

Moldova President Sandu Targets Media Freedom with New Censorship Institution

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President Maia Sandu announced during a press briefing that a new tax-payer-funded institution intended to supervise and limit press freedom in Moldova would be established. Amid the economic meltdown in the country, Sandu is trying to control the media narrative while also attacking Russia.

"The best antidote against the information war is the development of citizens' resistance to the real facts. Today I am announcing the legislative initiative to create an institution to combat propaganda and defend citizens from manipulation. I will propose to the Parliament the creation of the National Center for Information Defense and Combating Propaganda, called Patriot. The institution will have two basic responsibilities: to transmit truthful information to citizens and to identify, evaluate and combat disinformation," Sandu said on May 29.

According to the president, the legislation initiative will be sent to the Parliament by the end of June.

"I know that this announcement will stir the hornet's nest working against the Republic of Moldova. They will invoke the right to freedom of expression. But this right cannot be a screen for lying and intoxication. I have confidence in the Republic of Moldova, I am sure that we have a chance to build a European state, I want the citizens to have confidence in the Republic of Moldova," Sandu added.

Her ambition to limit Russian-friendly media to impose a Western narrative monopoly in a dictatorial manner comes as the EU steps up its support for Moldova. 46 EU and European leaders will be in Chisinau on June 1 to offer financial and political solidarity with Moldova and show strength against Russia.

French President Emmanuel Macron initially envisaged the European Political Community (EPC) as a platform for unity across the wider European front. The EPC will meet for the second time in Chisinau, only eight months after its inaugural meeting. The meeting brings together the leaders of the 27 EU member states and Ukraine, Turkey, the UK, and other countries in the Balkans, but not Russia or Belarus.

Security and energy supplies, which have been part-funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), are expected to be top of the agenda. The EBRD invested €525 million in Moldova in 2022, accounting for 4% of its GDP. The investment comes as Moldova struggles with high inflation and the economic repercussions of the war in neighbouring Ukraine, in addition to problems in Transnistria, a breakaway region and post-Soviet conflict zone with a majority Slavic (Russian-Ukrainian) population.

To assist Sandu's ambition to sever Russian-Moldovan ties, the EU will provide financial muscle with the help of the EBRD and an €87 million EU contribution to so-called non-military logistical aid. This aid will include a mission in Chisinau, which will staff up to 50 officials. Opening on May 30, the office aims to build Moldova's resilience against disinformation and cyber-attacks, with support at strategic and technical levels.

Sandu is expected to use the EPC summit to push for quicker EU access, which she claims is the only guarantee against becoming Russia's next target, even though no such ambitions exist.

"We do believe that Russia will continue to be a big source of instability for the years to come and we need to protect ourselves," said Sandu, on the sidelines of a Council of Europe summit in Iceland earlier in May. "We do believe that this [EU membership] is a realistic project for us and we are looking forward to see this happening as soon as possible."

Although accession could take years to achieve, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia won official candidate status to join the EU. For this reason, Sandu is taking advantage of heightened Russophobia in the West to project it in Moldova, which has a high level of Russophilia. However, this path of serving Western interests to oppose Russia is significantly affecting the economy.

In May, Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean said that before the Ukraine war, his country was 100% dependent on Russia for its gas, but "Today Moldova can exist with absolutely no natural gas or electricity from Russia."

Moldova is currently struggling to deal with the spillover effects of the war in Ukraine, which has significantly impacted households, the economy, and public finances. The war also oversees a considerable drop in Moldova's GDP due to the disruptions in trade, remittances, and the energy crisis. Therefore, ordinary Moldovans suffer despite Recean's boasting of cutting Russian gas.

As Valeriu Ostalep, former diplomat and ex-Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration for Moldova, said:

"Sandu and her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) are involved completely in the Western geopolitics of the region; they just copy and paste the West's rhetoric. It would not be a problem (to take) a position like that, but Sandu and PAS have lost the

connection to the real problems of Moldova and the population. They are concentrated exclusively on the 'fight against Russia'."

"So we have total support by the West for Sandu and PAS and a complete disaster in the realities on the ground in Moldova, including the growing disdain of the population against Sandu and PAS," he added.

By establishing Patriot, Sandu attempts to control the media narrative and criticism against her government by inadvertently targeting Russophile media. In fact, for Sandu's supposed defence of liberalism and universalism, it is proven beyond doubt that these are not values that she defends but only buzzwords used to secure funding and support from the West.

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