

# Walking the tightrope towards the EU

Moldova's vulnerabilities amid war in Ukraine

Clingendael Report

Bob Deen  
Wouter Zweers



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



# Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

## Walking the tightrope towards the EU

Moldova's vulnerabilities amid war in Ukraine

Bob Deen  
Wouter Zweers

Clingendael Report  
September 2022

**Disclaimer:** The research for and production of this report have been conducted within the PROGRESS research framework agreement. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

## **September 2022**

© Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'.

Cover photo: © Colby Gottert for USAID / Digital Development Communications

Unauthorized use of any materials violates copyright, trademark and / or other laws. Should a user download material from the website or any other source related to the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', or the Clingendael Institute, for personal or non-commercial use, the user must retain all copyright, trademark or other similar notices contained in the original material or on any copies of this material.

Material on the website of the Clingendael Institute may be reproduced or publicly displayed, distributed or used for any public and non-commercial purposes, but only by mentioning the Clingendael Institute as its source. Permission is required to use the logo of the Clingendael Institute. This can be obtained by contacting the Communication desk of the Clingendael Institute ([press@clingendael.org](mailto:press@clingendael.org)).

The following web link activities are prohibited by the Clingendael Institute and may present trademark and copyright infringement issues: links that involve unauthorized use of our logo, framing, inline links, or metatags, as well as hyperlinks or a form of link disguising the URL.

### **About the Clingendael Institute**

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public platform activities we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

The Clingendael Institute  
P.O. Box 93080  
2509 AB The Hague  
The Netherlands

Follow us on social media

-  [@clingendaelorg](#)
-  [The Clingendael Institute](#)
-  [The Clingendael Institute](#)
-  [clingendael\\_institute](#)
-  [Clingendael Institute](#)

Email: [info@clingendael.org](mailto:info@clingendael.org)  
Website: [www.clingendael.org](http://www.clingendael.org)

## About the authors

**Bob Deen** is Coordinator of the Clingendael Russia and Eastern Europe Centre (CREEC) and Senior Research Fellow of the Security Unit of the Clingendael Institute. His research focuses on international security issues and multilateral cooperation, with a particular focus on Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

**Wouter Zweers** is a Research Fellow at the EU & Global Affairs Unit of the Clingendael Institute. His research revolves around the external dimension of EU policymaking with a specific focus on the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. He coordinates Clingendael's 'Balkans Hub', a project in which Clingendael engages with think tanks from the Western Balkans in joint research and events.

# Contents

Executive summary	1
List of acronyms	4
1 Introduction	5
2 Domestic political vulnerabilities and the ‘Russia factor’	8
Traditional and evolving political divisions over geopolitics and identity	8
Winter is coming again: Moldova’s gas debt and dependency on Russian energy	14
National minorities and the position of the Russian language	15
‘Don’t mention the war’: Russian media content and narratives	18
3 Transnistria: stuck in the middle without EU	21
Russia’s leverage over Transnistria and Tiraspol’s response to the war	22
Different factions in Tiraspol and their response to Moldova’s EU candidacy status	26
The complicated maths of the conflict-settlement process: 5+2 or 1+1?	27
4 Gagauzia, the restless region in the south	30
A short history of Gagauzia and its autonomy	30
Dysfunctionality of the autonomy	32
Sources of Russian influence over Gagauzia	33
Security risks stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine	36
5 The European Union: from passive observer to key actor	39
Moldova’s EU integration path	39
The intersection of democratisation and geopolitics	43
Energy	44
Minority issues and language rights	45
Media and disinformation	46
The EU and Transnistria	47
The EU and Gagauzia	48
Conclusions and recommendations	50
Recommendations	52

# Executive summary

The Republic of Moldova, one of the two newest candidate countries of the European Union, faces a raft of complex crises linked to its domestic political and economic situation as well as to the war in neighbouring Ukraine. Since the 2021 parliamentary victory of Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), her pro-European government has been struggling to stamp out domestic corruption and reverse past processes of state capture. The authorities are simultaneously scrambling to achieve energy security, curb rising inflation and cope with the influx of refugees from Ukraine. But the PAS-led government also faces a difficult balancing act in its relations with the Russian Federation, even if the latter has so far refrained from all-out destabilisation of Moldova. If it wanted to, Russia could exploit multiple vulnerabilities at the national level in Moldova as well as in two of its regions: the breakaway region of Transnistria and the autonomous region of Gagauzia. This report examines *to what extent Russia's influence over Moldovan domestic politics as well as the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia poses risks to the internal and external stability of Moldova*. It also looks into the role the EU could play in mitigating these vulnerabilities.

Moscow can and does take advantage of the long-standing but evolving divisions within national Moldovan politics over geopolitics and identity, dependency on Russian gas, the influence of Russian-produced content in the Moldovan mass media, and the situation of national minorities. In the past, the Kremlin has exercised influence primarily through candidates from the Communist or Socialist parties. But due to the declining influence of their respective leaders, including former president Igor Dodon, Russia is increasingly hedging its bets and also investing in new political actors. The Russian Federation could further leverage its grip on Moldova's energy supply, through Moldova's continued reliance on both Russian gas for heating and cheap electricity imports from Transnistria. As in the rest of Europe, rising gas prices are pushing up living costs, which could, in turn, trigger social unrest. Most worryingly, there is a risk of collusion between the interests of Russia to keep Moldova out of the EU's geopolitical orbit and those of various political and oligarchic factions within Moldova whose positions are threatened by the anti-corruption reforms of PAS.

As a result of, and taken together with, divisions over responses to the war in Ukraine, Moldovan politics are being 're-geopoliticised'. The Moldovan electorate has traditionally been divided along 'pro-Russian' and 'pro-European' lines and remains prone to identity and language politics, including the status of the Russian language. Although recent elections have focused more on domestic issues such as the fight against corruption, it remains to be seen whether or not this positive trend can hold. Russia could also leverage its significant presence across Moldova's media landscape, including through

affordable and attractive Russian-language content. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the murky ownership structure of the media in Moldova. Finally, Russia could specifically target Moldova's sizable national minority communities, exploiting their preference for Russian-language communication and susceptibility to narratives that emphasise socially conservative values, as well as their general lack of integration in Moldovan society. The Moldovan Orthodox Church, canonically subordinated to Moscow, also plays a role in this regard.

These dynamics are particularly present in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in the south of the country. For nearly 20 years Gagauzia's autonomy arrangement, which was negotiated to accommodate ethnic tensions in the early 1990s, has been poorly implemented and occasionally turned into a flashpoint for tensions between the region and the centre. For many historic, linguistic, religious, economic and other reasons Gagauzia remains one of the regions most susceptible to Russian influence and has occasionally hinted at separatist intentions. However, these should not be overstated: Gagauzia's intent and ability to engage in armed conflict with Chişinău remains very low due to its geographic specificities and lack of military means. Unless the war in Ukraine takes an unexpected turn and Russian troops reach Odesa or Ukraine's neighbouring Budzhak district, Gagauzia is likely to remain restless rather than outright separatist. It will nonetheless remain resistant to certain reform efforts of the central government, in particular if it feels excluded from the process. While the Gagauz remain sceptical towards aspects of Moldova's EU integration prospects that touch upon widely held socially conservative values or their long-held affinity to the Russian Federation, they are remarkably pragmatic when it comes to economic opportunities. Most notably, their labour migration patterns are shifting away from Russia and towards the EU or third countries such as Turkey. Moldova's candidacy status creates an opening for the EU to further engage the region, to enhance the (public) impact of its activities in Gagauzia and to become more active with regard to the functioning of the autonomy.

Similar opportunities exist for the EU in the breakaway region of Transnistria, although much will depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Due to Russia's military and political presence in Transnistria, the region remains a critical vulnerability for Moldova that Moscow could exploit if it so desired. That said, the region's military significance is limited as long as Ukraine controls the Odesa oblast. The relatively lightly armed soldiers of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), most of whom are Transnistrian residents with Russian passports, are not in a position to mount much of an offensive towards Ukraine. While many Transnistrians may have hoped for a Russian victory that would connect them to Russian-controlled territory, they are also fearful of a potential Ukrainian attack, following inflammatory statements from Kyiv. The authorities in Tiraspol prefer to wait quietly and see how the war unfolds.

In reality, Russia's grip on Transnistria is not as strong as it sometimes seems and there are different factions in Tiraspol with different outlooks on Moldova's EU candidacy status. Russia exercises control over Transnistria through the presence of its armed forces and security agencies, but also through political, economic and cultural means. First and foremost among those is the supply of cheap Russian gas that makes Transnistrian businesses competitive in energy-intensive sectors such as electricity generation and scrap-metal processing – which also pose opportunities for kleptocratic enrichment. Russia also holds sway over Transnistria's education system, as students from the unrecognised entity struggle to find other countries to study. However, Russia is gradually losing out in the economic sphere. Transnistrian businesses have gradually reoriented their exports following Transnistria's inclusion in the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement in 2015. This strengthens the hand of Brussels and Chişinău, especially after Ukrainian territory and the port of Odesa became inaccessible for Transnistrian trade. As such, economic elites in Transnistria, that is, those involved with the Sheriff business conglomerate, have been adjusting their calculations. Moldova's candidacy status offers the EU a chance to engage with different factions in Tiraspol and support the 1+1 direct talks between the sides more actively. This could compensate for the suspension of the official 5+2 conflict-settlement process, which stands little chance of being resumed while two of its official mediators are effectively at war with one another.

By simultaneously granting EU candidacy status to Ukraine and Moldova, the EU implicitly acknowledged that the fates of both countries are to a large extent linked and that the EU enlargement process is also a geopolitical instrument. Much of Moldova's future, including that of Transnistria and Gagauzia, will depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Both Kyiv and Brussels should be mindful of Moldova's many vulnerabilities and give the country some space to manage its complex relationship with Moscow, as long as it gradually aligns with EU foreign policy goals – such as sanction regimes – and in the meantime is not used to circumvent those goals. But the EU accession process and the upscaling of EU support for reforms in Moldova also offers the EU a number of possibilities to engage actively to address Moldova's vulnerabilities, help it circumnavigate the difficult waters ahead this autumn and winter, and reduce the potential of the Russian Federation to destabilise the country in the future. This report puts forward several recommendations to that effect that can be found in the concluding chapter.

# List of acronyms

<b>1+1 format</b>	Negotiations format between Moldova and Transnistria
<b>5+2 format</b>	Negotiations format comprising Moldova, Transnistria (negotiators), Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE (mediators), and the US and EU (observers)
<b>AA</b>	Association Agreement
<b>bcm</b>	billion cubic metres
<b>BECS</b>	Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists
<b>CIS</b>	Commonwealth of Independent States
<b>CMI</b>	Crisis Management Initiative
<b>DCFTA</b>	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
<b>EaP</b>	Eastern Partnership
<b>EAP6</b>	Eastern Partnership six: Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia
<b>EBRD</b>	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
<b>ECHR</b>	European Court of Human Rights
<b>ECRML</b>	European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages
<b>ECTT</b>	European Convention on Transfrontier Television
<b>EEU</b>	Eurasian Economic Union
<b>ENP</b>	European Neighbourhood Policy
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUBAM</b>	European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine
<b>EUR</b>	Euro
<b>HCNM</b>	OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities
<b>LGBTQI+</b>	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex as well as other identities
<b>MASSR</b>	Moldovan Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic
<b>mcm</b>	million cubic metres
<b>MGRES</b>	Moldavskaya GRES' Kuchurgan power station
<b>MMZ</b>	Mogilev Metallurgical Works, metallurgical plant in Ribnița
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>ODIHR</b>	OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
<b>OGRF</b>	Operational Group of Russian Forces
<b>OSCE</b>	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
<b>PAS</b>	Party of Action and Solidarity
<b>PCRM</b>	Communist Party
<b>PDM</b>	Democratic Party
<b>PMR</b>	Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic
<b>PSRM</b>	Socialist Party
<b>SBU</b>	Ukrainian intelligence agency
<b>SIS</b>	Moldovan Security and Intelligence Service
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USD</b>	United States dollar

# 1 Introduction

When the Council of the European Union decided on 23 June 2022 to grant Moldova the status of EU candidate country, it boosted the morale of a beleaguered government in Chişinău trying to circumnavigate a daunting series of crises. Since Maia Sandu ousted Socialist President Igor Dodon in the presidential election in 2020 and her reform-oriented Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) obtained a parliamentary majority in 2021, Moldova has barely had a chance to catch its breath. In the year that followed, the country experienced an energy crisis that almost deprived it of gas in the winter of 2021-2022, a budding economic crisis with rampant inflation, and a security and refugee crisis as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine.

The war in its immediate neighbourhood, with Russian troops advancing in the spring along Ukraine's southern coast to barely over 100 kilometres of Moldova's borders, has further complicated the already difficult geopolitical balancing act of successive Moldovan governments. It has also aggravated existing security risks. For years, Moldova has balanced its aspirations to join the EU with its constitutional neutrality and its many dependencies on the Russian Federation. While President Putin was quick to congratulate Maia Sandu on her election and has so far refrained from open hostility towards her government, there are still many vulnerabilities that Moscow already leverages and could further exploit if it chose to destabilise Moldova. Not only is Moldova's economy highly fragile and dependent on Russian energy, there are also political forces and regions that see their interests threatened by the reforms of the PAS government in Chişinău – and over which Moscow has different degrees of influence. Two of such regions are the separatist region of Transnistria in the east and the autonomous region of Gagauzia in the south of the country. A better understanding of these key vulnerabilities could help the EU and the Netherlands to assist Moldova in reducing them and to increase the stability and resilience of the EU's newest candidate country.<sup>1</sup>

The central question of this research report therefore is *to what extent Russia's influence over Moldovan domestic politics as well as the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia poses risks to the internal and external stability of Moldova.*

---

1 This report builds on previous research commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands on Russia's influence on Moldova and the EU's attempts to 'Europeanise' the country. See Francesco Montesano, Tony van der Togt and Wouter Zweers, "[The Europeanisation of Moldova: is the EU on the Right Track?](#)" *Clingendael Report*, 2016.

In Chapter 2, the report will first focus on the interplay between geopolitics, domestic politics and identity politics that have long affected Moldova's political stability and governance. It will particularly look at the extent to which, for its own benefit, Moscow could leverage internal political divisions, the situation of the country's sizable national minorities, and key dependencies on Russian energy and media. Due to the scope of the research, the report excludes other vulnerabilities that are already well documented, such as cyber security, border security and the impact of refugees from Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 3 will zoom in on the situation of the breakaway region of Transnistria and its ambiguous relationship with the European Union, as well as the way Tiraspol has positioned itself in light of the war in Ukraine and Moldova's bid for EU candidacy status. Chapter 4 will look more closely at the situation of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in the south of the country in order to determine the extent to which it poses a risk for Moldova's internal and external stability. Chapter 5 will then chart Moldova's evolving relationship with the European Union and will assess to what extent the EU's assistance to Moldova has contributed to reducing these vulnerabilities. The report concludes with recommendations to the EU.

