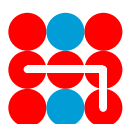


The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova: economic, political and social dimensions



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Contents

Summary	5
Introduction	6
Russian leverage in Moldova's economy	7
Energy sector	7
Natural gas	7
Electricity	8
Trade	9
Labour migrants	9
Key pro-Russian political parties and organizations	11
Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM)	11
The ŞOR Party	12
Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM)	14
National Alternative Movement (MAN)	14
Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC)	15
Russia's position in the Transnistria region and the Gagauz Autonomy	17
Other elements of Russia's influence toolkit in Moldova	22
Cyber security	22
Bomb alerts	22
Ukrainian refugees	22
Media and fake news	23
Conclusions	24
Author	25

Summary

This Hybrid CoE Working Paper analyzes the key instruments that Russia can use to achieve its political objectives in the Republic of Moldova. By taking advantage of the growing energy crisis related to rising gas and electricity prices and limiting their supply to Moldova, Moscow is contributing to the growing social discontent, which is then exploited by pro-Russian opposition groups supported by Moscow, who organize regular anti-government protests. The deteriorating financial situation also fuels Russian-backed anti-government forces in the traditionally pro-Russian autonomous Gagauzia. At the same time, the Kremlin is trying to build up a sense of insecurity in Moldova. This is being fostered both by the frequent false bomb alerts recently triggered mainly in Chisinau and by alleged terrorist attacks carried out in separatist Transnistria. To support these activities, Russia uses the mass media functioning in Moldova (both classical and online), groups on social media, cyber warfare, and fake news. At the propaganda level, the pro-Russian opposition and anti-Western, powerful Moldovan Orthodox Church (subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate) also support this narrative.

Introduction

Although Russia is currently primarily engaged in its war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has not lost interest in the neighbouring Republic of Moldova. Russia is interested in destabilizing the situation in the country and overthrowing the pro-Western government formed by the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) in August 2021. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, removing the current pro-Western (and pro-Ukrainian) government and bringing pro-Russian forces to power in the country would increase the Kremlin's influence in the region, which is important in the context of the ongoing war against Ukraine. Secondly, Russia would notch up an important political and propaganda success, vital in view of the lack of significant progress on the Ukrainian front.

In order to achieve this goal, Russia is simultaneously using a range of instruments at its disposal, duly creating a perfect storm of crises and posing a serious challenge to

the pro-European authorities and Chisinau's pro-Western course. Among the available instruments, those of an economic character seem to play a key role. Moldova is one of the poorest countries on the European continent. Moldovan society is particularly vulnerable to the worsening economic situation linked to price increases for commodities such as fuel, energy and food (inflation in October 2022 reached 34.6%). Public discontent over the economic situation is being reinforced by Russian hybrid threat activities in other areas and exploited by pro-Russian political parties.

This Hybrid CoE Working Paper looks at the different tools at Russia's disposal. It begins with economic leverage, continues with political and other influential groups, and then analyzes Russia's position in Transnistria and the Gagauz Autonomy. The paper concludes with some future-oriented remarks.

Russian leverage in Moldova's economy

Energy sector

Energy remains an important instrument of Russian pressure on Moldova, which is wholly dependent on imports of energy resources (100% of its gas and oil products), and which lacks self-sufficiency when it comes to electricity. Right-bank Moldova (i.e. the territory controlled by Chisinau, excluding Transnistria) can only produce about 20% of the electricity consumed, while the remaining 80% has to be obtained from other sources.

Natural gas

Russia's Gazprom is the main supplier of gas to Moldova. Until November/December 2022, it was a monopolist, responsible for covering 100% of the country's needs. Moscow had started to heavily exploit Moldova's dependence on the Russian company to exert pressure on the pro-Western authorities in Chisinau as early as late 2021. Russia's actions in this area became particularly disruptive in the last quarter of 2022. In October of that year, Gazprom reduced supplies to Moldova to volumes equivalent to 70% and 50% of the volumes contracted for October and November respectively. At the same time, the company announced that it would maintain the reduced deliveries in December as well (i.e. to just 43.5% of the contracted volumes).¹ Gazprom also threatened to withhold supplies completely at any time, due to Moldova's failure to meet its contractual obligations. Under the existing contract, Chisinau has committed to audit Moldovagaz for its debt (Gazprom claims that the Moldovan operator owes it around 700 million US dollars) and

to sign an agreement to settle it (which was to happen by 1 May 2022). Moreover, the corporation hinted that it might also break the contract due to Moldova's regular delays in meeting its current payment obligations.

To limit the potential for Russian pressure, in December 2022 Moldova abandoned its reliance on Russian gas for the right-bank. Currently, gas for this part of the country is supplied by Moldovan state-owned company Energocom. In early 2023 – using a 300 million euro loan from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) – the company managed to accumulate around 300 million m³ of gas in underground reservoirs in Romania and Ukraine (Moldova has no storage facilities of its own). This quantity is sufficient for the winter period.² At the same time, gas sourced from Gazprom goes entirely to Transnistria (which Moldova does not pay for).

Despite these changes, Moldova remains vulnerable to Russian energy pressure. Gazprom can still reduce or stop gas supplies. While this will not hit right-bank Moldova directly, it will lead to the collapse of electricity supplies from Transnistria and an economic and humanitarian crisis in this separatist region. This, in turn, could lead to destabilization of the situation in the country. Moreover, the gas that Moldova buys from traders (on exchanges) is expensive. In December 2022 and January 2023, Energocom was selling it to distributors for around USD 1,100 /1,000 m³. At the same time, access to cheaper Russian gas is virtually out of the question, not only because of the reduction in supplies, but also because the contract that

1 The corporation (falsely) blamed the reduction in supply on Ukraine.

2 The gas it supplies to the right-bank probably comes from these stocks, but it cannot be ruled out that the company is continuing to import gas on an ongoing basis from non-Russian suppliers, including in reverse flow via the Trans-Balkan pipeline and the Iasi-Ungheni-Chisinau pipeline from Romania.

Moldova signed with Gazprom in October 2021 provides for a less favourable price formula than before. Both factors make it impossible for Chisinau to reduce household tariffs, which increased more than sixfold between October 2021 and November 2022. This is particularly painful during the cold season (when consumption is highest). It is estimated that in winter 2022–2023, Moldovans will fork out on average around 65% of their income on energy bills.

