

# Russia Poses Long-Term Threats to Moldova’s European Integration Beyond the October Elections

By Christina Harward

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**Executive Summary:** Moldova stands to advance its path towards European integration in the upcoming October 2024 presidential election and referendum, but Moldova will likely remain a battleground state into the 2030s as Moldova's European Union (EU) membership negotiations continue. The possible reelection of pro-Western Moldovan President Maia Sandu and passing of the pro-EU referendum in October 2024 will not set Moldova's EU path in stone. The Kremlin has recently been trying to sabotage Moldova’s EU accession and destabilize Moldovan democracy and will continue these efforts in the coming decade. Support for EU membership is growing in Moldova, but the Kremlin is unlikely to cease its influence operations and may instead increase its efforts to reverse pro -EU trends in the coming decade. The Kremlin is likely prepared to pursue several lines of effort in the future to derail Moldova’s EU path, such as attempting to influence and capture Moldovan state institutions; exploiting the Kremlin's military, economic, and political ties to the pro-Russian Moldovan regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia; and conducting reflexive control campaigns to shape EU member states' decision-making regarding Moldova's EU accession. The threat of a Russian invasion of Moldova through Ukraine is currently extremely low, but the current conditions may change in the future, allowing Russia to invade and occupy more of Moldova than what it currently does in Transnistria. Moldova's future as an independent and sovereign state is directly tied to the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine and affects NATO's planning for the defense of its eastern flank. Western aid to both Ukraine and Moldova is vital to these states' abilities to resist Russian malign influence and aggression and keep Russian forces from threatening NATO.

## **Background**                                      **and**                                      **Kremlin**                                      **Objectives**

Moldova, a former Soviet republic located between Ukraine and NATO member Romania, has made significant progress on its path towards EU membership since Sandu's election in 2020 and the establishment of the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity's (PAS) parliamentary majority in 2021. Moldova has taken steps to reform its government, leading the European Commission to open accession negotiations with Moldova in December 2023.[1] Sandu is running for reelection on October 20, 2024, and is currently the frontrunner in the polls.[2] Sandu would continue to pursue EU membership for Moldova if elected for a second term. Moldovan citizens will also vote on October 20 in a referendum about potential amendments to the Moldovan Constitution that would define EU membership as a Moldovan "strategic objective" due to the "European identity" of the Moldovan people and the "irreversibility of the European course" of the country.[3]

(Note: All polls referenced throughout this text only surveyed Moldovans living within Moldova and do not take into account the considerable Moldovan diaspora. The Moldovan CEC reported in July 2024 that there are 3,301,368 total registered Moldovan voters.[4] The UN estimated in 2020 that there were about 1.15 million Moldovans living abroad.[5] Although part of the diaspora would not be of voting age

and may not have registered to vote, the Moldovan diaspora represents a significant portion of the Moldovan electorate.)

**The Kremlin has long sought to reestablish its dominant influence over Moldova.** Moldova notably falls within Russian President Vladimir Putin's geographic definition of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*), which Putin claimed in late 2023 encompasses the territories of Ancient Rus' (Kyivan Rus), the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation.<sup>[6]</sup> Russia has repeatedly invoked its alleged need to protect Russian "compatriots abroad," including in Moldova.<sup>[7]</sup> Moldova's membership in the EU would mark a major setback for the Kremlin's efforts to gain control over its asserted sphere of influence and would threaten the stability of Putin's regime, as a reformed and prosperous Moldova would be another example of a former Soviet state benefiting from its chosen path towards the West. Continued progress towards Moldova's EU membership would follow both Ukraine's and Armenia's reorientations towards the West in recent years and will impose reputational costs on Moscow as the security and economic guarantor in the former Soviet space.<sup>[8]</sup>

The Kremlin has not given up its objective of reestablishing its influence over Chisinau despite Moldova's recent movement towards the West. Moldova has maintained various levels of relations with the EU over the past 30 years, including signing an Association Agreement in 2014.<sup>[9]</sup> The pro-Western Sandu presidency and the PAS parliamentary majority in 2020 and 2021 likely pushed the Kremlin to reevaluate its long-term plans in Moldova. Leaked documents reportedly drafted in 2021 outlined the Kremlin's plans to increase Moldova's involvement in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union by 2030, including by proliferating Russian media, maintaining Russian gas supplies, and elevating the status of the Russian language in Moldova.<sup>[10]</sup> The start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 likely derailed these plans, but the Kremlin appears to have since turned to more extreme measures to destabilize Moldova, including coup attempts, false flag operations, and energy blackmail.<sup>[11]</sup> The Kremlin's objectives in Moldova have stayed consistent throughout these shifts, and Sandu's possible reelection in 2024 is unlikely to deter future Kremlin influence operations in Moldova. Continued Moldovan efforts to counter Russia's malign influence may even push the Kremlin to adapt and resort to new methods.