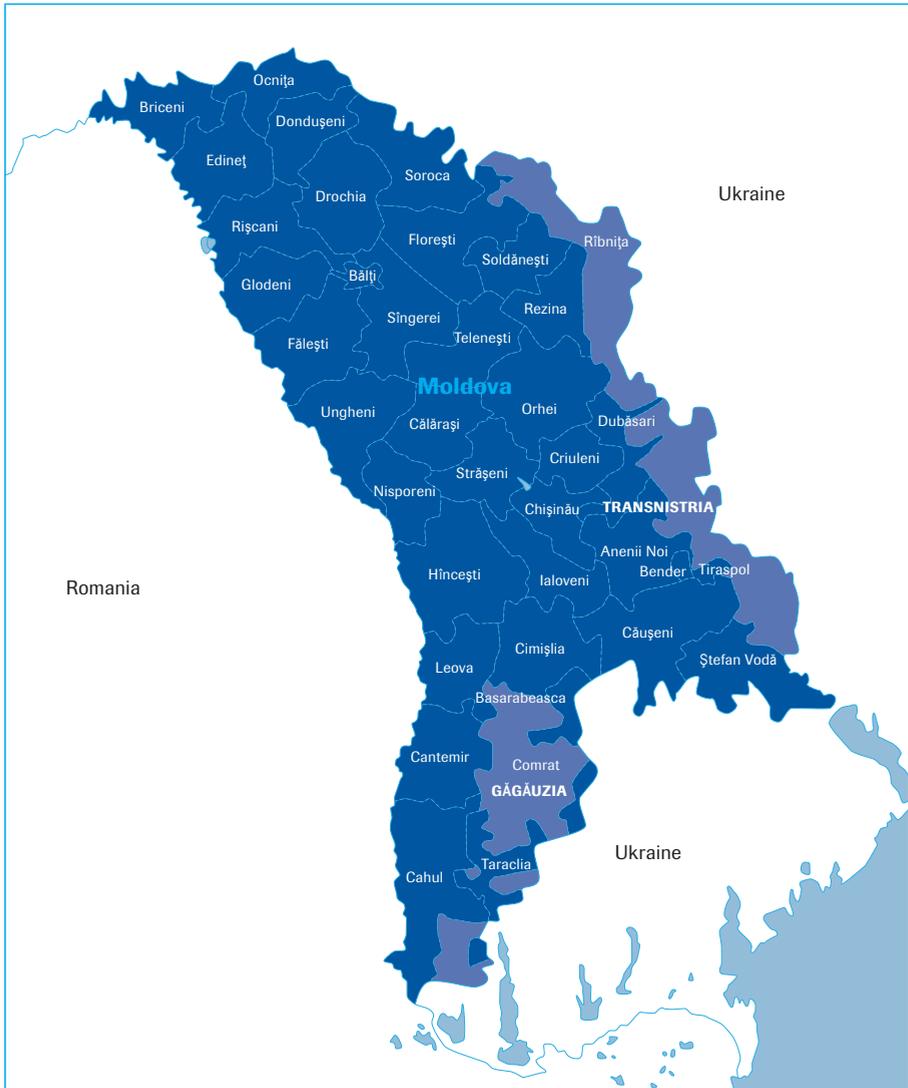
The report is based on a mixed methodology that combines literature review with field research and semi-structured interviews with officials, politicians, national minority representatives and experts during a research visit to Chişinău, Tiraspol and Comrat in June 2022.<sup>3</sup>

---

2 On cyber security, see for example Natalia Spinu, "[Moldova Cybersecurity – Governance assessment](#)", Geneva Center for Security Sector Governance, November 2020; see also Dinu Turcanu et al. "[Cybersecurity of the Republic of Moldova: a retrospective for the period 2015-2020](#)", Technical University of Moldova, 2021. On the challenges related to refugees, see Reliefweb. "[Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Moldova – Key preliminary findings](#)", July 7, 2022.

3 The authors are grateful to Iulian Groza, Victoria Nemerenco, Floris van Eijk and Babette Kolen for their invaluable support to the research project and the research visit to Moldova. The authors would also like to thank Dick Zandee, Jan Marinus Wiersma and Dionis Cenusă for their valuable feedback to an earlier draft of this report.

**Figure 1 Map of Moldova (including Transnistria)**



Source: Wikipedia commons, see [online](#)

## 2 Domestic political vulnerabilities and the 'Russia factor'

Moldovan domestic politics have a long tradition of both instability and susceptibility to Russian influence for a variety of reasons. This chapter explores four vulnerabilities that contribute to Russia's leverage over Moldova's national politics: the long-standing but evolving divisions within Moldovan politics over geopolitics and identity; dependency on Russian gas; the specific situation of national minorities; and Russia's considerable media influence inside Moldova. Most of these vulnerabilities predate the war in Ukraine and sometimes have roots that go back decades. That said, they influence significantly how society and politicians have responded to the war.

### Traditional and evolving political divisions over geopolitics and identity

Moldova's complex history of being part of – and suffering at the hands of – various powers is traditionally reflected in the political views and geopolitical preferences of its electorate. In particular, the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the region, then known as Bessarabia, taken from the crumbling Russian Empire in 1918 and incorporated into Greater Romania, only to be carved up by Stalin and Hitler two decades later by the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in 1939. During World War 2 the Soviet Union and Nazi-allied Romania fought bitterly over Moldova, which was eventually annexed by the Soviet Union. This left deep scars in different sections of Moldovan society. These diverging historical memories between groups that are sometimes described as 'Moldovenists' and 'Romanianists' still influence Moldovans' political perceptions of Russia and Romania, as well as their attitude towards the Russian and Romanian languages.<sup>4</sup>

---

4 For an excellent overview, see Philip Remler, "[Inventing crisis in Moldova: All geopolitics is local](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Commentary*, May 17, 2021. For a good treatise on Moldova's complex and contested history, see Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1999). On Moldova's different political and identity crises in the period 1991-2009, see Bob Deen, "[Deadlock and Division in Moldova](#)," *Security and Human Rights* 20, no. 4 (November 2009): 325-338.

For nearly 20 years after Moldova's independence in 1991, politicians actively used these sentiments and divisions to mobilise their respective electorates against one another and to secure support from Moscow, Brussels, Washington or Bucharest – and often used them to obfuscate internal problems such as poor governance, persistent corruption and lacklustre economic reforms.<sup>5</sup> What is known in Moldova as the 'left', originally represented primarily by the Communist Party (PCRM) of Vladimir Voronin and later by the Socialist Party (PSRM) of PCRM defector Igor Dodon, traditionally promotes good relations with Russia, a stronger position for the Russian language, Moldova's distinctiveness from Romania and a sympathetic approach towards Soviet history.<sup>6</sup> The left is openly supported not only by the Kremlin but also by the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which is canonically subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church and which espouses socially conservative values and sometimes takes a political position.<sup>7</sup> After a first turbulent decade, this faction was in power from 2001–2009 under Vladimir Voronin, and from 2016 made a comeback under Igor Dodon, who won the Presidential election in 2016 but failed to secure a strong parliamentary majority.

The 'right' in Moldovan politics pushes for a stronger Romanian identity, less dependency on Russia and a more westward geopolitical orientation towards the European Union or – to a lesser extent – even unification with Romania. In the period 2009–2019 various unstable parliamentary coalitions, predominantly headed by centrist and right-wing parties, many of whom had close links to Moldovan oligarchs, pursued a nominally pro-European and pro-Romanian course. Although they initially secured strong support from the EU, and from Romania in particular, in reality the 'Alliance for European Integration' and its successors embarked on a process of largescale enrichment and a 'takeover' of government institutions and the judiciary. This process was spearheaded by the Democratic Party (PDM), the political vehicle of oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, who gradually eliminated most of his oligarchic rivals including

---

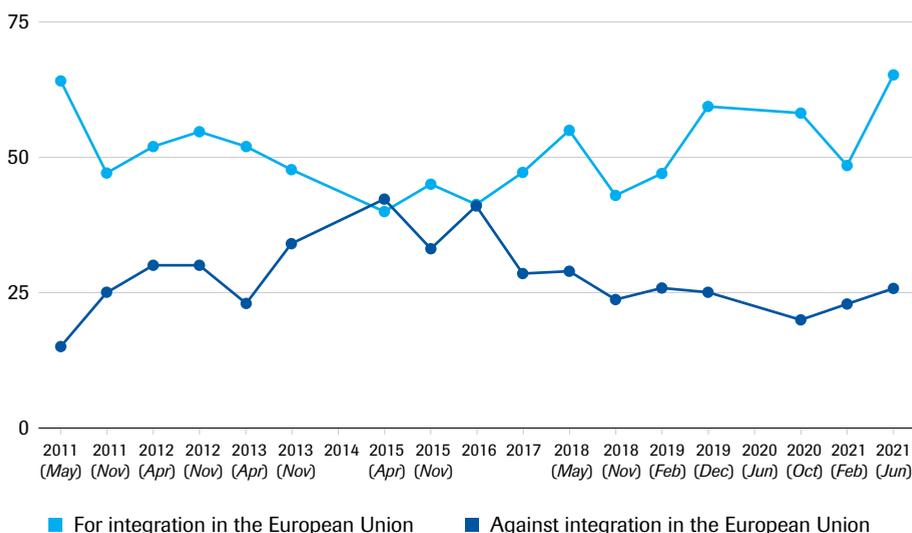
5 See for example Andrey Devyatkov, "[Dynamics of Russian Power in Moldova](#)," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 22, 2017.

6 'Left' and 'right' in the Moldovan context have only limited resemblance to the traditional left-right split between socialist/progressive and liberalist/conservative ideologies in Western European domestic politics. The 'left-right' labels in Moldova are more culturally, historically and geopolitically defined, despite the choice of party names and their affiliations to European political families.

7 Religion in Moldova is a complex matter, unfortunately outside the scope of this report. The Moldovan Orthodox Church is subordinate to the Russian patriarchate, while the rival Bessarabian Orthodox Church is canonically subordinate to the Romanian patriarchate. For more details, see Daniel Jakubek and Vladimir Baar, "[Rivalry between the Bessarabian and Moldovan churches within the context of support of Russian politics](#)," *Political Science Revisited* XVI, 1, pp. 191–208.

Veaceslav Platon and Vladimir Filat.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, this initially led to *receding* support for European integration in the period 2011-2015, although the overall trend is consistently towards a more pro-European course and decreasing support for membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In turn, unificationist sentiment is gradually increasing but still has more opponents than proponents – and for many Moldovans unification remains an ideal, but not a realistic proposition (see Figures 2-4).<sup>9, 10</sup>

**Figure 2 Public opinion on integration with the EU**



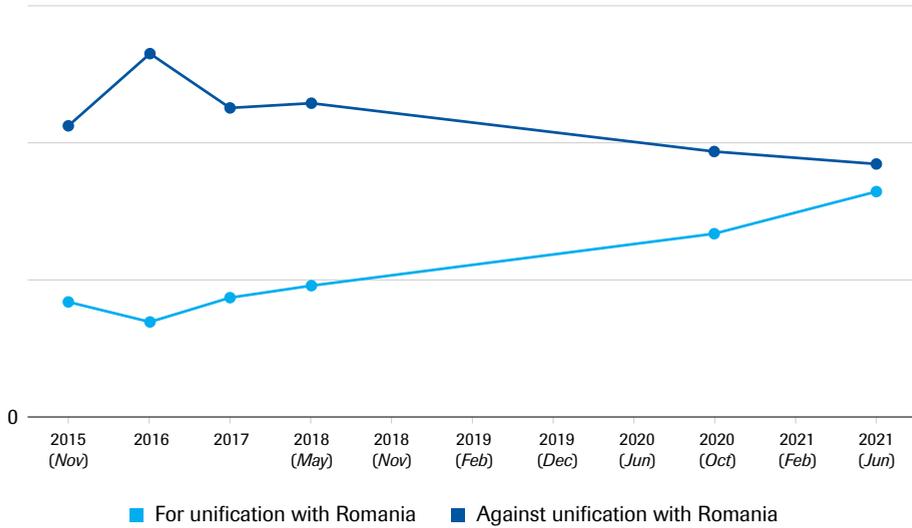
Source: Institute for Public Policy (IPP), “[Barometer of Public Opinion](#)”, 2011-2021, retrieved July 2022.

8 For the evolution of Plahotniuc’s hold on power and his links to other politicians and oligarchs, see Kamil Calus and Wojciech Kononczuk, “[Explaining Oligarchic Moldova](#),” *Carnegie Europe*, May 4, 2017. See also Dionis Cenusă, ‘Moldova’s Anaemic Democracy and Distorted Europeanisation’, in Michael Emerson et al. (eds), [The Struggle for Good Governance in Eastern Europe \(2nd edition\)](#), Centre for European Policy Studies, 2021.

9 Institute for Public Policy (IPP), “[Barometer of Public Opinion](#)”, 2011-2021, retrieved July 2022. Although pro-unificationist sentiment has increased, the prospects of actual unification (“unirea”) between both countries are low for various reasons. For a good explanation, see Kamil Calus, “[Moldova: record-breaking support for reunification with Romania](#),” *Centre for Eastern Studies*, April 19, 2021.

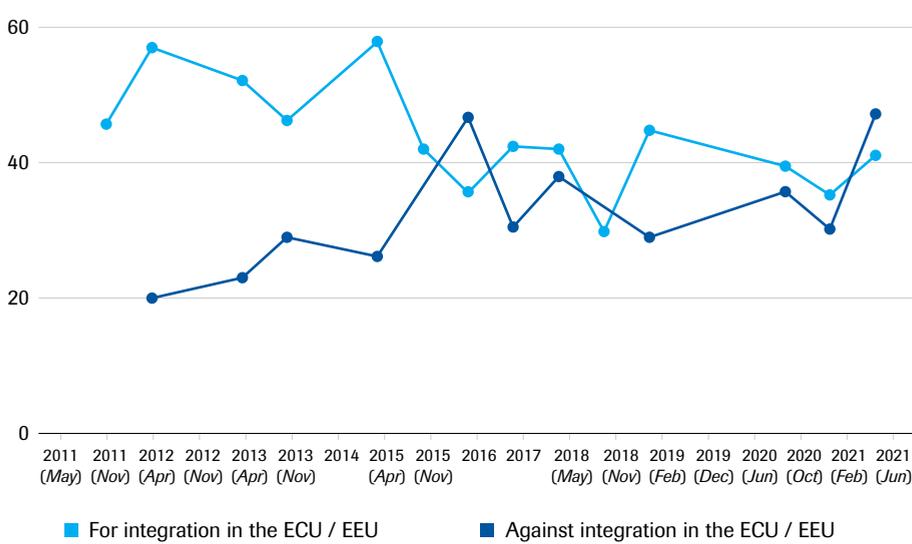
10 Ibid.

**Figure 3 Public opinion on integration with Romania**



Source: Institute for Public Policy (IPP), "[Barometer of Public Opinion](#)", 2011-2021, retrieved July 2022.

**Figure 4 Public opinion on integration with the Eurasian Customs Union / Eurasian Economic Union**



Source: Institute for Public Policy (IPP), "[Barometer of Public Opinion](#)", 2011-2021, retrieved July 2022.

In this regard, it is a frequently held misunderstanding that Moldovan political parties are simply ‘pro-European’, ‘pro-unification’ or ‘pro-Russian’. In fact, most are opportunistic and personality-driven patronage networks that pragmatically try to balance relations with all ‘sides’ to advance their own interests. For example, for all his catering to nostalgia towards the Soviet Union, Communist party leader Voronin signed numerous agreements with the European Union and in 2008 even declared Moldova’s EU integration process an ‘irreversible process’.<sup>11</sup> Despite frequent statements of support for Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union, in which the PSRM negotiated an observer status in 2017, Igor Dodon did not suspend this integration process either. In turn, the period in which various pro-European parties were in power was marred by three factors: political instability, lagging reforms and largescale corruption. The latter was epitomised by the ‘bank heist of the century’ in which approximately 1 billion USD were embezzled and the banks involved had to be bailed out with public finances from an impoverished Moldova. After a constitutional crisis in 2019, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe went as far as to use the term ‘state capture’ to describe the situation of democratic and judicial institutions in Moldova.<sup>12</sup>

In response, exasperated Moldovan voters increasingly turned their backs on the old political divisions running along geopolitical and identity lines and turned towards a new political movement running on an anti-corruption platform, the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) of Maia Sandu.<sup>13</sup> While promoting a pro-European geopolitical orientation, Sandu largely steered clear of identity issues such as language policy. In 2020 she defeated Igor Dodon in the presidential election and in 2021 secured a parliamentary majority for her party. This not only signified a strong preference for Moldovan voters to do away with corrupt practices of the past, but also indicated that geopolitical and identity factors had lost importance and that ‘most of the citizens no longer allowed themselves to be trapped by scarecrows and sterile geopolitical discourse’.<sup>14</sup> The fact that a party running on an anti-corruption agenda secured a strong parliamentary majority is in principle a positive development. However, several interviewees expressed concern that the combination of PAS appointees’ lack of experience, high levels of distrust both inside the party and towards all other

---

11 [“Vladimir Voronin: Moldova’s European integration is an irreversible process.”](#) IPN Press Agency, May 28, 2008.

12 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, [The functioning of democratic institutions in the Republic of Moldova](#), Resolution 2308 (2019), paragraph 5: ‘*The Assembly acknowledges the legitimate and necessary steps needed to eradicate from state institutions all aspects that are characteristic of “State capture”.*’ The Secretary-General of the Council of Europe had already described Moldova as a ‘captured state’ in an opinion article: Thorbjorn Jagland, [“Bring Moldova Back from the Brink,”](#) *New York Times*, August 11, 2015.

13 For the 2019 parliamentary elections, PAS formed an electoral bloc called ‘ACUM’ with another pro-reform movement, the ‘Party of the Platform Dignity and Truth’ (DA), headed by Andrei Nastase.

