential election, economic pressure, disinformation, and the stoking of interethnic tensions.

The Kremlin has stopped short of delivering on its “next Ukraine” threat and resorting to violence, not least because it remains preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, but nor has it shown any desire to ease up the pressure on Moldova. Moscow believes that Moldova’s lingering vulnerabilities, if manipulated properly, will constitute a sufficient obstacle to the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration. The hope is that in time, the combination of the weak Moldovan state, polarized society, and the Transnistrian dispute will drag Moldova back into Moscow’s orbit in sync with Russia’s advances in Ukraine.

## Threats, Blackmail, and Proxies

In disparaging Moldova’s pro-European policies, Russian President Vladimir Putin likes to add condescendingly that Russia doesn’t actually need to cooperate with such a small and poor country. Therefore, in Putin’s telling, Moscow is prepared to respect any geopolitical choice by Chişinău—even if it is “self-destructive.”<sup>2</sup> The reality, however, is very different. While the invasion of Ukraine has largely overshadowed recent Moldovan developments, they leave no doubt that Russia remains determined to anchor Moldova in its sphere of influence as the Russian army continues to fight in Ukraine.

The early weeks of the war in the spring of 2022 saw a number of mysterious explosions and drone attacks in Transnistria.<sup>3</sup> There were no casualties, and no claims of responsibility, but Moscow used the opportunity to issue Chişinău with a series of threats.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko ominously hinted in April 2022 at the possibility of Moldova becoming embroiled in the war, while Rustam Minnekaev, deputy commander of the Russian Central Military District, was even more direct.<sup>4</sup> Two months after the start of the invasion, he stated that Russian armed forces, which by then had taken the Ukrainian city of Kherson, would move further along the coast to Odesa, cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea, and eventually reunite with the Russian contingent in Transnistria.<sup>5</sup>

That plan never materialized. In the fall of 2022, the Ukrainian army took back Kherson and pushed the Russians beyond the Dnieper River. But even major setbacks on the battlefield weren’t enough to make Moscow forget about Moldova. With saber-rattling having failed, the Kremlin resorted to the time-tested tactics of energy blackmail and political pressure.

In October 2022, Russia’s Gazprom—the majority owner of the Moldovagaz gas operator and Moldova’s monopoly gas supplier since independence—abruptly reduced daily deliveries by one-third, citing payment delays.<sup>6</sup> The cuts presented the country, already struggling with an influx of over 400,000 Ukrainian refugees and disruption from the war in Ukraine, with a whole new set of economic problems.<sup>7</sup> With winter looming, Chişinău had to organize gas imports from Europe and reroute remaining Russian deliveries to Transnistria.<sup>8</sup> The latter was important not only to prevent the collapse of the separatist region’s economy, but also to sustain the work of the Transnistrian Cuciurgan gas power plant, which is the main source



of electricity for the rest of the country. Currently, the Moldovan government is conducting international negotiations on behalf of Transnistria to keep Russian gas flowing there after the Russia-Ukraine gas transit agreement expires at the end of the year.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to EU assistance, the rerouting was complete before the onset of freezing temperatures, preventing a humanitarian crisis in both right-bank Moldova and Transnistria. But the resulting price increases caused inflation to spike to 30 percent in 2022,<sup>10</sup> enabling another tool for use by Moscow: mass pro-Russian protests against the socioeconomic policies of pro-European President Maia Sandu and the government of her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS).

For several months from the fall of 2022, Moldovan pro-Russian politicians competed for Moscow's favor by holding regular anti-government rallies in Chişinău. In February 2023, Sandu said that Russia was plotting to overthrow her government.<sup>11</sup> The political impact of the rallies, however, proved underwhelming, even though many protesters were paid and provocations staged.<sup>12</sup> After an initial surge of interest, with price hikes driving tens of thousands into the streets, people soon got used to these noisy but insincere performances in the capital and stopped paying attention.

The protests declined by mid-summer 2023 without much effect, but did bring about a major realignment in the pro-Russian camp. Moscow's longtime favorite, former president Igor Dodon, was sidelined by the fugitive Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor. The latter emerged from shady business dealings into Moldovan politics when that scene was dominated by another oligarch, Vladimir Plahotniuc, in the late 2010s. Initially, Shor had little love for Russia, where he was under investigation for money laundering. But relations improved after Shor fled to Israel in 2019, anticipating a fifteen-year prison sentence for his role in stealing \$1 billion from three Moldovan banks. In early 2024, he moved from Israel to Russia, and even claims to have acquired Russian citizenship.<sup>13</sup>

As a politician, Shor is unelectable. Thanks to his infrastructure investments, he has cultivated a pocket of support in the town of Orhei (population 20,000), but the majority of Moldovans detest him for his machinations, and his personal rating is around 5 percent at best. Still, his experience in taking control of Moldovan institutions and his mastery of electoral manipulation make him a valuable asset for the Kremlin in its quest to discredit Moldova's current leadership and the pro-European agenda as a whole.

