

Russian soft power and influence projection instruments in Moldova – a forecast for the 2022- 2024 period

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Introduction

"Russia can't be understood with the mind alone, No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness: She stands alone, unique – In Russia, one can only believe"

– are the words written by the Russian diplomat and poet Fyodor Tyutchev back in 1866. The interesting thing about this phrase, which has become and remained generic for Russian state propaganda, is that even at the time it was written it was already being thought of in the context of building a mystical aura of Russia in contrast to the "degrading West". As early as the 19th century the ideas and creative wording were taken up by the state propaganda of the Tsarist regime, which clearly saw itself threatened by the movements in European countries, who were transitioning from absolute monarchies to republics. And the ideas of a unique role, messianic character, "Noah's ark" for Christianity and traditions, all in contrast to the West formulated by Tyutchev fit well. As did the calls for the denial of reason - "In Russia you can only believe" - were extremely appropriate. A kind of "believe and don't investigate". The short poem is so well constructed that it has

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managed to serve multiple propagandistic needs, especially when it is necessary to add as much relativism as possible and calls for the suppression of critical thought¹.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the regime in Russia is facing problems similar to those during the European revolutions of the 1840s - it feels threatened by democracy. Old clichés are being pulled out and adapted to reality, including phrases from Tyutchev's poetry. The first phrase has become a universal meme of Russian state propaganda. Effectively applied for absolutely diverse purposes, but especially in international relations and foreign policy. Vladimir Putin even took it upon himself to adapt the poem during a meeting with the former president of France². And Tyutchev's ideas about Russia's "special path" of development - different also from Europe and Asia - do not differ much from the theoretical-propagandistic constraints of Vladislav Surkov³. In foreign policy, Putin's Russia is propagating the "Russia can't be understood with the mind" meme vehemently. The Kremlin tries to ascribe to itself a quasi-mystical aura of an evil but highly intelligent, efficient, unpredictable, contradictory power, always with sophisticated and well-thought-out plans at hand, in other words - impossible to confront. Many factors have contributed to this perception among the general population, opinion formers, a significant part of the press and, consequently, policymakers. Apart from Russia's own effort, mainstream culture has played a huge role - films, TV series etc. have always presented a disproportionate and irrational - but certainly fearsome - Russia. The exaggerated exploitation for the purposes of political infighting of the importance of the Kremlin and the effectiveness of its actions in the US political agenda (after meddling in the 2016 elections), the Western community's stuttering vis-a-vis the occupation of Crimea and military aggression in the Donbas - all of these have contributed to reinforcing this mythical image of the Kremlin. The public debate about Russia, and to some extent the Western decision-making process as a result, is highly influenced by alarmist clichés while real dangers issued by the Kremlin are often overlooked. Since the fall of the Soviet Union 30 years ago, the Kremlin still manages to keep the West in fear. This is a major achievement, given the incomparably smaller potential and resources compared to the communist empire before 1991.

It is my opinion that most of the Kremlin's successes are precisely due to a shortage of evaluation of every potential action. That is what happened with the invasion of Georgia and Ukraine. For both the US and EU countries it was an unexpected move. So was the intervention in Syria. Clearly, attitudes are changing and the focus on analysis and planning to prevent Russian aggression in the region and the world has become much stronger. And this could work since Russia has by no means a perfect strategic planning and implementation machine, it has a lot of loopholes and weaknesses that can seriously disrupt its expansionist plans. It is from this perspective that I will construct my analytical

¹ https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2019/07/27/a_12538561.shtml

² Ibid

³ <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/odinochestvo-polukrovki-14/>

study - from the absolute denial of the meme "You cannot understand Russia with your mind". My presumption is that there are rational explanations for every aggressive and soft power action, they can be foreseen and prevented. Russia can and must be understood in order to have a chance to prevent its aggressive expansion.

The study will examine the case of the Republic of Moldova and the Kremlin's policies/actions towards Moldova in the past, present and near future. I will start by assessing the strategic objectives pursued by the Russian Federation in the region and in Moldova in particular. The study will shortly review the evidence of the Kremlin's actions in the Republic of Moldova over the past 12 years, how it has undermined the country's western orientation, subordinated its political forces, spread disinformation, etc. A mapping of the Russian actors who have played an important role in shaping and pursuing the Kremlin's policies towards the Republic of Moldova will be carried out. Additionally, the causes of Russia's major failures and successes in Moldova will be examined. In particular, the applicant will seek to identify the causes of the major failure suffered by Russian-controlled forces in the Republic of Moldova in the 2020 and 2021 elections.

A final and most important chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the interests and instruments available to the Kremlin in the new political context in the Republic of Moldova. In particular, given the reduced room for maneuver in the political sphere, I will examine how the breakaway Transnistrian region as an instrument of influence on the new political power in Chisinau could be enhanced.

At the end of the study, recommendations will be formulated for policymakers in the Republic of Moldova and partner countries (EU and US) to prevent and counteract the Kremlin's malign influence in the new political context.

Russian Federation's interference in Moldovan elections - a tradition with an elusive purpose.

In this analysis we will try to examine how the Russian Federation got involved in the Putin era in the Moldovan elections⁴. We will start with the 2005 elections and trace the history of these actions up to the 2020 and 2021 election campaigns. The description is based on public sources, information held by the author as a participant in several electoral processes as well as on interviews with active participants in political processes in various periods. The report is not exhaustive for objective reasons - the enormous amount of information. In order to analyse the Russian Federation's involvement and objectives in the Moldovan elections we use official statements and indirect clues based on publications in

⁴ Some of the findings presented in this chapter were reflected in my study on Russian interference in the 2019 parliamentary elections, where I presented them in much more detail and in a more systemized way - <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Why-is-Russian-meddling-Modova-2019-elections.pdf>

the Russian and Moldovan press. In particular, we will analyze the behavior of the most important Russian TV channel - Pervii Kanal, as it is a very good marker of Kremlin's positioning towards one subject or another, but also because it has been broadcast all these years in the Republic of Moldova (the news of this channel was broadcast until February 2017 by the Prime TV channel owned since 2007 by Vlad Plahotniuc, and since 2021 the news is being retransmitted by the "First in Moldova" TV channel (Primul în Moldova) owned through intermediaries by Igor Dodon and several Russian businessmen). Moreover, all these years, "First in Moldova" has been the most popular and influential TV channel in Moldova. According to the Public Opinion Barometer data, throughout the years, the Russian channel has always been in the first place as a source of information. In 2008 64.5% of Moldovans watched this channel every day or several times a week. Unfortunately, we do not have older data, but before 2005, this TV channel was the main source of information for even more citizens.

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On June 2nd 2017, the 21st International Economic Forum took place in St. Petersburg. The plenary session included a panel with the participation of Vladimir Putin, Austrian Chancellor Kern, Indian Prime Minister Modi and the newly elected President of Moldova - Igor Dodon. NBC (formerly FoxNews) host Megyn Kelly moderated the panel and had the opportunity to ask many questions on political issues. After trying unsuccessfully to corner the Russian president with uncomfortable questions about the US election meddling investigation, Kelly addressed the Indian prime minister⁵. *"Prime Minister Modi, President Putin said the other day that Russia does not engage in state sponsored interference with other countries' elections. Do you believe that?"* The audience, packed with admirers of the Russian president, laughed. The host also smiled. As the Indian prime minister prepared to answer, Putin, clearly amused, cut him off, turned on his microphone and said - *"You should ask Dodon! He knows!"* Putin seemed very satisfied with the joke he had pulled off, while the audience applauded and laughed. The Moldovan president displayed a forced smile. The ridicule of the Moldovan president did not go unnoticed in Moldova, but also in the European media. The Danish publication Jylland Posten wondered whether the Russian president considers Dodon a clown in his own court⁶. Balkan Insight published a similar opinion piece⁷.

What did Putin imply? Maybe Dodon indeed knew something? What does Dodon actually know? Or perhaps the sarcasm meant the fact that even Dodon is unaware of the extent to which he is the product of Russian interference? In the following years, and even

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3OYwtFID9Q> (Min: 2:04:10)

⁶ <https://jyllands-posten.dk/international/europa/ECE9630469/er-han-putins-hofnar/>

⁷ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/moldovan-president-ridiculed-after-putin-joke-06-05-2017>

until now, the former president of the Republic of Moldova has fully displayed himself as a pawn of the Kremlin. His dependence on Moscow has proven to be even stronger than on the feared Moldovan oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc. Furthermore - Igor Dodon's election took place at the same time as the election of Donald Trump, which was also suspected of being influenced by Putin's agents. Dodon's election was the culmination of the Russian Federation's successful efforts to gain control of political power in Moldova through legitimate elections. It was just 4 years later, when Igor Dodon and all the pro-Russian political forces were defeated by Maia Sandu in the presidential elections and then in the parliamentary elections. What explains these contrasting results? Let's try to find out the answers below.

In the table below I have systematised the instruments used over the last 20 years by the Kremlin to influence the Moldovan election results. I have also tried to highlight to what extent each of these is applied, by comparing them. Thus, the red colour signifies a very high scale use, while the yellow color indicated an episodic use or very limited impact and orange is intermediary. The remaining white cells signify either no evidence or no use.

	Media support	Political support (image transfer)	Economic sanctions and stimulation	Moldovan diaspora in Russia stimulation	Organized crime structures involvement	On-line manipulation and social media adds	Financing electoral actors	Moldovan Orthodox Church (Russian Patriarchy)	Analytical groups involvement and sociological data collection	Persons connected to Russian special services (SVR; FSB, "Chernov" department etc.	Voter "mobilization" in the Transnistrian region
2001	Yellow										
2005	Orange		Orange	Orange	Yellow		Orange			Red	
2009 I	Yellow										
2009 II	Yellow							Yellow			
2010	Orange	Yellow						Yellow		Yellow	
2014	Red	Red	Red	Orange	Orange		Red	Yellow	Red	Red	Yellow
2016	Red	Red	Orange	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Yellow
2019	Orange	Red	Red	Red		Red	Orange			Red	Red
2020	Orange		Yellow	Orange	Orange	Red	Orange	Red	Red	Red	Orange
2021	Orange	Yellow			Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Orange	Red	Orange

The conclusions are obvious: since 2014, after the invasion of Ukraine and the beginning of a new confrontation with the West, Russia has also intensified its interference in the elections and other political processes in Moldova. However, each episode must be analysed individually. In addition to a visibly more aggressive foreign policy, there were also many domestic factors and actors in the Republic of Moldova that made the Kremlin's more intense interference possible. The list in the table includes only national elections.

But in the same period, there were also other elections worth mentioning - the 2011 Chisinau mayoral elections. Moscow got directly involved in these elections by sending Colonel Igor Maslov - the head of the "Moldovan section" of the Kremlin administration - to Chisinau⁸. Maslov even worked side by side with Vlad Plahotniuc, having an office in his hotel - all to raise the "new star" of Moldovan politics - Igor Dodon. Additionally, we cannot ignore the elections in the Gagauz autonomy - Irina Vlah's election for her first term as head of the autonomy was administered directly by Kremlin-appointed politologists.

Likewise – I have tried to systematize the beneficiaries in whose support Russian interference worked in various elections. Additionally, I mapped the political forces against whom this effort was directed.

