The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Russia Torpedoed Its Own Influence in Moldova

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May 15, 2023



A ceremony marking the State Flag Day in Chisinau, Moldova. **Vladislav Culiomza / Reuters**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has turned neighboring Moldova into a tinder box. Its border with Ukraine stretches for almost 1,000 kilometers, and Russian missiles have entered Moldovan airspace on more than one occasion. Moscow has threatened to prevent Moldova from becoming another "anti-Russia," while making fearmongering accusations that the Ukrainian army has plans to seize Moldova's breakaway region Transnistria.

The direct military threat to Moldova, however, receded after the Ukrainian army defeated Russia in Kherson, and the Moldovan government appears to have successfully adapted to the new situation and restored relative stability. Despite historically strong pro-Russian sentiment, the vast majority of Moldovans now agree that cooperation with Moscow has become too toxic, while the allure of EU integration — such as the opportunity to work there — is more tempting than anything Russia has to offer. Chisinau is accordingly taking increasingly decisive measures in its fight against Russian interference.

A state of emergency has been in effect in Moldova ever since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, affording the government and law enforcement agencies additional powers. So far, the authorities have not resorted to radical measures, but the fact that the state of emergency is extended every two months shows that they are seriously concerned about the threat of destabilization.

Throughout the past year, Chisinau has condemned Moscow for the war, but avoided direct confrontation, and was initially reluctant to actively oppose Russian interference. Moldovans welcomed Ukrainian refugees, but declined Kyiv's requests to sell it six MiG-29 fighter jets, which was a bitter pill for Kyiv to swallow, considering that the Ukrainian army had thwarted Russia's attempts at the start of the war to carve a corridor through Ukraine to Moldova's Moscow-backed breakaway region, Transnistria.

If it were not for Ukraine's counterattack, then Moscow would likely have already taken control of Moldova and installed a pro-Russian president there: Russia's rhetoric about the illegitimacy of the current Moldovan leadership is getting louder and louder. It is unlikely that Moldova, neither a large nor wealthy country, would have been able to put up much of a fight.

Chisinau's caution is understandable: after all, there are 1,500 Russian troops stationed in Transnistria, both as peacekeepers and as guards for Soviet-era arms depots. Moldova only joined anti-Russian sanctions this spring.

Before that, the government demurred, citing the country's dependence on the Russian economy, even though Moldova's main trading partner has long been the European Union. Last year, almost 60% of Moldovan exports went to the EU, while less than a quarter went to the entire Commonwealth of Independent States, including Russia. And while exports to the EU increased by a third in 2022, those destined for Russia decreased by about the same amount.

Even Moldova's long-standing and almost complete dependence on Russian gas supplies has significantly weakened during the past year, largely due to the actions of Russia itself. Last October, Russia's Gazprom reduced gas supplies to Moldova from 9 million to 5.7 million cubic meters per day in a payment dispute.

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Moscow also reduced gas supplies to Transnistria, which almost left Moldova without electricity, since until 2022 up to 70% of electricity supplied to the rest of Moldova came from Transnistria and its regional power plant, which runs on Russian gas. The rest was supplied by Ukraine. Due to the reduction in gas supplies, Transnistria stopped selling electricity to Chisinau, while Kyiv also stopped exports due to the Russian missile strikes against its energy infrastructure, which had caused severe energy shortages across the war-torn country.

Soon afterward, Chisinau reached an agreement with Tiraspol, Transnistria's de facto capital. Chisinau agreed to send its own Russian gas supplies to Transnistria in exchange for the resumption of electricity supplies from the latter. To meet its domestic requirements, Moldova began buying gas from the EU, which by January 2023 had enabled it to save $330 per

1,000 cubic meters compared with Russian prices thanks to the relative stabilization of the European gas market.

In the spring, Ukraine resumed electricity exports, and the Transnistria power plant returned to its prewar capacity. The energy crisis hit Moldovan consumers hard, but prodded Chisinau to establish alternative gas suppliers, including Romania and Greece, with plans to add Azerbaijan to that list. This energy diversification has strengthened the Moldovan government's position in its relationship with Moscow.

