

Moldova's Security Dilemma: Transnistria, EU Aspirations, and Russia's Influence

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This analysis explores the geopolitical dynamics surrounding Transnistria, a self-proclaimed separatist entity situated between Moldova and Ukraine. Initially emerging following Moldova's disintegration from the Soviet Union, Transnistria de facto maintains self-governing status, backed by Russia's political and military support. Strategically positioned as a buffer zone between Ukraine and Moldova, Transnistria serves as a foothold for projecting Russian influence in the region, impeding Moldova's aspirations for integration with Western institutions. Economically, Transnistria's industrial base presents opportunities for economic cooperation with Russia, although recent geopolitical shifts have prompted a reorientation of trade towards Western Europe. The recent plea from Transnistria's authorities for greater "protection" from Russia underscores Moscow's pivotal role in the region's security affairs, potentially escalating tensions with Moldova and Ukraine. Meanwhile, Moldova navigates a delicate balance between Russia and the West, facing challenges to its sovereignty and territorial integrity amidst Russia's multifaceted approach encompassing economic, political, and military dimensions. Moldova's future hinges on leveraging its European identity, strategic advantages, and fostering internal cohesion to overcome the challenges posed by Russian influence operations.

Transnistria in a nutshell: what, who, where, when and why?

Transnistria -formally called as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic by Moldova- constitutes a slender swath of territory nestled between the Dniester river in eastern Moldova and the border with western Ukraine. [Encompassing approximately 4,160 square kilometers \(1,600 square miles\), Transnistria extends over roughly 12% of Moldova's landmass, a nation situated amongst the most economically disadvantaged in Europe.](#) Within this primarily Russian-speaking enclave reside approximately 400,000 individuals, yet the government situated in Moldova's capital, Chisinau, assets 360,000 of them hold Moldovan citizenship. Beyond this enclave, Moldova accommodates a populace of approximately 2.6 million inhabitants.

Emerging as an unacknowledged separatist entity subsequent to Moldova's departure from the Soviet Union, Transnistria de facto maintains a self-governing status. Moldova -encompassing Transnistria- formerly constituted a republic within the Soviet Union. Antecedent to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Transnistria expressed a desire to maintain its status within the waning confederation as an autonomous republic, thereby declaring independence from Moldova in 1990—a proclamation unacknowledged by the USSR at the time. Subsequently, in 1992, Transnistria engaged in armed conflict with Moldova, which had declared its own sovereignty the preceding year. Remarkably to the present day, Transnistria's independence is not recognised by either member of the international community -not even by the Russian Federation- despite having its own currency, flag, anthem, national bank and customs house.

The narrow region on the eastern bank of the Dniester River was established with Moscow's help to support Russian speakers there. Thus Transnistria even today maintains strong connections with Russia, with its populace predominantly consisting of Russian speakers and governance largely overseen by pro-Russian separatists. Russia's support extends beyond political alignment, providing Transnistria with complimentary natural gas and pension supplements for its elderly residents.

Another interesting factor is, that despite Russia's lack of official recognition of Transnistria as an independent nation, the region maintains its sovereignty primarily due to the substantial military backing from the Russian army, stationed within Transnistrian borders. Russian troops have maintained a presence in Transnistria since the early 1990s. Following the conflict between Moldova and the region in 1992, the Soviet 14th Guards Army intervened in support of the separatists and has remained in the region since. Moscow claims they serve as a peacekeeping force, with their roles including peacekeeping duties and safeguarding ammunition depots. Moldova's President, Maia Sandu, has persistently urged their departure since 2020, arguing that their presence, without authorization, violates the nation's sovereignty and neutrality.