14 Mihaela Fedoseev, [“Manipulation with geopolitical messages - increasingly ineffective in election campaigns?”](#) *IPRE Blog*, August 17, 2021.

political forces, and a strong drive to ‘quickly clean up’ democratic institutions could have longer-term negative effects for the independence of these institutions, as well as for political pluralism and democratic consolidation in Moldova.<sup>15</sup>

The electoral victory of PAS was also facilitated by a shift in labour migration, geopolitical orientation and the voting patterns of the sizable Moldovan diaspora away from Russia and towards the EU. In 2021, those ‘external voters’ made up 18.2% of Moldova’s electorate and a whopping 86.2% of them voted for PAS, against only 2.5% for the Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists (BECS).<sup>16</sup>

This shift also meant that Moscow had to adjust its strategy. In the past the Kremlin was able to influence the outcomes in Moldovan elections through its media presence and by showing overt support for the leaders of the Communist or Socialist parties. But due to the plummeting popularity of both of these parties Moscow had to diversify its approach and the ‘Russia factor’ in Moldovan politics has become more amorphous. In particular, the Kremlin had to look for an alternative to Igor Dodon. Most tellingly, when Dodon was arrested in May 2022 on charges of corruption and treason, Russia did not come staunchly to the defence of its traditional ally but instead declared this an ‘internal affair’ that it would ‘monitor’.<sup>17</sup> The Kremlin is now cultivating stronger ties with several political actors and new political forces beyond the PSRM and PCRM, including Chişinău mayor Ion Ceban, former prime minister Ion Chicu and various politicians in Gagauzia. Most worryingly, there is a risk of collusion between the interests of Russia to keep Moldova out of the EU’s geopolitical orbit and those of various political and oligarchic factions in Moldova whose positions are threatened by the anti-corruption reforms of PAS, including those of Vladimir Plahotniuc, Veaceslav Platon and Ilan Shor.

For now, it appears that the Kremlin – which has its hands full in neighbouring Ukraine – is content to bide its time in Moldova and see which political force ‘floats to the top’.<sup>18</sup> Instead of actively trying to topple the Gavriliţa government, Moscow has several other levers it can use to pressure Moldova and avoid it taking a pro-Ukrainian stance too openly in the war or deviating from its formal neutrality – including through alignment with EU sanctions. This is first and foremost through its control over Moldova’s energy

---

15 See for example Freedom House, ‘[Moldova](#)’, *Nations in Transit 2022*.

16 Kanat Makhanov, “[External Voting Patterns in new post-Communist democracies](#),” *Eurasian Research Institute*. The author estimates that approximately 45% of the total population of Moldova lives abroad; of those, 45% work in the EU and 26% in Russia. The European Training Foundation (ETF) estimates that in 2020 Moldovan international migrants represented around 1.1 million people, or 28.7% of the population, of whom approximately 30% go to Russia. The total contribution of labour migrants to Moldova’s GDP is estimated to be 16%. See ETF, [Skills and Migration Country Fiche: Moldova](#), 2021.

17 “[Russia Says Will Monitor Moldova Ex-Leader’s Case](#),” *The Moscow Times*, May 25, 2022.

18 Clingendael policy interviews, Chişinău, June 2022.

supply and the concomitant effects on Moldova's economy and social stability, which may be more effective for Russia to achieve its political objectives than direct meddling in Moldovan domestic politics.

## Winter is coming again: Moldova's gas debt and dependency on Russian energy

Moldova is almost entirely dependent on the Russian Federation for its supply of natural gas and, indirectly, for a large proportion of its electricity supply. MoldovaGaz – 50% of which is owned by Gazprom and 13.4% by the de facto Transnistrian administration – imports approximately 2.9 billion cubic metres (bcm) of natural gas. Out of these, 1.3bcm is consumed by right-bank Moldova for heating purposes and 1.6bcm is consumed on the left bank of the Dniester by Transnistrian heavy industry and the 'Moldavskaya GRES' power station (MGRES) power plant in Kuchurgan, which provides around 70% of the electricity for right-bank Moldova as well. Over the years Transnistria has racked up an astronomical debt of 7 billion USD, but right-bank Moldova also owes Gazprom around 700 million USD.<sup>19</sup> Chişinău in effect has to pay Moscow twice: first for the import of the gas to Transnistria, and then to MGRES to import the electricity from Transnistria – albeit at prices that are substantially lower than on the international electricity market.

This double reliance on Russian gas and Transnistrian electricity, combined with the sizable debt to Gazprom, gives Russia a strong grip on any Moldovan government. Gazprom could at any time use the debt as a pretext to suspend gas deliveries to Moldova, although it would also deprive its 'allies' in Transnistria of electricity and heating in the process. Knowing this, the Moldovan government similarly does not always implement all of its contractual obligations towards Gazprom. When Moldova missed the contractual deadline for an external audit of its debt to Gazprom, the company nonetheless continued to supply gas to Moldova, and MGRES continued to supply electricity at subsidised rates – reportedly in exchange for an environmental licence for the scrap metal processing plant in Rîbniţa that plays an important role in the Transnistrian economy.<sup>20</sup> Russia-related energy imports are therefore not only a key source of potential kleptocratic enrichment on both banks of the Nistru and in Russia, they are also a critical vulnerability that the Russian Federation can and does exploit.

In fact, Moscow did not wait long after the PAS victory in the parliamentary elections to test Maia Sandu and her new government. In October 2021, when Moldova's previous long-term contract with Gazprom expired and gas prices had shot up, Russia began

---

19 "Moldova's Gas Crisis and Its Lessons for Europe," *Carnegie Moscow*, November 5, 2021.

20 Andrei Chirileasa, "," *Romania Insider*, May 2, 2022.

to charge Moldova the full market price of 790 USD per million cubic metres (mcm), up from an average of 148 USD/mcm in 2020. Partially due to its own procrastination and inability to anticipate the ending of the contract, the Moldovan government had to issue a state of emergency and scrambled to source gas from alternative suppliers. It eventually made a new, temporary deal with Gazprom that indexed the gas price to a rolling average over the preceding months and temporarily cushioned the blow to Moldova. However, this only postponed the problem, as gas prices kept rising further and further. While Sandu denied that she had made any political concessions, Gazprom had reportedly pushed for a weakening in trade ties with the EU, including in the implementation of the Third Energy Package. Some ambiguous wording about this made it into the protocol, but the exact concessions made by the Moldovan authorities to Gazprom remain unclear and a new spat is possible virtually at any time.<sup>21</sup>

Pending more sustainable solutions regarding the debt restructuring to Gazprom, the electricity supply from Transnistria and a broader solution to Russia's grip on the wider European gas market, Moldova will remain acutely vulnerable to disruptions or sharp price increases in its energy supply. Fears abound that higher heating bills this winter will combine with simmering social discontent and mobilise the electorate against the Gavrilița government, leading to social and political instability and a possible change of power.<sup>22</sup>

## National minorities and the position of the Russian language

When Russian general Rustam Minnekayev made his ominous but rather ill-founded threat in April 2022 to take the entire south of Ukraine 'as a way out for Transnistria', he also referred to 'facts of oppression of Russian-speakers', prompting fears that Russia might want to use the status of the Russian language as a pretext for an operation against Moldova itself.<sup>23</sup> Foreign Minister Lavrov echoed these statements in a recent TV interview, in which he said Russia would defend Russian-speakers in Moldova and also mentioned Gagauzia.<sup>24</sup> Issues of language and ethnicity are highly sensitive issues

---

21 Andrew Wilson, "[Moldova's gas deal with Russia: David tries to draw with Goliath](#)," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 4, 2021.

22 For more detail about the political context around the gas deals see Dionis Cenușa, "[Russia-Moldova gas disputes: Is an "energy divorce" possible?](#)" *Riddle*, October 28, 2021. The author argued in October 2021 that "(...) *discrediting of the pro-reform and pro-EU forces might create a new momentum for the weakened pro-Russian forces that try to capitalize on the government's missteps in the management of the energy crisis.*"

23 See Madalin Necșutu, 'Via Southern Ukraine, Russia Eyes "Another Route" to Moldova's Transnistria', *BalkanInsight*, April 22, 2022.

24 Vitalie Calugareanu, 'Russia Warns Moldova over Transnistria Troops', *Deutsche Welle*, September 3, 2022

in Moldova for the historical reasons explained above.<sup>25</sup> In addition to divisions *within* the majority population (which is largely bilingual, but has different linguistic preferences for the use of Romanian or Russian), the country is also home to several sizable national minority groups. Roughly 18% of right-bank Moldova identified as a minority in the 2014 census, of which ethnic Ukrainians (6.6% of the total population), Gagauz (4.6%), Russians (4.1%) and Bulgarians (1.9%) comprised the four largest groups. Many live compactly in regions in the north and south of the country, have limited knowledge of Romanian and generally speak Russian as their preferred language of everyday use. They also consume significantly more Russian-language media, including content produced in Russia, compared to the majority population.<sup>26</sup>

The status of the Russian language in Moldova has been an issue of political and legal controversy since independence. In its 1989 language law Moldova recognised Russian as the ‘language of inter-ethnic communication’ alongside the state language. It nominally remained in force until the Constitutional Court annulled it in 2018.<sup>27</sup> Attempts to pass a new language law or adopt a balanced language policy that does justice to Moldova’s complex linguistic legacy have failed for many years due to fierce mobilisation along ethnic and linguistic lines and a tendency by political actors to abuse this issue purely for short-term political gain. For example, in January 2021, Igor Dodon made use of his temporary majority in the Moldovan parliament to pass a law on the official status of the Russian language that was promptly thrown out by the Constitutional Court. Successive governments and parliaments have dragged their feet for 20 years and still have not ratified the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML), even though Moldova signed it in 2002 and promised to ratify it as part of its pre-accession criteria towards the Council of Europe.<sup>28</sup> While language policy remains

---

25 King (op. cit); Matthew H. Ciscel, “[Reform and Relapse in Bilingual Policy in Moldova](#),” *Comparative Education* 46, no. 1 (2010): 13-28.

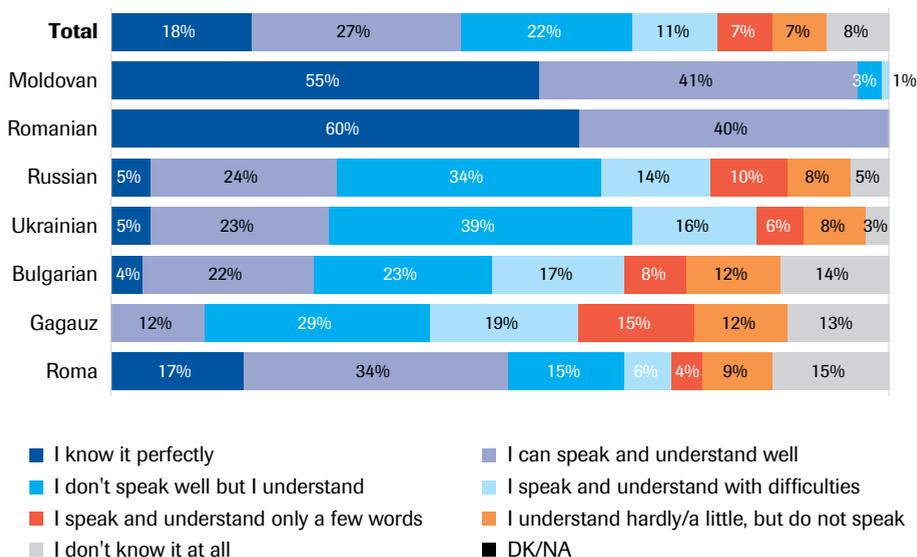
26 See CIVIS Centre, [Ethnobarometer Moldova -2020](#), 2020, 59-61. This report yields interesting insights on minorities and language. For example, it shows that ethnic minorities mainly communicate in Russian outside of their family and relatives’ circles. For instance, 76% of the Ukrainians, 87% of the Bulgarians, 86% of the Gagauz and 53% of the Roma speak Russian with their colleagues at work, university or school. Moreover, Russian is also primarily used to communicate with public authorities. See CIVIS Centre, [Ethnobarometer Moldova -2020](#), 2020, 53-60.

27 In a somewhat controversial decision, the Constitutional Court used the concept of ‘desuetude’ (disuse) to declare the law unconstitutional, despite a reference in the Moldovan constitution, and gave precedence to the Moldovan declaration of independence. For an overview of the debate, see IPN, “[Debates on functioning of spoken languages should be protected from propagandistic confrontations](#)”, 7 June 2018.

28 See for example Federica Prina, “[Linguistic divisions and the Language Charter – The case of Moldova](#),” *ECMI Working Paper* no. 64 (March 2013); or Matthew H. Ciscel, “[Uneasy Compromise: Language and education in Moldova](#),” in *Multilingualism in Post-Soviet Countries*, ed. Aneta Pavlenko (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2008), 373-395.

deadlocked, the issue continues to fester and might be used at any time by domestic political actors or the Russian Federation to stir up controversy – not only within the majority population, but in particular towards national minorities.

**Figure 5 Extent to which Moldovan citizens speak Romanian, by ethnicity**



Source: CIVIS Centre, [Ethnobarometer Moldova, 2020](#).

Typically, people belonging to national minorities are staunchly opposed to the idea of reunification with Romania and generally tend to vote for parties on the left of the political spectrum that advocate for a stronger position for the Russian language and closer ties with Russia. It is nonetheless a frequently held misunderstanding that minorities in Moldova are all ‘pro-Russian’ or ‘anti-European’; most support the general idea of European integration and concomitant reforms such as the fight against corruption, but are more susceptible to narratives in Russian-language media that emphasise socially conservative values and resistance against ‘Gayropa’.<sup>29</sup>

29 See for example Marcin Kosienkowski and William Schreiber, “Moldova’s national minorities: Why are they Euroskeptical?” *Russie.Nei.Visions* no. 81 (November 2014). The term ‘Gayropa’ is an example of “Russian anti-Western discourse [which] represents European civilization as currently undergoing a process of degeneration”, whereby the “perversion of the normal gender order” is provided as proof for such degeneration. See Tatiana Riabova and Oleg Riabov, “Gayromaidan”: Gendered Aspects of the Hegemonic Russian Media Discourse on the Ukraine Crisis’, *Journal of Soviet and Post-soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, 89.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine they have tended to emphasise Moldova's neutrality more than voicing staunch support for Russia's invasion.

Minorities are also – with good reason – concerned that they have been insufficiently involved in political life by the parties of the right and are under-represented in various state structures.<sup>30</sup> As national minorities traditionally vote predominantly for PCRM or PSRM, other parties such as Maia Sandu's PAS pay relatively little attention to their concerns. It is telling in this regard that the government is yet to appoint a new director for the Agency for Inter-ethnic Relations. This agency is key in the implementation of the 'Strategy on Consolidation of Inter-ethnic Relations', adopted in 2016 with support of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). Implementation of this strategy has been slow and there is a lack of genuine efforts to promote integration of Moldovan society, including through better knowledge of the Romanian language by persons belonging to national minorities and by promoting their participation in public life. This, combined with the inability of successive governments to strike a reasonable compromise regarding the status of the Russian language, continues to present opportunities for domestic and external political actors to manipulate sentiments over language and identity. While many national minorities and Russian-speakers, disillusioned by previous governments and frustrated by pervasive corruption, voted for PAS in the 2021 elections and helped Sandu obtain a parliamentary majority, they may not do so in the future if they feel the party advances only the aims of the Romanianist majority.<sup>31</sup> PAS officials sometimes speak about the importance of building an overarching civic Moldovan identity which would contribute to a more inclusive and cohesive Moldovan society, but have so far taken limited steps in this direction.

### **'Don't mention the war': Russian media content and narratives**

The linguistic divisions in Moldovan society contribute to the emergence of parallel realities for those who consume Romanian-language or Russian-language media. While this also applies to print and online media, it is particularly television, the most popular source of information for almost three-quarters of the population, that is of critical

---

30 When asked in an OSCE-funded survey whether or not 'my ethnic group is sufficiently represented in State institutions', 59% of respondents who self-identified as Moldovans answered affirmative, against 20% for Ukrainians, 28% for Russians, 29% for Gagauz and 22% for Bulgarians. See CIVIS Centre, [Ethnobarometer, Moldova -2020](#), 2020, 28. For an official assessment of the situation up until 2017, see Advisory Committee Opinion of the FCNM, [Fourth Opinion on Moldova](#), ACFC/OP/IV(2016)004.

31 Clingendael interviews, Chişinău, June 2022.

importance in shaping attitudes towards key (geo)political issues.<sup>32</sup> This also extends to the war in Ukraine, which divides Moldova in general but also sees a correlation with linguistic preferences and media consumption. For example, in a survey in May 2022, 51% of those whose native language is Romanian considered Russia's invasion of Ukraine as aggression, compared to only 20% of those who speak Russian or other languages. While there is no clear-cut causal link between native language and perceptions, given that nearly half of Romanian speakers view the war differently, the correlation is nonetheless strong.<sup>33</sup>

Due to the popularity of re-broadcast content from Russia, Moldova has long been highly vulnerable not only to Russian narratives, but also to disinformation campaigns. Together with Belarus it ranks as the country in Eastern Europe least able to withstand foreign-led information threats in the Disinformation Resilience Index.<sup>34</sup> As Moldova's domestic market is relatively small, it is difficult for Moldova to produce Russian-language entertainment content that can rival the quality of content re-broadcast from the Russian Federation. An additional complication is posed by long-standing problems regarding media ownership and pluralism. For years, political and oligarchic actors in Moldova have used media holdings to pass their own, politically biased messages through their respective TV channels.<sup>35</sup> They often make use of Russian-produced content to increase their popularity and have business links with Russian media moguls connected to the Kremlin. For example, content produced by Russian state TV channels *Perviy Kanal* and *RTR* have consistently been among the most popular in Moldova. Such content was first re-broadcast by Plahotniuc-controlled *PRIME TV*, but later taken over by a channel of a media holding that is close to the PSRM, Media Invest Service, which owns *Accent TV* and *Primul*. Media Invest Service is 51% owned by Igor Chaika, the son of Russia's prosecutor-general.<sup>36</sup>

---

32 Institutul de Politici Publice, [Barometrul de Opinie Publică](#) (Chişinău: Institutul de Politici Publice, 2021), 26. Respondents could choose up to two options. TV is the most popular at 74.2%, with the internet in second place at 58.6%. Radio makes up only 16.2%. See also Valeriu Pasha, Vasile Cantarii and Iryna Sterpu, [“Republic of Moldova’s television content and the manner in which it is shaping electoral behavior: an assessment of Russia’s influence on the country’s geo-political options,”](#) *WatchDog.md*, 2018.

