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THE EFFECTS OF THE RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE:

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MOLDOVA IN THE LEAD UP TO ELECTION SEASON

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LibMod Policy Brief

THE EFFECTS OF THE RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE:

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MOLDOVA IN THE LEAD UP TO ELECTION SEASON

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Security threats travel geographically. This is why Moldova – Ukraine’s smallest neighbour – has been subjected to relatively significant war-related effects. For instance, its territorial contiguity with Ukraine resulted in an influx to Moldova of over a million people fleeing Ukraine in the wake of Russian military aggression. Even though only some 100,000 stayed, this is a significant number given that Moldova’s population is only slightly over 3 million. The geographic proximity of the war has led to internal political tensions – in March 2022, Russia attempted an amphibious operation in the Odessa region, which, if successful, would have opened direct access for Russian forces to Moldova’s Transnistrian region that is already controlled by the Russian military. Moldova’s size has not helped either, since it does not have an economy of scale. Combined with its limited resources, along with an economy focused on agriculture and services, these altogether make Moldova more vulnerable to external shocks and more dependent on Western economic support.

Given the upcoming busy election season in Moldova (presidential elections will be held this fall, parliamentary elections in the summer of 2025), the Russian war against Ukraine may have strong effects on Moldova’s political scene. It is important to consider the nature and potential magnitude of these effects, for the purpose of mitigating them and that of preparing responses in case this mitigation fails.

Russia’s direct military aggression against Ukraine has produced three noteworthy effects of this kind on Moldova. One is that it has further strengthened the already increasingly pro-Russian attitude in the Moldovan populace. Another is that has emboldened Russia’s political proxies in Moldova, in particular the movements and parties funded by Russia and the economically powerful interest groups that have benefited from corrupt governmental practices in the past.

The third major effect is a beneficial one: Moldova obtained EU candidate status – through what was a geopolitical decision taken by the EU – which would otherwise have taken years to materialize. There have been other beneficial effects as well, such as the gradual change in the strategic culture of Moldovan ruling elites, as these latter have been forced to accept that they must not take security and sovereignty for granted. This last effect is not very significant though. This analysis will focus specifically on the first two (negative) effects due to the severity of their potential impact and the uncertainty they involve.

Pro-Russian attitudes in Moldova

A combination of factors, most related to the Russian war in Ukraine, have contributed to a reversal in pro-European sentiment and support in Moldova and a consolidation of pro-Russian sentiments. These factors are the war’s economic fallout on Moldova, the public fears that Moldova might follow Ukraine as a target of aggression, and the intensification of Russia’s

influence operations (including propaganda and disinformation) in Moldova after its February 2022 invasion.

The variation of Moldovan public opinion about the war in Ukraine strongly indicates an increasing Russian presence and activity in Moldova's information space, and serves as good proxy for increasing influence operations by Russia in Moldova. According to the Chisinau-based Institute for Public Policy, 38.3% of Moldovan citizens believed in November 2022 that Russia's aggression in Ukraine was unjustified. By August 2023, that figure had fallen to 33.4%. During the same period, the percentage of respondents who believed that the aim of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine was "to defend the people's republics in the Donbas and Luhansk regions against Ukraine" and "to free Ukraine from Nazism" increased from 32.2% to 35.1% overall (this is a cumulative score, both options show an increase). Other surveys found similar views in the populace. The 2023 Eurobarometer reveals that 44% of Moldovan respondents support economic sanctions against Russian government, companies and individuals while 41% oppose such sanctions. An average 77% of respondents in EU countries support sanctions, and only 22% oppose them. Similarly, only 44% of Moldovans support the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine, while 45% are against it, compared to 64% and 31%, respectively, in the EU.

Given that political preferences and beliefs are generally resistant to change, it would be difficult to explain the occurrence of such a considerable shift over a period of less than a year without reference to a strong external effect. In other words, it is very unlikely that this shift occurred naturally and far more likely that it reflects increasingly active and effective operation by Russia in Moldova's informational space. The examples above are not isolated signals.