[Transnistria has conducted numerous plebiscites to determine its status, with the most recent occurring in 2006, where over 97% of voters supported annexation with Russia.](#) According to the IISS Military Balance, approximately 1,500 Russian troops are stationed in the enclave. However, recent data from the Chisinau government suggests that most of them are locals holding Russian citizenship, a consequence of Ukraine's refusal to allow troop rotations through its territory following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. A not significant presence of approximately 1,500 soldiers stationed in Transnistria, primarily composed of local Transnistrians possessing Russian passports, underscores Russia's involvement in the region's security affairs. Transportation restrictions imposed by Moldova and Ukraine have prompted Russia to engage locals in Transnistria, further solidifying its influence. Despite its relatively modest military size, the Transnistrian military, comprising 4,500 to 7,500 soldiers, is bolstered by Russian military intentions, exemplified by Russian commander Rustam Minnekaev's

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recent statement regarding plans to establish a land corridor through southern Ukraine to Transnistria. Furthermore, a Ukrainian military think-tank estimates the presence of an additional 7,500 well-equipped separatist troops in the region. Both Moldova's President Sandu and Prime Minister Dorin Recean advocate for a peaceful resolution to the longstanding conflict with Transnistria.

Moldova's EU ambitions and the resistance of the Russian Federation

Transnistria holds a significant position in Russia's geopolitical calculus for a multitude of reasons deeply rooted in geopolitical strategy, historical ties, and economic interests.

Firstly, the historical and cultural ties between Transnistria and Russia run deep. This cultural affinity fosters a sense of kinship and solidarity with Russia, fueling support for Transnistria's separatist ambitions.



Strategically, Transnistria's location is paramount. [Nestled between Ukraine and Moldova, both countries of considerable interest to Russia, it serves as a buffer zone and a foothold for projecting influence in the region.](#) The presence of Russian peacekeeping troops since the end of the Transnistrian War in 1992 underscores Russia's commitment to maintaining stability and assert its presence in the area. Moreover, Russia's longstanding efforts to maintain influence in Moldova are closely tied to Transnistria. The unresolved status of Transnistria contributes to regional instability, which aligns with Russia's broader geostrategic goals. By keeping Moldova and Ukraine entangled in internal challenges stemming from the Transnistrian issue, Russia can impede their aspirations for integration with Western institutions such as the European Union and NATO, thus safeguarding its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe: by stationing troops in the breakaway region, Russia effectively limits Moldova's Western aspirations and reinforces its own sphere of influence. Moldova's pursuit of EU membership is hindered by the presence of Russian troops, as it prevents the country from exercising full control over its borders—a prerequisite for EU accession. Amidst this unfolding narrative, Major General Rustam Minnekayev's 2022 statement on Russia's military objectives confirmed Russia's intent to leverage Transnistria's strategic prominence in its maneuvers against Ukraine. He underscored the region's pivotal role in Russia's broader ambitions. The revelation of Russia's aspiration for "total control" over the eastern Donbas region and southern Ukraine, coupled with its designs concerning Transnistria, has stirred palpable unease in Moldova.

The economic dimension further underscores Transnistria's importance. While historically aligned with Russia, recent geopolitical shifts, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine, have prompted Transnistria to reorient its trade towards Western Europe. Moldova's free-trade agreement with the EU has facilitated this shift, enabling Transnistria to strengthen economic ties with Western Europe. Nevertheless, its industrial base, particularly its steel production and manufacturing facilities, presents economic opportunities for Russia. [Access to these resources and industries not only bolsters economic cooperation but also strengthens Russia's leverage over the area and its authorities.](#)

In summary, Transnistria serves as a linchpin in Russia's geopolitical strategy, encompassing military, economic, and political dimensions. Its significance lies not only in its historical ties to Russia but also in its potential to shape regional dynamics and further Russia's broader objectives in Eastern Europe. This strategic asset offers Russia cultural affinity, strategic positioning, and economic interests. Its unresolved status perpetuates regional instability, providing Russia with a means to advance its geopolitical objectives and maintain influence in Eastern Europe.

