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# RUSSIA'S HYBRID WAR IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA



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## ***Russian hybrid war in the Republic of Moldova***

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# **RUSSIA'S HYBRID WAR IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

*by George SCUTARU, Marcu SOLOMON, Ecaterina DADIVERINA, Diana BAROIAN*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Russia's war against Ukraine has surpassed both the one year mark and the geographical boundaries of Ukraine. If Ukraine is the object of large-scale military aggression, the main victim of Moscow's complex hybrid war is the Republic of Moldova. The analysis of the continuous sabotaging process to which the Republic of Moldova is subjected, is essential not only for understanding the regional context, but also how the Russian Federation is acting to destabilize and control the states of the former Soviet space, as there is a pattern that makes it easier to infer the Kremlin's next moves as it seeks to maintain its sphere of influence.

The Republic of Moldova retains a strong Russian influence and many vulnerabilities, from energy dependence on Moscow, low living standards, to an autonomous territorial unit that can be influenced and politically manipulated at any time by Russia, to Russian troops on a secessionist territory that it does not de facto control. Although it does not have a direct border with Russia, being located between Romania and Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova remains a target for the Kremlin's destabilizing actions. Finding itself outside the EU and NATO, the country lacks immediate security guarantees and support mechanisms, as the country's dependence on Russia and frequent governments that have mostly mimicked reforms have not aided the formation of strong institutions and a resilient society. The current President, Maia Sandu, and the still solid majority in Parliament formed following the victory of the Action and Solidarity Party in the July 2021 elections, are trying to make up for lost time, in highly unfavorable conditions due to the war in Ukraine and the severe economic and social crisis generated by soaring energy prices.

The first two sections of the study focus on areas of Moldova that have a special status and where Russia's influence is important: Transnistria, a separatist region with Russian troops on its territory, and Gagauzia, a region with a high degree of autonomy, which in spite of externally driven tensions, maintains dialogue and inter-institutional cooperation with Chisinau.

The issue of energy dependence on Russia was discussed at length, taking into account the fact that Moscow has been able to use gas as an effective instrument of pressure on Chisinau for three decades, with a decisive impact on the country's social and economic stability. Since

the proclamation of Moldova's independence in 1991, Russia has developed various means of influencing both the political environment and the population, as part of its hybrid arsenal against Chisinau to which the research has turned its attention. Such means are political and commercial influence, propaganda and disinformation, the Church, Russian-speaking minorities, cyber attacks.

For this study, the authors used information from open sources, as well as relevant information obtained as a result of a fact-finding visit organized by the New Strategy Center to the Republic of Moldova on 23-26 January 2023, during which they had a series of meetings with officials in Chisinau and Comrat, as well as with independent experts.

## I. TRANSNISTRIA – EUROPE'S FIRST FROZEN CONFLICT

The breakaway region of Transnistria is a narrow strip almost 200 kilometers long and 30 kilometers wide between the Dniester River and Moldova's eastern border with Ukraine, which is *de jure* part of the Republic of Moldova but *de facto* outside the control of the government in Chisinau. The population of the Transnistrian region is estimated at 465,000, and according to the website of the so-called Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Transnistria, the three major ethnic groups are Moldovans (33.2%), Russians (33.8%) and Ukrainians (26.7%).<sup>1</sup>

Historically, Transnistria emerged as an artificially created administrative unit in 1924 in the Soviet Union, then called the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova, as part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>2</sup> This entity was created by the Soviets to justify a future annexation of Bessarabia,<sup>3</sup> which had been a Russian governorate since 1812 and had decided in 1918, at the time of the dissolution of the Tsarist Empire, to declare its independence from Russia and then to unite with Romania in March 1918. In exactly the same way, the Bolsheviks created a Ukrainian Soviet Republic in Kharkov in December 1917, as a counterweight to the Ukrainian People's Republic, which had its capital in Kyiv and lasted until 1920.<sup>4</sup>

As a consequence of the infamous August 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact imposed an ultimatum on Romania to surrender Bessarabia and occupied the region in June 1940.<sup>5</sup> On the back of the Soviet Union's Western offensive, Bessarabia was occupied en passant in 1944,

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<sup>1</sup> "General Information", *official site of the (so-called) Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic*, available at: [https://mid.gospmr.org/ru/republic\\_main](https://mid.gospmr.org/ru/republic_main)

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Johansson. "The Transnistrian conflict after the 2005 Moldovan parliamentary elections". *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 22, no. 4 (2006): 507-516, p. 509.

<sup>3</sup> Bogdan-Alexandru Ciachir. "How did Bessarabia become part of the Russian Empire?", available at: <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/cum-a-ajuns-basarabia-in-componenta-imperiului-585728.html>

<sup>4</sup> Vali Brad. "Stalin and Ukraine. A history lesson". *Rador*, February 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.rador.ro/2022/02/28/stalin-si-ucraina-o-lectie-a-istoriei/>

<sup>5</sup> Anatol Țăranu "Pactul Molotov-Ribbentrop în oglinda nostalgiei imperialiste a Kremlinului", *IPN.md*, available at: [https://www.ipn.md/en/the-molotov-ribbentrop-pact-in-the-mirror-of-the-kremlin-7978\\_1091853.html#ixzz7shxrS1w](https://www.ipn.md/en/the-molotov-ribbentrop-pact-in-the-mirror-of-the-kremlin-7978_1091853.html#ixzz7shxrS1w)

following an extensive process of deportation of the Romanians living there, of denationalization and Russification, with the introduction of the Cyrillic script instead of the Latin alphabet, and the imposing of the idea that Moldovans are a different people from Romanians, with a language other than Romanian,<sup>6</sup> at the same time as the Russian language was being imposed as the "lingua franca", a necessary development for the political domination of the USSR. The Soviets would unite most of Bessarabia with Transnistria, forming the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. Southern Bessarabia, now known as the Budjak region, became part of Soviet Ukraine.

The industry of the Moldovan SSR was concentrated within Transnistria, including most of the factories, especially the metallurgical and energy-producing ones, while the territory between the Dniester and Prut was destined for agriculture.<sup>7</sup> The majority of the nomenklatura in Soviet Moldova were largely ethnic Russians, Romanians in Bessarabia, especially the wealthier peasants, were subject to repression by the Soviet authorities, the most frequent being deportations to Siberia and northern Kazakhstan, with more than 35,000 forced to leave their homes.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1980s, the reformist policy of glasnost and perestroika,<sup>9</sup> launched by Mikhail Gorbachev, led to national liberation movements, and to a broad process of contestation of the union center, especially in the Baltic States or in the Republic of Moldova. The newly created Popular Front promoted Romanian identity, the declaration of Romanian as the only official language in the Moldovan SSR and the return to Latin spelling. Concerned about these developments, Russians and some of the other Russian-speaking minorities began to organize and oppose such centrifugal trends.<sup>10</sup>

In the tense context of September 1990, the Russians in Transnistria decided to establish the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. Subsequently, after the failed Moscow coup of 19-22 August 1991, and against the background of the accelerated dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moldova proclaimed its independence on 27 August 1991.<sup>11</sup> Tensions between Tiraspol and Chisinau escalated, leading to an intense armed conflict, which took place between 30 March 1992 and 21 July 1992, the separatists in Transnistria being supported by Russian troops of the 14th

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<sup>6</sup> "How it went from Cyrillic to Latin script. I am talking about people from the south of Moldova", *Moldova.org*, available at:

<https://www.moldova.org/cum-s-trecut-de-la-chirilica-la-grafia-latina-povestesc-oameni-din-sudul-moldovei/>

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Johansson. "The Transnistrian conflict after the 2005 Moldovan parliamentary elections". *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 22, no. 4 (2006): 507-516, p. 508.

<sup>8</sup> "Lists of those deported to Siberia in 1949 are available online". *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/listele-deporta%C8%9Bilor-%C3%AEn-siberia-%C3%AEn-1949-sunt-accesibile-online-/31929778.html>

<sup>9</sup> "A state policy since the end of the 1980s in the Soviet Union, represented by liberalization, both politically and economically, as well as from the point of view of freedom of expression.

<sup>10</sup> Ion Mardarovici. "NATO and security in the Eastern countries during transition times". *NATO Research Fellowships programme*, 2002, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> "Moldova: 25 years of independence", *Deutsche Welle*, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/the-republic-of-moldova-25-years-of-independence/a-19508448>

Army priorly deployed there.<sup>12</sup> On July 21, 1992, in Moscow, the Convention ending hostilities was signed by the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, and the President of the Republic of Moldova, Mircea Snegur. Russian troops became “peacekeepers” and a buffer zone was established between the two belligerents.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the first frozen conflict generated by Russia in the Black Sea region emerged.

The first negotiating format included Russia, the Republic of Moldova and its two neighbors, Ukraine and Romania. The latter was excluded just a few months later, with the aim of isolating the Republic of Moldova, under the pretext raised by Moscow that all conflicts in the former Soviet space should be settled at the level of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Romania's withdrawal from the negotiating format was partly motivated by Ukraine's support for Transnistria during the war, which allowed the transit of Russian Cossack units on their way to the conflict zone.<sup>14</sup> Transnistria was subsequently included as part of the negotiations in 1994, along with the OSCE, which at the time was a big Russian victory, because it managed to put the legitimate authorities in Chisinau on the same level as the separatists in Tiraspol. In 1997 the Primakov Memorandum, named after the Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, was signed in Moscow, negotiated with the support of Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE, giving Transnistria the right to participate in Moldova's decisions on important foreign policy issues, allowing it to establish international economic relations (which opened the way for the export of metal products at dumping prices throughout Europe) and reconfirming the presence of Russian peacekeeping troops.<sup>15</sup> In 2006, the US and the European Union became observers, leading to the current 5+2 format.<sup>16</sup> The history of the negotiation process is marked by several important moments: the 1999 Russian pledge at the Istanbul OSCE Summit to withdraw its troops from the Republic of Moldova, followed by 2003 Kozak Memorandum, a settlement plan ultimately rejected by the Republic of Moldova, as it would have effectively paralyzed its ability to conduct an independent foreign policy.<sup>17</sup>

Thirty years after the fighting on the banks of the Dniester, Transnistria remains an illegitimate and internationally unrecognized separatist territory, with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe formally naming the Transnistrian region “as a zone of Russian occupation”

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Duffy. “Moldova and the Transnistria Conflict: Still a Regional Cold War?”, *E-International Relations*, 2021, p. 1, available at:

<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/03/moldova-and-the-transnistria-conflict-still-a-regional-cold-war/>

<sup>13</sup> “18 years since the ceasefire on the Dniester”. *Deutsche Welle*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/18-ani-de-la-%C3%AEncetarea-focului-la-nistru/a-5822372>

<sup>14</sup> Constantin Corneanu, “Romania, Russia and the Geopolitics of the Transnistrian Conflict”, *Asociația Europeană de Studii Geopolitice și Strategice*, available at:

<https://www.aesgs.ro/romania-rusia-si-geopolitica-conflictului-transnistrean/>

<sup>15</sup> “Memorandum On the Bases for Normalization of Relations Between the Republic of Moldova and Transdneistria”, OSCE, available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/9/42309.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Ryan Kennedy. “The limits of soft balancing: the frozen conflict in Transnistria and the challenge to EU and NATO strategy”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 3 (2016): 512-537, p. 517.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 515.

in March 2022.<sup>18</sup> Russia created the conflict in Transnistria and has set itself up as its moderator, doing everything it can to prevent Moldova's union with Romania in the first place and then to block Moldova's access to the EU and NATO. Thus, in November 2006, a double referendum was held in Transnistria, with participants being asked whether they wanted to give up independence and integrate into the Republic of Moldova in the future, or whether they were in favor of independence and future integration into the Russian Federation, with the majority in favor of Transnistria's independence and integration into Russia.<sup>19</sup> This referendum is still an instrument of pressure on the Republic of Moldova, which Moscow can reactivate at any time, considering that the annexation to Russia is an "act of popular will", as it did in 2014 when it annexed Crimea.<sup>20</sup> or in September 2022, when it annexed parts of four regions of Ukraine in staged referendums.<sup>21</sup> The specter of Transnistria's independence is used by Russia at important moments, for example, after the Republic of Moldova signed its application to join the European Union in March 2022, the separatist region of Transnistria demanded recognition of its independence.<sup>22</sup>

The most obvious means of pressure is the Russian troops deployed in Transnistria. The 2,000 troops are grouped into two categories: the so-called "pacifiers" or "peacekeeping troops", who began their mission in 1992 at the end of the war (about 500 troops) and the Russian soldiers of the Russian Troops Task Force (about 1.500 troops), whose mission is to guard the Cobasna arms depot on the border with Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> It should also be noted that after 2014, Ukraine blocked rail and air access to the separatist strip, and the Republic of Moldova banned the deployment of Russian troops through the Chisinau airport, so troop rotation is ensured by recruiting Transnistrian locals who have Russian citizenship.<sup>24</sup> At the end of January 2023, the Tiraspol authorities announced the mobilization of men up to the age of 55 in the so-called

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<sup>18</sup> "Transnistria, officially recognized as an area militarily occupied by Russia". *Deutsche Welle*, available at: <https://www.dw.com/ro/transnistria-oficial-recunoscut%C4%83-ca-zon%C4%83-ocupat%C4%83-militar-de-rusia/a-61145534>

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Gardner, "Russia to annex Transnistria?". *Politico*, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-to-annex-transnistria/>

<sup>20</sup> "Results of the referendum on the independence of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic of September 17, 2006", *Central Electoral Commission of Transnistria*, available at: <https://www.cikpmr.com/o-vyborakh-i-referendumakh/informatsiya-referendumakh/rezultaty-referenduma-o-nezavisimosti-pridnestrovskoj-moldavskoj-respubliki-17-sentyabrya-2006-goda.html>

<sup>21</sup> "Pseudo-referendums in the occupied territories", *Novynarnya Nestor*, available at: <https://novynarnia.com/2022/09/23/psevdoreferendymy-na-okupovanyh-terytoriyah-propagandysty-vzhe-namalyuyaly-rezultaty-yaki-naslidky/>

<sup>22</sup> "Maia Sandu signed the application for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union", 03 March 2022, *Președinția Republicii Moldova*, available at: <https://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedinta-maia-sandu-a-semnat-cererea-de-aderare-a-republicii-moldova-la-uniunea-europeana>

<sup>23</sup> Mădălin Necșuțu, "What troops and armaments exist in Transnistria", *G4 Media*, available at:

<https://www.g4media.ro/analiza-ce-trupe-si-armament-exista-in-transnistria-fortele-interne-numara-circa-5-000-de-militari-iar-rusia-are-peste-1-600-de-trupe-stationate-ilegal-pentru-a-pazi-uriasese-depozite-de-munitii-din.html>

<sup>24</sup> "The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have restricted the access of the Russian military to Transnistria - press". *Economica.net*, available at: [https://www.economica.net/republica-moldova-si-ucraina-au-ingradit-accesul-militarilor-rusi-in-transnistria-presa\\_101433.html](https://www.economica.net/republica-moldova-si-ucraina-au-ingradit-accesul-militarilor-rusi-in-transnistria-presa_101433.html)

peacekeeping contingent.<sup>25</sup> They were offered food, clothing and a salary of 2800 Transnistrian rubles (175 USD). Transnistria also has its own armed forces, the exact number varying between 4000 and 7500 soldiers (plus 15,000 volunteers), plus members of other force structures (interior ministry, local KGB).<sup>26</sup> The stationing of Russian troops in Transnistria is putting pressure on Chisinau, which has repeatedly demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops illegally stationed on the territory of the left bank of the Dniester, a request ignored by Russia.<sup>27</sup>

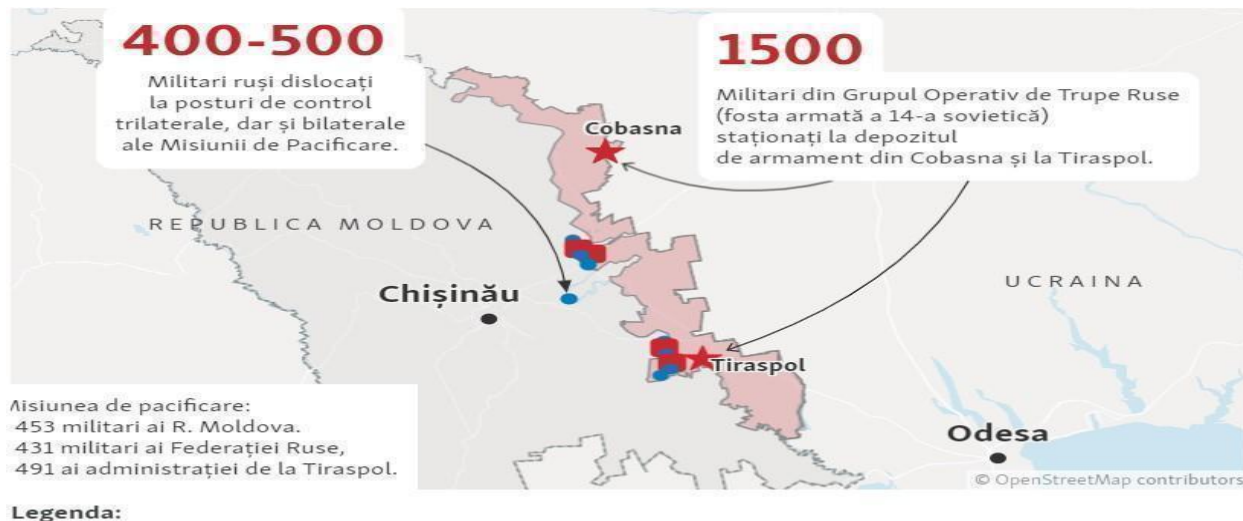


Fig 1. Russian troops in the Transnistrian region.  
 Source: Ștefan Grigorița/ <http://zonadesecuritate.md>