Electricity

The issue of Russian gas imports is also closely linked to the problem of Moldova's electricity supply. The country's main energy supplier is the Moldavskaya GRES power plant, located in Transnistria and owned by the Russian state-owned company Inter RAO. The power plant is fuelled by gas, supplied to Transnistria from Russia under the aforementioned contract with Moldova. It generates about 70–80% of the power consumed by the right-bank. Any reduction in or interruption to the electricity supply from the region poses a serious problem for right-bank Moldova, which is then forced to address the shortfall by importing power from Romania at much higher prices. This is illustrated by the electricity crisis that Moldova went through in 2022. On 24 October, due to the reduction in gas supplies to Moldova, the Transnistrian power plant reduced its production of electricity and cut its supply to the right-bank by more than 60%, stopping it completely on 1 November. As a result, Moldova has faced a continuous electricity shortage since the beginning of November. Although energy imports from Romania were helping Moldova

avoid a complete collapse of its electricity system, as with gas, costs were an issue. Part of the energy was imported on the basis of bilateral contracts, at a regulated, lower than market price of approximately 90 euros/MWh, but the rest was purchased on the Romanian power exchange OPCOM, where the average price in November 2022 was approximately 231 euros/MWh. These prices were clearly higher than the cost of energy delivered from Transnistria (around 60 euros/MWh). At the same time, imports from Ukraine (which previously offered energy at a slightly higher price than that from Transnistria) were not possible after October due to Russian missile strikes on the country's energy infrastructure.

In December 2022, Transnistria resumed energy supplies to Moldova (at approx. 70 euros/ MWh). However, there is no doubt that supply disruptions could occur again. The suspension of electricity supplies from Transnistria and Ukraine (in both cases as a consequence of Russia's actions) and forcing Moldova to import expensive energy from Romania are intended – as in the case of gas – to increase tariffs for the population and thus fuel anti-government sentiment. Regardless of the source of the energy supply, Moldova's electricity security is also threatened by Russian shelling of Ukraine's power system, since the two countries are infrastructurally linked. In November 2022, due to grid destabilization caused by Russian attacks, two massive black-outs lasted from several minutes to several hours and affected much of Moldova.

It should be emphasized that Russia still has one important lever at its disposal, the use of

which could seriously restrict access to Romania's electricity imports. This entails its control over the electricity hub located in Transnistria, near the Moldavskaya GRES power station. Energy imported from Romania is first supplied to this hub and only then transmitted onwards to the Moldovan network. There is therefore a risk that Russia – wishing to aggravate the energy crisis in Moldova – may decide to block the energy transport. Russia may frame this as a “terrorist attack” (similar to those allegedly carried out in Transnistria in April 2022) and accuse Ukraine of carrying it out.

Trade

The importance of Russia for Moldovan exports has declined dramatically over the last decade. While Russia was still the main recipient of Moldovan exports in 2011 (approx. 30%, almost twice as much as to the second most important country, Romania), by 2021 this figure had dropped to less than 9% (third place after Romania and Turkey). Many Moldovans are still unaware of this change and assume that trade relations with Russia are crucial for the Moldovan economy. Both Russian propaganda and pro-Russian groups, who are persuading voters that Moldova's pro-Western course will lead to the country's economic collapse, often exploit this fact. Although for the economy as a whole, trade with Russia is now of secondary importance, there are still groups for whom the country is the main export market. These are primarily fruit producers, particularly apple producers.³

Russia is keen to take advantage of this fact and regularly imposes embargoes on imports of such products. The last time it decided to do so was on 15 August 2022. The ban was introduced under the pretext that Moldovan products did not meet phytosanitary standards, and covered agricultural products exported to Russia from Moldova as a whole (except Transnistria). At the same time, Russia regularly makes it clear that the real reason for such decisions is political and often lifts embargoes against localities or regions governed by favourable political forces. Thus, in October 2022, the embargo was lifted against seven companies from the Orhei raion, governed by the ŞOR Party.⁴ This was done to send a signal to voters that supporting pro-Russian forces could result in improved conditions for exporters.

Labour migrants

The remittances that Moldovans receive from their relatives working abroad constitute a very important part of the household budget for a significant proportion of the country's population. It is estimated that around 1 million Moldovans (out of 2.6 million living in the country) work outside their homeland. In 2021, they sent at least USD 1.611 billion to the country, namely about 12% of GDP (the real value is certainly higher, as part of the cash is brought into the country physically and is not declared).⁵ For many years, Russia was the main destination for Moldovan labour migration. In 2014, up to around 600,000 Moldovan citizens worked in

³ In 2021, 72% of fruits (including more than 95% of apples) produced in Moldova went to Russia.

⁴ 'Роспотребнадзор снял ограничения еще с четырех компаний из Оргеева' [Rospotrebnadzor lifted restrictions from four additional companies from Orhei], Newsmaker.md, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/rospotrebnadzor-snyal-ogranicheniya-esche-s-chetyreh-kompaniy-iz-orgeeva/>. [All links were last accessed on 13 March 2023, unless otherwise indicated.]

⁵ 'Transferurile de bani în Moldova au crescut cu 8,4% în 2021' [Money transfers to Moldova grow by 8.4% in 2021], Infotag.md, <http://www.infotag.md/finances-ro/296850/>.

Russia, and accounted for 60% of all money transferred to their homeland. In the following years (due to the tightening of the Kremlin's migration policy and the depreciation of the rouble, among other things), Russia's importance began to decline sharply. In 2020, only around 14% of the total remittances were sent from Russia, while the number of Moldovans in the country at the beginning of 2022 decreased to just 80,000 or thereabouts.⁶ As in the case

to the argument about the need to maintain good relations with Russia due to its importance for Moldovan labour migration. In addition, pro-Russian parties try to gain the support of the electorate by acting as defenders of the interests of Moldovan migrants in Russia (by negotiating various types of social protection for them, access to Russian pensions, etc.).

of trade, however, a large part of the population is unaware of this change and remains sensitive

6 'Moldovenii au părăsit în masă Federația Rusă. În ultimii doi ani numărul lor a scăzut de 3,5 ori' [Moldovans left the Russian Federation en masse. In the last two years their number decreased 3.5-fold], MoldStreet, <https://www.mold-street.com/?go=news&n=14539>.

