

Moldova votes on European future amid continued security challenges

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Figure 1. The giant flags of the Republic of Moldova and the European Union on the walls of the Casa Guvernului, Moldova's houses of government, ahead of the June 2023 European Political Community summit in Chisinau.

THIS AUTUMN, MOLDOVANS are casting their votes on the country's future. On 20 October, Moldova is holding presidential elections and a referendum on the country's continued EU integration. The issue is whether reform-minded President Maia Sandu, the driver behind Moldova's recent Western turn, will receive a renewed mandate and whether Moldova will continue along its path of EU integration. What is on the security policy

agenda ahead of the elections and referendum, and what can we expect going forward?¹

A RUSSIAN "HYBRID WAR"

Russia's ambitions of regional control over the security and foreign policy orientation of its neighbours, which is propelling its war against Ukraine, extend to Moldova as well. Moldova has been the target of

¹ I am grateful to those Moldovan experts in security and defence, representatives of Moldovan authorities, whom I met during an research trip to Chisinau in June 2024 and whose observations greatly contributed to this analysis.

an extensive Russian destabilisation campaign since Moldova opted for closer cooperation with Western partners in spring 2022. Russia's methods have varied. Until December 2022, it leveraged its near-monopoly on supplying energy to Moldova to pressure its society and government: sharply increasing the price of Russian natural gas and limiting its supply led to an economic crisis there. Russia continues to finance pro-Russian political parties and public protests in Moldova, while flooding the local media environment with disinformation and its own narratives on Ukraine, the West, and Moldovan government policies. Meanwhile, its control over the separatist region of Transnistria remains a source of instability.²

Moldovan authorities describe the Russian campaign as a “hybrid war” aimed at replacing the current government with a Russian-leaning leadership. In December 2023, the current Moldovan government's National Security Strategy explicitly identified Russia as a direct security threat for the first time. By February 2023, both Ukrainian intelligence and Moldovan authorities had already accused the Kremlin of plotting a coup d'état, using pro-Russian parties and protests to destabilise the government. In response, President Maia Sandu strengthened her cabinet's security profile by appointing Dorin Recean, her former security advisor, as Prime Minister.

SUPPORT FOR SANDU AND EU INTEGRATION. . .

Polls in late summer showed a lead for President Sandu in the October elections, well ahead of her major opponent, the Socialists' candidate, Alexandr Stoianoglo. Approximately 53 % of Moldovans are expected to support EU membership in the referendum. In addition, unaccounted for in the polls, Sandu and EU integration will likely receive the majority backing of the substantial Moldovan diaspora. While Stoianoglo has stated his support of EU integration, his party is traditionally close to Russia. The platform Pobeda, created by fugitive Moldovan politician Ilan Shor to unite Russia-backed political forces ahead of the elections, is banned from running and is instead expected to challenge the legitimacy of election results.³

. . .BUT FERTILE GROUND FOR DESTABILISATION

Despite a positive outlook for Sandu and EU integration, support for closer relations with Russia and disapproval of the current pro-Western policies remain widespread in the countryside and among older generations. Moldovan society is increasingly polarised. Poverty, weak institutions, and corruption continue to provide a bridgehead for Russian influence. Indeed, while the government is concerned with national security, the issue closest to the hearts of most Moldovans is the dismal economic situation.⁴



Map 1. Map of Moldova

Källa: Per Wikström, FOI

Lately, the autonomous region of Gagauzia has become a focal point of divisive Russian measures. Since the Soviet Union's dissolution, the Gagauz people have remained close to Russia, whose narratives are especially pervasive here. This adds to the long-standing tensions between Gagauzia and the central government; these

² For an overview of Russian actions against Moldova, see Jakob Hedenskog, *Strengthening Resilience in Moldova Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, SCEEUS Report No. 19, Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, 20 December 2023, <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/strengthening-resilience-in-moldova-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