By this spring, following the resignation of the government and a subsequent reshuffle, Moldova had begun to toughen its stance on Russia. New Prime Minister Dorin Recean was previously a national security advisor and interior minister, and his appointment was a signal that security issues are Chisinau's top priority right now.

A few days before the reshuffle, President Maia Sandu said that Ukrainian intelligence had intercepted a Kremlin plan to organize a coup in Moldova through opposition protests and the involvement of foreign mercenaries. It's hard to verify the claims, but what is certain is that Russia has always had extensive influence in Moldova, and has traditionally enjoyed the support of about half the population. Even now, polls show that while the majority of Moldovans condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, about 30% still admire Putin.

Since last fall, the Shor party has been leading Moldovans in anti-government protests, officially against high utility prices. Russian propaganda portrays the protests as anti-European and nationwide, and describes the party's head, the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, as the leader of the Moldovan opposition. But in reality, the protests only attract a couple of thousand people, and those participants do not hide the fact that they are paid to attend.

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Ilan Shor fled to Israel after being sentenced to fifteen years in prison in Moldova for his role in laundering $1 billion through three Moldovan banks. A change of regime in Chisinau to a pro-Russian government would allow him to avoid prosecution and return to Moldova. Many believe that the Kremlin has offered him precisely these guarantees.

The Moldovan government was concerned by the protests, but did not dare to take tough action: the Shor party has six seats in parliament, and freedom of assembly is enshrined in the constitution. But the reports of Kremlin plans to destabilize Moldova, and then the emergence of a document titled "Strategic Goals of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova," which spelled out a plan for regime change, forced Chisinau to act more decisively.

The new Moldovan cabinet has appealed to the Constitutional Court to declare the Shor party illegitimate for promoting the interests of a foreign state. Meanwhile, in response to the opposition rallies, Sandu has called on Moldovans to assemble on Chisinau's main square on May 21 in support of EU integration. About 60% of Moldovans are in favor of their country's accession to the EU.

The reshuffled government has also stopped the broadcasting of Russian TV channels, and stepped up its efforts to publicly refute dubious Russian claims, such as that Ukraine is

preparing to occupy Transnistria. The powers of the Information and Security Service, Moldova's main intelligence agency, have been expanded, and a number of Russian officials — including President Vladimir Putin — have been banned from entering the country.

Chisinau's position on Transnistria has also become tougher. In February, the Moldovan parliament amended the law to make separatism an offense punishable by jail time, prompting outrage in Tiraspol. Chisinau insists that the amendments will not be applied retrospectively: only to future manifestations of separatism. Still, it is not yet clear how the new law will work in practice, so for now, Transnistrian officials prefer not to be seen in Chisinau.

Russia's actions have also prompted a public discussion in Moldova about the country's Armed Forces, which will not be able to put up much resistance to a serious security threat. At the Munich Security Conference in February, Sandu asked NATO countries to provide Moldova with air defense systems. The government has not yet abandoned neutrality, but is making it clear that it is ready to turn to NATO for help in the event of an escalation.

Chisinau's course toward more resolute resistance to the Kremlin doesn't mean that the country will be able to rid itself of its dependence on Russia overnight, of course. Nor will Moscow relinquish its foothold inside the country without a fight. Most likely, the Kremlin will continue to interfere in Moldovan political life by financing pro-Russian parties, portraying NATO as a threat, and accusing Sandu of trying to drag Moldova into the war. It's possible that the pro-Russian forces will be able to take advantage of the country's socioeconomic problems to put in a decent showing in the next elections.

Even that scenario, however, will not result in fundamental changes to Moldova's foreign policy. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is helping to consolidate Moldovan society in favor of EU integration and emancipation from Moscow. No matter who ends up leading the country in the future, they will not be able to ignore that consensus.

This article was originally published by The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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