

WAR IN UKRAINE

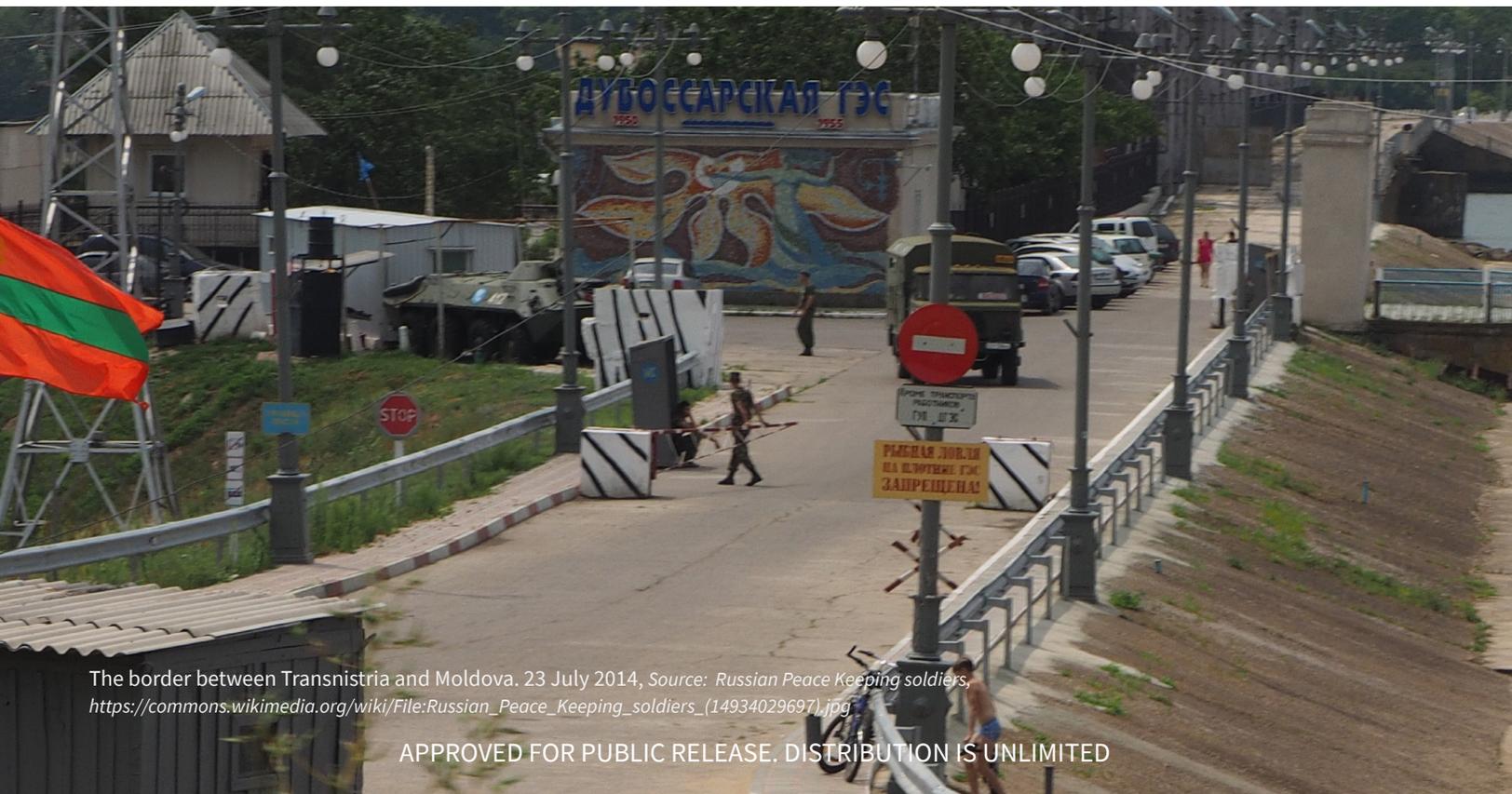
SOCIOCULTURAL RUNNING ESTIMATE

Peripheral Impacts: Russian Active Measures in Moldova



In This Running Estimate...

- Putin's domestic popularity remained relatively stable at 84% in September, but support for the Russian government fell three points to 68%. Support for the War in Ukraine also remained stable at 76%, but belief in success of the war dropped to 60%. Russians wanting a negotiated end to the war rose to 54% from 50% in August, but still below the 58% in July.
- Moldova narrowly approved a constitutional amendment requiring EU Integration, and the incumbent pro-West President won the 3 November run-off with over 54% of the vote against the former state prosecutor and pro-Russia candidate.
- Continuing its efforts to re-establish a buffer against the West in its Near Abroad, Russia seeks to increase influence in Moldova through political warfare preceding and after presidential and parliamentary elections and an EU referendum.
- An exiled Moldovan oligarch convicted in absentia of embezzlement is a power player behind pro-Russia political warfare in Moldova.



