

# WARNING: Transnistria May Organize a Referendum on Annexation to Russia to Support Russian Hybrid Operation Against Moldova

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*Warning: The pro-Russian breakaway region of Transnistria may call for or organize a referendum on Transnistria's annexation to Russia at a recently announced Transnistrian Congress of Deputies planned for February 28. The pretext for such a call would be the purported need to protect Russian citizens and "compatriots" in Transnistria from threats from Moldova or NATO or both. Russian President Vladimir Putin could, in the most dangerous course of action, declare Russia's annexation of Transnistria during his planned address to the Russian Federal Assembly on February 29, although that appears unlikely. Putin will more likely welcome whatever action the Transnistrian Congress of Deputies takes and offer observations on the situation. ISW offers this assessment as a warning for a high-impact event of indetermined probability. Moldovan government officials state that the situation in Moldova is unlikely to worsen as of February 22.[1]*

## Background

*Moldova and Moldova's objectives.*

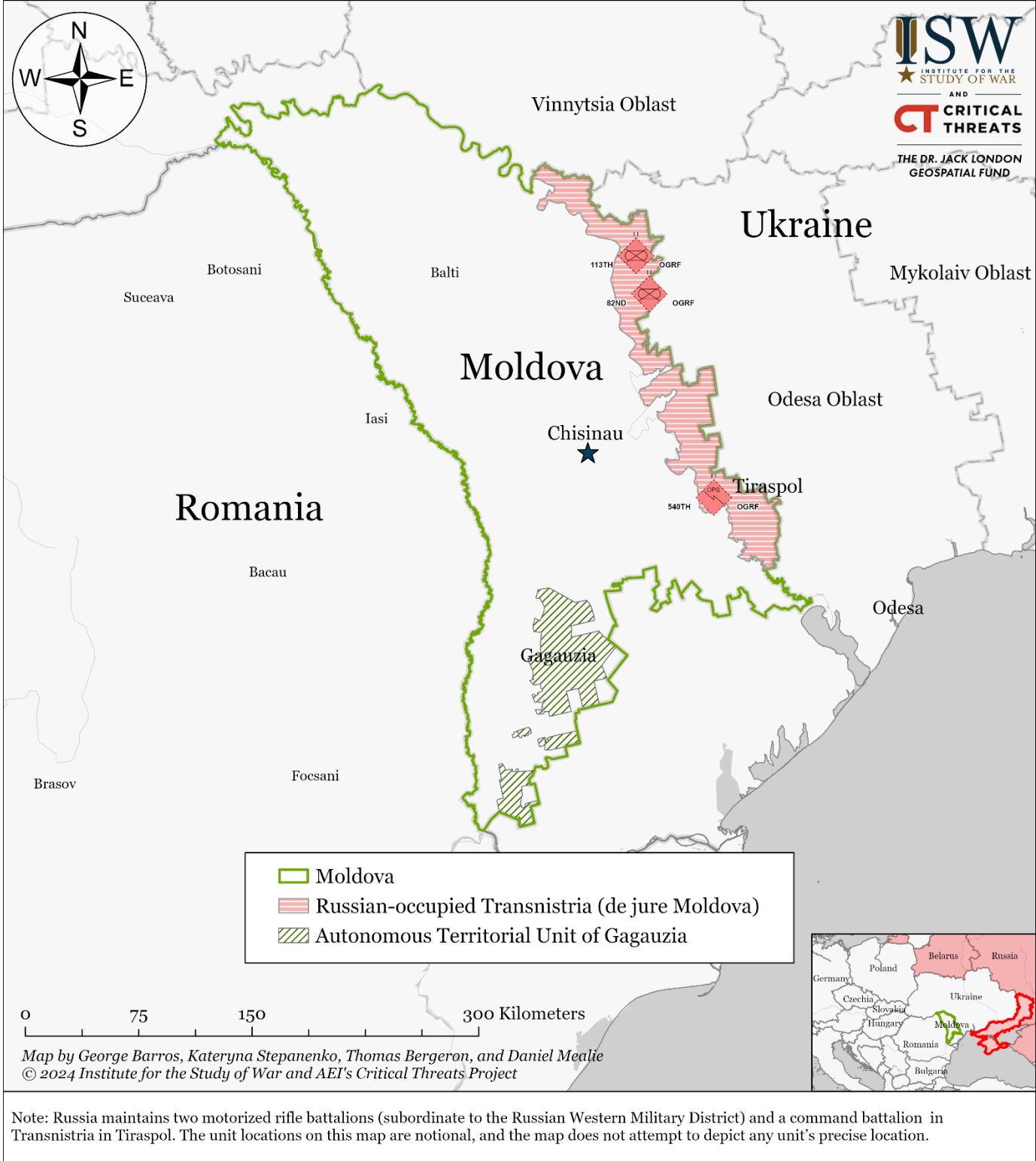
Moldova is a former Soviet state located between Romania and Ukraine with a population of about 2.6 million. Moldova's parliament has a pro-Western majority, and pro-Western Moldovan President Maia Sandu seeks to have Moldova join the European Union (EU).[2] Sandu's government has advanced Moldova's relationship with the EU since she took office in 2020. EU leaders granted Moldova candidate status in June 2022.[3] European Council President Charles Michel announced in December 2023 that EU leaders had agreed to launch membership talks with Moldova.[4]