Beneficiaries of Russian support	Direct	Indirect	Main targets
2001		Party of Communist (Voronin)	
2005	"Democratic Moldova Bloc" (Urechean, Diacov) Ravnopravie (now Shor party), Patria etc.		Party of Communist (Voronin)
2009 I		Party of Communist (Voronin)	
2009 II	Party of Communist (Voronin)		Pro-European opposition (Filat, Ghimpu)
2010	Party of Communist (Voronin), Democratic Party (Plahotniuc)		Pro-European parties (Filat, Ghimpu)
2014	Party of Socialists (Dodon), Our Party (Usatyi)	Democratic Party (Plahotniuc), Communists Party (Voronin)	Pro-european opposition (Filat, Ghimpu)
2016	Igor Dodon	Vlad Plahotniuc (Democratic party)	Maia Sandu
2019	Party of Socialists (Dodon)	,Shor Party (Ilan Shor), Democratic Party (Plahotniuc)	Pro-European opposition (Sandu, Nastase)
2020	Igor Dodon	Kleptocratic groups	Maia Sandu
2021	Party of Socialists	Shor party, local kleptocratic groups (Platon, Plahotniuc)	PAS party (Maia Sandu)

⁸ <https://dossier.center/chernov/>

It appears that the Russian Federation has always tried to influence the balance of forces on the Chisinau political arena. Over the years these attempts have intensified. At the same time, it is important to understand that none of the political forces supported by the Kremlin were created/initiated by it. It is the political leaders in the Republic of Moldova who are competing for the political (perhaps financial) benefits of Russian support. In the analysis published in 2019, we named this phenomenon "influence by invitation"⁹. Moreover, various actors in the Republic of Moldova have managed to speculate very well the interests of the Russian Federation (and the Western ones too) and to arrange convenient political relations through Russian efforts. First of all, it is Vlad Plahotniuc who, on the one hand, exerted influence on the PSRM, allowing them to grow only to a certain level. On the other hand, Plahotniuc tried to get European and American support, or at least acceptance, by blackmailing that otherwise the socialists could take the power. Moreover, there are reasonable grounds to believe that it was in fact Plahotniuc who introduced Igor Dodon to the corridors of Russian power so that he could obtain the status of Putin's "chosen one" in the Republic of Moldova.

The causes of the success and failures of these operations will be discussed below, but at this stage it is important to try to see what Russia's aims are in these actions. **In general, the Russian Federation has tried to limit Moldova's sovereignty in making foreign and domestic policy decisions.** This seems to be the purpose of introducing politicians dependent on Moscow into Parliament or into the office of President. This interference culminated in 2016-2020. In 2016, Igor Dodon, openly supported by the Kremlin and more discreetly by oligarch Plahotniuc, became the country's president. In 2019, the Party of Socialists led by Igor Dodon became the largest party in parliament. A brief period of conjunctural coalition between pro-European parties and pro-Russian Socialists followed. Its aim was to oust the odious oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc.

Then, in autumn 2019, the leaderless Democratic Party voted for a government controlled by Igor Dodon¹⁰. Igor Dodon shared some powers with the Democratic Party, but had almost total control of the main state institutions. Parliament voted on virtually anything that was asked of it, yet there has been no sudden change in foreign policy behaviour. With the exception of the attempt to take out a loan on highly controversial terms¹¹ and some dubious changes to the terms of the gas supply contract¹², no decisions have been taken that truly anchor Moldova in the sphere of Russian influence. The absolute majority of the

⁹ <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Why-is-Russian-meddling-Moldova-2019-elections.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-moldova-politics-government-idUSKBN1XO1KS>

¹¹ <https://www.watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Opinion-Russian-credit-ENG-7.pdf>

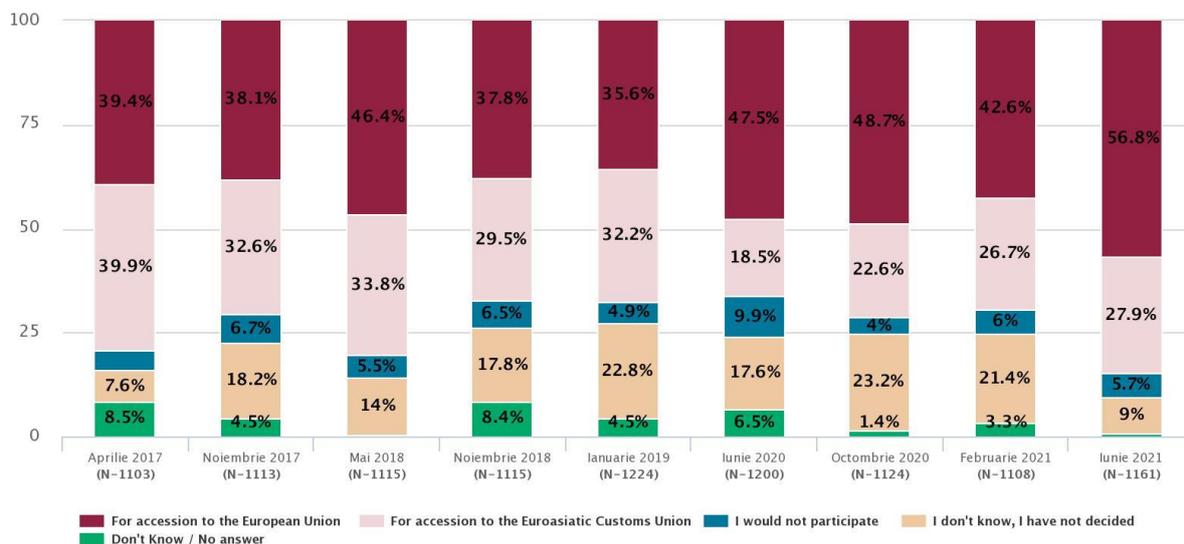
¹²

https://infomarket.md/en/pwengineering/Moldovagaz_is_negotiating_with_Gazprom_a_new_model_for_calculating_the_cost_of_natural_gas_and_the_price_can_be_partially_tied_to_its_value_in_the_spot_market

risks and bad scenarios previously formulated in the event of a takeover of power by pro-Russian forces have not come true. No strategic enterprises have been privatised for Russian benefit, no agreements related to the Transnistrian region or to defence and security have been initiated.

Instead - since Igor Dodon took over quasi-total power in the state, his and the party's popularity has steadily declined. Thus, if in the first round of the 2016 presidential elections Igor Dodon garnered more than 680 thousand votes, but in the first round of 2020 he had already obtained less than 440 thousand. All of this happened under direct control of administrative resources and organized active voting for voters in the Transnistrian region! A similar situation happened with the geo-political preferences of Moldovans. The multi-year measurements by the Barometer of Public Opinion¹³ shows a steady decline in the number of Moldovans who would prefer to join the Eurasian Union rather than the EU¹⁴. From the graph below we can see that in the last five years there was even a period when the number of supporters of the EAU was a bit higher than the EU. It happened in April 2017 - right after the election of Igor Dodon as president. In contrast - the minimum support (below 19%, i.e. more than twice as low as in 2017) for the Eastern option appears in the June 2020 poll, i.e. half a year after Igor Dodon effectively took over full power in the state.

If you had to choose in a referendum between Moldova's accession to the European Union and Moldova's accession to the Euroasiatic Customs Union (Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan), which would you opt for?
Perioada: 04.2016, 10.2016, 04.2017, 11.2017, 05.2018, 11.2018, 01.2019, 12.2019, 06.2020, 10.2020, 02.2021, 06.2021



N - number of respondents

Copyright © 2021 Public Opinion Barometer. Institute of Public Policies.
Accessed: 07.12.2021
Available: <http://bop.ipp.md>

¹³ <http://bop.ipp.md/en>

¹⁴ An important point is that the surveys do not include the Moldovan diaspora (about 1.15 million) and the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region (about 250 thousand).

That is to say, the effective takeover of state power by pro-Russian political forces has strongly negatively affected the attractiveness and credibility of the Russian-led integrationist project. This is due to the poor quality of governance, the association with corruption scandals and the failure to deliver on any of the many promises of investment, welfare, etc. that Igor Dodon has been promising on behalf of the Russian Federation. Verified in practice - the alternative of association with Russia at the expense of the EU has proven to be a false one. This situation could not have gone unassessed and prevented if the Kremlin had a detailed plan to take over and consolidate/maintain a puppet government in Moldova. Instead, we witnessed massive investments in keeping the Lukashenko regime afloat in Belarus, major investments in destabilising Ukraine, or the recent operation to support a friendly regime in Kazakhstan¹⁵. This means that Russia has not set out to take full control and responsibility for a pocket government in Chisinau. It is absolutely clear that Putin's regime is ready to pay major financial and other costs for the expansion and maintenance of geopolitical influence, especially in Eastern Europe. But he probably doesn't consider this a feasible endeavour at this stage in the case of Moldova, when Belarus and Ukraine are a priority.

Most likely, at this stage, the strategy vis-à-vis the Republic of Moldova is not to bring it into its full sphere of influence, but to prevent the country's definitive break from the Russian zone of influence. That is, keeping the country in a grey zone. This approach fits rather neatly into the Russian foreign policy visions known as the Primakov Doctrine¹⁶. Within this doctrine, the post-Soviet space plays one of the central roles. **Bringing the countries that have broken away from the USSR into the Russian zone of influence, turning them into satellite states with limited sovereignty, and having this status recognised and enshrined internationally is seen as a source of great power status in the 'multipolar world system'.** Russia's recent diplomatic "offensive" and the conditions formulated for negotiations with the US and NATO confirm this view¹⁷.

In this paradigm, Russia should play a major role alongside the US, China, possibly India. The essential thing is to reduce the dominant influence of the US in the system of international relations. There are various interpretations of the stages of achieving the objectives of the Primakov Doctrine, but what is certain is that Russia's lack of economic, military, technological and political capacity to subordinate all post-Soviet states simultaneously is recognised. Russia's current priority is to force the annexation or transformation into satellite states of Ukraine and Belarus, while Moldova, as well as the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia¹⁸, are second. Prioritising Belarus and Ukraine

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/troops-protesters-clash-almaty-main-square-kazakhstan-shots-heard-2022-01-06/>

¹⁶ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>

¹⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/17/ukraine-russia-military/>

¹⁸ The intervention in Kazakhstan is a reactive one, aimed rather at avoiding loss of influence and other dangers for Russia in Kazakhstan, in the event of strengthening Islamist camps and the role of Turkey

as first phase targets is also in line with the assessment made a quarter of a century ago by Zbigniew Brzezinski¹⁹. Namely that Russia needs to absorb or turn the two East Slavic countries into satellite states in order to build the Russian empire based on the "Slavic nation". If we look at the article signed this summer by Vladimir Putin himself²⁰, we observe exactly this logic of discourse - Ukraine's very right to independent statehood is questioned and Belarus' similar position is presumed.

Bottom line – the Republic of Moldova, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Baltics are treated by Russia as "second tier" targets. On this group of countries, the Putin regime is applying the strategy of the intermediate stage. That is, maintaining Russian influence, bridgeheads and preventing the growth of alternative influences, especially the US and the EU. A separate chapter in the relay is the competition with China (in Central Asia in particular) and Turkey (in the Caucasus, but also in Central Asia). This is seen as contrary to Russian interests on the one hand, but also as an alternative in competition with the influence of Western allies.

The Kremlin's recent démarche to the US and NATO²¹ fits exactly into this logic - while demanding "unattainable" things such as effectively cancelling NATO expansion in Eastern Europe, i.e. a condition the West will reject anyway, Vladimir Putin has formulated several lines of demands from the outset so as to benefit from the principle of "ask for the impossible in order to get what you want". The most likely 'compromise' that Vladimir Putin wants to achieve is the warranty that Ukraine, Georgia and other European countries remain outside NATO, and that military cooperation and the establishment of the US military bases throughout the post-Soviet area stopped. The success of this demand would mean achieving the 'preservation' of these states in the grey zone. This will allow for the future absorption or subordination (rather this option) of these countries by Russia.

Tools of influence and possible scenarios applied by the Kremlin.

In the case of Moldova, Russia feels less threatened than in the case of Ukraine for several reasons. The main reason is the recognized status of neutral country and the government's lack of declared ambition to join NATO. Another reason is the fact that the Republic of

and/or Muslim countries in the Persian Gulf. This is also confirmed by the limited number of troops sent there. Which is not to say that Putin won't subsequently seek significant concessions from the Tokayev regime in return for the offered support. Another element that has conditioned Russia's reaction is the very danger of regime change through uprisings. The Kremlin perceives such processes as potentially "contagious" for Russia.