At the same time, it becomes relevant to ask about the loyalty of the region and its inclination towards Russian influence. The question of whether it is beneficial for Transnistria to maintain a strong relationship with Russia is complex and depends on various factors. On one hand, a close relationship with Russia can provide Transnistria with economic support, security guarantees, and diplomatic backing. Russia has historically been a significant ally for Transnistria, offering political recognition and military protection. Additionally, Russia's influence can provide Transnistria with leverage in negotiations with Moldova and other international actors regarding its political status and autonomy.

However, there are also potential drawbacks to a reliance on Russia. Overdependence on Russia could limit Transnistria's diplomatic flexibility and hinder its ability to engage with other international partners. Furthermore, aligning too closely with Russia may exacerbate tensions with Moldova and other neighboring countries, potentially leading to further isolation, instability and exposure to Russian interference, a significant reduction in the ability to defend against it. This can be observed for example from the economic perspective: while the provision of free gas has been instrumental in securing Transnistria's allegiance to Moscow, the European Union has concurrently extended an economic lifeline to the region through the implementation of new trade agreements.

The landscape shifted dramatically following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent conflict with Ukraine over the Donbas region, prompting Transnistria to pivot its economic orientation from Russia towards Western Europe. The escalation of hostilities in Ukraine prompted a reassessment of border policies, leading to a tightening of controls on routes traversing in and out of Transnistria, which had long been conduits for illegal trafficking activities spanning nearly three decades. This crackdown coincided fortuitously for Transnistria. [Moreover, Moldova's signing of a free-trade agreement with the European Union in 2014 opened avenues for trade from Transnistria.](#) Consequently, the region's economic ties with Western Europe have flourished, while its trade relations with Russia have waned. Presently, over 70% of Transnistria's exports find their destination in Western Europe.

Moldova: Navigating a fine line between Russia and the West

Amidst the intricate regional geopolitical currents, Moldova finds itself delicately poised between the opposing forces of Russia and the West, navigating a complex dance of influence and identity. The dissolution of the post-Cold War order in Europe, triggered by Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine, has resurrected echoes of Cold War tensions.

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NATO and the EU, fortified in Brussels, fortify their security, political, and economic frameworks while Russia asserts its influence, leaving former Soviet territories like Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova ensnared in the power struggles of a fractured security landscape.

After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Moldova found itself pulled between Russia and Romania, shaping its politics, culture, and economy. [As Moldova sought reunification with Romania, concerns among ethnic Russians and minorities led to the creation of the Transdniestrian Republic and Gagauz autonomy.](#) Attempts to control Transdniestria resulted in conflict in 1992, maintaining a stalemate since. Economic woes, political turmoil, corruption, and demographic changes have impeded Moldova's advancement, leading to emigration and population decline.

Amidst these challenges, Moldova treads cautiously between Russia and the West. While closer ties with Romania and the EU offer economic prospects, Russia's historical influence and military presence necessitate prudent diplomacy.

In a narrative fraught with geopolitical intricacies, Moldova finds itself delicately positioned between the assertive influences of the European Union and Russia. The tumult triggered by Russia's incursion into Ukraine has transformed Moldova into a focal point of tension, with its extensive border with Ukraine and occasional breaches of its airspace by Russian missiles amplifying concerns. Moscow's rhetoric, coupled with fear-inducing allegations about Ukrainian designs on Moldova's Transnistrian region, has further heightened tensions.

Yet, the direct military threat to Moldova diminished following Ukraine's successful defense against Russia in Kherson. The Moldovan government has shown adaptability in restoring relative stability amidst this volatile landscape. Despite historically strong pro-Russian sentiments, Moldova's populace increasingly perceives cooperation with Moscow as untenable, while the allure of EU integration, notably the prospects of employment, eclipses Russia's offerings. Consequently, Chisinau is taking assertive measures to counter Russian interference.

[Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Moldova has been under a state of emergency, granting additional powers to the government and law enforcement agencies.](#) While radical measures have yet to be deployed, the recurrent extension of the state of emergency underscores the authorities' grave concerns about potential destabilization.

