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Transnistria: the Achilles heel of Moldova's European future?

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Never before has the former Soviet republic of Moldova been so close to Europe. Thanks to the war in Ukraine and a resolutely pro-Western head of state and government, European authorities have accelerated the implementation and negotiation procedures for its accession to the European Union. In Chisinau, the government is very optimistic, with many of its 2.3 million citizens preferring membership of the European project to ties with Russia.

Moldovan ruling circles have begun to dream of negotiations starting in 2028, with entry into the European Union two years later. Members of parliament are already working hard to adopt the European legislative corpus, while efforts are being made to bring institutions into line in a country where corruption remains rife and the banking and financial system is susceptible to harmful influences. This optimism is ambiguous however, since it is tempered by the feeling that, despite everything, Moldova's fate is largely dependent on the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

This is all the more justified given that Moldova, with and through its separatist region of Transnistria, is one of the Kremlin's strategic objectives. Whether it is a question of encircling Ukrainian territory as much as possible or bringing Moldova itself back into Russia's sphere of influence. Transnistria (the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, according to the Russian designation) has been *de facto* independent since the 1992 war, in line with what Moscow wanted to keep a powerful leverage against the independent Moldova. Since the ceasefire, Russia has maintained a military presence in Transnistria, which constitutes a permanent threat to Moldovan security and sovereignty.

As things stand, integrating Moldova into the European Union as a unitary state, as Chisinau would like, would effectively mean having a Russian military base on European

territory. The presence of this base poses a major challenge to the strategic objectives of European leadership in Brussels and in many capitals across the Old Continent, which believe that the war in Ukraine is indeed our own in the sense that a Russian victory would give a very strong boost to anti-democratic political forces in our countries and around the world. It is impossible to consider Moldova's fate without linking it to that of Ukraine.

1. MOLDOVA, SO CLOSE TO EUROPE, BUT...

Moldova has never been this close to the European Union, but rarely has the tension surrounding it been this high, due to the war in Ukraine (where, if it prevails, Russia would immediately attempt to regain control). Russia is also exerting pressure on Moldova, using hybrid means as well as military and conventional means, through among others the Transnistrian 'separatist' conflict.

1.1. Moldova has never been so close to the European Union

Since March 2022, Europe, under the leadership of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, has been laying the groundwork for a fast-track procedure to bring Moldova into the Union. In the wake of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe encouraged [Moldova](#) to submit its application

for membership, granted it 'candidate country' status three months later, and adopted various measures to support it economically, address the energy crisis and cope with the [influx of Ukrainian refugees](#) arriving on its territory after February 2022. For Brussels and most European capitals, the aim is to promote an area at its border that is in line with its political and geopolitical fundamentals (democracy, rule of law, liberal economy) within the framework of its neighbourhood policy, more specifically the '[Eastern Partnership](#)' launched in 2009, which Ukraine and Georgia have also agreed to cooperate with. Apart from this offer, unthinkable before 2022 given the country's poverty, corruption and weak rule of law, popular opinion in Moldova is pro-European. However, there are nuances to be considered, as evidenced by the results of the referendum on 20 October 2024 on the inclusion of the country's objective of joining the European Union in the Constitution: the 'yes' won with 50.35% of the vote, with a turnout of 50.69%.

[Polls](#) paint a more nuanced picture. They show that around 52% of Moldovans would vote in favour of joining the European Union if a referendum were held next Sunday, compared with 25% who would say "no". For a quarter of a century, Moldovan opinion on this question has fluctuated between 44% (2014) and 71% (2008) in favour of 'yes', compared with 6.2% (2001) to 37% (2014) who said 'no'. The choice of Europe is clear without being overwhelming, but still consistently higher than the choice of Russia: from 7% when support for Europe was at its lowest to 27% today.

In this context, President Maia Sandu and the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), which won 55 of the 101 seats in parliament in the [28 September 2025 general elections](#), are doing everything they can to adopt the measures required by Brussels for accession as soon as possible — firstly, in terms of bringing Moldovan legislation into line with the *acquis communautaire*. Even though Moldova falls far short of meeting certain European requirements, for example with regard to the independence and corruption of the judiciary and banking system

standards, which could lead some Member States to oppose its entry into the Union.