A major source of tension in Moldova's relations with the Russian Federation is the military depot at Cobasna, guarded by Russian troops, which is guarded by Russian troops, and 20.000 tons of ammunition belonging to Soviet units deployed in the GDR and Czechoslovakia.<sup>28</sup> The depot is located a few kilometers from the Ukrainian border and is considered a major threat to regional security because of its obsolete ammunition. The latest

<sup>25</sup> "Tiraspol announces the mobilization "in the contingent of peacemakers" of men up to 55 years old; Pay - from 2800 rubles", *Jurnal.md*, available at: <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/0659e7ca2e4b18cb/tiraspolul-anunta-mobilizarea-in-contingentul-de-pacificatori-a-barbatilor-pana-la-55-de-ani-taxa-de-la-2800-de-ruble.html>

<sup>26</sup> Ana Maria Touma, "Transnistria is forcing young men to join the army, according to a Moldovan report", *Balkan Insight*, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/07/14/moldova-rights-group-warns-of-separatist-military-recruiting-07-13-2017/>

<sup>27</sup> "The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova requested, at the OSCE Council, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria", *G4 Media*, available at: <https://www.g4media.ro/ministrul-de-externe-al-republicii-moldova-a-cerut-la-consiliul-osce-retragerea-trupelor-rus-e-din-transnistria.html>

<sup>28</sup> Simion Ciochină, Robert Schwartz, "Explosive inheritance". *Deutsche Welle*, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/transnistrias-explosive-inheritance-from-the-soviet-era/a-18886862>

OSCE inspection<sup>29</sup> took place in 2006, when the commission members did not have access to all the warehouses, so neither the exact quantity of ammunition nor its condition are known. According to the OSCE Mission to Moldova, about half of the total 42,000 tonnes of ammunition were evacuated to Russia from 2001 to 2003, but this process was stopped by Russia in 2004.<sup>30</sup>

Transnistria is also a platform for Russian propaganda and electronic warfare activities in the region. The Transnistrian Radio Centre in Maiak, about 22 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, was built during the Soviet period for broadcasting Russian-language broadcasting broadcasts abroad and had a reach as far as the US and Cuba. In 2007, the Russian company "Russian Television and Broadcasting Network" (RTRS) became the owner, although the Chisinau authorities deemed any privatization organized by the separatist authorities in Tiraspol as illegal.<sup>31</sup> Russian radio stations "Vesti FM" and "Radio Russia", instruments of Russian propaganda in Moldova and Ukraine after the start of the war in February 2022, used to broadcast from Maiak.<sup>32</sup>

On 26 April 2022, Transnistrian authorities said that a drone attack had blown up two of the most powerful towers of the Maiak transmission complex.<sup>33</sup> The attacks have not been claimed, with Tiraspol blaming Ukraine for the attack,<sup>34</sup> while Chisinau said "pro-war forces in Transnistria" were behind the attacks.<sup>35</sup> The Maiak incident followed after unidentified individuals fired a grenade launcher at the Ministry of National Security headquarters in Tiraspol in broad daylight the day before on 25 April, with no casualties.<sup>36</sup>

Russia's attention to the Transnistrian transmission complex should also be seen from the perspective of an electronic warfare platform. In 2011, a senior official in Tiraspol mentioned

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<sup>29</sup> Aliona Ciurcă, "Cobasna, the largest military depot in Eastern Europe, forbidden land for the Republic of Moldova", *Ziarul de Gardă*, available at:

<https://www.zdg.md/video/video-cobasna-cel-mai-mare-depozit-militar-din-europa-de-est-teren-interzis-pentru-r-moldova%EF%BF%BC/>

<sup>30</sup> "Cobasna weapons depot: at the disposal of GOTR and Transnistrian paramilitary formations", *Zonadesecuritate.md*, available at:

<https://zonadesecuritate.md/dex-depozitul-cu-armament-de-la-cobasna-la-dispozitia-si-folosinta-gotr-si-formatiunii-or-paramilitare-transnistrene/>

<sup>31</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, "Russian nets thrown into the Dniester River", *Kommersant*, available at:

<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/809732>.

<sup>32</sup> "Russian radio stations continue to broadcast via MW transmitters in Transnistria", *Obob.tv*, available at: <https://obob.tv/sobytiya/rossiyskie-radiostancii-prodolzhayut/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Explosions in the town of Maiak", (so-called) *Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic*, available at: <https://mvdpmr.org/kriminalnie-novosti/37731-vzryvy-v-posjolke-mayak.html>.

<sup>34</sup> "Attempted terrorist attack in the town of Maiak", (so-called) *Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic*, available at:

<https://mvdpmr.org/kriminalnie-novosti/37772-popytka-terakta-v-posjolke-mayak.html>,

<sup>35</sup> Vitalie Călugăreanu, "Maia Sandu: The explosions were caused by pro-war forces inside the Transnistrian region", *Deutsche Welle*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/maia-sandu-exploziile-au-fost-provocate-de-for%C8%9Be-pro-r%C4%83zboi-din-interiorul-regiunii-transnistrene/a-61600135>

<sup>36</sup> Valentin Vidu, "Attack with the grenade launcher at the headquarters of the "public security ministry" in Tiraspol, Transnistria; the pro-Russian separatist police announce that no one was injured", *News.ro*, available at:

<https://www.news.ro/externe/atac-cu-lansatorul-de-grenade-la-sediul-ministerului-securitatii-publice-din-tiraspol-in-transnistria-politia-separatista-prorusa-anunta-ca-nimeni-nu-a-fost-ranit-video-1922401925002022042020685459>.

the "Maiak radio centre" as one of the capabilities that could be made available to the Russian Federation as part of "symmetric response actions" to the US deployment of some elements of the missile shield in Europe.<sup>37</sup> The Transnistrian leader at the time, Igor Smirnov, said that Transnistria would not object if Russia, in response to the installation of American missiles in Romania, wanted to install Iskander missiles on its territory.<sup>38</sup>



Fig 2. Radio transmission towers at Maiak after the attack. April 2022.

Source: [MVD Transnistria](#)

Another important incident since the beginning of the invasion took place on March 4, 2022, when the railway bridge over the Cuciurgan River, which separated the Ukrainian town of Pavlivka from the Moldovan town of Pervomaysk, was blown up by Ukrainian forces to prevent an attack on Odessa from Transnistria.<sup>39</sup> At the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Transnistria could have been an important element of a combined attack on Odessa.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> "The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PMR commented, in an interview given to the REGNUM press agency, on the statement of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev regarding the US plans to deploy an anti-missile defense system in Europe", (so-called) *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic*, available at: <https://mid.gospmr.org/en/node/1122>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> Florin Marinescu, "The railway bridge connecting Transnistria with Ukraine was blown up to prevent an invasion from the pro-Russian separatist territory", *G4 Media*, available at: <https://www.g4media.ro/video-podul-feroviar-care-leaga-transnistria-de-ucraina-a-fost-aruncat-in-aer-pentru-a-prev-eni-o-invazie-din-teritoriul-separatist-pro-rus.html>

<sup>40</sup> Dorin Oancea, "Ukraine is concerned about the situation in Transnistria. Kyiv authorities denounce the provocations in the pro-Russian region of Moldova", *Mediafax*, available at: <https://www.mediafax.ro/externe/ucraina-este-ingrijorata-de-situatia-din-transnistria-autoritatile-de-la-kiev-denunta-provocarile-din-regiunea-pro-rusa-a-moldovei-20780436>

Ukraine maintains a considerable amount of troops on its border with Transnistria to deter a possible Russian attack,<sup>41</sup> which can enter Transnistria and annihilate the Russian forces, if the situation on the ground would allow them to do so. We should keep in mind that neither the Russian contingent nor the Transnistrian troops have modern weaponry in their equipment<sup>42</sup> and that after 2014, it was impossible for Russia to ensure the transfer of military technology by rail through Ukraine.

Transnistria also represents a means of energy pressure that Russia exerts on Moldova. During the Soviet period, the 12-turbine Cuciurgan power plant was built here, supplying electricity to southern Ukraine, Moldova and Romania. Although it has old machinery and is energy inefficient, with only a 30% performance,<sup>43</sup> electricity is cheap for Transnistria and Moldova because it uses gas from Russia, for which Transnistria does not pay. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian company GAZPROM started to reduce gas supplies to Moldova, and in October 2022 they were cut by 30%,<sup>44</sup> and again in November by 56.5%.<sup>45</sup> However, this policy has affected both sides of the Dniester, because lower gas deliveries have significantly reduced Transnistria's industrial activity. One of the largest employers in Transnistria and one of the largest contributors to the budget of the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Republic is the steel plant in Ribnitsa. It produces significant quantities of steel at dumping prices, sold mainly on the EU market, also as a result of the use of free gas and cheap electricity.<sup>46</sup>

On October 20, 2022, Tiraspol announced that the Cuciurgan power plant had reduced electricity deliveries to the right bank of the Dniester from 70% to 27% of the export level.<sup>47</sup> The

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<sup>41</sup> "Ukraine strengthens the border with the separatist region of Transnistria, after the latest incidents", *Digi24*, available at:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/ucraina-intareste-granita-cu-regiunea-separatista-transnistria-dupa-ultimele-incidente-1920667>

<sup>42</sup> Madalin Necsutu, "Moldova Defends Action, Blocking Russian Troop Rotation in Transnistria", *Balkan Insight*, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/22/moldova-defends-action-blocking-russian-troop-rotation-in-transnistria/>

<sup>43</sup> "ANRE: The electricity delivered by the Cuciurgan Power Plant cannot cost 1.8 US cents", *Monitorul Fiscal*, available at:

<https://monitorul.fisc.md/mic/anre-energia-electrica-livrata-de-centrala-de-la-cuciurgan-nu-poate-sa-coste-18-centi-sua.html#:~:text=Noi%20am%20efectuat%20un%20calcul.3%20kWh%20de%20energie%20electric%C4%83.>

<sup>44</sup> Eugen Uruşciuc, "Gazprom reduces deliveries to Moldova by 30%, from October 1 | Chisinau will cover the difference from reserves or new purchases", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/gazprom-reduce-livr%C4%83rile-%C3%AEn-moldova-cu-30-de-la-1-octombrie-%C8%99in%C4%83ul-va-acoperi-diferen%C8%9Ba-din-rezerve-sau-achizi%C8%9Bii-noi/32060579.html>

<sup>45</sup> Adrian Tudor, "Gazprom reduces gas deliveries to the Republic of Moldova by 56.5%". *G4 Media*, available at:

<https://www.g4media.ro/gazprom-reduce-cu-565-livrarile-de-gaz-catre-republica-moldova-in-plus-gazprom-a-acuzat-ucraina-ca-ar-fura-din-gazul-destinat-republicii-moldova-lucru-negat-de-kiev.html>

<sup>46</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>47</sup> "The Cuciurgan power plant will reduce electricity supplies to the right bank of the Dniester from 70% to 27%. Krasnoselski claims that in November "the energy package for Moldova could be a maximum of 23%", *Ziarul de Gardă*, available at:

<https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-economice/centrala-de-la-cuciurgan-va-reduce-de-la-70-la-27-livrarile-de-energie-electrica-catre-malul-drept-al-nistrului-krasnoselski-sustine-ca-in-noiembrie-pachetul-energetic-pentru-moldova-ar-pute/>

energy delivery to the Republic of Moldova worsened even more during the Russian bombing campaign on Ukraine's electricity infrastructure.<sup>48</sup> Chisinau managed to overcome the blockade relatively quickly, by importing massive amounts of energy from Romania, mostly at prices subsidized by the Romanian state. Romania has helped Moldova not only with electrical energy, but also with gas,<sup>49</sup> but also with gas,<sup>50</sup> fuel oil, firewood,<sup>51</sup> funds,<sup>52</sup> which, along with EU financial aid for gas imports and subsidies for disadvantaged groups,<sup>53</sup> have made the government in Chisinau resist Russian energy blackmail. With help from Romania, Chisinau has strengthened its negotiating power vis-a-vis Tiraspol on the issue of more affordable energy supplies.

In December, the parties agreed that Transnistria would receive all the gas supplied by Russia from Chisinau, and Transnistria would in return deliver electricity from the Cuciurgan power plant at a lower price.<sup>54</sup> According to experts in Chisinau, this cooperation is convenient for both sides, as Transnistria can support its economy with the funds it receives from Chisinau for electricity and access to more gas, while Chisinau receives electricity at a lower price than on the European market. Another objective of Chisinau officials was to avoid an economic collapse in Transnistria, which would cause social problems and mass departures to Moldova.<sup>55</sup> Because of the war, Russia is no longer able to fulfill all its previous commitments to the breakaway region. As such, there are delays regarding pensions for Transnistrians with Russian

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<sup>48</sup> "The Russian strikes in Ukraine interrupted the supply of electricity to the Republic of Moldova". *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/loviturile-ruse%C8%99ti-%C3%AEn-ucraina-au-%C3%AEntrerupt-livr%C4%83rile-de-curent-electric-c%C4%83tre-r-moldova/32075051.html>

<sup>49</sup> Robert Lupițu, "Unprecedented: today Romania provides 90% of the electricity needs of the Republic of Moldova", *Calea Europeană*, available at:

<https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/fara-precedent-romania-asigura-astazi-90-din-necesarul-de-energie-electrica-al-republicii-moldova/>

<sup>50</sup> Robert Lupițu, "Premiere: Romania started exporting gas to the Republic of Moldova through the Iași-Ungheni pipeline". *Calea Europeană*, available at:

<https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/premiera-romania-a-inceput-exportul-de-gaze-catre-republica-moldova-prin-conducta-iasi-ungheni/>

<sup>51</sup> "Maia Sandu: The first batch of wood from Romania has arrived in the Republic of Moldova, over 2,000 square meters, which will soon reach the citizens". *G4Media*, available at:

<https://www.g4media.ro/maia-sandu-in-republica-moldova-a-ajuns-primul-lot-de-lemn-din-romania-de-peste-2-000-de-metri-steri-care-vor-ajunge-in-curand-la-cetateni.html>

<sup>52</sup> "Cross-border projects of over 70 million euros, financed by the Program Romania - Rep. Moldova". *Euractiv Moldova*, available at:

<https://www.euractiv.ro/euractiv-moldova/proiecte-transfrontaliere-de-peste-70-milioane-euro-finantate-prin-programul-romania-rep.-moldova-31550>

<sup>53</sup> "EU helps the Republic of Moldova to face the gas crisis", *European Commission*, disponibil la:

[https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-helps-republic-moldova-face-gas-crisis-2021-12-15\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-helps-republic-moldova-face-gas-crisis-2021-12-15_en)

<sup>54</sup> Eugen Urușciuc, "Chisinau and Tiraspol, about the effects of signing the contract with MGRES", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/chi%C8%99in%C4%83u-%C8%99i-tiraspol-despre-efectele-semn%C4%83rii-contractului-cu-mgres/32161100.html>

<sup>55</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

citizenship,<sup>56</sup> (Russia covers around 20% of pensions in Transnistria)<sup>57</sup> or in the construction of social and cultural facilities (schools, kindergartens, hospitals, etc.).<sup>58</sup> This would put even more pressure on the Republic of Moldova as it has to manage the presence of more than 80,000 Ukrainian refugees and multiple social issues caused by inflation and soaring energy prices.<sup>59</sup> But there are other voices, especially from the pro-Western political opposition,<sup>60</sup> who say Moldova should make this aid conditional with some Tiraspol concessions, such as the release of political prisoners or an end to aggressive policies against Romanian-language schools.<sup>61</sup>

Transnistria's dependence on the Republic of Moldova is also increasing due to the fact that currently all export/import operations are carried out only through the Republic of Moldova. This gives Chisinau the possibility to monitor trade activities and financial flows, as the border between Ukraine and Transnistria is closed. This has almost completely eliminated smuggling, which was an important source of illicit revenue for Transnistria. Another effect of Ukraine's attitude shift towards Transnistria has been the large number of applications for so-called "neutral numbers", which allow drivers from the breakaway region to drive outside Transnistrian territory. Applications for such numbers have not been in great demand, with several postponements from Chisinau for a deadline for implementing such a measure, but tensions increased when Ukraine announced that from 1 October 2021 it would no longer allow cars with Transnistrian number plates to enter its territory.<sup>62</sup>

The current regime in Chisinau is trying to apply the "carrot and stick" policy towards Tiraspol and believes it has identified a more pragmatic faction willing to talk. Using mainly economic levers, Chisinau must negotiate with the two camps, one pragmatic, with which it can negotiate and reach an agreement in the future, i.e. the one controlled by Victor Gushan, the owner of the Tiraspol-based Sheriff Company (with the current Transnistrian leader Vadim Krasnoselsky as its exponent), the other, undesirable, controlled by the force structures directly linked to the Russian secret services (headed by the so-called Foreign Minister Vitaly Ignatiev).