*Transnistria and Transnistria's objectives.*

Transnistria is a pro-Russian breakaway region in eastern Moldova with a population of about 470,000 that illegally declared independence from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1990. The Russian military has maintained a presence consisting of two motorized rifle battalions of the Western Military District in Transnistria since 1992.[5] No United Nations (UN) member recognizes Transnistria's sovereignty, and the region is considered by the UN to be part of Moldova.

Transnistria has officially sought to be annexed to Russia since 2006. Transnistria passed a referendum seeking to join the Russian Federation and rejected a referendum on reunification with Moldova in 2006.[6] President of Transnistria Vadim Krasnoselsky reaffirmed Transnistria's continued commitment to implementing the 2006 referendum on joining Russia in January 2023.[7]

# Moldova Situational Map as of February 22, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



*Transnistria is located on a narrow strip of land between the Dniester River and the Moldova–Ukraine international border.*

## *The Kremlin's objectives in Moldova.*

The Kremlin sees Moldova's EU candidacy status as unacceptable, just as it saw Ukraine's association agreement with the EU in 2014 as unacceptable. Kremlin opposition to Ukraine's association agreement prompted pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to refuse to sign the agreement after the Ukrainian Rada had passed it, which in turn prompted the Euromaidan protest movement, Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity, and the first Russian invasion of Ukraine.[8] The Kremlin has geopolitical ambitions to control all post-Soviet states, including Moldova, and considers Moldova to be a part of Russia's rightful historical territory. Russian President Vladimir Putin made a lengthy speech on Russian identity in November 2023 in which he defined Russian identity in part as a wider "Russian world" ("Russkiy Mir"), including people living in former territory of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire. Putin defined the concept of the Russkiy Mir as a union of people who feel a spiritual connection to the "Motherland," consider themselves to be native Russian speakers, and are carriers of Russian history and culture regardless of their national or religious affiliation, a definition that includes "compatriots abroad" in Moldova and Transnistria. Putin geographically defined the Russkiy Mir as the Ancient Rus' (Kyivan Rus'), the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation, a definition that encompasses the territory of Moldova, including Transnistria.[9] The Kremlin argues that Russia's invasions of Ukraine were allegedly in defense of "compatriots abroad" in Ukraine.[10] Russia notably used similar justifications about the need to protect its "compatriots abroad" when it militarily intervened on behalf of separatist Transnistria in 1992.[11]

The Kremlin seeks to use Transnistria as a Russian-controlled proxy that it can use to derail Moldova's EU accession process, among other things. The Kremlin historically has dominated Moldova's geopolitical orientation through pro-Russian political proxies in Moldova's government.[12] The Kremlin may also seek to leverage Transnistria as a lodgment from which it can execute hybrid war operations against Moldova, Ukraine, and NATO. It may, finally, seek to destabilize Moldova using Transnistria in order to create a crisis on NATO's southeastern flank. These objectives are mutually compatible.

### **Tripwire**

The Transnistrian government on February 21 unexpectedly announced that the situation in Transnistria "has deteriorated sharply since January 1, 2024," and that it has decided to convene a previously unplanned Congress of Deputies in Tiraspol on February 28.[13] The Transnistrian government accused the Moldovan government of "destroying" Transnistria's economy, Moldovan officials of "violating human rights and freedoms in Transnistria," and unspecified actors of exercising "external political and economic pressure" against Transnistria, which, it claims, has sharply worsened conditions for "socially vulnerable segments of [Transnistria's] population." [14]

The Transnistrian Congress of Deputies rarely convenes, and its last meeting was in March 2006, when it decided to hold the referendum to join Russia and not reunify with Moldova later that year.[15] A prominent Transnistrian opposition activist warned on February 21 that the Transnistrian Congress of Deputies will ask the Russian Federation to annex Transnistria on February 28.[16] Russian President Vladimir Putin will deliver his annual state of the nation address to the Russian Federal Assembly on February 29 and could use that forum to address any announcements made by the Transnistrian Congress of Deputies.