Moldova's pro-European leadership braces itself for heightened conflict, particularly with two pivotal electoral events looming on the horizon this year. Adding fuel to these apprehensions is the specter of Transnistria. In a reminiscent echo of events in Ukraine, pro-Russian factions in Transnistria have beseeched Moscow for safeguarding, echoing precedents that paved the way for illicit annexations elsewhere. Yet, amidst these deliberations, questions linger as to Moldova's susceptibility to Russian encroachments and the fortitude of its indigenous resilience. How susceptible is Moldova to external interference? What stratagems has Moscow already set in motion within Moldova, and how does Moldova navigate these encroachments?

Moldova finds itself hemmed in by geopolitical complexities. Its eastern border demarcates the breakaway territory of Transnistria, although Moldova itself lacks direct adjacency with Russia. Despite this geographic configuration, Russia's historical claims to Moldova persist, as underscored by past declarations from the Kremlin. With forthcoming presidential elections and a referendum on European Union membership slated for later this year, Moldova emerges as a pivotal arena for Moscow's exertions to bolster its sway and thwart potential integration into the EU. In a manner reminiscent of Ukraine's trajectory, Moldova found itself on the EU accession negotiation table in December 2023.

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Although conspicuous by its absence in Vladimir Putin's address on February 29, Transnistria's plight reverberates through past rhetoric and actions of the Russian leadership, delineating Moldova as a historical Russian bastion. This narrative mirrors Putin's neo-imperial aspirations to reassert dominion over erstwhile Soviet dominions, thereby expunging Western influences from Eastern Europe. Strategic ousting of Moldova's pro-European president, Maya Sandu, in favor of a pro-Russian opposition forms an integral component of Moscow's election strategy, as alleged by authorities in Chisinau.

Furthermore, Moldova grapples with governance frailties and the perpetual struggle against corruption, as underscored by dismal scores on the Resilience Barometer. These vulnerabilities, ripe for exploitation, render Moldova susceptible to intensified Russian machinations in the lead-up to elections. Moldova is thus a focal point for Moscow's hybrid tactics, spanning economic coercion, information warfare, cyber assaults, and electoral subversion. Notably, Russian interference in Moldova's 2023 local elections exemplifies the multifaceted assault on its democratic processes. The perpetuation of corruption and the judiciary's susceptibility to external influence exacerbate Moldova's vulnerabilities, evident in sluggish legal proceedings against electoral malfeasance. Allegations of complicity with the previous oligarchic regime further erode public trust in Moldova's institutional integrity. In combating these encroachments, Moldova endeavors to bolster its national resilience through concerted measures aimed at countering Russian interference. With the government's focus on enhancing societal and institutional resilience under Prime Minister Dorin Recean, Moldova embarks on a journey to mitigate external influence through the formulation of a comprehensive National Security Strategy. A pivotal stride includes the establishment of a specialized institution tasked with combating disinformation. Efforts to mitigate energy dependence on Russia further underscore Moldova's determination to curtail external leverage. Nevertheless, challenges persist, with the judiciary's perceived susceptibility to undue influence posing a formidable obstacle to Moldova's quest for resilience.

In the face of mounting challenges, Moldova has condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine but initially hesitated to directly confront Moscow. Moldova's ambivalent stance was compounded by Moldova's reliance on EU markets, with nearly 60 percent of its exports destined for the EU compared to less than a quarter for the Commonwealth of Independent States, including Russia. Additionally, Moldova's once-heavy dependence on Russian gas has been alleviated by diversification efforts, notably sourcing gas from the EU. Amidst these transformations, Moldova's posture towards Russia has grown firmer. [The reshuffle in the government, with the appointment of Prime Minister Dorin Recean, signals a prioritization of security concerns.](#) President Maia Sandu's disclosure of intercepted Kremlin plans to foment unrest in Moldova underscores the gravity of the situation. Despite enduring pro-Russian sentiments among a portion of the population, Moldova's resilience against Russian interference is becoming increasingly evident. Chisinau's recent actions reflect a departure from its previous stance of cautiousness. Measures such as banning Russian TV channels, expanding intelligence capabilities, and imposing entry bans on Russian officials demonstrate a newfound resolve to counter Russian influence. Furthermore, Moldova's legislative amendment to criminalize separatism in Transnistria underscores its commitment to territorial integrity.