Key pro-Russian political parties and organizations

There are currently two significant groupings in Moldova that practise pro-Russian politics – the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and the ŞOR Party. The Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (which ruled the country from 2001 to 2009) should also be included in this category, although this grouping has been in deep crisis for many years and hovers on the verge of the electoral threshold. An interesting case is the National Alternative Movement Party (MAN), which is a recently established formally pro-European party, but led by a former PSRM politician and current mayor of the Moldovan capital. The MAN is often seen as a potential Trojan horse to attract a more moderate electorate to pro-Russian forces.⁷

Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM)

The PSRM has been one of the largest and most dominant pro-Russian political parties in recent years. Its ranks include Igor Dodon, the party's long-time leader and president of Moldova from 2016 to 2020. The grouping openly calls for closer ties between Moldova and Russia and integration into the Eurasian Economic Union promoted by the Kremlin. It defends Russian influence in Moldova, the position of the Mol-

dovan Orthodox Church (subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate), and advocates maintaining the special status of the Russian language.⁸ It is critical of NATO and the EU (although it does not oppose the idea of Moldova joining the latter). Despite its name, it represents conservative views (for example, aversion to sexual minorities). In recent years, the PSRM has enjoyed clear support from Russia, including during election campaigns. The highest representatives of the Russian government willingly receive PSRM members in Moscow. According to the findings of Moldovan investigative journalists, Russian consultants linked with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) have probably collaborated with the party in the past.⁹ The PSRM has also been repeatedly accused of being funded by Russia. In a hidden-camera recording released in 2019, Igor Dodon himself, in a conversation with oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc (who at the time was the de facto key decision-maker in Moldova), appears to admit that Russia contributes up to USD 1 million per month to the party's activities.¹⁰

The Kremlin's attitude towards the PSRM has changed perceptibly since the series of political defeats the grouping has suffered in recent years. In 2020, Igor Dodon lost in the presidential election to the pro-Western Maia

7 Anatol Țăranu, 'Pro-Russian left mounts "Trojan horse" for future presidential elections in Moldova', ipn Press Agency, https://www.ipn.md/en/pro-russian-left-mounts-trojan-horse-for-future-presidential-elections-7978_1091974.html; Pelin, Victor, 'The European alternative of Mayor Ion Ceban', IPN Press Agency, https://www.ipn.md/en/the-european-alternative-of-mayor-ion-ceban-op-ed-by-7978_1091927.html.

8 The Russian language enjoys a special status in Moldova. Among other things, according to the legislation in force, legal acts (including laws) are always published in Romanian and in Russian. Public institutions must also be described in Russian. Education in Russian is also guaranteed.

9 'Кураторы Молдовы из ФСБ' [Moldova's FSB handlers], RISE, <https://www.rise.md/rusa/%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%8B-%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%8B-%D0%B8%D0%B7-%D1%84%D1%81%D0%B1/>.

10 'Плаhotниук включил видео. Телеканал лидера ДПМ опубликовал записи его переговоров с Додоном' [Plahotniuc turned on the video. TV channel of PDM leader published recordings of his talks with Dodon], Newsmaker.md, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/plahotnyuk-vklyuchil-video-telekanal-lidera-dpm-opublikoval-zapisi-ego-peregovorov-44015/>.

Sandu, and a year later, despite forming an electoral bloc with the pro-Russian Communists (PCRM), the Socialists were unable to prevent the spectacular success of the pro-Western PAS party. Linked to President Sandu, the PAS party managed to secure an independent majority of 63 MPs (in the 101-seat parliament) in the early parliamentary election of July 2021, while the Bloc of Communists and Socialists – BECS – garnered only 32 seats (22 of which the Socialists won). At the time, Russia considered that the responsibility for the party's defeat lay primarily with Dodon himself, who not only failed to effectively organize and run an election campaign, but who constitutes a burden for the party in terms of his image (voters associate him with numerous corruption scandals).

Currently, the grouping is mired in an internal crisis. On 24 May 2022, Dodon was arrested and subsequently charged with passive corruption, treason, illicit enrichment and financing a political party by means of a criminal organization (part of the charges had to do with the aforementioned hidden-camera footage).

By late 2022, the Socialists had clearly lost popularity, and the electorate that had supported them thus far was gradually switching its allegiance to the ȘOR Party (according to polls from September and October, the PSRM was counting on around 21–22% of the vote).¹¹ There is no doubt that despite the image and organizational problems that the PSRM currently faces, it is still seen by Russia as a valuable tool for influencing the situation in Moldova. The

grouping has extensive field structures (more than 30% of all local councillors and mayors belong to the PSRM). It is also able to attract the part of the pro-Russian electorate that does not sympathize with Ilan Șor, the leader of the ȘOR Party, seeing him as corrupt and untrustworthy and overly populist. Russia is expecting that, following the ousting of Igor Dodon, the party will manage to refresh its image and regain the confidence of the electorate, at least in part, in the near future.

The ȘOR Party

The ȘOR Party is currently the most dynamic, fastest growing and most active opposition group in Moldova. It is led by and named after its founder, Ilan Șor, a controversial Moldovan politician and businessman, sentenced in 2017 by a court of first instance to 7.5 years in prison for money laundering and embezzlement related to the 2014 theft of 1 billion US dollars from Moldovan banks (however, a final verdict in the case has never been delivered). In June 2019, after the overthrow of Vlad Plahotniuc's regime, Șor fled the country and has since gone into hiding in Israel (he is an Israeli citizen). Despite this, he is still officially a member of the Moldovan parliament and is politically active.