The Kremlin has leveraged its long-established military exclave in Transnistria and deepened political and economic ties within Moldova to prevent Moldova's Western integration and will continue to do so. Russia has maintained about 1,500 troops in the pro-Russian breakaway parastate of Transnistria since Russia militarily intervened to support Transnistrian separatists in 1992 following the fall of the Soviet Union and Moldova's independence.<sup>[12]</sup> The Kremlin has also significantly increased its ties to the Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia since March 2024.<sup>[13]</sup> US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan opposition politician Ilan Shor has been integral to expanding Russian malign influence operations in Moldova, especially in Gagauzia.<sup>[14]</sup> The Constitutional Court designated the Shor Party as unconstitutional and banned the party in July 2023, but Shor maintained his influence in Moldovan politics, especially through the creation of the Kremlin-affiliated "Victory" electoral bloc of Moldovan opposition parties in April 2024.<sup>[15]</sup> These long-standing and deepening ties offer the Kremlin multiple tools with which to influence Moldovan — and European — society and politics.

# Moldova and Russian-occupied Transnistria

Control of Terrain Assessment as of October 13, 2024



**Moldova in 2024 is similar to Ukraine between 2014 and February 2022, and the Kremlin has enacted elements of its hybrid war playbook in both states as part of its long-standing, strategic-level efforts to reshape the governance and geostrategic orientations of Ukraine and Moldova.** [16] Moldova and Ukraine both have historically been part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, and both have histories of corruption and dependence on Russian energy. [17] Moldova and Ukraine include significant concentrations of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, whom the Kremlin considers "compatriots abroad" whom Russia must protect. [18] Moldova — like Ukraine in February 2022 — has a frozen conflict with a Russian military exclave occupying a part of

the country illegally. Moldova's frozen conflict has notably existed for three decades — much longer than Ukraine's which lasted from 2014 to 2022 — but there has been very little actual fighting in Transnistria, as opposed to the regular conflict that characterized Ukraine in the period of the supposed Minsk Accords ceasefire.[19] Moldova is also trying to enshrine its path towards the West in its constitution, as Ukraine has previously done; the changes to the Moldovan Constitution that could pass in the October 2024 referendum would partly mirror those made to the Ukrainian Constitution in 2019 that stipulated that Ukraine's strategic objective is to join the EU and NATO.[20] The Kremlin takes such constitutional statements very seriously, insisting that post-Soviet states commit to what it calls “neutrality,” by which it means rejection of Western institutions and willingness to participate in Russia-dominated organizations. Ukraine’s constitutional provisions formed part of the *casus belli* Moscow offered before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[21]

**The Kremlin has pursued similar political settlements to the conflicts in Moldova and Ukraine in the past, suggesting that the Kremlin's initial goals in Ukraine and Moldova were similar.** The Russia-backed 2003 Kozak Memorandum to settle the Transnistrian conflict would have created a bicameral Moldovan parliament and required that a Senate majority approve all laws.[22] The Kozak Memorandum would have granted Transnistria nine out of 26 Senate seats and granted Gagauzia four seats — essentially giving Moscow significant influence over Moldovan federal policy. Russia pursued similar efforts in Ukraine post-2014 with the Minsk II Agreement, which called for Ukraine to grant “special status” to the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics.[23] Ukraine accepted the Minsk Agreements, whereas Moldova refused to sign the Kozak Memorandum at the last moment in 2003.[24] Moscow has since spent the last 20 years pursuing other methods to reestablish Russia's influence over Moldova, including strengthening Russian media in Moldova and developing close ties with Moldovan politicians, such as former Moldovan President Igor Dodon.[25]

**The Kremlin may be setting conditions to abandon its efforts to diplomatically resolve the Transnistrian conflict and instead conduct a full-scale invasion of Moldova in the future.** Information operations are the central part of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy, and the Kremlin and its proxies in Moldova have promoted narratives that directly mirror those that the Kremlin has used to justify its two invasions of Ukraine.[26] Kremlin actors, for example, have claimed that Chisinau, like Kyiv, is persecuting ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers and is conducting a Nazi-like “genocide.”[27] These Russian information operations targeting Moldova likely aim to set conditions to justify an intensification of Russia's hybrid war or the start of a conventional war against Moldova in the future. Russia also updated its Foreign Policy Concept in 2023 and omitted the previously included stipulation stating that Russia advocates for a political-diplomatic settlement of the Transnistrian conflict “based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and neutral status of the Republic of Moldova in determining the special status of Transnistria.”[28] This omission paves the way for the Kremlin to intervene militarily in Moldova in the future should it choose to do so — assuming Moscow achieves its desired objectives in Ukraine, as an independent, pro-Western, and strong Ukraine is the most significant impediment to Russian military operations in Moldova.