Two interrelated processes can be discerned following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. One is expressed in a distinct, though not dramatic, decrease in the level of trust in the European Union (Figs. 1 and 2). Over the same period and despite the Russian aggression against Moldova's neighbour, there has been a steady increase in anti-EU sentiment coupled with an increase in pro-Russian sentiment. The latest polls from the Chisinau-based Institute for Public Policies reveal that support for EU integration is slowly dwindling and support for integration into the Russia-led Eurasian Union is slowly growing (Fig. 2). This seems counter-intuitive given that the EU granted Moldova candidate status in June 2022 and opened accession negotiations in December 2023.

The poll data also reveals that the percentage of respondents who express support for EU accession when given the binary choice "vote for joining the EU" and "vote against joining the EU" is higher than the percentage who do so when given the binary choice "vote for joining the EU" vis-à-vis "vote for joining the Eurasian Union". Thus, some respondents seem to feel less inclined to support EU accession in the context of a Eurasian Union option. One plausible explanation would be that some respondents shift their stance when provided with an alternative strategic option. Another plausible explanation would be that the Eurasian Union option awakens feelings of intimidation by Russia (due to its aggression against Ukraine) that makes some respondents hesitant about voting for EU accession.

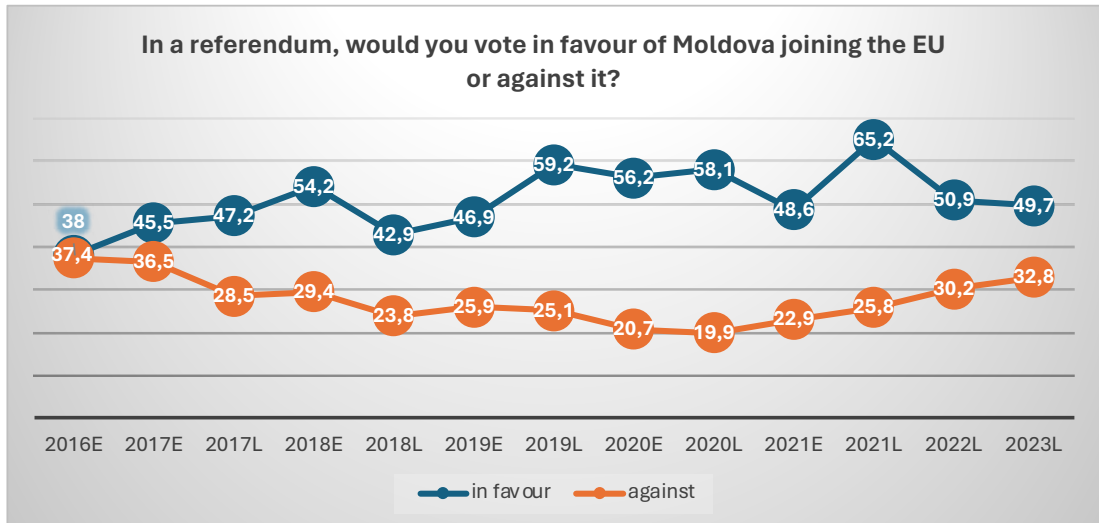


Fig. 1. Source: Chisinau-based Institute for Public Policies (E-early, L-late in the year).

Both scenarios support the idea that the views of at least a sizeable segment of Moldovan voters are not determined by normative considerations – that is, voters are not attracted by the EU’s guarantees of individual rights and freedoms. This is consistent with the idea that the larger public in Moldova is more concerned about their economic survival than about value-driven considerations. This is not a fixed state, since as soon as economic survival becomes a lesser concern, citizens are likely to start paying attention to normative considerations when voting.

