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Russia's hybrid warfare poses an existential threat to Moldovan democracy

Moldovan President Maia Sandu was re-elected on 3 November amid accusations of Russian election meddling. Eleanor Knott writes that with parliamentary elections scheduled for next year, the country is braced for further attempts by Moscow to subvert its democracy.

In recent weeks, Moldova has held three elections: an EU referendum, the first round of a presidential election on 20 October and the run-off of the presidential elections on 3 November. It was not by accident that the first round and the EU referendum were scheduled on the same day – 20 October 2024. This clash was intended to boost turnout for the incumbent president, Maia Sandu.

High stakes and narrow margins

The EU referendum was won on a knife edge, garnering 50.35%. This was only 10,564 votes more than the “no” option. In short, Sandu gambled her incumbency on the referendum, and it only narrowly paid off.

Meanwhile, Sandu's regime has been open about the lack of a “plan B” besides winning the referendum. Just as the Sandu regime frames EU membership as “**existential**” for Moldova, so does its promise for the Sandu regime.

The Sandu campaign had also never planned for a second round of the elections, hoping to secure a victory in the first round by scoring over 50%. Throughout the campaign for the first round, it was unclear who Sandu might face in a run-off.

Vying for this position were various pro-Russian opposition groups. This included the major pro-Russian opposition party, Moldova's Socialist Party's (PSRM) candidate, Alexandr Stoianoglo. It also included other emerging and minor parties and independent candidates.

Many of these candidates have evident and less apparent ties to Moldova's fugitive oligarch, Ilan Shor. Shor was responsible for the "stolen billion" from Moldova's banking system in 2014. He is also responsible for massive vote buying through Russian money in the 2024 presidential elections and Moldova's 2023 local elections.

Renato Usatii – the former mayor of Bălți, Moldova's more Russian second city – is also worth mentioning as a populist and possible contender for the run-off. In the end, Usatii came in third in the first round with 13.79% of the votes, compared to Sandu, who secured 42.49 (8.5% short of no run-off), and her opponent in the run-off, Stoianoglo, who secured 25.95%.

Sandu vs Stoianoglo

Heading into the run-off, there were some notable differences between Sandu and Stoianoglo. For example, Sandu has consistently condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and highlighted Russia as the biggest threat to Moldova's **security** and safety. She has also consistently **condemned** "criminal proxies" within Moldova who "do Moscow's dirty work on the ground" and seek to undermine Moldovan democracy and prop up Russia's attempts to undermine the state via **hybrid war**, where "the battlefield is everywhere".

In contrast, Stoianoglo has avoided taking a clear position on Russia's full-scale invasion. As **Cristian Canțâr highlighted**, Stoianoglo talks passively about the war and the Sandu regime for imposing sanctions on Russia, as if they are inviting conflict. Stoianoglo has also called for **a reset of relations with Russia**. One might ask if such a reset is possible when Russia's end goal is not normal relations with Moldova as an equal but relations where Moldova is subservient to Moscow.

On anti-corruption too, Sandu and Stoianoglo look quite different. While progress has been slow and stalled, Sandu has always stood on a clear platform of pursuing anti-corruption and judicial reform. In contrast, Stoianoglo was a top prosecutor before he was released pending criminal investigation and later **sacked by Sandu for corruption**. At this moment, Stoianoglo decided to return to politics.

Vote buying as a strategy of hybrid war

What is clear is the scale and pace of vote buying in Moldova's 2024 presidential elections, at the hands of Ilan Shor and his financial backing from the Kremlin. These strategies were tried and tested in Moldova's 2023 local elections. They will likely be ramped up in the lead up to the parliamentary elections in 2025.

The sums that Russia has been willing to invest in vote buying in Moldova are eye watering: around **\$100 million**. Importantly, Shor has enabled the Kremlin to change how it seeks to influence Moldovan politics. Rather than seek to influence political parties, politicians and the Moldovan media, it has changed tack to attempt to buy voters directly. And, it has become extremely effective in doing so.

Tremendous investigative reporting by **Ziarul de Gardă** exposed Shor's schemes of seeking to bribe 130,000 people in the run up to the first round of presidential elections. At the same time, some of this investment was **not in the form of monetary gifts but loans**, with people realising they had unknowingly signed up for credit.