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<sup>56</sup> "Pensions paid by Russia in the Transnistrian region, in great delay. Krasnoselskii: "It does not depend on the services of the Transnistrian side". *Replicamedia.md*, available at:

<https://replicamedia.md/ro/article/L1ndP8Jqw/pensiile-platite-de-rusia-in-regiunea-transnistreana-in-mare-intarziere-krasnoselskii-nu-depinde-de-serviciile-partii-transnitrene.html>

<sup>57</sup> "Tiraspol has good reasons not to get involved in the Ukrainian war: an important source of imports and exports, and Krasnoselski, Ignatiev and Gushan have Ukrainian passports", *Zonadesecuritate.md*, available at:

<https://zonadesecuritate.md/y-тирасполя-есть-веские-причины-не-ввя/>

<sup>58</sup> "Sheriff Republic" -21. The Kremlin changes its stake in Transnistria" *Ava.md*, available at:

<https://ava.md/2020/08/25/respublika-sherif-21-kreml-menyaet-stavki/>

<sup>59</sup> Simion Ciochină, "How will the Republic of Moldova withstand the energy winter". *Deutsche Welle*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/cum-va-rezista-republica-moldova-iernii-energetice/a-63813584>

<sup>60</sup> "Igor Munteanu: It is necessary to dismantle the separatist regime through economic strangulation", *IPN*, available at:

[https://www.ipn.md/ro/igor-munteanu-e-necesara-destamarea-regimului-separatist-prin-sugrumare-7965\\_1093277.html](https://www.ipn.md/ro/igor-munteanu-e-necesara-destamarea-regimului-separatist-prin-sugrumare-7965_1093277.html)

<sup>61</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Lina Grău, "Online traffic jam when changing Transnistrian license plates", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/placute-neutre-moldova-ucraina-programare-online/31508290.html>

Sheriff Tiraspol was founded by Victor Gushan and Ilya Kazmaly, two former KGB officers, and managed to secure a monopoly over most areas of economic activity in Transnistria.<sup>63</sup> As its economic power grew, the company gradually infiltrated Transnistria's political life, gaining control over many politicians. The clearest victory for the oligarchs at the top of the company was the 2016 election of the current so-called president of Transnistria, Vadim Krasnoselsky, who defeated the Kremlin's preferred candidate, Evgeny Shevchuk. In 2020, the company-controlled party, called Obnovlenie (Renewal), won a parliamentary majority.<sup>64</sup> Foreign trade from the Transnistrian region is redirected in particular towards EU countries, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.<sup>65</sup> The main assets of the Sheriff Tiraspol holding, apart from Transnistria, are not in Russia but in Ukraine,<sup>66</sup> hence the greater openness towards Europe. In reality, everyone who is relevant in Transnistria is connected to the Russian services, the opening to the West of the Sheriff forces has purely mercantile reasons. In April 2022, the Chisinau press published a list of influential people in Tiraspol (members of the separatist government, politicians, secret service generals, trade union leaders, journalists). The information has been received from a so-called group of "patriotic "Transnistrian officers" who did not want the separatist region to be drawn into a war against Ukraine and who wanted to show the great influence of the Russian army's intelligence service - the GRU.<sup>67</sup>

We must understand that despite the often apparently conflicting rhetoric, the leaders in Chisinau and Tiraspol have had many common economic interests over the past 30 years, taking advantage of cheap Russian gas, smuggling through Ukraine, the export at dumping prices of steel from the Transnistria's Ribnita steel plant. The kleptocracy on both sides of the Dniester has over time built up an effective mode of cooperation, the roots of which transcend parties and governments. Geographically further away from Moscow, claiming loyalty in declarations and enjoying free Russian gas, Tiraspol leaders have earned a significant amount of money together with politicians in Chisinau, while also financing election campaigns, and making the most of their "gray zone" status. The war has damaged the comfort and predictability of relations with Russia and Moldova for Tiraspol, businessmen, politicians and members of the power structures, because Ukraine is now a major player and, above all, a hostile one. Even if Chisinau is willing to make concessions, Kyiv will not want an area in its vicinity where Moscow plays an important role.

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<sup>63</sup> Mădălin Necșuțu, "Transnistria: Sheriff's man holds on to power with Moscow's blessing". *Veridica.ro*, available at: <https://www.veridica.ro/en/editorials/transnistria-sheriffs-man-holds-on-to-power-with-moscows-blessing>

<sup>64</sup> "Breakaway Transnistria fully under Sheriff's control as Obnovlenie party sweeps board in parliament election". *Intellinews*, available at: <https://www.intellinews.com/breakaway-transnistria-fully-under-sheriff-s-control-as-obnovlenie-party-sweeps-board-in-parliament-election-198054/>

<sup>65</sup> "EUBAM Annual Report 2021", available at: <https://eubam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/EUBAM-Annual-Report-2021.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> "UKRAINIAN "TICKET" TO EUROPE FOR RUSSIAN "ZONE" HEADS". *Rise Moldova*, available at: <https://www.rise.md/articol/bilet-ucrainean-in-europa-pentru-sefii-zonei-rusesti/>

<sup>67</sup> "The list of Russian spies from Transnistria, published by the Moldovan press, which attributes it to a group of agents from the security services in Tiraspol", *G4 Media*, available at: <https://www.g4media.ro/lista-spionilor-rusi-din-transnistria-publicata-de-presa-din-moldova-care-o-atribuie-unui-gr-up-de-agenti-din-serviciile-de-securitate-de-la-tiraspol-fortele-destructive-ale-protejatilor-ru.html>

Since 2005, negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict have taken place in the 5+2 format (Republic of Moldova and Transnistrian separatists, Russia, Ukraine, OSCE as mediators, plus the European Union and the US as observers). The negotiations did not produce any remarkable results, as they are currently stalled due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At this point, few people in Chisinau believe that there is any chance of resuming the 5+2 negotiating format, as it is highly unlikely that Russia and Ukraine will be able to sit down at the same table and play their role as mediators in the Transnistrian conflict.<sup>68</sup>

It is obvious that future negotiations on relations between Tiraspol and Chisinau depend on the outcome of the war between Russia and Ukraine. The Republic of Moldova wants a peaceful resolution of the conflict, which is why it is unlikely for them to accept Ukraine's annihilation of the Russian military presence in Transnistria through a military option.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, the Republic of Moldova is unlikely to want the issue of the Transnistrian conflict settlement to be on the agenda of future negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, no matter how and when they take place, because it will not be able to influence such negotiations in any way.<sup>70</sup>

Following the resignation of Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița and her replacement by Dorin Recean<sup>71</sup> it is possible for the negotiation dynamics between Chisinau and Tiraspol to change. His experience as a presidential adviser on security issues and his role in the dialogue with Tiraspol in 2022 have so far made it possible to avoid incidents in the context of the war in Ukraine.<sup>72</sup> Prime Minister Recean will have to continue the dialogue with Tiraspol, given that the 5+2 negotiating format is no longer viable and Moscow is trying to exploit any vulnerability, which can be seen in Russia's increasingly aggressive rhetoric on Transnistria. In February 2023, the Kremlin announced the repeal of a 2012 decree on Russian foreign policy guidelines, in the logic of escalation and Cold War between Russia and the West, and this measure also canceled the provision whereby Moscow assumed the obligation "to continue active participation in the search for ways to resolve the Transnistrian problem based on respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and neutral status of the Republic of Moldova in the establishment of the special status of Transnistria", a decision that raised new concerns in Chisinau.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Simion Ciochină, "Oleg Serebrian: The Transnistrian problem depends a lot on how the war in Ukraine will evolve", *Deutsche Welle*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/oleg-serebrian-problema-transnistrean%C4%83-depinde-foarte-mult-de-cum-va-evolua-r%C4%83zboiul-din-ucraina/a-61235453>

<sup>69</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> "Dorin Recean, appointed Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova by President Maia Sandu after the resignation of the Gavrilița government". *Radio Free Europe Romania*, available at:

<https://romania.europalibera.org/a/demisie-guvern-gavrilita-moldova/32265304.html>

<sup>72</sup> "Carp: Dorin Recean is currently in talks with Vadim Krasnoselski, in Varnița", *TV8.md*, available at:

<https://www.tv8.md/ru/2022/28/04/video-carp-dorin-recean-se-afla-chiar-acum-in-discutii-cu-vadim-krasnoselski-la-varnita/199223>

<sup>73</sup> Alexandru Costea "Moldova responds to Putin after canceling the decree by which Russia recognized the sovereignty of Chisinau in the matter of Transnistria", *Digi24*, available at:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/moldova-ii-raspunde-lui-putin-dupa-ce-a-anulat-decretul-prin-care-rusia-recunoste-suveranitatea-chisinaului-in-problema-transnistriei-2259775>

The Russian Defence Ministry continued pressuring Chisinau by announcing that it had information that Ukraine was about to invade Transnistria, and the Foreign Ministry in Moscow immediately stated that an attack on Transnistria and the Russian military deployed there would be considered an attack on the Russian Federation.<sup>74</sup> Subsequently, Tiraspol's law enforcement agencies announced that in March 2023 they had foiled an attack on Transnistrian leader Vadim Krasnoselsky, blaming Ukrainian intelligence services. But they vehemently denied involvement, calling it an attempt by Moscow to raise tensions, while Prime Minister Recean said the assassination attempt was unconfirmed.<sup>75</sup>

Although Russia does not recognise Transnistria's independent status, with this declaration it assumes protection rights similar in spirit to those existing in the mutual assistance treaties concluded with the so-called independent republics of Donetsk and Lugansk before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This opens the way to a possible recognition of Transnistria's independence, but also to a possible annexation, as Moscow did with the separatist regions of Donbass, depending on the military context and the reality on the ground. Russia's destabilization attempts are evident and have attracted the attention of Western allies, with White House national security spokesman John Kirby saying that Russia is spreading disinformation about an imminent Ukrainian attack in Transnistria and is supporting protests to instigate an insurrection against the government in Chisinau, prompting the US to step up support for Moldova, including through intelligence exchanges to counter Russia's actions.<sup>76</sup>

On June 23, 2022, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova were granted candidate status for accession to the European Union by the EU European Council,<sup>77</sup> as their European pathway became inextricably linked together and conditioned by Kyiv's ability to resist the Russian invasion and Chisinau's ability to prove its resilience in the face of destabilizing actions by the Kremlin. On the same day, the so-called foreign minister of the Transnistrian Republic said that "Mrs Sandu may really want the country to join the EU and unite with Romania, but the people of Transnistria have totally different plans", claiming independence and closeness to Russia.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> "Moscow warns the US, NATO and Ukraine: An attack on Transnistria will be considered an attack against the Russian Federation". *Jurnal.md*, available at:

[https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/aec6562e48c34848/moscova-avertizeaza-sua-nato-si-ucraina-un-atac-asupra-transnistriei-va-fi-considerat-un-atac-impotriva-federatiei-ruse.html?utm\\_source=RSS&utm\\_medium=RSS&utm\\_campaign=RSS](https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/aec6562e48c34848/moscova-avertizeaza-sua-nato-si-ucraina-un-atac-asupra-transnistriei-va-fi-considerat-un-atac-impotriva-federatiei-ruse.html?utm_source=RSS&utm_medium=RSS&utm_campaign=RSS)

<sup>75</sup> Alina Cotoros, "Recean, about the alleged attempt to assassinate the leader from Tiraspol: We do not have a confirmation", *Adevărul.ro*, available at:

<https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/republica-moldova/recean-possibila-tentativa-asasinare-lider-tiraspol-2248729.html>

<sup>76</sup> Ion Gaidău "The White House: Moscow is trying to destabilize the Republic of Moldova to install a pro-Russian government in Chisinau", *Adevărul.ro*, available at:

<https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/republica-moldova/casa-alba-moscova-incearca-sa-destabilizeze-2249138.html>

<sup>77</sup> Vitalie Călugăreanu. "Moldovans, waiting for the historic decision of the European Council". *Deutsche Welle Moldova*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/moldovenii-in-asteptarea-deciziei-istorice-a-consiliului-european/a-62238396>

<sup>78</sup> Mircea Olteanu, "Tiraspol claims that the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria have different values and identities, almost impossible to reconcile". *Umbrela Strategică*, available at:

<https://umbrela-strategica.ro/tiraspolul-sustine-republica-moldova-si-transnistria-au-valori-si-identitati-diferite-aproape-imposibil-de-reconciliat/>

## II. GĂGĂUZIA- BETWEEN RUSSIA, TURKEY, AND EUROPE

The Territorial Administrative Unit (TAU) of Gagauzia is a part of the Republic of Moldova, located in the south of the country, with an area of 1,848 km<sup>2</sup>, consisting of three districts, Comrat, Ceadir-Lunga and Vulcanesti, with Comrat as the administrative center.<sup>79</sup> Gagauzia is an autonomous territory within the borders of the Republic of Moldova, with a special legal status, having its own fundamental law similar to a constitution (Regulation), with a local parliament (People's Assembly) and a local government (Executive Committee). The leader of Gagauzia is the Governor or Bashkan, to whom all Gagauz public administration authorities are subordinated and who represents Gagauzia on the territory of the Republic of Moldova and internationally.<sup>80</sup>

There are 134,535 citizens living in Gagauzia, of which 112,387 declare to be Gagauz, 6,564 Bulgarians, 6,292 Moldovans, 4,344 Russians, 3,317 Ukrainians, 57 Romanians and the rest are Roma or other ethnic groups.<sup>81</sup> Although Gagauzia has three official languages (Gagauz, Moldovan and Russian), Russian is the lingua franca, used for everyday communication, in the education system, public administration and judiciary matters, as well as the majority of mainstream media.<sup>82</sup> The Gagauz speak a language related to Turkish, but are Orthodox Christians. When the Ottoman Empire stepped up repression in Bulgaria, where the Gagauz originally lived, many began to settle in Bessarabia under the protection of the Tsarist Empire in the 19th century. For this reason, historical memory<sup>83</sup> and the pro-Russian affinities of the Gagauz remain to this day, by preserving this image of a protective Russia. During the Soviet regime, the Gagauz were once again subjected to Russification,<sup>84</sup> becoming supporters of the Soviet cause. In March 1991, the Gagauz voted unanimously to remain part of the USSR and supported the August 1991 Moscow coup by anti-Gorbachev conservatives.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> "Legal Status", *Găgăuzia.md*, available at:

<https://www.gagauzia.md/ro/ato-gagauziya/simvolika.html>

<sup>80</sup> "Regulation of Gagauzia", *General Directorate of External Relations UTA Găgăuzia*, available at:

<http://gder.md/md/index.php?do=static&page=pravovaya-baza-ulozhenie-ob-osobom-pravovom-statuse-ato-gagauziya>

<sup>81</sup> "Găgăuzia", *Population and Housing Census 2014*, available at:

<https://recensamant.statistica.md/ro/dissemination/person/3724f1b309d02b7f475f69eba8107ae0>

<sup>82</sup> "General Information", *Găgăuzia.md*, available at:

<https://www.gagauzia.md/ro/turizm/obshhaya-informacziya.html>

<sup>83</sup> "Gagauz Adamyk. How Moldova became a common home for different nations. Part two", *Newsmaker*, available at:

<https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/gagauz-adamyk-kak-moldova-stala-obshchim-domom-dlya-raznyh-narodov-chast-vtoraya-38495/>

<sup>84</sup> "Gagauzia: Another obstacle on Moldova's path to Europe?", *CIFE.org*, available at:

<https://www.cife.org/blog/2016/02/04/gagauzia-another-obstacle-on-moldovas-path-to-europe/>

<sup>85</sup> "WHO ARE THE GAGUZ / Wandering through history". *Timpul.md*, available at:

<https://timpul.md/articol/cine-sunt-gagauzii-rataciti-prin-istorie-30276.html>

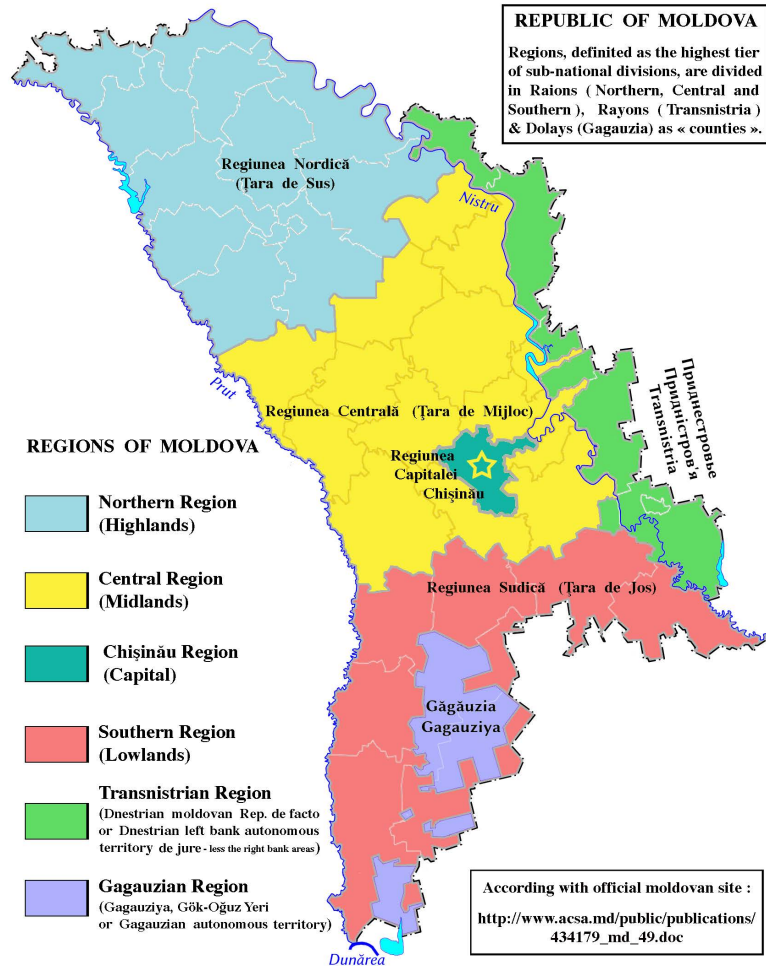


Fig. 3. Geographical position of Gagauzia

Source: Julieta39, via Wikimedia Commons <https://shorturl.at/Ow8zE>

Against the background of tensions between Chisinau and Tiraspol, the trend in favor of declaring independence began to grow in the region inhabited by the Gagauz population, encouraged by Moscow. In December 1990, the Gagauz Halkî separatist movement proclaimed the Republic of Gagauzia in the Comrat, Ceadir-Lunga and Vulcanesti districts.<sup>86</sup> Unlike Transnistria, armed conflict was avoided and after intense negotiations Gagauzia's autonomy was recognised by the Republic of Moldova. On 23 December 1994, the Chisinau Parliament passed the Law on the Special Status of Gagauzia, transforming the region into an autonomous national territory, part of the Republic of Moldova.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> "Gagauzia and Transnistria, the two vulnerabilities on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. How Russia activates its foci of instability in ex-Soviet countries", *Hotnews.ro*, available at: <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-16848282-gagauzia-transnistria-cele-doua-vulnerabilitati-teritoriul-republicii-moldova-cum-isi-activeaza-rusia-focarele-instabilitate-din-tarile-sovietice.htm>

