Avenues of Russian Political Intervention in Moldova

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Key Points

- Corruption and hyper-politicization of nominally independent government bodies provide avenues for Russian interference in Moldovan domestic politics.
- The election of pro-Russian President Igor Dodon in 2016 was made possible by his de facto campaigning with Putin and has resulted in Moldova turning away from the EU and NATO and toward Russia.
- The pro-Russian Moldovan Orthodox Church and various nongovernmental organizations are both vehicles for promoting Moscow’s worldview and organizations for Moldovan politicians like Dodon to signal their closeness with the Kremlin.

A divided national identity and pervasive Soviet legacy provide fertile ground for Russian interference in the weak and unstable Moldovan political system. Historically, Moldovan political elites have always been divided between those who support and those who oppose closer ties with Russia. Russophiles have generally had the upper hand ever since Moldova became a Russian protectorate in the early 18th century, only to have its eastern part, known as Bessarabia, incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1812. However, despite an assiduous process of assimilation and denationalization, a significant portion of Bessarabian elites maintained their identity and used the opportunity provided by the Russian Revolution to unite with Moldova’s kin state Romania in 1918. Nonetheless, a Soviet ultimatum forced Romania to concede Bessarabia in June 1940, only to regain it a year later. Yet the Soviet Union ultimately took control of the region in August 1944 and established the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

Despite zealous efforts to turn Moldovans into Soviet citizens, some local elites withstood the denationalization process, albeit at an extremely high personal cost, as many of those who opposed the regime were imprisoned or deported to the Soviet Far East. Against all odds, a national emancipation movement was still active even in the Soviet police state. Later, as Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of perestroika and glasnost allowed some political liberty across the USSR, a national movement laid the groundwork for a future Moldovan state, which gained independence in December 1991.

Political Vulnerabilities of a Young Democracy

The political system of the Republic of Moldova is still transitioning from a Soviet one-party police state to a pluralist democratic society. Despite having adopted a modern European-style constitution in 1994, Moldova’s democratic credentials have consistently come into question. As political scientist
Lucan Way stated, “Moldova is best understood not as a struggling or unconsolidated democracy, but instead as a case of failed authoritarianism or ‘pluralism by default.’”

The two main problems of central government bodies in Moldova are their hyper-politicization and pervasive corruption. Despite two decades of discussions on the benefits of depersonalized public service, Moldova is still far from a professional technocratic government. Apart from the destructive practice of excessive politicization of government structures, political control over the judiciary and other key institutions that should remain beyond the realm of politics—such as the central bank, regulatory agencies, and law enforcement—discredits the key democratic principles of separation of powers and checks and balances. This state of affairs plays into Moscow’s hands because Russia has heavily invested in promoting its type of “sovereign democracy” as an alternative to traditional Western-style democracy.

Weak state institutions, shifting elite networks, and polarized politics have enfeebled Moldovan democracy. Moldovan political parties are notorious for their short life cycles, depending almost entirely on the popularity of their founding leaders, with power most often concentrated in the hands of the party leader or a handful of donors. Due to high personification of political parties, weak ideological foundations, and overreliance on geopolitically driven electoral platforms (either for or against closer ties with Russia or the West), parties are easy targets for foreign interference and manipulation.

Unsurprisingly, the parties in power and their de facto partners in the opposition tend to be treated more leniently by the Central Election Commission (CEC), a supposedly independent watchdog. The 2016 presidential campaign of Igor
Dodon is a case in point. Media investigations uncovered an allegedly illegal campaign finance scheme in which money was funneled from Russia via offshore companies in the Bahamas. However, the CEC not only failed to take these allegations seriously, but Vadim Filipov—one person mentioned as a beneficiary of the offshore funds, who was also a lawyer and major contributor to the Party of Socialists—was appointed a member of the Central Election Commission.

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However, Russian influence over the Moldovan political process can also take a less subtle form when Russian politicians, particularly President Vladimir Putin, endorse local Moldovan leaders. Igor Dodon’s presidential victory in 2016, much like the Socialists’ success in the 2014 parliamentary elections, was possible in part thanks to the Kremlin’s direct backing. Joint photos of Putin and Dodon were a major part of the Socialists’ campaign strategy and apparently propelled Dodon to the top of Moldovan national politics. Since his election in November 2016, President Dodon has met with Putin six times, including during the Victory Day parade on May 9, 2017, in Moscow, where Dodon had the dubious honor of being the only foreign leader in attendance.

This seemingly close relationship between Putin and Dodon is clearly predicated on Dodon following the Russian agenda in Moldova and the broader region, including in relations with Moldova’s neighbors. It was therefore unsurprising to see Dodon oppose Moldova’s EU integration agenda and sabotage Moldova’s cooperation with NATO by opposing the opening of a NATO liaison office in Moldova and banning army units from participating in military exercises in NATO partner countries. He also has greatly complicated Moldova’s relations with neighboring Ukraine and Romania by acknowledging Crimea as Russian territory and by calling for a ban on parties and organizations that promote Moldova’s union with Romania.