Despite these moves, Moldova's path towards full emancipation from Russian influence remains challenging. Moscow's persistent interference, including the financing of pro-Russian parties and propaganda efforts, continues to pose threats. Nevertheless, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has galvanized Moldovan society towards EU integration and autonomy from Moscow. This consensus, irrespective of future leadership changes, will remain a defining feature of Moldova's trajectory.

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As Moldova marks twenty-five years of independence, it faces critical challenges including entrenched corruption and political dysfunction, alongside the complexities of managing relations with both Russia and the West. While engaging with the EU's Eastern Partnership offers avenues for reform, maintaining practical relations with Russia remains crucial for economic stability and security. Moldova's future hinges on harnessing its European identity, strategic advantages, and internal unity to surmount obstacles on the journey towards stability and prosperity.

Simultaneously, Moldova's relationship with Russia has undergone transformations. Established diplomatic ties since 1992, culminating in the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation in 2002, have marked both nations as strategic partners, evidenced by over 180 diplomatic documents. Moldova's participation in the Commonwealth of Independent States reinforces its integration into spheres where Russia holds sway. Prior to 2014, Russia stood as Moldova's primary trading partner and largest foreign investor. However, the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU strained relations, leading to Russian sanctions on Moldovan goods. This shift escalated with the 2017 presidential elections, which propelled pro-Russian figure Igor Dodon to power.

In summary, Moldova's relationship with Russia has undergone significant shifts. Established diplomatic ties and partnerships have been affected by Moldova's pursuit of closer integration with the EU. The election of pro-Russian leaders, like Igor Dodon, signaled a potential pivot towards Russia, though internal divisions complicate efforts for consensus. [Despite these challenges, Moldova continues to grapple with the complexities of achieving stability and prosperity while balancing between its European aspirations and historical ties with Russia.](#)

The escalating conflict between Moldova and Transnistria

While currently embroiled in the conflict in Ukraine, Russia remains attentive to its interests in the neighboring Republic of Moldova. [The Kremlin seeks to destabilize Moldova and oust the pro-Western government led by the Party of Action and Solidarity \(PAS\) since August 2021.](#) This endeavor serves two main objectives. Firstly, replacing the current administration with pro-Russian forces would bolster Moscow's influence in the region, particularly crucial amid the ongoing Ukraine conflict. Secondly, such a move would yield a significant political and propaganda victory, compensating for the lack of progress on the Ukrainian front.

To achieve these aims, Russia employs a multifaceted approach, orchestrating crises to challenge Moldova's pro-European authorities and their Western orientation. Economic tactics assume particular prominence given Moldova's status as one of Europe's poorest nations. The populace is acutely vulnerable to economic downturns, exacerbated by soaring prices of essential commodities like fuel, energy, and food, with inflation reaching 34.6% in October 2022. Public discontent stemming from economic woes is compounded by Russian hybrid threat activities and exploited by pro-Russian political factions.