**Moldova's presidential election in October 2024 is of central importance to the Kremlin's grand strategic effort to maintain its influence over former Soviet states.** The reelection of Sandu in October 2024 would secure a Moldovan executive branch that is committed to furthering Moldova's EU accession process for another four years. The Moldovan Electoral Code stipulates that if no candidate secures over 50 percent of the vote in the first round, then the top two candidates face off in a second round.<sup>[29]</sup> The Kremlin would prefer that should Sandu win reelection, she not win in the first round, as this would demonstrate widespread popular support for Sandu's pro-EU policies.<sup>[30]</sup>

The Kremlin's preferred outcomes of the presidential election, from most to least preferred, are:

1. A Kremlin-friendly candidate wins in the first round of voting.
2. A Kremlin-friendly candidate wins in the second round of voting.
3. Sandu does not win in the first round of voting but wins in the second round by a narrow margin.
4. Sandu does not win in the first round of voting but wins in the second round by a large margin.
5. Sandu wins in the first round of voting by a narrow margin.
6. Sandu wins in the first round of voting by a large margin.

**Several candidates who have previous links to the Kremlin and/or have held Kremlin-friendly platforms are running in the October 2024 election.** The Moldovan Central Election Commission (CEC) officially registered 11 presidential candidates for the upcoming election.<sup>[31]</sup> Polls from July to September 2024 show 26 to 35 percent of voters supporting Sandu.<sup>[32]</sup> Alexandr Stoianoglo and Renato Usatii appear to be competing for second place but are trailing Sandu by at least 14 points, preliminarily suggesting that Sandu may not win in the first round and may face either Stoianoglo or Usatii in the second round.<sup>[33]</sup>

#### *Alexandr Stoianoglo: Possible Second Round Contender*

Kremlin-linked former Moldovan president and current leader of the Moldovan Socialist Party Igor Dodon endorsed independent candidate Stoianoglo and called for opposition forces to coalesce around him.<sup>[34]</sup> Stoianoglo served as the Moldovan Prosecutor General from 2019–2021.<sup>[35]</sup> After Sandu's win in 2020 and PAS's parliamentary majority in 2021, Moldovan authorities suspended and arrested Stoianoglo in October 2021 on charges of corruption and abuse of office and dismissed him in September 2023.<sup>[36]</sup> Moldovan authorities acquitted Stoianoglo of one charge of abuse of office in February 2024, and the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Stoianoglo's suspension from office in September 2023 violated his right to trial.<sup>[37]</sup> Stoianoglo announced in July 2024 that he would run in the presidential election, and shortly thereafter the Moldovan Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office reopened Stoianoglo's case concerning his role in the 2020 release of imprisoned Moldovan oligarch and former member of parliament Veaceslav Platon, an "architect" of the "Russian Laundromat" scheme in which Russian elite laundered over \$20 billion in banks around the world,

including in Moldova, between 2011 and 2014.[38] Stoianoglo's presidential platform ostensibly supports Moldova's European integration but labels Russia as a "development partner" with which Moldova "must be friends." [39] Stoianoglo has consistently gained about 10 to 11 percent of respondents' support in recent polls.[40]

### *Renato Usatii: Possible Second Round Contender*

Usatii is the former mayor of Moldova's second largest city, Balti, which is heavily pro-Russian, and is running on the ticket of his political party, Our Party.[41] Usatii had business ties to Russian state-owned Russian Railways and is reportedly deeply entangled in Moldovan and Russian corruption and organized crime.[42] Usatii and Our Party signed a cooperation agreement with the Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) and its leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in 2017.[43] Usatii has called for Moldova to join neither the European Union nor the Eurasian Economic Union.[44] Usatii came in third place in the first round of voting in the 2020 presidential election and called on his supporters to oppose Dodon but did not directly endorse Sandu.[45] Polls from July to September 2024 found that roughly seven to 11 percent of respondents supported Usatii.[46]

### *Irina Vlah: Shifting Platforms*

Irina Vlah is running as an independent candidate elected by citizens' assembly.[47] Vlah was the governor of Gagauzia from 2015 to 2023. Vlah met with Russian Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko and then State Duma Chairperson Sergei Naryshkin in Moscow in 2015 before the Gagauzian gubernatorial election, and Kremlin officials reportedly prepared speeches and slogans for Vlah's campaign.[48] Vlah has promoted pro-Russian platforms, and her slogan in 2015 was "Being with Russia is in our hands!" [49] Vlah advocated for the illegal Gagauzian referendum in 2014 in which voters supported Moldova's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and the possible declaration of Gagauzian independence in the future.[50] Vlah reportedly met with Shor Party-affiliates in July 2024, who agreed to help collect signatures for Vlah's presidential campaign as an independent candidate.[51]

Vlah has notably shifted her platform in recent years to be more pro-EU.[52] Vlah had routinely made public statements in support of the illegal Gagauzian referendum but halted this practice in 2021.[53] Vlah reportedly made several undisclosed trips to Russia in 2023, despite her platform shift.[54] Surveys between July and September 2024 showed Vlah polling behind Sandu, Stoianoglo, and Usatii with six to eight percent of the vote.[55]