Moldova’s complicated history makes bilateral relations with Romania a highly sensitive issue, especially among pro-Russian nationalists and so-called Moldovan nationalists, who reject Romanian identity in favor of a completely separate Moldovan identity. Ironically, leftist pro-Russian nationalists feed off the right-wing pro-Romanian nationalists and vice versa. The desire of about 20 percent of Moldovan citizens for Moldova to reunite with Romania is a core political cleavage that defines the Moldovan political system and represents the most important subset of a larger dichotomy between pro-Russian and pro-Western groups that puts heavy pressure on the fragile Moldovan state. Russia has been all too eager to capitalize on these divisions, actively supporting not just leftist pro-Russian groups but also some right-wing Romanian nationalists in Moldova to stoke more interethnic resentment and thus perpetuate instability and bolster Russia’s influence.

Soft Power as a Means of Political Interference

In the past decade, Russia has significantly boosted its soft-power capabilities by investing heavily in local media and civil society as well as by capitalizing on the power of the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet space and beyond. The Kremlin has made strategic use of the Russian language under the banner of the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation, which, in cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church, promotes values that challenge the Western cultural tradition and position the Russian World as a global alternative project. Russian World goes far beyond defending the interests of ethnic Russians living abroad. Russia has always used ethnic Russians, referred to as “compatriots” (sootechestvenniki), living in the post-Soviet space as a pretext for interfering in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. Yet under Putin, the Russian World concept has expanded to include anyone who feels a cultural-linguistic affinity with Russia, including Russian speakers who are not ethnic Russians.

In the context of Moldova’s divided national identity, highly polarized politics, and the presence
of two major sources of separatism (one active in Transnistria\(^9\) and one latent in Gagauzia\(^6\)), the Russian World narrative is highly popular among not just ethnic Russians but also Russian speakers of other ethnic backgrounds living in Moldova, including Ukrainians, Gagauz, Bulgarians, and many Moldovans. Much of the campaign’s appeal rests on the Soviet nostalgia driving Putin’s perceived attempt to rebuild the USSR and reunite the so-called Soviet people into a strong and prosperous Eurasian Union. Apart from defending Russian speakers and the conservative values of Russian Orthodox Christians in the post-Soviet space, this narrative also promises economic benefits, particularly in the form of cheaper Russian energy supply as well as unimpeded access of goods and labor to the Russian market. Market access is a strong lever in Moldova because large parts of Moldova’s agricultural sector and most seasonal guest workers still depend on Russian markets. This dependence is a major vulnerability for Moldova as Moscow has never shied away from using market access as a political tool, despite its commitments under the World Trade Organization and to the Independent States Free Trade Area.

**Moldovan Politics and Russian Media**

While the sway of the Russian World theme partially stems from the Soviet legacy, it would not have reached such prominence without the backing of leading national politicians and especially the support of Russian media. Unsurprisingly, President Dodon promised to block any government proposals that would ban the rebroadcast of Russian news reports and political talk shows in Moldova. This starkly contrasts with Ukraine’s decisive measures to secure its information space by banning Russian television rebroadcasts in 2014 and blocking Russian social media websites in 2017.\(^{11}\) Ironically, the rebroadcasting rights in Moldova for the main Russian propaganda outlet—the first federal television channel Perviy Kanal—are owned by Vlad Plahotniuc, the leader of the nominally pro-European Democratic Party, who also put forward a bill to curtail Russian propaganda in Moldova.\(^{12}\)

Russian media is one of the most effective tools in shaping public opinion in Moldova. As a result, Putin remains by far the most popular foreign leader in Moldova, and his rating is much higher than that of any local politician.\(^{13}\) Russian media have also been instrumental in undermining the Moldovan public’s trust in Western institutions, particularly NATO and the European Union. A report by a Moldovan media association listed some of the most persistent Russian propaganda messages: “Vladimir Putin is the best president,” “more and more countries want to join the Eurasian Union, which has protected its members from crisis,” “NATO wants to surround Russia,” and “Ukraine will fall to ruin as soon as Western donors stop financing the country.”\(^{4}\)

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Russian influence has been felt in all of Moldova’s recent elections, but Moscow’s hand in the 2016 presidential race was particularly visible. Dodon has been a valuable asset for the Kremlin as the only prominent politician in Moldova who would openly endorse Russian actions in Crimea, provoking a wave of criticism from Ukrainian politicians and media.\(^{15}\) Russian media actively spread fake news to undermine Maia Sandu, Dodon’s pro-Western opponent.\(^{16}\)

To preclude a reprise of the 2014 parliamentary elections, when the Party of Socialists ran on a “Together with Russia” slogan, and its electoral posters featured Vladimir Putin and Igor Dodon,\(^{17}\) subsequent legislation has banned candidates from receiving endorsements from foreign politicians. Yet Dodon found a legal loophole and received a highly publicized blessing from Patriarch Krill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.\(^{18}\) Furthermore, Metropolitan Vladimir, the head of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, who is subordinated to Patriarch Krill, also publicly endorsed Dodon, while other prominent Moldovan clergy vocally attacked Dodon’s opponent, questioning Maia Sandu’s faith, sexual orientation, and fitness for office.\(^{39}\)
The Church and NGOs