The border between Transnistria and Moldova. 23 July 2014, Source: *Russian Peace Keeping soldiers*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Peace_Keeping_soldiers_\(14934029697\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Peace_Keeping_soldiers_(14934029697).jpg)

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

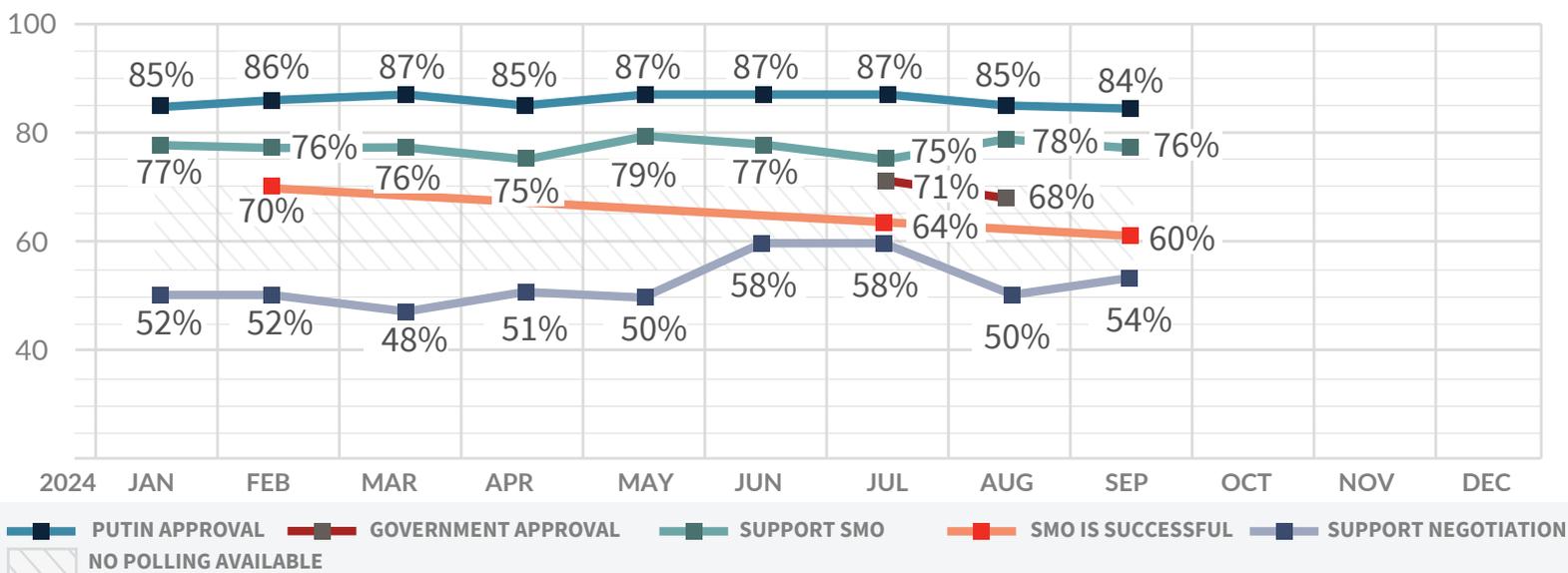


Figure 1. Domestic Russian Perceptions, GCKN.¹

NOTE: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

PUTIN APPROVAL

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings have remained relatively stable despite ongoing political challenges. His approval held at 87% in May, June, and July before dipping slightly to 85% in August and 84% in September. This stability follows a peak of 88% in March, coinciding with the Russian presidential election, which marked the highest approval of a post-Soviet president. A similar spike occurred in 2008 during his tenure as prime minister. Putin’s approval surged significantly after the invasion of Ukraine, rising from around 70% before the conflict, showing the war’s initial impact in consolidating public support.²

State-controlled media continues to play a crucial role in maintaining Putin’s high approval rating, pushing narratives that frame the war as a necessary “denazification” effort and a historical reclamation of Russian territory. These messages resonate with many Russians, reinforcing both previously held beliefs and a sense of national pride and justification for the conflict. However, other factors also contribute to the sustained public support. Strict control over public discourse, harsh penalties for dissent, and a climate of enforced patriotism all pressure Russians to publicly express favorable opinions of Putin. This environment may mask broader discontent, as individuals feel constrained in voicing criticism.

GOVERNMENT APPROVAL

In contrast, public approval for the Russian government dropped from 71% in July to 68% in August, signaling a growing divide between support for Putin as an individual and dissatisfaction with the state apparatus he oversees. This discrepancy reflects a complex dynamic: while Putin remains a symbol of national leadership and strength, dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of domestic issues, such as economic hardships and the war’s prolonged nature, is growing.

SUPPORT FOR THE SMO

In September, 76% of Russians supported the “Special Military Operation” (SMO) in Ukraine, slightly down from 78% in June but up from 75% in July. Support for the war peaked in May at 79%, indicating that a large portion of the population continues to back the SMO despite mounting concerns over troop losses and civilian casualties. Support is highest among men (82%), older Russians (55 and older) (80%), Muscovites (84%), wealthier Russians (78%), and those who rely heavily on state-controlled television for their news (87%). These demographics suggest that support is concentrated among those more likely to align with government messaging and less exposed to alternative perspectives. In contrast, women (71%), younger Russians (24 and younger) (63%), lower-income individuals (69%), and those who get their news primarily from YouTube (66%) show the least support for the SMO. This divide reflects differing sources of information and life experiences across demographics, with younger and lower-income groups being more critical, possibly due to their exposure to independent media and vulnerability to the war’s economic and social impacts.³

Notably, nearly half of the population (47%) now believes the war has caused more harm than good—a 6% increase since May 2023. Only 28% view the war as beneficial, marking a significant 10% drop over the same period. Among those critical of the war, 52% cite general grief and suffering as the primary reason for their disillusionment, while others focus on military losses (21%), economic decline (18%), and worsening international relations (7%). These concerns suggest that the war’s human and economic toll is increasingly affecting public sentiment, even as many Russians remain supportive of the broader strategic goals. On the other hand, those who view the war as beneficial often point to perceived gains such as territorial acquisitions (26%), protection of Donbas residents (24%), and strengthening Russia’s international standing (16%). Despite growing discontent, polling indicates a significant portion of the population still views the war through a lens of nationalistic achievement bolstered by state media narratives.⁴

This evolving trend shows a growing conflict between the state’s portrayal of the war as a necessary defense of Russian interests and the public’s increasing awareness of its costs. As more Russians grapple with the war’s long-term consequences, there could be further shifts in support if military losses or economic conditions worsen.

