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# Russia's Planned Coup in Moldova Reminds Us Why Ukraine Must Win This War

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Protesters demanding early elections outside Moldova's parliament in Chisinau. **EPA / DUMITRU DORU**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's announcement last week that Ukrainian intelligence had intercepted a Russian plan to topple the pro-Western government in neighboring Moldova reminded the world that whatever Russia's failings as a military power might be, it continues to lead the field in hybrid warfare and influence operations.

As Moldova was plunged into a political crisis following Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita's resignation and the collapse of her government, Moldovan President Maia Sandu revealed further details of the alleged plot, which she said entailed using foreign actors "with military background, camouflaged in civilian clothes, to undertake violent actions, attacks on state institutions and taking hostages."

Russia's plot to violently overthrow the Moldovan leadership echoes its illegal annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine in 2014, when the so-called "little green men" — a mixture of Russian special forces, intel operatives, and mercenaries — violently seized Ukrainian government buildings in an operation all too familiar to Russia.

While the Kremlin has of course denied Moldova's allegations, the planned coup is a case of Moscow making good on threats made publicly by its own officials last spring. In late 2021, as Russia was making final preparations for its invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin set its sights on Moldova, issuing continuous threats and unleashing a torrent of disinformation and propaganda.

The trigger was Moldova's pro-Kremlin president Igor Dodon losing his re-election bid to the pro-Western Sandu in 2020. The threats escalated further following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine with some Russian government figures calling for the "denazification" of Moldova to protect the country's Russian speakers.

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At the center of all this is Transnistria (Pridnestrovie), an internationally recognized part of Moldova that broke away from Chisinau in 1990. For decades, some 1,500 Russian troops have been stationed in the region, sparking concerns among Ukrainian officials last year that Russia could use Transnistria to launch a new front in southern Ukraine.

While making various threats against Moldova last spring, Moscow briefly considered recognizing the independence of Transnistria, and while it ultimately didn't take that step, it has used its military presence in the region to exert pressure on the Moldovan government and to run destabilizing operations in the country.

The situation is very similar to Russia's occupation of eastern Ukraine's Donbas region, and it was no surprise that shortly after Putin signed his decree in February recognizing Donbas as a part of Russia, the pro-Kremlin leadership in Transnistria requested the same recognition.

Insisting that Transnistria considered itself part of Russia, pro-Kremlin voices accused Sandu and "her Romanian curators" of seeking to unleash a war in the region. Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov), a key intelligence operative in Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, even claimed Romanian troops were donning Moldovan military uniforms in a bid to start a war. That was followed by a series of false flag terrorist attacks inside Transnistria.

While the disinformation operations calmed down over the summer as Russia suffered heavy losses in Ukraine, the plan to destabilize Moldova remained in place.

As the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine approaches, last week's revelations only increase the chances of the war in Ukraine spilling over into its neighbors. In that sense, Moldova is particularly at risk, due to it not being a member of NATO.

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While the events of the past year have exposed the weakness of Russia's military amid

rampant corruption, Moscow does continue to excel at conducting malign operations, and its hybrid approach to warfare allows it to engage in multiple theatres and engineer chaos in many regions, despite being tied up with the war in Ukraine.

Russia's readiness to interfere in another country's domestic affairs is yet another example of why it cannot be allowed to win in Ukraine. Moldova may have survived the collapse of its government, which has already been replaced by a new pro-Western administration, but that won't stop Russia from plotting operations against Moldova in the future.

The planned Russian coup in Moldova reveals that despite being made a global pariah and subjected to harsh international sanctions for the past year, Russia still feels no need to rein in its behavior. Some experts continue to claim that any harsher response to Russia's actions would serve only to escalate the situation, but this latest attempt to subvert democracy shows that despite walking a fine line, Russia's egregious behavior continues and is itself escalatory.

This is hardly Russia's first coup attempt, either, with its agents in recent years attempting to assassinate Montenegro's prime minister, interfere with the Catalonian referendum to weaken Spain, influence the outcome of Scotland's independence referendum, invade Georgia, and perhaps even support a plot to violently overthrow the German government. Above all, of course, Russia illegally annexed Crimea and invaded Ukraine.

Russia's brutal assault on Chechnya in the early 2000s, in which it terrorized the civilian population in Grozny, should have led to its international isolation. But instead, Putin and his regime were allowed to grow stronger, leading to the atrocities unfolding today in Ukraine.

The Kremlin's revanchist and imperialist ambitions must be quashed and the West must keep arming Ukraine with the weapons it needs for victory as only Russia's total defeat in the conflict will right the course.

The diplomatic path was always going to be futile with Vladimir Putin and too much time has already been wasted. There is now no more room for error, however. Should Ukraine fall, Moldova will be the next sovereign state to face Russia's brutal wrath, and it won't be the last.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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