33 Stela Untila, “Sondaj: 25% dintre moldoveni consideră că Putin personal este vinovat de războiul din Ucraina. 19% dau vina pe SUA” *NewsMakers*, May 10, 2022. It is noteworthy that out of the total population, around 40% of Moldovans considered Russia's invasion as ‘unreasonable and unprovoked’, while 23% believed Russia protected the Donbas from attacks by Ukraine and another 15% believed that Russia was liberating Ukraine from Nazism.

34 For more details see WatchDog.md team, “Moldova,” in [Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe](#), eds. Pavel Havlíček and Andrei Yelisseyu (Warsaw: East Center, 2021), 163, as well as WatchDog.

35 See for example [“Moldova: Stakeholder submission on media freedom for the universal periodic review,”](#) *Freedom House*, July 23, 2021, others.

36 [“ВЭБ. РФ стал совладельцем новой компании сына генпрокурора России Игоря Чайки,”](#) *OpenMedia*, December 29, 2019.

The Moldovan government has tried to take action. In its 2018 National Information Security Strategy it acknowledged that disinformation campaigns are part of hybrid warfare and can create internal instability.<sup>37</sup> In the same year the PDM-led government banned news and analytical broadcasts and limited other content from non-EU countries that had not ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (ECTT), which was a roundabout way of saying ‘the Russian Federation’ – especially as exceptions were made for the United States and other countries that had not ratified the Convention. Although the coalition circumvented a presidential veto by Dodon, the ban was widely perceived as political manipulation by Plahotniuc. It also did not prove to be particularly effective, as media consumption moved more online, cable operators in Gagauzia refused to implement it and the PSRM bitterly fought it in the parliament.<sup>38</sup> The Audiovisual Council, the key institution mandated to regulate the media sphere, remained unwilling or unable to address the problems of media ownership and the risk of Russian disinformation.

However, it was the war in Ukraine that again noted the urgency of information space as a security issue and prompted action, as Moldovan authorities became acutely concerned about the risk of Russian propaganda spreading throughout the country. The Moldovan security services quickly shut down Sputnik on 26 February on the grounds that it ‘promotes information that incites hatred and war’. But rather than outright pro-war propaganda, it is manipulation of public opinion through omission or the repetition of Russian narratives about discrimination of Russian-speakers that have a more pernicious and divisive effect on public opinion.<sup>39</sup>

In June 2022, parliament passed a new Law on Information Security that once again banned news and analytical programmes and imposed a cap on other content from non-ECTT signatory countries. The ban was again criticised harshly by Moscow and PSRM deputies.<sup>40</sup> Its effectiveness remains to be seen, as media consumption increasingly moves online and is hard to regulate. Russia’s presence in Moldova’s information space remains a key vulnerability that can only be addressed by a complex set of measures, ranging from promoting media literacy to producing more local Russian-language news, and from addressing media ownership to strengthening governmental and civil society responses to fake news.

---

37 WatchDog.md team, “Moldova,” in [Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe](#), eds. Pavel Havlíček and Andrei Yeliseyev (Warsaw: East Center, 2021), 166.

38 Vasile Gancev, [“What is the future of Moldova’s ‘law against propaganda’?”](#) *Global Voices*, January 20, 2020.

39 Madalin Necsutu, [“What War? Moldova grapples with pro-Russian media propaganda,”](#) *Balkan Insight*, April 12, 2022.

40 Madalin Necsutu, [“Moldova bans Russian media to counter propaganda over Ukraine,”](#) *Balkan Insight*, June 20, 2022.

### 3 Transnistria: stuck in the middle without EU

When Russia recognised the ‘People’s Republics’ in Donetsk in February 2022 and its invasion initially advanced rapidly westward along Ukraine’s southern coast in the direction of Odesa, this sparked not only strong emotions in right-bank Moldova but also in the breakaway territory of Transnistria. Speculation ran rife that Russia might try to connect its ‘land bridge’ from Crimea to Transnistria and use its longstanding military presence there to occupy and annex parts of Ukraine. These speculations were initially prompted by westward arrows on a Russian military map shown by the Belarusian ruler Lukashenka but further fanned by statements to this effect by the Russian general Minnekayev in April.

This served as a reminder that one of Europe’s longest protracted conflicts is by no means entirely ‘frozen’, that there are still Russian troops stationed on Moldova’s territory and that Transnistria poses a security risk to both Moldova and Ukraine. But when Russia’s troops were pushed back from Mikolayiv to Kherson and a Ukrainian official even openly began to speculate that Ukraine might help Moldova take back Transnistria, the mood in Transnistria began to shift. While some factions continued to staunchly support Moscow, others quietly began adjusting their calculations. This was further affected by both Moldova’s and Ukraine’s successful bids for EU candidacy status, which means Transnistria is now wedged between two EU candidate countries. The war between two of the official mediators in the conflict-settlement process known as the ‘5+2’ also effectively put an end to that process, although nobody has yet formulated an alternative.<sup>41</sup>

This section briefly explores Russia’s leverage over Transnistria, the response of the different factions to the war in Ukraine and to Moldova’s EU candidacy status, and the prospects for the conflict-settlement process.

---

41 The 5+2 format derives its somewhat confusing name from the five participants (Chisinau and Tiraspol as the ‘sides’, and Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE as ‘mediators’), with the EU and the United States as ‘observers’.

## Russia's leverage over Transnistria and Tiraspol's response to the war

Although some of its roots are local, including some identity-related aspects as described in Chapter 2, the Transnistrian conflict cannot be seen separately from Moscow's overall and long-term objective to retain control over Moldova.<sup>42</sup> The small strip of land east of the Nistru was declared the 'Moldovan Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic' (MASSR) within Ukraine by Stalin in 1924 in response to Romania's annexation of Bessarabia and served as a political and military 'bridgehead' to eventually regain control over what would then become the Moldovan Socialist Soviet Republic.

When Moldova's leaders from 1989 to 1991 pursued a staunchly pro-Romanian course prior to and shortly after Moldova's independence, pro-Moscow elites in Transnistria in turn declared their own independence as the 'Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic' (PMR). This sparked a relatively short but nonetheless bloody conflict in which Transnistrian militia worked closely with the Soviet and later Russian military to defeat Moldova's limited armed forces and retain control over most of left-bank Moldova and the city of Bender on the right bank of the Nistru. The conflict ended in 1992 with a stalemate overseen by Russian 'peacekeepers' and a very slow conflict-settlement process under the auspices of the OSCE. Since then, Russia has held Transnistria in a firm grip and provided it with political, economic and military support, to the extent that the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) twice deemed that the Russian Federation exercised effective control over the Transnistrian administration.<sup>43</sup> While strong, Russia's control over the Transnistrian leadership and population is by no means limitless and has a security, political, economic and cultural dimension. Each will be discussed in turn.

The most visible but often overstated element of Russian leverage is through the **presence of its military and security services**. In addition to the approximately 800 Russian peacekeepers that are stationed in Transnistria as part of the 1992 ceasefire agreement, Russia also has reformatted the 14<sup>th</sup> Army into an 'Operational Group of Russian Forces' (OGRF) of approximately 1,500 soldiers and several hundred support

---

42 See King, *The Moldovans*, as well as Thomas de Waal, [Uncertain Ground: Engaging with Europe's de facto states and breakaway territories](#) (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 2018), 35-47.

43 [Case of Catan and others v. Moldova and Russia](#), European Court of Human Rights, Applications nos. 43370/04, 8252/05 and 18454/06 (October 19, 2012). See for example paragraph 122 of the 'Catan' case: 'The Court, therefore, maintains its findings in the *Ilaşcu* judgment (cited above), that during the period 2002-2004 the "MRT" was able to continue in existence, resisting Moldovan and international efforts to resolve the conflict and bring democracy and the rule of law to the region, only because of Russian military, economic and political support. In these circumstances, the "MRT"'s high level of dependency on Russian support provides a strong indication that Russia exercised effective control and decisive influence over the "MRT" administration.'

personnel that guard the enormous depot of decommissioned Soviet-era arms and ammunition in Colbasna.<sup>44</sup> However, it would be incorrect to see these troops as wholly 'Russian': only very few come directly from the Russian Federation, while an estimated 90% of these soldiers are residents of Transnistria who hold Russian passports. In fact, the same soldiers often rotate from the Transnistrian security forces ('PMR militia') into the OGRF, then into the peacekeeping contingent where salaries are higher, and finally back into the PMR militia.<sup>45</sup>

Both Russia's military and the Transnistrian militia are only lightly armed and certainly not trained or equipped to mount an offensive against neighbouring Ukraine. Russia also has no good way to reinforce them, neither over land nor through the air. Some argue Russia saw them as a potential occupying force in case of a successful operation against the Odesa oblast and a way to pin down Ukrainian forces in the west of the country, but most analysts agree their practical use as invading force is very low.<sup>46</sup> Estimates of Transnistria's security forces vary; most put them around 3,000 troops, while the authorities could in theory mobilise 15,000-20,000 more. It remains doubtful how many of these would actually fight; many young men would rather flee to right-bank Moldova than participate in a war against the much better armed and combat-ready Ukrainian forces. In fact, the statement by Oleksiy Arestovych, an adviser to Ukraine's presidential administration who boasted that Ukraine could take over Transnistria at the snap of a finger if Moldova asked for it, reverberated throughout both left- and right-bank Moldova.<sup>47</sup> After it became apparent that Russia's troops were not able to make it to Odesa, Transnistria has instead tried to avoid being dragged into the conflict and is uneasily waiting to see what happens on the battlefield. A few shady security incidents initially raised concerns but were quickly defused.<sup>48</sup>

Russia's second lever over Transnistria is more **political in nature**, as its main patron and as its advocate for a special status within Moldova. While officially a mediator within the 5+2 process, Russia in practice positions itself as the main defender of Transnistria's

---

44 Estimates of the exact number of Russian troops and the size of the Transnistrian militia vary across sources and interviewees, but the difference is relatively minor. Clingendael interviews indicate around 3,000 active Transnistrian security forces, with the potential to mobilise up to 15,000-20,000 more. For more information see, for example, Michal Torz, "[Transnistria. What's going on there?](#)" *Warsaw Institute Romania Monitor*, May 18, 2022.

45 Clingendael policy interviews, Chişinău, June 2022.

46 See for example Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "[Operation Z: the Death Throes of an Imperial Delusion](#)," *Royal United Services Institute Special Report* (April 2022), 17.

47 ФЕЙГИН LIVE, "День шестьдесят второй. Беседа с Алексеем Арестовичем," YouTube, April 26, 2022, 2:57 to 3:37.

48 Dionis Cenuşa, "[Transnistria: Another Russian Pressure Point?](#)", *Riddle*, 6 May 2022. See also Collin Mayfield, "[War will decide the fate of Transnistria](#)," *Palladium*, July 18, 2022.

interests both vis-à-vis Chişinău and on the international political stage. This support is by no means unconditional and occasionally frustrating for Tiraspol, which has repeatedly but unsuccessfully appealed to Russia to recognise its independence and even to eventually integrate with the Russian Federation.<sup>49</sup> Despite its recognition of no less than four other breakaway territories in Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow still maintains, for a variety of reasons, that Transnistria is and should remain part of the Republic of Moldova. Despite its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, its role as a 5+2 mediator and its grip over the Transnistrian *de facto* Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its chief negotiator Ignatieff, Russia is unlikely to be able to ultimately block Transnistria's reintegration with Moldova by political means alone.

Russia's third, still potent but gradually reducing, influence is its key role in Transnistria's economy through its **direct and indirect subsidies**. The primary source of leverage is, once again, natural gas, which Russia provides to Transnistria virtually free of charge. Transnistria uses this cheap gas to run its heavy and otherwise possibly uncompetitive industry such as the MMZ metallurgical plant in Rîbniţa, to generate electricity that is used for cryptocurrency mining and, most importantly, to export to right-bank Moldova. Many of these schemes are also highly profitable for Russian businessmen – and used to be profitable for Moldovan and Ukrainian actors as well.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Russia provides direct financial support to Tiraspol as 'humanitarian aid' and finances its law enforcement agencies and security forces. Without Russia's support, Transnistria's 'aided economy' would most likely collapse – and the *de facto* authorities would struggle to balance their budget.<sup>51</sup>

That said, Russia's role as trading partner for Transnistria is gradually receding. Over time, but in particular after the signing of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU in 2014, Transnistria has reoriented its exports towards the European Union (see Figure 6). After Ukraine fully closed the border with Transnistria and the region lost access to the crucial port of Odesa, more and more economic activity will need to be oriented westwards.

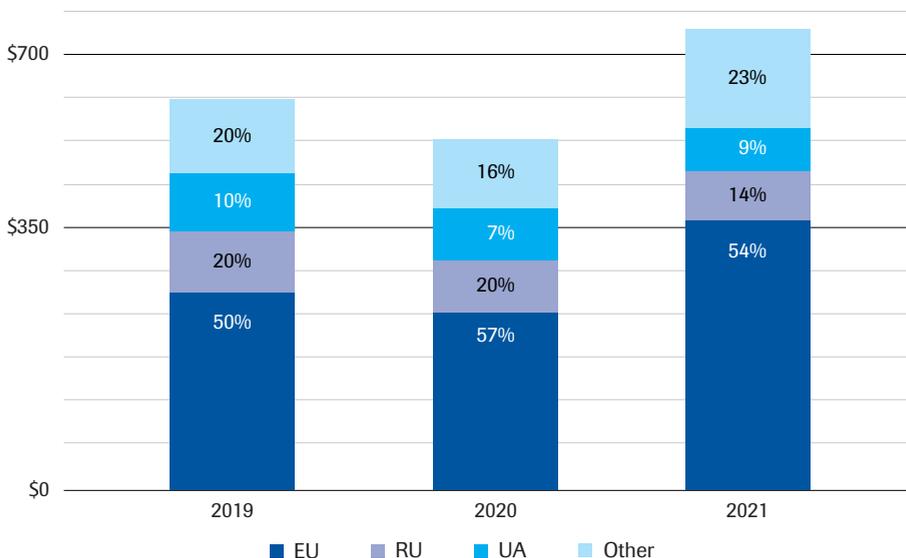
---

49 Transnistria held an unrecognised referendum in 2006 in which 98% voted for independence and 'potential future integration' with the Russian Federation. Transnistrian 'Minister of Foreign Affairs' Ignatieff reaffirmed this 'external vector' in a statement on 22 July 2022, which got a lukewarm response from Kremlin spokesperson Peskov. See <https://Odesa-journal.com/transnistria-announced-plans-to-become-part-of-russia-how-moldova-and-russia-reacted/>.

50 For example, Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov owned the MMZ through his MetalloInvest holding until it was transferred directly to the Transnistrian authorities in 2015. For a lengthy overview of the various financing schemes, see Sergiu Tofilat and Victor Parlicov, "[Russian Gas and the Financing of Separatism in Moldova](#)," *Kremlin Influence's Quarterly*, August 14, 2020.

51 For a good overview see Kamil Calus, "[An aided economy. The characteristics of the Transnistrian economic model](#)," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, May 16, 2013.

**Figure 6 Transnistria exports to the EU, Russia, Ukraine and other countries**



Source: European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM), “[annual report 2021](#)”, p. 16.