SMO IS SUCCESSFUL

In September, 60% of Russians believed the SMO was progressing well, down from 64% in July and 70% in February. This steady decline points to growing concerns over Ukraine’s increasing military pressure, particularly the recent strategic incursion into Russia’s Kursk region. Unlike previous minor cross-border skirmishes, this strong Ukrainian attack into Kursk displaced tens of thousands of Russian citizens, captured up to 400 square kilometers of Russian territory, and forced Russia into a retreat that left conscripts behind as prisoners of war. This incident dealt a significant reputational blow to the Kremlin, raising new questions about Russia’s military capabilities and handling of the conflict.⁵

The lack of decisive progress in the SMO is wearing down public confidence as the war drags on, especially with no clear end in sight. While Russia has seen occasional tactical victories, the overall stalemate and high human, economic, and social costs sour public opinion. The sense of vulnerability caused by the Ukrainian Kursk offensive erodes the image of strength that the Kremlin and Putin sought to project and undermines confidence in their ability to secure a clear and favorable outcome. The prolonged nature of the war and related economic strain is also affecting Russians’ daily lives, further dampening confidence in the outcome.

However, deeply entrenched narratives and patriotic fervor—fueled by state-controlled media—are likely to prevent a further downward shift in public opinion for now. Despite the declining perception of success, the Kremlin’s portrayal of the war as a defense of Russian sovereignty and society against the West will likely keep many Russians committed to the cause, even as doubts about the war’s progress grow. However, if military set-

backs continue, public patience may wear thin, reducing confidence in the operation's success and amplifying calls for a diplomatic solution.

SUPPORT FOR NEGOTIATION

In September, 54% of Russians supported negotiations to end the war, rebounding from 50% in August, but still lower than the high of 58% in July. The August dip came after Ukraine's Kursk incursion, which likely stoked patriotic fervor and a temporary surge in resolve to continue the fight. This event may have led to a shift in public mood as Russians grappled with the idea of defending Russian soil against foreign aggression, reinforcing nationalist narratives pushed by state media.⁶

Despite the rebound in support for negotiation, most Russians remain staunchly opposed to significant concessions. Only 20% of respondents will consider territorial or political compromises to end the war. This reluctance to concede reflects a sense of national pride and the influence of Kremlin-controlled messaging, which continues to portray the conflict as an existential struggle for Russia's sovereignty and influence.⁷

Notably, while the public remains divided on broader political concessions, there is overwhelming support for pragmatic steps that could lower tensions. Support for prisoner-of-war exchanges has increased to 87%, indicating a desire for humanitarian measures even among those who back the war. Similarly, 60% now favor an immediate ceasefire, a 15% increase since May 2023, suggesting growing fatigue with the ongoing conflict and a desire for a pause in hostilities. These figures suggest that Russians may not yet be ready to abandon the fight entirely, but there is an increasing appetite for measures to de-escalate the situation without requiring significant sacrifices.⁸

At the same time, proposals like returning Russian-occupied regions in Ukraine (Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and the Donbas) or allowing Ukraine to join NATO find almost no support, with only 7% and 5% of Russians backing these ideas, respectively. This resistance highlights the deep entrenchment of the Kremlin's narrative, which frames these issues as non-negotiable national security matters. The public's unwillingness to entertain such concessions shows how effectively state-controlled media has cemented the idea that "the unavoidable conflict" has always been about defending Russia's territorial integrity and preventing Western encroachment.

“It’s not about territories; we never wanted foreign land... we wanted people who are part of the Russian world to be treated humanely, as international law requires.”

-Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, September 2024⁹

RUSSIAN ACTIVE MEASURES IN MOLDOVA

“STRATEGIC GOALS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA”

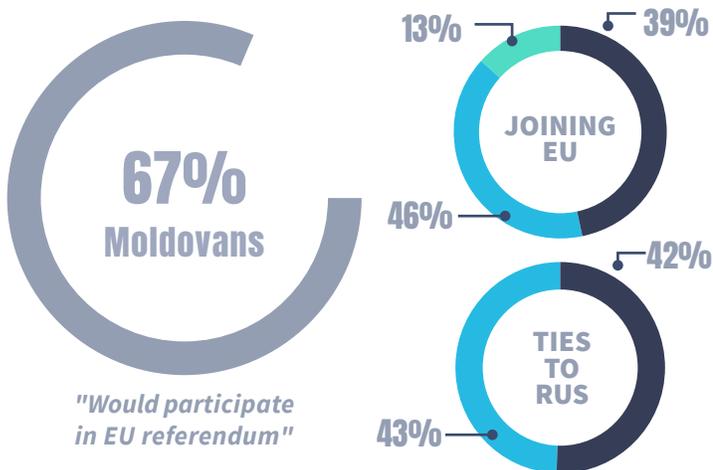
A leaked 2021 document titled “Strategic Goals of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova”, from the Russian Directorate for Cross-Border Cooperation, details Kremlin plans to gradually gain influence over Moldova by 2030. The intent is not to subsume the country as a part of Russia, but to bring it firmly within the Russian sphere of influence. As such, public and political sentiment would shift against the West, pro-Russia media would dominate in the country, and Russian would be “the language of interethnic communication.” Moldova would become dependent on Russian trade and energy, with the Russian ruble playing an elevated role. Moldova would assume a greater role in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union. Transnistria would remain as an autonomous region with a Russian troop presence, and Chişinău would be forced to stop all political and economic pressure on the breakaway region. “By 2025, Russia was aiming to expand the reach of Russian-friendly political projects, form strong pro-Russian sentiment, substantially increase popular opposition to Moldova’s cooperation with NATO, and intensify bilateral contacts through military and law enforcement.”¹⁰

