

From Crisis to Catalyst: The Impact of Russia's War on Moldova's Domestic and Foreign Policies

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Igor Zaharov¹

Carolina Bogatiuc

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked a pivotal moment in European geopolitics, drawing widespread condemnation and reshaping the security, economic, and political landscape of the region. Moldova has found itself at the forefront of this crisis – indeed, it has been the second most affected country behind Ukraine itself.

While the war has forced Moldova to confront multiple challenges and crises, it has also served as a catalyst for profound changes in the country's domestic and foreign policies. Facing the humanitarian, economic, security, and energy challenges posed by the invasion of Ukraine, Moldova transformed EU accession into an overarching national priority. The government has actively [pursued](#) the reforms required for EU accession and implemented all recommendations made, demonstrating a commitment to democratic principles, rule of law, and economic modernization. With support from the EU, Moldova has found a way to handle the influx of refugees, enhanced economic connectivity with the EU, managed the security situation around the separatist region of Transnistria, and diversified its energy sources away from Russia. The country has substantially improved its position on numerous democracy indices and is working diligently to prepare for the EU accession negotiations. Seen from Moldova, EU membership is understood not just as a strategic choice, but as a vital step toward securing the country's future. The country is also keen to contribute to strengthening Europe as a whole.

Challenges Facing Moldova in the Wake of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Since the Russian invasion, Moldova has confronted multiple crises that have tested its resilience and adaptability. First came the humanitarian crisis: Moldova was prepared to host 30,000 refugees but instead [saw](#) an influx of almost 1 million people, with around

¹ Igor Zaharov served as communications adviser to former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Moldova Nicu Popescu. Carolina Bogatiuc served as chief of staff to former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Moldova Nicu Popescu.

100,000 refugees remaining in the country. This unexpected surge posed significant challenges in terms of providing adequate shelter, food, and healthcare. Accordingly, Chişinău [declared](#) a 60-day state of emergency and fully closed its airspace for nearly a month. The state of emergency, which was supposed to last 60 days, persisted until December 30, 2023, underscoring the profound repercussions of Russia's incursion into Ukraine on Moldova.

Economically, the war has exacerbated existing challenges, impacting trade routes, inflating prices, and straining resources. Moldova's economy, which is heavily reliant on agriculture and remittances, has faced severe disruptions. The year 2022 was particularly challenging: the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by six percent, a stark indicator of the economic turmoil unleashed by the geopolitical tensions in the region. Inflation [soared](#) to an alarming 34 percent, dramatically increasing Moldovans' cost of living and putting immense pressure on the national economy. Today, Moldova's economic situation is showing signs of improvement, thanks to both domestic efforts and international assistance. While challenges remain, the economy is gradually recovering, with projections of three-percent GDP growth in 2024.

In 2022, Moldova suffered its worst energy crisis since independence. Prior to the war, the country was almost entirely dependent on Russian energy. In 2022, however, Gazprom delivered less than half the amount of natural gas stipulated in the relevant supply contracts and instituted a four-fold price hike for gas supplies to Moldova, leading to a sharp spike in inflation. Compounding the problem, in early October, as a result of a mass bombing campaign carried out by Russia against Ukrainian civilian and energy infrastructure, Ukraine became unable to export electricity to Moldova. On October 24, this provoked an electricity deficit in the country. Some regions [faced](#) short-term blackouts and Moldova began importing electricity from Romania. Security concerns have also increased, with missiles violating Moldovan airspace and increased risks of illegal border crossings, arms and drug smuggling, and human trafficking.

Nor is Moldova only facing external challenges. Indeed, the country is grappling with domestic strife, much of which is linked to Russia's influence through proxies. At the heart of these difficulties is a hybrid warfare strategy designed to destabilize and manipulate, featuring tactics that range from disinformation campaigns to cyber-attacks. This turmoil is linked in large part to the activities of fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, who is currently evading justice in Israel. Shor has been involved in [financing](#) paid protests in Moldova with a view to undermining the government and its pro-European Union trajectory. Such events not only create a climate of fear and uncertainty that disrupts daily life, but also place undue strain on the country's security services, diverting attention from other critical issues.