<sup>87</sup> "WHO ARE THE GAGUZ / Wandering through history". *Timpul.md*, available at: <https://timpul.md/articol/cine-sunt-gagauzii-rataciti-prin-istorie-30276.html>

South of Gagauzia, the Ukrainian region of Budjak holds an important Gagauz population. The region is ethnically heterogeneous, with a relative Ukrainian majority and important Russian, Bulgarian and Moldovan minorities.<sup>88</sup> Although less talked about, the 2014-2015 Russian hybrid offensive in Ukraine targeted Budjak as well, together with Crimea and Donbas.<sup>89</sup>

Russia maintains a strong influence over Gagauzia, which has not eroded since the aggression against Ukraine began. An opinion poll conducted in January 2023 shows that 93.8% of Gagauz residents have a favorable attitude towards Russia and 82.4% towards Putin. 66.5% have a neutral attitude towards the war in Ukraine, 26.4% are in favor of Russia and only 2.7% support Ukraine.<sup>90</sup>

Gagauzia has repeatedly declared its opposition to Chisinau's rapprochement with the EU. When Moldova signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, and an illegal referendum was held in Gagauzia, where 99% of the population voted for Gagauzia's independence, 98% voted for Moldova to join the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union and only 2% supported the partnership decision with the EU.<sup>91</sup> One of the favorite themes of Russian propaganda in Gagauzia has been the "danger of unification with Romania", which prompted local politicians to insert a provision into Gagauzia's main law allowing them the right to self-determination in the event of "a change in the independent state status of the Republic of Moldova".<sup>92</sup> It remains to be seen what will happen if the Republic of Moldova will integrate into the European Union in the years to come and if Gagauzia will use this right of secession. As we are talking about a long process, it is expected that the perception of the EU will improve in Gagauzia, as is the case of their attitude towards Romania, which is slowly but surely becoming more positive, despite Russian propaganda. As such, 23.7% of Gagauz were declared as having a favorable attitude towards Romania in January 2023. This is due to an increase in the number of children learning Romanian, Romania's balanced attitude, which has directly allocated investment funds in school infrastructure, and above all Romania's economic attractiveness.<sup>93</sup> The example of the Romanian-language high school "Mihai Eminescu" in Comrat, the capital of Gagauzia, is suggestive. Thanks to funding from the Romanian government, another school building was built, allowing the number of pupils to increase from

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<sup>88</sup> "On Bugeac and Snake Island", *Rumaniamilitary.ro*, available at:

<https://www.rumaniamilitary.ro/despre-bugeac-si-insula-serpilor>

<sup>89</sup> John Haines, "A quarrel in a far away country", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, available at:

[https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/04/a-quarrel-in-a-far-away-country-the-rise-of-a-budzhak-peoples-republic/#\\_ftn4](https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/04/a-quarrel-in-a-far-away-country-the-rise-of-a-budzhak-peoples-republic/#_ftn4)

<sup>90</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Călin Marchievici, "The referendum in Gagauzia: destabilization plan orchestrated by Moscow and its pawns", *Cotidianul.ro*, available at:

<https://www.cotidianul.ro/referendumul-din-gagauzia-plan-de-destabilizare-orchestrat-de-moscova-si-pionii-ei/>

<sup>92</sup> "Regulation of Gagauzia", General Directorate of External Relations UTA Gagauzia, available at:

<http://gder.md/md/index.php?do=static&page=pravovaya-baza-ulozhenie-ob-osobom-pravovom-statuse-ato-gagauziya>

<sup>93</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

600 to 1000. For the school year 2022/2023 there were 1400 applications!<sup>94</sup> Increasing the number of Gagauz who speak Romanian is also a way to diminish the influence of disinformation campaigns promoted by Russia, because it facilitates their access to sources of information other than Russian.

The relationship between Chisinau and the authorities in Comrat is a sinuous one, depending mainly on how the former President of the Republic of Moldova related to Russia. The relationship between current President Maia Sandu and the Gagauz (Bashkan) leader Irina Vlah is cold, without overstepping the institutional relationship, with Vlah's support for incumbent President Igor Dodon during the 2020 presidential elections, a pro-Russia politician close to Vladimir Putin, weighing heavily on their perception of each other. Irina Vlah's position on the war in Ukraine is ambiguous. Although she said she was "frightened" by the war nearby, Vlah did not clearly condemn Russian aggression and did not talk about war crimes committed by Russian troops, preferring a pacifist discourse.<sup>95</sup> The People's Assembly of Gagauzia did not ban the wearing of the Saint George's banner, a symbol of Russia's war in Ukraine, after Chisinau had banned it.<sup>96</sup> However, it should be noted that the current Bashkan's attitude was well thought-out and did not encourage radical initiatives in Gagauzia in 2022, which would have strained the situation amidst the economic and social problems faced by Moldova. Local agents of influence, backed by the Russians, tried to organize anti-government and anti-Maia Sandu demonstrations or to convene meetings that could have led to the adoption of secessionist resolutions. In the end, these efforts did not have the desired impact.<sup>97</sup>

Chisinau must continue the dialogue with the authorities in Comrat in order to reduce Russia's room to maneuver while presenting those living in Gagauzia with the benefits of the tremendous support coming from the EU, Romania and the USA.<sup>98</sup> Western aid remains little known to the Gagauz, who get more information from Russian sources,<sup>99</sup> and the Russian

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<sup>94</sup> There is also a Romanian high school in Vulcănești, with 400 students, the local authorities of Găgăuzia requesting support from Romania to open a high school with teaching in Romanian in the third district of Găgăuzia, at Ceadir-lunga. Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts during the visit to Comrat in January 2023.

<sup>95</sup> "She was suggesting that the war in Ukraine 'really scares' her, but she signed the act allowing the use of the black and orange ribbon". *Jurnal.md*, available at:

<https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/741f04364339a82a/sugera-ca-razboiul-din-ucraina-o-inspaimanta-cu-adevarat-dar-a-semnat-actul-ce-permite-utilizarea-panglicii-negru-oranj.html>

<sup>96</sup> Liliana Barbăroșie, "The Legislature of Gagauzia adopts a law in favor of the ribbon of St. George". *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/legislativul-g%C4%83g%C4%83uziei-adopt%C4%83-o-lege-%C3%AEn-favoarea-panglicii-sf-gheorghe/31827169.html>

<sup>97</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>98</sup> "Pro-Russian Gagauzia, financed by the EU", *Ziarul de Gardă*, available at:

<https://www.zdg.md/reporter-special/reportaje/gagauzia-pro-rusa-finantata-de-ue/>

<sup>99</sup> "Experts: The population of UTA Gagauzia remains captive to Russian propaganda", *Adevărul.ro*, available at: <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/republica-moldova/experti-populatia-din-uta-gagauzia-ramane-captiva-2116932.html>

language remains the main means of communication, even surpassing the Gagauz language, including in educational establishments.<sup>100</sup>

Russia is a landmark for politicians in Gagauzia, and any visit to Moscow takes on a special symbolism in the eyes of the local population. In 2015, after winning her first term as governor of Gagauzia, Irina Vlah traveled to Moscow, where she met with former Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, the head of the Russian State Duma's CIS Committee Leonid Sluchishy and other Russian officials,<sup>101</sup> and in 2018, during another visit to Moscow, Vlah also had the opportunity to meet President Vladimir Putin.<sup>102</sup> The influence was so strong that even Irina Vlah's 2015 inauguration speech was corrected by Russian advisers, who added anti-European, and anti-Romanian messages advocating rapprochement with Russia.<sup>103</sup>

Russian influence is seconded by Turkish soft power, based on the linguistic and cultural ties between the two peoples, accentuated by the policy of neo-Ottomanism promoted by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkey is investing in infrastructure and education projects,<sup>104</sup> by opening cultural centers, bookshops<sup>105</sup>, and a consulate in Comrat.<sup>106</sup> Most importantly, Turkey has never encouraged secessionist attitudes and plays an important role in tempering radical tendencies that would help Russia destabilize the region. The visit of the Turkish Parliament speaker, Mustafa Shentop to Chisinau and Comrat in September 2022 is suggestive in this respect, best illustrated by Shentop's statement that "the future of Gagauzia is not elsewhere, but in Moldova. Gagauzia is an integral part of Moldova."<sup>107</sup> This statement is important because it was made shortly after Moscow tried to organize anti-government protests in Gagauzia, speculating on economic difficulties. The initiative fell on deaf ears, gathering only 3000 people.<sup>108</sup> Educational projects funded by Turkey to preserve and increase

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<sup>100</sup> Tatiana Beghiu, "Even the Gagauz teachers, among themselves, do not speak Gagauz...", *moldova.org*, available at: <https://www.moldova.org/limba-gagauza-este-putin-vorbita-in-gagauzia/>

<sup>101</sup> Iulia Modiga, "Irina Vlah met Rogozin in Moscow", *infoprut.ro*, available at:

<https://infoprut.ro/38672-irina-vlah-si-a-dat-intalnire-cu-rogozin-la-moscova.html>

<sup>102</sup> Stirimd, "Irina Vlah met with Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg", *Ştiri.md*, available at:

<https://stiri.md/article/politica/irina-vlah-s-a-intalnit-cu-vladimir-putin-la-sankt-petersburg>

<sup>103</sup> "Instructions for Favorites", *rise.md*, available at:

<https://www.rise.md/articol/instructiuni-pentru-favoriti/>

<sup>104</sup> „Gagauzia Bashkan and Tika Officials Discuss Implementation of Projects Funded by Government of Turkey”, *Infotag*, available at: <https://www.infotag.md/rebellion-en/296609/>

<sup>105</sup> „Welcome to Găgăuzia!”, *Gagauzia Regional Development Agency. Cooperation for development*, available at: <http://www.adrgagauzia.md/pageview.php?l=ro&id=3128&idc=675>

<sup>106</sup> "Inauguration of the Consulate General of Turkey in the capital of the Gagauz Autonomous Region", *TRT*, available at:

<https://www.trt.net.tr/romana/lume/2020/08/28/inaugurarea-consulatului-general-al-turciei-in-capitala-autonomiei-gagauze-1480520>

<sup>107</sup> "The President of the Parliament of Turkey, a message of unity in the Republic of Moldova, in the context of the war in Ukraine: The future of Gagauzia is not elsewhere, but in Moldova, it is an integral part / Have a more constructive attitude than ever in relations with Chisinau", *G4Media*, available at:

<https://www.g4media.ro/presedintele-parlamentului-turciei-mesaj-de-unitate-in-republica-moldova-in-contextul-razboiului-din-ucraina-viitorul-gagauziei-nu-este-in-alta-parte-ci-in-moldova-este-parte-integranta.html>

<sup>108</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

the role of the Gagauz language,<sup>109</sup> should be seen as an instrument to stop the dominant influence of the Russian language in Gagauzia.



Fig 4. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on an official visit to Comrat, capital of ATU Gagauzia  
Source: [Agora.md](https://www.agora.md)

In the context of Russia's attempts to destabilize Moldova in various ways, the fate of the Gagauz TAU will be decided by who will become the next Bashkan in the aftermath of the 2023 elections. A balanced leader will be more favorable towards dialogue with Chisinau and will not engage in excesses that could create an additional source of instability in Moldova even if, in order to win votes, the electoral action matrix involves criticism of Chisinau and an overtly pro-Russian attitude.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> "TİKA Supports Preserving the Gagauz Turkish Language", *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency*, available at: [https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/tika\\_supports\\_preserving\\_the\\_gagauz\\_turkish\\_language-63228](https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/tika_supports_preserving_the_gagauz_turkish_language-63228)

<sup>110</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

### III. RUSSIA'S HYBRID INSTRUMENTS AGAINST THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

#### 1. Energy - Russia's most effective hybrid weapon

The declaration of independence on 27 August 1991 did not bring the Republic of Moldova energy independence, with painful economic and political effects. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and much of its power, Russia remained quite adept at weaponizing energy both in its self-professed post-Soviet realm, as well as in its relation with Europe.

After the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022, Chisinau had to face the effects of the misguided policy promoted over the past 30 years. Moldova preferred energy vassalage to Moscow, namely the comfort of Russian gas received at a subsidized price, instead of seeking alternative options that would diminish Russia's malign influence in the energy field. Russia has used Gazprom as a lever of political influence, discretionary sharing of gas in the former Soviet space at different prices. There were situations, such as in 1994, when the Republic of Moldova was paying USD 80/1000 cubic meters of gas, while other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States were getting much cheaper gas at USD 50/1000 cubic meters.<sup>111</sup>

All the while, Gazprom has been creating strategic economic connections in the Republic of Moldova, so that energy has been transformed into one of Moscow's most powerful hybrid and pressure weapons against the Republic of Moldova. The Moldovan-Russian joint-stock company Moldovagaz is one of the largest enterprises in the country, dealing with the transportation, supply and distribution of natural gas, and is the sole distributor of Russian gas in the Republic of Moldova, including Transnistria. Gazprom holds a majority stake in Moldovagaz, 50% plus one share.<sup>112</sup> Russia's dominance is best exemplified by the 11 out of 17 management positions being occupied by Gazprom employees.<sup>113</sup> In this way, Chisinau allowed Russia to have control over the entire gas distribution network, which accentuated Moldova's dependence on Russia, which was not only the sole supplier of gas, but also had a monopoly over the distribution network. The first important step in breaking this monopoly was

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<sup>111</sup> Nicolai Paholinițchii. "Gazprom asks Moldova to return a debt of \$700 million. Where did it come from? the amount and how things are in reality?", *Newsmaker.md*, available at: <https://newsmaker.md/ro/gazprom-cere-moldovei-restituirea-unei-datorii-de-700-mln-de-unde-s-a-luat-suma-si-cu-m-stau-lucrurile-in-realitate/>

<sup>112</sup> "Annual General Meeting of Shareholders of SA Moldovagaz", *Moldovagaz*, available at: <https://www.moldovagaz.md/rom/centrul-de-presa/comunicate-de-presa/adunarea-general-a-anuala-a-actionarilor-s-a-moldovagaz-1721>

<sup>113</sup> "Governing bodies", *Moldovagaz*, available at: <https://www.moldovagaz.md/rom/despre-companie/organele-de-conducere>

the construction of the Iasi-Ungheni gas pipeline in 2014, and then its continuation to Chisinau, a process completed in 2020, enabling Moldova to access Romanian gas. The pipeline is 150 km long and can cover all of Moldova's consumption of 1.5 billion cubic meters (excluding Transnistria), thanks to a Romanian investment of €150 million in the project.<sup>114</sup> Due to the lower price of Russian gas, the Republic of Moldova has not used this pipeline to at least partially offset imports from Russia, with the first major gas shipment of 1 million cubic meters delivered only on December 3, 2022,<sup>115</sup> after Gazprom drastically cut supplies to Moldova in October 2022 by 30%,<sup>116</sup> and in November by 56.5%.<sup>117</sup> This pipeline is also useful because it can bring gas from Azerbaijan or even liquefied gas from the US to Moldova, using Romania's various interconnection systems.<sup>118</sup> In the summer of 2022, the Romanian Commodities Exchange (BRM) announced that it had completed the procedures allowing the full operation of the competitive gas trading platform in the Republic of Moldova.<sup>119</sup> This allows the supply of natural gas for national consumption from the Romanian and European market.



Fig 5. The gas pipeline network through which Gazprom delivers gas to the Republic of Moldova  
Source: New Strategy Center

<sup>114</sup> "The Iasi-Chisinau gas pipeline, completed after 5 years and 150 million euros", *Mediafax*, available at: <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/gazoductul-iasi-chisinau-finalizat-dupa-5-ani-si-150-de-milioane-de-euro-19447434>

<sup>115</sup> "Premiere | Romania delivered the first gas transport to Moldova through the gas pipeline from Ungheni". *Radio Free Europe Romania*, available at: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/romania-da-gaze-moldovei/32160257.html>

<sup>116</sup> Eugen Uruşciuc, "Gazprom reduces deliveries to Moldova by 30%, from October 1 | Chisinau will cover the difference from reserves or new purchases", *Radio Free Europe Romania*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/gazprom-reduce-livr%C4%83rile-%C3%AEn-moldova-cu-30-de-la-1-octombrie-chi%C8%99in%C4%83ul-va-acoperi-diferen%C8%9Ba-din-rezerve-sau-achizi%C8%9Bii-noi/32060579.html>

<sup>117</sup> Adrian Tudor, "Gazprom reduces gas deliveries to the Republic of Moldova by 56.5%". *G4 Media*, available at: <https://www.g4media.ro/gazprom-reduce-cu-565-livrarile-de-gaz-catre-republica-moldova-in-plus-gazprom-a-acuz-at-ucraina-ca-ar-fura-din-gazul-destinat-republicii-moldova-lucru-negat-de-kiiev.html>

<sup>118</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>119</sup> "Moldovan operators can buy natural gas on the Romanian Commodity Exchange", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/31948520.html>

The Russian gas blackmailing of Moldova could end in 2027, when Romania will start extracting gas from its most prolific Black Sea gas field, Neptun Deep. The consortium of OMV Petrom and Romgaz, in which Romania has a 60% stake, will be making the biggest investment in Romania's energy sector in the last 30 years, worth more than €4bn. Neptun Deep has an estimated capacity of 100 billion cubic meters of gas,<sup>120</sup> turning Romania in 2027 the largest gas producer in the European Union and the fourth largest in Europe, after Russia, Norway and Great Britain.<sup>121</sup> Romania will thus not only be able to ensure its full domestic consumption, but also to have a consistent influence in the region, becoming an energy security provider for countries dependent on Russian gas. Romania will be able to remove the Republic of Moldova completely from Gazprom's influence, thanks to international prices which are expected to moderate by 2027,<sup>122</sup> and thus the geopolitical implications of Black Sea gas reserves are really important for the whole region.

