

Moldova: The anatomy of a Kremlin subversion campaign



MOLDOVA'S HISTORY

- Moldova lies between Ukraine and Romania. It is a majority orthodox Christian state with a population of approximately 3.2 million. 75% identify as Moldovan and 56% identify Moldovan as their Mother tongue. It functions under a parliamentary democracy. Its national symbols are an eagle, an auroch and an eight pointed star (top right).
- The first recorded use of the term 'Moldova' as a unique sovereign state was in the 14th Century.
- Moldova has consistently featured in struggles for influence between Imperial Russia and the Ottoman Empire. Both of which at various times recognised its autonomy and status as an independent nation.
- In 1940, the Soviet Union annexed Moldova. After significant protests in the 1980s, the state became independent in 1990.
- Like Ukraine and other states in Russia's so-called 'Near Abroad', the Kremlin has persistently sought to dominate Moldova through a variety of sub-threshold subversion tactics and prevent its growing alignment with the West.
- After the 1992 war in Transnistria in which Moscow sided with separatist forces, Moldova succumbed to pressure and included a guarantee for permanent neutrality in its 1994 Constitution. The plan was to barter neutrality in exchange for Russian troop withdrawals from the region, but these withdrawals never took place.
- As of the outbreak of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine, these efforts are reported to have become more aggressive. Russian Major General Rustam Minnekaev openly admitted that one of the goals of Moscow's "special military operation" was the creation of a land corridor to Transnistria. In March of 2023, President Maia Sandu expressed concerns that the Kremlin was attempting to "orchestrate a coup". A document purported to be from the FSB (Russia's security service responsible for operations in the so-called 'Near Abroad') detailed how the campaign would take shape.



ANATOMY OF A SUBVERSION CAMPAIGN

- The term "coup" often implies a form of kinetic action with the use of force. However, the strategy presented in the document focuses on non-kinetic actions of subversion. Defined as "actions designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a governing authority."
- Subversion campaigns have long been a tool in statecraft, but hold an important role in modern Kremlin strategic culture.
 - Former KGB Colonel Oleg Kalugin estimated "psychological operations made up "80% of our actions".
 - Similar KGB officials claimed they were evaluated as employees based on the number of disinformation narratives they produced.
 - The Kremlin is reported to spend up to 1.5 billion a year on state-owned media and their stations abroad.
- Traditionally, subversion tactics include disinformation, elite capture, the establishment of supportive NGOs and supporting breakaway movements militarily and in international institutions.

- **According to the document, the strategy for subverting Moldova includes**

- a. Forcing Moldova's government to give up attempts to influence Transnistria (a self-proclaimed state supported by Russia);
- b. Supporting political forces friendly to the Russian Federation;
- c. Maintaining the country's dependence on gas supplies from Russia;
- d. Setting up Moscow-friendly NGOs (especially by leveraging the Orthodox Church);
- e. Countering "Romanization," (i.e. cutting Moldova's ties with neighboring Romania).

- The importance of discouraging Moldovans from joining NATO and the European Union is stressed several times in the plan.



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DEBUNKING KREMLIN DENIALS

- The Kremlin has denied that the document is genuine. It has insisted it is a forgery; provocation; and the result of "hysterical russophobia".
- However, it is likely the document is genuine based on the following
 - a. It matches established Kremlin aims and subversion doctrine. Although it can be argued this can be readily copied, there is little real need for the West to influence Moldovan opinion. Moldova has already expressed support for Ukraine and continues to be open to pursue integration into Western institutions. Also, existing evidence suggests it is unlikely such evidence would alter opinions in the Global South. Therefore, the likelihood of deception is relatively low.
 - b. A similar document was circulated regarding the absorption of Belarus into a Russian Union by 2030. Belarus's dictator, Aleksandr Lukashenko, admitted on camera that there was a realistic possibility that such a document existed.
 - c. The document is dated at a similar time to the Belarussian one and lists the same unit (the Directorate for Cross-Border Cooperation) which was confirmed as existing by presidential decree.
 - d. In October 2020, the London-based Dossier Center identified four people dealing with Moldova in this unit. Visegard identified another: Andrei Vavilov (reported to be a graduate of the FSB Academy and served ten years in the service). His phone conversation (in which he acknowledged who he was before saying "you have the wrong number" and abruptly hanging up) did not exactly dispel suspicions.
 - e. The document has surfaced at a time of increased subversion activity and provocations in Moldova.
 - i. The pro-Kremlin Shor Party called for protests against the current administration within days of the President publicising the 'coup' document. The Shor party was previously led by pro-Russian businessman Ilan Shor, who fled the country after being accused of corruption. It is alleged he continues to bankroll pro-Kremlin politicians in Moldova.
 - ii. For the last two winters, the price of Russian gas supplies have been raised and the Kremlin has threatened to cut off supplies.
 - iii. There has been an increase of information output by Kremlin-aligned seeking to manipulate Moldovan perceptions with the following narratives:
 1. The West is weaponizing Moldova to wage a war in Transnistria
 2. NATO and Ukraine are preparing to open a second front in Transnistria
 3. The Moldovan government are Western puppets putting Moldova on a path to war.

BACKLASH: MOLDOVA'S LESSONS IN RESILIENCE

- Although the recent activity in Moldova has sparked alarm in the West, it is not unusual. Moldova has consistently faced subversion campaigns from the Kremlin that combine traditional subversion tactics upgraded for the 21st Century.
- The tactics include disinformation, energy warfare, weaponised corruption and the support of the breakaway region of Transnistria.
- But despite these efforts, public opinion remains committed to Western integration. This demonstrates a core problem with subversion campaigns:

It is not enough to just undermine an existing system, the subverter must present a legitimate alternative. So far, the autocratic narrative pushed forward by the Kremlin and others have shown they can at best occasionally deliver short-term benefits for a few, but at major long-term losses. Moldova's experience demonstrates that the first step to bolstering societal resilience begins by acknowledging dissatisfaction while offering a genuine alternative.