³ For election opinion polls, see WatchdogMD, “Preferințele electorale în cazul alegerilor prezidențiale și parlamentare. Rezultatele unui sondaj de opinie,” 30 August 2024, https://watchdog.md/polls/208281/preferintele-electorale-in-cazul-alegerilor-prezidentiale-si-parlamentare-rezultatele-unui-sondaj-de-opinie/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

⁴ IRI, International Republican Institute, “What is the most important problem facing Moldova today? And what is the second most important problem?” in *National Poll of Moldova May–June 2024*, 15 July 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-moldova-may-june-2024/>

have also worsened further under the region's new leader, Yevgenia Gutsul. She maintains close ties to Moscow and to pro-Russian politician Shor, who was sentenced in absentia in 2015 to 7,5 years in prison, prolonged to 15 years in 2024, for large-scale fraud and money-laundering, and sanctioned in 2022 by the United States for his role in fomenting political unrest in Moldova. Gutsul has threatened to propagate for irredentism for Gagauzia over claims that the Moldovan government is moving towards a union with Romania and oversee the introduction of the Russian *Mir* payment system in the region. While Gagauzia is not a source of military threat for Chisinau, its lack of its own armed forces and simultaneous and large-scale demonstrations in Gagauzia and other regions risk undermining stability in the country as a whole.

NECESSARY AND CONTROVERSIAL DEFENCE

Albeit distant, there is a lingering fear of Russian military action. Authorities in Chisinau are aware that Russia may again attempt to establish a land corridor to Moldova through the breakaway region of Transnistria, should Ukrainian defences falter and the current destabilisation campaign prove inadequate to change Moldova's trajectory.⁵ Correspondingly, the Moldovan government is investing in its hitherto small and ill-equipped armed forces. The need is great: until recently, Moldova lacked, inter alia, functioning air surveillance. Defence spending rose about 70 % in 2023, to 0.55 % of GDP, largely enabled by the EU's financial contribution through the European Peace Facility. To reach the ambition of 1 % by 2030, the government may need to reprioritise public spending — a policy that would likely be unpopular in the poor country. Beyond investing in its own capabilities, there appears to be a political realisation that Moldova cannot face the threat of war on its own. Cooperation with NATO is increasing; Chisinau has also entered into a Security and Defence Partnership with the EU and is strengthening its bilateral security cooperation with individual countries, not least Romania.

However, investments and cooperation in defence are not uncontroversial. Most Moldovans support the country's constitutional neutrality, and many view investments and cooperation in defence as challenging it. This is also a focal point for Russian propaganda. While President Sandu has hinted at the need for a "larger alliance" for Moldova, the government has stated that it is not seeking NATO membership, citing the lack of public support.⁶ Beyond the military, the government is also making efforts to strengthen societal resilience. Providing natural gas from non-Russian sources was an early priority. Emphasis is now put on strategic communication, media literacy, and cyber defence. However, Moldova is facing an uphill battle in attempting to limit Russia-backed media outlets with large financial resources. While many are banned and closed down, new ones keep popping up.⁷

TRANSNISTRIA ON THE BACK BURNER, BUT CHALLENGES AHEAD

The separatist region of Transnistria is effectively not only under Russian control, but also hosts a Russian military presence and a local militia. The Russian military footprint is often estimated to be about 1,500 soldiers, divided into the Operational Group of Russian Forces and the peacekeeping mission, the Joint Control Commission. In reality, most of the staff are locals with Russian passports.⁸ Compared to the concern that Russia would establish a land corridor, stakeholders in Chisinau appear less worried about the military threat from Transnistria itself. While the government has taken a harsher stance on the region with the introduction of criminal culpability for separatism, Moldovan analysts emphasise that the local leadership in Tiraspol and the government share an interest in maintaining the status quo. Indeed, economic matters are becoming more important in the relationship. Since Ukraine closed the border to the region, the local economy in Transnistria is deeply dependent on trade with the EU, conducted through other Moldovan regions. Increased economic interaction may stimulate further cooperation.⁹

5 There were reports of Russian operational plans for an incursion into Moldova at the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine. See Mary Ilyushina, Cate Cadell, Dan Lamothe, David L. Stern and Timothy Bella, "Commander hints at Russian ambitions beyond Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/04/22/russian-ambition-beyond-ukraine/>.

