

Geopolitics of Accession: How Russian Coercion Shapes EU Enlargement Credibility — The Case of Moldova

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Introduction

On 25 June 2024, the European Union officially launched accession negotiations with Moldova, a decision that was decisively determined by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, in which Moldova assumed a critical strategic role. The country simultaneously functions as a logistical corridor, ensuring the transit of Ukrainian agricultural products to international markets via the EU's "Solidarity Lane," and as a humanitarian corridor, having hosted between 400,000 and 1,000,000 refugees, of whom more than 100,000 remain on Moldovan territory (European Commission, 2022).

Moldova's path to EU membership is fundamentally conditioned by the constant pressure exerted by Russia, making the country's transformation not only a normative undertaking, but also a deeply geopolitical one. This context has significantly altered the functioning of EU enlargement conditionality by diverting EU resources and institutional attention toward crisis management rather than the integration timeline. Intensified Russian pressure has increased the political costs of EU compliance for Moldova's ruling elite and undermined the credibility and feasibility of conditionality itself.

These tensions are clearly visible in domestic politics. The 2024 constitutional referendum on EU membership ended with the narrowest margin of victory, 50.35% to 49.65%, and the 2025 parliamentary elections revealed a deeply divided society with significant pro-Russian political support. While the pro-European Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), led by President Maia Sandu, won 50.2% of the vote, pro-Russian parties collectively won around 45%, converting this into 46 out of 101 parliamentary seats (BBC, 2025). Both contests were marked by widespread Russian interference, including coordinated disinformation campaigns, documented voter-buying operations, and organized attempts of civil unrest.

This paper examines how Russian pressures have transformed Moldova's EU accession process from an integration project into a sustained crisis management exercise, and analyzes how Moldova has withstood these pressures while attempting to maintain its European trajectory. It also warns of the risks posed by a delay in enlargement, both for Moldova's domestic political stability and for the broader credibility of the EU's eastward enlargement policy.

We argue that Moldova constitutes a critical test case for two interconnected questions: whether the EU can sustain enlargement when its credibility is actively contested by

Russia, and whether candidate states operating under conditions of constant external coercion can nonetheless advance substantive democratic transformation.

The Political Landscape: Energy Blackmail and Resilience under Pressure

This section examines Moldova's resilience in its most structurally vulnerable sector: energy, where decades of dependence on Russia have created conditions for systematic coercion, but where the most visible progress in deterrence and recovery has ultimately been made.

Resilience, as understood here, refers to the state's ability to withstand, absorb, and recover from destabilizing disruptions and hybrid threats, while maintaining core institutional functions (Vatamani, 2025). This is precisely what President Sandu's government has experienced since 2021: energy blackmail, refugee management following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, interference in the 2024 presidential election and EU referendum, interference in the 2025 parliamentary election, persistent disinformation pressure, and economic recession.

According to investigative journalism, during the 2024 presidential elections, Russian oligarch Ilan Shor, residing in Russia, allegedly bribed 10% of voters - promising 150 euros to each in exchange for voting against Maia Sandu (OSW, 2025), while, in the 2025 parliamentary election, Russian crypto system A7A5 was used as an intermediary bridge to finance pro-Russian parties and voters (Smith 2026). Soon after the preliminary results were published, the pro-Russian party, an alliance of four parties, "Patriotic Electoral Bloc," led by former president Igor Dodon, announced street protests.

This vulnerability is further exacerbated by the unresolved Transnistrian conflict, which involves a Russian-backed separatist administration and a Russian military presence, as well as the autonomous region of Gagauzia, whose Russian-speaking population voted 95% against EU integration in a 2024 referendum (OSW, 2025).

A population that is partially receptive to Russian narratives, the continued presence of Russian troops, and sustained Russian financial investments in Moldovan political actors have created a landscape in which Moldova has withstood energy blackmail while continuing to pursue its European path.

Phase One: Initial Crisis (2021–2023)

Historically, Moldova was overwhelmingly dependent on Russian natural gas routed through Ukraine to Moldova through its breakaway region of Transnistria. Moreover, Transnistria housed Moldova's only major power plant, the Cuciurgan gas-fueled station, the only high voltage transmission line through which Moldova receives generated

electricity. This plant, while generating 70% of Moldova's electricity using Russian gas, was also used to import electricity from Romania and Ukraine. Moldova's structural dependence on Gazprom and Transnistria as a transit and generation hub for energy gave Russia significant and disproportionate leverage (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2024).

Following the defeat of Kremlin-backed candidates in the 2020 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections, energy blackmail became a central pillar of Russia's hybrid campaign against Moldova. In late 2021, Gazprom demanded that Moldova pay a fabricated "historic debt" of \$770 million for gas consumed by Transnistria: a figure an independent international audit in 2023 reduced to \$8.6 million, which Gazprom rejected (Hill, 2025). As a result, gas prices rose from \$160 to \$790 per 1,000 cubic meter in a single year; heating prices increased by 170%; and electricity prices went up by 40% (World Bank, 2024). In addition, following Moldova's public criticism of Russia's invasion, Gazprom cut supplies by 30%.

