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Russia's Intentions and Actions Toward Moldova

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Introduction

In recent years, the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe has been shaped by Russia's strategic ambitions, with Moldova emerging as a key focus of Moscow's regional goals. Understanding Russia's short- and medium-term objectives for Moldova, along with the tools and tactics it employs, is essential to assessing the challenges Moldova faces.

Russia's interests in Moldova span political, economic, and military domains, all aimed at keeping the country within its sphere of influence. Unlike Georgia or Ukraine, Moldova is neutral and has no aspirations to join NATO, yet Moscow has maintained relentless pressure on the country for over 30 years. Politically, Russia supports pro-Russian parties, spreads anti-European narratives, and uses disinformation to undermine trust in Western institutions. Economically, it exploits Moldova's dependence on Russian gas and markets, wielding energy as a tool to block closer ties with the EU. Militarily, Russia's presence in Transnistria, under the guise of peacekeeping, destabilizes Moldova, limits its sovereignty, and serves as a platform for projecting power over Ukraine and the Black Sea.

These actions reflect a strategy not of defense but of dominance, aimed at keeping Moldova weak and dependent. In the short term, Moscow backs pro-Russian parties and spreads anti-European narratives to sow division. While Moldova has reduced its reliance on Russian gas, Gazprom continues to use supply cuts to exert pressure on the pro-European government. Despite these challenges, Moldova is diversifying its energy sources and building stronger ties with Romania and the EU, demonstrating a clear determination to reduce Russia's influence.

At the heart of these efforts lies Russia's fear of losing its grip on Moldova as the country moves closer to Europe. Russia's primary objective is to obstruct Moldova's path to EU membership, fearing a loss of influence over a nation breaking away from outdated ties to Moscow. As Moldovans increasingly look toward Europe and reject association with an aggressor state, Russian forces remain stationed in Transnistria under the guise of peacekeeping. This military presence, however, lacks legal legitimacy, further destabilizing Moldova and limiting its independence. Moldova's integration into the EU would represent a decisive shift away from Russia's control, an outcome Moscow is determined to prevent.

This paper explores Russia's actions in Moldova, focusing on the tools it uses to maintain influence. It assesses the effectiveness of these strategies, their alignment with Russia's broader regional goals, and whether they have succeeded or met resistance. By examining Russia's approach, this paper sheds light on the complexities of geopolitical conflict in Eastern Europe and highlights the importance of understanding Moscow's intentions in a rapidly changing regional and global context.

Russia's Short- and Medium-Term Goals for Moldova

Russia's goals for Moldova are shaped by historical ties, strategic priorities, and security concerns that define its foreign policy in Eastern Europe. Moscow's focus is on maintaining political influence through party

financing, media manipulation, disinformation, and vote-buying schemes. These efforts are amplified by Russian-language media targeting Moldova's Russian-speaking population and by backing organized criminal groups and oligarchs to further its anti-European agenda, particularly during electoral campaigns.

Economically, Moldova's dependency on Russian gas was a major leverage point for Moscow. In recent years, Russia has used [gas supply reductions](#) to pressure Moldova, particularly in the winter of 2022-2023, when sharp gas price spikes affected Moldova's pro-European government. In response, Moldova has started diversifying its energy sources, with a [new gas interconnector](#) to Romania in 2024, signaling a shift away from Russia's economic dominance.

In the medium term, Russia wants to stop Moldova from fully aligning with the European Union, as this would reduce its influence and strengthen Moldova's pro-European direction. In Transnistria, Russia has two types of troops: peacekeepers with a legal basis and other forces that are there illegally. Together, they keep a "frozen conflict" in place, limiting Moldova's independence and giving Russia the power to destabilize the country.

Moldova plays a key role in Russia's broader Black Sea strategy, where it aims to retain economic and political control. By maintaining influence in Moldova, Russia strengthens its position in Eastern Europe, preventing the spread of European values and countering EU and NATO expansion in the region. Thus, Moldova is not just a target for Russian influence, but a strategic asset that helps Russia counter Western influence and secure its position in the Black Sea.