Finally, Russia holds a certain ‘**soft power**’ sway over Transnistria and its population through cultural, educational and historical links, as well as the prevalence of Russian media and the fact that most PMR residents hold Russian passports. Most Transnistrians study in Russian-accredited educational institutions that include entire chunks of Russia’s educational curriculum. For decades, young graduates of Transnistrian schools and universities struggled to find places to work and study in Moldova or western Europe, not least due to the lack of official recognition of their diplomas. While some of these obstacles have been partially addressed, for many, Russia remains the ‘default option’, as it allows Transnistrians to work and study freely; Russian universities have cooperation agreements with the Transnistrian ‘State University’ in Tiraspol, recognise Transnistrian high school diplomas and provide subsidised places for Transnistrian students.<sup>52</sup> The two education systems have diverged further since Moldova adapted its higher education system to the European ‘Bologna process’ in 2005, while Transnistria

<sup>52</sup> According to the rector of the Transnistrian State University there are around 130 cooperation agreements with educational institutions in the Russian Federation, including 16 of the leading universities.

operates according to Russian educational standards.<sup>53</sup> The ‘soft power’ – and particularly its grip over Transnistria’s education system – gives Russia a long-term and sometimes underestimated influence over the Transnistrian population. This influence is partially countered by the EU’s visa liberalisation process which since 2014 allows Transnistrian residents, many of whom hold a Moldovan passport, to travel to the EU.

## Different factions in Tiraspol and their response to Moldova’s EU candidacy status

Despite Russia’s considerable leverage as described above, it is an often-held misunderstanding that Transnistria is entirely monolithic and subservient to Moscow. Despite a lack of genuinely democratic institutions, it nonetheless has its own internal political dynamics and various elites that each lobby Moscow and, increasingly, Brussels to advance their own political and business interests. Its first ‘president’, strongman Igor Smirnov, increasingly got into conflicts with the powerful ‘Sheriff’ business empire founded by shady entrepreneurs Viktor Guşan and Ilya Kazmali.<sup>54</sup> Smirnov eventually incurred the ire of both Moscow and Sheriff and was ousted in 2011 by Ribniţa lawyer Evghenii Shevchuk, who unsuccessfully tried to develop his own power base. It was not until 2016 that Guşan and Kazmali fully consolidated control over the breakaway republic’s political life, with the election of Vadim Krasnoselsky as third ‘president’ and the Sheriff-backed ‘Renewal’ party fully in control over the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet (Parliament).<sup>55</sup>

In the absence of any meaningful opposition there are now effectively two factions who share power in Transnistria and who have different views on the breakaway republic’s future. Without doing justice to the complexity of the situation, they can be roughly described as the ‘security elite’ and the ‘business elite’. The **security elite**, represented by the *de facto* Minister of Foreign Affairs Ignatiev as well as the omnipresent Transnistrian security services and law enforcement agencies, has the closest and direct

---

53 For background on Moldova’s integration in the Bologna Process and the effects on Transnistria, see Elena Mandaji, [“The Influence of the Bologna Process on Higher Education of the Republic of Moldova,”](#) *Paper for the Conference on the Danube Axis of European Identity* 10, no. 1 (June 2020): 267-275.

54 Viktor Guşan was a KGB officer in the Soviet Union who struck a deal with Smirnov that allowed him to run a network of supermarkets, petrol stations and other enterprises throughout Transnistria. His company reportedly owes its fortunes to the smuggling of cigarettes, alcohol and food, until Ukraine cracked down on this after 2014. For more detail, see Robert O’Connor, [“Transnistria Isn’t the Smuggler’s Paradise It Used to Be,”](#) *Foreign Policy*, 5 June 2019

55 See Andrey Devyatkov, [“Never Sans Sheriff: Consolidating Power in Transdnistria,”](#) *Carnegie Moscow: Eurasia in Transition*, August 7, 2017.

ties to the *silovik*<sup>56</sup> in the Kremlin and generally loyally implements orders from Moscow. They are in direct contact with Russia's presence in Tiraspol, including the Federal Security Service (FSB). They responded to Moldova's bid for EU candidacy status with a snub and a statement reiterating Transnistria's independence.<sup>57</sup> This faction was also hoping and perhaps even expecting that Russian troops would make it to Moldova's borders.

The **business elite**, represented first and foremost by Sheriff, also has some degree of control over the security apparatus and relies on Russia's support to Transnistria's economy, in particular the cheap gas that powers their heavy industry. It nonetheless realises that due to the drastic changes in Ukraine, including the closure of the border and the situation in the port of Odesa, its former earning model of illicit trade is now severely curtailed, and without access to European markets many of its legitimate business ventures are doomed. The business community therefore cherishes the registration of Transnistrian businesses in right-bank Moldova that allow it to trade as part of the DCFTA – and even sees economic opportunities in Moldova's further integration with the EU.<sup>58</sup> This opens up possibilities to use the appeal of Moldova's candidacy status and the eventual opening of accession negotiations to involve Transnistria and thereby lay the groundwork for future reintegration into Moldova, as will be further discussed in Chapter 5. However, this begs the question of how this process is related to the official OSCE-mediated conflict-settlement process known as the 5+2.

## The complicated maths of the conflict-settlement process: 5+2 or 1+1?

The official conflict-settlement process was already fraught with difficulties long before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. The process may appear doomed and ineffective at first sight, but it has not entirely come to a standstill. It takes place in two separate but linked formats. Negotiators from Chişinău and Tiraspol speak directly to one another in a format known as the '1+1', which has a number of thematic working groups and subgroups facilitated by the OSCE Mission to Moldova. In addition, Tiraspol and Chişinău negotiate with one another in international talks with the OSCE, the Russian Federation and Ukraine as official mediators. In 2005 the European Union and the United States joined as observers, creating the current format known as the '5+2'.

---

56 'Silovik' (which literally translates as 'strongman') is a label for actors working in, affiliated with or originating from the security sector in Russia, ranging from the security services to the military and law enforcement agencies.

57 "Заявление МИД ПМР в связи с обращением РМ о вступлении в ЕС," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic*, April 3, 2022.

58 Clingendael interviews, Bender and Tiraspol, June 2022.

In the absence of a joint political vision of the eventual resolution of the Transnistrian conflict, the 5+2 focuses primarily on small and technical steps, confidence-building measures and improving the lives of the populations on both sides of the Nistru. Its main deliverable in recent years was the series of agreements known as the 'Berlin-Plus package' negotiated in 2016/2017 under the auspices of the German and Austrian chairmanships of the OSCE, although implementation has been painstakingly slow and talks are frequently suspended over substantive or symbolic issues.<sup>59</sup>

Pretty much everyone agrees that in the current geopolitical environment the 5+2 has no chance of delivering meaningful results in the foreseeable future. Two of the mediators, Ukraine and Russia, are effectively at war with one another while the third mediator, the OSCE, is undergoing an existential crisis as it struggles with the broader question of Russia's role within the organisation.<sup>60</sup> But despite the widely held opinion that the format is 'dead', very few see any real alternative on the multilateral horizon.

In fact, none of the seven participants can be eliminated from the process without killing it altogether. Ukraine is an essential partner that should have a say in the final outcome for it to be effective and sustainable. Russia, while delegitimised through its war in Ukraine, is still the key political, economic and security actor in Transnistria – and has significant leverage over both Tiraspol and Chişinău as described above. In response to the security threat emanating from Russia, both Chişinău and Kyiv will continue to want the US involved, despite the occasionally lagging interest in Washington. And finally, in light of Moldova's new EU candidacy status, the EU has both a greater stake in the resolution of the conflict and more leverage of its own. As a result, some suggest the EU could be 'upgraded' from observer to formal mediator – as it is in the Geneva International Discussions on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While this would formally acknowledge the EU's more substantive role, in practice it would make relatively little difference to the process itself. Finally, Moldova's western neighbour Romania has long expressed an interest in joining the 5+2, but since Romania is already represented within the EU, an upgrade to 6+2 would be more beneficial to Bucharest than to the process itself – especially since Tiraspol would object. In fact, discussions on reformatting the 5+2 are likely to be counterproductive, leading those most involved to express a strong preference to 'put it in the freezer' and leave it alone for now.<sup>61</sup>

---

59 For a detailed overview, see Victoria Rosa, "[The Transnistrian Conflict: 30 Years Searching for a Settlement](#)," *SCEEUS Report on Human Rights and Security no.4*, October 2021.

60 For a good overview of the OSCE's dilemmas of suspending Russia or continuing to make joint decisions with Moscow, see Cornelius Friesendorf and Stefan Wolff, "[Options for Dealing with Russia in the OSCE](#)," *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, May 11, 2022.

61 Clingendael policy interviews, Chişinău and Tiraspol, June 2022.

With the 5+2 deadlocked, the main responsibility to solve both practical and political issues falls to the direct talks between the sides within the 1+1. They have repeatedly shown an ability to solve matters of joint concern in a transactional matter, including by making a deal on subsidised electricity from the MGRES in Kuchurgan to right-bank Moldova in exchange for Chişinău giving an environmental licence to the MMZ in Rîbniţa. The problem is that such backroom deals are always at risk of involving shady business interests – and could undermine Moldova’s longer-term efforts to reform. The sides also have a preference to resolve mutually beneficial economic matters over humanitarian ones. This leads to issues such as the return of unaccompanied minors or regulations on adoption of children to fall by the wayside or become hostage to symbolic wrangling over status issues.

If practical issues are sometimes resolved, the overall political issue of future status is avoided. The government in Chişinău, fraught with crises and acutely aware that a compromise regarding Transnistria would be unpopular among its pro-Romanian constituency, is not engaging in any substantive discussions on the region’s future status within Moldova. Even within the ruling party PAS there are different factions that disagree with one another on whether or not a pragmatic or a principled approach should be followed. Like many Moldovans political leaders before her, President Sandu has not yet shown political leadership or articulated an actual vision for the end state of the conflict-settlement process, beyond its peaceful resolution and the withdrawal of Russian troops. In turn, Tiraspol is simply waiting to see how the war in Ukraine will play out before adjusting its strategy. As one well-informed observer noted, the Transnistrian issue will eventually have to be resolved before Moldova can join the European Union – and the time window in which it would have to be done is much shorter than that of Moldova’s EU accession.<sup>62</sup> While both sides are in a wait-and-see mode, the EU could pressure Chişinău to take this time to articulate a vision and a suggestion for a process to resolve the conflict.

---

62 Ibid.

## 4 Gagauzia, the restless region in the south

This chapter focuses on two specific sub-questions. First, what role does the autonomous region of Gagauzia play, both in internal Moldovan politics and in relations with the Russian Federation? Second, to what extent does this region pose a risk to the stability of Moldova, and in what way? To answer these questions, the chapter first provides a short overview of the history of the region and its autonomy. Next, the chapter assesses the functioning of the autonomy in practice. It then describes sources of Russian influence in the region, before analysing security risks in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### A short history of Gagauzia and its autonomy

The Gagauz are a Turkic people who were repressed under Ottoman rule for their Orthodox Christian orientation. They found a safe haven in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Bessarabia, then part of the Russian empire. Originally, the Gagauz spoke Gagauzian, a Turkic language, but since being part of the Soviet Union, Russian has become the dominant language. Early in 2022, the Moldovan statistical bureau set the population of Gagauzia at 121,700.<sup>63</sup> Our interviews suggest that due to emigration, actual population figures may be closer to about 75,000, and in the last Gagauz elections only just over 40,000 people voted.

As part of the Soviet Union, the relatively poor region of Gagauzia developed economically and culturally, leading to an awakening of Gagauz nationalism in the 1980s, partially in response to growing Romanian nationalism and unificationist sentiment within Moldova. Back then, Gagauz leaders explained that their longing for political self-determination originated from a fear of extinction, as the Gagauz had no

---

63 National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, [Usual resident population by area and sex, in territorial profile, at the beginning of 2014-2022](#). In the 2004 Moldovan census, 147,500 people identified as Gagauz or 4.4% of the Moldovan population, with 127,835 of the Gagauz living in the eponymous region of Gagauzia in the south of Moldova. In the most recent census of 2014, the number of Gagauz had fallen to 126,010, while their percentage of the total Moldovan population remained about the same, indicating population decline in Moldova at large. See National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, [Population Census 2004, Population by main nationalities, in territorial aspect; Population Census 2014: Ethnic structure of population on 2004 and 2014 censuses, by area](#).

co-ethnic political patron entities elsewhere in the world.<sup>64</sup> The Gagauz tried repeatedly to become autonomous or even independent from Moldova, voting in a referendum in 1990 to become an independent republic of the Soviet Union and operating as a quasi-independent state for a few years. Although in March 1991 they voted overwhelmingly to stay within the Soviet Union, Gagauz deputies did not oppose Moldova's own declaration of independence on 21 August 1991.

Wary of the threat of Gagauz secessionism in the wake of the Transnistria conflict, the central government in Chişinău and Gagauz leaders in Comrat began difficult and occasionally heated negotiations on an autonomous status.<sup>65</sup> In 1994 Moldova adopted its constitution, which separated powers but also laid the basis for the Gagauz autonomy. Article 111 of that constitution read, 'the places on the left bank of the Nistru river, as well as certain other places in the south of the Republic of Moldova may be granted special forms of autonomy according to special statutory provisions of organic law'.<sup>66</sup>

Autonomy was subsequently arranged through a December 1994 law on the special legal status of Gagauzia, which created the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (*Gagauz Yeri*, or Gagauzia in short). The law stipulated the right to self-determination of Gagauzia should Moldova lose its sovereignty. In practice this provision was spurred by a Gagauz fear of a potential Moldovan merger with Romania. The law recognised Moldovan, Gagauz and Russian as the three official languages of the region, and established Gagauzia's political structures: the People's Assembly of Gagauzia as legislative, and Bashkan (governor) as executive.<sup>67</sup> The borders of the region were set on the basis of ethnicity figures and for some municipalities stipulated through referenda in 1995. Only nearly a decade later, the basic principles of Gagauz autonomy were enshrined in the constitution through amendments to Article 111.<sup>68</sup>

---

64 Keiji Sato, "[Mobilization of Non-titular Ethnicities during the Last Years of the Soviet Union: Gagauzia, Transnistria, and the Lithuanian Poles](#)," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 26 (2009): 151.

65 Kamil Calus, "Gagauzia: Growing Separatism in Moldova?," *OSW Commentary*, March 10, 2014; Siegfried Wöber, "[Making or Breaking the Republic of Moldova? The Autonomy of Gagauzia](#)," *European Diversity and Autonomy Papers* (February 2013), 11.

66 Council of Europe, [Report on the application by Moldova for membership of the Council of Europe](#) (1995), art 46.

67 Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, [The law on the special legal status of Gagauzia \(Gagauz Yeri\)](#).

68 Siegfried Wöber, "[Making or Breaking the Republic of Moldova? The Autonomy of Gagauzia](#)," *European Diversity and Autonomy Papers* (February 2013), 14.

## Dysfunctionality of the autonomy

While the peaceful accommodation of Gagauzia's desire for self-determination through a territorial autonomy arrangement can in principle be regarded a success, the autonomy law suffers from several 'design flaws'. Experts consider the law overly ambiguous and flexible, which has led to divergent interpretations of the text. For example, a hierarchy of laws issue has remained, revolving around the question whether Gagauzia needs to bring in line its laws with those of Moldova or vice versa.<sup>69</sup> Second, the competencies of Gagauz and central authorities have not been properly defined. The issue of ambiguity is exacerbated by a lack of a designated arbitrage mechanism to solve disputes between the parties.

These design flaws are aggravated by unhelpful political attitudes from both Chişinău and Comrat, a lack of capacity to implement the autonomy, and little effort by successive central governments to improve the participation and language skills of national minorities. As a result, Gagauzia and its population is insufficiently integrated into Moldova at large. Moldovan authorities and politicians in Chişinău lack a genuine interest in Gagauzia; for example, the current PAS majority in parliament did not put any Gagauz residents on its electoral list and President Sandu has visited the region only twice, and did not meet with the Bashkan on either visit. This lack of interest is partially due to the fact that the Gagauz public usually vote overwhelmingly for Communist or Socialist parties. Parties on the right of the political spectrum therefore rarely try to reach out to the Gagauz people and regard them as a pro-Russian 'lost cause', while the left takes their votes for granted.<sup>70</sup> This also means Gagauzia is often in conflict with the central government if there are pro-European leaders in power – and sometimes even threatens separatism to obtain political concessions; for example, on 2 February 2014 Gagauzia organised a dual referendum in which 98% affirmed the region's right to secede from Moldova should there be a change in statehood. They also voted to integrate with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The autonomy law includes certain provisions to safeguard Gagauzia's interests at the national level. Most importantly, the Bashkan of Gagauzia formally has a dual-hatted role in which he or she is also *ex officio* part of the government in Chişinău. While this provision is formally respected and could serve as an important channel of communication, successive Bashkans have bitterly complained that they are not given

---

69 Ibid, 34

70 In the 2021 early parliamentary elections, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) electoral observation mission (EOM) noted that '*pro-Romanian "unionist" parties' campaigners were received with hostility in predominantly "pro-Russian" Gagauzia*'. OSCE Election Observation Mission, [Republic of Moldova – Early Parliamentary Elections, 11 July 2021](#), December 2021, 17.

timely information about, or satisfactorily involved in, decision making. In response to their low representation at national level, after the PAS electoral victory the Gagauz People's Assembly again voted on 25 May 2022 in support of a quorum of five Gagauz seats in the national parliament, an idea that has failed to gain traction in Chişinău. Gagauz politicians feel that the central government is 'afraid of engaging with Gagauzia', while Chişinău perceives the Gagauz as not very constructive. Nonetheless, there are channels and initiatives to overcome long-held disagreements. For example, a long-running dialogue between the Moldovan Parliament and the Gagauz People's Assembly on the functioning of the autonomy is taking place facilitated by the NGO Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), with financial support from some EU member states, for example Sweden.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, the dialogue has made painfully clear the extent to which parliamentarians lack insight into the basic parameters of the autonomy.