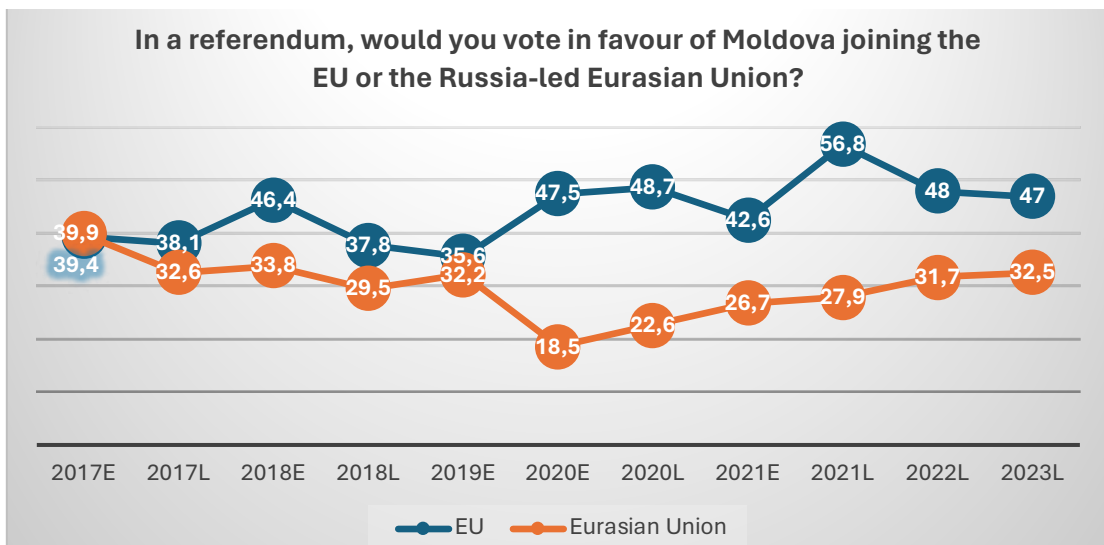


Fig. 2. Source: Chisinau-based Institute for Public Policies.

Data from 2023 World Value Survey (WVS) tells a story that is consistent with the idea that normative considerations are not the determining factors for Moldova’s voters. In an insightful graphic representation called a “cultural map”, the WVS compares over a 100 countries in terms of their populations’ preferences across two dimensions: traditional vs secular values, and survival vs self-expression values.

segment of Moldova’s population is susceptible to Russia’s anti-Western rhetoric, is vulnerable to Russia’s influence operations and that the opinions – along with political preferences – of people in this population segment are easily malleable. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine raised the stakes for Moscow in relation to the entire