Transnistria, having seceded unlawfully from Moldova as the Soviet Union crumbled, has remained firmly within the Kremlin's orbit while Moldova aligns itself with and wants to join the European Union. Gatherings of Transnistria's Congress of Deputies, an institutional relic of the Soviet era, are infrequent yet hold considerable significance when convened. It was through a Congress of Deputies that Transnistria emerged in 1990, igniting a conflict between Moscow-supported separatists and the nascent Moldovan republic two years thereafter. [Prior to the events of the 28th of February, the Congress had convened only sporadically, with its most recent assembly dating back to 2006. On that occasion, it sanctioned -the above mentioned- a referendum advocating for integration with Russia.](#) However, when Transnistrian politicians unexpectedly announced a new gathering, analysts

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speculated that it might herald fresh calls for reunification with Russia. Moldovan and Ukrainian officials sought to downplay such conjecture. Ultimately, the Congress refrained from endorsing such an extreme stance, opting instead to adopt a resolution entreating Russia to afford greater "protection" to the Russian nationals residing in Transnistria against perceived Moldovan encroachments. Specifically to safeguard its economy, Transnistria purportedly perceives a looming threat from Moldova, which seeks to reintegrate the region.¹ The local authorities substantiated their request for assistance by the presence of over 220,000 Russian citizens permanently residing in the territory of the Republic of Moldova of Pridnestrovia [the official name of Transnistria] and the notably positive track record of Russian peacekeeping efforts in region, Russia's role as a guarantor and mediator in the negotiation process," as outlined in the resolution.

Moldovan authorities dismissed the congress as an attempt to stoke "hysteria.": "There are no dangers of escalation and destabilization of the situation in this region of our country," spokesperson Daniel Voda wrote on Telegram. "What is happening in Tiraspol is a propaganda event." On the contrary, according to the Russian state media, "Transnistria will persistently fight for its identity, for the rights and interests of the Transnistrian people and will not give up defending them, despite any blackmail or external pressure". [This was complemented by a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry, which said that "protecting the interests of Transnistrians, our compatriots, is one of our priorities".](#)^p

The recent entreaty from Transnistria's self-proclaimed authorities stands as a harbinger of heightened apprehension regarding Moscow's expansive territorial designs. Concurrently, the resurgence of speculation regarding Russia's alleged intentions to annex the region could be perceived as a calculated move by Moscow to exacerbate political tensions within Moldova, particularly in the lead-up to the pivotal autumn 2024 presidential election, potentially coinciding with a referendum on EU membership. Despite Transnistria's lack of international recognition, all member states of the United Nations, including Russia, acknowledge its affiliation with Moldova.

The recent plea furnishes Russia with a credible pretext to augment its troop deployments, although the logistical intricacies posed by Transnistria's landlocked geography render such endeavors challenging. It is widely anticipated that Russia will rationalize this augmentation by citing the imperative to safeguard its citizens, a stratagem reminiscent of its interventions in eastern Ukraine, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. Transnistria thus emerges as a focal point for Putin's strategic calculus, given the ease with which he can escalate tensions, leveraging the presence of Russian troops and citizens in the region.

Amidst distractions in Ukraine, the Middle East, and ongoing electoral processes in the West., Putin appears emboldened to exploit the Transnistria crisis to underscore the West's perceived indifference toward Moldova's security. This maneuver may serve as a prelude to a potential referendum on accession to the Russian Federation or even the outright annexation of Transnistria by Russian forces, fueled by conjecture surrounding Russia's aspirations to establish a contiguous "land bridge" linking southern Ukraine to Transnistria.

Russia's military presence within Moldova could precipitate direct confrontations with its government and armed forces, potentially engendering yet another theater in Russia's expansive geopolitical maneuvers.

¹ According to the document, the social and economic tensions in Transnistria are in direct contradiction with European principles and approaches to the protection of human rights and free trade.

Moldova's vulnerabilities and the risk of war

The specter of the Ukraine conflict and the continued presence of Russian troops in Transnistria have stirred apprehension among Moldovans and certain international observers, raising concerns that Moldova could become the next target of Putin's ambitions.

