

How the EU Can Reduce Russia's Exploitation of Moldova's Vulnerabilities

Jakob Hedenskog
30 November 2022

Executive Summary

Russia is seeking to undermine both Ukraine and Moldova. Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 also increased its interest in Moldova, which was probably perceived as a potentially easy target after Ukraine had been conquered. Although the immediate Russian military threat to Moldova has diminished since the spring, due to Ukraine's counteroffensive in the south, Moscow is working intensively to undermine the Moldovan government and bring about regime change in Chisinau. Russia seeks to exacerbate Moldova's countless vulnerabilities, such as its energy dependence, economic crisis, through media influencing, disinformation, and manipulation of public opinion. There are also other security concerns linked to Russia's war in Ukraine, such as the situation in the separatist region of Transnistria.

Traditionally, Russia's main tools of influence in Moldova have been energy dependence and corruption of the economic and political elite. Former President Igor Dodon and the Socialist Party have been replaced by the oligarch Ilan Shor and the Shor Party as Russia's main political instrument, but Moscow has connections with several oligarchs and politicians whose interests are threatened by the current pro-European Moldovan government's anti-corruption reforms. The rather small protest movement in Chisinau in the autumn of 2022, sponsored by Shor, has the potential to increase during the winter due to social discontent linked to inflation and increasing energy prices in the country.

Much of Moldova's future, including relations between Chisinau and the separatist region of Transnistria and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, will depend on the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine. These entities are sceptic towards the European Union (EU) and tend to see Moldova's EU integration as a tool for unification of Moldova with Romania. It is therefore imperative that the EU increases its efforts on Moldova's membership and takes all necessary measures to ensure that the EU enlargement process for Moldova and Ukraine advance together at the same speed.

Introduction

On 23 June 2022, the Council of the European Union granted both Moldova and Ukraine the status of EU candidate countries. By granting candidacy to both countries at the same time, the EU implicitly recognized that the fate of both countries is intertwined, and that the EU's enlargement process is also a geopolitical instrument.¹ Moldova's candidate status would not have happened without Russia's war in Ukraine. It can therefore also be interpreted as a belated response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Given the immediate threat to Moldova linked to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Moldovan government was initially reluctant to take a strong stance against Russia.² However, as the Russian military advance in southern Ukraine was halted and later even rolled back by a Ukrainian counter-offensive, Chisinau gradually increased its criticism and took a position on sanctions. In her speech to the European Parliament in May 2022, President Maia Sandu said that "Crimea is Ukraine. Donbas is Ukraine. Kyiv is Ukraine. And they will always be Ukraine".³ This declaration infuriated Moscow, which insinuated that Sandu had violated the neutrality enshrined in the Moldovan constitution.⁴ The constitutional neutrality of Moldova, however, is not recognized by any other state, and Russia constantly contravenes it by stationing troops on Moldovan soil in Transnistria, against Chisinau's will.

The Moldovan government faces a difficult balancing act. Aspirations to join the EU must be balanced with an economic and energy dependency on Russia. Despite a strong performance by the pro-reform and pro-European parties in the most recent elections – after Maia Sandu's victory in the presidential elections of 2020 the parliamentary elections in 2021 gave the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) a parliamentary majority. However, this pro-European parliamentary majority is fragile. Apart from the PAS, all the other parties in parliament – the bloc of communists and socialists, and the Shor Party led by an exiled oligarch – are openly pro-Russian, giving little room for a future pro-European coalition between any of them and the PAS. Furthermore, the PAS election victory in 2021 was facilitated by a shift in labour migration, geopolitical orientation and above all the voting patterns of the sizeable Moldovan diaspora away from Russia towards the EU. In 2021, external voters made up 18.2 per cent of Moldova's total electorate and voted overwhelmingly (86.2%) for the PAS.⁵ Given the harsh economic situation not only in Moldova, but in Europe as a whole, a repeat of this substantial success cannot be guaranteed in the next parliamentary elections to be held no later than 2025.

