



BULLETIN

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How to Offset Russian Shadow Power? The Case of Moldova

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Besides a display of military or economic strength, there is a more obscure dimension to Russian might in the neighbourhood. Russian power cannot often be seen with the naked eye, but its presence can be unmistakably felt. As Moldova's case shows, Russian shadow power in the neighbourhood seeks to corrupt elites, distort reality by shaping public opinion and ultimately hinder state-building processes. In the light of Russia's opaque practices, the EU should augment the security dimension and public communication in its neighbourhood policy. Moldova should help itself too, by ensuring rigorous control of party finances, increasing the transparency of media ownership, and devising an integration strategy for national minorities.

Engineering Public Disorder. One of the tracks Russia has pursued in Moldova throughout 2014 has been the penetration of local authorities, with the aim of orchestrating public disorder. Many in Moldova expected troubles to come from Transnistria, so, from the Russian perspective, the autonomous region of Gagauzia in the south of Moldova represented an ideal springboard for an unexpected surge in destabilisation activity. The foundations for action were laid by a referendum held by the Gagauz authorities in February 2014, an initiative declared illegal by the local court. Citizens were asked to choose between integration with the Customs Union formed by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (CU) or the EU. Although the Moldovan government tried to curtail financial resources for the illegal plebiscite, Yuri Yakubov, a Russian businessman of Moldovan origin, provided at least half of the money needed (estimated between €55,000 and €75,000) to the Gagauz administration. Backed by an allegedly overwhelming majority supporting accession to the CU (98.4%), Gagauz officials sharpened the discourse vis-à-vis central government. Russia also reciprocated by selectively lifting the embargo on wine producers from Gagauzia, but not the rest of Moldova. But much assertive rhetoric from local authorities in Gagauzia, and the charm offensive from Moscow, intended to create a more brutal scenario.

In June, Moldovan authorities uncovered a scheme involving officials from Gagauzia who recruited and facilitated young people from the region to undergo specialised training in military camps in Russia. The first group went to Russia for training in January 2014. An investigation revealed that, by October, around 100 people must have attended sabotage courses in Russia (receiving training in managing fire arms, building barricades and check points, street fighting techniques, and seizing buildings). Once they returned home, the graduates were looking via the internet to procure fire arms and prepare further ground for action. Law enforcement bodies opened criminal cases in relation to eight individuals from Gagauzia, four were detained, and two of them were sentenced for crimes against state. At the same time, one official within the Gagauz executive, apparently hiding in Rostov, was put on the international wanted list, while heads of the local police and intelligence service were suspended. For now the risk of disturbances seems to have abated, but Chisinau should keep vigilance high. Since July 2014, Moldova's border police have denied entry to approximately 30 Russian military personnel and three Russian political consultants.

Feeding "Trojan Horses." Russia is an active political player in Moldovan domestic politics. As the country approached election time, Russia went into high gear to manipulate the political scene. Moscow initially encouraged the radical wing inside the Communist Party (which still tops party ratings) to play a more prominent role and gradually marginalise party leader Vladimir Voronin, in whom Kremlin has little trust. It is suspected that the radical

group inside the Communist party coordinated the activity of so-called “Anti-fascists movement” (“Antifa”), which launched its website in May 2014. Modelled on a similar movement in Russia, “Antifa” is not registered and allegedly numbers several hundred members. Among other objectives, it assumes responsibility to patrol and monitor order in public spaces. In late June it organised a protest in front of the Ukrainian embassy in Chisinau, demanding “an end to war in Donbas.” Soon after, the leader of Communists distanced the party from “Antifa” and later purged the radical faction from executive positions in the party and the elections list. Despite this apparent divorce, the Communists’ domestic and foreign policy agenda often overlaps with Russia’s, so tacit cooperation is still very possible.

