



Georgia and Moldova: Putin's dominoes?

by Ian Bond, 17 October 2024

Georgia and Moldova are EU candidate countries facing elections this month. Both risk coming under increased Russian influence, but for very different reasons. The EU should invest in keeping them in its camp.

Ordinarily, elections in Georgia and Moldova, two countries with a combined population of less than seven million, would not excite much interest elsewhere. Yet this month's elections in both countries will be closely watched in Western capitals and in Moscow. Russian president Vladimir Putin is seeking to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty by force of arms; he is using more subtle methods to increase Russia's sway over Georgia and Moldova. In simple terms, Georgia has a pro-European population and a Moscow-leaning government; Moldova has a pro-European government and a Moscow-influenced population.

If either Georgia or Moldova slipped into Russia's orbit after these elections, it would be a setback for EU and wider Western interests in the Black Sea region. A Moscow-aligned Moldova would potentially offer Russia a base from which to attack south-western Ukraine's grain exporting ports. The pipeline through which Azerbaijan exports gas to Turkey and beyond – an increasingly important alternative source of supply for some parts of Europe that used to rely on Russian gas – runs through Georgia.

Moreover, if Georgia or Moldova gave up their efforts to join the EU, it would reinforce the impression that the prospect of EU membership was no longer enough to persuade the Union's neighbours to adopt EU values and become stable, prosperous democracies. For Putin, more pro-Russian governments in one or both countries would be a significant prize – not as important to him as subjugating Ukraine, but another sign that he was continuing to 'make Russia great again' and to reverse Western encroachment on Russia's former imperial possessions.

Georgia

Georgia will hold parliamentary elections on October 26th. For the first time, these elections will be held on a fully proportional basis, with parties that obtain a 5 per cent share of votes entering parliament. If

the elections are free and fair, the new system should benefit Georgia's largely pro-Western opposition parties. The population of Georgia is the most pro-EU (and pro-NATO) in the former Soviet space, according to [opinion polls](#): about 80 per cent want Georgia to join the EU, and around two-thirds want it to join NATO. The same polls put Russian military aggression, Russia's occupation of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Russian propaganda, as the top threats to Georgia. With this level of pro-Western and anti-Russian sentiment, no Georgian government can espouse overtly pro-Moscow policies or explicitly give up the aspiration to EU and NATO membership.

When it came to power in 2012, Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party initially pursued the same pro-EU policies as its predecessor, the United National Movement (UNM) government led by President Mikheil Saakashvili. The EU-Georgia association agreement and 'deep and comprehensive free trade agreement', creating closer economic integration with the EU, entered into force in July 2016. From March 2017, Georgian citizens were permitted to visit the EU (except for the UK and Ireland) without visas for 90 days in every 180.

GD's steps to consolidate power, crack down on dissent and increase Georgia's ties with Russia, however, raised concerns in the EU about the country's trajectory. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's election observation mission [described](#) Georgia's November 2020 parliamentary elections as "competitive", but also noted "widespread allegations of pressure on voters" and a "blurring of the line between state and ruling party".

Georgia formally applied for EU membership in March 2022, on the same day as Moldova and a few days after Ukraine. But the Georgian government has refused to join EU sanctions against Russia. [Investigations](#) this year showed that sanctioned goods from the West are transiting Georgia en route to Russia. Additionally, Georgia has adopted [legislation](#), modelled on a similar law in Russia, designating civil society organisations with foreign ties, including those receiving project funding from the EU or US, as 'foreign agents'. It has also followed Russia's example in passing a [law](#) severely infringing the rights of the LGBT+ community. In both cases, GD ignored EU criticism and warnings that such laws would hamper Georgia's EU aspirations.

The main factor in GD's authoritarian and pro-Russian turn is its reclusive billionaire founder and de facto leader Bidzina Ivanishvili. He has long-standing connections with Russia, having made his money there in the 1990s. In a speech in April 2024, Ivanishvili blamed the "Global War Party, which has a decisive influence on NATO and the European Union", for the wars in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022; Russian aggression did not get a mention. In August, he [said](#) that after the elections GD would take legal steps to outlaw the UNM and all related parties.

Because of the EU's concerns about political developments in Georgia, the country had to wait longer than Moldova and Ukraine to receive candidate status, and the EU has still not opened accession negotiations. In the Commission's June 2022 [opinion](#) on Georgia's application, it set out 12 priorities for Georgia to address before it could receive candidate status, in areas such as judicial independence, freedom of the media and 'de-oligarchisation' – in other words, steps to reduce Ivanishvili's influence on government policy. In December 2023, the European Council [agreed](#) with a Commission recommendation to grant Georgia candidate status, "on the understanding" that nine steps set out by the Commission would be taken. Some of these were among the original 12 priorities; others were new, including improving Georgia's alignment with EU foreign policy. In 2022 and 2023 Georgia aligned itself with less than half of EU statements and Council decisions on foreign policy.

