



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Russia will continue the pressure on Moldova; does the West have an effective response?

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With Maia Sandu's victory in the presidential elections, Moldova has passed the second of three levels in total, after which it could feel somewhat closer to EU membership and immune to Russia's influence.

Still, Ms Sandu's narrow victory in last Sunday's second round of elections and the even narrower result of a **referendum** two weeks ago in which only half a per cent of Moldovans said they wanted to join the EU hint at much more turbulence in the former Soviet Union republic.

Moscow has invested a significant amount of subversive effort and money in the past year to thwart the risky strategy of the Moldovan pro-Europeans, who aim to cement the country's long-term course towards EU membership through a series of elections.

"Russia will try to repeat the situation in Georgia, where the pro-Western president Salome Zourabichvili is isolated, while the government and the majority that support her in the parliament adopt controversial laws related to human rights, slow down reforms, and could thus come into conflict with the EU and the USA," **stated** the post-election study of the New Strategy Centre, a think tank from Romania.

The authorities in Chisinau have provided ample evidence about Russia's interference in the presidential election process and the EU referendum. They show Russia's undisguised ambition to keep Moldova and its 2.5 million citizens under their control through manipulation and bribery.

According to the Moldovan prosecutor's office, close to 40 million dollars arrived in September and October from Moscow to Moldova, through the sanctioned Russian bank Promsvyazbank, in order to bribe as many Moldovans as possible to vote against EU membership in the referendum and for the pro-Russian candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo in the presidential elections.

After the presidential elections ended, this transfer proved to be only one of the channels

through which Moscow tried to extinguish the pro-European momentum in Moldova.

Russian funds were also invested in transporting a large number of Moldovans living in Russia to vote in Belarus and Azerbaijan.

## Deepening divisions

But even more than the substantial funds that Moscow has invested in electoral manipulations in Moldova, the reactions of politicians to the news that the pro-European president Maia Sandu will remain in office reveal Moscow's intentions to persist.

"Russia does not interfere in Moldova's election campaign. However, as we keep following the developments over there, we have witnessed some irregularities in the recent referendum with regard to electoral technology," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov **said** on the eve of the second round of presidential elections.

High-ranking officials of the Russian Parliament, Andrey Klishas and Konstantin Kosachev, specifically emphasised the "disgraceful organisation" of voting abroad. The Russian establishment is deeply troubled by the fact that the crucial votes for Maia Sandu's victory came specifically from the large Moldovan diaspora, particularly those residing in Western Europe.

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Moscow's initial responses clearly suggest the direction of Russia's pressure prior to the third and crucial stage of the ongoing political "war" in Moldova, specifically until the parliamentary elections scheduled for the first half of 2025.

Russia will continue to fiercely deepen the

existing divisions in Moldovan society and politics, which are already quite numerous. First of all, Russia will intensify the division into pro-European and pro-Russian parts of the population—a division that has proven to be very sharp and extremely polarising.

## Patriots and traitors

Moscow, not only through its proxy political options in Moldova but also through direct propaganda influence from Russia, will highlight Moldova's attempt to shift away from its traditional largest partner, Russia, and towards European markets and investors as the root cause of the country's challenging economic situation. Now more than 60% of Moldova's foreign trade is with EU markets.

Moscow will further exploit the division between Moldovans living in the homeland and those in the diaspora. Maia Sandu can truly thank the votes of the diaspora, one of the largest in Europe in proportion to the total number of inhabitants, for her new presidential mandate.

Approximately 1 million to 1.2 million Moldovans reside outside the country, with the majority—approximately 60%—residing in Western Europe. That represents nearly half of the population residing in Moldova, and their influence is evident not only in their strength in elections but also in their financial **contributions** to the country's economy.

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Moldovan emigrants contribute over 12%, one of the EU's highest rates, to the country's GDP through remittances to their families.

Moscow is already accusing President Sandu of winning with the votes of the diaspora, thereby creating a narrative that they are

second-class citizens, as they did not stay in the country to share the fate of their compatriots, who are facing great economic difficulties.

Former President Igor Dodon, leader of the pro-Russian Socialist Party, accused President Sandu of becoming "a president of the diaspora" and that her opponent, Stoianoglo, "won the presidential elections inside the country."

Therefore, Russia and its allies in Moldova will insist on dividing the country into patriots who stayed and "traitors" who fled for a better life in the West during the long period leading up to the parliamentary elections.

## Territorial disputes

The most dangerous influence of Russia is undoubtedly in relation to the disputed territories in the east of the country, specifically Transnistria. The residents of this area desire stronger ties with Russia, while Moscow maintains it as an area of unresolved conflict.

No less desirable for Russian efforts to foment divisions is the Gagauzia region in the south of Moldova, where in a recent referendum as many as 95% of the population said they did not want to join the EU.



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Therefore, Russia will combine financial

bribery, narratives about a negative economic future in the EU, and the risks of unrest and territorial division in order to reverse the pro-European trend in Moldova in the next six months.

Moscow, which does not want to allow the rapprochement of a country in the critical region of Ukraine's neighbourhood and the Black Sea belt with Europe, has a significant stake in the victory of its political satellites in the parliamentary elections next spring.

In its past strategies, which it has implemented in the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, Russia has shown that the key to its imperial ambitions in that area is the installation of a puppet government in each of the countries in which it wants to maintain its dominant influence.

"For Moscow, the new government, to be established after the parliamentary elections in 2025, does not necessarily have to be visibly pro-Russian but have a polycentric policy, advocating for the restoration of ties with Moscow and opening to China. The adoption of controversial laws, as happened in Georgia, will delay the reform process and damage relations with the EU. In the end, there will be arguments that the EU does not want Moldova or wants it under certain conditions that mean the loss of tradition and national identity, so the only solution is for Moldova to turn back to Russia, because Moscow accepts Moldova as its own," assessed the Romanian New Strategy Centre.

## Can the West match Moscow?

Western leaders welcomed Maia Sandu's victory in the presidential election with immense relief.

In his congratulatory message to Ms Sandu, US President Joe Biden **said** that she achieved a "historic re-election" and her people showed a "vision for a secure, prosperous, and democratic" country. In a similar, celebratory tone, European leaders also congratulated the Moldovans and their president.

But, like Moscow, the EU also has a significant stake in the coming months because, along with Georgia, Moldova is the main training ground for stopping Russia's influence in Europe, including the military.

### European partners and the US face a brief period in which they must secure a quick win in Moldova

But are European capitals ready to invest in this goal, at least to the same extent as Moscow? The actions taken thus far have not strengthened Moldova's pro-European stance; additionally, its pro-European factions have emerged victorious in both the referendum and the presidential elections despite numerous challenges.

European partners and the US face a brief period in which they must secure a quick win in Moldova, implementing visible and tangible improvements that the citizens can observe and validate in the crucial parliamentary elections in the spring.

The opening of larger support funds for reforms in Moldova and stronger guarantees for its accelerated path to membership in the Union, along with a strong partnership narrative, could be the way to finally verify the successes of pro-European forces so far in next year's elections.