As Russia failed to tighten its grip on the Communist Party, it reoriented visibly towards alternative political projects on the left flank. The Socialist Party of Moldova, run by Igor Dodon, a former member of the government under the Communists, received a substantial boost from Russia. Its leader benefited from photo opportunities with Russian politicians and Patriarch Kirill, and organised a concert with an anti-government message for the Moldovan diaspora in Moscow (around 300,000 Moldovans work in Russia), while Iosif Kobzon, a Russian singer notorious for patriotic songs, performed at the party’s event in Moldova. The Russian-friendly International Institute of Monitoring of Democracy Development, Parliamentarism and Citizens’ Electoral Rights in the Commonwealth of Independent States released results of a dubious opinion poll showing the Socialists comfortably surpassing the 6% threshold for entry to parliament (9.6%). In parallel, the Socialists snatched the Eurasian flag from the Communists, promoting a very visible and quite expansive public campaign for accession to the CU. In synergy with the Russian embargo on fruit from Moldova, the Socialists mobilised farmers to protest against the association agreement (AA) with the EU and who threatened to block the border with Ukraine. Before the start of the electoral campaign, two of Moldova’s former ambassadors to Russia, with wide ranging connections in Moscow, joined the Socialists’ party list, further strengthening Russia’s control over the party.

Russia is also apparently behind two other “Trojan horses.” The outgoing head of Gagauzia, who runs the Party of Regions (PR), joined forces with the Social Democrats and the “Movement for CU” to form an electoral block “Moldova’s Choice—CU.” Although Moscow would like PR to throw support behind the Socialists, it still might prove useful to fend off pro-European parties inroads in Gagauzia. Renato Usatii, another Moldovan businessman who built his fortune in Russia (he claims to own shares in Gazprom) arrived in Chisinau, apparently with Moscow’s blessing. He splashed money for concerts with Russian singers, and philanthropic activities, while his message targeted the Liberal Democrats, who are part of the governing coalition. Besides getting into parliament, his objective seems to be to weaken as much as possible the main pillar of the pro-European alliance. After failing to register his party (PaRUs), he joined Motherland’s party list for elections.

Multiplying the Propaganda Effect. Moldovans are active consumers of mass media. According to the European Neighbourhood Barometer Survey for 2014, at least once a week 91% of Moldovans watch TV, 55% use the internet, and 53% use social networks. Thus, Russian channels re-transmitted by local stations, and Russian social networks, still influence public opinion in Moldova to a great degree. For instance, when asked in April 2014 whether Russia military intervention in Crimea was legitimate, 41% of respondents in Moldova sided with Russia’s contradictory interpretations (saying either that it was legitimate, or that there had been no military intervention). As the EU lifted visa restrictions for Moldova, “Trojan horses” strived to diminish the significance of the achievement, receiving back up from Russian friendly media in Moldova. Although they attacked the visa-free regime for not allowing Moldovans to work in the EU (which, however, was never the objective of the visa-free talks), the Socialist nevertheless profited from visa-free travel by sending to Brussels a group of activists to protest ahead of the AA signature ceremony.

After Moldova signed the association agreement, Russian federal media also ran reports on grim economic prospects for Moldova, portraying the association as a cynical expansion of the EU economic interests in the region. Farmers’ protests mobilised by the Socialists also received overinflated coverage on Russian TV. To reach the growing internet audience in Moldova, Russia via the Russian Youth League in Moldova, propped up two internet outlets Eurasiainform.md and Eurasianews.md, which combine local pro-CU content with Russia-centric interpretation of regional and global affairs. The Moldovan authorities tried to limit the fallout of Russian media resources. In July, Russia24 was suspended until January 2015, while four local outlets airing Russian news bulletins were sanctioned in October for lack of pluralism of opinion. The decisions triggered a sharp reaction from Moscow, which was reiterated by several Moldovan politicians.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The European Neighbourhood Policy should take into account the hidden faces of Russian power in the post-Soviet region. For instance, to boost the security dimension, the EU and its Member States can assist with advice and expertise reforms of intelligence services in order to increase analytical capacity and ability to react to low-scale, externally inspired threats. As part of its enhanced information policy, the EU should consider support for a Russian-speaking TV channel covering the Eastern neighbourhood. Eastern neighbours should help themselves too. As concerns Moldova, it should pass (in the second reading), and implement effectively, legislation on party finances. The electoral body should receive more intrusive powers to verify financial records of parties’ electoral campaigns. Neither can better regulation and more transparency (regarding ownership) in the media be postponed any longer. To this end, a new broadcasting code should be adopted. Last but not least, a complex approach towards Gagauzia’s development (infrastructure) and its population integration (increasing knowledge of the Romanian language) should be devised and enacted in the autonomous region.