Moldova Elections and EU Referendum

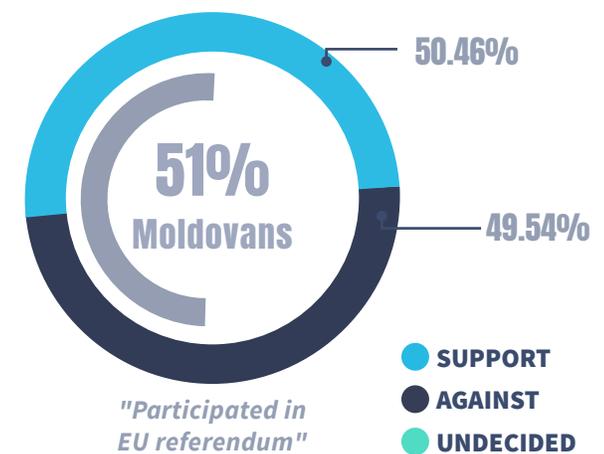
Continuing its efforts to re-establish a buffer against the West in its Near Abroad, Russia seeks to increase influence in Moldova through pro-Russia political parties and election of pro-Russian legislators. The Moldova presidential election and referendum on joining the EU took place on 20 October, with parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2025. As predicted by many analysts, incumbent

pro-West President Maia Sandu won a 3 November run-off with the former prosecutor general and pro-Russia PRSM party candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo, earning over 54% of the popular vote. The EU referendum passed with a bare majority that was much closer than pre-election polls indicated.^{9,11} As a result, the Moldovan constitution will be amended to add European integration as a strategic goal.¹²

SEPTEMBER NATION POLLING



OCTOBER 20 EU REFERENDUM



^a Moldova was granted EU candidate status in 2022. SOURCE: Brenda Cole, “Putin Sets Stage for Upheaval in Another Country,” *Newsweek*, April 22, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-moldova-putin-shor-sandu-1892802>

- The Moldovan Central Electoral Commission (CEC) declared the 20 October election and EU referendum valid. It reported that 50.72% participated in the EU referendum, with 749,719 voting in favor and 739,155 voting against integrating with the EU.¹³ The results are in contrast to a September national poll, where 66.7% of Moldovans said they would participate in the EU referendum, with nearly 46% of those in support of joining the EU, 39% against, and almost 13% undecided. However, at the same time, 42.6% of Moldovans supported closer ties to Russia and the Eurasia Union, while 42.5% were against.¹⁴ Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the pro-Russia voting bloc led in national polling.¹⁵ The close margin of victory for the EU referendum shows that Russian efforts may have been effective in swaying the election.

“The Russian Federation and its proxies in the Republic of Moldova represent the most dangerous and persistent source of threat [to the country].”

-2023 Moldovan Security Strategy¹⁶

- Proponents of EU integration framed the referendum as a choice between maintaining Moldovan sovereignty by joining the EU or being controlled by the “Russian Empire,” and not participating is de facto supporting Russia and “betraying Ukraine.”¹⁷ The election was presented by some Moldovan media outlets as a struggle between the United States and Russia to keep Moldova in each’s respective sphere of influence.¹⁸ In a 27 October debate, Sandu accused Stoianoglo of being “Moscow’s man” and of having links to pro-Russia oligarch Ilan Shor (see below). In turn, Stoianoglo accused Sandu of incompetence and insisted he supports EU integration.¹⁹
- Concern over Russian election interference in Moldova continues to be widespread. The Council of Europe warned about Russian election interference including disinformation, illegal campaign financing, and vote-buying intended to produce a neutral or pro-Russia country bordering Ukraine to keep NATO/the West in check and away from Russia itself.²⁰ In June 2024 Canada accused Russia of ongoing interference in the October election and referendum, “spreading lies” and “planning to incite protests in Moldova

should its “election meddling” fail.”²¹ At this time, those protests have not yet occurred.