¹⁹ https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/36/36669B7894E857AC4F3445EA646BFFE1_Zbigniew_Brzezinski_-_The_Grand_ChessBoard.doc.pdf, page 88

²⁰ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

²¹ https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en

Moldova could not become a role model within Russia. That is, it cannot be an "Anti-Russia" as opposed to the way that the Kremlin ideologues define Ukraine²².

The main threats and limitations to Russia's long-term goals in Moldova are:

- **deeper economic and political integration with the EU;**
- **strengthening of state institutions, especially in justice and security which would greatly diminish future penetration capacity;**
- **political, security and defense cooperation with the US;**
- **increasing the resilience of society and state institutions to disinformation, propaganda and interference in democratic processes**
- **strengthening/maintaining the high popularity of pro-European political forces.**

In recent years, Russia has lost a lot of room for manoeuvre **in the economic field**. Moldovan exports have shifted sharply towards the EU countries²³. In 2000, around 45% of Moldovan exports went to the Russian market, while in 2020 - less than 9%²⁴. In contrast, the share of exports to EU countries²⁵ has risen from 35% in 2000 to 66% in 2020. Moldovan producers are much more resilient to possible new embargoes. Russia "shot" these "shells" in 2006 and 2014. This is why, immediately after the new pro-European government was established, Moscow resorted to the last strong economic weapon it has against Moldova - the energy sector. This is where the country's potential for resistance is minimal. This was also confirmed by the results of the October 2021 "gas crisis"²⁶. The Republic of Moldova continues to depend 100% on natural gas imports from Russia and 80% on electricity production controlled by the Russian state company Inter RAO.

By playing the energy dependency card, Russia has pushed up prices. This generated additional costs of around \$200 million annually, of which around 40% are to be covered by the state budget. In other words, around 2% of GDP will be poured into GazProm instead of being invested in development. For comparison - the money allocated from the budget to

²² <https://iz.ru/1192145/nikolai-pozdnyakov-vladislav-zuevskii/v-proekte-anti-rossiia-net-mesta-suverennoi-ukraine>

²³

https://statbank.statistica.md/PxWeb/pxweb/ro/40%20Statistica%20economica/40%20Statistica%20economica__21%20EXT__EXT010__serii%20anuale/EXT010200.px/table/tableViewLayout1?rxid=b2ff27d7-0b96-43c9-934b-42e1a2a9a774

²⁴

https://statbank.statistica.md/PxWeb/pxweb/ro/40%20Statistica%20economica/40%20Statistica%20economica__21%20EXT__EXT010__serii%20anuale/EXT010200.px/table/tableViewLayout1?rxid=b2ff27d7-0b96-43c9-934b-42e1a2a9a774

²⁵ Including countries that joined along the way.

²⁶ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-11-03/moldova-contract-gazprom-threatens-3rd-energy-package>

partially compensate for gas price increase in 2022 is more than the entire budget for roads²⁷. In the absence of other strong economic instruments, Russia will continue to generate costs for Moldova in the energy sector. Specifically - it will continue its episodic²⁸ and systemic blackmail to pay off alleged gas debts. The legitimacy of these debts is highly dubious²⁹. If it succeeds in imposing the payment of the so-called "historical debt" of around \$700 million in 5 years, together with the increase in purchase prices - then the Moldovan economy will suffer annual losses of approximately \$340 million over the next five years due to gas alone. That is about 3% of GDP on average.

This is a huge cost that will severely slow economic growth. We anticipate that Russia will be able to counterbalance, from natural gas alone, at least all the benefits of international financing (EU, IMF, World Bank, etc.) that the Republic of Moldova might receive during that period. Another potential risk is in the field of electricity. If Ukraine does not have enough electricity to secure potential exports to Moldova³⁰, the Cuciurgan thermal power plant controlled by INTER RAO could take over GazProm's tactics. That is, to force a price increase, possibly on the grounds of the "high price of gas"³¹ needed for electricity production. In the absence of potential stable alternative supplies, this scenario is very likely. A possible 50% increase in the price of electricity sales to the right bank could cost the Moldovan economy an additional \$100 million annually.

By imposing these economic costs on Moldova, Moscow is pursuing several objectives. Firstly, **to limit the capacity of the government in Chisinau to invest** in the development of infrastructure in energy sector, roads, rails, electronic communications, energy efficiency, power generation, etc. The development of infrastructure in these areas is necessary to strengthen economic integration with the EU, decrease energy dependence on Russia, resist shocks related to energy consumption and to increase the competitiveness of Moldovan producers. Moscow's second objective is to affect economic growth. The slow economic growth will decrease the satisfaction of the population with the results of the pro-European government. Another indirect effect is **the decrease of the budget revenues** that otherwise could be directed towards strengthening the security system, defence, administration in general by attracting specialists with better salaries.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the energy tool, together with the influence on public opinion, are the main instruments of influence that the Russian Federation has at its

²⁷ <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-economice/doc-proiectul-legii-bugetului-de-stat-pentru-2022-aprobat-de-guvern/>

²⁸ <https://www.perild.com/2021/11/24/gazprom-did-not-receive-money-from-moldova-and-recalled-the-ultimatum/>

²⁹ <https://www.watchdog.md/2020/10/28/moldovagaz-vs-gazprom-who-actually-has-debts/>

³⁰ And such a scenario, against the backdrop of limited exports from Russia and Belarus seems quite realistic <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-10-19/ukraine-energy-problems-eve-heating-season>

³¹ The Transnistrian region does not pay for market gas prices, they are rather symbolic and set by the unconstitutional authorities in Tiraspol.

disposal and that will be fully applied by the Russian Federation in relation to the Republic of Moldova in order to achieve its strategic objectives in relation to this country in the next 3-4 years.

In order to exert **influence over the political and security cooperation with the EU, the US and some EU member states** (especially with Romania), Moscow has less room for manoeuvre. Essentially, Moscow will only be able to use disinformation and propaganda tools to discredit and denigrate the closeness to Western alliances in the eyes of Moldovan citizens. The propaganda and conspiracy narratives used by Moscow and its proxy agents in Moldova are already well known and no different from those applied in the world, the region or even inside Russia. Promotion of "traditional values", speculation on historical memory, fear-mongering of all kinds, falsehoods about a possible luring of Moldova into a war against Russia, allegations that a "colonial regime" led by the US and the EU has been installed in the country, "world government" conspiracies, etc. have been, are and will remain widely applied in the Republic of Moldova. Russia has a large network of media and opinion-makers financed to promote its media and ideological agenda. Most of this network is controlled by local politicians (PSRM). At the same time, a strong diversification of political actors promoting Russia's strategic narrative is expected to emerge. In fact, we are already witnessing this diversification³². More details on how the Kremlin could instrumentalize domestic political competition are described below.

Moscow will continue to plan and implement campaigns to manipulate public opinion in order to discredit European integration, targeting both partner countries and the Moldovan government. These campaigns will target specific events and projects (visits, agreements, infrastructure projects, Western investments, etc.) but also current activities, thus creating a general negative information background around Moldova's Western integration. It is important to note that the Russian state media is still very present in the Republic of Moldova. A new emerging element is the cooperation with local actors that have convergent goals with those of the Kremlin. These are the kleptocratic groups that are strongly threatened by the reformist and anti-corruption agenda of the new government. Individuals such as Veaceslav Platon, Ilan Shor, Vlad Plahotniuc and other corrupt actors are willing to invest heavily in the media and opinion makers to create political costs for the government led by President Maia Sandu. The aims they are pursuing (i.e. discrediting the government) are totally in line with Russia's strategic interest. That is why we expect an intensification of the cooperation of these groups with Russian decision-makers for joint actions in the Republic of Moldova.

We should not forget that in addition to these "soft" methods, Russia has tools to further tense the situation by provocations in the Transnistrian region and by activating a separatist movement in Gagauzia. If it finds that efforts to exert economic pressure, manipulate public opinion and interfere politically do not bring the desired success, and

³² <https://cotidianul.md/2022/01/05/nu-va-jucati-cu-gazul-contre-pe-facebook-intre-inga-grigoriu-si-ion-sturza/>

that the Republic of Moldova breaks away from Russian control for good, Moscow could still resort to scenarios similar to those applied in Ukraine. It is important to understand that the scale of potential military or para-military challenges could not be too great. For one thing, it would generate very high international costs. Secondly, it would be extremely problematic for Russia to keep the conflict active for a long period. Scenarios similar to the Donbas aggression are unlikely because the Kremlin cannot ensure a long-lasting conflict with resources. The situation could be entirely different in the event of a full-scale aggression against Ukraine. In such an extreme scenario, the Kremlin would certainly target Moldova to annex Transnistria and possibly south regions of the country. Moreover, in the event of an aggression against southern Ukraine, Moscow will most likely use its military assets from Transnistria against Ukraine and will most likely provoke insurgencies in Gagauzia.

It is an extreme scenario³³, but not an impossible one. However, on the assumption that Russia will not wage a full-scale war against Ukraine and that it could exclusively target the stability of the Republic of Moldova, limited actions in the security zone between the occupied Transnistrian region and the territory controlled by the Moldovan authorities are not excluded. These could be aimed at tensioning the internal political situation and social destabilisation through protest movements of the Russian-speaking population. Such a crisis would paralyse many of the Chisinau government's efforts, to the detriment of reforms. In return, Russia would face new tensions in its relations with the EU and the US. At the same time, an anaemic reaction at the EU level and the renunciation to further intensify Moldova's European integration in order not to irritate Russia is also plausible. The likelihood of such scenarios depends primarily on developments in Ukraine, but also on the success of the integrated US and EU strategy to deter Russia's aggressive actions in the region³⁴.

A completely opposite scenario could be **to use the frozen conflict on the Dniester** to create a "positive precedent" in Moscow's relations with the West. In other words, the reintegration of the Republic of Moldova under the condition of "strengthening its neutrality". A sort of Kozak Memorandum 2.0. This scenario is not at all unlikely and will almost certainly be attempted by the Kremlin at one stage or another in the coming years. The recent public statements of Dmitry Kozak have already shown that this scenario is being implemented³⁵. In parallel, Moscow has activated the Tiraspol administration, which it controls, in order to push for the resumption of negotiations. The unconstitutional leader of the Transnistrian region, Vadim Krasnoselski, sent public letters to Maia Sandu after a

³³ <https://www.brookings.edu/podcast-episode/will-russia-launch-a-full-military-invasion-of-ukraine/>

³⁴ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia%E2%80%99s-ever-shifting-red-lines-ukraine-197382>

³⁵ <https://realitatea.md/dorinta-rusilor-de-a-reglementa-politic-conflictul-transnistrean-bate-la-ochi-kozak-a-vorbit-ceva-si-cu-osce/>

visit to Moscow³⁶. All this indicates that Moscow may be trying to impose a solution by means of rapid reintegration under conditions which appear to be advantageous to Moldova, but which could prove fatal to the normal functioning of the state.

Moreover, I know from reliable sources that Dmitry Kozak himself has declared his intention and readiness to quickly find a reintegration formula. Clearly, such a solution, from Moscow's perspective, would have to include a disguised federalisation of the country with the blocking of any decisions on eventual EU membership, strengthening of relations with the US, etc., by the Kremlin-controlled political leaders in Tiraspol. Another solution from Kremlin's perspective could be a rapid reintegration in a unitary state format, so that Moldova becomes blocked economically and in terms of reforms. In the current state of the Moldovan institutions, lacking qualified staff, the capacity of the Moldovan government to plan and carry out such complex administrative actions as the integration of an uncontrolled, totally unsynchronised territory, under constant pressure from kleptocratic groups and media propaganda - the Republic of Moldova will become functionally incapacitated. All human, institutional and financial resources will be directed towards trying to extend the functioning of the state in the former secessionist territories. This means that reforms in the justice system, the fight against corruption and other transformations needed to strengthen European integration will be abandoned.