Approximately 30% of Moldovan households were unable to adequately heat their homes. Combined with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and a severe agricultural drought in 2022, the cumulative economic toll was hard-hitting: inflation peaked at 34.6% in October 2022. Some analysts compared this crisis to Moldova's economic collapse of the 1990s (InfoMarket.md, 2025).

Russian missile strikes on Ukrainian electricity infrastructure caused repeated power outages in Moldova. The government deployed emergency generators and provided financial assistance to citizens, while also beginning to purchase electricity from Romania at significantly higher prices. This prompted the introduction of alternative financial measures for the population. The main social instrument was the Energy Vulnerability Reduction Fund (EVRF), supported by EU assistance, which categorized households according to their ability to cover energy costs, and provided compensation through reduced utility bills and cash transfers (World Bank, 2024). The fund reduced the impact of energy price shocks on poverty by an estimated 8.3% in the 2023–2024 heating season.

To secure its gas supply, Moldova simultaneously expanded the capacity of the Iași–Ungheni–Chișinău pipeline from Romania, which was inaugurated in 2014 but only became fully operational in December 2022 (RFE/RL, 2022), and joined the Vertical Gas Corridor initiative, enabling potential imports of liquefied natural gas from Greece, and access to Caspian gas via the Southern Gas Corridor (CSIS, 2024).

By the end of 2023, Moldova had achieved partial energy independence, having ceased direct Russian gas imports entirely. Instead, gas was procured through 13 commercial companies based in Switzerland, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Germany, and The Netherlands, using competitive and transparent European market mechanisms (Government of Moldova, 2025). However, the gas infrastructure company

Moldovagaz, still 50% owned by Gazprom, remained partly under Russian control, and around 70% of electricity supply continued to originate from a Russian-funded plant located in Transnistria.

Phase Two: Escalation and Decoupling (2025)

On 1 January 2025, following the expiry of the Ukrainian gas transit agreement, Gazprom ceased all gas supplies via Ukraine. Russia refused to use the existing alternative “Turkish Stream” and Trans-Balkan routes, with the clear aim of destabilizing the Moldovan government ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections (Hill, 2025). The Cuciurgan gas-fueled station stopped exporting electricity to Chisinau. Even Transnistrian “citizens” were left without gas after its government refused both EU and Chisinau assistance (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2026).

Brussels mobilized a €30 million emergency package, followed by a €250 million two-year aid program aimed at accelerating grid renovations and compensating Moldovan households. For years, Transnistria had generated significant revenue by selling electricity to the rest of Moldova without repaying Russia for the underlying gas supplies. The EU’s proposed assistance excluded such revenue structures. Subsequently, the Kremlin offered its Transnistrian ally a modest loan to purchase gas via a Hungarian intermediary. In exchange for allowing gas transit through its territory, Chisinau secured several significant political concessions from Transnistrian authorities, including the broadcasting of Moldovan state television, the release of political prisoners, and the dismantling of illegal security checkpoints (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2026).

Moldova has since achieved complete decoupling from Transnistrian electricity generation. Its current energy system relies on domestic thermal generation covering 15–20% of peak demand, expanding renewable capacity accounting for approximately 10%, and electricity imports from Romania covering around 70% of demand (Moldova1, 2025). While imported electricity still physically transits Transnistrian territory, this maintains a residual structural vulnerability. However, new direct transmission lines to Romania that bypass Transnistria, the Vulcănești–Chișinău 400kV line and the Bălți–Suceava interconnection, are expected to be fully commissioned by mid-2026, and 2027 respectively (Government of Moldova, 2025). Moldova is therefore at a transitional moment, structurally breaking free from Transnistrian energy infrastructure.

The Affordability Challenge

While Russian coercion has accelerated Moldova’s energy independence, it has simultaneously created a significant affordability challenge. In June 2025, Moldovan households paid 12% more for electricity than Romanian consumers, 66% more than Bulgarians, and 185% more than Georgians (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2026).

Overall, electricity costs are approximately 75% higher than before January 2025, while gas prices have risen by approximately 400% since 2022 (EurAsia Daily, 2025; Negara, 2025). In a country where median salaries stand at roughly a quarter of the EU average, and economic growth has remained fragile: -5.02% in 2022, 0,7% in 2023, 0,3% in 2024, and 2.4% in 2025, these differentials carry significant political weight.

Pro-Russian parties have been quick to capitalize on these figures, arguing that EU integration imposes direct material costs on ordinary citizens. Left unaddressed, this narrative risks undermining the political sustainability of Moldova's accession process.

From Integration to Crisis Management

Russian pressure on its pro-European neighbors has shaped the EU's Eastern policy for almost two decades. As a result, the EU has found itself placed in a reactive position, responding to Russian pressure rather than pursuing enlargement on its own terms. After the Russia-Georgia 2008 war, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership initiative, which eventually secured association agreements and visa liberalization for its most advanced partner states: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Following Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the EU took a more significant step by granting candidate status to all three.