This report examines Russian tools of influence in Moldova since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and how these might affect the EU candidacy of Moldova. The report makes policy recommendations on the measures the EU could implement to reduce Russia's influence and exploitation of Moldovan vulnerabilities.

1 Deen, Bob and Zweers, Wouter (2022), *Moldova's vulnerabilities amid war in Ukraine*, Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 30 September, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/moldovas-vulnerabilities-amid-war-ukraine>.

2 Hedenskog, Jakob and Zachau, John (2022) *Russia's war on Ukraine: Consequences for Georgia and Moldova*, SCEEUS Commentary, 18 March, *Russia's War on Ukraine: Consequences for Georgia and Moldova - SCEEUS*.

3 Address by Maia Sandu, the President of the Republic of Moldova (2022), The European Parliament, 18 May, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-05-18-INT-1-009-0000_EN.html

4 Goble, Paul (2022) "Moscow working to block Moldova from leaving CIS", Eurasia Daily Monitor, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 19, Issue 168, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-working-to-block-moldova-from-leaving-cis/>

5 Deen and Zweers (2022), p. 13.

Moldova and Russia's War on Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the 24 February 2022 also posed a direct threat for Moldova. By all accounts, Russia's initial plans were to bring about regime change in Kyiv, to reverse the Maidan Revolution and establish political and military control over at least large parts of the country. If Russia had gained control over Odesa oblast in south-western Ukraine, it would have been able to connect with the pro-Russian separatist Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria. These ambitions appeared to be confirmed by General Rustam Minnekayev, commander of Russia's Central military district, on 22 April when he said that control over southern Ukraine would give "yet another point of access to Transnistria, where facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population have also been observed".⁶

That was neither the first, nor the last time in connection with its war in Ukraine that Russia used the protection of Russian-speakers in Moldova as a pretext to foment instability. In March 2022, only days into the invasion, Russia's Moldova embassy contacted Russians in Moldova asking them to report any instances of "national, linguistic, cultural or religious" discrimination. Scores of Russian speakers in Moldova responded by launching an online petition urging Moscow to leave the country alone, saying they had experienced no discrimination whatsoever. Moreover, in September 2022, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Russia would defend Russian speakers in Moldova, particularly mentioning Gagauzia where there is a high degree of pro-Russian sentiment. He also warned Moldova not to endanger Russian troops stationed in Transnistria, saying that doing so could spark military confrontation.⁷

Even if the direct military threat to Moldova has dwindled in recent months, as the capabilities of Russian ground forces and Russia's stockpile of artillery and drones have been reduced, Moldova is still in a highly vulnerable position. First, Moldova has processed a huge proportion of the refugees coming out of Ukraine. As of 15 November, there had been 693 013 border crossings from Ukraine since 24 February, among the largest per capita in Europe, and 90 per cent were Ukrainian nationals seeking urgent protection from the war. Most of these people quickly left Moldova for the EU but as of 15 November, 95 963 refugees were still in the country.⁸ As a result, refugees now account for some 3 per cent of the Moldova population – an unprecedented, if temporary, increase in population in the history of independent Moldova.⁹

Second, Moldova's economy has been severely affected by Russia's war in Ukraine and the western sanctions on Russia. Its main exports to Russia – vegetables, fruit, and medicines – cannot easily be oriented to other markets. Furthermore, in August 2022, Russia imposed an embargo on fruit from Moldova, excluding fruit grown in Transnistria, due to alleged "detection of dangerous elements in Moldovan products".¹⁰ This will lead Moldova to diversify from the

6 Zubarev, Dmitry (2022) "Rossiiskil general nazval tsel vtoroga etapa spetsoperatsii na Ukraine", *Vzglyad*, Zvesda, 22 April, <https://vz.ru/news/2022/4/22/1155071.html>

7 Calugareanu, Vitalie (2022), Russia warns Moldova over Transnistria troops, *DW*, 9 March, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-warns-moldova-over-transnistria-troops/a-63013005> -

8 UNHCR (2022) Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

9 Secieru, Stanislav (2022) "How big is the storm?", Brief No 10, October, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_10_Impact%20of%20Russian-Ukraine%20war%20on%20the%20Eastern%20Neighbourhood_web.pdf, p. 3.

