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Moldova's Path to European Integration amidst Conflicts, External Interferences, and Polarisation under Russian Pressure

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Abstract

This paper examines Moldova's path to EU integration amid regional conflicts, Russian interference, and internal polarisation. It analyses the impact of hybrid threats, the unresolved Transnistrian issue, and the role of EU support. Despite challenges, Moldova has shown resilience under President Maia Sandu. The study argues that inclusive governance and sustained international backing are key to Moldova's democratic stability and European future.

Keywords: European integration; hybrid warfare; Transnistria; geopolitical stress; strategic vulnerability.

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Introduction

Situated between Romania and Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova is a small, landlocked country of approximately 2.5 million inhabitants, the vast majority of whom are ethnically Romanian and Romanian-speaking. Despite its rich cultural heritage and strategic location at the crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe, Moldova remains one of the poorest countries on the continent, grappling with high levels of emigration, economic dependency, and institutional fragility. These structural vulnerabilities shape its geopolitical posture and complicate its efforts to pursue European integration, particularly in the face of external pressures and unresolved territorial disputes.

Yet, over the past few years, Maia Sandu's Moldova has been regarded as the "frontrunner" of the Eastern Partnership countries. Praising the country's progress, Antonio Costa, President of the European Council, claimed during his visit in Chisinau on July 4th, 2025, that he felt "impressed by how much [Moldova] has achieved in these three challenging years"¹. Under Sandu's leadership, the country successfully applied for EU membership on March 3rd, 2022, capitalising on the geopolitical momentum created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And on June 23rd, 2022, the European Council granted Moldova EU candidate status, alongside Ukraine, marking a historic pivot toward the West. Then, formal accession negotiations with the EU began on June 25th, 2024, again simultaneously with Ukraine. In contrast to Georgia's democratic backsliding and halted European trajectory, and war-torn Ukraine, Moldova has made rapid progress in its endeavour to align more closely with the European Union.

Yet, beyond the acceleration of Moldova's rapprochement with the EU, the war in Ukraine has put the Republic of Moldova under geopolitical stress. It is indeed confronted on a daily basis with significant challenges posed by external interferences, primarily emanating from Russia. Expectations that Transnistria would emerge as a secondary front in the war in Ukraine did not materialise. Instead, it is the potential instability within Transnistria that could exert influence over Moldova's trajectory towards European integration. Nevertheless, Moldova remains a primary target of Russian hybrid warfare tactics, which encompass a blend of cyber-attacks, political subversion, and economic pressure, testing Moldova's resilience. This paper examines the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on Moldova's stability, as well as its implications for Moldova's relations with the EU.

Transnistria and Regional Security: Consequences of the War in Ukraine

Contrarily to many expectations, the war in Ukraine has not led to a resumption of the Transnistrian conflict. On the contrary, it is less the military risk than the collapse of Transnistria that is worrying Chisinau today.

¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/03/remarks-by-president-antonio-costa-at-the-press-conference-following-the-meeting-with-president-of-moldova-maia-sandu/>

In the discourse surrounding the geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe, the case of Transnistria often emerges as a quintessential example of a protracted and unresolved conflict. Transnistria, or 'Pridnestrovie' as it is locally known, is a breakaway region of Moldova that has hosted Russian troops since the end of the 1992 Transnistrian War. These forces, initially part of the Soviet 14th Guards Army, were reorganized into the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) and now number around 1,500. They are nominally deployed as peacekeepers under the Joint Control Commission (JCC), a trilateral body created by the 1992 ceasefire agreement between Moldova, Russia, and Transnistria. The region also houses the Cobasna ammunition depot, one of the largest in Eastern Europe, containing up to 20,000 tons of Soviet-era weaponry, much of it obsolete and unstable. Since 1992, the region has existed in a state of de facto independence, supported politically, militarily, and economically by Russia. Despite Moldova's constitutional neutrality and its repeated calls for the withdrawal of Russian forces, Moscow has maintained its military presence. Since Ukraine closed its borders to Russian military transit in 2014, troop rotations and supplies are reportedly funneled through Chişinău airport, with Russia increasingly relying on Transnistrian citizens holding Russian passports to staff its units. Its unresolved status long remained a significant hurdle for Moldova's EU accession, as it represented a Russian foothold on EU's eastern border nearing Odessa.