Tools and Instruments Russia Uses in Moldova

Russia employs a broad range of strategies to influence Moldova, targeting political, economic, military, and cultural aspects of the country. These tools are diverse and interlinked, allowing Russia to maintain a multidimensional influence over Moldova's internal affairs and its foreign policy direction.

1. Political Influence

Russia's political influence in Moldova is primarily exerted through alliances with pro-Russian parties and political figures who advocate for policies aligned with Moscow's interests. The Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) is a primary vehicle for Russian influence, consistently pushing for closer ties with Moscow and opposing EU integration. In the 2020 presidential elections, former President Igor Dodon, backed by PSRM, promoted a "balanced foreign policy" between the EU and Russia, aligning his campaign with Russian interests. Although Dodon was defeated by pro-European candidate Maia Sandu, PSRM remains active in parliament, ensuring that Russian perspectives continue to shape Moldova's political discourse.

While political parties like PSRM serve as prominent vehicles for promoting Moscow's interests, Russia has also employed more covert methods to reinforce its influence. Recent investigations have uncovered a complex web of financial and organizational support for anti-European agendas within Moldova, revealing the extent to which Russia leverages local actors and hidden networks to sway public opinion. This became especially evident in 2024, when a [RISE Moldova investigation](#) exposed a financial network supporting anti-

European sentiment in Moldova. The investigation revealed that fugitive Moldovan oligarch Ilan Șor had established several companies in Moscow with financial backing from Russian state-owned entities. These companies funneled approximately \$15 million into Moldova during the EU accession referendum to sway public opinion against European integration. The funds, reportedly transferred through Russian banks and distributed using encrypted channels like Telegram, were directed toward vote-buying and supporting candidates sympathetic to Moscow. Moldovan authorities later uncovered evidence of widespread vote manipulation and interference, highlighting Russia's active role in influencing Moldova's political landscape through local proxies and financial channels.

In a related undercover [investigation](#), [Ziarul de Gardă](#) journalist Măriuța Nistor infiltrated Ilan Șor's network, revealing how funds were systematically transferred from Moscow to operatives in Moldova through Russian state-owned banks, including Gazprombank. These operatives coordinated voter manipulation campaigns via encrypted platforms, paying citizens to support anti-EU candidates and vote "No" in the EU accession referendum. The investigation uncovered specific instructions from Moscow to local agents, detailing voting behaviors and reinforcing Russia's direct involvement in Moldova's political processes. Following these revelations, Moldovan authorities launched official probes, exposing thousands of payments tied to this influence network, further underlining Russia's extensive reach into Moldova's political arena.

In 2023, the Republic of Moldova was the target of Russian-language [disinformation campaigns](#) aimed at influencing public opinion against Western institutions. These campaigns portrayed the European Union and NATO as destabilizing forces, resonating particularly with certain segments of the Moldovan population, especially Russian-speaking communities. Narratives presented the EU as economically exploitative and culturally invasive. Public opinion data from Moldova's Institute for Public Policy shows that around [30% of Moldovans trust Russian media](#) more than Western sources, underscoring Russia's effective reach in influencing Moldova's political landscape.

Russia plays on fears of war to strengthen its political influence in Moldova, using this tactic to intimidate even those skeptical of its agenda. By exploiting these fears, Moscow discourages voter participation and undermines support for pro-European policies.

2. Economic Leverage through Energy Dependency

Russia's control over Moldova's energy supply, particularly in relation to Transnistria, remains a significant tool of influence. While Moldova has made strides in reducing its dependence on Russian gas, it still relies on electricity supplied from Transnistria, where Russian gas powers much of the production. This arrangement allows Russia to leverage energy as economic pressure, as Moldova's dependence on Transnistrian electricity leaves it vulnerable to manipulation.

In late 2022, Gazprom demonstrated this leverage by reducing gas supplies amid rising political tensions, leading to a severe energy crisis and a spike in [gas prices by 220%](#), which contributed to a 34.6% inflation rate in early 2023. This situation placed immense economic pressure on Moldova's pro-European government, complicating efforts to deepen its integration with Western institutions.