Initially, the process moved with unusual speed. Moldova applied for membership in March 2022 and was granted candidate status within three months. However, momentum has since slowed. This reflects the dual weight of geopolitics and Russia's ongoing destabilization campaign in Moldova. It took the European Commission almost three years, from 2022 to September 2025, to confirm that Moldova had completed the initial screening process, a preliminary technical stage before substantive negotiations can begin.

The negotiations phase remains the most demanding. Moldova must align its legislation with 35 chapters of EU law, each of which must be opened, negotiated, and closed individually, with unanimous approval required from all member states for closure. Thus, structurally, Moldova's accession process is still in its early stages.

During the same period, Moldova has simultaneously faced sustained energy pressure from Russia, a severe economic recession partly linked to it, and extensive electoral interference.

The objective of mitigating Russian coercion has fundamentally reshaped the nature of EU financial assistance to Moldova, shifting it from integration-driven investment toward social stabilization and logistical support. Between 2021 and 2025, the EU allocated over €1.2 billion in grants to Moldova, predominantly as budget support to help approximately 1.2 million households manage rising electricity costs, with over 700,000 households receiving targeted gas subsidies (European Commission, 2025). The EU and Moldova have jointly developed a comprehensive strategy for energy independence and sustainability

aimed at full integration into the European energy market. As part of this effort, the EU and its partners committed €250 million in 2025 alone.

A further €85.5 million was mobilized as humanitarian assistance for Ukrainian refugees hosted in Moldova. In 2022, the EU also launched the “Solidarity Lanes,” €2 billion in alternative rail, road, and waterway logistics corridors, for which Moldova plays a key transit role (European Commission, 2026).

Resisting Russian pressure has also constrained Moldova's domestic reform capacity. The state of emergency declared in response to the Russian military's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and its renewal multiple times due to energy coercion until December 31, 2023, made it difficult to advance substantive democratic reforms.

Moldova relatively quickly fulfilled six out of the nine technical and administrative EU alignment requirements within one year (Electoral Code; organized crime measures; protection of human rights, particularly for vulnerable groups; management of public finances; involvement of civil society in the decision-making process; improvement of public services; and the start of public administration reform) (RFE/RL, 2023). However, it struggled with the remaining three (comprehensive justice system reform, fighting corruption, de-oligarchization), which the European Commission assessed as incomplete in November 2023, while still recommending the opening of negotiations (EU4Digital, 2023). These are precisely the areas most affected by years of state capture and oligarchic rule, and which are most vulnerable to Russian interference.

As Cenușă (2021) points out, under technical European integration, which includes legal approximation and sectoral harmonization, progress is only possible up to a minimal degree of Europeanization. Qualitative change, on the contrary, requires not only political resolve and will, but also a rules-based regional order in which systemic external violations, which create an alternative reality and provide resources, do not constantly disrupt the process (Mgaloblishvili, 2026).

While political will and determination is in place, the administrative burden imposed by Russian interference, absorbing financial resources, institutional capacity, and political attention, materially limits the space available for substantive reform in Moldova. According to Watchdog.MD (2025), the effectiveness of the fight against corruption in state-owned enterprises was rated at only 8 out of 100, while judicial anti-corruption reform was rated at 38 out of 100.

Moldova's Freedom House democracy scores reflect the lack of substantive democratic reforms since 2021: Moldova had 61 out of 100 in both 2021 and 2025, 62 in 2022–2024, and a decline to 60 in 2026 (Freedom House, 2021; 2022; 2024; 2025).

Conclusion

Moldova's case shows a European path is contested by Russian operations targeting Moldova's energy security, electoral integrity, and institutional capacity, reducing the space available for democratic transformation, and increasing the political costs of EU accession. Moldova has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to absorb successive shocks: it decoupled from Russian gas, withstood two rounds of electoral interference, secured significant political concessions from Transnistria, and maintained democratic continuity throughout the process. These are meaningful achievements for a small, poor state with a divided society and a legacy of state capture. But the pace and depth of Moldova's democratic transformation has suffered.

Russian coercion has also reshaped the EU's institutional engagement with Moldova, shifting financial assistance from integration-oriented investments to social stabilization and crisis management. The three-year delay between receiving candidate status and completing the screening process, during which Moldova has simultaneously managed energy crises, electoral interference, and economic recession, is symptomatic of a broader credibility problem: the EU enlargement policy has struggled to maintain credible deadlines under Russian pressure, inadvertently legitimizing narratives that portray European integration as an ultimately unattainable prospect.

Thus, the Moldovan test case provides a less than fully optimistic conclusion: a candidate state can demonstrate resilience, political will, and significant technical compliance, and still find that the accession process is slowed by the double weight of external coercion and internal institutional constraints. If the EU fails to offer a credible and substantive membership timeline, this will be a signal to other candidate states, and to pro-Russian forces within them, that their alternative narratives have a chance to succeed.

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