- Moldovan officials claim that Russia spent at least 50M Euros to influence the 2023 parliamentary elections and that the Kremlin would spend up to 100M Euros on the presidential election and EU referendum.²² Sandu claims to have “clear evidence” that the Kremlin bought up to 300,000 votes in an “unprecedented assault on democracy.” The EU concurs with Sandu, stating, “This vote took place under unprecedented interference and intimidation by Russia and its proxies, aiming to destabilize the democratic processes in the Republic of Moldova.”²³ A Kremlin spokesman described the elections as “unfree,” claiming opposition repression by Chișinău and decrying “a mechanically hard-to-explain rate of increase in votes in favor of Sandu and in favor of [EU integration].”²⁴

“ACTIVE MEASURES” AND “REFLEXIVE CONTROL”

Russian operational art includes a mixture of political, economic, and subversive activity that seeks to extend and maintain Moscow’s sphere of influence without triggering an armed response. The former Soviet Union frequently employed what it called “active measures” in the information domain, including forgery, propaganda, and false stories or “fake news.” Active measures in the information domain follow the “4D” approach: dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay. Russia is continuing and expanding its “active measures” beyond the traditional information environment and into the cyber domain via social media and proliferating fake news outlets. One way Russia does this is through “Reflexive Control.” Timothy Thomas, in his book “Kremlin Kontrol: Russia’s Political-Military Reality,” writes “Reflexive Control” is “a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.” It involves a cyclical repetition of the message ^{25,b}

b For more on Russian influence operations, see *GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 9: Russian Global Influence Efforts*, December 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>

Russian Disinformation

Russia's disinformation goal is to increase pro-Russia sentiment in the country, causing the EU referendum to be rejected, a pro-Russia president elected, and to gain more pro-Russia seats in the parliamentary election in June 2025. The EU referendum passed with a bare majority and President Sandu won the run-off. With the failure of Russia's main goals for the 20 October election, Russia will concentrate on swaying voters to elect a majority of pro-Russia (or at least not pro-West) members of parliament in June. This could set in motion a future rejection or withdrawal of EU membership by the parliament. Many of the same anti-NATO and anti-West disinformation tropes being used in Ukraine were being propagated in Moldova before the 20 October presidential elections and EU referendum, and will likely continue through the June 2025 Parliamentary elections.

RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION THEMES

The West Ends Sovereignty²⁶

Chişinău is “controlled by the West.”
The EU has “no democracy, rule of law, fairness, rights and freedoms.”

Moldova will become “EU colony.”

A West-imposed dictatorship blocked Shor's Victory Bloc from participating in the national elections and the EU referendum.

The West controls Ukraine, which “virtually no longer exists as a state.”
NGOs are agents of foreign influence.

The West Wants Moldova to Fight Its War²⁷

President Sandu “intends to turn the country into a NATO springboard” for war against Russia.

Chişinău is getting ready for war.

EU support for Moldova's resilience is a “sign of the country's militarization”.

The West/NATO is arming Moldova to join the Ukraine war as a “sacrificial lamb” “just for the sake of the news in the Western press and the geopolitical interests of the big players.”

EU integration will drag Moldova into the Ukraine war.

Any support for Ukraine is support for war.

The Moldovan Ministry of Education is running a ‘military-patriotic’ summer camp for children, with the support of the EU, where pupils are trained to use weapons.

Moldovan birthrate is declining because ‘men have to participate in military training alongside American and Romanian soldiers.

The West/Chişinău Will Ruin Moldovan Economy³¹

Moldova will impose a 10% ‘patriotic’ tax on remittances to cover the budget deficit.

The EU will bring higher prices.

Joining the EU will destroy Moldovan agriculture.

Chişinău has stopped the export of agricultural goods to Russia.

The West/Chişinău Destroys Russian Culture & Language²⁸

“Russophobia is cultivated in Moldova.”

The Russian language and Russian speakers are persecuted by Moldova.

The Moldova Metropolitan and the Russian Orthodox Church are under attack by Chişinău as part of the West's “hybrid war” against Russia.

Chişinău is hostile toward the residents of Gagauzia and Transnistria.

Ukraine will attack Transnistria at the request of Chişinău.

Degenerate West Threatens Traditional Values²⁹

EU integration threatens the traditional values of Moldova.

“EU integration would mean that the gender of children would be changed without asking parents and that the words “mother” and “father” will be banned.”

Moldovan authorities are encouraging LGBT propaganda in schools and kindergartens.

Chişinău is adopting quotas for sexual minorities in state institutions, including in defense and law enforcement.

Chişinău Prioritizes Foreign Interests³⁰

The Sandu Government is going to sell land to foreigners.

Romania is buying up strategic assets in Moldova through Chişinău authorities

Chişinău authorities are actually Romanian citizens seeking to erode Moldova's sovereignty.

The Moldovan army will be subordinated to the Romanian Armed Forces and NATO.

Russian Destabilization

Russian destabilization efforts are meant to weaken and discredit the Sandu government and exploit resulting instability caused by real and perceived government ineffectiveness, infrastructure deficits, and resource scarcity to gain influence. The 2023 Moldovan security strategy states that “the Russian Federation and its proxies in the Republic of Moldova represent the most dangerous and persistent source of threat” to the country.³² Moldovan Parliament Speaker Igor Grosu declared Russia and corruption as the largest threats to Moldova and threatened to dissolve the 2001 strategic partnership between Chişinău and Moscow due to Russia’s new security strategy.³³