Shor proved his usefulness to Russia in May 2023, when he managed to get his proxy Evghenia Guţul (née Buiuclic) elected head (Başkan) of Gagauzia, a historically pro-Russian ethnic autonomy in southern Moldova. Guţul was completely unknown in the region before the election and had neither prior political experience nor any special talent for campaigning. Her victory was secured by Shor tapping into local informal networks and massive vote-buying.<sup>14</sup> He demonstrated that a convicted oligarch could simply buy control over one of Moldova's regions at the behest of the Kremlin. Since then, Moscow has been showcasing Guţul at various public events as a representative of the "real Moldovan people" who appreciate the importance of good relations with Russia and are not fooled by Western propaganda.

The local elections in November 2023 were less of a success for Russian proxies. According to Moldova's Information and Security Service, Moscow spent about \$55 million on meddling in the vote,<sup>15</sup> which Shor utilized to mount a campaign, fielding several hundred candidates all over the country. Ultimately, however, he won nothing: just days before the vote, his Chance party was barred from running due to illegal financing.<sup>16</sup> The governing PAS came first by a wide margin, winning a third of all mayoralties, though it lost in the capital to the centrist National Alternative Movement.<sup>17</sup>

The next political milestones are the presidential election in October and the parliamentary election next summer. Shor is stepping up activity. He has held several assemblies of pro-Russian Moldovan forces in Moscow, fielded a little known parliamentary deputy—Vasile Bolea—as a presidential candidate, and increased the number of his proxy parties in order to minimize the risk of a ban on legal grounds.<sup>18</sup> He has also come up with some inventive means of financing his activities inside Moldova while evading Western sanctions and local financial controls. In April, Moldovan security services detained over one hundred people at Chişinău airport who were returning from Shor's assembly in Moscow.<sup>19</sup> They were accused of smuggling cash into the country for Shor's needs, though the sum carried by each individual was within the declaration-free limit of 10,000 euros. Since then, the Moldovan police have revealed that in September alone, Shor and his affiliates received about \$15 million for anti-Sandu and anti-EU campaigning: a fortune by the standards of Moldovan politics, which suggests a difficult campaign ahead.<sup>20</sup>

## Mixed Results

The results of Russia's frenetic activities in Moldova appear modest. The Transnistrian leadership—backed by oligarchs from the Sheriff business conglomerate who exploit Transnistria's gray zone status and the EU trade benefits granted to Moldova—are interested first and foremost in their own survival. They have ignored Moscow's provocations and taken a neutral stance toward the war. Although Transnistria could not survive without Russian support, Sheriff is primarily a local enterprise, and its owners are more interested in profits than the Kremlin's ideological pursuits. They prefer to lie low to avoid provoking a military intervention by Ukraine, which has offered Chişinău help in liquidating Russia's military presence in the region.<sup>21</sup>

The attempt at energy blackmail has backfired, leading Moldova to end its dependence on Russian gas and replace it with deliveries from Europe. Moscow's meddling in Moldovan domestic politics brought few electoral victories, but did mobilize the authorities to fight Russian interference, with substantial assistance from the West. Numerous pro-Russian media outlets have been suspended;<sup>22</sup> Shor's proxies are regularly barred from elections on legal grounds; and a number of respectable politicians, like the popular Chişinău mayor Ion Ceban, are trying to distance themselves from their past record of pro-Russian sympathies.

Perhaps the greatest cause for concern is the situation in Gagauzia, with its historical affinity to Russia and fraught relations with Chişinău. The Kremlin lavishes publicity on the region's new head Guţul. She travels to Moscow frequently, appears prominently in the Russian media, and was granted a personal audience with Putin, after which she announced an additional monthly payment of 100 euros for Gagauz retirees and public sector employees—though due to sanctions, only Gagauz residents with friends or relatives in Russia are able to access the money.<sup>23</sup>

Even so, the separatist threat in Gagauzia is overstated. The autonomy is small, poor, and heavily dependent on subsidies from Moldova's budget and on income from agricultural and labor exports to the EU.<sup>24</sup> Economic ties to Russia were marginal even before the war and are now almost nonexistent. Moreover, the vast majority of Gagauz, a Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christian people, do not harbor separatist sentiments. They mistrust Chişinău and are strongly pro-Russian, crediting Russia with inviting them to settle in Moldova from Romania and Bulgaria in the early nineteenth century. But the Gagauz are content with being Moldovan citizens—provided the country does not join Romania and ensures their right to self-government.