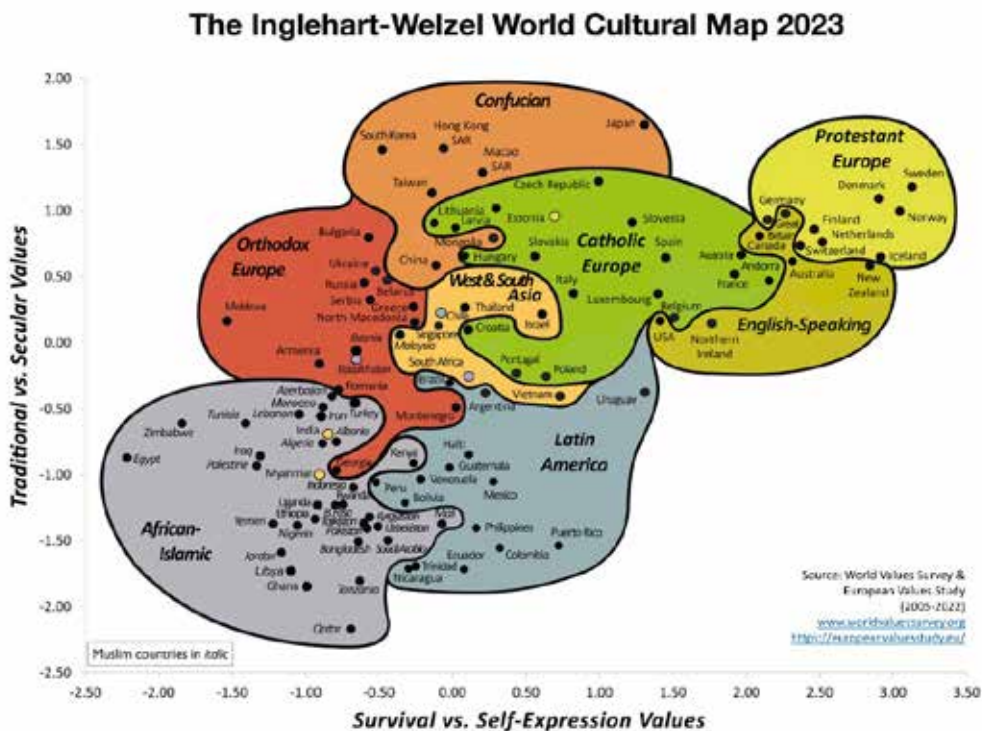


Fig. 3. 2023 World Values Survey

Moldova’s score places the country well to the left of all other Christian Orthodox countries on the survival-vs-self-expression-values axis (Fig. 3). In fact, Moldova scored lower on this dimension than all countries in the dataset except Egypt and Zimbabwe. Survival values emphasize economic and physical security and are linked with low levels of trust and tolerance. Self-expression values prioritize issues like autonomy and freedom from central authority, interpersonal trust, political moderation, and are linked with a growing trend towards embracing democratic values in society.

What does this mean for Moldova? It suggests that a large, and electorally significant

region, including Moldova: Russia is paying much more attention to Moldova and investing greater effort into Moldova-related issues. This brings us to the second major effect, that involving Russia’s local political proxies.

Russian political proxies in Moldova

On 6 March, President Vladimir Putin met with the head of Moldova’s Gagauz region, Yevgenia Gutul, in Sochi. Gutul was de facto representing the fugitive Moldovan oligarch Ilan Sor, who funded her campaign in Gagauzia. Sor had begun building up ties with Russia, making statements in support of Moldova’s integration

into Russia-led Eurasian Union and offering the Kremlin the support of his political assets and influence in Moldova.

The war in Ukraine has emboldened Russia's political proxies in Moldova, as well as some economic actors that have ties to Russia. By spurring Moscow to increase its attention to and engagement in Moldova, it created a new opportunity for these groups and organisations. As a result, they have been mounting a growing challenge of the incumbent government's EU integration policies, as has the amplification of Russia's influence operations and related messages by local pro-Russian actors, which include political parties such as the Party of Socialists and the Sor Party. These Russian proxies share a common interest with Russia – in undermining the process of Moldova's accession to the EU, which would sever their connection to political power and financial flows. In their view, the EU integration dynamic is reversible, as illustrated by the Brexit experience. These proxies have focused their efforts on preparing the ground for a similar scenario in Moldova, should Moldova's accession be finalized. Ideally, they would like to ensure stagnation in the integration process until they are able to capture political power in Chisinau and achieve a policy reversal.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine also triggered another, related phenomenon: a growing resistance, from both within and outside the public sector, to the ongoing reforms aimed at curbing the kleptocratic mechanisms. These kleptocratic "remnants" continue to erode and undermine the effective functioning of Moldova's public sector. The trend is mainly visible in the justice system. A case in point: an appeal court in Chisinau annulled the decision of the Commission for Emergency Situations prohibiting Ilan Sor's "Sansa" party from participating in 2023 local elections. In this kind of case, i.e., when corrupt judges need to extricate Russia's proxies or their agents from situations involving legal sanctions of this kind, they usually invoke procedural errors or manipulate and misapply the liberal rule-of-law principles. Frustration with these practices among the authorities

has become so great that Prime Minister Dorin Recean even came out to publicly criticise corrupt judges, who continue to obstruct justice reform and issue decisions unjustly favouring oligarchs and their agents, when investigations result in charges against them.