- The Moldovan government has accused Russia of engaging in a destabilization campaign which includes energy warfare,^c economic pressure, political protests, propaganda, and even attempting a coup^d since Western-leaning President Sandu was first elected. In March, Moldovan intelligence claimed that it uncovered a Russian plan to intensify destabilization activities leading up to the October 20 presidential election and EU referendum.³⁴ UK intelligence warned Moldova as early as April 2024 of the potential for Russian hybrid attacks meant to disrupt the election and referendum.³⁵
- Moldova fears the Kremlin is exploiting long-time animosities between Chişinău and the largely Russian speaking breakaway regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia to swing the elections and EU referendum in Moscow’s favor. Russia’s 2023 foreign policy doctrine on resolution of the Transnistrian conflict lacked language respecting Moldovan sovereignty and territorial integrity. Independence leaders in the two regions have repeatedly called for Russia’s diplomatic help in the face of alleged mistreatment by Chişinău. The Sandu government claims it is only enforcing the rules that the rest of Moldova must follow, in accordance with EU policies.³⁶ Presidential run-off election candidate Stoianoglo, an ethnic Gagauz, is reportedly the target of xenophobic attacks. However, since Gagauz are primarily and historically pro-Russia

(see Gagauzia, below), these “attacks” may merely be questions of whether he is oriented toward the West or towards the East.³⁷

The Kremlin’s Moldovan Bogeyman

Ilan Shor, a Moldovan oligarch living in exile in Russia due to his 2023 conviction for embezzling \$1B from government banks, is a power player behind pro-Russia politics in Moldova. In June 2023, Moldova’s Constitutional Court banned Shor’s political party at the request of the government, following its anti-government protests in Chişinău.³⁸ In April 2024, Shor formed the Victory Bloc, which has emerged as a challenger to the current Moldovan government’s aspirations to integrate with the West. Victory Bloc is composed of multiple Moldovan opposition parties supported by Russia. According to Shor, the Victory Bloc is “aimed to improve Moldovan relations with Russia and the [Russia-led] Eurasian Economic Union (EEUEA)” (composed of Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States) and to “campaign against Moldova joining the EU.”

- According to *Balkan Insight*, the Victory Bloc will allow Moscow to “focus on a unified political effort in Moldova, instead of maintaining relations with several pro-Russian actors and parties.”³⁹ The Institute for the Study of War assessed that “the creation of the Victory electoral bloc would allow the Kremlin to focus on a unified political effort as part of its attempts to destabilize Moldovan society, attack Moldova’s democratic government, and prevent Moldova’s accession to the European Union (EU).”⁴⁰ Pro-EU politicians have called Shor’s bloc a “mafia group” and a “malign group with connections to Russian secret services.”⁴¹
- According to Moldova’s Information and Security Service, Shor’s collective of Moscow supported anti-western opposition groups has been waging a hybrid war against Moldova for which Moscow has “allocated more than \$50 million.” Shor did not deny funding Moldovan opposition groups and even claimed that the amount was not \$50 million, but closer to a

c For more about Russian Energy Warfare, see *GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 10: Winter is Coming*, February 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>

d Ukraine Intelligence informed Chişinău in 2023 that it had intercepted a Russia plan for a coup against Sandu. SOURCE: “Moldova Divided: Easing Tensions as Russia Meddles and Elections Approach,” International Crisis Group, August 21, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/moldova/b97-moldova-divided-easing-tensions-russia-meddles>

billion. However, Shor claims that the money is not intended to destabilize Moldova, but to rebuild its infrastructure and pay pensions.⁴²

- Following the October 20 election and EU referendum, the Moldovan Central Electoral Commission (CEC) announced that it will investigate the campaign finances of five opposition parties affiliated with Ilan Shor, including the Victory bloc.⁴³

Shor, in collusion with Russia, is likely behind much of the political warfare within Moldova, which will continue through the parliamentary elections in June 2025, despite the passage of the October 20 EU referendum and the re-election of pro-West President Sandu in the presidential run-off election.

- Moldovan media alleges that Shor has established an “electoral network”, coordinated by Russia, that paid Moldovans to vote for pro-Russia candidates and against the EU referendum.⁴⁴ In April 2024, Moldovan authorities seized over \$1M from members of Shor’s Victory bloc on their return from a trip to Moscow. Authorities claim the money was meant to fund a “scheme of illegal financing of political parties from dark sources,” while the Institute for the Study of War assessed that the money would have likely been used “to bribe protesters and voters.”⁴⁵ Moldovan police report that up to 130,000 Moldovans sold their vote in the October 20 election and EU referendum to Ilan

Shor. Per sanctioned Russian PSB bank, Shor spent over \$39M in the two months prior to the election.⁴⁶

- Shor’s Eurasia organization, which is under sanction by the United States, is recruiting young Moldovans to spread a smear campaign about the Sandu government. These so-called “Shor Volunteers” are paid if they recruit five or more additional “volunteers” and engage in online political discussions disparaging the current government.⁴⁷
- Moldovan police claim that more than 300 young Moldovans were recruited to travel to Moscow for training on violent protests and vandalism starting in June 2024. Some were paid 500 Euros per month, and two of these men, who were arrested for vandalizing multiple Moldovan government buildings in September 2024, were paid 5,000 Euros each for the acts. The Bosnian Foreign Ministry stated that Russian PMCs Wagner and Ferma trained Moldovan citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, in August and September 2024 to conduct violent political protests in Moldova against “the negative impact of Russia in the heart of Europe.” Police state that Shor financed the training and vandalism to disrupt the elections, and the anti-corruption prosecutor stated his “office is currently conducting an investigation into several criminal cases related to the preparation of mass disturbance.”⁴⁸

Religious Influence on the Election

“[T]he church has always been an important ideological tool, and currently religion is part of the hybrid war. Vladimir Putin restored the church’s role as a geopolitical tool. We know from history that the church was a factor that went hand in hand with expansion and war.”