With her firebrand anti-Western rhetoric, Guţul is not representative of Gagauz society. Shor bought her election victory to showcase his effectiveness to his patrons in Moscow, but neither he nor Guţul commands a genuine support base in the autonomous region. He remains an outsider for Gagauz residents. His control over the majority in the local Gagauz legislature is uncertain and depends on a marriage of convenience with the assembly's speaker, Dmitry Konstantinov, an influential local businessman. Tensions between the two are mounting, and their alliance is unlikely to survive the redistribution of seats in the run-up to the next assembly elections due in 2025.

Overall, Gagauz elites tend to be fractured, consumed by petty interests, and unable to form a coherent force on issues other than upholding their autonomy. These are far from favorable conditions for a separatist undertaking, no matter what plans Moscow or Shor may have. Guţul is now under investigation in Moldova on suspicion of channeling funds from Russia,<sup>25</sup> but even if the case leads to her dismissal or arrest, it is unlikely to trigger a violent backlash in Gagauzia. A more realistic outcome could be a strong Gagauz vote for pro-Russian parties in the next elections, but the autonomy's population of 135,000 amounts to a mere 5 percent of Moldovan voters.

The main risks posed by Russian meddling lie elsewhere. Moscow's tangible successes may be limited, but they dominate and polarize Moldova's public debate, making Russia look disproportionately important and powerful in the eyes of many Moldovans. For example, Russia accounted for less than 4 percent of Moldova's foreign trade in 2023—many times less than the EU's share of 54 percent.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, 87 percent of foreign direct investment stock in the country comes from EU countries.<sup>27</sup> Moscow offers nothing to match the 2.2 billion euros in loans and grants that Brussels has made available for Moldova since 2021. Despite all that, 53 percent of Moldovans said Russia was the country's most important economic partner in an IRI poll conducted in mid-2024.<sup>28</sup> The EU got 65 percent (multiple

replies were possible). In a similar vein, 55 percent of Moldovans believe that maintaining neutrality—that is, accommodating Russia—is the best guarantee of the country’s security, while only 31 percent support joining NATO.

Combined with a stagnating economy and rising prices, such perceptions, especially among older Moldovans who grew up in the Soviet system and who fear Romanian nationalism, allow pro-Russian parties to remain surprisingly strong in Moldova. Together they enjoy the support of some 40 percent of the population. Tired of economic difficulties and scared by the proximity of war, Moldovans are looking for easy solutions. Two-thirds of them believe that Sandu should go to Moscow to negotiate a new gas contract.<sup>29</sup> Such attitudes reveal the gravity of economic and security concerns in Moldovan society: people are effectively willing to compromise the sovereignty of their country in exchange for uncertain Russian promises of better economic conditions and security.

## A Drain on Democracy

A troubling side effect of Russian meddling is the strain on Moldovan state resources. Moldova is a small country of modest means, whose population has fallen below 3 million as a result of outmigration. Its state institutions suffer from a perennial deficit of financing and qualified personnel. This allows the Kremlin to exhaust the capacity of Moldovan government agencies by targeting them with Shor’s endless provocations.

Shor’s machinations could go on indefinitely. Having won the legal case to ban the oligarch’s original party—also named Shor—in June 2023, the authorities are now preoccupied with court proceedings against his second party, Chance, as well as against Guțul. But under Shor’s orchestration, a plethora of new parties have already mushroomed, and the number of such shell structures may grow even further.<sup>30</sup>

A similar never-ending battle is being waged against Moscow-sponsored media. Since the start of this year alone, the Moldovan authorities have suspended the broadcasting licenses of twelve TV channels.<sup>31</sup> Dozens of websites have been blocked for spreading pro-Russian propaganda since February 2022. Still, the information war Russia is waging shows no signs of abating.

This is already taking a toll on the Moldovan state apparatus, with officials paying less attention to legal requirements. The suspension of the TV channels, for instance, was carried out without a court decision. The National Investment Promotion Council, whose connection to regulating the media landscape is unclear, simply ordered it done.<sup>32</sup> That prompted the head of the EU delegation in Moldova, Janis Mazeiks, to publicly express concern about keeping media regulation transparent and fair.<sup>33</sup> In much the same way, the barring of Shor’s proxies from the elections is often done in haste and without offering clear evidence of wrongdoing, which makes many voters see it as political revenge.