Unsurprisingly, the war in Ukraine has significantly heightened fears of potential spillover effects, thereby exacerbating concerns about regional stability and security in neighboring countries. Incidents like drone wreckages and explosions (e.g., April 2022 attacks on Tiraspol) underscore the region's volatility. This instability not only poses immediate security threats but also has significant political ramifications, as evidenced by subsequent developments. In February 2024, Transnistria's congress appealed to Russia for "protection" against alleged Moldovan pressure, raising concerns of escalation.²

In this context, the economic landscape of Transnistria has been profoundly shaped by its historical dependence on Russian gas, a critical resource that has underpinned the region's industrial and domestic sectors for decades. However, this reliance has rendered Transnistria economy particularly vulnerable to geopolitical shifts and energy politics, as starkly evidenced by the 2025 gas crisis.³ On 31 December 2024, Russia abruptly halted its gas supplies to Transnistria, following the expiration of its transit agreement with Ukraine. Ukraine refused to renew the deal, aiming to cut off Russian revenue amid the ongoing war. Russia, despite having alternative routes via TurkStream and the Trans-Balkan pipeline, chose not to reroute gas to Transnistria. As Transnistria's economy has long depended on free Russian gas, which powered the Cuciurgan power station, a key supplier of electricity to Moldova, and sustained local industries. The crisis opened new discussions about economic reintegration and humanitarian aid, shifting the focus from military stalemate to socio-economic recovery. Transnistria's political allegiance to Moscow continues to complicate Moldova's diplomatic and economic trajectory, particularly in the context of EU integration. Also, while the European Union has softened its stance on admitting countries with unresolved territorial disputes (such as Moldova and Ukraine), it remains clear that Russian troops stationed in Transnistria pose a tangible obstacle, especially in relation to NATO accession, where Article 5 would be triggered

² <https://theconversation.com/pro-russian-breakaway-region-transnistria-shows-limits-of-domino-theory-in-international-relations-230143>

³ <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2025/04/23/transnistrias-art-of-survival-navigating-the-2025-gas-crisis/>

by any armed conflict on member territory. This entrenched Russian presence effectively blocks any Moldovan rapprochement with NATO, even though Moldova has never formally requested membership, and public opinion remains largely opposed to this perspective.

For the EU, the situation is more nuanced. The bloc supports Moldova's reintegration efforts, notably through the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM), deployed since 2005 to facilitate economic reintegration and curb illicit trade across the Transnistrian border. EUBAM has helped reopen transport corridors and harmonize customs procedures, effectively integrating Transnistria into Moldova's economic space. In fact, over 80% of Transnistrian exports now go to the EU and Moldova, suggesting a de facto economic unity. Despite this, EU-led peacekeeping proposals have been limited. Moldova has long advocated for the internationalization of the peacekeeping mission, but no formal EU initiative has materialized. The EU has not proposed deploying its own peacekeeping force, and such a move would likely face resistance from both Tiraspol and Moscow, which prefer the status quo. The 5+2 negotiation format—involving Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE (as mediators), and the EU and US (as observers)—has been largely dormant since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which rendered the format unworkable. The effectiveness of the format is today largely contested.

External Interferences: Testing Moldovan State Resilience

In Moldova, Russian disinformation campaigns are designed to exploit the country's strategic position and its aspirations for closer ties with the European Union. These efforts include fabricated videos, such as one falsely showing President Maia Sandu banning the collection of rosehips—a cherished Moldovan tradition—intended to portray her as a Western puppet disregarding national customs⁴. Another viral video reused footage from a Romanian military parade, falsely claiming Romanian troops were massing on Moldova's border⁵. These narratives are amplified through pro-Russian media outlets, political parties, and social media influencers, particularly on platforms like Telegram, Facebook, and TikTok⁶. Despite these challenges, Moldova has demonstrated a notable capacity to withstand and overcome such adversarial attacks, showcasing resilience in the face of external pressures aimed at destabilising its democratic processes and European trajectory. Russia's approach to undermining Moldova's European aspirations is multifaceted, employing a combination of disinformation, cyberattacks, and vote-buying tactics. This hybrid warfare strategy seeks to erode public trust in democratic institutions and sow discord within Moldovan society. A critical moment in this ongoing struggle occurred in the fall of 2024, when President Maia Sandu publicly accused Russia of orchestrating a coup attempt.⁷ The allegations included interference in Moldova's EU referendum (20 October 2024) and presidential election (20 October – 3 November 2024) through the use of deepfake technology and the organization of paid protests. These activities were reportedly led by pro-Russian oligarchs, such as Ilan Shor, who have vested interests in maintaining close ties with Moscow and undermining Moldova's pro-European government.