*- Oleg Serebrian, Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration*⁴⁹

The Kremlin has long used the Russian Orthodox Church to extend state policy and influence, and continues to do so in Moldova.^e According to the Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, “the church has always been an important ideological tool, and currently religion is part of the hybrid war. Vladimir Putin restored the church’s role as a geopolitical tool. We know from history that the church was a factor that went hand in hand with expansion and war.”

- Since July 2024, up to 500 Moldovan Orthodox priests have taken free “pilgrimages,” reportedly funded by pro-Russia exiled oligarch Ilan Shor, to Moscow to “strengthen the ties and the Orthodox faith’ between the clergy of Moldova and the Russian Federation.”⁵⁰ Participants have been accused of taking on the mission to discredit President Sandu and the EU Referendum in exchange for bank cards.⁵¹ The Moldova Metropolitan, which is affiliated with the Russian Patriarchy, has publicly and “vehemently condemn[ed] the involvement of priests in politics or propaganda activities,” and claimed the pilgrimages were not coordinated with the Metropolitan or funded by the Russian hosts. Further, the Metropolitan stated it “reaffirms its commitment to keep the Orthodox Church in Moldova outside of any political influences.”⁵²
- Journalists found that some Russian Patriarchate-affiliated Moldovan priests spread anti-EU propaganda during services, in apparent violation of the Moldova Metropolitan non-political policies.⁵³
- During the 2016 national elections, Moldova Metropolitan priests aggressively engaged in electioneering activities despite the Constitutional Court having

requested Parliament pass laws punishing religious organization participating in elections. However, no action was ever taken.⁵⁴

- In response to the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kiril—it’s overarching leader—repeatedly justifying Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, more than 100 Moldovan priests withdrew their parishes from the Moldova Metropolitan and joined the Metropolis of Bessarabia within the Romanian Patriarchate.⁵⁵

Moldovan Dependence on Russia

Moldovan dependence on Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine for energy and food provides Russia opportunities to undermine the current pro-Western government and gain influence in the country. Although Moldova is working on Western solutions, its dependence in the meantime leaves the country vulnerable.

- Moldova purchases 70-80% of its electricity from a Russian-owned plant in Transnistria. The plant is fueled by Russian gas and transits a pipeline through Ukraine. As a candidate for EU membership, this runs afoul of EU divestiture policies (i.e., to purchase Russian oil and gas). However, the transit contract will expire on December 31, 2024, creating a potential energy crisis for Moldova and an economic crisis for Transnistria. An informal deal between Kyiv and Chişinău in May could continue Russian gas flow to the Transnistrian plant from Turkey. Additionally, a European gas deal is reportedly in negotiation, alongside a plan for the construction of new electrical transmission lines through Romania.^{f,56}

^e For more on Russian influence operations involving the Russian Orthodox Church, see *GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 9: Russian Global Influence Efforts*, December 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>

^f For more about Russian Energy Warfare, see *GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 10: Winter is Coming*, February 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>



Figure 2. Republic of Moldova showing autonomous regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia., map, SOURCE: TRADOC G-2.

- Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine are Moldova’s main sources of staple vegetables such as potatoes, onions, and carrots. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, deliveries from Russia and Belarus to Moldova take more time, must travel longer distances (with transportation now routing through Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania), and prices have tripled. In

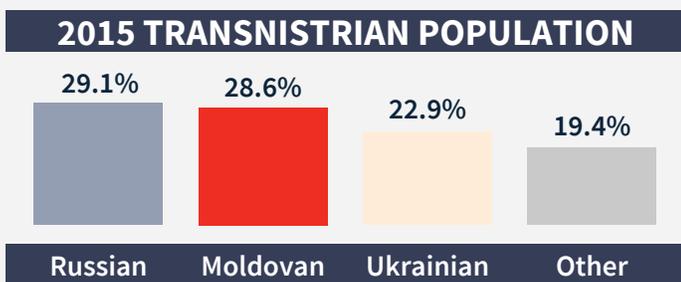
2023, 50% of Moldova’s onions (~3,474t) came from Russia, followed by Belarus (946t) and Poland (943t). Carrots were more evenly split between Belarus (2,775t) and Russia (2,612t). Ukraine was Moldova’s largest supplier of potatoes (34,873t), followed by Belarus (23,360t).⁵⁷

TRANSNISTRIA

The pro-Russian autonomous region of Transnistria, located along the Moldova-Ukraine border, is a flashpoint for Russian destabilization of Moldova and a means to reestablish influence as a buffer against perceived Western encroachment.

In 1940, Moldova was separated from Romania and joined Transnistria to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). The Transnistria region, which is east of the Dniester River along the border of Ukraine's Odessa Oblast, was a part of the Soviet Union since the 1920's. During the waning years of the Soviet Union, the MSSR sought independence and, following the 1991 collapse of the USSR, established the independent Republic of Moldova. Soon after, war broke out as the largely Russian-speaking Transnistria also declared independence, which was supported by Russia. Though a cease-fire has been in place since 1992, the Transnistria region remains highly contested—despite negotiations and several agreements—and planted firmly in the Russian sphere.⁵⁸

According to a 2015 Transnistrian census, 29.1% of the 475,000+ Transnistrian population is Russian, 28.6% is Moldovan, and 22.9% is Ukrainian, creating a Slavic majority.⁵⁹ As Russian-speaking “Compatriots,” Transnistrians may hold Russian passports and vote in Russian elections.⁶⁰ Chişinău claims that nearly 97% of the Transnistrian population hold Moldovan passports, while about 220,000 hold Russian passports. This means most Transnistrians hold documents from both countries.⁶¹ In a 2006 referendum that was not internationally recognized, 95% voted to join Russia.