Dependence on Russian gas has also caused Moldova to incur large debts compared to its financial possibilities. Gazprom claims debts of \$700 million for Moldovagaz, where it is also the majority shareholder, but the authorities in Chisinau dispute the credibility of this amount.<sup>123</sup> The parties have agreed to carry out an international audit, which is being carried out by specialist companies from Norway and the UK, and the results are awaited. However, it is unknown whether Gazprom will recognise the final audit report.<sup>124</sup> The Court of Accounts of the Republic of Moldova carried out an audit of Moldovagaz and found in its report numerous irregularities relating to the process of purchasing goods, fictitious debts to Gazprom, exaggerated costs for the construction of the new headquarters (which cost double the initial estimate), as well as invoices disappearing from the accounts. At the beginning of 2023, the National Anti-Corruption Centre informed the Court of Auditors that it had launched a series of investigations following the report.<sup>125</sup> In addition to this debt of the Republic of Moldova to

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<sup>120</sup> "OMV Petrom and Romgaz submitted the declaration of commerciality for the exploitation of gas from Neptun Deep, Black Sea". *PRO TV*, available at: <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/omv-petrom-si-romgaz-au-depus-declaratia-de-comercialitate-pentru-exploatarea-gazelor-din-neptun-deep-marea-neagra.html>

<sup>121</sup> "How the Snake Island matters in the context of the 2022 war in Ukraine? An assessment of the strategic importance of the most disputed island of the Russian-Ukrainian War November 2022", *New Strategy Center*, available at: <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NSC-NUPI-How-the-Snake-Island-matters-in-the-context-of-the-2022-war-in-Ukraine.pdf>

<sup>122</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>123</sup> Nicolai Paholinițchii, "Gazprom asks Moldova to return a debt of \$700 million. Where did the amount come from and how are things in reality?", *Newsmaker*, available at: <https://newsmaker.md/ro/gazprom-cere-moldovei-restituirea-unei-datorii-de-700-mln-de-unde-s-a-luat-suma-si-cu-m-stau-lucrurile-in-realitate/>

<sup>124</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>125</sup> Vitalie Călugăreanu, "Anti-corruption officers are investigating corruption at Moldovagaz", *Deutsche Welle*, available at: <https://www.dw.com/ro/ofici-antikorup%C8%9Berii-anticorup%C8%9Bie-investigheaz%C4%83-corup%C8%9Bia-de-la-moldovagaz/a-64595176>

Gazprom, there is the huge volume of gas supplied free of charge to Transnistria also through Moldovagaz, through which Russia has subsidized the separatist regime since its creation. Tiraspol does not pay for the gas it consumes, which has allowed it to deliver cheap electricity to Moldova and to export cement or metallurgical products, while the revenues generated by the energy sector are going directly into the Transnistrian economy and the state budget.<sup>126</sup> Basically, Transnistria's entire economic model is based on not paying for Russian gas.<sup>127</sup> As of September 30, 2021, Gazprom's reports mentioned Moldovagaz's debt of USD 8.2 billion for deliveries for the entire territory of the Republic of Moldova, including the breakaway region of Transnistria.<sup>128</sup>

Rising gas prices in Europe, generated by Russia as a form of political pressure and destabilization of the European Union, have also greatly affected the Republic of Moldova, bringing it to the brink of collapse. In one year, gas prices have increased sevenfold, from 4 to 29 Moldovan lei per cubic meter of gas,<sup>129</sup> with significant political repercussions beyond the energy realm. The political fallout created a societal spillover through incitement by pro-Russian politicians and their controlled TV channels to organize protests against the pro-European government in the wake of the energy crisis.<sup>130</sup> Russia's monopoly over the energy complex has ingrained in the local mentality the propagandist narrative that Moldova cannot manage without Russia in terms of energy and should return to the negotiating table with the Kremlin to stop the crisis. Energy is being used by Russia as a political weapon and a tool to generate social tensions and economic instability in order to undermine Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union.

Against this backdrop of multiple crises, the government in Chisinau has launched a series of initiatives, one of the most important of which is the establishment of the Energy Vulnerability Reduction Fund to provide state compensation to the citizens for the consumption of natural gas, heat and electricity.<sup>131</sup> Andrei Spînu, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of

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<sup>126</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>127</sup> Denis Dermenji. "Who will pay for Transnistria's gas? What would happen if no one would assume this role?". *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cine-va-pli-C4%83ti-pentru-gazele-transnistriei-ce-s-ar-%C3%AEnt%C3%A2mpla-dac%C4%83-nimeni-nu-%C8%99i-va-asuma-acest-rol-/32162556.html>

<sup>128</sup> Eugen Uruşciuc, "Sergiu Tofilat: Right Bank gas debt was artificially increased by Gazprom by at least USD 958 million.", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/31989169.html>

<sup>129</sup> Veronica Fetco, "We will pay over 29 lei for a cubic meter of natural gas. The new tariff comes into force from October 1", *Ziarul de Gardă*, available at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-economice/vom-achita-pestea-29-de-lei-pentru-un-metru-cub-de-gaze-naturale-noul-tarif-intra-in-vigoare-de-la-1-octombrie/>

<sup>130</sup> Iulian Moşneagu, "Massive protest in Moldova. Thousands of people have called for the resignation of the pro-Western government amid the energy crisis", *Mediafax*, available at: <https://www.mediafax.ro/politic/protest-masiv-in-moldova-mii-de-persoane-au-cerut-demisia-guvernului-pro-occident-21189874>

<sup>131</sup> "The Energy Vulnerability Reduction Fund is to be created in the Republic of Moldova", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at:

Infrastructure and Regional Development, the ministry in charge of energy, also said that by 2025, the Republic of Moldova will have two cogeneration thermal power plants with a capacity of 55 MW/h of electricity and 43 Gcal/h.<sup>132</sup> The government in Chisinau is working with the Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development and USAID to implement a new energy strategy with targets up to 2050.<sup>133</sup>

An additional vulnerability for the Republic of Moldova is the legacy of the Soviet-era interconnection with the Ukrainian electricity transmission grid, which means that the risk of automatic disconnection, in the event of the installations going into emergency mode, remains present, which happened several times when the Ukrainian energy infrastructure in the Odessa region was bombed by the Russians in November-December 2022.<sup>134</sup>

There are currently seven 330 kV and 11 110 kV power lines crossing the border with Ukraine, used for power exchanges. There is only one 400 kV interconnection line with Romania, with sections also crossing Ukrainian territory and reaching Chisinau after passing through Transnistria. The Moldovan government has started in 2022 the construction of a new 400kV line between Vulcanesti and Chisinau, to be completed in 2025, avoiding the crossing through Ukraine and Transnistria, with a total length of 158 km, as well as the construction of a back-to-back high-voltage direct current (HVDC) station at Vulcanesti, to enable the connection between the power system of the Republic of Moldova, the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E) and the Integrated Power System/United Power System (IPS/UPS). The investment is part of a larger €260 million project to interconnect the Republic of Moldova with Romania, financed by the European Union and several international financial institutions.<sup>135</sup>

An important step towards European energy integration was the successful synchronization of the electricity grids of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine with the European ones on March 16, 2022, which ensured the stability of the national electricity systems and the continuity of

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<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/%C3%AEn-r-moldova-urmeaz%C4%83-s%C4%83-fie-creat-fondul-de-reducer-e-a-vulnerabilit%C4%83%C8%9Bii-energetice/31946152.html>

<sup>132</sup> Mihaela Conovali, "By 2025, the Republic of Moldova will have two thermoelectric cogeneration plants", *Newsmaker*, available at:

<https://newsmaker.md/ro/spinu-pana-in-2025-moldova-va-avea-doua-centrale-termoelectrice-de-cogenerare/#:~:text=P%C3%A2n%C4%83%20%C3%AEn%202025%2C%20Republica%20Moldova,construc%C8%9Bia%20centralelor%20electrice%20de%20cogenerare>.

<sup>133</sup> "Moldova is rethinking its Energy Strategy, with the support of USAID", *Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development*, available at:

<https://midr.gov.md/noutati/moldova-isi-regandeste-strategia-energetica-cu-suportul-usaid>

<sup>134</sup> "Why did the light go out in the Republic of Moldova?", *Moldstreet*, available at:

<https://www.mold-street.com/?go=news&n=15017>

<sup>135</sup> "THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE 400 KV OVERHEAD ELECTRIC LINE VULCANEȘTI-CHISINAU AND THE BACK-TO-BACK VULCANEȘTI STATION WILL BE DECLARED A PUBLIC UTILITY OF NATIONAL INTEREST", *Government of the Republic of Moldova*, available at:

<https://www.gov.md/ro/content/constructia-linii-electrice-aeriene-400-kv-vulcanesti-chisinau-si-statiei-back-back>

services to Ukrainian and Moldovan consumers,<sup>136</sup> in spite of Russian hacking attacks on Romania's and Moldova's energy grid.<sup>137</sup>



Fig. 6 The electricity transmission network of the Republic of Moldova  
Source: [Moldelectrica](https://moldelectrica.md/)

This interconnection of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova with the European network is, however, takes the form of a single entity and not as two independent networks. The Republic of Moldova is currently unable to disconnect itself from the Ukrainian system in order to integrate into the Romanian system, due to insufficient connections with Romania. The construction of the new high-voltage overhead power line between Vulcanesti and Chisinau will reduce the almost total dependence on the Ukrainian energy transmission system and will lay the foundations for the connection of the Romanian electricity system to the Moldovan one.<sup>138</sup>

Although it is clear that reducing Moldova's energy dependence on Russia implies closer cooperation with Romania and, by extension, the European Union, progress regarding the interconnection between the two countries has been slow. Out of the three power lines proposed by Romania to Moldova, only one has been built, the 110kV Gotești-Fălciu line. As mentioned, the Chisinau-Vulcanesti line connecting to Romania at Isaccea is under construction on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, and the third proposed line, the 400kV

<sup>136</sup> "The electrical grids of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have been successfully synchronized with the EU electrical grids". *Calea Europeană*, available at: <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/retelele-electrice-din-r-moldova-si-ucraina-au-fost-sincronizate-cu-succes-la-retelele-electrice-din-ue/>

<sup>137</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>138</sup> "When will the construction of the 400 kV Vulcanesti-Chisinau power line begin? Pillars, tested in India". *Moldstreet*, available at: <https://www.mold-street.com/?qo=news&n=15188>

line between Suceava and Balti, has been included in the development strategies of the two countries since 2004, but work has not started. This line is currently scheduled for completion in 2031.<sup>139</sup> One of the reasons for these delays is also the fact that over the years Romania has had difficulties competing on the energy market with Transnistria, which receives gas from Russia without paying for it and produces electricity at a dumping price.<sup>140</sup> This is another aspect of the hybrid war orchestrated by Moscow, which has eliminated or delayed any competitive project that could have diminished its influence in the Republic of Moldova, through criteria of economic viability, distorted, however, by the lack of the cost of gas in the final price of electricity.

Another objective on the bilateral agenda of the authorities in Bucharest and Chisinau is the creation of a common energy market between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, and discussions are underway for the relevant Romanian authority (the Romanian electricity and natural gas market operator - OPCOM) to become the electricity market operator in the Republic of Moldova in the coming period.<sup>141</sup> In August 2022, the state-owned electricity transmission operators of the Republic of Moldova and Romania, Moldelectrica and Transelectrica, signed a commercial agreement for electricity transactions, which will allow electricity to be procured from Romania.<sup>142</sup> The deepening of relations between energy companies in Romania and the Republic of Moldova will facilitate the above-mentioned future energy projects and could contribute to reducing the completion deadlines.

Lack of funds, but especially of political will in the Republic of Moldova, bureaucracy in Romania, as well as unfair competition from Tiraspol, have led to a precarious interconnection between Moldova and Romania. It is only now, in the context of the major energy crisis and the war in Ukraine, that all these projects that have been on hold for years are being accelerated. As long as almost all of the Republic of Moldova's electricity transmission lines cross Ukrainian territory, the country remains vulnerable to Russian bombing of Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Moscow-generated energy crisis brought the unstable situation of the Moldovan energy complex to the attention of the West, so that from the first months of the war, Chisinau has benefited from EU and US aid.

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<sup>139</sup> "An electric line in 30 years: why energy interconnection projects are realized slowly". *Moldstreet*, available at: <https://www.mold-street.com/?go=news&n=15448>

<sup>140</sup> "Russia's octopus and control over energy targets in the Republic of Moldova", *Anticoruptie.md*, available at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/investigatii/economic/caracatita-rusiei-si-controlul-asupra-obiectivelor-energetice-din-republica-moldova>

<sup>141</sup> "The OPCOM energy platform could expand in the Republic of Moldova.", *Digi24*, available at: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/economie/digi-economic/platforma-de-energie-opcom-s-ar-putea-extinde-in-republica-moldova-2229947>

<sup>142</sup> "Suppliers from the Republic of Moldova will be able to buy electricity from Romania", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/furnizorii-din-r-moldova-vor-putea-cump%C4%83ra-energie-electric%C4%83-din-rom%C3%A2nia-/31984967.html>

The Republic of Moldova benefits from US support through several projects. In March 2022, the USAID-managed Moldova Energy Security Activity (MESA) project was launched, under which Chisinau received financial support to reduce its dependence on Russian markets.<sup>143</sup> In 2022, the US has decided to support Moldova's energy sector with about \$155 million. In April 2022, the US offered Chisinau \$50 million to strengthen democracy and reduce dependence on Russian markets.<sup>144</sup> In August, the Americans provided \$63 million to Moldova through USAID to support the country's multiple crises following Russia's invasion of Ukraine<sup>145</sup>, and in December the US ambassador in Chisinau, Kent D. Logsdon, announced that the US would provide \$42 million in financial assistance for "Moldova's energy future".<sup>146</sup> March 2023 marked the announcement of the largest ever US aid package for energy sector assistance, worth USD 300 million.<sup>147</sup>

In 2022, the European Union has provided the Republic of Moldova with approximately €340 million in the form of €75 million in grants as budget support to respond to the energy crisis,<sup>148</sup> a €15 million grant for energy efficiency in several institutions<sup>149</sup> and a €250 million support package for the purchase of gas and compensation of high energy costs for the population.<sup>150</sup>

The Soviet legacy of interconnecting electricity and gas transmission systems only to the east and Chisinau's misguided energy policies that favored a clientelistic relationship with Gazprom

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<sup>143</sup> "USAID will support the Republic of Moldova in the consolidation and diversification of the energy sector", available at: <https://md.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/210/MESA-Press-Release-RO.pdf>

<sup>144</sup> "Samantha Power: 'This support is to help your country meet the challenges'", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/samantha-power-acest-spriijn-este-pentru-a-ajuta-%C8%9B%C4%83-s%C4%83-fac%C4%83-fa%C8%9B%C4%83-provoc%C4%83rilor-/31789180.html>

<sup>145</sup> "America offers 63 million dollars to the Republic of Moldova through USAID", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/america-ofer%C4%83-63-de-milioane-de-dolari-r-moldova-prin-intermediul-usaid/31992942.html>

<sup>146</sup> "The USA offers another 42 million dollars for the energy security of the Republic of Moldova", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/sua-ofer%C4%83-%C3%AEnc%C4%83-42-milioane-de-dolari-pentru-securitate-energetic%C4%83-a-r-moldova-/32176092.html>

<sup>147</sup> Ion Gaidău, "The White House: Moscow is trying to destabilize the Republic of Moldova to install a pro-Russian government in Chisinau". *Adevărul*, available at: <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/republica-moldova/casa-alba-moscova-incearca-sa-destabilizeze-2249138.html>

<sup>148</sup> "Moldova receives another 75 million euros from the EU to alleviate the energy crisis", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/moldova-prime%C8%99te-de-la-ue-%C3%AEnc%C4%83-75-de-milioane-de-euro-pentru-atenuarea-crizei-energetice-/31955106.html>

<sup>149</sup> Daniela Davidov, "The Republic of Moldova receives 15 million euros from the EU to make public institutions in the country more energy efficient", *Cotidianul*, available at: <https://cotidianul.md/2022/09/13/republica-moldova-primeste-de-la-ue-15-milioane-de-euro-pentru-a-eficientiza-energetic-institutii-publice-din-tara/>

<sup>150</sup> "The European Union offers the Republic of Moldova new aid for energy", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/uniunea-european%C4%83-ofer%C4%83-republicii-moldova-noi-ajutoare-pentru-energie-/32123739.html>

have kept Moldova in Russia's energy sphere of influence. Russian primacy in the energy sector, the accumulation of significant debts, which created additional leverage for blackmail and political pressure from the Kremlin against Chisinau, as well as Russian control of the main energy companies, led to the crisis that Moldova is now facing, with profound political, social and economic implications. The Republic of Moldova is managing the crisis and trying to prevent an economic and social collapse only thanks to massive Western aid, with Romania playing a key role in this effort. The Republic of Moldova needs the completion of energy projects with Romania, a European energy perspective and the modernisation of its infrastructure with the help of the EU and the US in order to fully break away from dependence on Russia. It is a long process, which depends mainly on political fluctuations in Chisinau and the political will of the leaders here, but which will ultimately lead to the disappearance of the most effective instrument of control, blackmail and pressure which Russia has so skilfully created and developed in its relations with the Republic of Moldova: energy dependence. Russia's energy relationship with the Republic of Moldova is a lesson we must all learn: cheap Russian gas is a mercantile euphemism for the loss of one's freedom.