The ȘOR Party is a populist party, focusing mainly on social slogans, oriented primarily towards the poorer parts of society (pensioners, residents of smaller towns and villages, etc.). One of its flagship activities is the Merișor chain of subsidized "social shops" stocking

11 CBS Research, 'Sodaj socio-politic, Republica Moldova, Octombrie 2022' [Socio-political survey, Republic of Moldova, October 2022], https://www.ipn.md/storage/ckfinder/files/Studiu-Omnibus-FNF_IDIS.pdf; 'Partidele care ajung in Parlament dacă duminică ar avea loc alegeri parlamentare anticipate: o cincime din respondenți ar vota pentru BCS. Distribuția mandatelor în Legislativ' [The parties that would reach Parliament if early parliamentary elections were held on Sunday: a fifth of respondents would vote for BCS. Distribution of mandates in the Legislature], Ziarul de Gardă, <https://www.zdg.md/importante/sondaj-idata-partidele-care-ajung-in-parlament-daca-duminica-ar-avea-loc-alegeri-parlamentare-anticipte-o-cincime-din-respondenti-ar-vota-pentru-bcs-distributia-mandatelor-in-legislativ/>.

cheap necessities. Although, unlike the PSRM, it is not an openly (i.e. according to its political programme) pro-Russian grouping, in practice it is of this nature. The ŞOR Party claims that high energy and gas prices are the result of the government's anti-Russian policy and argues that it would be able to reach an agreement with Moscow on this issue. The party is also keen to play on the post-Soviet sentiments of a part of the Moldovan electorate, which is in keeping with the propaganda of the so-called *Russkiy mir*. In the last parliamentary election in 2021, the party won six seats, and it currently has a support level of around 10 to 17% (September and October 2022 polls). The grouping also indirectly controls several TV channels broadcasting Russian content. Up until December 2022, it was estimated that the total market share of the channels controlled by the ŞOR Party amounted to around 8.5%.¹² However, the broadcasting licences of most of these channels were suspended in December 2022 due to their practice of disseminating disinformation about the war in Ukraine.

Since September 2022, the party has been organizing regular anti-government protests in Chisinau, accusing the pro-Western authorities of radically increasing gas and electricity prices and inflation and calling on both the PAS party and President Sandu herself to step down. The

protests have intensified, gathering up to ten thousand participants. There are indications that at least some of the protesters are being paid by the party to participate in the demonstrations through an organized crime group. On 20 October 2022, the Moldovan prosecutor's office carried out a series of searches at the ŞOR Party offices and seized about 20 bags of money (amounting to around 233,000 US dollars) earmarked to fund protests.¹³

The ŞOR Party enjoys clear political support from Russia, which now appears to see it as the main force in Moldova representing its interests (amid the weakness of the PSRM). According to the findings of Moldovan investigative journalists, the ŞOR party, like the PSRM, maintains close relations with Russia. At the same time, Moldovan counter-intelligence officials admit unofficially that FSB officers direct the anti-government protests organized by this group.¹⁴ In October, the US Treasury Department sanctioned Şor, recognizing, among other things, that from June 2022 onwards he "had received Russian support and the ŞOR Party was coordinating with representatives of other oligarchs to create political unrest in Moldova" and that he cooperated with "Moscow-based entities (...) to undermine Moldova's EU bid as the vote for candidate status was underway".¹⁵

12 Paholnitchi, Nicolai, 'Илан Шор становится медиамагнатом. Угрожает ли это безопасности страны?' [Ilan Şor becomes a media mogul. Does it threaten the security of the country?], Newsmaker.md, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/ilan-shor-stanovitsya-mediamaqnatom-ugrozhaet-li-eto-bezopasnosti-strany/>.

13 Davidov, Daniela, 'Percheziții la membrii și activiștii Partidului Şor: Au fost ridicate 20 de pungi cu aproximativ 3.5 milioane de lei. 24 de persoane, reținute' [Raids on members and activists of the Şor Party: 20 bags with about 3.5 million lei were seized. 24 people detained], Cotidianul.md, <https://cotidianul.md/2022/10/20/perchezitii-in-mai-multe-localitati-din-tara-la-membrii-si-activistii-partidului-sor/>. [Last accessed on 5 April 2023.]

14 'Кураторы Молдовы из ФСБ' [Moldova's FSB handlers], RISE, <https://www.rise.md/rusa/%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%8B-%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%8B-%D0%B8%D0%B7-%D1%84%D1%81%D0%B1/>.

15 US Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin's Malign Influence Operations in Moldova', <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1049>.

Russia sees the ŞOR Party as the main political force capable of capitalizing on the currently growing social discontent related to high energy prices and inflation. The party – as it has already proved – is able to organize regular, relatively large protests. During demonstrations, it is not uncommon for participants to provoke the Moldovan police and end up being detained. Ilan Şor may thus portray the PAS government as undemocratic, fighting freedom of speech and using force against its own people. It should not be ruled out that if social discontent grows, the party may seek to exacerbate the confrontation with the authorities, which could lead to overt violence. The Moldovan Prosecutor's Office recently detained several people that they believe were involved in recruiting men of athletic build to stage provocations during ŞOR Party protests.¹⁶

On 8 November 2022, the Minister of Justice of Moldova, Sergiu Litnivnienco, requested the Constitutional Court to ban the ŞOR Party. A possible positive decision by the Court in this case is hardly expected to curtail the group's activities. Instead, it may provide both Şor and Russian propaganda with an argument about the government restricting democracy and freedom of association in Moldova.

Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM)

The Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) is one of the oldest pro-Russian parties on the Moldovan political scene. The grouping held power in the country from 2001 to 2009. The PCRM has 10 MPs in parliament at present. It currently enjoys only a

fraction of its former popularity, but still has enough supporters to count on winning seats in the Moldovan parliament (polls give it about 5%). The party's programme coincides with that of the PSRM (the PCRM has formed a political bloc with the Socialists since 2021). However, the grouping does not have the potential to grow. Its electoral base is shrinking (it is mainly comprised of pensioners and elderly people). However, the party can easily enter into a coalition with any other pro-Russian groupings.

National Alternative Movement (MAN)

The National Alternative Movement (MAN) party was only founded officially in December 2022, on the basis of a political movement of the same name created in late 2021. The founder and leader of this grouping is Ion Ceban, the current mayor of Chisinau, who has held this position since November 2019. Ceban himself was associated with pro-Russian groupings for years – firstly with the Party of Communists (PCRM) and then with the Party of Socialists (PSRM), where he carved out a major political career. He was an MP, party secretary for ideological affairs and (between 2016 and 2018) also an adviser to President Igor Dodon on domestic policy. After his victory in the mayoral election, he formally left the Socialist Party, declaring that he would be "a mayor outside politics". Nevertheless, he still maintains close ties with the PSRM. In October 2020, he took a leave of absence so that he could support Igor Dodon in the then ongoing presidential campaign. Formally, the party is not only not pro-Russian, but even explicitly in favour of European integration. At the same time, Ceban tries to distance himself

¹⁶ Gorceas, Olga, 'В Молдове проходят новые обыски по делу о подготовке массовых беспорядков' [New searches are underway in Moldova in the case of organizing mass riots], Newsmaker.md, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/v-moldove-prohodyat-novye-obyski-po-delu-o-podgotovke-massovyh-besporядkov/>.

from geopolitical conflicts and emphasizes that he is interested in constructive cooperation with representatives of all political options. In practice, however, he is often critical of the actions of the current government.