Transnistria's economy has largely benefited from its location between Moldova and Ukraine and the roughly 1500 Russian “peacekeepers,” mainly local recruits with Russian passports, stationed there.⁶² Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Transnistria “received free gas from Moscow and Russian pension payments; engaged in trade and smuggling across its 400km border with Ukraine; and

enjoyed access to EU markets through Moldova.” Ukraine closed its border with Transnistria to prevent a potential second front in the southwest, which forced the Transnistrian economy to rely on trade through Moldova at higher prices, including taxes to Chişinău.⁶³ In the first quarter of 2024, a record 72.8% of all Transnistrian exports went to Moldova and Romania, and a record low 3.5% went to Russia, while imports from Russia fell 38%. Although the war in Ukraine played a large role in this decline, Transnistrian authorities blamed it on economic pressure from Moldova.⁶⁴ The Transnistrian economy is controlled by Sheriff, a monopoly of a wide range of vital businesses including retail stores, gasoline stations, TV stations, and manufacturing, which limits economic integration with Moldova.⁶⁵ Further, the transit contract supplying Russian gas to Transnistria will expire at the end of 2024 (see Dependence on Russia, above). This could result in up to a 15-fold cost increase, which is unaffordable by Transnistrians.⁶⁶ These economic conditions are a major source of friction between the breakaway region's leadership and Chişinău.

“The protection of the residents of Transnistria is one of [our] priorities”

-Russian Foreign Ministry⁶⁷

Transnistrian officials have repeatedly appealed to the Kremlin for support to counter cultural suppression and an “economic blockade” by Chişinău. In February 2024, Tiraspol asked Moscow to “implement measures for defending Transnistria amid increasing pressure from Moldova, given the fact that more than 220,000 Russian citizens reside in Transnistria.”⁶⁸

While Transnistrian separatist leadership remains wedded to Moscow, Transnistrian citizens are increasingly looking to the West for opportunities. Enrollment in Romanian language schools has increased since 2022, and the majority of Transnistrians have applied for Romanian passports. Further, the March 2024 Russian presidential election had the lowest turnout in Transnistria in 18 years.⁶⁹

In a 2023 national poll, only 1.9% of Moldovans put any priority on tensions between Moldova and Transnistria. Although the conflict, even if frozen, is a potential obstacle to EU integration, the EU “would like them to come in as full countries with their territorial disputes fully resolved.” This could force Chişinău into renewed negotiations with Tiraspol.⁷⁰

GAGAUZIA

The pro-Russian semi-autonomous region of Gagauzia provides Russia with a ready target minority population for disinformation and dissent against Chişinău, in its goal to reestablish influence in Moldova.

Gagauzia is a small, narrow region within Moldova. It consists of an ethnic Turkic Orthodox Christian minority population of roughly 150,000. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Gagauzia briefly declared its independence but joined the newly independent state of Moldova as a semi-autonomous region, with its own governor and parliament, in 1994.⁷¹

Gagauz mostly speak Russian. Few residents speak Gagauz, the region's official Turkic language, but road signs are in both Gagauz and Russian. Few speak Romanian, the official language of Moldova, and Chişinău has been providing Romanian language lessons in efforts to ease integration. Gagauzia boasts the highest number of applicants for classes after the capitol, Chişinău.⁷² However, the Gagauz Parliament appealed to Chişinău to make Russian the “language of interethnic communication,” in effect recognizing Russian as an official language of Moldova and echoing the language of the 2021 “Strategic Goals of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova” (see above).⁷³

Gagauzia is strongly pro-Russia, even though it is surrounded by Moldovan territory and 70% of its budget is subsidized by Chişinău, Moldova's main industrial and commercial center. In 2014, in two local referendums, 98% of Gagauz voted to join the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan customs union and rejected joining the EU; the referendums were declared unconstitutional. All gubernatorial candidates in the May 2023 election ran on pro-Russia,

anti-EU platforms. This is in spite of Romania, Turkey, and Ukraine (all EU members) being “bigger markets for Gagauz exports than Russia, and the EU [being] much more heavily invested in the region than Moscow.” The winner of the 2023 gubernatorial election, Evghenia Guţul, is a Shor protégé. Sandu refused to recognize Guţul's election or include her in the Moldovan government, claiming that being a member of Shor's party, Gutul is “a member of a criminal group.” Nearly a year after the election, Moldovan state prosecutors charged Gutul with illegally financing a political party, leaving Gutul facing prison and a bar to political office. The United States followed this action by sanctioning Gutul in June 2024.⁷⁴

Gutul has stated that Gagauzia will declare independence if Moldova loses its independence. Her comments refer to a scenario where Moldova unites with Romania and/or joins the EU, as Gutul has often repeated Russian propaganda that Moldova will cede its sovereignty when it joins the EU. Gutul has also stated that she will request Russian military intervention if Moldova sends in troops in response to a Gagauzian declaration of independence. According to Gutul, Russian President Vladimir Putin “promised to extend support to Gagauzia and the Gagauz people in upholding our legal rights, our authority and positions in the international arena” during a March 2024 meeting with her in Moscow. Gutul also arranged opportunities for Gagauzia residents to open bank accounts in Russia, and for pensioners and civil servants to receive 103 Euros to augment their income.^{75w}

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