⁴ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/10/russias-information-war-in-moldova/>

⁵ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/10/russias-information-war-in-moldova/>

⁶ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/russias-disinformation-targets-moldovas-ties-europe>

⁷ <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2024/10/22/moldavie-apres-la-victoire-etriquee-du-referendum-sur-union-le-spectre-du-syndrome-gorbachev/>

Russia's influence in Moldova is further amplified through its strategic leverage in the breakaway region of Transnistria and the autonomous territory of Gagauzia. These regions serve as critical nodes in Russia's efforts to exert pressure and create internal divisions within Moldova. In Gagauzia, for instance, a 2024 referendum saw an overwhelming 95% of voters opposing Moldova's EU referendum, reflecting the deep-seated pro-Russian sentiments cultivated in the region. The pro-Russian governor of Gagauzia, Evgenia Gutul, has been a pivotal figure in this dynamic, facing EU sanctions for her ties to the Kremlin. Her arrest in March 2025, and sentenced to seven years in prison for illegally financing the outlawed Shor Party in August 2025, underscores the complex interplay between regional politics, external influence, and the broader geopolitical contestation in Moldova.

Despite Moldova's efforts to counter Russian influence, including bans on Russian media outlets, Moscow continues to find alternative avenues to reach Moldovan audiences. Through networks in Gagauzia, and more widely in Moldova as a whole, Russian disinformation campaigns persist, exploiting existing societal polarisation to garner support for pro-Russian candidates and narratives. This disinformation ecosystem not only challenges Moldova's democratic resilience, but also complicates its path toward European integration.

An Increasing Polarisation: A Threat to Democratic Resilience and Stability

The phenomenon of polarisation in Moldova is not merely a domestic issue. It is deeply intertwined with broader regional dynamics and hybrid threats. This polarisation has wide-ranging consequences for Moldova's future and the broader context of EU-Eastern Europe relations. As Moldova navigates a complex geopolitical landscape, the interplay between internal divisions and external influences poses significant challenges to its democratic resilience and stability.

Moldova's political landscape is characterised by a stark divide between pro-EU urban voters and pro-Russian rural and Russian-speaking communities. This divide is emblematic of the broader geopolitical contestation between Western and Russian spheres of influence. Urban centres, largely supporting President Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), advocate for closer ties with the European Union and the implementation of democratic reforms. In contrast, rural areas and regions such as Gagauzia and Transnistria exhibit strong pro-Russian sentiments, reflecting a preference for maintaining historical and cultural ties with Moscow. This includes not only ethnic Russian and Ukrainian minorities, but also Romanian-speaking populations in certain rural areas who have been influenced by Russian-language media and cultural connections. The 2024 referendum on EU integration, which saw a narrow majority of 50.4% in favor, and Sandu's re-election with 55% of the vote, underscore this deep-seated divide.⁸ Notably, Sandu's support within Moldova's domestic territory was less pronounced compared to her overwhelming backing from the diaspora, where Moldovans living abroad (particularly in Western Europe and North America) voted decisively in her favour. This stark contrast between domestic and diaspora voting patterns highlights significant regional and demographic disparities in political preferences, with overseas Moldovans generally more supportive of pro-European candidates and policies. This polarisation is further exacerbated by the strategic narratives promoted by pro-Russian parties, such as the Socialists

⁸ <https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/6604>

and the Shor Party, which continue to garner significant public support. Economic factors play a crucial role in fuelling polarisation and pro-Russian sentiment in Moldova. High inflation rates, which reached 30% in 2022, and persistent poverty, have disproportionately impacted rural areas. These economic hardships have contributed to a sense of disillusionment with the current political establishment and a nostalgia for the perceived stability of the Soviet era. The economic disparities between urban and rural regions have created fertile ground for pro-Russian parties to cultivate support by promising economic relief and stability. This dynamic not only deepens the political divide but also complicates efforts to implement comprehensive economic reforms and foster national unity.