There is no doubt that Moscow is watching the development of this political project with interest (if not supporting it openly). Ion Ceban, sympathetic to Moscow for years and linked to the Socialist Party, can attract a centrist electorate that is in favour of EU integration, but at the same time is interested in maintaining as close ties with Russia as possible, supports the presence of Russian culture, media and language in the Moldovan public space, and so on. Ceban and his party have considerable political potential. Through his position as mayor of Chisinau, he is recognizable at a national level. He is also one of Moldova's most trusted public politicians. In November 2022, 37.1% of the country's population declared trust in him (in comparison, Maia Sandu recorded a score of 35.7%). The MAN also has the added advantage of being open to entering into coalitions with any other grouping. Although the party is currently in the process of shaping its structures and does not yet play a significant political role (1–2% of support), it may soon become an important balancing force whose involvement may be needed to create a stable pro-Russian majority.

Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC)

By far the most significant instrument of Russian soft power in Moldova is the Moldovan

Orthodox Church (MOC), subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate and officially known as the Metropolis of Chisinau and All Moldova. It is one of two – along with the Bessarabian Metropolis, which is part of the Romanian Orthodox Church – and the largest of the Orthodox Churches present in the country. It is estimated that about 70–80% of the country's population belong to it (the remaining 10–20% are members of the Bessarabian Metropolis). Religion plays an important role in the life of Moldovans. As many as 90% declare themselves to be Orthodox.¹⁷ At the same time, this institution also traditionally enjoys the greatest public trust – in 2021, 68.9% of respondents declared that they have very strong or some trust in the Church.¹⁸ As a result, the Church is an important factor shaping the views of Moldovans not only in the religious sphere, but also in the social or political field (this is especially true in rural areas, where more than 60% of the country's population live).

The MOC has traditionally maintained close relations with pro-Russian parties in Moldova, most notably the Party of Socialists (PSRM) and the Party of Communists (PCRM). In recent years, the Church hierarchy has also repeatedly engaged in election campaigns, siding with parties advocating close cooperation with Moscow and calling for the preservation of close Moldovan-Russian ties. Examples of this include the 2016 presidential election, during which then Bishop (now Archbishop) Marchel of Balti and Falesti openly called on believers to vote

17 'Rezultatele Recensământului Populației și al Locuințelor 2014 (RPL2014)' [Results of the 2014 Population and Housing Census (RPL2014)], Biroul Național De Statistică Al Republicii Moldova, <https://statistica.gov.md/ro/recensamantul-populatiei-si-al-locuintelor-2014-122.html>.

18 'Biserica, Primăria și Președinția – instituțiile în care moldovenii au cea mai mare încredere (BOP)' [The Church, the City Hall and the Presidency – the institutions in which Moldovans have the most trust (BOP)], Agora, <https://agora.md/stiri/84289/biserica-primaria-si-presedintia-institutiile-in-care-moldovenii-au-cea-mai-mare-incredere-bop>.

for pro-Russian Socialist Party candidate Igor Dodon. The bishop at the same time criticized Dodon's rival, pro-Western Maia Sandu, calling her a "threat to the Orthodox Church", suggesting that she was neither Christian nor patriotic (unlike Dodon), and accusing her of demoralizing young people.¹⁹ The MOC also regularly takes action to attack the public image of pro-Western groups. In October 2021, following the acquisition of power in the country by the PAS party, some of the MOC clergy under Archbishop Marchel publicly appealed to him to relieve them of their duty to pray for the country's rulers and to ban those politicians from the Church and sacraments. This appeal was a

reaction to the Istanbul Convention adopted moments earlier by the PAS.²⁰ The Church has also been involved in spreading misinformation about, among other things, Covid-19 vaccines, and showing open support for Russia's war on Ukraine. On 9 May 2022, during a Victory Day march, Archbishop Marchel pinned a St George ribbon to his chest, even though this (along with other symbols expressing support for Russian aggression against Ukraine) had previously been banned by law by the Moldovan parliament. The gesture was clearly a provocation. The Russian Orthodox Church in Moldova has also failed to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

19 'Епископ Маркел призывает христиан отказаться в поддержке Майе Санду' [Bishop Marchel urges Christians to withdraw their support for Maia Sandu], Vedmosti.md, <http://www.vedomosti.md/news/episkop-markel-prizyvaet-hristian-otkazat-v-podderzhke-maje>.

20 The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (more commonly known as the Istanbul Convention) is a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe opposing violence against women and domestic violence, which was opened for signature on 11 May 2011 in Istanbul. Many conservatives consider the Convention controversial due to the fact that the document obliges parties to promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men to eradicate prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men (this is sometimes seen as a way to combat, for example, the traditional family model). Another problem is the Convention's definition of gender, denoted in Article 3(c) as "the socially constructed roles".

Russia's position in the Transnistria region and the Gagauz Autonomy

Transnistria is formally (according to Moldovan law) an autonomous region in eastern Moldova, but de facto a quasi-state not recognized by any UN member state. It includes areas on the left bank of the Dniester River and the right bank town of Bendery (Rom. Tighina). Russia is the political, economic and military patron and protector of Transnistria. The local political and economic elites (represented by the Sheriff company, which controls the entire local political scene and the "state" apparatus) are fully dependent on Moscow's decisions. Transnistrian society (about 25% are ethnic Russians) is unequivocally pro-Russian. Russian media are also very popular in the region, and the Moldovan Orthodox Church is the dominant one. Around 200,000 inhabitants of the region (officially populated by around 450,000 people) hold Russian passports. Many of them also have Moldovan, Ukrainian or other citizenship. It is worth noting that Moldovan citizens from Transnistria can vote in Moldovan parliamentary and presidential elections. This is being exploited by pro-Russian parties, which are reportedly keen to organize the transportation of the region's residents to polling stations located in Chisinau-controlled territories.²¹ Finally, Russia is important from a social point of view. Transnistrian labour migrants mostly work in Russia (in 2021, 51.4% of all remittances to the separatist region came from Russia). Russia also regularly pays allowances to Transnistrian pensioners of around 10 euros per month.

