False Narratives in the Freezing Cold

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Ever since Moldova has formally declared and received its European perspective as a European Union (EU) candidate state in 2022, Russian hybrid activity in the country has accelerated. During Moldova's 2024 presidential elections, significant Russian interference was reported by pro-European President Maia Sandu. Russia is trying to undermine Moldova's EU integration path through various hybrid tactics, of which the most recent the current energy crisis in the country. This article will address the current energy crisis in Moldova and explore what it reveals about the role of Russian hybrid warfare in Moldova's EU accession path.

In December 2024, Ukraine formally announced that it would not renew its contract with Russia's state-owned gas company Gazprom, as they are financially supporting the war against themselves through this contract. Consequently, the pipeline that runs from Russia through Ukraine to Moldova will no longer supply gas to Moldova. Gazprom could supply Moldova with gas through other routes, but the company claims that Chisinau has a debt of almost $700 million, creating a narrative that this caused the halt in gas supply. Chisinau disputes this number and states that it should be $9 million and that this has mostly been paid already. Like other European countries, Moldova has diversified its gas supplies since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, the pro-Russian breakaway region of Transnistria has neglected to do the same and is still completely dependent on Russian gas. Furthermore, contrary to Moldova's diversified gas supply stands their electricity dependence on a powerplant in Transnistria, for which the entire electricity supply is generated through Russian gas. For now, the powerplant is running on coal, but there are limits to this supply. This creates the crisis situation of Transnistria's dependence on Russian gas for both its electricity and gas and of Moldova's electricity dependence on Transnistria. The situation led to Moldova declaring a state of emergency already in December, demonstrating the high risks accompanying the crisis.

The current crisis exacerbates tensions between Chisinau and Tiraspol as Russian disinformation interferes. False narratives about the crisis circulate, claiming Chisinau is 'freezing' Tiraspol into reintegrating with Moldova. The Moldovan government plans to replace the electricity shortage with electricity from other European countries, but Transnistria is refusing their support. The accumulation of other European sources of energy will lead to significant price surges, creating the risk of feeding into anti-EU sentiments and destabilising the country further. Especially considering the parliamentary elections taking place later this year, this energy crisis cannot be seen as a separate occasion.

This means that the energy crisis emphasizes Russia's use of energy as a weapon in hybrid warfare. As mentioned, the energy crisis can destabilize the country and play into its already precarious economy. Furthermore, false narratives around the crisis further feed into societal polarisation and combined with economic instability undermines the legitimacy of the Moldovan government. This could have serious consequences for Moldova's EU accession path as its success greatly depends on the upcoming parliamentary elections. The crisis reveals how various hybrid tactics, such as the weaponization of energy, disinformation and meddling in domestic politics, aim to derail Moldova's EU accession path and maintain their dependence on the Russian Federation.