10 Necsutu, Madalin (2022) "Russian Ban on Moldovan Fruit Imports Angers Chisinau", *Balkan Insight*, 17 August, <https://>

Russian market in the same way as the Moldovan wine industry has to a large extent after experiencing Russian embargos. Another important channel for the Moldovan economy is remittances, which according to the World Bank made up 15.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020.¹¹ Russia's war has resulted in a further decline in remittances from Russia over and above that already experienced in recent years. Other economic effects of the war are increased food and energy prices, which have fuelled already high inflation, putting a heavy burden on fiscal policy and a budget already strained by the refugee influx and the structure of the energy sector.¹²

Third, the war still poses a more direct security risk to Moldova. Russia's heavy shelling of Ukraine, using artillery and cruise missiles to target Ukrainian energy infrastructure, risks spilling over to Moldovan territory. On 10 October, three Russian cruise missiles launched from the Black Sea aimed at western Ukraine crossed into Moldovan air space. Moldova Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu labelled this a breach of international law and summoned the Russian Ambassador to provide an explanation.¹³ In addition, a Russian missile shot down by Ukrainian air defence on 31 October landed in the Moldovan village of Naslavcea, causing material damage but no casualties.¹⁴

Ukraine supplied 30 per cent of Moldova's electricity before the February invasion but the Russian bombing of power stations in Ukraine means that Moldova has had to turn to Romania instead, facilitated by its connection since March 2022 to the European ENTSO-E electricity grid. After a Russian missile strike on 15 November caused an electricity blackout across the border from Moldova, Popescu noted that: "Every bomb dropped on Ukrainian cities and energy infrastructure has direct consequences for the people of our country".¹⁵

Main Tools of Russian Influence in Moldova

Although Russia is likely to have a military scenario for Moldova, it would probably prefer to control Moldova without having to use the military option by establishing the "limited sovereignty" that it has in practice imposed on Belarus since 2020.¹⁶ While waiting for an opportunity for regime change in Moldova, Moscow encourages vulnerabilities in Moldovan society.

Moscow has various opportunities to exploit Moldova's weaknesses at the national level and in two of its regions, Transnistria and Gagauzia. The two main tools at the national level are

balkaninsight.com/2022/08/17/russian-ban-on-moldovan-fruit-imports-angers-chisinau/

11 The World Bank (2020) "Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) – Moldova", the World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?end=2020&locations=MD&start=1995>.

12 Busch, Carolin (2022) "War in Ukraine: Moldova to face severe economic shock", *German Economic Team*, March-April, <https://www.german-economic-team.com/en/newsletter/war-in-ukraine-moldova-to-face-severe-economic-shock/>

13 Fiedler, Tristan (2022) "Russian missiles crossed Moldovan airspace, deputy PM says", *Politico*, 10 October, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russian-missiles-crossed-moldova-airspace-deputy-prime-minister-claims/>

14 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2022) "O racheta ruseasca a cazut pe teritoriul R. Moldova. Mai multe case din Naslavcea, avariate", <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/explozii-la-frontiera-de-nord-cu-ucraina-mai-multe-case-din-naslavcea-avariate/32108598.html>

15 Associated Press (2022) "Russia's strikes on Ukraine spotlight Moldova's energy woes", posted at *Ktar News*, 17 November, <https://ktar.com/story/5349224/russian-strikes-on-ukraine-spotlight-moldovas-energy-woes/>

16 Pasa Valeriu; Albu, Natalia; Gotisan, Iurie; Marzac, Elena, Flenchea, Alexandru; Sandu Sanda; Parlicov, Victor (2022), Threats to the security of the Republic of Moldova in the short and medium term, Watch dog, 22 September, <https://www.watchdog.md/2022/09/22/threats-to-the-security-of-the-republic-of-moldova-in-the-short-and-medium-term/>

the country's dependence on Russian energy and Moscow's ability to corrupt large parts of the country's business and political elite.