A sense of urgency is driving the country's leadership, which would like to decouple its accession process from that of Ukraine to ensure that it does not miss the historic opportunity to become a member of the European Union. This is a task that President Sandu wants to accomplish before the end of her second term (2028), as her pro-European stance has earned the country unprecedented support across Europe.

1.2. Tremendous pressure from Russia

Since the fall of the USSR and Moldova's independence in 1991, Moscow has been using a range of levers to put pressure on Chisinau to keep it within its sphere of influence. These are the same as the ones used against Georgia and Ukraine: regional "separatist" conflicts, political and financial support for local politicians and oligarchs, information warfare, instrumentalization of the orthodox church, etc. This has been ongoing for three decades in most of the former Soviet republics, however small they may be. It is striking to see the extent of the means of influence deployed by Russia to keep a small country like Moldova within its orbit.

The latest illustration of this hold was the extravagance of resources deployed by Moscow during the parliamentary elections on 28 September 2025. "Our security services estimate that Russia spent at least €300 million to ensure the defeat of the pro-European camp in the election," says a government adviser on national security. This task has now been entrusted to the teams of Sergei Kiryienko, head of the 'political directorate' of the Russian presidential administration[1], Moldova served as a testing ground for his new policy designed to prevent it from definitively switching to the European camp. "In a similar fashion to the Shor Party's efforts in 2023[2], a range of proxy political entities with illicit ties to Russia sought to contest the elections, leading to the decision of Moldova's Central Electoral Commission (CEC) to reject their registration (...). During the

[1] After Dmitri Kozak was dismissed from his position in the Presidential Administration last September and was therefore no longer the "curator" of Moldova, i.e. the person in charge of designing and implementing the Kremlin's unofficial policy to keep the country within its sphere of influence.

[2] Ilan Șor (Ilan Shor), oligarch who has been involved in major corruption scandals in Moldova in the past and who uses his fortune to serve Russia's interests. On the way he financed political parties during last September's election campaign, see: *The Fugitive Oligarch, The Cryptocurrency, And A "Wild" Kremlin-Blessed Sanctions Evasion Scheme*, Mike Eckel and Ernest Nurmatov, Radio Free Europe, 1 December 2025.

campaign period, [it was revealed that] a network of Moldovan influencers and trolls paid with Russian funds to spread propaganda on TikTok and Facebook (...). Russia also allegedly trained upwards of 150 Moldovans in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to serve as would-be provocateurs around and after the election (...)," summarizes one of the reports describing Russian interference in the election[3].

The latter also served as a testing ground for the Moldovan authorities, who introduced measures to resist the hybrid aggression they saw coming, having been warned of Russia's new methods by the example of the [presidential election](#) in neighbouring Romania at the end of 2024[4]. "The way in which our authorities contained Russian interference will go down in history and should inspire other countries. Everything counts: the determination of the authorities, the coordination and unity of the bodies involved, the support of the West... It was a matter of protecting the information space, taking measures against those who play into the hands of external powers, and communicating effectively with our population," sums up a close associate of the Moldovan presidency.

For Moscow, the stakes of this election went beyond Moldova alone. By helping to bring back a pro-Russian government in Chisinau, it also sought to continue its pincer movement on Ukraine, as evidenced by the fact that the Russian government and army are making the city and region of Odessa a major target. Bringing Chisinau back into its orbit is also a way for Moscow to revive the Russian base in the separatist region of Transnistria. A victory for the pro-Russian opposition would have created an explosive situation on Ukraine's south-western flank.