In November 2024, Moldova’s former Energy Minister, [Victor Parlicov, met with Gazprom](#) representatives in St. Petersburg to discuss energy security concerns, especially amid Russian attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure and the looming expiration of the gas transit agreement between Russia and Ukraine. The talks also addressed gas supplies to Transnistria, whose electricity generation depends almost entirely on Russian gas. No official outcomes from the meeting were made public, but the engagement reflected Moldova’s attempt to ensure energy stability and reduce dependence on Russian-controlled routes.

Despite these efforts, in January 2025, Moldova was hit by a [major energy crisis](#) when gas deliveries to Transnistria were suspended following the end of the transit agreement. Electricity production in Transnistria came to a standstill, and Moldova had to rely on emergency imports from Romania and the EU to stabilize its grid. The crisis once again exposed Russia’s use of energy as political leverage and highlighted Moldova’s vulnerability to external disruptions.

The impact on Transnistria’s population was severe. Over [51,000 households and 1,500 apartment](#) buildings were left without gas and heating in the middle of winter. Many residents resorted to improvised heating methods, creating serious health and safety risks. Schools and factories shut down, and emergency shelters were opened. In response, the European Union provided not only humanitarian aid – including fuel, generators, and heating equipment, but also direct financial support to help local authorities cope with the crisis and assist vulnerable groups. This intervention alleviated the worst consequences and demonstrated the EU’s commitment to supporting people across Moldova, including in the Transnistrian region.

To reduce future risks, Moldova has stepped up strategic infrastructure investments aimed at diversifying energy sources and reducing external dependence. A key project is the construction of a 400 kV overhead [power line linking the Strășeni substation in Moldova with the Gutinaș station in Romania](#). This 190-kilometer interconnection is scheduled to begin construction in late 2025 and to become operational by 2028, significantly improving the stability and autonomy of Moldova’s electricity supply. In parallel, Moldova [ratified an agreement](#) with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to build another 400 kV line between Bălți and Suceava. Together, these projects underscore Moldova’s determination to strengthen its security of supply and to reduce Russia’s ability to exert pressure through critical infrastructure dependencies.

3. *Military Presence and Security Leverage in Transnistria*

Russia’s military presence in Transnistria, a separatist region in Moldova, is a crucial point of leverage. Russia maintains about 500 troops legally recognized as peacekeepers under a 1992 ceasefire agreement, but it also keeps an additional [1,200–1,500](#) troops as part of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), which have no legal basis. This combined presence constrains Moldova’s ability to fully control its foreign policy and keeps a “frozen conflict” in place, serving as both a reminder of Russian influence and a way to destabilize Moldova when convenient.

In March 2023, President [Maia Sandu condemned](#) what she described as Russian provocations in Transnistria, accusing Moscow of orchestrating tensions to undermine Moldova’s stability. Moldovan officials have called

for international support to address the ongoing security risks posed by the unresolved Transnistrian conflict. According to [a document](#) obtained by Western intelligence services, Russia's strategy includes maintaining influence over Moldova by supporting pro-Russian actors and escalating tensions in Transnistria. Moldovan officials have called for international support to counter the security risks in the region and protect the country's stability.

Additionally, recent claims about Transnistria's potential request to join Russia have been debunked by [Ukrainian intelligence](#), who identified these reports as part of a disinformation campaign, and by Transnistrian authorities themselves. Transnistria clarified that it had not made any such request and instead appealed to the wider international community. This underscores Russia's broader efforts to manipulate the region and destabilize Moldova while avoiding direct escalation.

4. Cultural and Religious Influence

Russia uses the Russian Orthodox Church as a significant tool of influence in Moldova, leveraging religious channels to strengthen its soft power. A recent example is the August 2024 pilgrimage, during which over [60 Moldovan priests from the Moldovan Orthodox Church, subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, traveled to Moscow](#). While Church officials claimed the pilgrimage was not institutionally organized, local media reported that it was supported by pro-Russian sources, including oligarch Ilan Șor. This visit highlights the strong ties between Moldova's Orthodox Church and Moscow, which continue to influence public opinion, particularly among those who prioritize Orthodox traditions and view Western integration as a cultural threat.