This is not even the full extent of Shor's attempts to influence Moldovan politics. In October, **US Senator Ben Cardin** wrote to Meta and Google CEOs imploring them to step up efforts to thwart Shor's influence. Cardin noted that Shor had spent "\$33,000 on Facebook advertisements in June [2024] alone, and more than \$400,000 since being sanctioned in October 2022".

Elections and seeking to buy influence is therefore very much part of the Kremlin's hybrid war against Moldova. Critically, via Shor, the Kremlin seeks to undermine Moldova's democracy, erode trust and deflate anti-corruption reform by investing in criminality.

Looking ahead to Moldova's parliamentary elections

At the same time, the scale of vote buying should not eclipse any criticism of Sandu's party, PAS, which is also in government and holds most of the seats in Moldova's parliament (62 out of 101).

In 2025, Moldova will hold parliamentary elections. And Moldova is a parliamentary public making these elections, at least domestically, more important than this year's presidential elections. Even in the days since the presidential elections, people have already moved on to the next challenge: the parliamentary elections. Of course, Russia via Shor will likely seek to influence these elections. Candidates aligned to their interests will likely pick up seats.

Moldova's **diaspora** turned out in numbers not seen before and largely contributed to re-electing Sandu. This effect is despite Shor **chartering planes** to ferry people from Russia to Turkey and Belarus. But, Moldova's diaspora is likely to be less mobilised in parliamentary elections and their effect watered down by Moldova's electoral geography.

Beyond vote buying, we have to face the reality that people are frustrated and let down with PAS, and the time for change before the parliamentary elections is limited. In **Ziarul de Gardă** in October, **Petru Grozavu** criticised PAS for governing in a way that was "out of touch with reality" and "non-transparent", with its politicians too "arrogant" and uncaring if they deliver. Since the presidential elections, PAS have promised a cabinet reshuffle and more judicial reform, but we are yet to see what this will look like.

Moldovan society is frustrated and not only existentially scared about Russia's full-scale invasion of their neighbour. They want a government that listens better and is more responsive, realises that what unites people are economic challenges and the social consequences of migration, and promises not only reasons to hope but a chance that such optimism can be delivered on.

Other political parties, not only those attached to Shor, are waiting in the wings. Populist Renato Usatîi, leader of “Our Party,” might seek to be a coalition partner, given the opportunity.

Then there is a new party, MAN (“Mişcarea Alternativă Națională”), attached to Ion Ceban, the mayor of Moldova’s capital city, Chişinău. Ceban is a Communist, turned Socialist, turned centrist, neutral, populist, independent politician and mayor. Principally, he is seeking to capitalise on his vision – and success – of aesthetically modernising Chişinău. In next year’s parliamentary election, he will likely seek to expand his party’s reach outside of Chişinău.

Whether PAS will continue in government, and whether they have to go into coalition with another party, look like very real questions right now. PAS’s pro-European opposition, meanwhile, continues to play in a league below mainstream politics. Perhaps the presidential elections will be enough to get the cogs rolling in PAS, preparing them to compete as the party in power in next year’s parliamentary elections.

Ukraine as Moldova’s “shield”

Finally, there is the geopolitical reality in which Moldova is positioned. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has put Moldova more on the West’s radar and Moldova is more a player in international politics than it has ever been before. But, Moldova is still more affected by what happens on the outside than being able to affect change on international politics.

A common discourse in Moldova is that Ukraine is Moldova’s “shield”. Whatever happens in Ukraine has more profound spillover effects on Moldova than on any other state.

Then there is the uncertainty of a Trump presidency. We do not know how the Trump regime will handle Ukraine, though we have some clues given Trump’s positive attitude towards Putin. We know even less how a Trump regime will handle Moldova. Meanwhile, the spot for a US ambassador in Chişinău remains vacant since June 2024, offering Trump an early opportunity to install his preferred candidate. It will be on Europe to politically, geopolitically, and economically fill this gap. And we, not least Ukraine and Moldova, no longer have the luxury of time.

Imagine the unlikely scenario where a Trump regime brings about an end to Russia’s full-scale invasion that might be palatable to Ukraine (i.e. full restoration of territory within its internationally recognised borders). Such a scenario would likely not entail an end to Russia’s hybrid war against Moldova nor to Shor’s related attempts to subvert democracy in Moldova. There is no implication that Russia is willing to give up its dark blackmail of Moldova for anything less than capitulation.

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