1.3. Threatening Russian military base in Transnistria

It is said that there are 1,500 Russian military stationed in Transnistria, mainly Transnistrian residents but led by 70 to 100 officers from Russia. These forces were deployed in 1992 at the end of

the so-called "secessionist" conflict, which the local forces won in nearly five months thanks to decisive support from the Russian 14th Army. Once the ceasefire was signed, the Russian forces remained in place, initially as part of a 'peacekeeping mission', before reorganizing themselves into the 'Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria', officially to guard and manage the Cobasna ammunition depot (22,000 tons of military equipment and ammunition) and unofficially to ensure the security of the separatist regime. It also includes a separate Russian unit of approximately 350 troops, dispatched to the province as part of a joint Moldovan-Russian-Transnistrian peacekeeping force (the 'Joint Control Commission').

This force has the backing of between 10,000 and 15,000 more men from the armed forces of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic: army, police, security services, etc. This represents a force greater than the army of the Republic of Moldova itself, whose troops comprises only 6,500 men and 2,000 conscripts, with an annual budget of €90 million. This Russian-Transnistrian force has been weakened since the start of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, as the Moldovan authorities have prevented any rotation of equipment and personnel at the Transnistrian base. However, it remains a very significant threat to Moldova if the Russian army were to prevail in Ukraine or if it were at least able to reach Transnistrian territory and thus make its base there operational again.

Many Europeans, including those who are strongly in favour of Moldova, believe that the European Union will not be able to accept Moldova as long as this Russian military base exists. For the time being, the Moldovan government prefers to move forward with its accession by separating it from the issue of Transnistria's effective reintegration into its constitutional fold. Even though Chisinau has no intention of joining the Union other than as a 'unitary state' (with Transnistria). At this point, no one can say how this will be possible.

[3] [Lesson in Resilience: Moldova's Resistance to Election Interference](#), Matthew Schaaf and Andrew Rogan, IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems), 17 December 2025.

[4] *During the Romanian presidential election on 24 November 2024, strong suspicions arose of external interference, manipulation of algorithms on social media platforms (notably TikTok) and illegal campaign financing. This was supported by reports from intelligence services. The allegations focused on the unexpected rise of candidate Călin Georgescu (winner of the first round with 23% of the vote), described by the international press as pro-Russian and ultra-nationalist. The election was declared invalid by Romania's Constitutional Court on 6 December, two days before the second round.*

2. TRANSNISTRIA, A GEOPOLITICAL PROJECT FROM THE OUTSET

The difficulty posed by the Russian military presence in Transnistria is deeply rooted in the project devised at the origins of Moldova by Soviet political and ethnic engineers. Moldovan leaders are aware of deep the problem goes: *"I don't know what the Russians are up to in Transnistria, but I am certain of their goals: to prevent Moldova from becoming a member of the European Union and NATO by using Transnistria as leverage,"* says the advisor to one of the country's top officials over the last few years. This poses such a threat to Moldova that the authorities have been forced to outline cautious and gradual strategies to defend the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity despite everything.

2.1. Moldova, a buffer State

Present-day Transnistria has its origins in the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), which included the territory of present-day Transnistria and part of the Odessa region. The Moldovan ASSR was created on 12 October 1924, and placed under the responsibility of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), on the left bank of the Dniester.

Through this entity and through the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, created on 2 August 1940, the Bolshevik leaders (including Stalin, the *'Father of the People'*) implemented their ethnic engineering to serve their geopolitical objectives. In this case, the aim was supposedly to defend the Romanian minority in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) so as to create the conditions so that one day a Soviet Romania would be established to serve as a bridgehead for revolution in the Balkans. But after the signing of a non-aggression treaty between the USSR and Romania in 1938, Moscow renounced its plans to Sovietize Romania and claimed only Bessarabia, which would form the bulk of the future Republic of Moldova.

Moscow manoeuvred, notably during the negotiation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, to seize Bessarabia. Among other things, this was to lay the foundations for the Sovietization of the Balkans. After many twists and turns, the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) was created on 2 August 1940. Its territory corresponded to 87% of Bessarabia and 13% of the Moldovan ASSR, the left bank of the Dniester known as Transnistria (*Pridnestrovie* in Russian).

