

Electricity policy tiraspol

Europe is bracing for another energy crisis this winter, teeing up a high-stakes early test of how a newly inaugurated Trump administration will attempt to balance efforts to reset relations with Russia against the needs of U.S. allies seeking fuel to stay warm during what's forecast to be an unusually cold season.

On Jan. 1, 2025, the Russian state-owned gas giant Gazprom's long-standing contract to ship fuel to Europe via Ukraine's pipelines expires. With no renewal deal in sight as Moscow intensifies its assault on its neighbor and the U.S. ratchets up sanctions on Russia's gas business, Gazprom is now planning for the total end of sales to Europe transiting through Ukraine next year.

Few places will feel the pinch as much as Moldova, one of Europe's poorest nations and the one its own leaders have described as the "most vulnerable country" in Europe to "Russian energy blackmail."

Russia's invasion in 2022 sent shockwaves through the tiny former Soviet republic landlocked between Romania and Ukraine. Like Ukraine, Moldova's government is attempting to embrace the West and ultimately join the EU. But as in Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow has maintained some control in Moldova by propping up pro-Russia separatist forces in a breakaway province.

Russia has maintained a military base in the mountainous sliver of a region on Moldova's eastern border called Transnistria since the 1990s and provided the unrecognized government in the regional capital of Tiraspol with gas so cheap it's practically free.

Over the last three years, the country almost quit buying Russian gas for heating, instead purchasing fuel on the market and shipping it into Moldova via Romanian pipelines. Moldova approved new transmission lines to Romania, too, clearing the way to buy more surplus nuclear power from its EU neighbor. The government in Chişinău even built some solar panels, boosting the limited supply of renewable power.

During an interview with HuffPost earlier this month on the sidelines of the WebSummit tech conference in Lisbon, Portugal, Dumitru Alaiba, the deputy prime minister in charge of economic development, said Moldova was "no longer dependent" on Russia for gas.

"Three years ago, we were the most vulnerable country on the continent in terms of energy blackmail from Russia," Alaiba claimed. "In three years, we have succeeded to essentially decouple our gas supply from Russia."

Over the next two weeks, however, members of Alaiba's own administration ended up rushing to St. Petersburg for emergency meetings with Gazprom's chief executive about how to increase the supply of gas from Russia, warning that looming shortages threatened a "humanitarian catastrophe."

That's because Moldova still relies on Transnistria's biggest power station for roughly 70% of its electricity supplies -- and that plant depends on heavily subsidized Russian gas delivered through Ukraine's pipelines. Chi'in?u has managed to pay for higher-priced gas shipped through Romania over the last three years, but now Moldova will be competing with Austria and other Central European powers for shipments via the EU's pipeline network.

European proposals earlier this year for a deal to swap Russian gas shipped via Ukraine with gas from Azerbaijan ignored that the Central Asian nation does not have sufficient additional supplies in the short term to replace Russian gas volumes, a recent study from Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy found. Plus, virtually every pipeline route from Azerbaijan cuts through Russia or through war-torn territory Moscow controls in Ukraine's east, raising doubts as to whether the damaged infrastructure could safely transit fuel even with the Kremlin's reluctant blessing.

Gas speculators could also buy shipments of gas at the Russian border and cut a separate deal to channel that supply through Ukraine. But those types of high-risk, short-term deals require a lot of upfront cash. Brokering those kinds of contracts could cost even more since the U.S. levied new sanctions on Gazprom's in-house bank this month, forcing anyone looking to buy a shipment of fuel from the Russian gas giant to first obtain special permission from Washington.

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