Cultural and linguistic divides further exacerbate polarisation in Moldova. The distinction between Romanian-speaking Moldovans and Russian-speaking minorities (beyond Gagauzia and Transnistria) has long been a source of tension, reflecting broader debates about national identity and cultural heritage. The initial influx of Ukrainian refugees, while initially well-received, has placed additional strain on Moldova's social services, infrastructure, and resources, highlighting the challenges of managing cultural diversity in a context of limited resources. Regions such as Gagauzia, with its Turkic Orthodox population, and Transnistria, with its predominantly Russian-speaking population, have been particularly resistant to EU-oriented reforms. This resistance is amplified by Russian propaganda, which emphasises the importance of “traditional values” and portrays EU integration as a threat to cultural and religious identity. The propagation of these narratives not only deepens cultural divides, but also undermines efforts to foster a shared sense of national purpose and cohesion.

In response to these challenges, President Sandu's government has implemented policies aimed at countering disinformation and limiting the influence of pro-Russian media and parties. While these measures are intended to safeguard Moldova's democratic institutions and promote European integration, they risk alienating Russian-speaking voters and deepening polarisation. The crackdown on pro-Russian media and parties, while necessary to counter hybrid threats, provides Russia with propaganda fodder and reinforces narratives of persecution and marginalisation among Russian-speaking communities. These dynamics underscore the delicate balance that Moldova must strike between countering external interference and fostering inclusive governance in order to address the legitimate concerns and aspirations of all its citizens.

Conclusion

Moldova's journey toward European integration, set against the backdrop of regional conflicts, external interferences, and internal polarisation under Russian pressure, encapsulates a multifaceted struggle to redefine its national identity and secure its democratic future. The intricate interplay of political, economic, and cultural factors has deepened societal divisions, posing significant challenges to Moldova's democratic resilience. Politically, President Maia Sandu's leadership has propelled Moldova toward EU candidacy and the initiation of accession negotiations in June 2024, yet her pro-Western agenda faces resistance from pro-Russian factions and rural communities wary of rapid reforms. Economically, Moldova grapples with persistent poverty, with inflation having peaked at nearly 29% in 2022 due to the Ukraine war but since moderating to around 8% by 2025, though this remains above Western European levels and continues to strain household budgets and public confidence in economic

management. Culturally, linguistic diversity and historical ties to Russia amplify polarisation, with Russian disinformation campaigns exploiting these fault lines to erode cohesion. These interconnected dynamics threaten the stability of Moldova's democratic institutions, requiring a delicate balance between reformist ambitions and inclusive governance to sustain public support for European integration. The influence of external actors, notably Russia and the European Union, is central to Moldova's political trajectory. Russia's hybrid tactics—disinformation, economic coercion through energy supply disruptions, and alleged interference in the 2024 elections and referendum—seek to destabilise Moldova's pro-European course, leveraging internal divisions to maintain geopolitical influence.

In contrast, the EU's robust support, including the €1.9 billion Reform and Growth Facility specifically designed for Moldova and approved in March 2025, consisting of approximately €400 million in grants and €1.5 billion in highly concessional loans, along with technical assistance for alignment with EU standards, has fortified Moldova's resilience against external pressures. International partnerships, including with Ukraine and Romania, along with deepening ties with Western institutions, further bolster Moldova's strategic positioning, providing critical resources to navigate its precarious geopolitical environment. The success of these efforts, however, depends on Moldova's ability to translate external support into tangible domestic progress, particularly in addressing economic grievances and fostering social cohesion. Ultimately, Moldova's path to European integration hinges on its capacity to strengthen democratic institutions while mitigating polarisation. International support, particularly from the EU, is indispensable in countering Russian interference, enhancing economic stability, and promoting inclusive reforms.

As the country approaches the 2025 parliamentary elections, its leaders must prioritise dialogue across societal divides, ensuring that the pursuit of European integration unites rather than divides the nation. Only through such concerted efforts can Moldova overcome the pressures of conflict and interference, securing its place within the European family while safeguarding its sovereignty and democratic aspirations.

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