

A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR MOLDOVA

The election victory by pro-Europeans in Moldova was a geopolitical blow to Russia.

The Kremlin is actively working to oust the current Moldovan leadership.

Russia uses gas supply and energy security as a means of pressure.

From Moscow's point of view, Moldova's geographic location between Romania and Ukraine is strategically important. If Russia were to "lose" Moldova, the "hostile sphere of influence" of the West would extend uninterruptedly from Romania to the Russian border. However, as long as Moldova remains a neutral strip of land wedged between Romania, a member of NATO, and Ukraine, which wants to integrate with the West, the strategists of the Russian General Staff can sleep much more peacefully – especially if this land strip also houses Russian military bases (in separatist Transnistria).

The strategists of the Russian General Staff can sleep much more peacefully with Russian military bases in Transnistria.

However, Russia's interests in the Black Sea region suffered a setback in 2021, when pro-European forces gained power in Moldova. Snap parliamentary elections on 11 July 2021 were overwhelmingly won by the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS, *Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate* in Romanian), which took a total of 63 seats in Moldova's 101-member parliament. The pro-Russian Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists won only 32 seats, while the party of the internationally wanted oligarch Ilan Shor won only six.



President Maia Sandu (pictured right) and other pro-European forces in Moldova have reason to watch their back. The former leader of the country's pro-Russian politicians, Igor Dodon (center), may be considered out of the game, but the Kremlin continues to try and gain control over Moldova's domestic and foreign policy.

Source: Maksim Andreev / NewsMaker

Before the parliamentary elections, pro-Russian political forces had also lost the presidency; in the November 2020 presidential election, Maia Sandu won against Igor Dodon, the incumbent head of state. Before becoming president, Sandu was the head of PAS and a leader of pro-European political forces in Moldova.

Igor Dodon, on the other hand, was the de facto leader of the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM, *Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova* in Romanian), even while he was officially above party politics as head of state.

The loss of power by pro-Russian political forces may have been all the more disturbing to the Kremlin since, as of the end of 2019, Igor Dodon had subjugated virtually the entire Moldovan executive branch, including the Security and Intelligence Service, and his party, the PSRM, had a majority in parliament. Dodon used this power, among other things, for illegal surveillance of his political opponents.

The fact that the Socialists and Dodon spent a significant amount of their time and energy fighting for power with other pro-Russian politicians may also have played a role in their defeat. Dodon's list of political enemies included people such as Renato Usatîi, mayor of Bălți, Irina Vlah, governor of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, and Ion Ceban, mayor of Chișinău (who is also a member of the PSRM).

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At the same time, Russia will almost certainly not accept pro-European rule in Moldova and is actively working to oust the PAS and, if possible, President Sandu. And the Kremlin has various levers of influence it can use to undermine Moldova's current leadership. The most significant of these are probably Moldova's dependence on Russian energy supplies (especially natural gas) and the frozen conflict in Transnistria (especially Russia's military presence in the region). However, other key "tools" include the Moldovan Orthodox

Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, the pro-Russian Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, and Russian-language television and other media.

In October 2021, a gas crisis broke out in Moldova. After the expiry of a supply agreement with Gazprom, Russia increased the price of natural gas sold to Moldova severalfold and reduced its gas supplies to Moldova. This crisis was not a bureaucratic misunderstanding or an economic trade dispute. Instead, it was a deliberate choice to exert political pressure by Russia.

In our assessment Russia will continue to seek ways in order to undermine the credibility of the pro-European government in Moldova and restrict the political choices of the Moldovan government.