### *Vasile Bolea: The Kremlin's Candidate That Wasn't*

The Kremlin-linked and Shor-led Victory electoral bloc nominated Bolea, whose platform called for prioritizing the restoration of Moldova's relations with Russia and the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Moldova's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union and BRICS.[56] The Moldovan CEC refused to register Bolea as a candidate, however, due to repeated electoral

regulation violations and problems with his paperwork.[57] A poll from August 2024 indicated that only 4.4 percent of respondents would have voted for Bolea.[58]

**Kremlin-affiliated and Kremlin-friendly Moldovan opposition forces appear to be trying to attract votes away from Sandu by promoting similar-sounding pro-EU platforms.**

Polling between May and August 2024 found that 33 to 35 percent of respondents would vote for Sandu and that 52 to 53 percent said they would vote for the referendum — indicating that support for the EU referendum does not necessarily translate into support for Sandu.[59] Some opposition candidates, including those who have consistently supported Moldova's orientation towards Russia or have indirect links to the Kremlin, are likely now promoting ostensibly pro-EU platforms in hopes of attracting voters away from Sandu. The majority of Moldovans hold positive views about the EU, and many of the opposition candidates likely understand that promoting anti-EU platforms will not attract many voters.[60]

Support for Sandu has stayed consistent between April 2024 (35.1 percent) and August 2024 (35.5 percent), suggesting that the introduction of more pro-EU candidates to the ballot in recent months has not changed the minds of Sandu's core supporters. The number of undecided voters, whom the opposition may hope to attract, appears to be increasing, however. Polling from September 2024 found that over 34 percent of respondents had not decided on a candidate yet, whereas an earlier poll from August 2024 found that only 18 percent of respondents were undecided.[61]

**The Kremlin likely seeks to influence turnout in the October 2024 referendum such that it does not pass or fails to meet the highest threshold required for certain constitutional amendments.**

Moldovan law differentiates between two types of referenda. The first type involves "provisions regarding the sovereignty, independence, and unity of the state, as well as those regarding the permanent neutrality of the State," which "may be revised only by referendum with a vote of the majority of registered citizens with voting rights." [62] The Moldovan Constitutional Court ruled in April 2024, however, that the October 2024 referendum "does not affect the sovereign, independent, and unitary character of the state...nor the status of permanent neutrality." [63] The October 2024 referendum, therefore, will be the second type of referendum, which requires a turnout of more than 1/3 of all registered voters to be considered valid.[64]

The referendum's passage would demonstrate Moldovans' long-term commitment to their country's EU accession, complicating the Kremlin's ability to achieve its objective of reestablishing its dominant influence over Chisinau and reorienting Moldova's geopolitical position towards Russia. The Kremlin would first and foremost prefer that the majority of Moldovans vote against the referendum but would likely be content if there was insufficient turnout that would still prevent any changes to the Moldovan Constitution. The Kremlin's preferred outcome of the referendum, from most to least preferred, is therefore likely as follows:

1. The majority of participating voters vote against the referendum, and the referendum reaches the required 1/3 turnout threshold. The result of the referendum is considered valid, and the constitution remains unchanged.
2. The majority of participating voters vote against the referendum, but the referendum does not reach the required 1/3 turnout threshold. The result of the referendum is considered invalid, and the constitution remains unchanged.
3. The majority of participating voters vote for the referendum, but the referendum does not reach the required 1/3 turnout threshold. The result of the referendum is considered invalid, and the constitution remains unchanged.
4. The majority of participating voters vote for the referendum, and the referendum reaches the required 1/3 turnout threshold. The result of the referendum is considered valid, and the constitution changes.

**Kremlin-linked and Kremlin-friendly opposition parties in Moldova likely forecasted that the referendum would achieve the necessary turnout numbers given previous presidential elections' turnout numbers well above 33 percent and decided to focus their campaigns on convincing voters to vote against the referendum.**<sup>[65]</sup> The pro-Russian Communist Party, Revival Party, and Chance Party (the latter two of which are affiliated with the Shor Party) have been calling for Moldovans to vote against the referendum.<sup>[66]</sup> Shor's Victory electoral bloc, which includes the Revival and Chance parties, applied to the Moldovan CEC to campaign against the referendum but failed to submit the proper documents.<sup>[67]</sup> Shor nonetheless promised free gas supplies to all homes in Moldova starting December 2024 and \$2 billion worth of investments in social infrastructure should Moldovans vote against the referendum.<sup>[68]</sup> Shor did not outline how he would fulfill these promises, however.

**Other opposition parties are trying to convince voters to boycott the referendum, which could threaten the referendum's ability to meet the required voter turnout.** The Moldovan CEC reported in July 2024 that there are 3,301,368 registered Moldovan voters.<sup>[69]</sup> The result of the October 2024 referendum will be considered valid if 1/3 of all registered voters vote in the referendum – about 1.1 million people. Although surveys in recent months suggest that the referendum will meet the required voter turnout, the margins are not large.<sup>[70]</sup> The Socialist Party is campaigning for voters to boycott the referendum entirely.<sup>[71]</sup> Polling suggests that the opposition's boycott campaigns may be successfully swaying some Moldovan voters; polling from August and September 2024 indicated that about 67 to 68 percent of voters residing within Moldova intended to vote in the referendum, whereas earlier polling in May-June 2024 stated that 79 percent were planning to vote.<sup>[72]</sup> Continued decreases in the number of voters who plan to vote in the referendum could threaten the referendum's ability to meet the threshold.