It was not until 1944 that the USSR actually annexed the republic and occupied Romania (until 1958). The Bolshevik regime carried out bloody purges among the Moldovan elites. The ethnic balance changed in the Moldavian SSR. Romanians had to speak Russian there, while the Romanian language was called 'Moldavian'. Only the Cyrillic alphabet was allowed. The new leaders appointed to positions of responsibility in the Moldavian SSR were of non-Romanian ethnicity. History was rewritten. The Soviet government imposed a 'Moldovan culture' (Moldavism), designed to erase all references to Romania.

In this endeavour of engineering, Transnistria was therefore attached to the Moldavian SSR in 1940 for strategic reasons. Moscow's objective was to create a buffer administrative entity, the Moldavian SSR, by merging Bessarabia (taken from Romania) and the left bank of the Dniester (largely Russian-speaking) in order to demarcate Soviet space from Europe. *"Knowing this history, which reveals the DNA of our country, I am certain that the Russians will never give up Moldova. You only have to read the articles by Vladislav Surkov[5]. It says everything about the imperial mentality of the Russians. It is clear that Transnistria, although in very poor shape, remains the leverage that the Russians will continue to try to use to bring Moldova back into their sphere of influence,"* explains political scientist Igor Botsan.

2.2. A partially defused bomb

The war in Ukraine has changed the situation in Transnistria. Since the early 2010s, Chisinau has

[5] See, for example, the article ['Where has the chaos gone? Deciphering stability'](#) (*'Kuda del'sya khaos? Raspakovka stabil'nosti'*), *Aktualnie Kommetarii*, 20 November 2021. It states, in particular: *'Russia will expand [territorially] not because it is good, nor because it is bad, but because it is a matter of physics.'*

gradually restricted access to the Russian Operational Group of Forces. This restriction was tightened after 2014 and the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Moldova refused entry to Russian soldiers not participating in the so-called 'joint' peacekeeping mission, forcing them to pass through Ukraine. From 2015 onwards, Moldova required that rotating personnel be approved by her. Russian forces were also no longer able to renew their military equipment there. Personnel rotations were reduced to zero in February 2022, with Ukraine completely closing its border with Transnistria after the start of the large-scale invasion of its territory.

These measures also undermined the separatist entity's economy, as lucrative illegal trade, particularly with the port of Odessa, also came to an end. At the same time, the pro-Western Moldovan government gradually isolated Transnistria. The groundwork initially focused on the question of energy, to make Moldova independent of the infrastructure inherited from the USSR and transiting through Transnistria. This included receiving Russian gas, delivered via a complex network of gas pipelines passing through Ukraine, and electricity production in Transnistria (by the Cuciurgan thermal power plant, fuelled by Russian gas).

"This system, designed during the Soviet era, not only made Moldova dependent on Transnistria, but also allowed Moscow to finance the separatist entity it supported at the expense of Chisinau," explains Victor Parlicov, expert and Moldovan Minister of Energy from February 2023 to December 2024. By not charging Transnistria for the gas it consumed (resulting in a debt of around \$10 billion owed to Moscow by Transnistria, which has not been claimed), Russia made it possible for it to fund its budget by selling its electricity to Moldovans and its various products, which were manufactured at very low cost. Thanks to the determination of the pro-Western government and negotiations with its European partners, led by Romania, Chisinau has set up a network of power lines and gas pipelines that means it has not been dependent on energy from Transnistria, and therefore Russia, from the summer of 2025 on.

This has been (financially) costly for Moldovan citizens, but the geopolitical gain is enormous: reduced dependence on Russia and economic suffocation of the separatist entity. Schools had to remain closed during the winter of 2024-2025 because they lacked heating, salaries are hardly being paid anymore, and young people are flocking to the rest of Moldova in search of work. As for the elites, starting with the Sheriff group, which dominates the separatist economy and controls heavily the local government, they are resuming discreet discussions with Chisinau.

It was partly due to this new context that Chisinau decided in 2022 to reject the '[5+2' discussion format](#), a diplomatic framework supported by the OSCE designed to resolve the Transnistrian conflict in the presence of the two parties (Moldova and Transnistria), five mediators (Russia, Ukraine, OSCE) and observers (European Union, United States). Chisinau now favours a '1+1' format.