6 Suzanne Lynch, "Time to join NATO? Moldova eyes joining a 'larger alliance,'" *Politico*, 20 January 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/maia-sandu-moldova-nato-alliance-joining-ukraine-war-russia-invasion/>.

7 Andrew Wilson, "Democracy under siege: Tackling Russian interference in Moldova," *European Council on Foreign Relations—ECFR*, 8 December 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/democracy-under-siege-tackling-russian-interference-in-moldova/>.

8 The Russian peacekeepers do not have a UN mandate. The OGRF is deployed to guard the Soviet-era ammunition stockpile in Cobasna. In practice, there is no clear distinction between the contingents.

9 For a discussion of the situation in Transnistria, see Kamil Całus, "Transnistria in the new international reality," *osw Commentary*, Centre for Eastern Studies, 29 December 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-12-29/transnistria-new-international-reality>.

A more acute challenge may be how to fit the Transnistrian settlement process into Moldova's EU integration. The Moldovan government has made clear that it seeks the peaceful reintegration of the region and that EU membership concerns the whole of Moldovan territory, including the far bank of the Nistru river. However, the practical implementation of this remains unclear. Importantly, for Chisinau, any discussions on Transnistria's reintegration must be conducted without giving the local leadership in Tiraspol, and thereby Russia, a veto in the EU process. The question of how the reintegration of some 300,000 Transnistrian residents will impact society looms beyond the horizon. While there are already functioning people-to-people contacts across the river, differences in economic standards, civil freedoms, and the media environment will be challenging. The management of Transnistrian security structures will create particular problems; they would likely include disbandment, huge layoffs, and individual security screenings.

Since December 2022, Moldova is no longer dependent on heating with natural gas imports from Russia through Transnistria. However, the energy situation remains entangled with the separatist region — and with Ukraine. Moldova as a whole still obtains the majority of its electricity from the Cuciurgan power station in Transnistria, which, in turn, receives Russian natural gas via transit through Ukrainian territory. It is not clear what will happen when the transit agreements through Ukraine expire in December 2024. Moldova is currently constructing power lines to Romania to alleviate its dependence on the Transnistrian plant.

However, even with alternative supply, a cessation of gas deliveries to the Cuciurgan station would not be in Chisinau's interests. While it would sever a conduit of Russian influence over Transnistria, it would lead to an economic crisis and possibly massive refugee flows across the river. The local Transnistrian economy is built on cheap electricity from the plant.¹⁰

LOOKING AHEAD

As the October elections approach, Moldova appears to be taking another step along its Western path. However, many challenges remain. In the short term, as Moldova heads to the urns, we can expect Russia to ramp up its disruptive efforts, including through disinformation, financing protest, and possibly vote-buying. These will be important issues for the ODIHR election-monitoring mission. Beyond October, the parliamentary elections in 2025 loom. Russia will then aim to break the ruling party's parliamentary control, which has been crucial in advancing reforms toward fulfilling the EU acquis. In fact, a major reason for Russian efforts around the present elections may be to rehearse its tactics ahead of next year's more decisive vote.

In the longer term, unresolved tensions, societal vulnerability, and, importantly, the further development of the war in Ukraine may all alter the current trajectory. The Transnistrian settlement process and how it fits into EU integration presents a particular hurdle. Fundamentally, while Moscow maintains the ambition to control its neighbours and Chisinau stays its course, Moldova's European choice is about the ability of a small but sovereign country to freely choose its own security policy. ■

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¹⁰ Michał Paszkowski, "Moldova: Potential problems with electricity availability in 2025," *IES Commentaries* 1124 (99/2024), 16 May 2024, <file:///C:/Users/krimel/Downloads/ies-commentaries-1124-99-2024.pdf>.