### **Pattern**

One of the Kremlin's most prominent political proxies in Moldova met with a senior Russian official responsible for overseeing legislation on protecting Russia's "compatriots abroad" on February 7, 2024. US-sanctioned pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor visited Russia on February 7 and met with Leonid Kalashnikov, the chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee on Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Eurasian Integration, and Relations with Compatriots Abroad.[17] Shor and Kalashnikov discussed the "negative impact of the collective West on the lives of ordinary citizens of Moldova" in a choreographed filmed meeting.[18] Shor stated that Moldova's only chance at salvation is joining the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union — Russia's imitation of the European Union.[19]

Shor's meeting with Kalashnikov is a notable inflection. Shor and Kalashnikov are both known Kremlin action agents. Kalashnikov in particular played a significant role in the Kremlin's political charade recognizing the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics in December 2021 – January 2022 in the weeks immediately before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.[20] In January 2022 Kalashnikov himself sponsored the bill asking Russian President Vladimir Putin to have Russia officially recognize the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic – the Kremlin's longtime proxies in eastern Ukraine before Russia recognized them as Russian federal subjects on February 21, 2022.[21]

The Russian government eased the requirements for “compatriots” living abroad to apply to resettle in Russia on February 17, 2024.[22] The Russian government announced on February 17 that it will no longer require “compatriots” abroad to prove their Russian-language proficiency when applying for resettlement in Russia if the individual is a Russian citizen permanently residing abroad; an individual who previously renounced Russian citizenship; an individual who was born or permanently resided in the Soviet Union and had Soviet citizenship; or an individual who has relatives who were born or permanently resided on territory formerly part of the Soviet Union or Russian Empire.[23] All these provisions can support Russian hybrid operations against Moldova. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the West of making Moldova “the next Ukraine” in February 2023.[24]

The Kremlin has increasingly signaled its view that there are Russian citizens and “compatriots abroad” in Transnistria whom Moscow must protect since December 2023. Russian state media intensified efforts to set information conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova in December 2023.[25] Russia has distributed over 200,000 Russian passports to people in Transnistria whom the Kremlin claims to be Russian citizens.[26] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated on January 10, 2024 that it summoned the Moldovan Ambassador to Russia to protest Moldova's “unfriendly actions,” including the “politically motivated persecution of Russian and Russian-language media” and “cases of discrimination against Russian citizens entering Moldova.”[27] The Russian MFA threateningly stated that if such actions continue, “the Russian side reserves the right to take additional retaliatory measures.” Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov announced on February 14, 2024, that Russia is concerned for its citizens in Transnistria and that Moscow will not allow the West to victimize 200,000 Russian citizens living in Transnistria.[28]

Transnistria has been asking Russia for help against supposedly growing NATO threats and claimed “terrorism” risks since May 2023. A Transnistrian occupation representative to Moscow, Leonid Manakov, in May 2023 asked Russia to increase the number of Russian “peacekeepers” in Transnistria due to claims of increasing security and terrorist risks.[29] (Russia styles its combat forces in Transnistria as “peacekeepers.”) Manakov proposed that Transnistria increase the number of “peacekeepers” by involving the Russians living in Transnistria in the “peacekeeping” operations. Manakov's statement followed Moldovan prosecutors detaining and cracking down on the members of the pro-Russian “Shor” Party (named after Ilan Shor) in April and May 2023.[30] Chisinau detained 27 protestors from the “Shor” Party on May 7, for example.[31] President of Transnistria Vadim Krasnoselsky claimed in an interview with Kremlin newswire TASS published on January 9, 2024 that Moldova's increased military budget, joint exercises with NATO, and military subsidies and supplies from European states are evidence of Moldova's “militarization,” which he claimed threatens Transnistria.[32] Krasnoselsky claimed that Russian forces have defended Transnistria since 1992 to protect ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations.[33] Krasnoselsky claimed that Moldova “treacherously attacked [Transnistria's] peaceful cities in the past” and has committed “massive” human rights violations.[34]

Actors in Transnistria have been setting information conditions for a possible false-flag operation in Transnistria as part of wider Kremlin efforts to destabilize Moldova. The Transnistrian Ministry of State Security (MGB) issued a press release on January 12, 2024 claiming that Moldovan special forces are training “special combat groups” of more than 60 people to destroy critical facilities, sabotage military installations, and capture or destroy senior Transnistrian officials and law enforcement officers.[35] The MGB is a Russian-dominated organization that is commonly understood to be a “department of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB)” that likely takes orders directly from Moscow.[36] The MGB and Transnistrian officials have previously made similar, less escalatory claims likely also as part of the Kremlin's efforts to set informational conditions aimed at

destabilizing Moldova and justifying any future Russian campaigns in the region by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova.[37]