One common narrative pushed through such disinformation campaigns is that Moldova's aspirations to EU integration and potentially NATO membership would lead to economic

ruin, the loss of national sovereignty, and compulsory involvement in military conflicts. These narratives aim to instill fear and opposition to Western integration among the Moldovan public and ultimately derail Moldova's pursuit of EU integration, keeping Moldova within Russia's sphere of influence.

On February 9, 2023, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky [said](#) that Ukrainian intelligence had intercepted plans by Russian intelligence to overthrow the democratically elected government of Moldova and establish control over the country. The allegations were subsequently corroborated by Moldovan intelligence. On February 13, Moldovan President Maia Sandu said the authorities had [confirmed](#) the existence of such a plot and revealed the details thereof. She said the coup plan envisioned using saboteurs with military training dressed in civilian clothes to stage attacks (including on state buildings) and take hostages. The Moldovan government was to be overthrown and replaced with a puppet government. The plan allegedly involved an alliance between criminal groups and two exiled Moldovan oligarchs. On February 21, Prime Minister Dorin Recean [declared](#) that Russia had tried to bring the Chişinău airport under its control in order to bring in Russian and pro-Russian diversionists to overthrow the government. Eight months after the alleged coup, President Sandu [said](#) that the Wagner Group and its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, had been directly involved in the coup plot.

Handling multiple crises simultaneously proved to be a daunting challenge. Yet amid these difficulties, Russia's aggression demonstrated that EU integration is the sole path for Moldova. Moving toward EU integration is not merely a strategic choice but a vital step in solidifying the democratic advances Moldova has made since gaining independence. Moreover, it represents a commitment to fostering regional stability and security.

Navigating Turbulence: How Moldova Successfully Managed These Multiple Crises

Moldova's response to these crises was multifaceted, demonstrating resilience and strategic realignment toward European integration. Diversification of energy sources was a key strategy, enabling Moldova to navigate its first winter (2022/2023) without Russian gas and electricity. International support and solidarity—both through the [Moldova Support Platform](#), co-created by Germany, France and Romania, and otherwise—were crucial. Moldova addressed the humanitarian crisis by providing support to refugees, strengthened its cybersecurity to counter hybrid threats, and maintained stability in politically sensitive regions such as Gagauzia, as well as in the separatist region of Transnistria, which is internationally recognized as a part of Moldova. Economic and social measures were implemented to mitigate the economic impact of the crises, supported by international financial aid and investments in critical infrastructure to boost economic resilience.

These crises catalyzed Moldova's EU integration process, transforming EU accession into an overarching national priority. Moldova's support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression highlighted Chişinău's alignment with European values and security interests. The government has actively [pursued](#) the reforms required for EU accession and implemented all recommendations made, demonstrating a commitment to democratic principles, rule of law, and economic modernization.

On June 23, 2022, against the backdrop of the war, both Moldova and Ukraine [obtained](#) candidate status. On December 14, 2023, the European Council [decided](#) to open accession talks with Moldova and Ukraine.

As a candidate country, Moldova has stepped up its contribution to a stronger Europe. The country successfully hosted the second European Political Community Summit; has continued strengthening security and defense cooperation with EU counterparts, especially through the European Peace Facility; and [expedited](#) the launch of the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM). Moldova's growing contributions to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and United Nations (UN) missions underscore its commitment to global peace and security.

In 2023, Chişinău significantly increased its alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), reaching a cumulative alignment rate of 89.2 percent, up from 64.2 percent in 2022. This entailed aligning with 13 new EU sanctions regimes, such as the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, and three specific sanctions regimes related to Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine. The country has also adopted a new framework for international development aid. Moreover, Moldova's dedication to regional cooperation and humanitarian support is exemplified by the provision of aid to Ukraine, the establishment of Solidarity Lanes, and the opening of new border crossings with Romania and Ukraine.