2.3. The choice of gradual and peaceful reintegration

According to a rumour circulating in Chisinau, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy proposed to Maia Sandu that Moldova intervene militarily in Transnistria to neutralize the Russian base there. She reportedly refused. Whether true or false, this 'information' serves the Moldovan government's purpose showing that it wants to resolve the conflict by peaceful means and gradually reintegrate the secessionist province.

According to Moldovan politicians, probably fewer than 350,000 inhabitants of Transnistria are compatriots, but they have been fed anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda for decades. The region cannot be taken back in one fell swoop, for example through military action, with the hope that everything will turn out well. Chisinau's strategy is therefore to win over the Transnistrians, to attract them to Moldova (to want themselves to be citizens of Moldova), first and foremost through the economy. *"The Moldovan leadership is pursuing a cautious*

policy of inertia. This may be criticized, but it has led to a kind of collapse of the Transnistrian economy. This has led the real leaders of the region, the bosses of the Sheriff holding company, Victor Gushan and Ilya Kazmaly, to look towards Moldova," observes conflict resolution expert Alexandru Flenchea.

Although this strategy is clear in people's minds and is the subject of a strong consensus, it has not been put down on paper. *"The consensus is strong, as confirmed in 2005 with the adoption of Organic Law 173/2005, passed by 100% of the deputies at the time. This text establishes the legal framework for Transnistria's special status, defining it as an autonomous territorial unit within the Republic of Moldova. It aims to democratize and demilitarize the region, creating the conditions for its reintegration. Adopting a doctrine or other document would only constrain us in terms of how to reintegrate Transnistria,"* explains an adviser to the Moldovan government. Various formats for discussion have existed for years. *"There is a direct dialogue between Chisinau and Tiraspol. For our part, we need to clarify our strategy. To be ready in 2028 to begin our final discussions on accession to the European Union. The Russian base in Transnistria will have to be closed by 2030,"* says a source close to the Moldovan presidency.

3. A REGION FROM WHICH BOTH PEACE AND WAR CAN COME

The situation created by Russia's war in Ukraine since 2014 means that Moldova has never been closer than now to a possible resolution of the Transnistrian conflict. More and more fundamental conditions are coming together: the weakening of the Russian military base's human and equipment resources, Moldova's energy independence, the beginning of a rapprochement between the population and the secessionist elites (for economic reasons), pressure from Ukraine on Tiraspol, etc.

But Moscow could regain its lost assets in the event of a 'victory' in the conflict it has unleashed in Ukraine. Other factors must also be taken into

account when considering whether a resolution to the conflict in Transnistria and Moldova's accession to the European Union are possible: the actions of the US President and his administration in Russia and Europe, the strengthening and increased strategic, political and military autonomy of the EU, the future of NATO, and the continued rule of a pro-Western government in Moldova. Since the war in Ukraine is the most decisive factor in the future of the Transnistrian conflict, we outline three 'typical' scenarios in this final section:

3.1. Russia ultimately prevails in Ukraine

In 2027, by gradually encroaching on Ukrainian territory, Russian troops would occupy strongholds in the east and south of the country, including Zaporizhia. Kyiv might then accept a number of conditions imposed by Moscow, with mediation from the Americans and Europeans. Before concluding the negotiations, Moscow would launch a major military offensive on Odessa and its region with the aim of controlling the territory linking the areas it occupies in southern Ukraine to Transnistria and Moldova.

- **Consequences for Moldova:** Moscow would do everything in its power to bring down Maia Sandu's pro-European government. It would advance its armed forces deep into Moldovan territory and activate all its hybrid warfare leverages to achieve its ends.
- **Consequences for Transnistria and the resolution of the conflict:** Moscow could strengthen its 'Operational Group' base by adding units from southern Ukraine. Within a few weeks, it could re-equip it and appoint new officers to lead it. This would initially bring down the government in Chisinau before posing a permanent threat to Ukraine's south-western flank, further closing the gap between Ukraine and Europe.
- **Recommendations for the European Union:** in this scenario, where force prevails, Europe can only respond with force and coercive measures, with the risks of direct confrontation with the Russian army that this entails. As a first step,

before this scenario becomes a reality, Europe must support Moldova in terms of planning and defence capabilities, intelligence and information warfare, while stepping up diplomatic and political initiatives to defend the country's sovereignty (involving the major world powers).