In contrast to Ukraine, Moldova possesses a relatively modest military force, akin to the capabilities of Transnistria's armed contingents. With a standing army comprising around 6,000 personnel, Moldova's capacity to repel Russian incursions is notably limited. [Moldova, characterized as one of Europe's economically disadvantaged nations, boasts a populace of approximately 2.6 million. The vulnerability of Moldova's energy sector stands out as a prominent concern.](#) In a significant development, Moldova commenced natural gas imports from international markets, chiefly Romania, in December 2022, diverging from its previous reliance solely on Russian gas. This shift marks a pivotal step in reducing Moldova's susceptibility to Moscow's influence, despite its pro-European stance. On the surface, Transnistria appears strategically advantageous for Russia as a potential springboard for military actions against Ukraine or Moldova. However, Transnistria's independent capabilities to confront Ukraine or the willingness to engage in hostilities against Moldova remain dubious. Moreover, the logistical hurdle of accessing Transnistria necessitates substantial territorial gains in the southern reaches of Ukraine. Notably, Ukrainian forces seized the city of Kherson in November 2022, a pivotal victory that disrupted Russia's aspirations to control the Black Sea coastline via the southern regions of Ukraine.

Thus it also raises the question of „How vulnerable Moldova is to influence operations by the Russian Federation?“ The answer is quite complex as Moldova's susceptibility to Russian influence spans across various critical fronts, posing significant challenges to its economic stability, political autonomy, and security landscape. Russian leverage in Moldova's economy extends to the energy sector, trade, and labor migration.

[In the energy sector, Russia's Gazprom historically monopolized Moldova's natural gas supply. Exploiting this dependency, Gazprom exerted pressure on Moldova by reducing gas supplies and threatening further disruptions.](#) Moldova sought to mitigate this pressure by diversifying its gas sources and securing gas reserves from other countries. However, vulnerabilities remain, with potential disruptions posing risks to electricity supply and increasing energy costs for Moldovan consumers. Also important to mention, that the Moldavskaya GRES power plant in Transnistria, owned by Russia's Inter RAO, plays a pivotal role in Moldova's electricity generation. Any interruption in electricity supply from this region significantly impacts Moldova's energy security, forcing it to import costly energy from Romania. Russia's actions, including shelling of Ukraine's power system, further exacerbate electricity supply challenges, leading to blackouts and economic repercussions. This dependency exacerbates economic strains and poses challenges to Moldova's energy security.

In addition to energy, Russia's influence extends to trade and labor migration. Although Moldova's reliance on Russian markets has decreased, pro-Russian factions exploit perceptions of economic dependency to sway public opinion. Remittances from Moldovans working abroad, primarily in Russia, constitute a significant portion of the country's GDP, further linking Moldova's economic stability to Russian interests.

Lastly politics and religion also play key factors in the Russian hybrid toolbox. In Moldova, key pro-Russian political parties and organizations exert considerable influence on the country's political landscape. There are currently two significant groupings in Moldova that practise: [The Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova \(PSRM\), led by Igor Dodon, advocates for closer ties with Russia](#)

[and defends Russian influence, the Moldovan Orthodox Church, and the Russian language's special status.](#) Despite internal crises and declining popularity, the PSRM remains significant and receives support from Russia. The ȘOR Party, led by Ilan Șor, appeals to poorer sections of society with social slogans and indirectly aligns with Russian interests, blaming high energy prices on the government's anti-Russian policy. Meanwhile, the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), although diminished in popularity, still maintains support, particularly among pensioners. The PCRM shares pro-Russian views and has formed a political bloc with the PSRM. These parties shape Moldova's politics, with the Moldovan Orthodox Church serving as a significant instrument of Russian soft power, influencing public opinion in favor of pro-Russian sentiments.