Upholding Peace While Bolstering Democracy

The government has maintained peace and stability in the country by carefully managing the situation around the separatist region of Transnistria, which has become part of Russia's information war. In February 2024, as Moldova braced for a pivotal electoral year – featuring both the presidential election and a referendum on European integration slated for October – the separatist regime in Tiraspol [convened](#) the 7th “congress” of so-called “deputies of all levels.” Contrary to what was rumored in the international press, the final text of the resolution did not include a request for Russian President Vladimir Putin to annex Transnistria to Russia. However, the adopted document does contain “an appeal” to the State Duma and Federation Council of Russia, as well as such international organizations as the UN and OSCE, “to take diplomatic measures aimed at protection” of the Transnistrian region against “Moldova's pressure.” Such requests for Russian aid are nothing new: In the last two years, the Tiraspol regime has appealed to the Kremlin at

least three times. Moldova's success in maintaining peace in the Transnistrian region showcases its commitment to a peaceful resolution.

Amid these challenges, Moldova has tackled the insecurity surrounding gas and electricity supplies, thereby ensuring the well-being of the country's citizens. The country has been transforming its energy sector at great speed. In the last year, the country has moved away from its former complete reliance on Russian gas and now buys all gas needed for heating from other suppliers. Joint purchases of gas with EU countries, the synchronization of the country's electricity networks with the EU, and work on new electricity connections to Romania are all making Moldova more resilient. The nation's continued integration into the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E), significant gas reserves, and progress in the field of renewable energy highlight its commitment to a greener and more sustainable future.

In the economic sphere, Moldova has effectively addressed high inflation rates, which have now [decreased](#) to 5 percent (from 34 percent in 2022). The country has embarked on a transformative journey by participating in the EU internal market program, [signing](#) a new free trade agreement with the EFTA, signing an agreement on reducing roaming charges with the EU, enhancing connectivity, and promoting economic growth.

One of Moldova's standout accomplishments in this period has been its significant improvements on democratic rankings. For instance, Moldova now [ranks](#) 28th out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) index, a remarkable improvement of 63 positions since 2020. Similarly, in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, Moldova [ranks](#) 76th out of 180 countries, a notable improvement of 39 positions since 2020. Additionally, in the Global Gender Gap Report, Moldova currently [occupies](#) the 19th position out of 146 countries. These developments highlight Moldova's unwavering dedication to upholding democratic principles and fostering transparency within its governance.

The most significant indicator of Chişinău's ambition and commitment is its unwavering preparation for EU accession negotiations. The country has accelerated its efforts by establishing 35 working groups for each negotiation chapter, an effort that has involved over 600 civil servants. In October, the Government approved the National Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova's Accession to the European Union for the years 2024-2027. The Bureau for European Integration was [established](#) within the State Chancellery of Moldova, led by a Deputy Prime Minister who is also the country's chief negotiator for EU accession. Moldova has [fulfilled](#) eight of the nine recommendations of the European Commission and made significant progress on the remaining action. The country has now commenced the screening process and is diligently working to initiate formal negotiations through the first EU-Moldova Intergovernmental Conference, which is slated to take place by the end of June 2024.

Conclusion

In navigating the multifaceted domestic and international challenges posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moldova has demonstrated resilience and determination. While the conflict has underscored Moldova's vulnerabilities and the complexities of its security landscape, it has also served as a catalyst for profound changes, pushing the nation toward deeper integration with Western democracies and reinforcing its commitment to EU accession. Moldova's response to these crises reflects its unwavering dedication to democratic principles, economic modernization, and regional stability: EU membership is understood not just as a strategic choice, but as a vital step toward securing the country's future. Keeping a close eye on Moldova's political scene will be instructive, especially as the country gears up for two significant democratic events – the presidential elections and an EU integration referendum, both slated for the latter part of October – that will present Moldovans with the opportunity to clearly express their aspirations regarding EU membership. Meanwhile, Russia's attempts to sway Moldova from this course underscore the critical need for vigilance among the Moldovan public and authorities alike.

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