Why Moldova May Be the Scariest Country on Earth

A new report details a black market in nuclear materials.

By [Kathy Gilsinan](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/kathy-gilsinan/), The Atlantic

OCTOBER 8, 2015

On Wednesday, the Associated Press published a [horrifying report](http://bigstory.ap.org/urn%3Apublicid%3Aap.org%3A6fd1d202f40c4bb4939bd99c3f80ac2b) about criminal networks in the former Soviet Union trying to sell “radioactive material to Middle Eastern extremists.” At the center of these cases, of which the AP learned of four in the past five years, was a “thriving black market in nuclear materials” in a “tiny and impoverished Eastern European country”: Moldova.

The breakup of the Soviet Union left a superpower’s worth of nuclear weapons scattered across several countries (the Soviet Union did not keep all of their nuclear weapons within Russia) without a superpower’s capacity to keep track of them. When Harvard’s Graham Allison [flagged](https://books.google.com/books?id=uSxEDn9UNFEC&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=nuclear+black+market+former+soviet+union&source=bl&ots=o7Wsftgja-&sig=HOZPdD-otVhKV9MtdKd5i-P-wso&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CEIQ6AEwCDgKahUKEwjRhbqP0bDIAhXH8x4KHdtvB8M#v=onepage&q=nuclear%20black%20market%20former%20soviet%20union&f=false) this problem in 1996, he wrote that the collapse of Russia’s “command-and-control society” left nothing secure. [To wit](http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/Atomic%20Bulletin%20March%20April%202010.pdf):

The Russian nuclear weapons archipelago includes hundreds of sites over one-seventh of the Earth’s land mass, sites at which 1,000 tons of highly enriched uranium, 100 tons of plutonium and some 30,000 nuclear warheads are at risk.

Specifically, as [described](http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/31/letting-go-of-loose-nukes/) in *Foreign Policy* by the journalist Douglas Birch:

Russia inherited [the Soviet Union’s] vast stores of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. And they were a mess. Western visitors to weapons depots and labs were shocked to find AWOL guards, broken fences and unlocked doors. Two million nerve gas shells [were discovered](http://www.dtra.mil/Missions/Nunn-Lugar/Shchuchye.aspx) sitting in rotting barns in a patch of forest in western Siberia.

In the intervening years, the United States has spent billions to help Russia upgrade its nuclear facilities and improve security, helping [decommission or destroy](http://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/NunnLugarBrochure_2012.pdf?_=1354304005) thousands of nuclear warheads until [that cooperation](http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2015/01/19/after-two-decades-russia-nuclear-security-cooperation-becomes-casualty-deteriorating-relations/5nh8NbtjitUE8UqVWFIooL/story.html) ended in late 2014. But nuclear *materials* remain accessible, and certain estimates about their prevalence [are classified](http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2015/01/19/after-two-decades-russia-nuclear-security-cooperation-becomes-casualty-deteriorating-relations/5nh8NbtjitUE8UqVWFIooL/story.html).

While it would be hard to steal a nuclear warhead, radioactive components for a “[dirty bomb](http://www.cfr.org/weapons-of-mass-destruction/dirty-bombs/p9548)” are significantly easier to obtain and transport. Radiation sickness isn’t necessarily a deterrent for a suicide bomber.

In a case from February, for example, a smuggler tried to convince an undercover agent posing as a representative of ISIS to buy enough cesium 137 to, in the AP’s [words](http://bigstory.ap.org/urn%3Apublicid%3Aap.org%3A6fd1d202f40c4bb4939bd99c3f80ac2b), “contaminate several city blocks.” On the other hand, in a [2011 case](http://bigstory.ap.org/article/9f77a17c001f4cf3baeb28990b0d92eb/ap-investigation-nuclear-smugglers-sought-terrorist-buyers), an informant was able to buy highly enriched uranium in a “green sack” from out of a Lexus parked near a circus in Moldova’s capital. The AP reported that tests revealed it “was high-grade material that could be used in a nuclear bomb.”

Reports such as these [surface](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/12/10/georgia-nuke-investigations/1757963/) [periodically](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/07/nuclear-material-black-market-georgia) from the former Soviet Union and [Pakistan](http://www.economist.com/node/11585265). The underlying issues are largely the same as they were 20 years ago: The black market exists because there’s a supply of the material and a demand for it. As one Moldovan investigator told the AP: “As long as the smugglers think they can make big money without getting caught, they will keep doing it.”

1. In your own words, provide 5 facts from the article that you think are important:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

On a scale of 1-10, how big of a concern do you think the nuclear black market is? Explain.