Moreover, a June 2024 [report by the United States Institute of Peace \(USIP\)](#) highlights that while the Russian Orthodox Church is losing influence in the region, it still serves as a key supporter of Russia's foreign policy in Moldova. Despite the schism between the Moldovan Metropolitanate and the Bessarabian Metropolitanate (subordinate to the Romanian Patriarchate), Russia still benefits from support within certain segments of the Moldovan clergy. The involvement of Moldovan religious leaders in political matters reinforces Moscow's influence, keeping Moldova's political and cultural orientation aligned with Russian interests and preventing the country's full integration into the European Union.

Successes and Frustrations of Russia's Efforts

Let's take a closer look: what has Russia actually achieved in its efforts to influence Moldova, and what lesson have the Moldovan people delivered in return? In this struggle for influence, who has truly come out ahead? While Russia has tried to shape Moldova's direction, the real victory lies in the resilience of the Moldovan people, who have chosen democracy and a European future — not just now, but consistently over the last 30 years. Russian efforts have created challenges for Moldova's politics, economy, and society, but they have not been able to change the country's overall path. While they have imposed costs, Russia's influence has clear limits.

Over the past three decades, Moldova has pushed back against Russia's attempts to maintain control. The country shifted its trade toward Europe through agreements like the DCFTA, reducing its economic reliance on Russia. At the same time, many Moldovans have moved to work and live in Europe, strengthening the country's ties with the West. Despite pressure, Moldova has remained a democracy, and even leaders

supported by Russia, like Vladimir Voronin and Igor Dodon, never completely broke ties with Europe. This shows the strong commitment of the Moldovan people to a European future.

Moldova has also made progress in energy independence, cutting its reliance on Russian gas and working with Romania to secure its electricity needs. These steps have weakened Russia's ability to use energy as a way to pressure the country. While Russia has tried to divide Moldova with disinformation and manipulation, its biggest success has only been in supporting leaders who balance ties with both Europe and Russia, not in pushing Moldova to abandon Europe. This shows that, despite its efforts, Russia's influence is limited.

But how far is Moscow willing to go to maintain its grip on Moldova? Through a well-organized network of influence, Russia managed to shape the outcome of Moldova's EU membership referendum. While initial surveys indicated around [60%](#) support for European integration, the final results showed a narrower margin of [50.4%](#). This discrepancy reflects not only shifts in public sentiment but also the impact of a highly coordinated vote-buying scheme that overshadowed the results. Rather than relying solely on propaganda, Russia employed a strategic, systematic approach to interfere in Moldova's democratic process.

Russia succeeded in maintaining and strengthening its connections with Moldova's oligarchs, who hold significant influence over the country's economic and political sectors. These oligarchs played a key role in financing pro-Russian candidates and spreading anti-European messages, revealing vulnerabilities in Moldova's justice system and effectively delaying essential rule-of-law reforms.

Russia invested substantial resources in supporting pro-Russian candidates like Alexandr Stoianoglo, through funding and propaganda, aiming to undermine the influence of pro-European leaders. In this context, Ilan Shor, an oligarch with Russian ties, [orchestrated a vote-buying scheme](#) involving approximately 130,000 people, according to Moldovan authorities' investigations. These actions illustrate Russia's efforts to sway Moldova's election outcomes through oligarchic networks and corruption, attempting to delay the country's European path.

Russia has encountered numerous obstacles and failures in its attempts to shape the political course of the Republic of Moldova. Despite intense disinformation campaigns and significant support for pro-Russian candidates, the Moldovan people have shown remarkable resilience. The recent presidential elections underscored this resistance with [Maia Sandu's victory](#), securing a second mandate with 55.33% of the votes, a result unexpected by Moscow despite its influence efforts.

On the international stage, Russia's interference in Moldovan elections has been widely condemned. The United States and the European Union issued strong statements, reaffirming their commitment to Moldova's sovereignty and integrity while denouncing attempts at external influence.