## 2. Russia's commercial influence in the Republic of Moldova

Russia's commercial influence is declining, ranking 2nd in exports in the Republic of Moldova in 2022 after Romania, largely due to Chisinau's energy dependence, and only 6th in terms of markets for Moldova's export products, surpassed by Romania, Ukraine, Italy, Turkey and Germany.<sup>151</sup>

Figura 11. Structura importurilor, în ianuarie - octombrie 2017-2022, pe principalele țări de origine a mărfurilor (%)

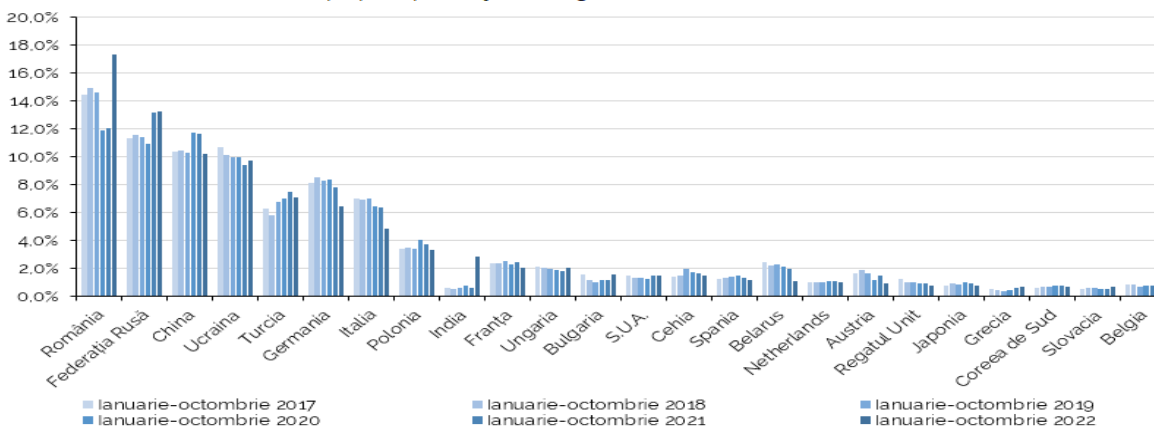


Fig 7. National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. International trade in goods of the Republic of Moldova in August and January-August 2022  
<https://old.statistica.md/print.php?l=ro&idc=168&id=7568>

<sup>151</sup> "International trade in goods of the Republic of Moldova in October and January-October 2022". *Statistica.gov*, available at: [https://statistica.gov.md/ro/comertul-international-cu-marfuri-al-republicii-moldova-in-luna-octombrie-si-in--9539\\_60169.html](https://statistica.gov.md/ro/comertul-international-cu-marfuri-al-republicii-moldova-in-luna-octombrie-si-in--9539_60169.html)

Figura 5. Structura exporturilor, în ianuarie - octombrie 2017-2022, pe principalele țări de destinație a mărfurilor (%)

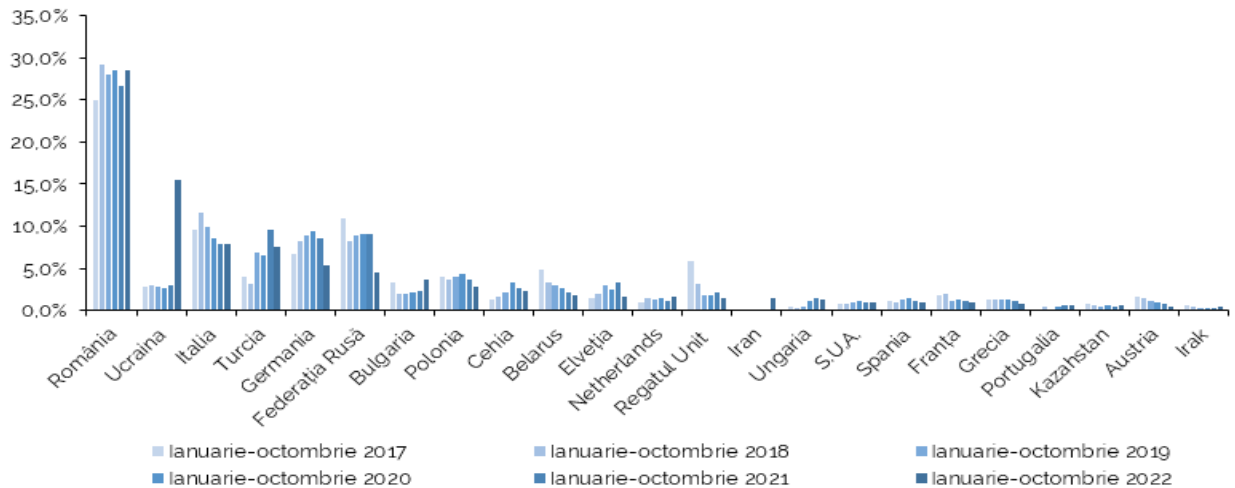


Fig 8. National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. Moldovan export structure, 2017-2022, based on destination countries. <https://old.statistica.md/print.php?l=ro&idc=168&id=7568>

Russia has often used the blocking of its market for Moldovan products, especially agricultural products, as retaliation when the authorities in Chisinau were not perceived as sufficiently docile towards Moscow. Economic pressure was thus one of the Kremlin's hybrid instruments of force, as it tried to gain political benefits using economic blackmail. A landmark year was 2014, when different embargoes were imposed, the first against the wine industry, which accounts for a significant percentage of Moldova's GDP, followed by a partial embargo on pork and one on Moldovan fruit and vegetables. The last two were applied just two months before the Free Trade Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union.<sup>152</sup> A more recent incident occurred in 2022, when Russia banned vegetable and fruit imports from Moldova for sanitary reasons, a measure taken to soften Chisinau's position in its negotiations with Gazprom.<sup>153</sup> Another element of Russia's trade policy towards the Republic of Moldova is the discretionary use of one-off facilities granted to certain companies in geographical areas where pro-Russian parties have a stronger influence. In the autumn of 2023, Russian phytosanitary authorities offered special exemptions for producers in Orhei, where the influence

<sup>152</sup> Răzvan Diaconu, "Russia's economic revenge against the Republic of Moldova: Four embargoes in one year". *Cursdeguvernare.ro*, available at: <https://cursdeguvernare.ro/razbunarea-economica-a-rusiei-impotriva-republicii-moldova-patru-embargouri-intr-un-an.html>

<sup>153</sup> Alexandra Coșlea, "Russia bans imports of vegetables and fruits from the Republic of Moldova". *Hotnews.ro*, available at: <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-international-25725608-rusia-interzice-importurile-legume-fructe-din-republica-moldova.html>

of pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor is strong,<sup>154</sup> accused in Moldova of corruption and fled to Israel, a financier of the anti-government protests that take place almost weekly in Chisinau.

Russian state-owned and private companies have aimed to gain control of strategic points of the young state's economy, such as the energy sector, the company MOLDOVAGAZ, where Gazprom is the majority shareholder, controlling the gas distribution network built during the Soviet period, or transport infrastructure such as the Chisinau international airport. This was commissioned by the Chisinau government in 2013 to a Russian company, which has not met its investment obligations. The conditions that disadvantaged the state opened the way to investigations that eventually led to the termination of the contract in court, after a long series of lawsuits, and the airport will return to state ownership in the summer of 2023.<sup>155</sup> The same Russian businessman, Andrey Goncharenko, who controlled the Chisinau airport, was also the beneficiary of the privatization of Air Moldova in October 2018 for MDL 50 million, equivalent to USD 6.2 million.<sup>156</sup>

Smuggling from Transnistria has been another illegal source of income, nourishing corrupt politicians on both sides of the Dniester River for years, financing election campaigns in both Moldova and Transnistria, and helping Russian-controlled politicians stay in power.<sup>157</sup> Transnistria has been one of the centers of illegal trafficking in Europe, which has severely damaged both Moldova's state budget and its reputation, as arms, among other goods, have been entering and transiting the country uncontrolled for at least 25 years.<sup>158</sup> This large-scale illegal trafficking was also made possible by the complicity of Ukraine, Transnistria's eastern neighbor. Kyiv changed its attitude after its relations with Moscow deteriorated following the annexation of Crimea, leading to increased cooperation with Moldova and the current "sealing" of the border with Transnistria, forcing Tiraspol to negotiate any customs issue directly with Chisinau.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> "How Russia divides the agricultural sector in the Republic of Moldova with the help of the fugitive Ilan Șor: Moscow allows export to the Russian market only for farmers registered in Orhei". *G4Media*, available at:

<https://www.g4media.ro/cum-dezbina-rusia-sectorul-agricol-din-republica-moldova-cu-ajutorul-fugarului-ilan-sor-moscova-permite-exportul-pe-piata-rusa-doar-pentru-fermierii-inregistrati-in-orhei-fieful-interlopului.html>

<sup>155</sup> "Chisinau International Airport will return to state management in no more than 180 days. How much money could the state return to the company "Avia Invest" for the "investments" it made in 7 years". *Ziarul de Gardă*, available at:

<https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/aeroportul-international-chisinau-va-reveni-in-gestiunea-statului-in-cel-mult-1-80-de-zile-cati-bani-ar-putea-intoarce-statul-companiei-avia-invest-pentru-investitiile-pe-care-le-a-facut-in-7-ani/>

<sup>156</sup> "The new owner of Chisinau Airport, also involved in the privatization of AIR Moldova, during the Filip Government". *Cotidianul.md*, available at:

<https://cotidianul.md/2019/12/28/noul-proprietar-al-aeroportului-chisinau-implicat-si-in-privatizarea-air-moldova-pe-timpul-guvernului-filip/>

<sup>157</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

<sup>158</sup> Ion Mardarovici. "NATO and the security in the Eastern countries during transition times". *NATO Research Fellowships programme*, 2002, p. 16.

<sup>159</sup> Nikolai Kuzmin, "Isolated Transnistria Shaken by Tremors of War in Nearby Ukraine", *Balkan Insight*, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/28/isolated-transnistria-shaken-by-tremors-of-war-in-nearby-ukraine/>

The presence of Russians in Moldova's nerve centers was made in parallel with the rejection, more overt or discreetly, of Romanian capital, one of Moscow's obsessions being to prevent any more consistent influence of Romania in the Moldovan economy. The acquisition of 66% of Victoriabank shares by Banca Transilvania<sup>160</sup> Romania's largest bank with Romanian capital, was supposed to be a success of the clean-up operation of the banking sector in the Republic of Moldova, badly damaged after the billion-dollar theft scandal of 2014, when oligarchs and politicians embezzled the banking system. The current situation of Banca Transilvania in the Republic of Moldova, majority shareholder together with the EBRD in Victoriabank (the 4th largest bank in Moldova) does not encourage large private Romanian investments, becoming a negative example for the bilateral relationship between Romania and the Republic of Moldova.<sup>161</sup>

### 3. Russia's Political Influence

#### ***Pro Russian parties***

The most evident form of Russian influence is through pro-Russian parties. The main vectors of political influence have been the Party of Communists and the Party of Socialists, which have held at different points in time an important role on the political scene for the last 20 years, until the early elections in 2021, when their electoral alliance was overwhelmingly defeated by the pro-European PAS (Action and Solidarity Party).<sup>162</sup> Another pro-Russian party that passed the 5% threshold is the "Shor" party, led by Ilan Shor, which has its electoral base in Orhei, a Russian-speaking area.

A landmark of the Kremlin's political influence was the rise of the Communist Party to power, namely Vladimir Voronin's tenure as president (between 2001 and 2009). It was shocking at the time in the West for a communist party to win elections and come to power by democratic means. Former Minister of Internal Affairs during the Soviet period (1989-1990),<sup>163</sup> Voronin

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<sup>160</sup> Sabina Fati, "Riscul anchetei de la Victoriabank. Ce spune principalul acționar, Banca Transilvania din România". *Radio Europa Liberă Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/riscul-anchetei-de-la-victoriabank-ce-spune-principalul-ac%C8%9Bionar-banca-transilvania-din-rom%C3%A2nia/30783952.html>

<sup>161</sup> The Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Moldova opened a criminal case against the bank and in 2020 placed an insurance seizure on assets of 100 million euros of Victoriabank, in the case of the theft of one billion euros, bank fraud that took place in 2014, although Banca Transilvania and EBRD took over the bank in 2018. There is no progress in the investigation, which prevents the bank from continuing to invest and expand on the banking market in the Republic of Moldova.

<sup>162</sup> "The Party of Socialists and the Party of Communists announced the formation of a permanent "political bloc". *Radio Europa Liberă Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/partidul-sociali%C8%99tilor-%C8%99i-partidul-comuni%C8%99tilor-au-anun%C8%9Bat-formarea-unui-bloc-politic-permanent/31706439.html>

<sup>163</sup> "Profile: Vladimir Voronin", *Rise.md*, available at:

pursued a pro-Russian policy, especially in his first years as president. He supported integration into the Russia-Belarus State Union and had vehemently anti-Western statements, saying that Moldova should resist Europe as Cuba resists the American continent.<sup>164</sup> In 2003, the Russian Federation proposed a plan to resolve the Transnistrian conflict, the so-called Kozak Memorandum, named after the deputy head of the presidential administration, Dmitry Kozak, who promoted the document. The plan proposed an asymmetric federation of Moldova, Transnistria and Gagauzia, with a bicameral parliament, in which the Senate would consist of 13 representatives from Moldova, 9 from Transnistria and 4 from Gagauzia, with the Senate validating any draft laws. Russian troops were to stay on Moldovan territory until 2023. The state language would have been "Moldovan" and Russian would have become the official language throughout the federation, without specifying the difference between "state language" and "official language".<sup>165</sup> The proposal triggered a wave of protests in Chisinau and from the opposition, as it was seen as an attack on Moldova's sovereignty, which would have led to the federalisation of the country. After initially backing the memorandum, Voronin radically changed his position due to the protests and postponed signing the document.<sup>166</sup>



Fig 9. Demonstrations against the Kozak Memorandum - January 2003  
Source: Radio Moldova

With the loss of influence of the Party of Communists, especially after 2009, the Kremlin's next vector would be Igor Dodon, President of Moldova between 2016 and 2020, leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM). He has restarted the Chisinau-Moscow dialogue, fully assuming the pro-Russian stance, after a period of about five years of

<https://profiles.rise.md/profile.php?id=190203105605&lang=rom>

<sup>164</sup> Cristian Cantir, Ryan Kennedy. "Balancing on the Shoulders of Giants: Moldova's Foreign Policy toward Russia and the European Union". *Foreign Policy Analysis* 11, nr. 4 (2015): 397-416, p. 402-403.

<sup>165</sup> Alexandru Cozer. "Who is Dmitri Kozak and what was his plan, which brought tens of thousands of Moldovans to the streets", *Cotidianul.md*, available at:

<https://cotidianul.md/2019/05/30/cine-este-dmitri-kozak-si-ce-prevedea-planul-sau-care-a-scos-zeci-de-mii-de-moldoveni-in-strada/>

<sup>166</sup> Valentina Basiul. "2003: The rejection of the Kozak plan". *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/27916820.html>

governments that had adopted a more pro-European line. As proof, Dodon traveled to Moscow at least 10 times in 2016 alone.<sup>167</sup> It also supported integration into the Moscow-led international organizations such as the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union<sup>168</sup> and seeking observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>169</sup> He showed his opposition to Moldova's European integration by removing the EU flag from the presidential administration in Chisinau.<sup>170</sup> Dodon is involved in corruption scandals, as allegations emerged that he received €1.5 million from a Bahamian offshore company connected to the Russian Federation to finance his presidential campaign.<sup>171</sup> In 2020, a video emerged in which Dodon received a bag of money directly from oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, which led to the opening of a criminal case in which he is accused of bribery, treason and accepting the financing of a political party by a criminal organization. Dodon is currently banned from leaving Moldova.<sup>172</sup> These examples show not only the total dependence of the socialist leader on Moscow, but also the immense vulnerability of the state, the level of political influence that could be exercised by Russia being unlimited.