The deficit of state capacity has also led to pro-European reforms being implemented more slowly than expected by many Moldovans. A poll conducted in early 2024 revealed that 62 percent of Moldovans believe that the situation in the country's justice system had remained the same or worsened over the previous three years.<sup>34</sup> The EU Commission noted the slow pace of reform and lack of significant progress in prosecuting high-level corruption.<sup>35</sup>

The fight against Russian meddling also drives the domestic debate away from social and anti-corruption issues, though the emphasis on the latter was the key reason behind Sandu and PAS's past electoral victories. Now, geopolitics has returned to the forefront, polarizing Moldovan society along the fault lines of identity and history. This is primarily due to Moscow's policy, but steps taken by Chișinău, such as the decision to hold a referendum on EU integration at the same time as the October presidential election, have also played a role.

The government's desire to highlight its successes is understandable. Over the past two years, Moldova has managed to secure EU candidate status and opened negotiations on EU accession, which was unimaginable just a few years ago. But all this comes at a price. Since pursuit of EU integration is not accompanied by significant socioeconomic and institutional improvements, many Moldovans are beginning to doubt the benefits of the pro-European course. The share of Moldovans who would vote in favor of joining the EU if such a referendum were held fluctuates between 53 and 56 percent, depending on the poll and time of polling.<sup>36</sup> The relatively low level of support is due to the fact that the EU agenda has become intermingled with domestic politics. For many Moldovans, supporting European integration is now a synonym for supporting PAS, its underwhelming justice reform, and even the price hikes they have experienced under the PAS government.

The Moldovan authorities are doing little to change such perceptions. They are even reinforcing them by trying to monopolize the pro-European agenda. PAS has accused a growing number of opposition politicians of being insincere in their pro-EU proclamations and serving as Russian agents in disguise. In some cases, there are legitimate reasons to doubt the sincerity of those Moldovan politicians who have recently switched their allegiance from Moscow to Brussels. But overall, it unnecessarily politicizes the issue of joining the EU. Accusing those who don't support PAS of being anti-European is alienating a significant part of the Moldovan political class and wider society, pushing some of them into the pro-Russian camp.

Such tactics are likely to secure Sandu a victory in the October presidential election: she still enjoys popular support of over 30 percent, leading her opponents by a significant margin.<sup>37</sup> But during the parliamentary election in 2025, growing polarization is bound to have repercussions for the ruling party. PAS is still the most popular political force according to the polls, but it is unlikely to repeat its 2021 success and get enough votes to form a government on its own. It will struggle to find allies among opposition parties, which may become united by their resentment toward it.

## Missed Opportunities

Russian meddling in Moldova also hinders the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict—or at least any resolution that would allow Chişinău to pursue policies independently of Moscow. There has been little progress toward the settlement, despite the war in Ukraine, which has cut the separatist statelet off from Russia. Moscow can offer little assistance to its approximately 1,500 troops in Transnistria, of whom fewer than 100 are actually from Russia, the rest being locals paid by Moscow.<sup>38</sup> Kyiv, on the contrary, is eager to get rid of this Russian pocket and has refrained from doing so chiefly due to the objections of Chişinău, which is concerned about Moscow’s potentially violent reaction and the overwhelming difficulties Moldova itself would face in governing, administering, and politically integrating Transnistria.<sup>39</sup>

The closure of the border between Transnistria and Ukraine has rerouted all Transnistrian interactions with the outside world through right-bank Moldova. Now Chişinău controls the separatists’ exports to the EU and imports of free Russian gas: both vital for the statelet’s economy. Meanwhile, right-bank Moldova no longer depends on Russian gas, and is about to overcome its dependency on Transnistrian electricity. The construction of sufficient transmission capacity from the EU is to be completed in 2025, giving the country access to Romania’s electricity market, which is expanding its green energy capacity and adding new units to the Cernavoda nuclear power plant.<sup>40</sup>

Over past decades, Moldova has done a lot to mend ties with Transnistria at the societal level. Despite their separatist reputation, Transnistrians experience no difficulties in traveling to Moldova or through Moldova to Europe. They easily acquire Moldovan passports, now [held](#) by over 90 percent of Transnistrians.<sup>41</sup> Those with such passports can register their cars and get their diplomas notarized in right-bank Moldova to be recognized abroad. Chişinău does not oppose Transnistrian companies registering in right-bank Moldova in order to access EU markets, which helped reduce Russia’s share in Transnistrian exports to below 10 percent even before the war, and down to 6 percent in 2023.<sup>42</sup>

To be sure, there are occasional hiccups in the management of relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol, but in comparison to other separatist conflicts in the Balkans and the post-Soviet space, interactions between Transnistria and the Moldovan state are much more stable and simple. Day-to-day contacts between Transnistrians and right-bank Moldovans abound and are generally free of enmity, with many of the former admitting that their quasi-statehood is a liability.