Rather than agreeing to open accession negotiations, the June 2024 European Council [concluded](#) that developments such as the 'foreign agents' law and violence and intimidation against civil society representatives and opposition politicians jeopardised "Georgia's EU path, de facto leading to a halt of the accession process". Since then, the EU has suspended €30 million in aid to the Georgian armed forces and cut €121 million of unspent technical assistance funding for Georgia. A Commission spokesman [warned](#) that if GD continued on its authoritarian course, the visa liberalisation agreement could also be suspended. Meanwhile, the US has imposed sanctions on four Georgians involved in violence against peaceful protesters in Tbilisi and visa restrictions on 90 more accused of undermining democracy in the country. Washington is also [reportedly](#) preparing to sanction Ivanishvili, whom it alleges has acted at the direction of the Russian intelligence services.

Opinion polls in Georgia are not always reliable, but suggest that GD will get about one-third of the votes in the elections; UNM about a fifth; and various opposition electoral groupings and parties that might be able to work in coalition with the UNM (some more reluctantly than others) somewhere between a quarter and a third, with the rest going to smaller parties, most of which will not get enough votes to enter parliament. President Salomé Zourabichvili, who was originally elected with the support of GD but has become a harsh critic of the government, has persuaded all the main opposition parties to sign up to a 'Georgian Charter'. In it, they have agreed to repeal laws that stand in the way of the accession process, clean up the judiciary and law enforcement bodies and reform the electoral commission. But they have not agreed to Zourabichvili's proposal that they form a short-term technocratic coalition government to carry out these steps, to be followed by fresh elections. In the immediate aftermath of the October 26th elections, GD will probably try to fracture the opposition and persuade or bribe parts of it to abandon the charter and join a GD-led coalition instead. If the election result is contested, there could easily be violence. If GD manages to hold onto power, particularly through violence or fraud, the EU accession process will be put on ice indefinitely. Putin, who has recently [given](#) Georgian citizens the right to work in Russia, will no doubt be ready to offer other incentives for closer relations with Moscow.

Moldova

Moldova will hold the first round of presidential elections on October 20th, together with a referendum on enshrining the goal of EU integration in the constitution. The strongly pro-EU incumbent president, Maia Sandu, is leading the [polls](#), with around 36 per cent. Assuming that she does not win an absolute majority in the first round, the top two candidates will go to a second round on November 3rd.

Moldova has many advantages when it comes to European integration. Because the official language of the country is Romanian, it does not have to translate EU laws for itself as Georgia, for example, does. About half of Moldovan citizens also have [Romanian](#) citizenship, while 20 per cent of the population already [lives](#) in EU countries, primarily in Romania, Italy and Germany.

Yet Moldova's foreign policy direction has veered between Moscow and the West since it gained independence in 1991. For most of the first two decades of independence it had presidents and prime ministers from the Communist Party or with close connections to it; since then, there have been both pro-European and pro-Russian leaders. Sandu's predecessor, Igor Dodon, was perceived as pro-Russian (though for most of his time in office the governments were more pro-EU).

Although almost 80 per cent of the population declared Romanian as their first language in the 2014 census, Russian is also widely spoken. In areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, such as Gagauzia in southern Moldova, and in rural areas, many people still live in a Russian-speaking information space. Russia puts

considerable effort into influencing Moldovan politics, including through disinformation and illicit finance. Although Russian media can no longer broadcast in Moldova, they are easily accessible online. Moldovan police have [accused](#) pro-Russian politicians living in exile of funnelling large sums into the country to buy votes. The EU has [imposed sanctions](#) on a number of Russia-linked individuals and organisations it accuses of undermining Moldova's sovereignty and independence, or promoting separatism.

Whether thanks to Russian efforts or not, the Moldovan population is more [ambivalent](#) about the EU than the Georgians are, and unenthusiastic about NATO. An [opinion poll](#) in June showed 53 per cent in favour of joining the EU, with 36 per cent against; only 31 per cent favoured joining NATO, with 51 per cent against. This reflects support for Moldova's permanent neutrality, laid down in its constitution. Neutrality is regarded as the best guarantee of Moldova's security by 55 per cent of the population. Protection provided by the EU comes second, on 13 per cent, and protection by Russia third, on 10 per cent.

One factor in Moldova's stance may be its concern about the separatist enclave of Transnistria, a sliver of territory mostly on the east bank of the Nistru river, with Ukraine to its east. Transnistria broke away from Moldova in a sporadic conflict between 1990 and 1992. This ended in a ceasefire but has still not been finally settled. Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which border Russia and are de facto part of it, with substantial Russian forces in place, Transnistria's status is more ambiguous. It is physically isolated from Russia (especially since Moscow invaded Ukraine); most of the 1,500 nominally 'Russian' forces there are locally recruited; and, despite the unresolved conflict, it has close economic and other ties with the rest of Moldova. Many Transnistrians have Moldovan and Romanian passports; 80 per cent of Transnistria's exports go to the EU. But the unresolved conflict leaves Transnistria as a [haven](#) for organised crime and corruption (affecting Moldova itself as well as Transnistria), and provides Russia with an opportunity to stir up trouble and threaten to intervene. Most of Moldova's electricity is generated by a plant in Transnistria powered by (in effect) free gas from Russia; some Moldovans may see keeping the lights on as a higher priority than 'provoking' Russia by joining Western organisations.