The Moldovan central authorities' lack of motivation to engage with Gagauzia may be partly explained by the region's many internal issues related to infighting, corruption and the low capacity of its People's Assembly. Our conversations with Gagauz officials and experts suggest that corruption involving with EU funds, political clientelism and nepotism, as well as personal squabbles between the region's politicians, are widespread. Some in Chişinău perceive Gagauzia largely through a security lens, seeing the region as a potential source of Russian-provoked instability.<sup>72</sup>

A final problem is that Gagauzia – which has no real external territorial homeland – lacks an external guarantor of its autonomy.<sup>73</sup> This is a role that the EU could potentially play, both as a mediator and as an enforcer of agreements that have been reached. The recently opened EU accession trajectory of Moldova offers the EU leverage to require that formal principles of the Gagauz autonomy are respected. The EU could also demand and foster engagement between Gagauz and central authorities to find solutions to issues such as language barriers and education.

## Sources of Russian influence over Gagauzia

Due to its historical, cultural and linguistic trajectory, Gagauzia has traditionally been strongly oriented towards the Russian Federation. Over the years this has translated into Russian influence over societal, political and economic developments in the region.

---

71 See Gagauzia Dialogue, "[Supporting institutionalized and sustainable dialogue on Gagauzia Autonomy.](#)"

72 Clingendael research interviews, Chişinău, Comrat, June 2022.

73 For a discussion on the 'commitment problem' in minority-majority relations and the role of an external guarantor, see James D. Fearon, 'Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict', in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (eds), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 123-124.

The identity of the Gagauz is rooted in a cultural and historical background. Their historic memory is one of being accommodated in the Russian empire and later the Soviet Union, in contrast to one of forced assimilation in the period of the Romanian kingdom. This has led to the Gagauz identifying with the 'Russian world', an 'imagined transnational community of people identifying themselves with Russia through a common language, religion, conservative values (that oppose Western liberal ideas), culture, history, emotional attachment, or political, economic and security considerations and practices'.<sup>74</sup> For example, when the central government controversially banned the use of St George's Ribbon in April 2022, the Gagauz People's Assembly overturned the ban and the symbol was used openly in Comrat during the 9<sup>th</sup> of May celebrations.<sup>75</sup>

Gagauzia's sense of belonging to the Russian world begins with language barriers that are reinforced by the education system. While in official census data the Gagauz often indicate that their 'mother tongue' is Gagauz, in practice they speak predominantly Russian.<sup>76</sup> A 2020 study shows that in family circles the Gagauz tend to speak their mother tongue, whereas with colleagues, friends and public authorities they mainly use Russian.<sup>77</sup> Unlike ethnic Moldovans, who are more often bilingual in Romanian and Russian, Gagauz will often study primarily in Russian and have limited or no knowledge of Romanian.<sup>78</sup> As such, young Gagauz have little opportunity to study or work in Chişinău, where teaching is mostly in Romanian. Instead, several interviewees suggested that Gagauz remain in Comrat for their education, or emigrate to Tiraspol, Odesa or the Russian Federation. Comrat University has educational agreements with universities in Russia and with Tiraspol for that purpose. As discussed in Chapter 2, the language barrier also reinforces pro-Russian attitudes, as media consumed comprises mostly rebroadcasted Russian programmes, as well as locally produced Russian-language TV. For example, 73% of respondents who identify as ethnic Gagauz consume

---

74 Marcin Kosienkowski, "[The Russian World as a legitimization strategy outside Russia: the case of Gagauzia](#)," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62, no. 3 (2021): 1.

75 The orange/black ribbon of St George ('Георгиевская ленточка') is originally a symbol commemorating the Soviet Union's victory in World War 2. Since 2014 it has increasingly become a patriotic symbol in Russia and has been extensively seen during the war against Ukraine, leading to Ukraine and several EU countries banning it. See "[St. George's ribbon 'permitted' in Gagauzia in defiance of national ban](#)," *IPN*, April 29, 2022.

76 In the 2014 census, 114,532 Moldovans declared Gagauz their mother tongue, with 74,176 declaring it as their language for everyday communication. In the region of Gagauzia, the 2014 census indicates that 55.6% of the population speak Gagauz as their daily language compared to 41.3% who speak Russian, and only 1% Moldovan/Romanian. National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, [Structure of population by mother tongue, in territorial aspect in 2014, and Structure of population by language usually used for communication, in territorial aspect in 2014](#).

77 See CIVIS Centre, [Ethnobarometer Moldova – 2020](#), Figure 58. What language or languages do you usually use to communicate with different interlocutors?, 54.

78 CIVIS Centre, [Ethnobarometer Moldova – 2020](#), 2020, 50.

media from the Russian Federation, compared to 47% who identify as Moldovans.<sup>79</sup> A Gagauz politician declared the recent ban as 'painful'. Alignment with Russia is also apparent through Gagauzia's strong resistance to normative issues – such as the social acceptance of LGBTQI+ people – that are espoused by the European Union, and which have become somewhat of a symbolic 'flag' for the Gagauz to rally around. This issue is abused time and time again by Gagauz politicians for electoral and mobilisational purposes. The most recent case was a Gagauz People's Assembly vote on 25 May 2022 which banned both a potential gay pride event in Comrat and 'propaganda of non-traditional relations'.<sup>80</sup> Together with the Gagauz' staunch opposition to unification with Romania, these socially conservative values provide local politicians as well as Russian propagandists with useful 'buttons to press' to mobilise the Gagauz against Chişinău and Brussels if needed.

Russia is also an active player in local politics in Gagauzia. Gagauz politicians seek Moscow's approval as a legitimisation strategy, and traditionally the politician with the strongest or at least most ostensible support from Moscow wins the Bashkan elections. The current and previous Bashkans have been known for their Russian orientation. Ties between the Kremlin and current Bashkan Irina Vlah were considered close at the time of her election, although they have reportedly cooled since.<sup>81</sup> Vlah's originally staunchly pro-Russian discourse has made way for a more balanced approach to Gagauz and Moldovan politics, suggesting geopolitical pragmatism and possibly indicating her political ambitions in Moldova at large. It is unclear what other political figures Russia is looking to support in Gagauzia.

The orientation of the region towards Russia also has an economic component. In a 2014 referendum, an overwhelming majority of Gagauz citizens voted for integration with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union rather than with the EU, while also rejecting further EU integration in general.<sup>82</sup> The region, and some of its politicians, indeed benefit from certain exemptions to Russian import levies on Moldova, and Gagauz citizens emigrating for labour opportunities traditionally mainly leave for the Russian Federation. However, as Russia's economy contracts and travel to Moscow becomes harder, more Gagauz are shifting their labour migration patterns towards other regions or countries, such as the EU and Turkey.<sup>83</sup>

---

79 99% of respondents who identified as ethnic Gagauz indicated they consume mass media in Russian. Ethnobarometer, 59

80 "Gagauzia banned propaganda of non-traditional values and LGTB marches," *Infotag*, May 26, 2022.

81 Some note the cancellation of Vlah's planned appearance at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum as a sign of the Kremlin's disfavour.

82 RFE/RL's Moldovan Service, "Gagauzia Voters Reject Closer EU Ties For Moldova," *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, February 3, 2014.

83 Clingendael policy interview, June 2022. Some interviewees believed that due to sanctions, travel difficulties and lower salaries in Russia more Gagauz now go to the EU to work than to the Russian Federation.

Despite their ideological disposition towards Russia, when it comes to trade and business opportunities, the Gagauz are remarkably pragmatic and similar to the business elite in Transnistria. They make full use of export opportunities to the EU facilitated by the 2014 agreed Association Agreement (AA)/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), as well as to Turkey, with which the region has had a free trade agreement since 2016. Gagauz representatives nominally support cooperation with the EU for such pragmatic reasons, but to date EU-sponsored investments in the region have failed to decisively alter the pro-Russian orientation of the region.<sup>84</sup>

### Security risks stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Despite heated rhetoric and high levels of distrust, the real security risks stemming from Gagauzia in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are low. As noted above, spurred by Russian-language media consumption and political rhetoric, the Gagauz generally hold a positive view of Russia. Experts argue that a majority of Gagauz citizens subscribe to the Russian narrative that Ukraine may have called the war upon itself. Ukrainian refugees are being accommodated in Gagauzia but this has not significantly altered their perceptions of the war.

Moldovan experts and officials estimate the actual security threat emanating from Gagauzia itself as low. The region neither borders Russia nor Transnistria and has limited potential to engage in kinetic conflict. There may still be some small Soviet-era caches of small arms and light weapons, and some local law enforcement officials might be persuaded to defect if there was an escalating conflict, but the number of Gagauz who are trained and willing to take up arms and fight the central government is not militarily significant.

Instead, Gagauzia should largely be perceived as one of the regional security risks to Moldova posed by Russia's war in Ukraine, in terms of both conventional and hybrid warfare. This particularly concerns the Budzhak district of Ukraine, the southern part of the historical region of Bessarabia. It is populated by a mix of ethnic Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians and Gagauz and is only linked to the rest of Ukraine by two bridges and a narrow strip of land. Back in 2015 a short-lived attempt took place to form a 'Bessarabian National Council', and the then-Bashkan of Gagauzia, Mihail Formuzal, participated in one of its meetings in Odesa.<sup>85</sup> The Moldovan Security and

---

84 The anti-Romanian and pro-Russian sentiment and distrust in the region sometimes goes to such an extent that some Gagauz interviewees perceived EU investments in road infrastructure as a covert instrument to potentially facilitate the arrival of Romanian tanks.

85 ["Эксперты: преследование сторонников "Народной Рады Бессарабии" - нарушение прав человека."](#) TASS, April 10, 2015.

Intelligence Service, SIS, effectively cooperated with its Ukrainian counterpart, the SBU (Ukrainian intelligence agency), to quickly crack down on separatist attempts to establish a 'People's Republic' in the Budzhak region. Russian officials and state media made considerable efforts to portray these developments as Ukraine and Moldova undermining the human rights of minorities. Speculation arose that Russia could use the region as part of a hybrid warfare campaign against Moldova and Ukraine.<sup>86</sup>

In 2022, new reports emerged of protests in Gagauzia in favour of closer cooperation with the Russian Federation. A citizens movement called the 'People's Union of Gagauzia', said to be led by Viktor Petrov, a deputy in the Gagauz People's Assembly, organised itself in July 2022 to 'protect the rights and freedoms of Gagauzia and its inhabitants' and to 'develop good relations with the historical friends of the Gagauz people – Russia and other countries from the Eurasian Economic Union'. On 17 July, they protested against rising (fuel) prices. According to the group, its founding congress on 23 June 2022 was attended by over 700 people. It remains unclear to what extent links with the Russian Federation will appear, but these developments reaffirm that Gagauz citizens can still be easily mobilised against the central authorities. They also reflect the growing popularity of Viktor Petrov, who may aim to become the new Bashkan in 2023.<sup>87</sup>

In 2022 the war in Ukraine came closest to Moldova when Russian missiles hit one of the bridges connecting Budzhak to the rest of Ukraine. Some interviewees noted the possibility that Russia could use Budzhak as an amphibious landing area for an invasion of Ukraine's southern coast.<sup>88</sup> Even though a Russian operation in Budzhak appears highly unlikely at present, Gagauzia's security situation could well change quickly if Russian troops were to invade the Odesa oblast. Some interviewees argue that 80% of Gagauz believe this may well happen in the medium to long term; one also noted that a potential Transnistrian integration with Russia might be used by Gagauz authorities to organise a new referendum on the future status of Gagauzia. Ultimately, as with Transnistria, much will depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

All in all, through cultural, historic, economic, political and other ties, Russia retains a clear influence over Gagauzia. The lack of adequate engagement from and

---

86 John R. Haines, "[A Quarrel in a Faraway Country": the Rise of A Budzhak People's Republic](#)," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 8, 2015; Emmet C. Tuohy, "[The Dog that Finally Barked? Separatism and Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine](#)," *Atlantic Council UkraineAlert*, May 6, 2015.

87 See Keith Harrington, "[Rising Anger Among Gagauz Presents Another Headache for Moldova](#)," *BalkanInsight*, July 27, 2022; Video material of the bicycle protest is available on YouTube, [LIVE: Белопротест в Комрате](#).

88 Clingendael policy interviews, Chişinău, June 2022. For a recent overview of the ambivalent and apprehensive mood in Budzhak, see Dimiter Kenarov, "[All Quiet on the Southwestern Front: A report from southern Bessarabia](#)," *The Point*, April 7, 2022.

engagement with Moldova at large exacerbates this. While economic cooperation with and investments from the EU have been embraced for pragmatic reasons by Gagauz leaders, such efforts have so far not significantly curtailed Russia's influence nor shifted Gagauzia's general orientation towards the 'Russian world'.

# 5 The European Union: from passive observer to key actor

Given Moldova's domestic political vulnerabilities stemming from Russian influence, as well as vulnerabilities related to Transnistria and Gagauzia, the country's EU integration path cannot be expected to take the form of a smooth ride along a well-paved highway. The question that arises from the previous chapters is how the EU, using its leverage stemming from Moldova's bid for EU membership, could effectively help to address such vulnerabilities. To answer that question, this chapter briefly assesses the recent history of Moldova's EU integration path. It then zooms in on the role the EU currently plays in relation to Moldova's key vulnerabilities and discusses possible ways forward.

## Moldova's EU integration path

Since the early 2000s, successive Moldovan governments have tried to balance their relations with Russia by seeking closer cooperation with the European Union. The EU itself had become more interested in Moldova prior to its 2004 eastern enlargement round, which would make the country a direct neighbour. As such, the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004 with Moldova as one of the initial members. In 2005 the EU and the PCRM government in Moldova agreed on an ENP action plan for Moldova and in the same year the EU established its presence on the ground through a newly opened EU delegation in Chişinău. The same year also saw the creation of the European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, including the Transnistrian section, to facilitate adequate border management and to counter smuggling that was widespread at the time.<sup>89</sup>

Cooperation between the EU and Moldova deepened when in 2009 the EU set up the multilateral Eastern Partnership to guide relations with the Eastern Partnership (EaP) six (or EaP6), which as well as Moldova included Ukraine, Belarus and the three republics in the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia). While providing for relatively close cooperation with the EU, an accession perspective would not be seen until 2022. After a successful visa dialogue, Moldova in 2014 became the first Eastern Partnership country

---

89 Francesco Montesano, Tony van der Togt and Wouter Zweers, "[The Europeanisation of Moldova: is the EU on the right track?](#)" *Clingendael report*, 2016, 8-9.

to attain visa-free travel to the EU for its citizens. The EaP has been an instrument for Moldova to secure adequate attention from the EU even as, particularly in recent years, different paths of the EaP6 have stood in the way of effective cooperation.<sup>90</sup>

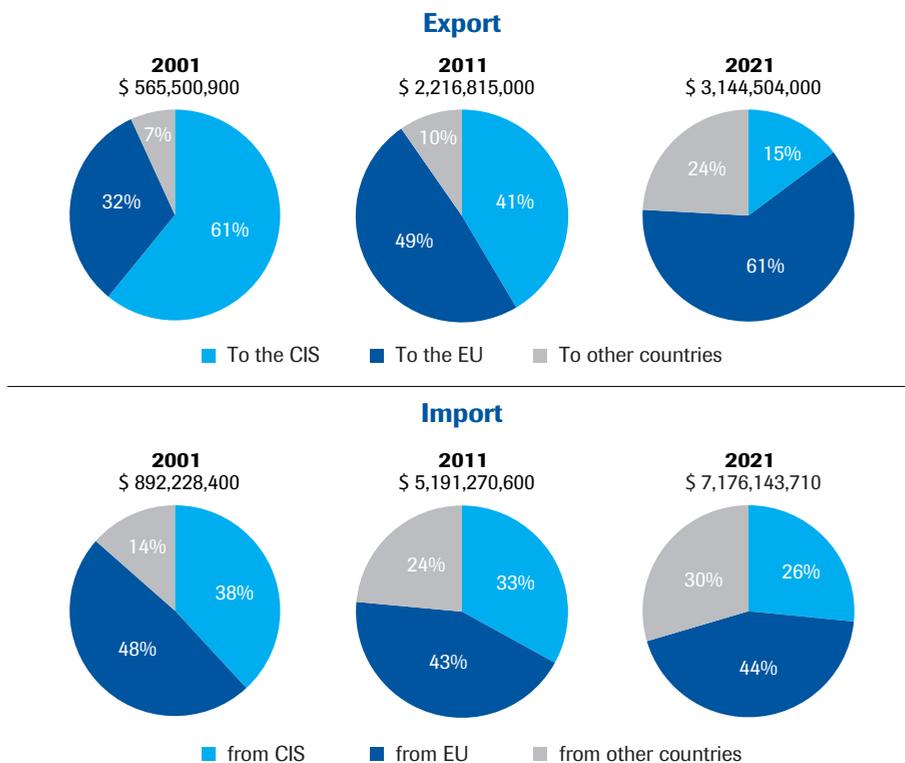
Moldova's EU integration path was accelerated with the 2014 Association Agreement (AA) that established close cooperation in many fields as well as an approximation of Moldova with the EU *acquis* and which came into force in 2016. The AA aimed to political association and economic integration with the EU and demanded that Moldova step up its work on democratisation and anti-corruption efforts and on adopting European values. The AA also included an economic component, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) that replaced earlier preferential trade schemes between the EU and Moldova. This set in motion an export reorientation of the Moldovan economy, leading the EU to become Moldova's largest trade partner by far. Importantly, as the DCFTA includes Transnistria, it has had a similar economic reorientation effect in that region.<sup>91</sup>

---

90 Bob Deen, Wouter Zweers and Iris van Loon, "[The Eastern Partnership: Three Dilemmas in a time of Troubles](#)," *Clingendael report*, 2021.