Russia plays a key role in maintaining the stability and competitiveness of the Transnistrian economy. The separatist region has been receiving free gas from Russia for years. This commodity is

supplied under a contract signed with Gazprom by Moldova, but Russia has consistently not claimed payment from Transnistria for its supply. This has led to a gas debt, currently amounting to around 7–8 billion US dollars, which Russia sometimes attributes to Moldova.

The gas thus obtained supports Transnistria in three ways. Firstly, the money from its sale on the "internal" (Transnistrian) market generates huge profits, which are used to balance the local budget deficit. Secondly, free gas makes it possible to maintain very low (up to 25 times lower) energy tariffs for the population, which is important for ensuring calm, and support for the authorities in the separatist region, and which has sometimes been used as an element of pro-Russian propaganda against Moldova (cooperation with Russia means cheap gas). Thirdly, free gas is sold to Transnistrian companies at non-market prices, which, combined with cheap labour, underpins the competitiveness of the local economy. Surprisingly, Russia is not an important export partner for Transnistria (less than 10% of the total exports in 2021). The economic model of this unrecognized republic is based on the use of cheap Russian gas for production, which is then sold primarily to EU countries (35%) and to right-bank Moldova (32% of total exports).

As a result, the political and business elite currently ruling Transnistria are even more dependent on Russia and de facto cannot afford (even if they wanted to) to oppose the will of the Kremlin. The Transnistrian banking system generally depends on Russian banks, which act as intermediaries for transactions outside Transnistria. The Russian company Inter RAO

²¹ Some 28,000 Transnistrians took part in the early parliamentary election. A total of 62% voted for the Bloc of Communists and Socialists, 13.59% for PAS, and 6.25% for the ȘOR Party.

also owns the region's largest power plant, Moldavskaya GRES, which generates energy for Transnistria.

Russian Armed Forces units have been stationed in Transnistria since the 1990s. They are formally part of two structures. The first comprises the so-called peacekeeping forces, deployed in the region under the 1992 agreement between Chisinau and Moscow that ended the war in Transnistria. They are estimated to number around 500 soldiers. The second component is the so-called Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), a remnant of the 14th Soviet (and later Russian) Army stationed in the region (and actively participating in the Transnistrian war on the separatist side). It is estimated to amount to around 1,000–1,500 soldiers. Moldova considers the presence of these forces illegal. Neither the Russian "peacekeepers" nor the OGRF have any significant combat potential. The OGRF primarily operates two mechanized infantry battalions and a command battalion, as well as other support structures. Russia also has full control over a huge arms and ammunition depot located near the Ukrainian border (in Cobasna). It is estimated that it holds about 22,000 tons of ammunition.²² However, it is difficult to assess how much of this stockpile is useable.

Units of the so-called Transnistrian Army are also considered to be de facto controlled by Russia and subordinate to Russian command.²³ The size of the army is difficult to determine, but estimates vary between 3,000 and 7,500

people (with this higher figure seeming to include not only soldiers, but also employees of other force structures, including the Interior Ministry). Its core consists of mechanized infantry units, supported by an artillery battery (including B-21s) and token armoured troops (about 15 T-64 tanks, of which very few are likely operational). Transnistria also has a few transport aircraft and helicopters (including An-2, Mi-2 and Mi-8), but their technical condition is unclear and most are probably inoperable.

The morale of the Russian armed forces in Transnistria, and of the Transnistrian Army itself, is unknown, but should be assessed as presumably low. The vast majority of their constituent soldiers (especially those from Transnistria) treat service as gainful employment and are not eager to participate in possible military actions, especially of an offensive nature. As a result, both for personnel and equipment reasons, the military potential of the "Transnistrian Army" should be considered weak.

Russia also controls the local secret services. The structures of the so-called Ministry of State Security (MGB) were created back in the 1990s by Vladimir Yuryevich Antyufeyev, who held the post until 2012. In 2014, Antyufeyev became the so-called Deputy Prime Minister for State Security in the separatist Donetsk People's Republic within Ukraine. Currently, as of 2017, the head of the MGB is Valerii Dmitrievich Gebos, a former officer of the Soviet KGB and then the Russian FSB (in service until 2007).

22 European Parliament, 'European Parliament resolution of 5 May 2022 on the state of play of EU-Moldova cooperation', europarl.europa.eu, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0205_EN.html.

23 In practice, many soldiers of the so-called Transnistrian army simultaneously, or on a rotating basis, also serve in the OGRF or peacekeeping forces. This is due to the fact that, after 2014, Moldova introduced severe restrictions making it difficult and sometimes outright impossible for Russia to rotate OGRF troops in Transnistria. As a result, Russia has increasingly tended to fill personnel gaps with Russian passport-holders born and living in Transnistria. It is estimated that such individuals now make up as many as 80% of Russian troops in Transnistria.

At present, the use of the Russian-controlled armed forces stationed in Transnistria for widespread aggressive actions against Moldova seems highly unlikely (not least because they cannot count on supplies of reinforcements and logistical support from Russia). However, this does not mean that these troops cannot be involved in potential hostile activities on Moldovan territory. It should be noted at the same time that the so-called administrative border between the territories controlled by Chisinau and Transnistria is not very well protected by Moldovan forces.

Nevertheless, in recent months, Russia has consistently sought to stir up tension in Transnistria. This is facilitated by the alleged “terrorist attacks” and “subversion actions” taking place in the region, most likely conducted with Russia’s knowledge or directly under its command. For example, on 25 April 2022, a building of the so-called “Ministry of State Security” in Tiraspol was fired upon with hand grenade launchers. A day later, a series of explosions destroyed two relay masts in the village of Maiac, both of which were used to broadcast Russian radio stations. At the end of July, local media reported that Transnistrian services had detained a Ukrainian citizen, who was alleged to have purchased and smuggled into his homeland the uniforms of so-called Transnistrian border guards in order to “organize provocation and to discredit them”. Both Chisinau and Kyiv reject allegations emanating from Tiraspol of involvement in organizing attacks on Transnistrian institutions. The alleged attacks, however, are in Russia’s interest as they fuel fear and a sense of instability in Moldova and remind the

inhabitants of Transnistria that Moscow is the only guarantor of their security (further tying this region to Russia).