The EU has done a lot to help Moldova, particularly since the start of the war in Ukraine: assistance and investment worth more than €2.8 billion has been made available. On October 10th 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Chişinău and promised investment of €1.8 billion over three years in areas including school renovation, hospital building and road links to Romania and Ukraine. But foreign diplomats in Chişinău complain that it is hard to persuade people in rural areas of Moldova that the EU is a more important economic partner than Russia – despite the fact that 54 per cent of Moldova's [trade](#) is with the EU, and only 4 per cent with Russia.

The tentative conclusion of most experts in Chişinău is that the referendum on European integration will pass, and that Sandu will win re-election in the second round. But even some of Sandu's supporters worry that their assumptions could turn out to be too optimistic. If Sandu's pro-Moscow opponents can unite behind whichever candidate comes second in the first round, she could be defeated. Meanwhile, the referendum requires a turnout of 33 per cent to be valid, and one of the main pro-Russian opposition parties is calling for a boycott.

More importantly, parliamentary elections must be held July 2025, and Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), though the most popular single party, is at risk of losing out to a coalition of several pro-Russian parties. The president of Moldova has limited powers; the system of government is parliamentary, though the prime minister is nominated by the president. A pro-Moscow parliamentary majority in 2025 would leave Sandu as a lame duck.

What is to be done?

The EU never likes to be accused of interfering in the internal affairs of its partners. But it cannot act as a neutral observer in Georgia or Moldova – it is in a battle for influence that it needs to win. Von der Leyen's visit to Moldova suggests that she has reached the same conclusion. The EU needs to tailor its action to the differing situations in Georgia and Moldova, and ensure that in fighting against Russian influence, it hits the right targets.

In Georgia, suspending visa liberalisation would make life harder for ordinary Georgians; it would not send the message that the EU had their best interests at heart. Georgians need to know that the EU will work with any democratically elected Georgian government that is genuinely committed to taking the steps needed to ensure that Georgia can fulfil the requirements of EU membership. The Union needs to make equally clear that a government that promises to take Georgia into Europe while passing laws that do the opposite will get no rewards from the EU. At the same time, the EU should continue to work with pro-European forces in Georgia – political parties, civil society and the president – to get out the message that Georgia's future lies with the West, not with Russia.

In the time available, the EU probably cannot do much to counter the effect on the election outcome of GD's ability to bribe or coerce voters, particularly those in government or government-subsidised jobs. But it can make clear that it will follow the US example of imposing sanctions on those responsible for undermining democracy in Georgia.

Because Georgia faces a genuine security threat from Russia, which continues to advance the de facto boundary between South Ossetia and Georgia, the EU should reverse the decision to cut aid to the Georgian armed forces and (as I [recommended](#) in April 2023) should offer to beef up the unarmed EU Monitoring Mission that operates around Abkhazia and South Ossetia, replacing it with a more capable military force, which could better deter further Russian moves into Georgian territory.

In Moldova, assuming that Sandu is re-elected and that the referendum succeeds, the EU needs to work on supporting pro-Western forces in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. Given the number of Moldovans outside the country, and the fact that they have in the past voted heavily for pro-EU parties, it would be worth working with the Moldovan government to ensure that the diaspora has access to information and is encouraged to vote.

Within Moldova, the EU needs a communications strategy that emphasises the advantages that the process of integration with the EU can offer, even before full membership (such as access to the EU's single payments area, mentioned by von der Leyen as a way for the Union to help Moldova's businesses). In other words, the EU needs to step up its public diplomacy effort, including in Russian. It needs to challenge Russian narratives among parts of the population that still rely on Moscow for most of their information. The EU should also take advantage of Transnistria's current relative isolation from Moscow to explore what might be needed to bring about reunification on acceptable terms, without empowering Transnistrian organised crime or entrenching Russian political influence in the rest of Moldova.

Moldova also needs security assistance – both for its armed forces, which are small and under-equipped, and for its law enforcement and intelligence bodies, which need more capacity to identify and deal with Russian information operations, illicit financing of political actors and other hybrid attacks on Moldova.

After the Vietnam War, the ‘domino theory’ – the idea that if one country fell to communism, its neighbours would follow suit – was somewhat discredited. But in the case of Georgia and Moldova – two states in the EU’s neighbourhood that the Union has invested in politically over the last decade – the EU should prevent them being swallowed up in Moscow’s “region of privileged interests” (as former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev called Russia’s neighbourhood). To do otherwise would send a clear signal to others of the EU’s weakness. Putin would be encouraged to try his luck in other former Russian possessions. The EU needs to ensure that the first two dominoes do not fall.

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