Moscow's frustration became apparent through statements from Russian officials. Following Maia Sandu's victory, [Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova](#) declared the elections "the most undemocratic" in Moldova's post-Soviet history, stating that Russia does not recognize the results. Such remarks reflect Moscow's disappointment and frustration over its failure to shape the electoral outcome in its favor.



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Another setback for Russia was its inability to mobilize Moldova's diaspora in Russia decisively enough to impact the election results. In contrast, the larger pro-European diaspora played a crucial role in contributing to Maia Sandu's victory.

These failures underscore the limits of Russia's influence in Moldova and highlight the capacity of Moldovan society and institutions to withstand external pressures, choosing a democratic and European path forward.

What is the West Doing to Support Moldova?

In the face of Russia's destabilizing actions in Moldova, from disinformation campaigns to energy blackmail and vote manipulation, one might ask: how is the West helping Moldova resist these challenges and secure its future? The European Union and its partners are providing strong support to help Moldova stand firm. Financial aid has been crucial, including a [€75 million package](#) to strengthen the country's economy and resilience. Additionally, the EU has introduced a [€1.8 billion Growth Economic Plan](#) to support Moldova's development as part of its EU accession process. The recently adopted investment plan allocates [€1.5 billion \(83.3%\) as loans](#) with a repayment period of up to 40 years, including a 10-year grace period, and €300 million (16.7%) as grants, underscoring that implementation will not be immediate and citizens will need to be patient as results materialize.

The European Union has helped Moldova strengthen its energy security by connecting to Romania's gas network through the Iasi-Ungheni-Chisinau pipeline and supporting the integration of Moldova's electricity grid with Romania. The EU has also funded [renewable energy](#) projects like wind and solar, reducing Moldova's reliance on Russian energy and limiting Moscow's ability to use energy as a weapon. Moreover, in January 2025, the EU provided [€30 million in emergency support](#) for the purchase and delivery of natural gas to Moldova, following Gazprom's suspension of gas supplies, highlighting the EU's responsiveness to Moldova's immediate energy security needs.

Politically, the EU and its member states are standing by Moldova. The [Moldova Support Platform](#), created by Germany, France, and Romania, provides financial, technical, and diplomatic backing. Security assistance is also part of the effort, with the European Peace Facility enhancing Moldova's defenses. Together, these actions show the West's clear commitment to helping Moldova resist external pressure and secure its path toward a stable, democratic, and European future.

Moldova has once again shown its ability to choose the right friends by committing to the path of EU integration, with EU member states becoming steadfast allies, offering support and reinforcing the feeling that we are not alone on this journey.

Conclusion

The ongoing struggle for influence in Moldova reflects the larger geopolitical contest in Eastern Europe. Russia's persistent efforts to keep Moldova under its influence — through political alliances, energy pressure,



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disinformation, and interference — highlight its intent to limit Western expansion. Yet Moldova's steady progress toward European integration, supported by strong partnerships with the West, shows its determination to break free from this grip.

Moldova's actions, such as diversifying energy sources and building resilience against Russian tactics, send a clear message to Moscow and the EU that the country is committed to reducing dependency. Western allies, recognizing Moldova's strategic importance and vulnerabilities, have stepped in with financial, technical, and political aid, reinforcing its path toward EU integration. Leaders like Maia Sandu and Ursula von der Leyen symbolize this growing solidarity, which strengthens Moldova's European aspirations despite the challenges.

As Moldova moves forward, it faces continued pressure from Moscow, particularly with upcoming elections. However, the country's resilience, backed by a population increasingly leaning toward Europe, suggests it is prepared to meet these challenges. Moldova's strategic role in the Black Sea region makes its success critical, not just for its own future but for the balance of power in Eastern Europe. Moldova's journey is a testament to the strength of its people and the importance of standing firm against external influence in pursuit of democracy and sovereignty.

Moldova's progress has already been recognized at the highest level, with the formal launch of EU accession negotiations. This step anchors Moldova's European path and shows that the future belongs to those who choose it, not to those who threaten it.

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