Gagauzia, located in the south of the country, is the second most pro-Russian and anti-Western region of Moldova. It is inhabited by around 150,000 people, mostly the Gagauz, an Orthodox minority of probably Turkic origin who regularly speak Russian. Gagauzia is now an autonomous region within Moldova, but it has a history of separatism. Back in 1990, in reaction to Moldova’s desire for independence from the USSR and fears of the republic’s possible incorporation into Romania, Gagauzia declared itself an independent republic within the Soviet Union. It was only four years later that Comrat, the capital of Gagauzia, recognized Chisinau’s sovereignty and accepted the creation of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia within the Republic of Moldova. Relations between the Autonomy and the central authorities have traditionally been difficult. Local politicians regularly criticize the authorities in Chisinau for marginalizing Gagauzia, one of the poorest regions in the country, and ignoring or limiting its rights. The Gagauz see Russia as a country defending their interests and guaranteeing the preservation of Moldovan independence, while there is a widespread belief in the region that Romania is interested in annexing Moldova. They also massively favour closer cooperation with Russia rather than the EU. In an illegal referendum held in 2014 in reaction to Chisinau’s planned signing of an Association Agreement with the EU, 98.5% of the Gagauz voted in favour of Moldova’s integration into the Customs Union led by Russia.

Moscow wields extensive soft power in Gagauzia. Russian media are very popular in the region, as is the Russian language and culture. A significant proportion of Gagauz who choose to emigrate from the country for work reasons go to Russia (or Turkey) rather than to EU countries, further strengthening the Gagauz-Russian bond. The Autonomy also maintains economic and cultural cooperation with some Russian regions and cities. However, this collaboration is mainly symbolic and political. At the same time, Russian investment in the region is marginal. Likewise, Russia does not play a particularly important role in the region's economy. In 2021, exports from Gagauzia to Russia amounted to around 17.5 million euros, or 13.6% of total exports (for Moldova as a whole, the figure was around 10%).²⁴

Virtually all regional politicians who are active in local authorities and in the central bodies of the Autonomy have a positive attitude towards Russia or declare such views for image reasons, as anti-Russian politicians have no chance of support in Gagauzia. The Autonomy has been headed by Irina Vlah, who has served as Bashkan (head) of the region since 2015. Vlah was associated with the Communist Party for many years. In 2015, however, she officially left the organization and until 2021 maintained a close relationship with the Socialists. Vlah herself does not oppose Moldova's cooperation with the EU, but at the same time stresses that the country, and by extension Gagauzia, should maintain good relations with both Moscow and Western partners.

The worsening financial situation of the population in recent months (as a result of, among other things, rising gas, electricity and food prices) has led to protests in Gagauzia, which often assume an openly pro-Russian character in the region. Protesters demonstrating against the increases and the policies of the pro-Western government not only call on Moscow to lower gas prices and provide humanitarian aid to the region, but sometimes call outright for the annexation of Gagauzia to Russia. On 25 September 2022, at one of the demonstrations that took place in the town of Vulcanesti, Alexandr Dinjos, a deputy of the Gagauz parliament, expressed the hope that Russia would help the region and unambiguously suggested that since "it is close" (i.e. Russian troops are in Ukraine), the Gagauz would soon welcome Russia to Gagauzia.²⁵

Several different political groups are behind the organization of the protests. One of the most visible is the group rallying around Victor Petrov, a deputy of the People's Assembly, namely the local parliament. Petrov is the founder of the Centrul Comunitar Anticriză organization, which owns the news portal gagauznews.md, a news outlet blocked by Moldova's Information and Security Service (SIS) after the Russian invasion of Ukraine for promoting content inciting hatred and war. At the end of July 2022 in Comrat, the capital of the Autonomy, Petrov announced the formation of the People's Union of Gagauzia (Gagauz Halk Birlii), an anti-government socio-political

24 'Анализ внешнеэкономической деятельности АТО Гагаузия за 2017 – 2021 годы' [Analysis of foreign economic activities of ATU Gagauzia for 2017 – 2021], Department of Economic Development and Tourism of Gagauzia, <https://econutag.md/analiz-vneshneekonomicheskoy-deyatelnosti/>.

25 'Депутат НСГ: «Русские близко, скоро мы их встретим с калачом и кaurмой»' [Member of the National Assembly of Gagauz: "The Russians are close, soon we will meet them with kalach and kaurma"], Gagauzinfo.md, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://gagauzinfo.md/news/politics/deputat-nsg-russkie-blizko-skoro-my-ih-vstretim-s-kalachom-i-kaurmoy>.

movement that aims, among other things, to develop good relations with Russia and other countries in the Eurasian Economic Union.

By supporting anti-government movements in Gagauzia, the Kremlin seeks to destabilize the situation in Moldova. It tries to present the Moldovan authorities as uninterested in the fate of the people of Gagauzia, or as directly acting against them, including by pursuing an allegedly “anti-Russian policy”. It is to be expected that the situation in Gagauzia may escalate in the near future. This will be fostered both by rising

energy and gas bills during the winter period and by campaigning for the Bashkan election in April, which is gaining momentum. Some political forces and Russian-backed candidates may even start using separatist slogans in such a situation. Although any real separation of Gagauzia from Moldova seems very unlikely (70% of the region’s budget is made up of subsidies from the centre), a potential deep crisis in relations between Comrat and Chisinau would pose a serious problem for PAS and distract it from other problems.

Other elements of Russia's influence toolkit in Moldova

Cyber security

Moldova remains extremely vulnerable to Russian cyberattacks. The country's government and other public administration institutions are not adequately protected against such threats. Hacking into social media accounts and instant messaging systems used by key people in the state presents a particular problem. In early November 2022, hackers broke into accounts belonging to, among others, President Mai Sandu, Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development Andrei Spînu, Minister of Justice Sergiu Litvinienko, and Minister of the Interior Ana Revenco. The alleged records (their authenticity has not been confirmed) of these politicians' conversations with other politicians, members of the administration, judges or advisers were obtained and made public, leading to a political scandal. According to the Moldovan secret service, the attacks were probably conducted from Russia.²⁶ On the one hand, such activities make it possible to blackmail the Moldovan political class and, on the other, can serve as an effective tool to undermine public confidence in the authorities. In the near future, it is to be assumed that similar intrusions will also affect other messages or emails. It is notable that a number of Moldovan administration employees still use addresses hosted by Russian companies (such as Yandex or Mail.ru), which makes them particularly vulnerable to hackers.