**Significant voter turnout among the Moldovan diaspora will likely ensure that the referendum reaches the voter turnout threshold and passes, however.** Voters among the Moldovan diaspora, particularly in the EU, are very likely to vote for the referendum. The Moldovan diaspora, making up an estimated 1/3 of the electorate and with its significant capacity to influence election results, may offset any of the opposition's success in convincing voters to vote against or boycott the referendum. Moldovan citizens living abroad who participated in the 2020 presidential election overwhelmingly (93 percent) voted for Sandu, and these 244,000 votes were key to her victory over Dodon by 16 points in the second round.<sup>[73]</sup> Moldovan citizens residing in the US, Canada, Norway,



Sweden, Finland, and Iceland will be able to vote by mail-in ballot in October 2024.[74] Only 1,996 Moldovans in these six states pre-registered to receive mail-in ballots, however, so mail-in voting will not significantly boost Sandu's numbers.[75] Other diaspora voters will have to vote in person, but the Moldovan think tank Watchdog recently noted that voting at polling stations abroad requires "considerable effort" for most members of the Moldovan diaspora, likely because not all Moldovans abroad live near a polling station.[76] The Moldovan government will open 234 polling stations abroad in October 2024 — an increase from 146 polling stations in the 2021 parliamentary election — which may help increase diaspora turnout.[77]

**Forecasts**

**Beyond**

**October**

**2024**

**The Kremlin is likely prepared to pursue several other lines of effort in the future to derail Moldova's EU path even if Sandu wins re-election and the referendum passes.** The process of Moldova's accession to the EU will last until at least 2030, and the Kremlin possesses multiple tools it can try to leverage to prevent Moldova's accession until then.[78] The Kremlin may try to influence upcoming elections, capture Moldovan state institutions, and exploit its ties to Moldova's Transnistrian and Gagauzian regions to keep Moldova within Russia's asserted sphere of influence. ISW offers the following possible Russian lines of effort to forecast how the Kremlin may continue efforts to destabilize Moldova and derail its EU path no matter the results of the October 2024 election and referendum. This list is not exhaustive of all the tools available to the Kremlin in Moldova, however.

#### *Kremlin Efforts to Influence State Institutions*

**The Kremlin may try to influence future parliamentary and presidential elections in Moldova to bring Kremlin-friendly politicians to power who can derail Moldova's EU accession.** The EU in 2022 identified nine areas that the Moldovan government must reform before Moldova can become an EU member — the judiciary, electoral code, anti-corruption, deoligarchization, organized crime, public administration, public reform, civil society, and human rights protections.[79] The EU reported in November 2023 that Moldova had made sufficient progress on six of these nine criteria but still had to strengthen its judicial reforms, anti-corruption reforms, and deoligarchization efforts.[80] Kremlin-friendly politicians in the Moldovan parliament or presidency could stall or entirely block the reform measures Moldova must take to become an EU member. Kremlin-friendly politicians could also enact new policies that reverse Moldova's previous progress on the other six categories.

Moldova has suffered from endemic corruption for decades, with Moldovan oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc having fully captured Moldova's state institutions up until just five years ago.[81] The European Commission reported in late 2023 that "the length of proceedings, low clearance rates, and the large backlog of cases negatively affect the [Moldovan] judicial system's efficiency." [82] Members of the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office also appear to be trying to push back on reforms by discrediting the recently created Pre-Vetting and Vetting Commissions that evaluate prosecutors.[83] The processes to rid state institutions of corruption and reform the judiciary will likely be lengthy and arduous, despite Moldova's recent extensive reform efforts, allowing the Kremlin time to try to exploit these weak points.

**The Kremlin can use information it gathers from the October 2024 presidential election to better prepare candidates to run against PAS in upcoming elections.** Sandu has consistently been the frontrunner in the months leading up to the October 2024 election but may not secure 50 percent of the vote to win in the first round.[84] The latest polling from mid-September 2024 indicates, however, that Sandu is highly likely to secure a second-round victory no matter who she will run against.[85] A runoff in the 2024 presidential election will give the Kremlin valuable information about which of the candidates performed the best against Sandu and help the Kremlin optimize candidate lists, platforms, and messaging for subsequent elections.

Polling between April and August 2024 already suggests that the October 2024 presidential election is affecting voters' decisions concerning the Summer 2025 parliamentary election. The number of voters who are undecided in the parliamentary elections is noticeably increasing as the October 2024 election nears.[86] One poll showed that support for PAS in the parliamentary elections remained relatively stable between April 2024 (29.8 percent) and August 2024 (28.4 percent), but support for Dodon's Socialist Party decreased from 16.2 percent to 10.1 percent, suggesting that Dodon's July 2024 announcement that he would not run for president is affecting overall support for his Socialist Party.[87] The Kremlin can use data about the electoral performance of Stoianoglo, Dodon's endorsed presidential candidate, among Socialist voters in 2024 to better understand why Socialists may be drifting away from the historically pro-Russian party and to which other candidates and platforms voters are drawn instead.