Western officials have been warning about a possible Russian hybrid operation against Moldova since early 2023. *CNN* reported in March 2023 that White House officials believe that Russian intelligence-linked individuals are planning to stage protests against the Moldovan government with the intent of fomenting a “manufactured insurrection” to install a pro-Russian administration in Moldova.[38] *CNN* reported that the US believes that Russia has been spreading disinformation about Moldova’s purported instability and supporting that disinformation with information operations emanating from Russian-occupied Transnistria.[39] ISW has recently reported on several ongoing information operations in Transnistria aimed at undermining the Moldovan government and sowing distrust of Ukraine and the West.[40]

The Kremlin is conducting information operations against Moldova very similar to those that the Kremlin used before its invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, likely to set conditions to justify possible future Russian escalation against Moldova. Lavrov answered a question after his speech to the Russian State Duma on February 14, 2024, about the Transnistria conflict and falsely alleged that the United States and European Union (EU) control the Moldovan government.[41] Lavrov claimed that the West stopped the 5+2 negotiating process in the Transnistria conflict. The 5+2 process included Russia, Ukraine, Transnistria, Moldova, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as mediators and the EU and US as observers. Lavrov claimed that Russia will “do everything” to resume the 5+2 process. Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Serebrian stated on January 28 that Moldova would not return to the 5+2 process as long as Russian-Ukrainian relations did not improve and Russia’s war in Ukraine continues.[42] Lavrov claimed in November 2023 that Moldova is “is destined to become the next victim in the hybrid war unleashed by the West against Russia”[43] Krasnoselsky blamed Moldova for stopping dialogue with Transnistria and abandoning previously reached agreements on January 9, 2024.[44] Krasnoselsky claimed that Moldova is “consistently following the path of escalation” and threateningly stated that Moldova “bears the responsibility for further inevitable consequences.”[45] Russian language surrounding the 5+2 process closely mirrors language the Kremlin used about the Minsk II Accords that had ostensibly established an armistice following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014.[46] The Kremlin has recently been re-emphasizing Ukraine’s supposed violations of the Minsk II Accords as its justification for the full-scale invasion launched on February 24, 2022.

## **Assessment**

The Kremlin will intervene in Moldova under the pretext of protecting Russian citizens and “compatriots abroad” in Transnistria if it perceives that such an intervention is the best way to prevent Moldova’s further accession with the EU or achieve other Kremlin objectives. The EU’s announcement on December 14, 2023, that it has agreed to launch membership talks with Moldova likely triggered the Kremlin preparations for a possibly imminent hybrid operation against Moldova observed in this report. Moldovan President Maia Sandu stated in November 2023 that Moldova may seek to enter the EU at first without Transnistria, and then later reunify Transnistria with Moldova, which may also be triggering the intensification of the Kremlin’s hybrid war conditions-setting.[47] The Kremlin will likely intensify information operations accusing the West of waging an anti-Russian hybrid war against Moldova and / or accuse Moldova of preparing to attack civilians in Transnistria. These information operations seek to prime the information space for Russia’s own hybrid operation against Moldova.

## **Forecast**

The Transnistrian Congress of Deputies will likely either initiate a new referendum seeking annexation by Russia or propose or demand action on the 2006 referendum it has already staged. Putin will likely welcome whatever actions the Congress of Deputies takes, although he may stop short of acting on a request for immediate annexation if the Congress makes such a request. ISW has not observed clear indications of Russian military preparations to intervene in Transnistria or Moldova more generally, although it likely would not observe covert preparations. Russian military intervention would be challenging for Moscow since Moldova (and Transnistria) is landlocked and accessible only through Romanian or Ukrainian territory. The Russian forces currently in Transnistria are not capable of posing a meaningful military threat to Ukraine without reinforcements. They

could pose a much more substantial threat to the stability of Moldova, however, although again, ISW has observed no indicators that they have been preparing to do so.

The most likely course of action, therefore, is that the Transnistrian Congress of Deputies and Putin's speech will mark an inflection in Russian preparations for hybrid warfare against Moldova, possibly intended to set conditions for an imminent political crisis.

The most dangerous course of action appears at the moment to be a Transnistrian request for annexation followed by Russian action to annex the territory. This course of action appears unlikely at this time.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and will offer further elaboration on likely and dangerous courses of action the Kremlin might pursue as additional indicators trip and the situation develops.

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