91 Francesco Montesano, Tony van der Togt and Wouter Zweers, "[The Europeanisation of Moldova: is the EU on the right track?](#)," *Clingendael report*, 2016, 9-13.

**Figure 7** Moldova’s trade with the EU, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and other countries



Source: National Bureau of statistics of the Republic of Moldova, “[External trade of the Republic of Moldova \(1997-2021\)](#)”.

Pro-European forces in Moldova have long wished to attain an EU membership perspective, and have been supported by several central European EU member states. However, given the problematic Western Balkans enlargement process and a series of EU internal crises, various EU member states, especially in north-west Europe, remained hesitant or outright sceptical. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moldovan authorities themselves had accepted that a membership request would stand little chance, and instead focused on already-gained benefits and reform challenges related to the AA/DCFTA.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine changed everything. Not only had the geopolitical imperative for closer EU-Moldovan integration become painfully explicit, but the Commission was also convinced by the pro-reform minded government efforts

to combat corruption and foster democratisation. As such, after applying for EU membership on 3 March 2022, the Commission issued a positive *Avís* (opinion) on 16 June.<sup>92</sup> Nominally, this convinced the hold-out member states, including the Netherlands, that had not yet spoken out in favour of Moldova's EU candidate status. In practice, (geo)political considerations, and the fact that France connected Moldovan candidate status to that of Ukraine, may have been a more decisive factor leading the European Council to grant Moldova candidate status on 23 June 2022.<sup>93</sup>

### Box 1 EU-Moldova cooperation timeline

- 1998: EU-Moldova Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
- 2005: Inclusion of Moldova in ENP; ENP Action Plan launched
- 2005: Start EUBAM border mission
- 2009: Start Autonomous Trade Preferences
- 2009: Start EU Confidence-Building Measures programme Transnistria (in UNDP framework)
- January 2010: Start of negotiations on AA/DCFTA
- May 2010: Moldova joins Energy Community
- June 2010: Start EU-Moldova Visa Liberalisation Dialogue
- April 2014: Moldovan citizens gain visa-free travel to the EU
- June 2014: Conclusion of AA/DCFTA and provisional application
- June 2014: ENP Action Plan replaced by Association Agenda
- July 2015: EU suspends budget support after bank frauds for a year
- July 2016: AA fully into force
- July 2019: EU resumes budget support to Moldova after a two-year break
- March 2022: Moldova applies for EU membership
- June 2022: Commission publishes positive *Avís*
- June 2022: Moldova gains EU candidate status

The prospects for opening accession negotiations will depend on Moldova's ability to fulfil the conditions stressed in the Opinion, which may take several years. These include the successful implementation of comprehensive justice reform, progress in the fight against corruption, and elimination of oligarchic influence over the country. Moldova is also expected to strengthen the fight against organised crime, increase the capacity of

---

92 European Commission, [Opinion on Moldova's application for membership of the European Union](#), June 16, 2022.

93 For Macron's statement, see Davide Basso, "[Moldova's EU bid must not be 'dissociated' from Ukraine's, Macron says](#)," *Euractiv*, June 16, 2022.

the public administration, complete public financial management reforms, enhance civil society participation in decision making, and strengthen protection of human rights.<sup>94</sup>

Naturally, growing linkages between the EU and Moldova have enhanced EU leverage over the country. That is the case through the economic reorientation as a result of the DCFTA and also through the conditionality, or carrot-and-stick mechanism, that the EU applied when offering Moldova the prospect of closer integration through visa liberalisation and the AA/DCFTA. Conditionality dynamics will only grow now that Moldova's engagement with the EU takes place in the context of accession.

## The intersection of democratisation and geopolitics

The EU is strongly engaged in democratisation and anti-corruption efforts in Moldova. Article 1 of the 2016 Association Agreement outlines its objective to contribute to the 'strengthening of democracy' as well as 'reinforcing the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms'.<sup>95</sup> Through the Association Agreement, the EU has put in place a political dialogue and stepped up financial support for capacity building in public institutions such as the judiciary. When it comes to the latter, the EU is actively supporting a vetting process to counter corruption and political and kleptocratic influence. Lessons from earlier vetting processes in, among others, Albania are taken into account to ensure continuity in the functioning of the judiciary and ensure solid outcomes.<sup>96</sup>

Moldova's EU integration and democratisation are intrinsically linked to geopolitical tensions, as reform processes search to strengthen institutions against undue influence.<sup>97</sup> While democratisation is hence an effective instrument to counter Russian influence, there is a risk that it is taken hostage by geopolitics.<sup>98</sup> In the past decades, Moldovan elites have played the geopolitical card to defer attention from corrupt practices and have used a pro-European discourse to extract funding for personal

---

94 European Commission, [Opinion on Moldova's application for membership of the European Union](#), June 16, 2022, 16-17. See also: Denis Cenusa, "The EU membership for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia: Enlargement from the Western Balkans to the Eastern Partnership," August 30, 2022, 5-9.

95 EUR-LEX, "[Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part](#)".

96 Madalin Necsutu, "[In Reforming Corrupt Justice System, Moldova Eyes Albanian Precedent](#)," *Birn*, February 24, 2022.

97 Kadri Liik, "[How the EU needs to manage relations with its Eastern Neighborhood](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 23, 2017, 6.

98 Bob Deen, Wouter Zweers and Iris van Loon, "[The Eastern Partnership: Three Dilemmas in a time of Troubles](#)," *Clingendael report*, 2021.

benefit and power. More recently, political campaigns and citizens' voting patterns on domestic issues indicate a shift towards socioeconomic issues, democracy and rule of law, even if in the light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the domestic focus is again under pressure. While the EU should refrain from 're-geopoliticising' Moldovan politics, it has a clear interest in helping the current government to withstand Russian pressure.

Politically, the EU should nonetheless not repeat its mistakes from the previous decade and retain some caution in order to see whether self-declared pro-European politicians put their money where their mouth is. Experts indicate that misuse of public funds and clientelism are not yet eradicated in Moldova.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, not all officials from previous governments, including those with a dubious rule of law record, have left political positions. This does not necessarily reflect a lack of genuine intentions, as eradicating state capture dynamics while simultaneously trying to ensure institutional continuity presents decision makers with difficult dilemmas. Nevertheless, the EU would do well to not only build good relations with the current governing majority, but also try to foster political pluralism and an adherence to the principles of multi-party democracy in the country.

## Energy

Energy security may be the most tangible and pressing vulnerability affecting Moldova's stability. The EU has therefore been widely engaged on the issue. In a period that should have served as a wake-up call for the EU's energy dependency on Russia as a whole, High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell said in October 2021 that 'gas is a commodity and (...) cannot be used as a geopolitical weapon'.<sup>100</sup> The EU did rise to the occasion and helped Moldova with technical advice as well as 60m EUR to subsidise heating bills and avoid social unrest in the winter of 2021/22. In June 2022 the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) provided Moldova with a loan of 300m EUR to strengthen its energy security, of which 100m EUR is meant to be used to acquire strategic gas reserves; the remainder is an emergency tranche to be used should there be supply disruptions.<sup>101</sup> The EBRD also financially supported the construction of a gas interconnector between Moldova and Romania through the Ungheni-Iași-Chișinău pipeline, which could in theory supply Moldova with

---

99 Clingendael interviews, Chișinău, June 2022.

100 ["Moldova: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference following the 6th EU-Moldova Association Council,"](#) EEAS, October 28, 2021, cited in Andrew Wilson, ["Moldova's gas deal with Russia: David tries to draw with Goliath,"](#) *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 November 2021.

101 Vanora Bennet, ["EBRD lends Moldova €300 million to safeguard energy security,"](#) *EBRD News*, June 23, 2022.

1.5 to 2.2 bcm per year and meet most of the demand for gas in right-bank Moldova – except in the coldest months. But as Moldova lacks gas storage facilities this gas must be stored either in Romania or in Ukraine.

Another important achievement in terms of energy was the synchronisation of the Moldovan (and Ukrainian) electricity grid with that of the rest of continental Europe, the ENTSO-E, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine. The shift from the Russian to the European network reduces energy dependency on Russia and thereby enhances the energy security of the country.<sup>102</sup> The EBRD is funding further efforts to better connect Moldova's energy grid with that of Europe by upgrading power grids between Balti (Northern Moldova) and Suceava (Eastern Romania), and between Chişinău and Moldova's south.<sup>103</sup> The EU has furthermore assisted Moldova through projects aimed at reducing energy dependency by promoting the use of renewables in public buildings.<sup>104</sup>

Still, in the short term Moldova remains very vulnerable to disruptions to its gas deliveries, which could cause soaring energy prices that could harden the attitudes of citizens and cause social unrest. As such, continued EU support is needed.

## Minority issues and language rights

The EU traditionally advocates for the protection of minority rights as part of its neighbourhood policy, and Moldova is no exception. Already in the AA, the EU and Moldova agreed on the importance of linguistic diversity.<sup>105</sup> However, as described in Chapter 2, Moldova's policy on linguistic diversity, and protecting minority languages such as Russian, has not been as proactive as the AA suggests. In its 2021 AA implementation report, the Commission notes under the header of human rights issues that 'actions announced by the authorities failed to deliver improvements', thereby pointing to the fact that Moldova adopted the Law on the functioning of languages in Moldova but its Constitutional court later declared it unconstitutional.<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, the Commission's *Avis* on Moldova's application for EU membership states that the

---

102 Madalin Necsutu, "[Moldova, Ukraine Hail Connection to EU Energy System](#)," *BIRN*, March 17, 2022.

103 "[Moldova-Romania Power Systems Interconnection Project](#)," Moldelectrica.

104 See for example "[Moldova: four schools in Cantemir switch to renewable energy](#)," EUNeighboursEast.

105 EUR-LEX, "[Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part](#)". art 124. Article 124 of the AA reads: 'The Parties shall promote cooperation and exchanges in areas of mutual interest, such as linguistic diversity and lifelong language learning, through an exchange of information and best practices.'

106 European Commission, "[Association Implementation Report on the Republic of Moldova](#)," October 13, 2021, 6-7.

country has ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, while in reality this is not the case.<sup>107</sup> Such a rather painful mistake signals the absence of the EU in past years on language-related issues in spite of commitments made in the AA. Even if questions related to minority rights persist, the *Avis* does not specifically mention the issue in the recommendation on human rights. Moreover, an overview of EU-funded projects in Moldova does not show any EU project on language-related issues.<sup>108</sup> This is at least partially due to the fact that in Moldova, national minorities are largely perceived as eurosceptical and susceptible to Russian narratives.<sup>109</sup> This makes both pro-European governments in Chişinău and EU officials less interested in promoting the language rights of Russian-speaking minorities. Rather than ‘geopoliticising’ minority rights by selectively overlooking particular linguistic communities, the EU should push for a more proactive integration of Moldovan society *as a whole*. This means promoting *both* the linguistic rights of national minorities *as well as* a proactive policy to promote knowledge of the state language and the full participation of minorities in public life, including in national politics and central government institutions. The accession context opens up enhanced opportunities for the EU to apply conditionality to pressure Moldova in this direction.

## Media and disinformation

The EU is already active in the media in Moldova, for example, through support for mass media and projects to improve media literacy of Moldovan citizens.<sup>110</sup> It strives to counter disinformation in the EaP, including in Moldova, through the EUvsDisinfo project of its East StratCom Task Force.<sup>111</sup> In response to the war in Ukraine, the EU has also adopted crisis response measures to enhance cyber security and shield the country from disinformation.<sup>112</sup>

---

107 European Commission, “[Opinion on Moldova's application for membership of the European Union](#),” June 16, 2022, 9. For the ratifications of the European Charter, see “[Signatures and ratifications of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#),” Council of Europe.

108 “[Projects](#),” EU4Moldova.

109 Clingendael policy interviews, Chisinau, June 2022. See also Marcin Kosienowski and William Schreiber, “[Moldova's National Minorities: Why are they Eurosceptical?](#),” *IFRI Russia/NIS Center Russie.NEI Visions No.87*, November 2014

110 See for example “[Strategic Communication and Support to mass-media in the Republic of Moldova](#),” EU4Moldova.

111 See the [EUvsdisinfo](#) website.

112 See European Commission Service for Foreign Policy Instruments. “[New support to the Republic of Moldova on cyber-security, addressing disinformation and social cohesion](#),” May 2, 2022.

As identified in this report, there is a particular need to develop professional Russian-language media that can provide unbiased news and good-quality content to Russian-speaking communities. EU member states such as the Netherlands support such media, though more could be done to compete with programmes rebroadcasted from the Russian Federation. The Moldovan ban on Russian news programmes offers a window of opportunity for the EU to step up its support. Not only private media, but also the public broadcaster could benefit from support to create both Moldovan- and Russian-language high quality entertainment content. The Moldova 1 TV station is in need of reform to reduce costs and improve quality.

Moreover, to reduce political and oligarchic influence over the media landscape, the EU would do well to support media ownership transparency in Moldova. EU member states have experience of supporting media ownership monitoring. The Federal German Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation, for example, sponsors the 'Media Ownership Monitor' which is, among others, active in Ukraine.<sup>113</sup> The EU could develop similar activities in Moldova.

## The EU and Transnistria

The EU's involvement with the Transnistria question began with a role as a humble observer in the 5+2 format. With the EUBAM mission, however, the EU has managed to influence developments on the ground to some extent as it diminished the opportunities for smuggling. However, it was only with the Association Agreement and the DCFTA that the EU managed to become a key factor of influence in the process. As outlined earlier, through direct dialogue between EU officials and the Transnistrian business community at the Bavaria 2015 conference, the EU managed to convince Transnistria to accept the terms of the DCFTA. In practice, this means that Transnistrian businesses need to register in right-bank Moldova to be able to trade with the EU internal market. The opening of the EU market has been a major reason for Transnistrian companies to reorient their exports and legalise their business models.

When it comes to formal conflict settlement, in the short to medium term the EU has limited prospects of breaking the deadlock in the 5+2. However, the EU could in the meantime support the formal 1+1 process between the parties, as well as more informal talks. The Finnish organisation CMI has been organising confidence-building programmes since 2011 and could benefit from EU support. The EU also boasts of its own programmes aiming to promote dialogue between the parties.<sup>114</sup> The EU could furthermore look for ways to support education cooperation between Tiraspol and Chişinău, even if education systems are currently largely non-compatible and language barriers remain.

---

113 See the [Media Ownership Monitor](#) website.

114 "[EU4Dialogue: Supporting Understanding Between Conflict Parties](#)," EU4Moldova.

Finally, the EU will need to find a model to, as happened in the negotiations on the AA/DCFTA, include Transnistrian authorities in Moldova's EU accession trajectory. It is clear that Moldova will not be able to become an EU member as long as the Transnistrian issue is not settled. The EU will therefore need to engage Moldova's left bank to make sure that progress in the accession process of the right bank does not lead to a widening gap between the two. The somewhat dualistic power structure in Transnistria may thereby play to the EU's advantage, especially as the region's business leaders have an interest in expanding their access to the EU internal market and benefiting from EU support. Negotiations between the EU and Moldova on issues such as finances, taxes, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, pharmaceuticals, tax rules, environmental standards should therefore be extended to Transnistria. It seems that the best format to do so is to make use of an informal construction similar to the 2015 negotiations on the AA/DCFTA.