Bomb alerts

Moldova is facing a wave of false bomb alerts. Since summer 2022, there have been around 400 reports of alleged explosive devices being placed in various public institutions, hospitals or transport hubs (especially at Chisinau Airport). In July 2022 alone, more than 50 such alerts were received by the services. These reports came from IP addresses in Russia and Belarus.²⁷ Although none of the alerts has proved to be genuine, there is no doubt that their aim is to instil an atmosphere of fear in society and to generate a perception that the authorities are not in control of the situation in the country.

Ukrainian refugees

Moldova is, alongside Poland, the country most affected by the influx of refugees from Ukraine. As of 15 November 2022, 693,000 people fleeing Ukraine (equivalent to 27% of Moldova's population) had crossed the border into Moldova.²⁸ Some decided to remain, and it is estimated that there are still approximately 80,000 refugees from Ukraine on Moldovan territory (3.1% of Moldova's population), half of whom are children. A significant number of them have been welcomed by Moldovans into their homes, but nonetheless the support and assistance provided to Ukrainians is putting a strain on the already very tight Moldovan budget (as much as 23% of the planned budget

26 Gorceas, Olga, '«Похоже, за „сливами“ стоят спецслужбы России». Глава СИБ о взломе переписок политиков в Telegram' ['It looks like Russia's special services are behind the leaks.' The head of the SIS on hacking the correspondence of politicians in Telegram], Newsmaker.md, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/pohozhe-za-slivami-stoyat-spetssluzhby-rossii-glava-siba-o-vzlome-perepisok-politikov-v-telegram/>.

27 Soltan, Irina, 'Alertele cu bombă vin din Belarus și Rusia. Natalia Gavrilă: Nu știm dacă cei care stau în spate sunt în aceste țări' [Bomb alerts are coming from Belarus and Russia. Natalia Gavrilă: We do not know if those behind them are in these countries], Agora, <https://agora.md/stiri/105833/alertele-cu-bomba-vin-din-belarus-si-rusia-natalia-gavrilita-nu-stim-daca-cei-care-stau-in-spate-sunt-in-aceste-tari>.

28 UNHCR, 'Ukraine Refugee Situation', <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

expenditure for 2022 derived from deficit financing). Meanwhile, the authorities in Chisinau fear that the ongoing shelling of Ukrainian energy infrastructure could lead to another wave of refugees during the winter months. Moldova will not only be unable to provide sufficient assistance to these people, but will not even be able to carry out full-scale border control, as the Moldovan border services and police are already overstretched. Moreover, the influx of large numbers of refugees during the winter period may lead to increased tensions in Moldovan society, which will be hardest hit by high energy and gas prices at precisely this time. In such a situation, anti-refugee sentiment is also likely to increase.

Media and fake news

Russian media have traditionally enjoyed considerable popularity in Moldova. According to a poll conducted in June 2021, 41.4% of Moldovans follow the PRIME channel (which retransmits the Russian state-owned Pervyi Kanal) as one of the three main channels they get their news from. A total of 22.6% include Russian NTV in this trio, and 20.8% mention the RTR Planeta channel. The popularity of Russian TV stations is mainly due to the attractiveness of the content, which has better technical quality and is more interesting for the viewer than that produced by local stations with smaller budgets. In order to combat the propaganda transmitted through these channels, the Moldovan authorities introduced a ban on the retransmission

of analytical and information programmes originating from Russia as late as the beginning of March 2022. In June, in turn, the parliament passed a law on countering disinformation, which extended the ban to war films, among others. Nevertheless, Russian propaganda continues to reach a significant proportion of the Moldovan population, primarily through social media, including Facebook groups sponsored by Russia and pro-Russian forces, or the Russian Odnoklassniki.ru, a social network service used mainly in Russia and former Soviet Republics. Pro-Russian groups on the Telegram messaging service are also active.

Another media-related instrument in Russia's hybrid threat toolbox targeting Moldova is the creation and dissemination of fake news, and so-called deepfakes in particular. In October 2022, Russian pranksters, pretending to be the Prime Minister of Ukraine, published a recording of an alleged conversation with President Sandu. This footage was used to argue that Moldova was preparing to mobilize troops against Russia.

Russian propaganda reaching Moldovans through both traditional and social media influences the perception of the ongoing war in Ukraine. According to a poll from October 2022, as many as 27% of Moldovans believe that the US bears primary responsibility for the outbreak of the war, while 21% blame NATO, and 19% the Ukrainian government. Putin (personally) and Russia are considered culpable by 40% and 20% respectively.²⁹

29 CBS Research, Sondaj socio-politic [Socio-political survey], Republica Moldova, October 2022.

Conclusions

Since the end of 2021, Russia has taken a number of steps to destabilize the political, social and economic situation in Moldova. The Kremlin is using all the instruments at its disposal in an effort to undermine the position of the government in Chisinau, trying to diminish support for it through economic means and by creating a sense of threat and instability (“attacks” in Transnistria, bomb alerts). It is also trying to undermine public confidence in the government and damage the image of pro-European forces (including through cyberattacks). There is no doubt that in the long run, Moscow is counting on pro-Russian forces to seize power in Moldova. Russia may try to provoke riots in the country and even attempt a coup by taking advantage of the rise in social discontent related to the weak economic situation (high

inflation, rising gas prices, high energy prices, gas and electricity supply disruptions), and a potential further wave of refugees from Ukraine.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that Russia’s leverage over Moldova has decreased decisively in recent years. Moscow no longer exerts as much influence over Moldova’s economy as it did even five years ago. Moldova, despite the high financial cost of such an arrangement, has the ability to import electricity and gas from non-Russian sources. This was not possible just a few years ago. Its economy is not dependent on exports to Russia, while the influence of Russian media, although still visible, is far weaker than before. It is likely that this trend will continue in the years to come.

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