Moldova has traditionally been nearly 100 per cent dependent on Russian gas. Moscow's control over Moldova's energy supply, crucial to the economy and to social stability, has been an even more effective tool than direct meddling in Moldovan domestic politics. In October 2021, for instance, Chisinau's long-term contract with Gazprom expired and gas prices were increased. Moscow began charging Moldova the full market price of US\$790 per million cubic metres (mcm), up from US\$ 148/mcm in 2020. At the same time, Gazprom proposed that, in exchange for cheaper gas from Russia, Moldova should adjust its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU and delay its energy market reform, which had been agreed with the EU, that required gas markets to be liberalized and to allow greater competition. This led the Moldovan Parliament to impose a 30-day state of emergency in the energy sector.

Rising gas prices have pushed up living costs for Moldovans, which in turn has triggered the risk of social unrest. In the autumn of 2022, Chisinau saw repeated oligarch-sponsored protests in Chisinau against alleged government failings amid an acute winter energy crisis and skyrocketing inflation.

Moldova's energy dependence on Russia is twofold: directly through its dependence on Russian gas for heating, and indirectly through the import of cheap electricity from Transnistria. The national energy company, MoldovaGaz, is in fact 50 per cent owned by Russia's Gazprom and 13.4 per cent owned by the de facto Transnistrian authorities. The largest power station in Moldova, which is operated by Moldavskaya GRES, a subsidiary of the Russian company Inter RAO UES, is in Transnistria. It provides about 70 per cent of Moldova's electricity. The rest is imported from Ukraine. Moreover, Transnistria has a gigantic energy debt of approximately US\$7 billion to Gazprom. This debt has accumulated because of decades of non-payment by the breakaway region. Chisinau's own debt to Gazprom amounts to US\$ 700 million.¹⁷ Moldova refuses to recognize the Transnistrian debt as its own. This dual dependency on Russian gas and electricity from Transnistria combined with the considerable debt owed to Gazprom gives Russia as strong hold over any Moldovan government.

However, Russia's war in Ukraine has to a large extent changed this situation. Following the extensive damage to Ukraine's energy infrastructure in October and November 2022, Ukraine stopped exporting electricity to Moldova. Chisinau managed to secure electricity supplies from Romania at a capped price in October 2022. Deliveries of Russian gas were also reduced in October and November, which led Moldavskaya GRES to reduce its power supplies to right-bank Moldova.

Regarding corruption, Moldova harbours various political, civil, and oligarchic forces with an interest in changing the government and halting reforms. According to sensitive material obtained by Ukrainian intelligence and published by *the Washington Post* in October 2022, since 2016 operations in Moldova by the Russian security service (FSB) have been led by Dmitry Milyutin, a General in the FSB and deputy head of the Department of Operational Information. For most of that time he worked through Igor Chaika, a Russian businessman

¹⁷ Deen and Zweers (2022), p. 14.

and the son of Russia's former Prosecutor General. Chaika is the representative in Moldova of a Kremlin-linked business association, *Delovaya Russia*.¹⁸

The FSB's primary vehicle in Moldova for many years was the Socialist Party led by Igor Dodon, who was Moldova's president in 2016–2020. This strategy backfired in 2020, however, when Moldovan voters rejected Dodon after he became mired in a series of corruption scandals. In one secretly recorded video leaked in 2019, Dodon admitted receiving Kremlin funding, including from Gazprom, and claimed that he required US\$ 800,000 to 1 million per month to cover his party's "running costs". In 2022, Dodon was charged with treason, illegal enrichment, corruption, and illegal party financing, but denied the charges in court saying the case against him was "100 per cent political".¹⁹ An investigation by RISE Moldova and the Dossiers Center found six bank transfers from Russia to Moldova, amounting to approximately US\$ 300,000, with Dodon as the beneficiary.²⁰