Sandu's reelection and the passing of the referendum in October 2024 will not be a guaranteed safeguard against backsliding. Georgia serves as a precedent of a former Soviet state where Kremlin-friendly politicians and parties have won a parliamentary majority despite the pro-EU views of the executive branch and the majority of the population, and the Kremlin may use malign influence campaigns to create a similar situation in Moldova in the future. The Georgian Dream party came to power in 2012 in part due to Georgians' economic concerns, and the Kremlin may try to exploit similar economic concerns in Moldova — one of the poorest states in Europe — in future elections.[88]

**The Kremlin may try to exploit the composition of the Moldovan Constitutional Court to invalidate the results of the October 2024 referendum.** The Kremlin may try to use its malign influence to stack the Constitutional Court with Kremlin-friendly judges in 2025. The term of one of the six judges on the Moldovan Constitutional Court will expire in July 2025 and the terms of another four judges will expire in August 2025.[89] The parliament will fill two of these spots for a six-year mandate, the government will fill two, and the Superior Council of Magistrates will fill one.[90] The Moldovan parliamentary elections will take place on a yet-to-be-determined date in Summer 2025, and the election of a Kremlin-friendly parliamentary majority could aid the Kremlin in efforts to influence the Constitutional Court in the future.

The Kremlin may try to influence the judges on the Constitutional Court to reverse the court's 2024 rulings about the EU referendum in the future. The Constitutional Court is responsible for confirming the results of republican referenda.[91] Should the October 2024 referendum pass and the court confirm this result, the Kremlin may try to influence the court to find reasons to cancel the referendum's constitutional amendments in the future. The Moldovan Constitutional Court has previously repealed amendments to the constitution in part due to procedural violations as long as 16 years after the amendments' implementation.[92]

The Kremlin may try to influence the Constitutional Court to revoke its April 2024 ruling that the October 2024 referendum does not concern Moldova's sovereignty, independence, unity, or neutrality. The possible reversal of this ruling would likely dictate that the referendum should have met the higher turnout threshold of 50 percent (as opposed to 1/3) to be considered valid. Kremlin officials and affiliates have repeatedly promoted narratives that a state's membership in the EU represents a loss of sovereignty and that the EU is essentially a military organization like NATO.[93] These information operations could set conditions for a future Kremlin-friendly Constitutional Court to rule that the October 2024 referendum did in fact affect Moldova's sovereignty and neutrality and therefore needed a higher turnout. (The Kremlin would likely only pursue this line of effort should the October 2024 referendum pass with a turnout of over 33 percent but under 50 percent.)

**The Kremlin may try to exploit the composition of the Moldovan Constitutional Court and CEC to pave the way for pro-Russian parties to run in future Moldovan elections.**

Amendments to the electoral code will go into effect when the mandates of the current CEC members expire in 2026, at which point there will be seven members on the CEC who will each serve six-year terms.[94] The Moldovan parliamentary majority will appoint two CEC members, and the president, Superior Council of Magistracy, cabinet, parliamentary minority, and civil society organizations will each appoint one member.[95]

The Moldovan Constitutional Court and CEC have both made decisions in the past that affected Kremlin-affiliated politicians' abilities to operate and run in elections, and the Kremlin may try to exploit these institutions to prevent similar rulings in the future. The Constitutional Court designated the Shor Party as unconstitutional and banned the party in June 2023.[96] The CEC also found differences between the Shor-affiliated Chance Party's spending and declared funding, causing the Moldovan Ministry of Justice to restrict the party's activities such that it could not participate in the October 2024 elections.[97] The CEC demanded that the Ministry of Justice do the same to the Shor-linked Revival Party following similar findings in August 2024.[98] The CEC did not register the Victory electoral bloc in the October 2024 elections due to errors in the bloc's paperwork and the fact that Shor is not legally allowed to represent the bloc as long as he is under EU sanctions.[99]

*Kremlin Efforts to Exploit Transnistria and Gagauzia*

**The Kremlin may try to exploit its growing economic relationship with Moldovan voters, particularly in Gagauzia, to influence Moldovan public opinion in the coming decade as its economic influence over Transnistria wanes.** Transnistria is informally a mafia state run by Viktor Gushan, whose company Sheriff Enterprises dominates Transnistria's economic landscape.[100] Gushan's political interests are tied to his businesses, which relied on black market trade with Ukraine before Kyiv shut its border with Transnistria in 2022 and which has since reorientated towards the Moldovan and EU markets.[101] Despite Gushan's Western-learning business interests, the Kremlin has enjoyed economic influence over Transnistria through Russia's supplies of free gas to the parastate.[102] Gazprom has supplied free gas to Transnistria's Cuciurgan power station, which in turn provides a significant portion of the funding to the Transnistrian budget with its

electricity exports to Moldova.<sup>[103]</sup> The planned construction of a direct Moldovan-Romanian power line by the end of 2025, however, will severely limit the Kremlin's control over Transnistrian coffers and strengthen Gushan's control over Transnistria's economic policies.<sup>[104]</sup>