Using religious groups for political ends has been an increasingly prominent tactic in the Kremlin’s arsenal. Historical legacy and divided national identity are also reflected in the sharp divisions between Moldova’s two rival orthodox churches: the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC), which is subordinate to the Romanian patriarch, and the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC), which is subordinate to the Russian patriarch. The MOC staged numerous vocal protests against the anti-discrimination bill that protects LGBT people against employment discrimination, and that was an important part of Moldova’s commitment under the association agreement action plan with the EU. Even though a watered-down version of the bill was finally enacted in 2013 and Moldova signed the association agreement with the EU the following year, the Moldovan Orthodox Church continues to encourage attacks on the law by pro-Russian political parties. In the process it smears the West in general and the European Union in particular as decadent, while promoting the Russian World as a morally superior alternative.

Kremlin-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have promoted Putin’s ultraconservative agenda play an increasingly active role in Moldovan society. For instance, the Izborsk Club opened a branch in Moldova only in 2016, but it has already achieved great prominence with the election of one of its members, Igor Dodon, to the presidency. Some of the main ideas promoted by the club members in Moldova are “the basic trait of the Moldovan collective identity rests in Orthodox religion,” “Moldova must reject its status of a political and economic colony of the West in favor of political and economic independence,” “Moldova needs a conservative intellectual and spiritual revolution,” and “concluding a strategic partnership with Russia without which Moldova will not be able to have an independent internal and external policy.”

Several other prominent Russian-backed NGOs try to shape Moldovan public discourse along a pro-Russian narrative. One of them is the Byzantine Club—a kind of platform for conservative intellectuals promoting the idea of Russia as the successor to the great Byzantine civilization and a spiritual alternative to the “decadent” European civilization. Additionally, Moscow has been instrumental in promoting some of its key propaganda symbols, which compete with and hollow out official Moldovan symbols. One of these is the orange and black Saint George Ribbon, which first became a widely popular Russian symbol during the World War II Victory Day celebration in 2005, apparently in reaction to orange ribbons that pro-democracy demonstrators in Ukraine had adopted as their symbol the previous year. In May 2017, Ukraine’s parliament banned the production and public display of the Saint George ribbon, labeling it a symbol of Russian aggression. Around the same time, members of the Moldovan Parliament representing the pro-Russian Party of Socialists proudly displayed the ribbon during legislative sessions.

By stoking fear and anxiety among Russian-speaking minorities across Moldova and by manipulating the legitimate socioeconomic grievances of the pauperized Moldovan public, Russia has significantly eroded the country’s democratic process.

Conclusion

Given Moldova’s history and divided national identity, Russia has a number of highly effective tools for influencing political developments in the country. Moscow has been instrumental in exploiting Moldova’s internal political divisions to keep the country in the Kremlin’s sphere of influence. Although direct Russian economic leverage has decreased in the past decade as successive Russian embargoes on wine and agricultural produce have forced Moldova to reorient its exports primarily to the European Union, the large influence of Russian media, the growing presence of Russian-funded NGOs, the vast power of the Orthodox Church, and ethnic minorities prone to manipulation provide Russia with actionable avenues for interfering in Moldovan domestic affairs.

Still, by far the most effective avenue for Russian influence is the mutually beneficial relationship Moscow enjoys with Moldova’s left-wing pro-Russian parties. Moldova’s relatively small but vocal right-wing nationalist camp with its anti-ethnic minorities agenda plays directly into Moscow’s hands. Furthermore, the financial
dependence of Moldovan parties on a handful of super rich oligarchs perpetuates a clientelistic party system with little-to-no internal democracy. Only further consolidation of the Moldovan civic nation coupled with democratic institutionalization can offer the country a glimpse of hope for surviving the devastating geopolitical storms that visit the region with tragic regularity.

About the Author

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Notes

9. Transnistria is a separatist region situated on a narrow strip of land between the Nistru River and Moldova’s eastern border with Ukraine. With about 10 percent of Moldova’s total population, the region proclaimed independence in September 1990 under the name the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. A military conflict erupted in March 1992, and a cease-fire was reached in July. It is recognized by only three non-UN states: Abkhazia, Republic of Artsakh (the Azeri territory occupied by Armenian separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh), and South Ossetia. Transnistria is a de facto Russian protectorate, and about 1,200 Russian troops are stationed in the region, despite repeated calls by the Republic of Moldova for Russia to end its military presence. For two decades, on-and-off negotiations under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe have failed to produce a settlement.
10. Gagauzia, formally known as the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri), is an autonomous region of Moldova. Situated in the southern part of the country, it is home to a Russian-speaking Christian Orthodox, ethnically Turkic minority. With about 5 percent of Moldova’s total population, the region engaged in a brief struggle for independence, but thanks in part to mediation by Turkish President Süleyman Demirel, it was granted an autonomous status in December 1994. The region remains heavily pro-Russian.


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