In doing so, the Russian Federation could bet on the currents of opinion in the West³⁷ and present this rapid settlement as a yielding on its part. If the Kremlin manages to convince the White House administration of the prospects of settling the Transnistrian dispute quickly - the opposition from Moldova's Eastern European allies (Ukraine, Romania, Poland, the Baltic States) is unlikely to be enough to stop the process. If this happens, the Kremlin could on the one hand gain an important precedent for its strategy in Ukraine, and on the other - not suffer any loss in Moldova. On the contrary - the actual reform process will be dynamited and all the scarce resources of the state will be directed to the reintegration of a region that comes with enormous economic and social costs. Even if we accept that the Republic of Moldova will receive significant funding for the reintegration of Transnistria, the limited capacity of the government will make it absolutely impossible to effectively manage both reintegration and reforms. Let us not forget also that this reintegration will dramatically change the electoral landscape - with some 200 thousand new voters under decades of unlimited Kremlin propaganda, the presidential elections will be much harder for pro-European forces to win.

³⁶ <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/scrisori-de-la-tiraspol-pre%C8%99edinta-maia-sandu-mai-prime%C8%99te-un-mesaj-cu-antet-de-la-krasnoselski/31626915.html>

³⁷ Turning the Transnistrian case into a successful one, in de-escalating Russia's relations with the West has long been discussed. It could be especially tempting for the French and German leadership, but the Kremlin could even speculate on the ideas of some of Putin's fiercest critics such as John Bolton or Michael McFaul - <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/3989>; <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2021/11/russia-has-bigger-plans-beyond-ukraine-and-belarus/>

A full reintegration of the Republic of Moldova can only be achieved after an effective reform of state institutions is conducted. First of all, a reform of the central administration is necessary (ministries, agencies, law enforcement structures, presidential administration, etc.), so that it enables it to design and implement comprehensive administrative actions such as building institutions in a new territory from scratch. Today, in the Republic of Moldova there is no institutional capacity even to elaborate the necessary actions and the possible practical impact of different reintegration scenarios. Even after solid reforms, a reintegration that does not destabilise and paralyse the Republic of Moldova can only be achieved gradually in consecutive stages over a period of at least 10 years.

Moreover, Russia will certainly ask Western countries for guarantees of Moldova's "neutral status". In other words, keeping Moldova untouched in the "grey zone" until "better times" come, when Russia can afford to annex or turn Moldova into a satellite country. An equally important issue for Vladimir Putin would be the above-mentioned scenario - to impose the federalist model of immobilization and desovereignization of the country, forcing the US and the EU to accept and legitimize the idea of spheres of influence. These precedents will obviously be used later to try to apply them Ukraine and perhaps Georgia.

The electoral interests of President Maia Sandu and the PAS party are another element that Kremlin already uses and will definitely continue to use in order to discourage Moldova's close cooperation with the EU and especially with the US. Although the EU membership option prevails among Moldova voters, many do not perceive the pro-European option as antagonistic to the cooperation and good relations with Russia. That is, a good proportion of pro-European voters are not anti-Russian at all. This category, around 30% of voters, refuses polarisation, even if it rationally prefers the EU integration. These "centrists" are decisive in elections. Maia Sandu and PAS won the elections precisely because they abandoned the antagonistic rhetoric of only two geopolitical options and generally condemned the polarisation of society on such criteria.³⁸ The new leadership in the Republic of Moldova, while stating unequivocally the priority of European integration³⁹, cannot afford the risk of openly antagonising Russia⁴⁰. Otherwise, the support from an important part of society will be greatly affected. Moreover, Maia Sandu and PAS made a clear commitment before the elections that they would try to build a mutually beneficial, fair and transparent relationship with Russia⁴¹.

³⁸ <https://jamestown.org/program/moldovas-presidential-election-geopolitics-take-a-back-seat-for-now/>

³⁹ https://www.ipn.md/ro/nicu-popescu-prioritatea-zero-in-politica-externa-integrarea-in-7965_1083662.html

⁴⁰ <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/vladimir-socor-reluarea-rela%C8%9Bilor-dintre-chi%C8%99in%C4%83u-%C8%99i-moscova-este-un-succes-de-politic%C4%83-intern%C4%83-al-pre%C8%99edintei-maia-sandu/31566632.html>

⁴¹

http://alegeri.md/w/Programul_electoral_al_candidatului_PAS_Maia_Sandu_la_alegerile_preziden%C8%9Biale_din_2020

On the other hand, Russia is quite openly making efforts to undermine the Moldovan government. In this way the Kremlin is engaging in a subtle game with the government in Chisinau. The latter will avoid being credibly blamed for pursuing an anti-Russian policy, including at the cost of limiting political, security and defence partnerships with the US and the EU (including taking positions on Russia's actions, the domestic situation in Russia, the situation in Belarus, etc.). At the same time, Chisinau has to be careful in its relations with Ukraine, the US, other countries in the region and, of course, the EU. Being forced to navigate very carefully between these interests in order not to lose the balance, Chisinau will periodically be forced by Russia to tilt too far to either side. Any imbalance will affect Maia Sandu's electoral position - either it will displease centrist voters - who are in favour of a good relationship with Russia, or right-wingers - who are in favour of an antagonistic position towards Russia, a stronger alliance with Romania (or even union with it), NATO, the US, Ukraine. The Kremlin is well aware of this constraint on the new administration in Chisinau and is making full use of its propaganda to try to create the perception in the eyes of as many Moldovans as possible that Maia Sandu and her party are Russophobes⁴².

At the same time, the government in Chisinau feels compelled to restrain its language, to avoid commenting in contradictory terms on some aggressive statements by Russian officials. The government feels compelled to even claim the absence of obvious aggressive actions on the part of the Kremlin⁴³. This puts the Western partners who support the Republic of Moldova in an embarrassing situation⁴⁴. Consequently - the Kremlin will continue to look for pretexts to convince the Moldovan public that it is the government in Chisinau and the "US and EU leading from behind" that cause the lack of good relations between Russia and Moldova⁴⁵. The government in Chisinau will avoid creating such opportunities for Kremlin, so that the Moldovans will have the opportunity to convince themselves that the Russian side is to blame. To better suit the propaganda agenda, Moscow will blame more the US and will claim that US is leading the government in Chisinau. This is an absolutely false claim, at least for the fact that the European Union, and implicitly Germany and Romania, actually play a much more important role in the agenda of the government in Chisinau than the US, including in terms of coordinating joint actions.

The example of the contradictory statements between the Moldovan President and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy has shown that this situation offers Russia real opportunities to damage Moldova's relations with the EU and the US.

Countering the resilience of state institutions is another area where the interests of the Kremlin and Moldovan kleptocratic groupings fully converge. Countering the

⁴² <https://regnum.ru/news/3398422.html>

⁴³ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5060868>

⁴⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-prime-minister-says-russian-gas-tussle-can-upend-economy-years/>

⁴⁵ <https://tass.ru/politika/12648073>

strengthening of the resilience of state institutions is another area where the interests of the Kremlin and Moldovan kleptocratic groups fully converge. Security and defence related institutions, the judiciary and other government institutions in Moldova are heavily affected by corruption, poor qualification and motivation, excessive politicisation by previous governments and probably quite a lot of Russian influence. The given situation facilitates subversive actions by the Kremlin, especially in the event of major crises. Strengthening the integrity, professionalism and resilience of state institutions means that Moscow would lose an important competitive advantage to project soft power, sharp - hard power or hybrid aggression. At the same time, it is the strengthening of institutions that poses the greatest danger to domestic kleptocratic groups. In particular, it concerns the institutions in the field of security and justice. Without allies within the state system, local kleptocrats will lose control over financial flows in the public sector, while schemes to enrich themselves through organised crime, smuggling in particular, would become much more difficult to run. Moreover - a reformed judiciary and strong law enforcement institutions could lead to the conviction of the heads and associates of corrupt oligarchic groups. Additionally, this would include effective international prosecution and recovery of their criminally obtained assets.

Given the new government's strong political will to strengthen the state, especially to reform the justice system, opponents of this process should first and foremost ally themselves. This seems to have already happened and will continue to take place. The Kremlin and the once antagonistic local kleptocratic groups already seem to be coordinating their sabotage efforts to some extent. The tools used to sabotage the resilience of state institutions are varied, but mostly they are propaganda-based. The Kremlin and oligarchs such as Veaceslav Platon and Ilan Shor are conducting campaigns to influence public opinion in order to discredit the reforms and the government. They use the parties they control (PSRM, PCRM, Shor and some extra-parliamentary parties), opinion leaders and the media that they finance. In particular, the narrative they use is that the new leadership is taking over the corrupt system instead of actually implementing reforms.

Likewise - to prevent major changes within the force structures and law institutions, information campaigns are conducted targeting candidates or newly appointed leaders. In parallel, kleptocratic groups will push for the appointment of people they can influence, or keep them in key positions. To this end, some exponents of the corrupt system will openly admit their adherence to the goal of justice reform and the fight against corruption, for example. Based on some of the promotions and appointments that have already taken place, it may be possible that this strategy is already having some success.

Another widely used tool in this battle of attrition will be the populist propaganda about budget spending. Since the new administration already faces a shortage⁴⁶ of qualified and

⁴⁶ <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/31424025.html>

incorruptible staff, it avoids reviewing the salaries of its administrative staff. With an average net salary that currently does not exceed EUR 400, state institutions are simply not competitive to attract professional employees. An investment in a substantial pay increase in key institutions necessary for successful reforms would cost the state budget up to €30 million annually. For comparison - the recent social measures approved by the new government cost the budget around €150 million annually. We must note that the new government is still not able to escape the pre-election populist mindset, which affects its ability to implement reforms and is used by the Kremlin and local kleptocratic groups against the government. An indication that this issue is a priority target may be seen in the strong media campaigns against the government regarding the insignificant increase in the salaries of the highest-ranking dignitaries (president, MPs) or the considerable increase in the salaries of constitutional judges⁴⁷. As far as we can see, it is unlikely that the new government in Chisinau relies on serious sociological assessments or analyses when it refuses to address the issue of salaries in the public system. Opponents are successfully exploring government's populist approach.

And these attacks do not target so much the image and the approval rating of the government. On the scale of the short-term priorities of Kremlin and its local allies is sabotaging the creation of a solid basis for reforms and administration, which is far more important than lowering PAS or Maia Sandu's approval ratings by one or more percentage points 3 years before the elections. Apart from the objective of sabotaging the state's ability to respond to systemic and momentary crises, failure to restore and strengthen the state will strongly damage the government's electoral positions in the long run. Without a fundamental and qualitative transformation of the administration, Maia Sandu and PAS will not be able to achieve their pre-electoral objectives - primarily fighting and punishing corruption. The capacity to meet the conditions for cooperation with the EU and the US will also be severely affected, which in turn is necessary including in order to obtain funding.

In addition to the government and individual politicians within it, other actors promoting change will be targeted (in fact they already are): media institutions, NGOs, civic activists and external partners. There is an ongoing campaign aimed at discrediting them. One only has to look at the recent attacks against TV8⁴⁸, or the ongoing propaganda about the alleged joint command centres between all independent media institutions⁴⁹ to understand that they are aimed specifically at discrediting the media and civil society, but also at antagonising them and the government.

