

RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE FROM THE BLACK SEA TO THE ASIAN STEPPES

Russia has largely managed to maintain its position in most former Soviet territories outside the European Union despite the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Moldova, however, stands out as it continues to pursue a pro-Western course at the national level.

Russia is attempting to tilt Moldova back into its orbit by influencing its electoral process in 2024-2025.

Against the backdrop of the Ukraine conflict, Russia has so far managed to maintain most of its foreign policy and economic positions in the former Soviet territories outside the European Union. Most of the countries that Russia still considers its sphere of influence have adopted a cautious stance. Moscow has publicly recognised some for their “constructive” policies and willingness to cooperate.

Among the cautious camp is Kazakhstan, a key Central Asian country that has provided symbolic support to Ukraine and has cautiously resisted some elements of Russian soft power. However, Kazakhstan only partially enforces sanctions against Russia to avoid secondary sanctions on itself.

Kyrgyzstan, broadly aligning itself with Russian foreign policy, falls into the category of “constructive” countries in Central Asia. In the South Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan are members of this “club”, while Armenia remains aligned out of necessity. Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus may even grow if, first, the West as a whole fails to increase its focus on the region and, second, Russia manages to emerge from the conflict in Ukraine as a perceived winner, even if only in appearance.

Georgia has allowed virtually unlimited numbers of Russian citizens and capital to enter the country. Additionally, Georgia has approved the resumption of air travel with Moscow, enabling Russians to use Georgia as a convenient layover when travelling to Europe. Russia sees Azerbaijan as a valuable partner in developing strategic transit corridors and ensuring the sustainability of its economy. Meanwhile, Armenia is preoccupied with its own security concerns to such an extent that Ukraine often goes unnoticed as Armenia grapples with the pressure and influence of Russia.

Moldova is one of the few among these countries to choose a pro-Western course. It has banned major Russian propaganda channels, shut down numerous local internet portals disseminating Moscow's war propaganda, and decisively resisted political parties directly controlled and funded by Russia. In the summer of 2023, Moldovan authorities expelled most Russian embassy diplomats after identifying some of them as intelligence operatives. The country also successfully resisted the notorious Russian energy weapon – the reduction of Russian gas supplies – and thwarted Russia's plans to essentially stage an armed coup in Moldova.

Russia's modus operandi towards Moldova has returned to a more typical yet potentially perilous pattern. Moscow is attempting to gain control of Moldova by taking advantage of democratic elections – the 2024 presidential election and the 2025 parliamentary election. Russian-controlled political forces and criminals posing as politicians are participating in the elections, with Ilan Shor, a Moldovan-born pro-Russian businessman who fled to Israel, being the most prominent figure. Russia supports their activities with advisors, political technologists and, most crucially, financial assistance – often in the tens of millions of dollars. This money is used for ongoing expenses, such as salaries, advertising or rent, and very often for direct bribery of key figures.



The Moldovan government counters Moscow's imperialism as Russia seeks to exploit the upcoming democratic elections in Moldova.

Source: Dumitru Doru / EPA

Moldova's institutions and society still have room for improvement in terms of resilience, making the country vulnerable to manipulations from Moscow. Hence, to keep Moldova on a Western course, it is crucial to provide continued active, robust and well-directed Western support and present an alternative path to counter the endeavours of Kremlin-aligned forces.