Russia appears to be trying to secure financial relationships with Moldovan regions, including Gagauzia, to influence parts of the Moldovan electorate. Gagauzian Governor Yevgenia Gutsul signed a deal with Russian state-owned bank Promsvyazbank (PSB) in April 2024, in which PSB agreed to provide about \$100 per month to 25,000 Gagauzian government employees and pensioners — significant payments to roughly 20 percent of the population of one of Moldova's poorest regions.<sup>[105]</sup> Residents in the Moldovan cities of Orhei and Taraclia also began receiving similar monthly payments from PSB in July 2024.<sup>[106]</sup> These payments serve to establish long-term loyalty to Russia among select sectors of the Moldovan population, securing Moscow's ability to disrupt and influence future elections.

Moscow is reportedly using PSB to funnel money into Moldova to buy votes in the October 2024 election, and the Kremlin will likely repeat and adapt these efforts for future elections. Shor has reportedly used PSB's mobile app to distribute at least \$15 million to Shor-affiliated regional leaders and voters in Moldova in the current election cycle.<sup>[107]</sup> Shor also reportedly created multiple companies in Russia in early September 2024, including three in partnership with PSB and one with internationally sanctioned Russian state bank Vnesheconombank (VEB), likely to facilitate these money transfers from Russia to Shor.<sup>[108]</sup> Moldovan authorities foiled previous Shor-linked efforts to smuggle money from Russia into Moldova through the Chisinau airport, and the PSB-linked schemes suggest that the Kremlin is adapting its methods in response to Moldovan authorities' responses.<sup>[109]</sup>

**The Kremlin may try to use its influence in Moldova to conduct reflexive control campaigns that aim to shape EU member states' decision making.** EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell stated in June 2023 that “Moldova's path [to the EU] is independent of what is happening in Transnistria” and that Moldova could join the EU with unresolved territorial conflicts as Cyprus did.<sup>[110]</sup> The parties in the Cypriot conflict, Greece and Turkey, were long-time NATO members and EU members/candidates, and EU states likely considered a Turkish-Greek conflict significantly less threatening than the presence of Russian troops in a potential EU member state. The EU requires that all member states unanimously vote in favor of the admittance of a new member, and some EU members may not approve Moldova's membership without Transnistria despite Borrell's apparent consent. The Kremlin has an incentive not only to maintain its troops illegally in Moldova but also to conduct information and hybrid operations aimed at instilling fear in EU states about the possible dangers that the deployment of Russian troops on another member's territory would pose to the union.

Gagauzia held an illegal referendum in 2014 in which voters opposed Moldova's membership in the EU, supported Moldova's membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, and supported the declaration of Gagauz independence “in the event of a change in the status of the Republic of Moldova as an independent state.”<sup>[111]</sup> Gutsul has recently threatened secession should Moldova join supranational structures or unify with Romania.<sup>[112]</sup> Gagauz secession is unlikely as Gagauzia lacks a contiguous territory, relies on the EU export market and subsidies from the Moldovan federal budget, and lacks the military power needed to defend its independence.<sup>[113]</sup> Russia is unlikely to be able to follow through on any promised military support to an independent Gagauzia in the near to medium

term as long as Russian forces are focused on the war in Ukraine and lack any viable means to deploy and supply Russian troops in Gagauzia. Russia could nonetheless exploit threats of Gagauzian secession and signal Russia's alleged willingness to economically and militarily support an independent Gagauzia in order to convince EU states to self-deter and deny Moldova's EU membership out of fear that this would lead to the deployment of Russian forces to Gagauzia. Although Borrell stated that Moldova could join the EU without Transnistria, it remains unclear if the EU would allow Moldova to join with *two* territorial conflicts.

**The Kremlin may exploit its military and security ties to Transnistria to influence future negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict to establish long-term influence over Moldovan domestic and foreign policies.** Although Viktor Gushan reportedly controls Transnistria's government and economy, the Kremlin's influence over Transnistria's military and security structures is well-established, as Russia has maintained two motorized rifle battalions in Transnistria since 1992 and many of the past and current heads of the Transnistrian Ministry of State Security came from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).<sup>[114]</sup> Russia will likely continue to wield influence over Transnistria's negotiating position in any future negotiations even if Russia is not itself party to those talks.