⁴⁷ <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/valeriu-pasa-despre-amanarea-deciziei-privind-majorarea-salariilor-judecatorilor-cc/31606263.html>

⁴⁸ <https://replicamedia.md/ro/article/4Mn1gJPOn/doc-declaratia-postului-de-televiziune-tv8-dupa-dezvaluirile-facute-de-jurnalista-natalia-morari.html>

⁴⁹ <https://primul.md/tirdea-in-moldova-sunt-26-de-baroni-ai-ong-urilor-care-fac-parte-din-reteaua-soros-si-au-legaturi-directe-cu-pas>

Maintaining the relevance and impact of public opinion manipulation and disinformation tools is still an important objective for the Kremlin. Compared to five years ago, the influence of Kremlin-controlled media has decreased in Moldova. In 2017, out of top 10 most watched TV channels, three were broadcasting content from Russian state channels⁵⁰. In terms of impact, it meant that about 50% of adult Moldovans watched at least one daily bulletin produced by these propaganda channels. In 2021 the situation changed dramatically. Even though the three TV channels remained in top 10, their cumulative popularity decreased nearly 3 times⁵¹. Therefore, only about 20% of Moldovans watch a news bulletin on Kremlin-controlled TV channels every day. However, this does not prevent Kremlin's propaganda to remain extremely influential. The decline in influence on television is partly compensated by a stronger presence online, on the radio and even in the print media (such as the party newspaper "The Socialists"). For example, Sputnik's Moldovan editorial office has expanded its team thanks to receiving additional funding since 2017. Sputnik.md's news content is picked up by more than 10 radio stations, thus imposing the Kremlin's version of news broadcast content. Several dozen other Romanian and Russian-language news portals pick up and amplify the Kremlin's strategic propaganda messages and the anti-reform agenda of local kleptocratic groups. In particular, we ought to highlight the activity of Veaceslav Platon who, as far as can be deduced, has taken over the funding of several media outlets (Unimedia.info, Publika TV, and presumably some news portals affiliated to the Socialist Party).

On the opposite side, the new Moldovan administration is committed to fight the toxic effects of disinformation and propaganda. This has led to a partial reform of broadcasting legislation and the election of a new independent Audiovisual Council⁵². The institution is responsible for the adherence to factual accuracy and balance of opinions in TV and radio. Although it has not yet started its de facto activity, the new team of regulators has already become the target of smear campaigns⁵³. Certainly, any enforcement actions aimed at punishing disinformation by state institutions will be interpreted as censorship and curtailment of the right to free expression by Kremlin-affiliated media outlets and local oligarchic groups. Moreover, we can expect numerous public appeals from Russian Federation officials and Moldovan opposition politicians on Council of Europe forums and in other venues, which will bring accusations of infringement on the freedom of expression and freedom of the press. In parallel, lobbying groups covertly sponsored by Veaceslav Platon or other stakeholders are likely to become active, seeking to advance the same messages within EU institutions and possibly in the US.

⁵⁰ <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Study-WatchdogMD-on-Russian-propaganda.pdf>

⁵¹ https://www.ipn.md/storage/ckfinder/files/PP_AfterPoll_Iunie%202021.pdf

⁵² <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/a6212e67b852895c/o-noua-componenta-a-consiliului-audiovizualului-votata-de-parlament-cine-sunt-noii-membri-ai-ca.html>

⁵³ <https://aif.md/igra-v-cenzuru/>

A large collective study, conducted in collaboration with IPIS⁵⁴, offers a detailed description of recent trends and of the logic of operation behind the complex propaganda and disinformation system in Moldova. It is certain that both the Kremlin and local kleptocratic groups have ramped up their investment in tools for influencing public opinion since the new Moldovan administration took office. If effectively implemented, administrative and legislative tools designed to combat disinformation will only have a partial impact, while Kremlin-control propaganda and local kleptocrats will continue to have a major impact on public opinion, while having the potential to destabilise the social-political order. Only by stopping the dark financial flows and by strengthening the influence of the independent press will it be possible to effectively counteract these malign influences.

At present, independent media outlets are only partially able to counterbalance the Kremlin-affiliated media and oligarchic groups. Even so, this capacity largely depends on financial support (grants) from Western countries. Fighting against cartel arrangements in the advertising market would contribute to some increase in the financial capacity of independent media; however, that would not be enough. Maintaining external support in the coming years is vital in order to preserve a diverse media environment. Moreover, support mechanisms have limited effectiveness. For example, the structure of these mechanisms discourages the consolidation of robust media institutions capable of creating quality news and entertainment content. There are far too many media websites and TV stations that benefit from external support. This support is sufficient for the survival and operation at a minimum capacity of all these media outlets. However, the support is insufficient for the allocation of resources (human and technical) to the production of international news, adequate investigative journalism, entertainment, reporting and original analytical material. This reduces the competitiveness of the independent press in relation to TV stations that broadcast Russian content or receive obscure funding from kleptocratic groups.

In contrast, Kremlin-affiliated TV stations receive engaging free entertainment and news content. These are the products of Russian TV stations, which are heavily funded by the Russian state budget and Russian state companies. Maintaining this status quo in Moldova will be one of Moscow's priorities in the coming years. In addition to the media, the Russian Federation has control over social networks such as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte. Odnoklassniki in particular was widely used in election meddling in 2016 and 2019⁵⁵. Subsequently, the popularity and impact of these social networks has declined sharply. In 2020, less than 15% of the adult population was actively using Odnoklassniki (about 2 times less than in 2016), while most Odnoklassniki users were also active on Facebook. This

⁵⁴ https://www.ipis.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ANALIZA-SI-STRATEGIA_compressed.pdf

⁵⁵ <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Why-is-Russian-meddling-Modova-2019-elections.pdf>;
<https://ipp.md/en/2019-07/odnoklassniki-and-parliamentary-elections-in-the-republic-of-moldova/>

platform, which is totally dominated by the Kremlin's strategic propaganda narrative, still has some impact on public opinion.

Recently, the use of the Telegram platform is gaining momentum in Moldova. Since 2020, anonymous Telegram channels dominated by pro-Russian and anti-Western discourse have become the main source of rumours and disinformation in Moldova⁵⁶. Apart from the platforms dedicated to Moldova, the country's online information space is heavily influenced by the enormous amount of propaganda, conspiracies and disinformation produced for the Russian public. Given that the vast majority of Moldovan citizens speak Russian, video and written content in Russian is actively disseminated in Moldova.

Reformatting the “Moldovan” decision structure in Kremlin and the proxy political parties in Moldova

The Party of Socialists and its leader Igor Dodon have been losing popularity since fall 2019, which led to heavy defeats in the presidential and parliamentary elections against pro-European, pro-reform parties. There are numerous causes to their failure, first among them the popular disappointment with the pro-Russian course. Even though the Russophile camp managed to gain quasi-total power in Moldova in the fall of 2019 (the Presidency, a parliamentary majority, the government, secret services etc.), the Kremlin did not provide Dodon with the resources needed to fulfill his generous electoral promises. For example, in 2018, Igor Dodon promised \$1 billion in investments from Russian businesspeople and billions more in loans and grants from the Russian government for the development of infrastructure⁵⁷. Such promises, combined with the Kremlin's support (see the chapter about electoral interference above) and the power vacuum after Vlad Plahotniuc had fled the country, Dodon managed to take power.

This success was not followed by any kind of investments. Vladimir Putin did not authorize any major support program to help maintain a pro-Russian government in Chisinau, even though they were in control. This apparent paradox is indicative of Russia's foreign policy strategic planning. While the “curators” of Russian actions in Moldova – Chernov and Maslov⁵⁸ – worked tirelessly to bring Igor Dodon to power, it seems that Vladimir Putin and his close circle of decision-makers did not consider this a priority. As Ekaterina Shulman and Nikolai Petrov⁵⁹ explain, the really important decisions in Russia are taken by a small circle of people gathered on the platform of the Supreme Security Council. They decide what to do in crisis situations, what concrete actions to take during rapidly evolving situations and

⁵⁶ https://www.facebook.com/watchdogmd/posts/2714769702167858?comment_id=2719922294985932

⁵⁷ <https://sputnik.md/20180405/dodon-investitii-rusia-18341495.html>

⁵⁸ <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Why-is-Russian-meddling-Modova-2019-elections.pdf>

⁵⁹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/decision-making-russia>

which strategic directions to follow in foreign policy dossiers. Those tasked with carrying out these decisions are not necessarily aware of the detailed long-term plans. Most likely, Igor Dodon's coming to power in Moldova was an accidental development – a big success for “the Chernov Division” and its on the ground man Igor Dodon, but not something prioritized by the Russian top leadership.

This can explain the inertial support for the Party of Socialists, but the lack of necessary support for their government in Moldova. Vladimir Putin's vision probably aims to establish instruments of political control that can prevent Moldova from definitively escaping the Russian influence area. However, the Kremlin does not want to take direct responsibility for the functioning of the regime in Chisinau, as it did in Belarus and secessionist regions in the post-Soviet space. For those regimes, Moscow openly provided an economic lifeline, which weakened its long-term strategic position. Without ample Russian support and amidst rampant corruption, Igor Dodon lost power to Maia Sandu and her Party of Action and Solidarity, nearly handing them a constitutional majority in Parliament. It is certain that if the Socialists had not taken over the government in the fall of 2019, they wouldn't have shrunk from a party with 36 MPs to one with only 20 MPs.

After Igor Dodon's defeat in the 2020 presidential election, I expected the Kremlin to draw some conclusions and start a radical renewal of the leadership and image of their satellite parties in Chisinau⁶⁰. However, Igor Dodon was allowed to enter a toxic alliance with the Short Party, then he failed to prevent the triggering of snap parliamentary elections, which he publicly and unpopularity opposed, even though the majority of the population was in favor, and went on to commit other political blunders. This chain of mistakes indicates that Moscow either did not have a substantial analysis of the situation in Moldova or that this analysis did not reach the higher ranks of decision-makers. A possible explanation could be related to the transition of responsibility for “the Moldovan dossier” between two different divisions of the Russian presidential administration. Before 2020, the Chernov division had been in charge of bilateral relations and subversive actions in Moldova for 15 years. In early 2021, this responsibility was transferred to the Cross-Border Cooperation Directorate headed by Alexey Filatov⁶¹. Previously, the same division was in charge of policies concerning Ukraine and separatist regions in Ukraine and Georgia. Although the details of this transition of responsibility are unclear, we can safely assume that it overlapped with the political crisis from the spring of 2021 and the July snap elections in Moldova. As the Moldovan dossier changed hands, the Kremlin's intervention capacity was limited, which accounted for the inefficient inertia that we witnessed.

Igor Dodon himself aggravated this lack of efficiency, as he mounted a self-defense effort by lobbying among Russian business people and opinion leaders. This helped delay the decision to remove him from as party head, as his leadership was already toxic for the

⁶⁰ <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/valeriu-pa%C8%99a-l-au-reales-a%C8%99a-le-trebuie-/31027342.html>

⁶¹ https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4660522?from=main_12

Socialists. Although we do not know exactly when the transfer of responsibility among the Kremlin's directorates was completed, by October 2021, Dmitry Kozak was accompanied by Alexey Filatov and his deputy during meetings with the Moldovan delegation. Kozak has been in charge of relations with Moldova since he replaced Dmitry Rogozin as deputy prime minister⁶². While he had various responsibilities within the government, it was in Moldova that Kozak managed to showcase his foreign policy credentials by being able to reach some compromises with the EU and the US⁶³. During a time when Russia's relations with the West were tense, finding some points of common interest was seen as a big success for Russian diplomacy. In January 2020, Kozak was moved up as deputy chief of the presidential administration and took over the Ukrainian dossier and responsibility for the whole post-Soviet space⁶⁴. As Kozak had to deal with the developments in Ukraine, the complex negotiation process and the need to organize a new toolset for Russian policies in the post-Soviet space, he paid little attention to Moldova. His obvious dislike of Igor Dodon probably was also a factor.

On the other hand, with Ukraine and the Donbass separatist regimes as his top priority, it was only logical for Kozak to strengthen precisely the directorate previously in charge of this region, to the detriment of the Chernov division. In late 2020, an interdepartmental commission was created under Kozak's supervision and tasked with "the coordination of international development assistance".⁶⁵ However, a look at the members of this commission and Dmitry Kozak's field of work suggests that the new body's activity has little to do with the provision of financial assistance for development.⁶⁶ This commission comprises representatives of the presidential administration's directorates in charge of influence operations in post-Soviet countries, the deputy secretary of the Security Council, deputies from almost all the ministries, including the interior and defense ministries, the deputy director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), a division chief from the Federal Security Service (FSB) and deputy directors of the most important state-owned companies. This is a superstructure that consolidates tools and resources for the planning and implementation of influence operations – soft power projection, sharp power actions and even destabilizing interventions such as hybrid aggressions.

