

A Window of Opportunity by Default: Will Moldova Use It?

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shattered Moldova's ability to balance between pragmatic ties with Moscow and a commitment – at least rhetorically – to EU integration. Massive support from the EU has been instrumental in enabling Moldova's president, Maia Sandu, and her government to successfully address the unfolding energy and security crises facing the country, handle the flow of Ukrainian refugees, and maintain political stability in the country. As a result, Chisinau has radically altered its geopolitical stance, which has become far less ambivalent.

Nevertheless, Moldova's fundamental political dilemma remains unresolved. As they always have, short-term political and security calculations continue to undermine Chisinau's commitment to reform, thus jeopardizing the country's long-term stability and impeding the lowering of Russia's influence below the critical threshold. Given both the government's unconvincing record of reform and Russia's existing leverage, the forthcoming electoral cycle poses a tremendous challenge both for the ruling party and for the country as a whole. To survive the elections and give the country a chance, Sandu and the ruling party would need to focus on achieving the breakthrough with reforms expected and required by the EU as part of Moldova's candidacy for EU membership.

Making the Choice

By the summer of 2021, Moldova's pro-European forces had completed their takeover of political power in the country. Following Maia Sandu's victory in the 2020 presidential election, her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) won a constitutional majority in the snap parliamentary elections of July 2021. Yet despite having run on a platform of comprehensive reforms and European integration, the new government immediately

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[emphasized](#) the need to establish “a constructive dialogue with Russia in the interest of Moldova’s citizens.” Moscow and Chisinau initiated bilateral discussions on energy, trade, and the situation in the breakaway region of Transnistria. In October 2021, Moldova replaced its expiring gas contract with Russia’s Gazprom with a new five-year deal that set a price substantially lower than the market rate—on condition that Moldova acknowledge its preexisting debts and accept that Gazprom’s demands would continue to delay the unbundling of the country’s gas markets.² To onlookers, it seemed that continuity rather than change was to be expected in Chisinau’s foreign policy.

But Russia’s invasion of Ukraine shattered Moldova’s balancing act and precipitated the country’s geopolitical realignment with the West. As the war began, Moldova’s neutrality was preserved only de jure. Indeed, President Sandu and the government immediately condemned Moscow’s actions. Moreover, even if Chisinau was initially unwilling to join Western sanctions against Russia and refused to provide military assistance to Ukraine, Moldova officially applied for EU membership just one week after the start of the invasion.

In response, Moscow resorted to exploiting the country’s political, security, and economic vulnerabilities. Given Moldova’s size, the flow of Ukrainian refugees had the potential to grow into a full-scale humanitarian crisis. Meanwhile, Russia’s offensive in southern Ukraine plausibly threatened to involve Transnistria in the operations against Ukraine. In April 2022, the Deputy Commander of Russia’s Central Military District, Major General Rustam Minnekaev, indicated that one of Russia’s goals in the war was to construct a land corridor stretching from the Crimean Peninsula to Transnistria. Russian officials accused Chisinau of oppressing the Russian-speaking population in Transnistria, which—combined with a series of [explosions](#) in and near the regional capital, Tiraspol, in April 2022—made it seem as though Moscow was preparing a pretext for taking the region by force. In this early stage of the war, Russian missiles passed through Moldova’s airspace and several fell on its territory.

As the military threat subsided, economic pressures increased. In October 2022, Gazprom reduced and later cut off gas supplies to Moldova, an issue aggravated by Ukraine’s decision to suspend electricity exports to Chisinau. In these dire socio-economic conditions, pro-Russian parties in Moldova tried to organize anti-government protests, sparking fears of a possible coup attempt.

The EU played a crucial role in enabling Chisinau to maintain stability. Brussels’ commitment to providing the necessary support to Moldova has significantly accelerated Chisinau’s geopolitical turn. Arguably, the decision to grant Moldova the official status of EU candidate country on June 22, 2022, reflected unprecedented political support for

² The agreement included a clause about how Moldova’s preexisting debts to Gazprom would be repaid. These debts, which Gazprom estimated to be over \$700 million, were to be audited by an independent auditor with the approval of the Gazprom-controlled Moldovagaz. The EU’s Third Energy Package requires “unbundling,” or the separation of the distribution, transmission, and production of gas.

the Sandu administration, as did several resolutions of the European Parliament that endorsed the country's decision to seek EU membership. The opportunity to host the European Political Community summit in Chisinau in June 2023 was another sign of encouragement. The EU also pledged to significantly enhance the capacities of the EU Delegation in Chisinau.

Most importantly, the EU radically increased its financial support, enabling Moldova to maintain economic stability and resist Russia's energy blackmail. Since October 2021, the European Union has [provided](#) more than €1 billion of assistance to Moldova. In March 2022, the EU's package of urgent humanitarian assistance helped Chisinau deal with the influx of refugees. Later that month, the Moldovan electricity grid was connected to the European one, guaranteeing the country a stable electricity supply. In April 2022, the EU allocated €150 million of macro-financial assistance, partially to complement a three-year IMF program providing \$795 million that had been adopted in December 2021 and would be augmented in May 2022. In October 2022, the EU Commission approved an additional €200 million for Moldova's energy security. Moldova further received €300 million from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to reorient its gas infrastructure toward the EU. In May 2023, the EU allocated an additional €145 million of macro-financial assistance to support economic stabilization and structural reforms in Moldova. The EU has also temporarily abolished tariffs and quotas on imports of seven agricultural products from Moldova (until July 2024), which ought to double the country's agricultural exports to the EU. In addition, the EU has established the Moldova Support Platform to rally contributions from non-EU donors.