Besides the political aspect, the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC) -under the Moscow Patriarchate- also holds significant sway in Moldova, with an estimated 70-80% of the population affiliating with it. [Enjoying widespread public trust, the Church plays a pivotal role in shaping Moldovans' views, particularly in rural areas. Traditionally aligning with pro-Russian parties like the Party of Socialists and the Party of Communists,](#) the MOC has actively engaged in election campaigns, advocating for close ties with Moscow. Notably, during the 2016 presidential election, Bishop Marchel endorsed pro-Russian candidates, while vilifying their pro-Western counterparts. Moreover, the MOC has been implicated in disseminating misinformation, including regarding Covid-19 vaccines, and openly supporting Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as evidenced by Archbishop Marchel's provocative gestures, such as wearing a St. George ribbon, a symbol of Russian aggression, during a Victory Day march. Despite mounting criticism, the Russian Orthodox Church in Moldova has refrained from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In summary, Russia's leverage over Moldova's energy sector, coupled with its influence in trade and labor migration, and religion underscores its ability to exert pressure on Moldova's political landscape. Despite efforts to diversify energy sources and reduce dependence, vulnerabilities persist, highlighting the complexities of Moldova's relationship with Russia.

Conclusion

The complex geopolitical landscape of Transnistria, epitomizes the intricate web of historical, cultural, and strategic factors shaping Russia's influence in Eastern Europe. Emerging as an unacknowledged separatist entity following Moldova's disintegration from the Soviet Union, Transnistria de facto maintains self-governing status, bolstered by Russia's political and military support.

Strategically positioned between Ukraine and Moldova, Transnistria serves as a buffer zone and a foothold for projecting Russian influence in the region. The presence of Russian peacekeeping troops since the end of the Transnistrian War in 1992 underscores Moscow's commitment to maintaining stability and asserting its presence in the area. Moreover, Transnistria's location facilitates Russia's broader geopolitical objectives, impeding Moldova's aspirations for integration with Western institutions like the European Union and NATO.

Economically, Transnistria's industrial base, particularly its steel production and manufacturing facilities, presents opportunities for economic cooperation with Russia, further solidifying Moscow's leverage over the region. However, recent geopolitical shifts, such as [Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine, have prompted Transnistria to reorient its trade towards Western Europe, diminishing its economic reliance on Russia.](#)

The recent entreaty from Transnistria's self-proclaimed authorities for "protection" from Russia underscores Moscow's pivotal role in the region's security affairs. This plea furnishes Russia with a credible pretext to augment its troop deployments, potentially escalating tensions with Moldova and

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Ukraine. Amidst distractions in Ukraine and ongoing electoral processes in the EU and the U.S., Putin appears emboldened to exploit the Transnistria crisis to underscore the West's perceived indifference toward Moldova's security.

Most recently, it is important to note that in Chisinau, the Moldovan Parliament has backed a call to promote the aspiration of EU membership, underlining its commitment to sovereignty, democracy and neutrality. Expressing concerns about Russia's influence and activities in the region, President Maia Sandu called EU integration key to Moldova's future stability. Despite opposition from pro-Moscow factions, the parliament approved the declaration, stressing that EU integration is Moldova's most important national ambition. Meanwhile, in the Transnistrian region, separatist leader Vadim Krasnostelsky urged the Moldovan authorities to recognise his region's autonomy and renounce claims to the region, stressing the desire for peace and stability

Moldova, then, finds itself delicately poised between Russia and the West, navigating a complex dance of influence and identity. The disintegration of the post-Cold War order in Europe has ushered in a [new era reminiscent of Cold War and the current Russia-Ukrainian divisions, with Moldova caught between the robust structures of NATO and the EU and Russia's territorial ambitions](#). Moldova's strategic position presents opportunities and dilemmas, with closer ties to the EU promising economic and political benefits, while Russia's historical influence and military presence in Transnistria compel Moldova to tread carefully in its foreign relations. In navigating these complexities, Moldova's future hinges on harnessing its European identity, leveraging its strategic advantages, and fostering internal cohesion to overcome the myriad challenges on its path to prosperity and stability. However, Russia's multifaceted approach, encompassing economic, political, and military dimensions, poses significant challenges to Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity, highlighting the vulnerability of Eastern European nations to Russian influence operations.

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