This transformation overshadowed the Moldovan dossier, but now that the reorganization is over, the new strategists and executors have got down to business. The tougher, rougher style of the Filatov division can be seen in the energy blackmail and the increasingly aggressive Kremlin propaganda against the new government in Chisinau. This should be no surprise, given that the experts from this directorate have experimented for years during a real war in Eastern Ukraine. Nonetheless, this move did not significantly change the

⁶² <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/29368356.html>

⁶³ <https://www.moldova.org/en/eu-russian-officials-johannes-hahn-dmitri-kozak-coming-chisinau-next-week/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kremlin-kozak-new-ukraine-negotiator-russia-surkov/30429185.html>

⁶⁵ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4604023>

⁶⁶ <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202011050036?index=6&rangeSize=1>

quality of expertise on Moldova within the Russian presidential administration. In the Moldovan section of the Chernov directorate, most of the staff, which was detailedly described by Dossier⁶⁷, did not possess the studies or experience required to produce quality analyses. Moreover, the quality of published materials, with numerous superficial formulations, indicate a careless attitude to the work of this section. From the staff led by SVR colonel Igor Maslov, only Vasily Kashirin had a proper understanding of the Moldovan political scene with all its nuances, and other topics concerning Moldova. It should be no surprise then that, according to documents leaked to the press, it was precisely Kashirin who opposed supporting Igor Dodon. The low quality of expertise and the superficial attitude within the “Moldovan section” in the Kremlin probably also contributed to the electoral failure of pro-Russian forces in Moldova.

Even though we do not know yet who are the experts in charge of the Moldovan file within Alexey Filatov’s directorate, early signs suggest the quality of expertise did not improve. The methods used so far are rather clichéd. During the crisis provoked by the negotiations for the extension of the gas supply contract, Kremlin-controlled press and influence agents mounted an ample media campaign to get President Maia Sandu to visit Moscow and involve herself in the negotiation process⁶⁸. This effort was a total failure. If the strategists in the Kremlin understood the Moldovan political reality, they would have realized that Maia Sandu, for electoral reasons, could not allow herself to manifest the same subservient behavior towards Russia as Igor Dodon had done. The political costs would have been too high and she would have lost the support of many pro-European voters. Another example is the announcement that Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban will create and lead a new pro-Russian force in Moldova⁶⁹. The timing could not have been worse, as the city was paralyzed by heavy snowfall and Ceban’s municipal services were faltering. The fact that the announcement was made during work hours attracted further criticism and overshadowed the launch of this new political force. Such details show a lack of planning and understanding of the local specifics. We see the same thing with Igor Dodon and the Socialists. Even though he was forced to resign as party leader, he remains very active in the public space and is still associated with the Socialists, which defeats the purpose of dissociating the party from his toxic image.

One conclusion we can draw is that the planning of Russian influence operations in Moldova is done at a macro level – there are strategic directions and goals, but they lack in-depth analysis and detailed operational management. While the Kremlin is successful in exploiting the systemic weaknesses of the Moldovan state and government, it stumbles in details and this can derail the whole strategy. So far, Russia has scored several victories on the background of anemic official opposition from Chisinau and favorable international

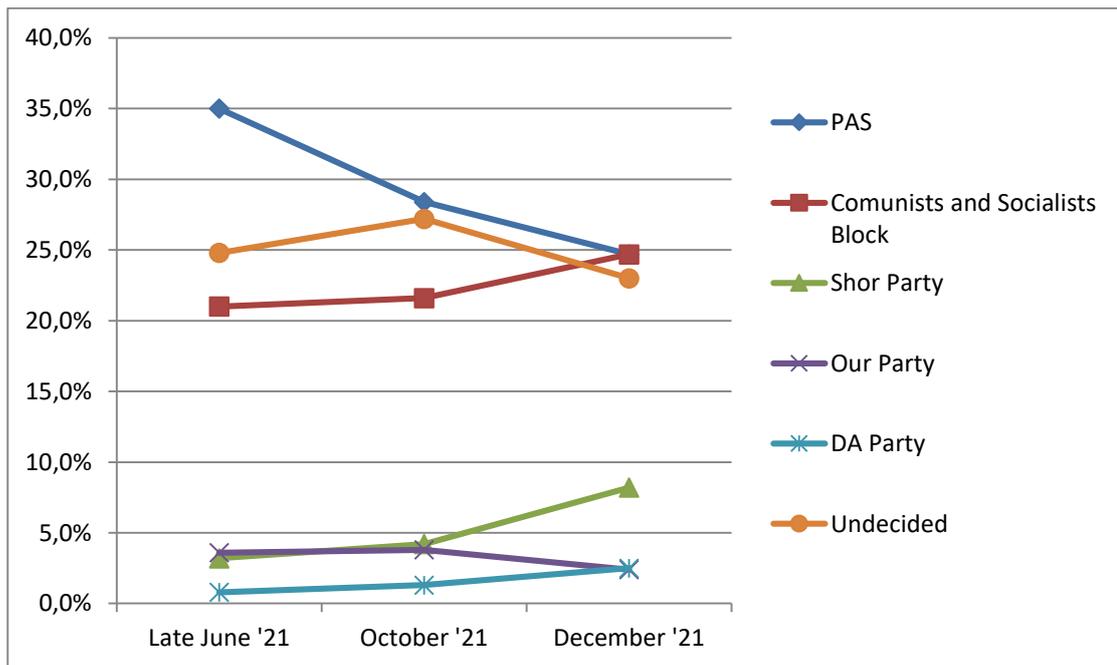
⁶⁷ <https://dossier.center/mld/>

⁶⁸ <https://sputnik.md/20210917/maiei-sandu-negocieri-gaze-rusia-44818456.html>

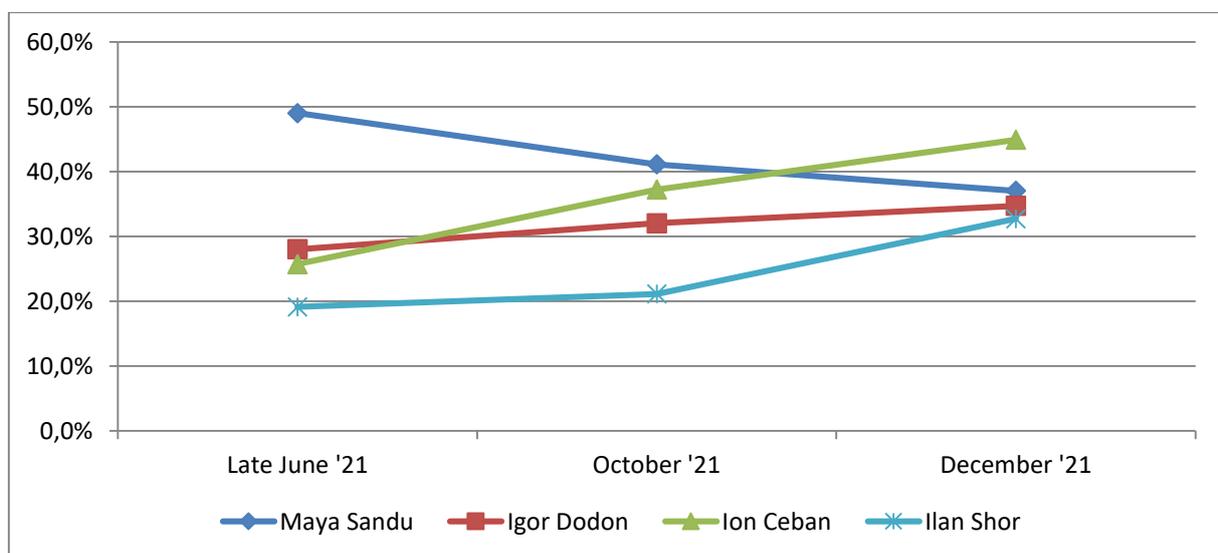
⁶⁹ <https://rta.md/en/2021/12/30/ceban-sozdaet-svoj-politicheskij-proekt-mer-kishineva-obyavil-o-zapuske-dvizheniya-nacionalnaya-alternativa/>

(gas price hikes and high inflation) and internal circumstances (subversive actions from kleptocratic groups).

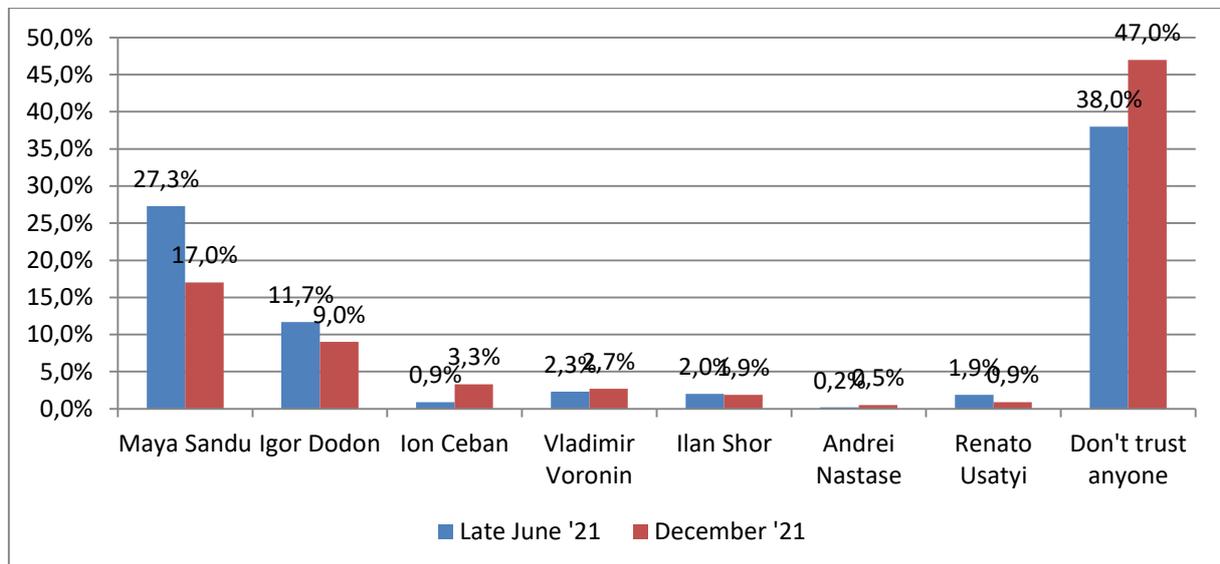
The Kremlin in partnership with Moldovan oligarchic groups managed to massively undercut popular support for Maia Sandu and PAS. The chart below shows the evolution of the main parties' rating in the last six months.



The next chart shows the level of trust in top politicians over the same period of time.



We see a rapid drop in popularity for PAS and Maia Sandu and resurgence of PSRM and Igor Dodon, while trust in Ion Ceban skyrocketed. However, the level of trust does not necessarily translate to a high personal rating, as we see below.



The percentage of responders who don't trust anyone has grown the most, Maia Sandu has lost a lot of support and Ion Ceban is growing in the ratings at the expense of Igor Dodon, slowly taking over the role of leader of the Moldovan pro-Russian left.

While it does not control a decisive faction in the Moldovan Parliament, the Kremlin managed to prevent the creation of a pro-European constitutional majority. Even though the chances of such a development are slim, Moscow sees this as a potential danger. A constitutional majority could change Moldova's permanent neutrality status or operate amendments to the status of the Gagauz Autonomous Region. If the responsible analytical bodies had objective expertise, they would not perceive such risks as real. But the current superficial approach leads Moscow to plan its actions in Moldova based on the worst-case scenarios. As in many other areas, the establishment in charge of implementing policies concerning Moldova is strongly influenced by propagandistic clichés, rudimentary imperialist thinking and supremacist attitudes towards Moldovans in general.