Last but not least, in April 2023, the European Union launched a civilian mission in Moldova (EUPM) and signed a status agreement with the country regarding operational activities carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) to assist Moldova with border management. The following month, the EU presented Moldova with a €40 million package to buy military supplies and train its armed forces.

Stabilization versus Transformation

Political and economic stabilization has, however, come at the expense of reform. Although the EU's candidate status and financial support were accompanied by a set of conditions, Moldova has been less than committed to complying with them.

According to the most recent EU assessment, as of June 2023, Moldova had fully implemented only three out of nine requirements related to democratic reform. Partial [progress](#) had been made on the issues of justice reform, de-oligarchization, and the reform of public finance management; insufficient progress had been achieved either toward stamping out corruption, financial crimes, and money-laundering or toward public administration reform.

Most importantly, the Moldovan authorities had demonstrated a lack of interest in tackling two structural challenges: systemic corruption in state institutions and political interference with the work of state agencies. These issues have undermined the efficiency of state institutions and tainted the popularity of the PAS. Along similar lines, Brussels' deep-seated concerns regarding the politicization and limited independence of the judiciary and anti-corruption institutions have not been fully addressed. Political pressure on the courts and politicized appointments to key institutions, including the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office and General Prosecutor's Office, remain major issues. The decentralization reform continues to stumble due to the lack of a mechanism for delineating between the powers of the center and of the local authorities.

Civil society has [expressed](#) concerns about the misuse of state institutions; politically motivated prosecutions; excessive centralization of power; and restrictive measures imposed on the opposition and pressure on local authorities, including a threat to cancel elections in the autonomous region of Gagauzia. Changes to the electoral code have tightened the requirements for party financing and the registration of presidential candidates, which—while in some ways beneficial—provoked fears that the Central Electoral Committee would become politicized. The legality of the Commission for Exceptional Situation's procedure for combating disinformation, which resulted in six popular TV channels being shut down—was called into question. At the same time, the expansion of powers of the unreformed security services risks their excessive use for political purposes.

Meanwhile, the security agenda has explicitly been prioritized. An effort to revise national security tenets in general and the constitutional principle of neutrality in particular has been launched. In December 2022, President Sandu set up a commission to develop a new national security strategy. The new government, appointed in February 2023 and headed by Dorin Recean, announced new principles and priorities for the settlement of the Transnistria issue. Moldova's information security has been boosted by the anti-disinformation law, the establishment of a new center to combat information threats, and the cleaning-up of the media space. The government has also announced its interest in more active military cooperation with NATO countries.

The New Electoral Cycle: A Risk of Reversal?

The November 2023 local elections, which will be followed by presidential (2024) and parliamentary (2025) campaigns, open a new electoral cycle that will put pressure on the incumbent authorities. President Sandu is apparently more popular in Brussels than among the Moldovan electorate. Even if society remains relatively disinclined to protest—as shown by the failure of attempts to organize large-scale protests in winter 2022—the public dissatisfaction is evident.

Socio-economic hardship and discontent with the pace of reforms have significantly reduced public trust in the national leadership. The majority of the population

[disapproves](#) of the work of the president and the government. The war is a major concern for only eight percent of Moldovans; most people are worried about the cost of living, the state of the economy, and corruption. According to a November 2022 poll by the International Republican Institute, 64 percent of respondents [believe](#) that the country is moving in the wrong direction.

The opposition, although weakened and discredited, continues to pose a significant electoral challenge. Key pro-Russian leaders like former president Igor Dodon and populist politician Ilan Shor have been criminally prosecuted and lost their media access. The latter's namesake Shor Party was legally banned in June 2023. Nevertheless, the Bloc of Communists and Socialists and Shor's new political project – the "Chance, Obligations, Achievements - Ș.O.R" bloc – are not far behind the PAS in the opinion polls. Political figures new to the national level, such as the ex-Socialist mayor of Chisinau Ion Ceban, will also draw votes away from the ruling party.

Identity debates are likely to gain prominence in the elections once again. Sandu's attempt to present herself as "pro-human" – i.e., standing above identity fault lines – will likely fail. Chisinau's cooperation with NATO and several new laws, including the law re-defining the state language as Romanian as opposed to Moldovan, are still very divisive matters for society. No doubt the pro-Russian opposition will try to exploit this situation.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has offered Chisinau a unique opportunity to break out of a vicious circle of domestic instability, poverty, and ambivalent foreign policy. But this window of opportunity is quickly narrowing. The new electoral cycle will be a major test of the sustainability of Moldova's new political course. Given the current political and socio-economic turbulence, public discontent, and inefficient state institutions, it will be a real challenge to maintain the country's current direction.

By themselves, Brussels' political and economic support and a fear of Russia do not guarantee success, especially since the latter is almost certain to tilt the scales. Moscow [looks](#) at Moldova as "the next Ukraine;" moreover, its unreformed state institutions and weak economy tempt the Kremlin to use the leverage it possesses. Attempts to undermine the country's socio-economic stability and its government's legitimacy are likely to increase as the presidential and parliamentary elections approach.

To give the country a chance, Sandu and the ruling party would need to focus on achieving a breakthrough with reforms, as expected and required by the EU. If Moldova is invited to begin accession talks but its reform commitment is deemed insufficient, the country will once again find itself in limbo, regardless of regional dynamics and the motivations of its Western partners.

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