Russia is now looking for new politicians willing to support its interests, most likely by encouraging options from the center of the political spectrum, which could take both the votes of the traditional pro-Russian electorate and some of the votes of those who are unhappy with the country's economic situation. The current mayor of Chisinau, Ion Ceban, a former member of the Party of Communists and the Socialist Party, created his own party in December 2022, the National Alternative Movement (MAN), in the center. Several reports in the Chisinau press have pointed to Ceban's connections with an FSB agent, Yurii Gudilin, when Ceban was a member of the Socialist Party,<sup>173</sup> and the US Treasury said he had also received help from the same agent in setting up the MAN party, with the Kremlin behind the operation.<sup>174</sup>

Ceban is trying to create an image of a balanced politician, focusing more on the profile of a good manager of the capital's problems, and even wishing to find, through multiple visits to

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<sup>167</sup> "Profile: Igor Dodon", *Rise.md*, available at: <https://profiles.rise.md/profile.php?id=190127114043&lang=rom>

<sup>168</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>169</sup> Nicole Bodishteanu. "Republic of Moldova and its eurasian track of policy: The impact of internal & external factors on the foreign policy formation". *Higher School of Economics Research Paper*, p. 12, available at: <https://wp.hse.ru/data/2020/12/01/1353755813/39IR2020.pdf>

<sup>170</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>171</sup> "Dodon's money from the Bahamas", *Rise Moldova*, available at: <https://www.rise.md/articol/banii-lui-dodon-din-bahamas/?lang=ro>

<sup>172</sup> "Republic of Moldova: Former President Igor Dodon is prohibited from leaving the country for another 60 days". *Agerpres*, available at: <https://www.agerpres.ro/politic-ex/2023/01/16/republica-moldova-fostul-presedinte-igor-dodon-are-interdictie-de-a-parasi-tara-inca-60-de-zile--1044278>

<sup>173</sup> "Ion Ceban, about his relationship with the FSB agent, Iurii Gudilin: "He connected us with a very large company, specialized in different fields"". *PROTV Chişinău*, available at: <https://protv.md/actualitate/ion-ceban-despre-relatia-sa-cu-agentul-fsb-iurii-gudilin-dumnealui-ne-a-facut-conexiuni-ea-cu-o-companie-foarte-mare-specializat-pe-diferite-domenii---2635791.html>

<sup>174</sup> "The mayor of the capital, Ion Ceban - accused by the USA that his party, the National Alternative Movement, was coordinated and financed by the Kremlin". *PRO TV Chişinău*, available at: <https://protv.md/actualitate/primarul-capitalei-ion-ceban-acuzat-de-sua-ca-partidul-sau-miscarea-alternativa-nation-ala-ar-fi-coordonat-si-finantat-de-kremlin---2630250.html>

Romania, partners for political dialogue in order to show a pro-European openness.<sup>175</sup> He embodies a more discreet Kremlin approach that no longer relies on aggressive anti-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric. Some analysts believe that donning the pro-European mantle makes it much easier to sabotage Moldova's Europeanisation policies.<sup>176</sup>

Although it no longer holds all the levers in Moldova, Russia is trying to build political alternatives for the upcoming local elections in autumn 2023 and presidential elections in November 2024 and to speculate on the difficult economic situation in Moldova. At the same time, however, it is trying to provoke a political crisis earlier in order to trigger early elections, using street pressure and social unrest or even a coup d'état. Thus, in February 2023, President Maia Sandu stated that she had been informed by Ukraine's intelligence services that Russia was preparing violent actions, using diversionary groups with military training, amid anti-government protests, to overthrow the legitimate power in Chisinau. Citizens of Russia, Belarus, Montenegro and Serbia were to be involved in such actions, which were to be joined by elements of criminal groups.<sup>177</sup> In just one week, in March 2023, the Moldovan authorities refused entry into the country to 182 foreign citizens, including a Russian citizen, a member of the Wagner paramilitary group, stopped at Chisinau airport.<sup>178</sup>

The deterioration of the security situation and Moscow's hybrid actions have forced Moldova to expand its cooperation with Western partners, first and foremost with Romania, in order to better counter these phenomena. During a visit to Chisinau on 23 March 2023, Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă stated that "the war in Ukraine, its major implications for the Republic of Moldova, as well as the increasingly aggressive destabilizing actions supported by Russia and hostile local interests, all call for close and constant coordination between our countries". One of the concrete initiatives is the creation of a European Union sanctions regime to counter destabilizing actions against Moldova. "We are continuing our efforts in this direction and we will work closely with the government in Chisinau, the EU Member States and the European institutions to put this objective into practice", said the Romanian Prime Minister after the meeting with his counterpart in Chisinau, Dorin Recean.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> "Presshub.ro: The mayor of Chisinau, received with honors by important Romanian politicians, financed by the Kremlin for the destabilization of Moldova". *Deutsche Welle*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/presshubro-primarul-chi%C8%99in%C4%83ului-primit-cu-onoruri-de-politicieni-importan%C8%9Bi-din-rom%C3%A2nia-finan%C8%9Bat-de-kremlin-pentru-destabilizarea-moldovei/a-63578516>

<sup>176</sup> Sorin Ioniță, "Rotative in Chisinau: who makes Moscow's games and what role does Romania play in the landscape". *Contributors.ro*, available at:

<https://www.contributors.ro/rotativa-la-chisinau-cine-face-jocurile-moscovei-si-ce-rol-joaca-romania-in-peisaj/>

<sup>177</sup> "Maia Sandu: Russia is preparing a coup in Moldova. "Military-trained saboteurs" will be sent to take hostages," *Digi24*, available at:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/maia-sandu-rusia-se-pregateste-sa-trimita-diversionisti-cu-pregatire-militara-cam-uflati-in-civili-sa-atace-institutiile-rep-moldova-2250027>

<sup>178</sup> "A Wagner mercenary tried to enter the Republic of Moldova. Pressure on the pro-Western government is intensifying". *Ziare.com*, available at:

<https://ziare.com/mercenar/mercenar-wagner-oprit-intrare-republica-moldova-1793560>

<sup>179</sup> "Prime Minister Nicolae-Ionel Ciucă visit to the Republic of Moldova", *Gov.ro*, available at:

<https://gov.ro/ro/stiri/vizita-premierului-nicolae-ionel-ciuca-in-republica-moldova>

## ***The influence of the oligarchs***

Another lever of Russian influence is represented by the oligarchs, who have had the financial and political capacity to undermine the Moldovan authorities and sabotage the process of Europeanisation and reform in the country. The most powerful oligarchs are Vladimir Plahotniuc and Ilan Șor. Plahotniuc has owned companies in oil, media, banking and real estate domains<sup>180</sup> and Șor inherited a chain of duty-free shops and is also active in real estate.<sup>181</sup> A veritable media empire was created by oligarchs to influence elections and the state of mind of the population, these publications being banned by the current authorities, because they repeatedly violated the provisions of the Broadcasting Services Code and presented "biased and manipulative news about the war in Ukraine and openly propagandized Russian aggression".<sup>182</sup> Both have controlled parliamentary parties, with the Șor Party also present in the current Parliament and Șor retaining his seat as a member of parliament, even though in exile.

The collaboration of politics and business in corruption is another side of the Russian hybrid war, which is generating political instability, slowing down the reforms needed for European integration and demoralizing the population about Moldova's future. Political power and influence over the state have been used to generate new illegal revenues by plundering the state. During this period, the Republic of Moldova was practically a state captured by oligarchs.<sup>183</sup> The defining case is the embezzlement of Moldova's banking system, through multiple money laundering schemes that took place between 2012 and 2014, at the end of which \$1 billion was stolen, representing 12% of Moldova's GDP at the time. The action orchestrated by oligarchs, politicians and senior officials has repercussions even now, as the credibility of the Republic of Moldova, the flow of foreign investment has been affected, and the state intervention to save the banking system has impacted on the country's external debt to be paid by citizens for the next 25 years.<sup>184</sup>

Plahotniuc and Șor have fled the Republic of Moldova on arrest warrants and are abroad in Northern Cyprus and Israel respectively.<sup>185</sup> The chances of being extradited and brought to justice are minimal.<sup>186</sup> However, their influence remains significant today. It is Ilan Șor who is

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<sup>180</sup> "Profile: Vladimir Plahotniuc". *RISE Moldova*, available at:

<https://profiles.rise.md/profile.php?id=190114120938>

<sup>181</sup> "Profile: Ilan Șor". *RISE Moldova*, available at:

<https://profiles.rise.md/profile.php?id=190129200722&lang=rom>

<sup>182</sup> "The Republic of Moldova in 2022 - to be or not to be?". *Deutsche Welle*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/republica-moldova-%C3%AEn-2022-a-fi-sau-a-nu-fi/a-64158590>

<sup>183</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>184</sup> Andriy Osavoliuk, Igor Savchenko, "Moldova's "Theft of the Century" – ostensible investigations or sincere lust for justice?", *Open Dialogue Foundation*, available at:

<https://en.odfoundation.eu/a/37290.moldovas-theft-of-the-century-ostensible-investigations-or-sincere-lust-for-justice/>

<sup>185</sup> Sorin Ioniță, "Rotative in Chisinau: who makes Moscow's games and what role does Romania play in the landscape". *Contributors.ro*, available at:

<https://www.contributors.ro/rotativa-la-chisinau-cine-face-jocurile-moscovei-si-ce-rol-joaca-romania-in-peisaj/>

<sup>186</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

financing the protests in Chisinau against the government.<sup>187</sup> The police have arrested people from his party who had large amounts of cash to pay demonstrators<sup>188</sup> many of them being low-income people who can be easily manipulated.<sup>189</sup>



Fig 10. An anti-government demonstration in Chisinau in November.  
Source: The "ȘOR" Party/Facebook



Fig 11. Money seized following the car search of those involved in financing Ilan Șor's protests, March 2023.  
Source: Security and Intelligence Service I of the Republic of Moldova

<sup>187</sup> "#OrheiLeaks: The public persons in the phone of the leader of the Șor Party protests". *Ziarul de Gardă*, disponibil la: <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/ancheta/orheileaks-persoanele-publice-din-telefonul-liderului-protestelor-partidului-sor/>

<sup>188</sup> Alina Cotoros. "Searches in the file of illegal financing of the Șor party in Rep. Moldova. Money was raised to organize anti-government protests". *Adevărul*, available at: <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/republica-moldova/perchezitii-in-dosarul-finantarii-ilegale-a-2248806.html>

<sup>189</sup> Andrew Higgins, "War Next Door Brings Energy Crunch, and Paid Protests, to Moldova". *New York Times*, available at: [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/11/world/europe/moldova-russian-ukraine-war.html?smid=url-share&fbclid=IwAR2avI55DloQI\\_PJRbxDzVS89xwckPUzDQZ7esdc\\_44Kw7Rc6Q4PmKt-7Rc](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/11/world/europe/moldova-russian-ukraine-war.html?smid=url-share&fbclid=IwAR2avI55DloQI_PJRbxDzVS89xwckPUzDQZ7esdc_44Kw7Rc6Q4PmKt-7Rc)

The authorities in Chisinau are aware of the Kremlin's tactics, with the current interior minister, Ana Revenco, declaring that "the stake of the weekly protests in Chisinau is the overthrow of the constitutional order and the establishment of Moscow's power in Chisinau".<sup>190</sup> She added that "we are face to face with a hybrid war and this energy blackmail, this massive disinformation, this fake news that says the authorities would be interested in oppressing Russian speakers - all are being used to radicalize society." Șor and Plahotniuc are under Western sanctions and have been named agents of the Kremlin by the West,<sup>191</sup> but they still have considerable economic power in the Republic of Moldova and can manipulate the masses, corrupt officials and guide pro-Moscow political movements to leadership positions. Thus, deoligarization is a mandatory step for maintaining stability and the European course in the Republic of Moldova.

### ***The process of deoligarchization as a process of "de-Kremlinization"***

It's only in the last two years that the Government of the Republic of Moldova considered some measures aimed at combating the influence of the oligarchs. Thus, the deoligarchization process is, in essence, a process of reducing Russian intrusion at the political and economic level. Among the first steps in this direction were taken in 2021, when the pro-European government of Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița adopted a law increasing the transparency of companies and their owners.<sup>192</sup> Currently, the implementation of an anti-oligarch law, similar to the one implemented in Ukraine in 2021, is being debated. However, there are also critical opinions that consider such a law to be a populist method to selectively attack certain oligarchs, depending on their support for political power. Thus, in the case of Ukraine, legislation allows the National Security and Defense Council, which is personally appointed by the president, to determine who is an oligarch and who should face restrictions in terms of owning media channels or participating in the political life of the country.<sup>193</sup> These measures may be questionable, even if they produce immediate effects, because they do not create

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<sup>190</sup> "Interview with Ana Revenco, the Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Moldova: The stake of the protests is the establishment of Moscow's power in Chisinau, by which they would use Moldova as a bargaining chip with Europe, with the West / Ilan Șor is in Israel, Vlad Plahotniuc in Northern Cyprus". *G4Media*, available at:

<https://www.g4media.ro/interviu-ana-revenco-ministrul-de-interne-al-republicii-moldova-miza-protector-este-instaurarea-puterii-moscovei-la-chisinau-prin-asta-ar-folosi-moldova-ca-moneda-de-negociere-cu-europa-cu-occid.html>

<sup>191</sup> "Oligarchs Vladimir Plahotniuc and Ilan Șor, on the list of people sanctioned by Great Britain". *Ziare.com*, available at:

<https://ziare.com/olan-sor/oligarhii-vladimir-plahotniuc-si-ilan-sor-sanctionati-marea-britanie-bunuri-inghetate-1776949>

<sup>192</sup> "Moldova Changes Law to End Secrecy Surrounding Offshores". *Balkan Insight*, disponibil la:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/14/moldova-changes-law-to-end-secrecy-surrounding-offshores/>

<sup>193</sup> "Ukraine's Anti-Oligarch Law: President Zelenskyy's populist power grab?",

*Atlantic Council*, available at:

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-anti-oligarch-law-president-zelenskyy-s-populist-power-grab/>

sustainable and truly independent mechanisms such as the creation of an independent judicial system, the strengthening of antitrust laws and authorities, the reform of corporate governance in the public sector, the elimination of tax advantages for large businesses and greater transparency in media funding.<sup>194</sup> Representatives of the European Union signaled to Chisinau that for the Republic of Moldova it would be preferable to reform public institutions and make the revenues, the owners of Moldovan companies and the financing of political parties more transparent.<sup>195</sup>

What remains of note is that, beyond the debates related to the right solution to reduce the power of the oligarchs, there is a real political will to adopt the necessary legislative framework, which will eliminate one of the great vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova and prevent the recapture of the state by the oligarchs. The relationship between corruption in Moldova and pro-Russian political formations is a symbiotic one, and affecting one element will have an impact on the other, which will consistently diminish Moscow's influence.

#### **4. Republic of Moldova – Russia's target for cyber attacks, hostile propaganda and disinformation**

According to the vice-prime minister for digitalization of the Republic of Moldova, Iurie Țurcanu, 2022 saw the most intense and numerous cyber attacks taking place in the Republic of Moldova, increasing by up to 35% compared to the previous year.<sup>196</sup> Web pages of public institutions were among the targets of DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attacks.<sup>197</sup> In August 2022, several attempted cyber attacks on the information systems of public institutions in the Republic of Moldova were registered, the attacks being carried out from IP addresses located in different countries. The purpose of these attempted attacks was to block access to information resources by sending a large number of connection requests or a large volume of data, overloading processing resources.<sup>198</sup> The attacks were launched after the pro-Russian group KILLNET threatened a cyberattack against the networks of institutions in the Republic of

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova.

<sup>196</sup> "The Republic of Moldova is drafting a law on digital security, following increasingly frequent cyber attacks", *Tvr.ro*, available at:

[http://stiri.tvr.ro/republica-moldova-elaboreaza-o-lege-privind-securitatea-digitala--in-urma-atacurilor-cibernetice-to-t-mai-frecvente\\_921585.html#view](http://stiri.tvr.ro/republica-moldova-elaboreaza-o-lege-privind-securitatea-digitala--in-urma-atacurilor-cibernetice-to-t-mai-frecvente_921585.html#view)

<sup>197</sup> "SIS announces attacks on some websites of public institutions in the Republic of Moldova: The cyber attack is attributed to a pro-Russian group", *Ziarul de Gardă*, available at:

<https://www.zdg.md/stiri/comunicate/sis-anunta-despre-atacuri-asupra-unor-site-uri-ale-institutiilor-publice-din-r-moldova-atacul-cibernetice-este-atribuit-unei-grupari-pro-ruse/>

<sup>198</sup> "Over 80 government websites in the Republic of Moldova were the target of cyber attacks; "They are launched from outside the Republic of Moldova", *Jurnal.md*, available at:

<https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/dfd07b614b6bca71/peste-80-de-site-uri-guvernamentale-din-r-moldova-au-fost-tint-a-unor-atacuri-cibernetice-sunt-lansate-din-afara-rm.html>

Moldova.<sup>199</sup> Some cyber attacks were carried out with the support of young people, who were identified by the Chisinau authorities. This indicates the ease with which Russia can carry out such attacks without directly involving Russian agents.<sup>200</sup>

The Republic of Moldova remains one of the states most vulnerable to Russian propaganda in the former Soviet space. Although on February 26, 2022 the Information and Security Service (SIS) of the Republic of Moldova blocked some websites such as Sputnik.md, on the grounds that they disseminated "information that incites hatred and war",<sup>201</sup> the Telegram platform became an immediate alternative. Lately, this has been the preferred social network of Kremlin-controlled media outlets. The Sputnik.md Telegram channel, which distributes not only pro-Kremlin messages, but also biased or false information about the current government in Chisinau, had over 25,000 subscribers in March 2022. There are also some similar pro-Russian channels with a large number of followers, for example Kp.md with over 17,000 subscribers,<sup>202</sup> Aif.md with over 4,000 subscribers<sup>203</sup> and gagauznews.md with almost 10,000 subscribers.<sup>204</sup>

Televisions remain an important vector of misinformation, especially for the older population. The Commission for Exceptional Situations in Chisinau ordered on December 16, 2022, the suspension of the licenses during the state of emergency of several television stations controlled by the oligarch Ilan Șor, but also by the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova.<sup>205</sup> This measure was taken in order to protect the information space and prevent the risk of disinformation through the spread of false information or attempts to manipulate public opinion, based on the list of natural and legal persons subject to international sanctions.<sup>206</sup>

Russia uses narratives adapted to the environment where they are launched, trying to identify the vulnerable points of that society. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, given that it is a former Soviet republic, which still has a fairly consistent Russian-speaking population, propaganda and disinformation can infiltrate much more easily. They have been amplified even

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<sup>199</sup> "Pro-Putin hackers have attacked the IT systems of the Republic of Moldova more than 80 times", *Digi24.ro*, available at:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/hackerii-pro-putin-au-atacat-de-pest-80-de-ori-sistemele-informatic-edin-republica-moldova-2059701>

<sup>200</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova.