All of this makes the reintegration of Transnistria’s population of 300,000 appear a challenging yet feasible task, but Chişinău is in no hurry to reap the benefits of its policies. So far, the Moldovan government has limited its use of its newly gained leverage to banning the export of dual-use goods produced in Transnistria,<sup>43</sup> making Transnistrian companies pay customs duties to the Moldovan budget, and canceling some tax exemptions for Transnistrians.<sup>44</sup>

Chișinău's concerns about preserving the status quo are not unfounded. Moscow may indeed react violently to any moves to reintegrate Transnistria, while the economic costs of reintegration risk breaking the country's already stretched budget. Still, both issues appear manageable with proper financial and security assistance from the West.

More difficult for the PAS government is the prospect of upsetting its own position in Moldova's domestic politics. Even though Transnistrians are eager to enjoy the benefits of EU integration, many of them are likely to vote for pro-Russian parties if reintegrated into Moldovan political life. Meanwhile, the lead of Moldova's pro-European forces remains so small that the addition of 300,000 Transnistrians to the electorate may swing the balance in Moscow's favor.

The Kremlin appears to share this assumption and base its strategy in Moldova upon it. Transnistria is the only pro-Russian separatist republic in the post-Soviet space that Moscow has neither annexed nor recognized. In fact, Russia still insists on Transnistria's reintegration with Moldova,<sup>45</sup> intending to use the statelet as leverage to gain control over the whole country, a consistent policy goal since the 2003 "Kozak Memorandum" proposal, which would have reintegrated Transnistria in exchange for Russian rights to military basing and limits on Moldova's foreign policy autonomy.<sup>46</sup>

Chișinău's claims that it intends to take right-bank Moldova into the EU without Transnistria—following the Cyprus model—appear to be aimed at merely depriving separatists of leverage in the country's talks with the EU.<sup>47</sup> Although Brussels is also prepared to consider such an option,<sup>48</sup> it is hard to conceive of the country joining the EU while a third party still has military control over part of its internationally recognized territory. Moreover, unlike in Cyprus, that third party is not a NATO member like Turkey, but Russia, which is entangled in the deepening confrontation with the alliance. As a result, Moldova's progress in integration with the West is bound to remain limited as long as the combination of domestic polarization and the unresolved Transnistrian dispute persists.

## Conclusions

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn a new dividing line in Eastern Europe. Since February 2022, Finland and Sweden have officially joined NATO: a previously unthinkable outcome and a major black eye for the Putin regime. Belarus, on the contrary, is firmly anchored in the Russian camp. The exact geography of the division in Ukraine is now being determined on the battlefield, but it is already clear that the occupied and unoccupied parts of the country will have very different futures. In Eastern Europe, only Moldova remains in a gray zone, with the West-Russia rivalry there acute but peaceful.

Putin has never been as passionate about Moldova as he is about Ukraine, but that doesn't mean he is ready to forfeit Russia's presence there. Rather, the Kremlin's current relegation of the country stems from the condescending attitude of the Russian leadership toward Moldova. Episodes such as Shor's unscrupulous machinations, former president Dodon accepting Russian money to make anti-Western statements, and the former chief of the Moldovan general staff turning out to be a Russian military intelligence asset have convinced the Kremlin that controlling Moldova doesn't require any special effort.<sup>49</sup>

Moscow's hope is probably that as soon as the Russian army approaches Moldovan borders in its advance toward Odesa, the country will fall into its arms of its own accord. Those pro-Western politicians with Romanian passports will flee to Bucharest where they belong, while those left will be ready to elect a pro-Russian president in order to accommodate the resurgent Russia. A forced reunification with Transnistria will seal Moldova's status as a loyal satellite on Russia's southwestern flank.

To be sure, the Kremlin realizes that at the current pace, Russian troops are unlikely to get close to Odesa in the foreseeable future. So it is playing for time in Moldova, stoking internal divisions, stalling reforms, and fueling disenchantment with the pro-European course. That will hardly bring pro-Russian forces back to power in Chişinău, but in the absence of a breakthrough in tackling the double challenge of domestic polarization and the Transnistrian conflict, it should be enough to keep Moldova in geopolitical limbo.



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## About the Author

**Maksim Samorukov** is a fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. Samorukov's research is focused on Russia's relations with the states of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe. From 2015-2022 he was a fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center based in Russia, until the center was closed down by the Russian authorities.



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