After Dodon stepped down as president in December 2020, Moscow quickly sought his political replacement in Ilan Shor, a former banker, populist politician and former mayor of the town of Orhei, and the leader of the Shor Party. Shor had been living in exile in Israel since 2019 after allegedly being involved in the theft of US\$ 1 billion between 2012 and 2014 from three private Moldovan banks guaranteed by the National Bank of Moldova. This banking scandal left the Moldovan government with a budget deficit equivalent to 12 per cent of GDP.

In September 2022, the management and control of Moldova's two main pro-Russian television channels were transferred to a close Shor associate, providing him with a major platform for advancing a Moscow-aligned agenda in Moldova. In addition, intercepted communications show that the FSB sent a team of Russian political strategists to advise Shor's party, and that the FSB oversaw a deal in which a Russian oligarch acquired one of Shor's main assets to shield it from the Moldovan authorities. Shor has denied ever receiving support from Moscow, including from the security services.²¹ He has, however, admitted that he organized the anti-government protests of 2022.

In October 2022, the US Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on Shor for his "detailed plans to undermine Moldovan president Maia Sandu and return Moldova to Russia's sphere of influence". Nine individuals and 12 entities were sanctioned, including Vladimir Plahotniuc, the oligarch and formerly all-powerful politician who engaged in state capture in 2016–2019; Ilan Shor's wife, Sara Lvovna Shor, better known by her stage name Jasmin, who was decorated by Putin as an honoured artist of Russia; and the above-mentioned Igor Chaika. The latter was accused by the OFAC of planning, in conjunction with Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov, to undermine President Sandu in advance of the 2021 Moldovan elections.²²

18 Belton (2022).

19 Belton (2022).

20 Thorik, Vladimir and Kanev, Sergey (2022) "Russian money for Dodon", *RISE Moldova*, 10 November, <https://www.rise.md/english/russian-money-for-dodon/>.

21 Belton (2022).

22 US Department of the Treasury (2022) "Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin's Malign Influence Operations in Moldova", 26 October, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1049>.

Russian Influence in Transnistria and Gagauzia

Russian troops in Transnistria represent a sizeable but not decisive security risk to both Moldova and Ukraine. Russia has an operational group of forces (OGRF) of probably less than 1,500 personnel, mainly guarding the remaining Cold War-era ammunition depot in Cobasna, and a peacekeeping contingent of around 400 troops. Both the OGRF and Transnistria's own armed and security forces are lightly armed and not trained for offensive missions against Ukraine. Since the Ukrainian government closed its territory to military transfer in 2015, there is no legal way to reinforce the Russian forces in Transnistria other than through Chisinau International Airport.

The Russian troops in Transnistria are not wholly "Russian". Only a few come directly from Russia, while an estimated 90 per cent of these soldiers are residents of Transnistria who hold Russian passports. In fact, the same soldiers often rotate from the Transnistrian security forces into the OGRF, and then into the peacekeeping contingent where salaries are higher, and finally back into the Transnistrian militia.²³

There are still numerous political, economic, and cultural means to be exploited in Transnistria if Russia wishes, but the Transnistrian elite is not the monolith it is often described as. The Transnistrian security elite, connected to the security forces and the so-called Ministry of State Security (MGB), is generally loyal to Moscow. Business interests, however, represented first and foremost by the Sheriff Company, while loyal to Moscow because of their dependence on the cheap gas that powers heavy industry in the region, are also interested in trade with the EU under the DCFTA.²⁴ This has been further propelled by Ukraine's decision to close its border with Transnistria a few days into the full-scale invasion.

Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine has made it impossible to hold meetings within the 5+2 negotiations format, which is Russia and Ukraine, together with Moldova and Transnistria as parties with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) as mediators and the US and the EU as observers. The discussions have moved increasingly to a 1+1 format where the parties to the conflict address everyday economic and social issues. The increase in Transnistrian trade through territory controlled by the Moldovan authorities due to the closure of the border with Ukraine has shifted the economic balance moderately in favour of Chisinau, creating conditions for further economic integration of Transnistria into Moldova.²⁵

Although the immediate military threat around Transnistria has receded somewhat, the security situation is occasionally tense. Nonetheless, the regional elite appears happy with status quo. When a series of explosions occurred in the spring of 2022, among them at MGB headquarters in Tiraspol and at a local radio transmitter, the authorities immediately raised the terrorist threat from yellow to red but refrained from escalating the situation further.

For historic, linguistic, religious, and economic reasons, among others, Gagauzia remains one of the regions in Moldova most susceptible to Russian influence. The Gagauz are Turkic but largely Russian-speaking Orthodox Christians. In 1994, following tensions between Chisinau and Comrat, the capital of Gagauzia, the Moldovan Parliament passed an autonomy

23 Deen and Zweers (2022), p. 23.

24 Deen and Zweers (2022), p. 27.

25 Secieru, p. 6.

law which gave Gagauzia special legal status and created the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. The autonomy law stipulates, for instance, Gagauzia's right to self-determination should Moldova lose its sovereignty; and establishes three official languages there, Gagauz, Romanian and Russian, as well as a legislature (the People's Assembly) and an Executive (*Bashkan*, or governor), who is also an ex-officio member of the Cabinet of Moldova.

Gagauzia is strongly oriented towards Russia, with a susceptibility to the conservative values cherished within the Russian concept of the "Russian world" (*russskii mir*). When Chisinau banned St George ribbons in April 2022, the Gagauz People's Assembly overturned the decision, and the ribbons were openly used during the 9 May victory celebrations in Comrat. On 25 May 2022, the People's Assembly banned a planned gay pride event in Comrat.

In Gagauzia, Russia is generally seen as protection against the majority Romanian culture in Moldova. A regional television channel broadcasts mainly in Russian and 95 per cent of the schools use Russian as the language of instruction. Residents tend to consume news from Russian language media outlets, which are controlled either directly by the Kremlin or by pro-Moscow political circles in Moldova.²⁶ When Moldovan Special Forces held an exercise in Comrat in August 2022, a regional website claimed that the drill was aimed at "restoring order" in the southern region. This false assertion found fertile ground in the pro-Russian disinformation space and scared many residents. The story originated from a website owned by Viktor Petrov, a local deputy of the current *Bashkan*, Irina Vlah.

Gagauzia has also occasionally hinted at separatist intentions. In February 2014, the local authorities organized an illegal referendum, and claimed that 98% had voted for integration into the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and reaffirmed the regions' right to secede from Moldova should there be a change in statehood. Its geographical isolation, the lack of a border with Transnistria and the lack of military means, however, makes the potential for violent separatism very small.

Russia's political and economic influence in Comrat politics is huge. The *Bashkan*, who is elected for a maximum of two four-year terms, usually needs Russia's support. Use of the Russian language means fewer opportunities to work and study in Chisinau than in Russia, and media consumption in the region is highly Russophone. For the same reasons, migrant workers from the region have usually tended to prefer Russia, although this is now shifting more towards Turkey and the EU. While the residents remain sceptical of Moldova's EU integration, as in Transnistria the regional economic elite appears pragmatic when it comes to the economic opportunities of the DCFTA and of EU integration. The region has also had a trade agreement with Turkey since 2016.