A good illustration of insufficient knowledge and poor understanding of Moldova can be found on the Telegram channel Smuglianka - <https://t.me/smuglianka>. According to several sources and to our analysis, its content is written by a Chisinau resident of the Russian special services. The wording and phrasing are clear indicators that the author is not local. The so-called analyses demonstrate the author does not know basic facts about Moldovan politics, laws, economy and recent history. This impression is confirmed by information uncovered by investigative journalists⁷⁰. For example, employees in the Chernov division were encouraged to use two Moldovan Telegram channels as a source of information:

⁷⁰ <https://dossier.center/mld/>

https://t.me/romania_ru and <https://t.me/tokanamd>. These are written by better-qualified persons from Moldova, but they are both very subjective in their analyses. There is no method and organization in the way they select and present facts. Anyone who follows these channels will not have a clear and complete picture of what is going on in Moldova.

Overall, Russia possesses weak expertise on Moldova, the analyses on hand are undermined by ideological subjectivism and supremacist attitudes towards Moldova, and the starting premise for their plan of action is usually a worst-case scenario for Russia. The Russian establishment is seriously considering the possibility that a pro-European party in Moldova could try to change the Constitution and get rid of the permanent neutrality status, or that Moldova could actually reunite with Romania. The aggressive actions concerning the energy sector, the intentional escalation of crises are typical of the Kremlin's approach - alarmist and superficial at the same time.

Moscow's analyses certainly show that a PAS government for the next four years will decrease Moldova's energy dependence on Russia, thus depriving the Kremlin of an important control and pressure instrument. This is why they decided to apply it for maximum effect now – because they want to get the most out of this instrument before it becomes obsolete in a couple of years. In effect, the Kremlin's actions only accelerated its inevitable loss of monopoly over the Moldovan energy market. Today, the government has no option but to prioritize the diversification of energy sources - gas and electricity. An in-depth analysis would have showed Russia that the new government in Chisinau lacked the capacity to implement multiple important reforms and strategies at the same time. The energy sector reform would have probably stagnated – the construction of energy interconnections is progressing very slowly, the gas market reform would have slowed to halt amidst endless talks about historic debt and the audit of Moldovagaz. Given that the new government simply does not have people with expertise in the field of energy security, the most likely scenario was that a swift and profound reform of the Moldovan energy sector was highly unlikely. Russia could have increased the price according to a predictable and acceptable calendar, it could have abstained from monthly threats of cutting off gas supply. Instead, its blackmail infuriated not only the government, but the people as well. This is done intentionally. Never in the past 15 years of the previous contract did Gazprom apply the clause that allowed it to stop gas supply if Moldova does not pay in advance 50% of the next month's bill⁷¹. Now, they motivated and legitimized the Moldovan government's efforts to reduce energy dependence on Russia.

Russia's superficial analysis and worst-case scenario planning is not necessarily beneficial for Moldova. As the gas crisis showed, the overestimation of risks by Russian policy-makers leads to exaggerated, unjustified aggressive actions towards Moldova. Both politicians in Chisinau and external partners must take into account this slightly paranoid attitude of the Kremlin. This extends to politics as well. As explained above, through joint efforts with

⁷¹ <https://tass.com/economy/1364803>

kleptocratic groups, Russia managed to deal a huge blow to the popularity of Maia Sandu's government.

The next step would be to channel unhappy voters towards new political forces obedient to the Kremlin and its allies on the ground. After two humbling electoral defeats, Russian political operatives likely realize that an openly anti-European party in a country where the majority of people declared themselves in favor of European integration⁷² cannot win a parliamentary majority. They will likely try to remodel the Moldovan political scene and support political parties that are not so entrenched along geopolitical lines. The goal is to attract centrist voters, necessary to win parliamentary and presidential elections. Moreover, as previously explained, Moscow has probably expressly indicated that these political forces must not put it in a position where it would have to assume financial responsibility for the government in Chisinau.

For Russia, the ideal Moldovan government is profoundly corrupt, dependent on the Kremlin, but declaratively committed to the European integration course, without substantial progress in this direction, just enough to keep receiving EU funding. A Kremlin puppet paid for by Brussels. To achieve this goal, Russia has started reformatting the political parties it controls in Chisinau. The first step is revamping PSRM. Igor Dodon was forced to give up the party leadership⁷³ and Deputy Speaker Vlad Batrinca will most likely be the new head. Despite Russian pressures to distance himself from the party, Igor Dodon is still reluctant to do so. It is improbable that his election as "honorary president" was coordinated with Dmitry Kozak or other Russian officials. For now, Igor Dodon is ably using his influence over some MPs and party members for his own benefit. As has become the norm over the past three years, Igor Dodon's interests go against the interests of the party. Dodon wants to be perceived as an active politician, which is his last line of defense against the criminal investigations concerning him⁷⁴. For the Party of Socialists, it would be best to dissociate itself from the increasingly toxic image of the former president. However, as the Kremlin is only dictating the general lines of actions, Dodon had the room for maneuver to adapt himself to the new circumstances.

The role of the Socialists will be to "cement" the anti-European electorate, brainwashed by Russian state propaganda. This is not an insignificant segment – almost 25%-30% of all voters. However, PSRM will not have a strong leader for several reasons. First, the Kremlin is planning for the presidential election, which will precede the parliamentary ballot, so it needs a strong candidate able to attract centrist voters. Certainly, Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban is perceived as such a candidate and the Kremlin does not need a rival for Ceban at

⁷² <http://viitorul.org/files/Sondaj%20DIS%20Decembrie%2C%202021.pdf>

⁷³ <https://tv8.md/2021/12/18/igor-dodon-a-fost-ales-presedinte-de-onoare-al-psrm-la-al-xvii-lea-congres-al-partidului>

⁷⁴ <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/52feddf613046859/igor-dodon-dupa-audierile-de-la-procuratura-este-un-dosar-politic-pas-incearca-sa-distraga-attentia-cu-subiecte-inventate.html>

the helm of PSRM. A strong Socialist candidate could make it into the runoff election ahead of Ceban and then lose against a pro-European candidate. This is the scenario that likely guides the Russian analysts' planning⁷⁵. PSRM might not even have a presidential candidate or it could nominate a very weak one, like Zinaida Greceanii, and stage a dull campaign. Previous Socialist campaigns relied almost exclusively on massive injections of cash. PSRM would then have to mobilize hardcore pro-Russian voters ahead of the parliamentary elections.

Overall, the Socialists play a secondary role in the plans designed by Russia and its allies led by Veaceslav Platon. The primary effort will be to create and grow one or several political projects that will situate themselves on the center of the political spectrum. These projects will claim they want “balanced relations with both the West and the East” and will emphasize their teams of managers and technocrats. We could have two parties, including one based on former prime minister Ion Chicu's party, and they could run as a bloc. It is very likely that this new political endeavour will include the Governor of the Gagauz Autonomous Region Irina Vlah. She cannot run for another term at the helm of the region and it has been clear for a while now that she is getting ready for national politics⁷⁶. For example, she has been careful to distance herself from Igor Dodon and to develop her own connections in Moscow. Even if she will probably be overshadowed by Ion Ceban, Irina Vlah is a highly skilled politician with a lot of electoral experience and she will be an important asset for any new centre-left political force.

In addition to these flagship projects – the Socialists and Ion Ceban's new party – the Kremlin will rely on local allies Veaceslav Platon and Ilan Shor to provide political room for maneuver. The Shor Party has recently grown in polls, propelled by sizable cash injections and populist actions, while also benefiting from the collapse of Renato Usatii's Our Party. If financing is maintained, the Shor Party could keep hold of its 8-10% share of the electorate until 2025. It will also try to expand its electoral base by winning some town halls, thus gaining “captive voters”. Whether Renato Usatii will return to politics is uncertain, but it seems that he was supported by Veaceslav Platon in the last parliamentary elections. Platon will also try to divide the centre-right and right-wing voters by supporting various pro-Romanian or pro-European parties. Among the parties that could act for Platon and discredit the PAS government we can count AUR, Democracy Home and some leaders of the Dignity and Truth Platform.

Their task, alongside several opinion-makers, will be to fuel dissatisfaction with Maia Sandu and PAS, and to disperse their voters. While furthering the Kremlin's interests in Moldova, these efforts will be planned and executed locally with the support of Veaceslav Platon.

⁷⁵ According to some data, the sociological analyses are again conducted by Sergey Borisov, a pretty good specialist <https://www.kp.md/daily/27245.5/4374330/>

⁷⁶ <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/550e8102899f5840/video-irina-vlah-eu-invat-limba-romana-si-toti-cetatenii-trebuie-sa-o-faca.html>

Several sources⁷⁷ indicate that former journalist Natalia Morari will be the coordinator of this campaign. Meanwhile, ex-Communist Mark Tkachuk's party also craves support from Russia and most certainly has connections within the Russian establishment, but has little chance of becoming the Kremlin's third political project in Moldova. Curiously, we see this party amplifying messages from Platon's agenda with increasing frequency and intensity. The fate of ex-president Vladimir Voronin's Party of Communists is uncertain. Despite rumours of a fusion with the Socialists, Voronin himself quashed them⁷⁸. Some recent stances suggest PCRM could find a place for itself in the movement led by Ion Ceban⁷⁹. We know that the Kremlin can exercise a strong influence over the Moldovan Communists via Russian MP Kazbek Taisaev⁸⁰.

This is the complex map of the Kremlin's design for the restructuring of the Moldovan political space, which is done with the help of local allies fearful of the changes in the judiciary. To summarize, the Socialists will serve as a vehicle for Russian interests by mobilizing radical anti-European voters, while centrist voters will be targeted by the political project headed by Ion Ceban, maybe as an electoral bloc, under the guise of a technocratic, moderate force, without strong geopolitical affiliations. The Shor Party will try to keep captive a part of the electorate, especially in regions where it has mayors. This repositioning is operated by Moscow in close cooperation with local kleptocratic groups, with Veaceslav Platon first and foremost among them. Even though it seems a successful strategy, its final outcome also depends on PAS and on other factors in local society. If people see through the packaging of Ion Ceban's new party and realize it's simply another version of PSRM, just as loyal to Moscow, then Ceban will lose centrist voters and will be forced to compete with the Socialists on the left. It also must be noted that Ceban's positive image is yet to translate into a high personal rating.

It is already clear that the next election for which Kremlin analysts are planning is the local election in Chisinau in 2023, which should be a prelude for the presidential ballot in 2024. Ion Ceban will be Russia's champion tasked with winning over centrist voters and taking over the President's Office. Whether the goals of local kleptocratic groups align in the long term is less certain. They seem to be trying to foment social unrest caused by Gazprom's energy blackmail and gas price hikes. Several opinion-makers and politicians, most likely secretly coordinated by Platon, are calling for massive protests against the government. It is too early to tell if these calls will lead to anything, but it is obvious that kleptocratic

⁷⁷ <https://cotidianul.md/2022/01/04/ion-sturza-natalia-morari-e-cea-mai-pretioasa-achizitie-a-lui-platon-e-un-pericol-pentru-maia-sandu/>

⁷⁸ <https://replicamedia.md/ro/article/VzpB0llnq/igor-dodon-dupa-ce-vladimir-voronin-a-respins-fuziunea-dintre-psrm-si-pcrm-nu-mai-intra-ei-in-parlament-pe-viitor.html>

⁷⁹ <https://realitatea.md/vladimir-voronin-este-sigur-ca-ion-ceban-va-obtine-un-al-doilea-mandat-acesta-ii-apreciaza-activitatea/>

⁸⁰ <https://www.veridica.ro/en/fake-news/fake-news-dodon-is-not-russias-man-and-moscow-did-not-interfere-in-the-republic-of-moldovas-parliamentary-elections>

groups are less patient than the Kremlin and they might try to force the destabilization of the situation

Conclusions and recommendations.