<sup>201</sup> "Information sources that distribute fake news, information that incites hatred, war or violence remain under SIS attention", *SIS.md*, available at:

<https://sis.md/ro/content/update-sursele-informatic-9Bionale-care-distribuie-%C8%99tiri-false-informatic-9Bii-care-instig%C4%83-la-ur%C4%83>

<sup>202</sup> The channel is available at: <https://t.me/KpMoldova>

<sup>203</sup> The channel is available at: <https://t.me/aifmd>

<sup>204</sup> The channel is available at: <https://t.me/gagauznewsmd>

<sup>205</sup> "Moldova bans Russian propaganda TV. 6 channels have been left without a licence", *Digi24*, available at:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/moldova/republica-moldova-interzice-televiziunile-de-propaganda-rusa-2186733>

<sup>206</sup> Vitalie Călugăreanu, "Journalism lesson. Chisinau removes Putin's "tanks" from audiovisual", *Deutsche Welle*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/lec%C8%9Bie-de-jurnalism-chi%C8%99in%C4%83ul-elimin%C4%83-tancurile-lui-putin-din-audiovizual/a-64135709>

more since the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine and have determined confusion among the population. A survey carried out at the beginning of 2023 shows that only 39.6% of those surveyed believe that the invasion of Ukraine is unjustified by Russia not being provoked in any way, while 22.5% believe that Russia is defending the People's Republics of Donbas from Ukraine, and 12% are of the opinion that it is about an operation to liberate Ukraine from Nazism.<sup>207</sup> At the same time, 52.3% say that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people, 47.7% do not believe that Russia wants to destabilize the Republic of Moldova, and 67.2% want President Maia Sandu to go to Moscow to negotiate better prices for gas. These indicators show the effectiveness of Russian propaganda, which influences a significant number of citizens of the Republic of Moldova in favor of the interests of the Russian Federation.<sup>208</sup>

Another narrative strongly present in Russian-inspired propaganda campaigns is the portrayal of the current pro-reformist government as a puppet of the West, portraying any action against a pro-Russian political figure, such as the investigation of Igor Dodon, is a diktat from Washington, the government in Chisinau not having any kind of autonomy.<sup>209</sup> In the same line, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, declared that Moldova is prepared by the West for entering a conflict with Russia.<sup>210</sup>

A favorite theme of Russian propaganda, also used against Ukraine to justify its aggression, is the oppression of the Russian-speaking population and fellow Russian citizens. The statements are so aggressive that some Russian officials have stated that Russia will make a corridor to Transnistria, in order to protect the Russophones in the area, as the Russian language is being oppressed by the regime in Chisinau.<sup>211</sup> Moreover, the Russian Embassy in the Republic of Moldova asked its citizens to report any kind of national, linguistic or cultural discrimination, indicating that this discrimination would be systematic.<sup>212</sup> Consistent with this theme of the

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<sup>207</sup> "Moldovans' perception of the war in Ukraine, seriously influenced by disinformation and propaganda", *Anticorupție.md*, available at:

<https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/perceptia-moldovenilor-fata-de-razboiul-din-ucraina-influentata-grav-de-dezinformat-e-si-propaganda>

<sup>208</sup> "MISINFORMATION: The number of Moldovans who are on the side of Russia in the war in Ukraine is increasing". *Veridica.ro*, available at:

<https://www.veridica.ro/en/disinformation/disinformation-the-number-of-moldovans-siding-with-russia-in-the-war-in-ukraine-is-growing>

<sup>209</sup> Adrian Nae, "Russian propaganda on Telegram: messages regarding the Republic of Moldova", *Centrul Român de Studii Ruse*, available at:

<https://russianstudiesromania.eu/ro/2022/06/01/propaganda-rusa-pe-telegram-mesaje-privind-republica-moldova/>

<sup>210</sup> "Lavrov threatens the Republic of Moldova. Maia Sandu is Russia's new target". *Deutsche Welle*, available at: <https://www.dw.com/ro/lavrov-amenin%C8%9B%C4%83-republica-moldova-maia-sandu-este-noua-%C8%9Bint%C4%83-a-rusiei/a-64592343>

<sup>211</sup> Radu Pircă, "Russian General: We will make a corridor to Transnistria, where the Russian-speaking population is oppressed". *Wall Street.ro*, available at:

<https://www.wall-street.ro/articol/International/284805/general-rus-vom-face-un-culoar-pana-in-transnistria-unde-popolatia-de-limba-rusa-e-oprimata.html#gref>

<sup>212</sup> "Russian speakers, at RFI: "We are not discriminated against in the Republic of Moldova. What is happening in Ukraine is a tragedy". *RFI.ro*, available at:

oppression of the Russian-speaking population, which aims to create inter-ethnic tensions, there is also the fake news stating that Maia Sandu is closing universities and schools with teaching in Russian. In fact, the decision is about merging some educational institutions, a process managed by the Ministry of Education, targeting schools in both Romanian and Russian.<sup>213</sup> By creating an us-versus-them mentality, it accentuates the rifts in society and preserves a pro-Moscow voter base whose opinion is hard to change.

Moscow's reaction was furious when President Maia Sandu promulgated the law adopted by the Parliament, which will replace the phrase "Moldovan language" with the phrase "Romanian language" in all legislation and official documents of the Republic of Moldova, including the Constitution. Maria Zaharova, spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, accused Romania of having occupied Bessarabia until 1940 and that the Moldovan language was a "symbol of self-identification" of the inhabitants of the Republic of Moldova, noting that the Moldovan language was officially preserved only in Transnistria.<sup>214</sup>

The stake of this law goes beyond the linguistic sphere, being a concrete step, symbolically powerful and with long-term effects, in the process of detaching the Republic of Moldova from the cultural and historical space of the Russian World (Russkii Mir) and of canceling the effects of the denationalization and Russification process started during the Soviet occupation. The connection to the Western cultural space through the Romanian language is, moreover, the objective publicly assumed by Maia Sandu: "Today I promulgated the law that confirms a historical and indisputable truth: the state language of the Republic of Moldova is Romanian. I want the Romanian language to unite all of us who live here and love this land. We, together with more than twenty-seven million other people around the world, speak Romanian, one of the official languages of the European Union. Those who have told us for decades that we, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, speak 'Moldovan' and not Romanian - have only one aim: to divide us. This is because, once you have divided a nation, you can subjugate and control it more easily. (...) I am very happy when I meet today young people of different ethnicities who speak Romanian very well. We can all support this effort so that, united, we can direct our energy towards building a common future in the European Union, where all languages are respected and protected".<sup>215</sup>

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<https://www.rfi.ro/reportaj-rfi-148683-vorbitori-de-rusa-la-rfi-nu-suntem-discriminati-rmoldova- ceea-ce-se-intampl>

<sup>213</sup> "FAKE NEWS: Maia Sandu closes universities and schools teaching in Russian". *Veridica.ro*, available at: <https://www.veridica.ro/stiri-false/fake-news-maia-sandu-inchide-universitati-si-scoli-cu-predare-in-limba-rusa>

<sup>214</sup> "Maria Zakharova, in delirium: the Romanian language should be renamed to "Moldovan language", not the other way around. Accusations against Romania". *PRO TV*, available at:

<https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/international/maria-zaharova-in-delir-limba-romana-trebuie-redenumita-in-zlimba-moldove-neasca-nu-invers-acuzatii-la-adresa-romaniei.html>

<sup>215</sup> "Maia Sandu promulgated the law making Romanian the official language in the Republic of Moldova", *Digi24*, available at:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/maia-sandu-a-promulgat-legea-prin-care-limba-romana-devine-limba-oficiala-in-republica-moldova-2291235>

In the logic of the war between Russia and the West, so present in the public space in Russia, the propaganda against Romania is constant and intense in the Republic of Moldova, which presents Romania as a revanchist power, with imperialist tendencies, that oppressed the population of the Republic of Moldova during the interwar period, when Bessarabia was part of Romania. This negative image built against Romania, which dates back to the Soviet period, has repercussions even now and is still effective, especially in areas with a greater affinity for Russia.<sup>216</sup> It was also used in electoral campaigns; for example, in the 2016 presidential campaign, Igor Dodon declared that "the Romanian gendarme wants to conquer us, oppress us, it's fascist", using the slogan "the Romanian gendarme will not be our master!".<sup>217</sup> This idea of the aggressiveness of the Romanian state has been directed against any attempt to intensify Bucharest-Chisinau relations, one of the most recent fake news being the one that says that Romania has received the agreement from Brussels to annex the Republic of Moldova.<sup>218</sup>

Another tool through which Russia exerts a significant influence on the Republic of Moldova, especially on older people, is the Church. In the Republic of Moldova, the Christian-Orthodox confession is dominant, but it is a field of dispute between Russia and Romania. The Metropolitanate of Chisinau and All of Moldova, the most powerful in terms of the parishes and parishioners under its authority, also known as the Orthodox Church of Moldova, is part of the Russian Orthodox Church, while the Autonomous Metropolitanate of Bessarabia belongs to the Romanian Patriarchate.

The main groups of citizens in the Republic of Moldova that are targeted by Russian propaganda through the Church are Russian-speaking ethnic minorities, active parishioners and the elderly. Russia, through the Orthodox Church in Moldova, wants to win the "minds and hearts of the parishioners",<sup>219</sup> to increase its relevance not only socially but also politically. The Russian Church uses its influence on parishioners in the Republic of Moldova especially during election periods, the relationship between the Church and the political decision-maker being a close one, because the Church benefits from financial support, and politicians affiliated with the Kremlin increase their visibility among citizens and win votes. For example, in 2016, Bishop Marchel, from Bălți and Fălești, urged Christians not to vote for Maia Sandu, because she would present a "danger for the Church", but to vote for "the Christian Igor Dodon". Marchel

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<sup>216</sup> "Soleancă, with everything: characters and conspiracies from the Kremlin kitchen". *Hotnews.ro*, available at: <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-international-24040354-conspiratiile-5g-dezinformarea-rusiei.htm>

<sup>217</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>218</sup> "FAKE NEWS: Brussels has turned around for the annexation of the Republic of Moldova to Romania". *Veridica.ro*, available at: <https://www.veridica.ro/stiri-false/fake-news-bruxelles-ul-si-a-dat-girul-pentru-anexarea-republicii-moldova-de-romania>

<sup>219</sup> Mădălin Necșuțu, "Politics and the Church join hands in the elections in Moldova", *Sinopsis*, available at: <https://sinopsis.info.ro/2019/01/24/politica-si-biserica-isi-dau-mana-in-alegerile-din-moldova/>

also declared that Maia Sandu is "barren", because she has no family and children, and that a vote in favor of her "would be a sin".<sup>220</sup>



Fig 12. Moldovan Metropolitan Vladimir and Kirill, Patriarch of Russia, after Vladimir's decoration.

Source:[Ziarul de Gardă](http://Ziarul de Gardă)

The connection between the Metropolitanate of Moldova and Moscow was not interrupted following the war in Ukraine. The leader of the Orthodox Church of Moldova, Metropolitan Vladimir, received a new decoration from the hands of Patriarch Kirill<sup>221</sup> and was invited to conduct a series of religious ceremonies in the church complex within the Kremlin.<sup>222</sup> These trips to the Kremlin and meetings between religious officials are a form by which Moscow reiterates the fact that it still has control over the population and the leadership of one of the most influential institutions in the Republic of Moldova. Surveys show that the Church remains the leader in terms of trust, with 62.5% of Moldova's residents trusting it in December 2022,<sup>223</sup> more than in any other institution.

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<sup>220</sup> "Moscow attacks Maia Sandu through the mouth of its misogynist priests from Moldova", *Deutsche Welle*, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/ro/moscova-o-atac%C4%83-pe-maia-sandu-prin-gura-preo%C8%9Bilor-s%C4%83i-misogin-i-din-moldova/a-36274358>

<sup>221</sup> Eugen Uruşciuc, "Metropolitan of Moldova, Vladimir, decorated by Kirill, Patriarch of Russia", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/mitropolitul-moldovei-vladimir-decorat-de-c%C4%83tre-kirill-patriarhul-rusiei/32082383.html>

<sup>222</sup> Alexandru Eftode, "Why was the Moldovan metropolitan chosen to replace the Russian patriarch at the Kremlin prayers", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, available at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/de-ce-a-fost-ales-tocmai-mitropolitul-moldovean-s%C4%83-l-%C3%AEnlocuia-sc%C4%83-pe-patriarhul-rus-la-rug%C4%83ciunile-de-la-kremlin/32091608.html>

<sup>223</sup> "The patriarch of all war. How the Church in Moldova serves and befriends Moscow", *Newsmaker*, available at: <https://newsmaker.md/ro/patriarhul-intregului-razboi-cum-biserica-din-moldova-serveste-si-prieteneste-cumoscova-proiect-special-nm/>

Russia carries out extensive operations to influence the Russian-speaking population using various cultural activities organized by the Russian House in Chisinau, financed by the "Rossotrudnicesto" Agency. Experience exchanges in Russia, concerts, poetry evenings, flash mobs with Russian flags near the university building in Tiraspol, traveling exhibitions on the significance of the Battle of Stalingrad or Borodino, the "Russian ambassador's camp" that offers a group of children from the Republic of Moldova stays in resorts, scholarships in Russia, all these are activities carried out by Russian organizations in 2022 throughout the territory of the Republic of Moldova. On the occasion of Unknown Hero Day, which is celebrated in Russia on December 3, the city of Balti hosted the "Victory - one for all" festival, most of the participants wearing Soviet-era military uniforms. On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad, the Russian Center for Culture and the organizations of ethnic Russians from various localities of the Republic of Moldova initiated a traveling exhibition in November and December 2022. Cooperation agreements were signed for the "conservation of the military-historical heritage and patriotic education of the youth" with several educational institutions from Chisinau and other localities in the Republic of Moldova. One of the organizers of the action posted on social networks that "the exhibition will reach the last village that awaits us, but in order not to ease the burden of the Romanian agents, we will not make the dates of the events public". Dozens of actions that actually promote the Russian militarist spirit and propagate false information about the war in Ukraine, about Romania and the West are organized in Transnistria, Gagauzia, but also in other areas of the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Center for Culture being thus a main vector of Russian propaganda.<sup>224</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The Republic of Moldova is the target of an extensive hybrid war carried out on multiple levels by the Russian Federation, with the aim of generating an additional source of instability, in the vicinity of Ukraine, NATO and the EU. Without the financial and political support of the West, the Republic of Moldova will collapse and Moscow will have the chance to impose an obedient government. Such a scenario will lead to the deterioration of the security situation for Ukraine, which will see its land and rail communication route between Odessa and Romania, which passes through the Republic of Moldova, cut off.

In the event of a long-term war of attrition in Ukraine and, finally, a favorable development for Russia from a military point of view, it is very likely that the Russian army will occupy not only the Black Sea coast of Ukraine, but also the Republic of Moldova. In such a situation, the Kremlin will not be content to install a puppet government in Chisinau, but will militarily occupy this small country, which does not have the strategic depth to absorb the initial shock of an

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<sup>224</sup> Information from the discussions held by New Strategy Center experts on the occasion of the information visit to the Republic of Moldova, January 2023.

attack, and has neither the army nor the will to fight. Such a scenario will considerably affect the security situation in the immediate vicinity of Romania, the presence of the Russians on the Prut River and at the mouths of the Danube, on the border of Romania, being the strategic nightmare for Bucharest.

On the other hand, the Republic of Moldova will not enjoy a European integration process with a successful ending if the problem of Transnistria is not resolved. The European Union will no longer accept a second Cyprus and a territory with uncertain international status. The current regime in Chisinau is trying to apply a carrot and stick policy towards Tiraspol and take advantage of the sealing of the border between Transnistria and Ukraine to put moderate pressure on Tiraspol, hoping that it will get a more flexible attitude in the future from the separatist leaders. As the export of Transnistrian companies can only be done if they are registered in the Republic of Moldova, Chisinau can now track the flow of exports/imports and, consequently, also the financial flows. In the fall of 2022, when Gazprom began to sharply reduce the gas quota, Chisinau turned to Bucharest for electricity. To the surprise of Tiraspol, the Chisinau Government proved that it can manage the cut in electricity supply from the Cuciurgan plant in Transnistria. The Republic of Moldova used Romania not only to manage an energy crisis, but also to create a lever of pressure on Tiraspol, proving that it can handle itself honorably in case of emergency.

Chisinau is trying to separate the separatist leaders into two camps: one pragmatic, with which is possible to negotiate and obtain an agreement in the future, having the current Transnistrian leader Vadim Krasnoselski as exponent, and the other, undesirable, controlled by the force structures in direct connection with the services Russian secrets, led by the so-called Foreign Minister Vitali Ignatiev. But, in reality, everyone who really matters in Transnistria is connected to the Russian services.

The biggest issue in Chisinau's strategy in relation to Tiraspol is the lack of time. It is a long process, which will economically connect Transnistria to the Republic of Moldova, allow the strengthening of the institutions of the Republic of Moldova and the gradual management, over 2-3 electoral cycles, of the influx of voters from Transnistria who prefer pro-Russian parties. It is unlikely that the current power in Chisinau will have a chance to manage this long process, which will give Tiraspol the opportunity to reduce pressure when a president and a Eurosceptic, if not pro-Russian, coalition would win the election. In addition, the current power in Chisinau does not condition Tiraspol in any way, unlike when Chisinau receives European funding conditional on the implementation of some reforms.

A settlement of the Transnistrian conflict is directly linked to the outcome of the war in Ukraine. A defeated and weakened Russia will determine not only a pressure from Chisinau on Tiraspol, but especially a strong one from Kiev. Ukraine will want to ensure that it does not share a border with a Russian enclave. In case of the military collapse of Russia, the military option on the part of Ukraine in Transnistria will come back into focus. This should not be ruled out, even if now Chisinau is strongly against such a solution. A Russian victory, however, brings to the fore not only the scenario of Novorossiia and the land bridge to Transnistria, but also the major danger of the occupation of the Republic of Moldova by the Russian Federation, a hypothesis

with a profound negative impact on the security of Romania and the entire southeastern area of the Eastern Flank of NATO. A middle option, very likely, of a freezing of the conflict, without the liberation by the Ukrainians of all the lost territories, makes it likely that Moscow will maintain an influence in Transnistria, much greater than desired. In any scenario of the evolution of the situation on the Ukrainian front, the 5+2 negotiation format (Republic of Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, OSCE - negotiators and EU and USA - observers) is no longer viable, taking into account the presence of two belligerent states in this format.

Unlike Ukraine, however, the Republic of Moldova has at its disposal an accelerated option to accede to the EU, if the European integration process started now will not have a real perspective and there will not be a definite calendar to obtain the status of a member of the Union. The Republic of Moldova still has the option of union with Romania, at which point it will become part of a state already a member of the EU and NATO, thus belonging to the Euro-Atlantic space, prosperous and democratic, and benefiting from the security umbrella of the North Atlantic Treaty. In 1940, Soviet troops brutally separated Bessarabia from Romania, and communism tragically marked the destiny of the Romanian nation for half a century. Now the political class from Chisinau has this option to call on Bucharest if it needs to avoid re-entering Moscow's sphere of influence, because Romania can be the safety belt of the Republic of Moldova.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> More about the idea of union with Romania as a last resort solution for the Republic of Moldova in the worst situation can be read in the article *L'unica garanzia di sicurezza della Moldova e la resistenza dell'Ukraine*, by Dan Dungaciu and Leonardo Dinu, *Limes* magazine, no. 1/2023, pages 225-234.



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