## The EU and Gagauzia

The EU has been active in Gagauzia via, among other measures, infrastructure investments, including through the EBRD.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, between 2016 and 2018, the EU financed a 7 million dollar project on agriculture and rural development, implemented by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which aimed to increase cooperation between Gagauz and Chişinău authorities, provided support for SMEs in Gagauzia, and contributed to infrastructure development and intercommunity cooperation.<sup>116</sup> Some argue that alleged embezzlement of EU funds has undermined the effectiveness of the programmes, with several interviewees arguing that they have foremostly ended up in the hands of local authorities who funnelled them to their patronage networks.<sup>117</sup> At the same time, as argued earlier, EU investments have not yet managed to substantially alter the perception of the EU in the region. The EU faces competition from, among others, Turkey (through the Turkish development agency TIKA), which has funded the construction of a sports stadium and an educational centre in Comrat.<sup>118</sup> Both Turkish president Erdoğan and foreign minister Çavuşoğlu have visited Gagauzia, with the latter opening a Turkish consulate in the region in 2020. Turkey pursues a strategy based on soft power and development aid to intensify economic and cultural ties with the region.<sup>119</sup>

---

115 For a full overview of EBRD projects in Moldova see "[Project Summary Documents](#)," EBRD.

116 "[\[Closed\] Support for Agriculture and Rural Development in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District](#)", UNDP.

117 Clingendael interviews, Comrat, June 2022

118 "[Turkish investments in the construction of the stadium in Comrat will amount to €10 million](#)," *Point*, January 12, 2019.

119 Luke Coffey, "[The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia: A new focal point for Russo-Turkish competition?](#)", Middle East Institute, April 29, 2021.

In spite of its investments in the region, the EU has not been active on the issue of autonomy as such. While the EU and Moldova agreed in the AA to cooperate on issues related to multi-level governance, the specific situation of the autonomy of Gagauzia is not mentioned in the AA.<sup>120</sup> Since the AA came into force, the EU has made various public statements on the need for Moldova to fulfil its obligations regarding Gagauz autonomy.<sup>121</sup> The EU also indicated it ‘stands ready to support the authorities in Chişinău in the implementation of the 1994 Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia, in order to strengthen the institutional functioning of this region within the Republic of Moldova.’<sup>122</sup> Our research suggests that, in practice, such support has been largely absent. Moldova’s EU candidate status offers opportunities for the EU to step up pressure on authorities in Chişinău and Comrat and to become a more active international guarantor of Gagauz the autonomy of Gagauzia. The EU could consider an (informal) model to engage Gagauz authorities in the EU accession talks, making use of its experience in involving autonomous regions in pre-accession negotiations.

When it comes to EU financial support to the region, the EU faces two challenges. The first is to ensure that support is not misused. One interviewee noted that it may be better for the EU to administer grants itself instead of working with local authorities. However, not working with local authorities runs contrary to the EU’s objectives of boosting the capacities and functioning of such authorities. Therefore, the EU can better work with a range of different local authorities, including the Bashkan and People’s Assembly, but also mayors, and ensure its investments are well spent through close monitoring and project audits. A second challenge is that financial support, be it for infrastructure development, SME support or financial support to institutions, becomes more visible and positively affects the EU’s image in Gagauzia. In light of competition from other powers, the EU may therefore consider creating a presence on the ground through an EU liaison office focusing on culture, social issues and economics. Such an office would not only ensure the visibility of EU investments through public diplomacy activities, but could also organise cultural and business exchanges to promote the integration of Gagauzia into Moldova as well as the European Union. The liaison office would work under the authority of the EU delegation in Chişinău to avoid the impression that the EU opens direct diplomatic relations with the Gagauz autonomy.

---

120 EUR-LEX, “[Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part.](#)” 107.

121 See for example Council of the EU, “[Joint statement following the third Association Council meeting between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova.](#)” March 31, 2017.

122 OSCE, “[Statement by The European Union at the 1316th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council](#)”, May 27, 2021.

# Conclusions and recommendations

This report has examined the extent to which Russia's influence over Moldovan domestic politics and the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia poses risks to the internal and external stability of Moldova. It is clear that both the war in Ukraine and the subsequent decision of the EU to grant Moldova candidacy status have sent shockwaves through Chişinău, Comrat and Tiraspol. These two events have restored the previously fading geopolitical dimension in Moldovan domestic politics. The EU and Russia now both have a heightened interest in Moldova, while Ukraine itself also expects support for its Western neighbour. As a result, Moldova's wiggle room to remain neutral is shrinking. Ultimately, everything does depend on how the war in Ukraine plays out; if Russian troops manage to capture Odesa and link up with Transnistria, Moldova's situation will be dramatically different compared to a stalemate or even a Russian defeat. This report operates from the assumption that the trend of the last four months will continue and that Russian troops will not make any more significant territorial gains along Ukraine's south-western coast.

The war in Ukraine has first and foremost exposed **Moldovan political and domestic vulnerabilities**. While the Gavriliţa government has nominally stuck to Moldova's constitutional position of neutrality and understandably tried to stay out of the war, it has strong sympathies for Ukraine's government and is under pressure to help Kyiv and align with EU foreign policy – including on sanctions. As a result, it faces difficulties in its complex relationship with Moscow, which could make use of several of Moldova's longstanding vulnerabilities to pressure the government – or even try to topple it, if it deems it advantageous or necessary. First and foremost among these vulnerabilities is Moldova's double reliance on Russian energy: directly through its dependency on Russian gas for heating, and indirectly through its imports of cheap electricity from Transnistria.

Moscow is also building new alliances with various political actors to replace the arrested and unpopular Igor Dodon. There are worrying signs that a toxic confluence of interests between the Kremlin and various Moldovan oligarchs, whose interests and revenues are threatened by Sandu's reforms, could lead to joint efforts to hamstring and replace the government. In particular, a hike in prices this winter combined with a sustained disinformation campaign and funded rallies could spark social discontent and trigger a new political crisis. Russia's overwhelming media presence in Moldova, longstanding concerns over language policy and the insufficient integration of

predominantly Russian-speaking minorities into Moldovan society gives the Kremlin additional leverage it could use for this purpose.

Vulnerabilities also stem from **the conflict with Transnistria**. Different factions in Transnistria have looked with varying combinations of apprehension and careful optimism at the first advancing but now retreating Russian forces along Ukraine's south-western front – and at Brussels' decision to grant Moldova EU candidacy status. Moscow retains a grip on the *de facto* authorities in Tiraspol through the presence of its military and security services, its direct and indirect subsidies to the Transnistrian economy and its soft power over the population. But despite its predilection towards Russia, Transnistria is acutely aware of its own vulnerabilities and specific geography. The war truly is a game-changer, although Tiraspol is waiting to see exactly how the game will change.

Neither Transnistria's own security forces nor Russia's modest military presence are in a position to mount an offensive against Ukraine, nor could they defend the region should Ukraine eventually follow through on its threat to 'liberate' Transnistria. Due to Ukraine's closure of the border, Transnistria is increasingly reliant on right-bank Moldova and on the EU for its trade, making the business elite quite keen to benefit from Moldova's EU candidacy status – and to participate in pre-accession negotiations with the EU. This may give Brussels some leverage to promote an eventual conflict settlement in which Transnistria is reintegrated into Moldova. Even if the official 5+2 process is completely stuck, changing the format would not make significant difference and might even be counterproductive at this point. Instead, the EU could actively support the 1+1 process, using Moldova's need to align with its *acquis* and Transnistria's desire to retain access to the European markets as sticks and carrots.

Last, this report discussed **vulnerabilities related to the autonomous region of Gagauzia**, which nominally remains staunchly pro-Russian but in practice has a pragmatic interest in benefiting from Moldova's candidacy status. Political relations between Gagauzia and Moldova at large have remained problematic since the autonomy was defined in 1994. Ambiguity in the autonomy has resulted in disagreements with Chişinău on its principles and implementation. Current relations between Gagauz authorities and those in Chişinău are marked by a lack of engagement and interest, even as the parliamentary working group between the two functions moderately well. The current reform-minded Moldovan government seems unwilling to engage with Gagauz leaders, whom it generally deems corrupted and under Russian influence. Indeed, corruption issues and relatively strong Russian influence continue to dominate the region's political landscape. Both Gagauz citizens and politicians remain predominantly oriented towards the 'Russian world'.

Stability risks stemming from Gagauzia remain limited in light of the current concentration of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the latter's east and south-east.

However, the July 2022 protests and formation of citizens action groups are early signals of potential instability that the government in Chişinău and EU should monitor carefully. Again, the security situation may change if, in the medium to long term, Russian troops reach Odesa and create a land bridge with Transnistria or if the war spreads to Ukraine's Budzhak region south of Moldova. As events in 2014 have shown, instability might also occur if the Gagauz political leadership attempts to invoke the self-determination clause of their autonomy arrangement in light of further Moldovan integration with the EU. Such a potential move could be expected to be supported by Moscow. Economic, political and cultural ties between Gagauzia and the Russian Federation continue to uphold the latter's influence over the region, undermining EU support efforts in the region and the EU integration path of Moldova at large.

## Recommendations

In order for the EU to effectively respond to the vulnerabilities described in this report, we formulate the following recommendations:

### On Moldova's (domestic) political vulnerabilities

- The next six to nine months will be critical. The EU should do what it can to help the Moldovan government to **mitigate social discontent linked to rising inflation**, including by direct budgetary support and direct subsidies for the energy bills of vulnerable citizens if needed. This support should be accompanied by a solid strategic communication campaign, since it would be beneficial if Moldovan citizens – including those from minority groups – could see a direct and positive impact of Moldova's EU candidacy status on their purchasing power.
- While the war in Ukraine rages on and Moldova remains acutely vulnerable, the EU should give the Moldovan government **space to manage its complex relationship with Moscow**. This includes not aligning with EU sanction regimes that target Russia directly. In turn, the Moldovan authorities should ensure Moldova is not used for sanction-busting – including in the banking sector, and that it commits to gradually aligning with EU foreign policy as part of the accession process. In order to contribute to managing the geopolitical dimension in Moldova's domestic politics, the EU should in its public communications try not to emphasise geopolitical competition, but instead tailor its discourse towards (EU support for) domestic challenges.
- As part of its relationship with its two new candidate countries, the EU could also **reach out to Ukraine to promote understanding of Moldova's precarious position**, in order to assuage Kyiv's concerns about a lack of support from Chişinău. Ukraine should particularly refrain from unilateral actions or statements regarding Transnistria that are not coordinated with Moldova and that risk further destabilising the region.

- The EU should continue and intensify its efforts to **reduce Moldova's reliance on Russian energy**, including by ensuring that the Iași-Ungheni gas interconnector becomes fully operational, that gas pressure issues on the Romanian side are resolved and that suitable locations for the storage of natural gas are identified in Romania or Ukraine. Together with EBRD, the EU should invest in upgrading Moldova's power grid, both its connections with Europe's energy grid as well as its own internal connections between the north and the south of the country. It should also help the Moldovan government to reduce its reliance on electricity from Transnistria and invest in country-wide energy efficiency and *renewables*.
- The EU should **support political pluralism in Moldova** by actively engaging the whole political spectrum. Even if the present pro-European government currently has a comfortable majority, a more sustained commitment to political pluralism is needed for inclusive governance, democratic consolidation and longer-term political stability. The EU could, for example, facilitate enhanced political relations between Moldovan and party-political families from the EU to foster professional political party development or support civil society activities aimed at promoting multi-party democracy.
- Potential links between Moldovan oligarchs and Russian businessmen, combined with the **alignment of interests of local political actors opposing reforms and those of the Kremlin, pose a particular risk to Moldova's democratic reforms**. The EU and the intelligence organisations of its member states should assist the Moldovan authorities to investigate these potential links, including by actively supporting the Financial Intelligence Unit, the public prosecutor and the state security services. This should be monitored closely as part of the EU accession process.
- The EU could step up its efforts to support a pluralistic, unbiased and good-quality **media landscape in Moldova**. It could do so by supporting the professionalisation and de-politicisation of Moldova's public broadcaster so it can create both Moldovan- and Russian-language quality content that can compete with Russian programmes rebroadcasted in the country. The EU could also build on the existing efforts of some of its member states to support unbiased Russian-language media. The EU is furthermore advised to sponsor media-ownership monitoring in Moldova such as it is doing in Ukraine and other countries to counter oligarchic and/or political control over the media. Last, the EU would do well to support public communication training for officials and/or the political establishment so as to enhance the effectiveness of their public communication, which is especially relevant in times of geopolitical tensions and rising socioeconomic concerns.
- The EU should use its leverage as part of the pre-accession negotiations, including the Copenhagen Criteria, to **protect and promote the rights of national minorities and facilitate integration of Moldovan society**. Rather than ignoring Russian-speaking minority communities who might harbour reservations towards European integration, the EU and the Moldovan government should actively reach out to them, including in their strategic communication. The EU should push for

a balanced and inclusive language policy and the long-overdue ratification of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, and also for increasing knowledge of the state language through the education system. The EU could more actively promote its experience with multilingual education and linguistic diversity and put its weight behind the full implementation of the Strategy on Consolidation of Inter-Ethnic Relations. To protect minority rights and promote participation of minorities, the EU could furthermore urge Moldova to fill vacancies of a presidential adviser on inter-ethnic relations, as well as a director for the agency of inter-ethnic relations. In the education system, it is of crucial importance that efforts to teach the state language are intensified, including through the use of multilingual education. The EU has a wealth of experience in this regard which it could share more actively with Moldovan central and local authorities.

- Moldova will continue to need considerable EU support to **develop and implement key strategies such as the National Security Strategy, the Cyber Security Strategy and the Strategy on Consolidation of Inter-ethnic Relations** that warrant more attention and resources from the authorities. In this regard, the practice of seconding high-level advisers to specific Mol opportunity to have a longer-term impact on the conflict-settlement dovan government agencies is beneficial, as long as they are appointed through a transparent and competitive recruitment process and their performance is regularly evaluated.

### On vulnerabilities related to Transnistria

- Despite the geopolitical deadlock of the 5+2 process, Moldova's and Ukraine's EU candidacy status combined with Transnistria's precarious position offers the EU a major opportunity to have a longer-term impact on the conflict-settlement process. **While altering the 5+2 process would be counterproductive at this time, the EU could take a more active role in supporting the 1+1 talks between the sides**, using the pre-accession negotiations as a tool.
- In particular, the EU should expect the Moldovan government to articulate a strategic vision on the eventual resolution of the Transnistrian strengthen knowledge of the state language and support educational conflict and translate it into actionable documents. The EU could then monitor this implementation rigorously.
- The EU should **carefully engage Moldova's left bank in the accession process** to ensure that further EU integration of the right bank does not lead to a widening gap between the two. It could base such a model of engagement on the informal negotiations with authorities in Tiraspol in the context of the DCFTA negotiations in Bavaria in 2015. In this regard the EU should be both aware of and make use of differences between different factions in Transnistria. If chief negotiators from Tiraspol remain unconstructive or outright hostile to Moldova's EU integration, the EU could set up a direct and informal dialogue with the Transnistrian business community. This would ensure that Transnistrian businesses understand what the accession process, especially approximation in economic fields, means for them.

In the process, the EU should not harbour any illusions about the adherence of these economic actors to EU values; it should keep in mind that its ultimate aims of promoting democratisation and rule of law should eventually also apply to Transnistria.

- The EU should **make efforts to reduce Russia's soft power over Transnistria's population**, in particular through the education system. For example, the EU could further explore options for enhanced contacts between left bank students and those in right bank Moldova and the EU. As integration of the regular curricula might remain difficult, such exchanges could focus on more irregular activities like summer schools. The EU could also open up more student exchange opportunities via the Erasmus+ programme for students at Tiraspol university and work directly with Transnistrian education professionals to address structural obstacles that impede such exchanges.

### On vulnerabilities related to Gagauzia

- The EU should make use of Moldova's accession process to address the vulnerabilities stemming from the uneasy relationship of the autonomous region of Gagauzia with the rest of Moldova. This would require a **balanced approach in which the EU both serves as a 'guarantor' of the Gagauz autonomy, requiring Chişinău to respect and implement its provisions, but also promotes the region's integration in Moldova as a whole**. In this regard the EU could make use of its experience of involving autonomous regions in other pre-accession negotiations.
- The EU should expect the Moldovan authorities to engage more actively with Gagauzia and should also do so itself, not only *despite of* but even *because of* its generally pro-Russian orientation. The EU could **consider establishing a presence on the ground in Comrat** through a liaison office focusing on culture, social issues and economics. Such an office could engage in public diplomacy activities to publicise outcomes of EU investments, and could ensure adequate engagement with local authorities and prevention of embezzlement. It should operate under the authority of the EU delegation in Chişinău.
- **Gagauzia should play a prominent role in EU efforts to promote the participation and integration of national minorities in Moldova as a whole**. Among other options, the EU could consider funding efforts to strengthen knowledge of the state language and support educational initiatives that enable Gagauz students to study in Chişinău or in the EU instead of in Russia or Tiraspol.