The Russian Federation applies towards Moldova a regional expansion strategy known as the Primakov Doctrine. The post-Soviet space is perceived as Russia's priority area of interest, while the former union republics are supposed to be subservient to the Kremlin by applying the "limited sovereignty" concept. Given its limited resources, the Kremlin cannot afford a simultaneous offensive in the entire targeted area. Therefore the priorities of the first state of absorption or full are Ukraine and Belarus. If in Belarus' case the Kremlin's mission can already be considered accomplished, then Ukraine remains the current priority target. Moldova, as well as the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia, are included in the next stage of expansion. The most likely target is not the annexation of territories, but the formation of an alliance similar to the Warsaw Treaty, where Russia will have a group of satellite countries with limited sovereignty regarding domestic policy and no freedom concerning their foreign policy.

The Kremlin's strategy towards these countries is to keep them in a grey zone, by avoiding the loss of instruments of control and influence, but also by avoiding the installation of puppet regimes for which Moscow would be responsible and would have to finance. In the specific case of Moldova, the Kremlin has suffered important losses in two consecutive elections and has admitted the formation of a pro-European administration that could cut dependence on Russia and bring Moldova irreversibly closer to the European Union. Under the new conditions, the Kremlin has changed the strategic planning unit responsible for developing and carrying out influence operations in Moldova. Instead of the "Chernov" Directorate, the task was taken over by the "Filatov" Directorate. Russia's priorities for action will include a number of priorities: avoiding closer integration and deeper cooperation of Moldova with the EU and the US; preventing the loss of room for influence operations; and avoiding the perpetuation of genuine pro-Western and reformist administrations.

In order to achieve these objectives, the Kremlin has further allied itself with Moldovan kleptocratic groups. Together they act both in the media and the political arena. Having common interests, these otherwise natural allies will try to achieve a reform of political power during the next electoral cycle. The new format is not supposed to be an overtly pro-Russian government, but a supposedly centrist one that nominally will follow the course of European integration, but will mimic reforms and adherence to Western values. In other words, it is a perfect model for keeping the country in the grey zone, but at little cost to Russia. Until then, in cooperation with its local allies, the Kremlin will aim to discredit Maia Sandu's administration through media campaigns and disinformation, possibly even

by stimulating social unrest. On top of this, energy tools will be employed to create major financial costs, sabotaging economic development and the state budget's ability to finance reforms. The instrumentalisation of energy dependence has already succeeded in provoking social discontent, which has had a major impact on the electoral ratings of the new administration just four months after its inauguration. Together with local corrupt groups, the Kremlin will discredit and do everything possible to prevent the implementation of reforms that would make the state more resilient in the face of hybrid threats; namely reforms concerning: justice, police, prosecution, security, media market, anti-corruption. This is where the interests of the Kremlin and its kleptocratic allies converge most.

In addition to the constant undermining of the new government's reform capacity and popularity, the Kremlin and its local partners will regroup and reorganise the political forces they control in Moldova. The PSRM will be used as a political platform which aims to attract voters captive by Russian propaganda. Either one or several new parties will be created for moderate centre-left and centrist voters. It is possible that multiple parties will form an electoral bloc. It is certain that this platform, in the hands of Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban, will fight to regain control over the municipality and then over the presidency. If Ceban wins, he will be able to easily secure a parliamentary majority with a hypothetical "Ion Ceban Bloc", which would include PSRM and the Şor Party.

As before, the planning of Russian influence operations suffers from superficial expertise. That is why we conclude that the Kremlin only sets the general directions and parameters, while the implementation is mainly entrusted to local actors. This leads to numerous tactical and even strategic errors. In other words, the success of this strategy depends to a large extent on the ability of Moldovan kleptocratic groups to operate freely, to freely direct money and to influence the actions of various officials through blackmail. On the other hand, without the political support for opposition politicians and the financial and media resources pumped by the Kremlin into its proxy political forces in Moldova, local corrupt groups would have no chance of achieving major political success.

The Kremlin and its allies will exploit, and are already exploiting to its full extent, the weaknesses of the Maia Sandu administration. First of all, they will bet on populism and will discourage the government from making apparently unpopular reforms such as increasing the civil servant and state official salaries in order to attract professionals. Another form of exploiting electoral populism will be to discourage closer cooperation with the US and the EU through public posturing by Russian officials. They might play on the administration's desire to refrain from taking unfriendly positions towards the Kremlin in order to avoid losing centrist support. Another weakness which has already been identified and fully exploited is the government's inability to fight several crises simultaneously. This is caused by the lack of qualified staff required to assist the decision-making process of President Sandu and of the executive.

Last but not least, it should be mentioned that both the Kremlin and local kleptocratic groups will make continuous attempts to identify opportunities to corrupt important exponents of the new government. If the ratings of Kremlin-controlled parties are stable, while pro-European parties perform poorly in the polls, we cannot rule out the possibility that the kleptocratic groups led by Platon, Plahotniuc and Șor could try to bribe PAS MPs in order to trigger snap parliamentary elections.

Recommendations

The Moldovan government must strengthen its analytic and operational capacities for strategic planning. Given President Sandu's central role in the power structures, the most logical option would be to strengthen the Supreme Security Council as a body that centralizes and analyzes all the information about the subversive actions of the Kremlin and its local allied kleptocrats in Moldova. Secondly, mass media and party financing should be put under strict tax control to prevent shady financing with cash from obscure sources. To achieve this, the government must amend legislation and increase the capacities of the tax administration.

In the energy sector, a rapid intervention is necessary to avoid the recurrence and perpetuation of social shocks caused by the permanent and unpredictable fluctuation of energy prices. This is always used as a base for media campaigns to fuel social unrest and destabilize the situation. In the medium term, the President must form a task-force that will negotiate alternative contracts for gas supply. As regards electricity, the government must negotiate with donor partners in order to revise the contract for the construction of the power line to Romania and accelerate the timetable, even if it means that extra funds and subcontractors must be brought in. Another priority in the energy sector is an international qualified audit, not by the Court of Accounts, of Moldovagaz and its predecessors, in accordance with expert recommendations⁸¹. This should lead to the initiation of litigation at an international court of arbitration against Gazprom, which will have to pay reparations.

On the domestic political arena, the president must become a “player-referee” and stimulate the growth of pro-European, pro-reform political forces as alternatives to PAS, who could attract voters that the ruling party will inevitably lose.

To avoid falling into traps like the gas supply negotiations, the government and the president must show maximum transparency in their relations with Russia. All joint draft documents that will be signed must be published as much as diplomatic rules allow

⁸¹ <https://www.watchdog.md/2020/10/28/comunicat-privind-studiul-despre-datoria-la-gaz/>

(especially considering Moscow's new "good practices" concerning the transparency of diplomatic correspondence).

Moldova's Western partners can be crucial in nullifying the Kremlin's subversive actions. The first target must be the highly functioning link between Moscow and local Moldovan kleptocratic groups so instrumental for the success of Russian subversive strategies. Veaceslav Platon, Ilan Shor, Vlad Plahotniuc and other Moldovan oligarchs involved in politics are using money from schemes of corruption and criminal endeavours. The current state of the Moldovan justice system means that prison sentences for these kleptocrats are still far away. Getting these sentences recognized abroad, arresting the culprits and recovering the assets they stole will take a long time, more than is left until the next electoral cycle. The US and the UK have the instruments to impose personal sanctions, to track and seize criminal assets. This would be a helping hand that does not imply major costs, but would have a huge impact on the internal situation in Moldova. It would seriously decrease the judiciary's resistance against reforms. The governments of EU countries where Moldovan kleptocrats own properties or where they laundered money could initiate investigations without waiting for final rulings from Moldova's corrupt courts.

Following the same train of thought, the US, the UK and EU countries could support the Moldovan authorities' efforts to locate and extradite kleptocrats who fled the country. This mainly concerns Israel and Turkey, where Ilan Shor and Vlad Plahotniuc respectively are known to hide.

In terms of energy security, the EU and other partners should focus on stimulating the production of energy from renewable sources, but more importantly on increasing the energy efficiency of buildings. There is a huge potential to reduce energy consumption here. The mechanisms of implementation for such projects must be redesigned. The current government is lacking the capacity to develop and manage a project that would involve investments of, say, \$500 million over 5 years. However, investments in the modernization of municipal centralized heating systems represent an immense potential. Considering the above-mentioned lack of capacity, donors could agree on the creation of a dedicated implementation unit that will be able to process large amounts of investments in the energy sector and that will function autonomously from the government. A third action in the energy sector, perhaps the most urgent of all, is to provide political support and expertise to help Moldova find alternative sources for the supply of natural gas.

In the area of countering propaganda and disinformation, maintaining the support of Western donors is crucial. However, these programmes should be improved to encourage the consolidation of independent journalists into larger and stronger media organisations capable of covering information needs on a multilateral basis. In particular, this concerns the TV stations. With a small advertising market, more than 4 TV stations cannot operate sustainably. It would be extremely useful to have a TV station broadcasting mainly in Russian language. An even better solution would be for such a universal TV station to

operate regionally for the former Soviet area, with common entertainment and analytical content, having only newsrooms in each country. In the case of Moldova, it is important that recipients of media support actually achieve the goals they set themselves, not just use the grants they receive to fund their current activity. For example, they should start paying attention to reflecting and combating fake news in news bulletins and to cover international events comprehensively. These recommendations can be achieved through coordination between donors and structuring the requirements of assistance programmes.

Through political education foundations and European political families, it is possible to stimulate the consolidation and the unveiling of healthy pro-European political forces alternative to PAS. It can also stimulate cooperation between smaller parties to avoid dispersion of human resources and votes during elections. Remaining in the area of reforming the political arena, a special positive role could be played by Romania. The usual structure of the pro-Western political arena in Moldova includes a pro-Romanian unionist party. Currently, there is a vacuum in this area, and several parties are competing to fill it, but most of them have discredited leaders who are clearly pursuing the agenda of kleptocratic groups. In other words, they are acting in the interests of the Kremlin, including by radicalizing unionist messages towards nationalism, which threatens ethnic minorities and feeds the Kremlin's anti-Western strategic propaganda narrative. With the contribution of the expertise in Bucharest, it would be possible to build a party with a constructive unionist message that can at the same time attract voters for whom the union with Romania is the highest priority but also not feed the Kremlin's strategy. A kind of rational unionism.

In the justice reform sector, the best contribution of external partners would be to encourage the Moldovan government to take more decisive action with transitional justice elements. This is the only model capable of delivering tangible and sustainable results in 3-4 years. However, to achieve this, strong support from the US, the EU and other European countries is required, especially within the Council of Europe, the Venice Commission, etc. In the security field, our external partners could support the reform of the non-military security sector. This would avoid the corrosive irritation and fueling of Russian propaganda and would also increase resilience against hybrid threats. Such assistance could focus primarily on strengthening the analytical, planning and monitoring capabilities of the Supreme Security Council in the field of security policy. Secondly, the assistance could also focus on increasing the integrity and professionalism of the Intelligence and Security Service.

During international discussions and negotiations, it is very important to avoid accepting the apparently advantageous offers of the Russian Federation for a quick settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. Any settlement acceptable to the Republic of Moldova should include a transitional period. Such time frame is difficult to estimate at the moment. The

external partners could also contribute to the formation of an international team of experts who will come to the Republic of Moldova to draw up a detailed plan for the reintegration of the country. This team of experts should analyse all the economic, administrative, demographic, social aspects, etc.; assess the financial conditions, the stages of implementation, the detailed plans for the reintegration of the public order system, education, medicine, local administration, justice, public finance, private finance, etc. Today there is no capacity in the Republic of Moldova to draw up such a complex set of policies and actions.

At the same time, in order to engage Russia in a constructive agenda concerning Transnistria, and namely the problem of the Cobasna ammunition depot, the creation of an international format would be beneficial, totally separated from the non-functional 5+2 format. Regardless of the developments on the entire issue, the resolution of the use of the ammunition in question is of common interest and cannot be achieved without the assistance of Ukraine, which can only be mediated by Western countries.