There are two factors that drive behaviour of the appel court mentioned above and other behaviour of this kind. One is that the belief on the part of the local Russian proxies and their agents working in Moldova's public sector that Russia is very likely to emerge victorious from the confrontation (of its own making) with the West, a confrontation in which Ukraine and Moldova are presumed to be the battleground. The war significantly strengthens the connection between Russia and themselves, due to Russia's dramatic change of paradigm vis-à-vis its "near abroad".

Another factor is the issue that these proxies view the current Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) government as weak, dysfunctional and indecisive, and see it as approaching the end of its time in power. They were more hesitant to openly challenge the authorities in the first year and a half of their governance, due to fears of coming under investigation in connection with questionable actions during previous administrations. They no longer see this as a serious risk, however, having regained some of their influence over critical elements of Moldova's public sector, and in the justice sector in particular.

The success of Russia's political proxies in re-connecting to elements of former kleptocratic networks within the Moldovan public sector is also due to an increasing belief on the part of these public servants that the incumbent PAS is indecisive and that their pro-Russian opponents are more likely to win in the forthcoming elections. As their thinking goes, it does not make sense to oppose the political group that is more likely to control the next government.

This dangerous combination – the growing Russian political and military investment in the region, the increasing confidence of Russian proxies in Moldova that the Kremlin is likely to be successful against the West, and the consolidating influence of these proxies over key individuals and institutions in the public sector – brings the momentum of the war in Ukraine into Moldova. In fact, Russia’s war in Ukraine generates momentum for political warfare in Moldova, better connecting the Kremlin with its local political proxies, which had been abandoned by Russia to some extent after their defeat by PAS in the 2021 parliamentary elections.

Conclusion and recommendations

The major challenge emphasized in this analysis is the fact that Russia’s war in Ukraine not only reveals a potential risk of but also creates preconditions for a reversal of the process of EU integration. Over the last few years, Moldovan authorities have focused excessively on generating a “push dynamic” – pushing the country towards the EU in what has been a largely elitist endeavour. Far too little effort was invested in addressing and disrupting the “pull” dynamic, pulling the country away from the EU, that Russia has been actively producing through its manipulation of Moldovan public’s political perceptions and preferences, and with the assistance of its local political proxies in Moldova.

Given the challenges Moldova now faces, an optimal course of action for the EU would be to help Moldova address the Russia’s efforts to draw the country away from the EU. In other words, to help Moldova destroy the tools through which Russia operates there. To this end, the EU would do well to implement more effective and even draconic measures targeting the Moldovan oligarchs who act as Russia’s political proxies in Moldova. This would include targeting their financial assets, by investigating how past business transactions or other actions on their part may have violated EU laws and regulations, and their freedom of movement within the EU.

The Moldovan authorities’ failure to build an effective justice system undermines their ability to govern, to enforce laws and regulations, and to implement appropriate security policies to respond to Russia’s indirect aggression in Moldova. The EU should consider an approach that is both more resolute and more hands-on, with the understanding that what Moldova needs first and foremost is a quick fix of its justice system. The alternative is to accept the increasing risk of losing Moldova. The EU should rely more on the reform logic driving the difficult cases of transitional justice than the light-hand approaches that are better suited in relation to countries where the risks are less severe.

Finally, the EU appears to be slowly losing the battle with Russia for the hearts and minds of Moldovans. While the establishment of a Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation in Moldova may be a good step, the EU should recall that while its Moldovan partners have traditionally been good at enacting laws and building tools, they consistently fail to implement them properly (if they do so at all). Refocusing the role of the existing EU Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova from advisory involvement to the role of a real partner in designing and implementing measures would be a more suitable strategy. The painful reality is that Moldova lacks the proper capacities to act alone and does not have enough time to build them.

The author expresses his personal opinion.



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