26 Garciu, Piotr (2022) "Russian propaganda Dominates Moldova's Gagauzia", *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 3 October, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/russian-propaganda-dominates-moldovas-gagauzia>

Policy Recommendations: Some Priorities for the EU's Policy on Moldova

- *Enhance Brussels' strategic communications:* The EU should improve its own strategic communication in Moldova, including by providing increased resources to the EU Delegation in Chisinau. The new candidate status of Moldova and Ukraine must ensure that Moldova keeps pace with Ukraine in terms of reforms and EU integration.
- *Support pluralism:* The EU should not put all eggs in one basket but build good relations with both the current government in Chisinau and other political representatives, thereby promoting political pluralism and adherence to the principles of a multiparty system and European values, which were largely undermined by the “pro-European” parties in 2009–2016. The EU should also invest more in exchanges, people-to-people contacts and scholarships to create greater direct knowledge of EU member states among younger Moldovans, especially those living outside the capital and minorities, so they are less inclined to regard the EU as a threat and part of a Romanian strategy of annexation. EU rapprochement is a way to disarm the false dichotomy that claims that Moldova's future is to be tied either to Romania or to Russia. On the contrary, Moldova can improve its relations with the EU member states and with Ukraine, which will require reconstruction after the war.
- *Enhance the EU's role in resolving the Transnistrian conflict:* Russia's increased economic weakness because of the war and Western sanctions, Transnistria's increasing economic dependence on the EU market and current demographic trends, such as a decreasing population in Transnistria and a possible increase in the population in Moldova due to refugees from Ukraine, all create favourable conditions for settlement of the conflict in the long run. The EU should increase facilitation of the pragmatic 1+1 format between Chisinau and Tiraspol to speed up Transnistria's integration into Moldova's economic and legal space. The outcome of the war will eventually affect the conditions for resolving all the protracted conflicts in Russia's neighbourhood, but especially the one in Transnistria.
- *Increase engagement in Moldova's other regions:* Moldova's EU candidacy has created better opportunities for the EU to be more active and visible, and more deeply engaged with actors in Gagauzia and the other Moldovan regions. The EU should intensify its support to the dialogue between Chisinau and Gagauzia, as well as with other regional and local authorities in the areas most vulnerable to Russian influence, establish a presence in Comrat, to protect and promote the rights of national minorities, and facilitate their integration into Moldovan society. It should also promote student exchanges, increase its role as an encourager of mediation and support Moldova's stalled decentralization reforms. The EU's investments in the region should be more visible to demonstrate what a rapprochement with the EU brings to ordinary Moldovans, including in the regions.
- *Launch a civilian CSDP mission:* Use of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) instruments should be considered to increase Moldova's resilience, focused on supporting security sector reform, addressing media literacy, and countering disinformation and other hybrid threats arising from Russia. These efforts must be complementary to the OSCE Mission to Moldova, not overlap with it, to prevent providing Russia with an argument for closing the mission.

- *Support increased energy security:* The EU should support reducing reliance on Russian energy by promoting the use of renewable energy sources, investment in upgrading the Moldovan energy grid to make it compatible with that of the EU, and the upgrading of power grids in the country. The future reconstruction of Ukraine should be seen as a chance to promote Moldovan business interests and Moldova's security, including its energy security.



Jakob Hedenskog

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS).

About SCEEUS

The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent Centre, funded by the Swedish Government, established in 2021. The Centre conducts policy relevant analysis on Russia and Eastern Europe and serves as a platform and meeting place for national and international discussions and exchanges on Russia and Eastern Europe. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

© 2022 Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies

Previous SCEEUS Publications:

[Next Steps for EU Enlargement – Forwards or Backwards? by Steven Blockmans & Michael Emerson](#)

SCEEUS Guest Report, 23 November 2022

[The New Reality in Europe: Time to Reshape the Eastern Partnership, by Kakha Gogolashvili](#)

SCEEUS Guest Platform for Eastern Europe Policy No. 11, 21 November 2022