The Kremlin may attempt to pursue a "Kozak Memorandum 2.0" to federalize Moldova in the future. A Kozak Memorandum 2.0 would cement significant, enduring influence over Moldovan policy in the hands of the Kremlin as long as Russia maintained its influence over Transnistria and Gagauzia. This would allow the Kremlin to divert resources previously allocated to years-long efforts to keep Moldova within Russia's asserted sphere of influence to other efforts. Gushan's likely approval of a Kozak Memorandum 2.0 would increase the attractiveness of this course of action. Gushan's and the Kremlin's diverging interests likely impeded Russia's attempts to control Transnistrian policy in the past.<sup>[115]</sup> A Kozak Memorandum 2.0 would benefit both parties, however, as Gushan would be able to ensure Tiraspol could prevent Chisinau from enacting economic policies that would be detrimental to his businesses. Moldova's willingness to sign a Kozak Memorandum 2.0 would heavily depend on Western support for Moldova and the credibility of Russia's coercive power over Chisinau.

**The Kremlin may exploit its military ties to Transnistria to invade and occupy all of Moldova, but the threat of a Russian invasion of Moldova through Ukraine is currently extremely low.** Russian forces currently occupy the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in southwestern Ukraine, and the Russian military command would have to redeploy a significant number of forces from other operationally significant sectors of the front in order to cross the river, make significant advances westward, and seize Odesa City (Ukraine's third largest city). The Russian military command is highly unlikely to commit such effort to southwestern Ukraine while Russia is focused on seizing the rest of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The formation of Russia's Northern Grouping of Forces and subsequent launch of the Russian offensive towards Kharkiv City in May 2024 also demonstrated Russia's current inability to deploy a new force grouping capable of seizing large Ukrainian cities.<sup>[116]</sup> If the Russian leadership wanted to maintain its current battlefield priorities in eastern Ukraine while also opening a new offensive effort westward towards Odesa City, Russia would likely have to conduct another partial mobilization like it did in September 2022, which ISW assesses is highly unlikely at this time.<sup>[117]</sup>

Russia is currently also incapable of invading Moldova by sea. Ukrainian naval and aerial drones have caused significant damage to the Black Sea Fleet's (BSF) landing ships that would be required for an amphibious landing.<sup>[118]</sup> Ukrainian strikes have successfully pushed the Russian BSF out of the northwestern Black Sea and forced it to relocate its ships from occupied Sevastopol, Crimea to

Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai.[119] Russia's naval infantry units, such as the BSF's 810th Naval Infantry Brigade, which the Russian military command is currently using as motorized rifle units, have reportedly suffered heavy losses and lost their combat capability multiple times throughout the war, likely greatly diminishing their status as "elite" units trained in amphibious landings.[120]

**Russia's ability to militarily threaten Moldova may change in the future depending on the development of the battlefield situation in Ukraine.** Should Russia be able to dramatically increase its force and materiel generation efforts, Russia may be able to launch a large-scale offensive in southwestern Ukraine towards Moldova while continuing to fight in eastern Ukraine. Alternatively, the Russian military command may reorient towards southwestern Ukraine should Russian forces achieve their objectives in eastern Ukraine. Viktor Gushan appeared to have resisted Russia's attempts to draw Transnistria into the war in Ukraine in Spring 2022, but this occurred after a series of Ukrainian battlefield successes that weakened Russia's coercive power over Gushan.[121] Gushan would unlikely be able to resist a more influential Russia possibly emboldened by battlefield successes in Ukraine in the future.

**Moldova's future as an independent and sovereign state is directly tied to the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine and affects NATO defense planning.** Russia could exploit a possible ceasefire in Ukraine to establish lines of communication to Transnistria by resuming flights from Russia over Ukrainian airspace, allowing Russia to build up its forces and means in Transnistria for future military operations against Moldova. A ceasefire in Ukraine that results in the Russian military occupation of Crimea and parts or all of Kherson Oblast would also increase the possibility that Moscow would be able to reconstitute its forces to successfully invade and occupy all of Moldova from Ukraine via land or sea at a later date. A Russian invasion of Moldova becomes even more likely should Russia occupy Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts in the future, let alone the entirety of Ukraine.

NATO is currently expanding what will be its largest base near Constanta in southeastern Romania, demonstrating the importance NATO places on this region in its defense against Russia.[122] ISW previously assessed that should Russia occupy all of Ukraine, NATO is unprepared to defend against Russian forces stationed directly on the borders of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania.[123] A Russian occupation of Moldova would increase these already strained defense requirements by forcing NATO to defend Romania's 680-kilometer border with Moldova.[124]

**Western military assistance to both Ukraine and Moldova is vital to these states' abilities to resist Russian aggression and keep Russian forces away from NATO's eastern border.** Full Moldovan and Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity would allow NATO to focus on its northeastern border with Russia and Belarus and would keep Russian forces further from the NATO base in Romania. Western partners have recently increased their military support to Moldova, but Moldova remains militarily weak.[125] Moldova currently only spends about 0.5 percent of its limited GDP on defense and maintains a force grouping of only 6,500 professional soldiers equipped with outdated Soviet materiel.[126] Although Moldova has shown it can counter Russian malign influence in recent years, Moldova would be unable to independently resist Russian forces advancing from Ukraine or a strengthened and better-equipped Russian contingent in Transnistria without major Western assistance.



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