3.2. Russia loses in Ukraine

Confirming reports that 1) Russia is struggling to recruit men for the front, 2) is being forced to cede ground due to the growing strength of the Ukrainian drones' army, financed by Europe, and 3) is experiencing serious economic difficulties as a result of Western sanctions, Moscow is ending its *'special operation'*. In negotiations involving the Europeans and Americans, it withdraws from the Ukrainian territories it occupies and grants Kyiv security guarantees.

- **Consequences for Moldova:** With the Russian security threat gone, the Moldovan government works to become a member of the European Union as quickly as possible in order to secure the political and military security guarantees that this situation offers. At the same time, Chisinau implements its strategy for the peaceful reintegration of Transnistria and negotiates with Moscow and the West to close the Russian military base in the separatist entity.
- **Consequences for Transnistria and the resolution of the conflict:** Isolated from Russia, Tiraspol enters into negotiations with Chisinau on its reintegration into the Moldovan constitutional order. These discussions are led by the owners of the Sheriff group, who attempt to reconcile their economic interests with those of Moldova.
- **Recommendations for the European Union:** Help to precisely formulate and implement future security guarantees for Moldova, assist and compel it to meet the European standards required for accession, and provide financial support for the peaceful reintegration of Transnistria.

3.3. No one wins in Ukraine

At the end of the war in Ukraine, a 'peace' agreement is concluded in a more or less clear-cut manner, as the protagonists are no longer able to continue fighting. This 'peace', which is undoubtedly not definitive, is set out on paper in a 'ceasefire' or 'agreements' confirming the military situation on the front line and laying the foundations, in a non-binding manner, for the future security of all parties.

- **Consequences for Moldova:** Its future security is not fully guaranteed. This uncertain situation encourages it to redouble its efforts to become a member of the European Union as soon as possible, in a troubled European context (strong criticism of the Union in most Member States, fears linked to enlargement, etc.).
- **Consequences for Transnistria and the resolution of the conflict:** the separatist authorities still count on Moscow's support, while seeing its population increasingly drawn to Moldova and Europe due to the difficult economic situation. The Russian military base is maintained, even if it weakens due to a lack of personnel rotations and equipment renewal.
- **Recommendations for the European Union:** If the decision to welcome Moldova as a member is confirmed, encourage and compel it to adopt European standards in law and in practice (in particular, to complete the reform of the justice and banking sectors). Continue efforts to build a genuine Moldovan defence and security environment, raising the 'cost' of any external aggression against the country (military or hybrid). Support the country in pursuing its policy of peaceful reintegration of Transnistria.

Many in Europe may think that Moldova's fate is not ours, that a war in Moldova would not be ours, just as they say that the war in Ukraine *'is not our war'*. But it is clear that we cannot remain indifferent to conflicts taking place on our doorstep, just as the conflict in Syria, although further away,

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has profoundly affected Europe: through the influx of migrants, the repercussions on our domestic politics, the geopolitical imbalances it has caused, etc. We cannot therefore ignore what is happening in Moldova, just as we should not have ignored the Russo-Georgian conflict in the summer of 2008, which foreshadowed the war in Ukraine that would break out in 2014.

For Europe, it is as much a question of protecting itself as it is of projecting its power or influence in the world and on its doorstep. Ignoring these conflicts means accepting exclusion from shaping tomorrow's world. None of the major players remains on the sidelines. One year after his return to the White House, it appears that Donald Trump is far from an isolationist. According to our information, his teams are interested in Moldova, seeking to bring the American head of state a '*ninth*' peace (or so-called peace) to add to his '*trophy cabinet*'.

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