

Policy Brief: Moldova in Focus

Country Office Republic of Moldova



Transnistria in 2025 – Reintegration Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

Moldova stands at a critical crossroads. The unresolved Transnistrian conflict has long been a stumbling block for the country's political stability, territorial integrity, and European ambitions. For decades, the breakaway region has been sustained by Russian influence – political, economic, and military. Yet in 2022, the regional context has shifted dramatically. Russia's war in Ukraine, the weakening of Transnistria's economic model, and new signals from Transnistrian leaders themselves have opened a fragile but real window of opportunity for reintegration.

At the same time, Moldova is accelerating its path toward EU accession. Reconciling these two trajectories – solving the Transnistria problem while moving closer to the EU –

is both the challenge and the opportunity of this moment. If Chisinau acts strategically, it could resolve one of Europe's oldest frozen conflicts and secure Moldova's European future. If it delays, however, Russia may soon reassert control and close off the chance for reintegration for another generation.

This brief outlines the historical background of the conflict, explains the current economic and political context, and explores three scenarios for reintegration. It concludes with recommendations for policymakers in Moldova and its partners in the EU, Ukraine, and NATO. The central message is clear: Moldova cannot afford to wait. Strategic decisions taken in 2025 will shape the country's trajectory for decades to come.

ARGUMENTATION

The conflict over Transnistria began in the final years of the Soviet Union. In 1990, Transnistria declared secession from Moldova. Two years later, in 1992, a short but bloody war erupted. Russian troops intervened on the side of Transnistria, ensuring that the region remained outside Chisinau's control. Since then, the presence of Russian soldiers – styled as “peacekeepers” – and the entrenched influence of Moscow have guaranteed Transnistria's separation.

In 2006, a “referendum” organized by Tiraspol claimed overwhelming support for independence and eventual union with Russia. However, this vote was orchestrated under Russian oversight and rejected by the international community. At every stage, Russia has been the main architect of the conflict, sustaining the separatist regime both politically and militarily. Local grievances have existed, but they would not have developed into a full-scale frozen conflict without Moscow's direct involvement.

For more than three decades, this situation has left Moldova divided, with roughly 300 thousand people living in an unrecognized entity and a Russian military presence on its territory. The unresolved conflict has repeatedly undermined Moldova's sovereignty and complicated its foreign policy, particularly its European aspirations.

Context: The Changing Landscape **Economic Fragility**

Transnistria's survival has depended on a unique economic model. For years, Russia supplied free natural gas, which the region used to fuel its industry and to generate electricity. That electricity was sold to right-bank Moldova, providing a major share of Tiraspol's revenues. While it is often noted that 86% of Transnistria's exports

go to the EU, this is misleading. The bulk of Transnistria's actual income came from Moldova itself – through electricity sales and other trade. Without this revenue stream, the region's economy is collapsing. The EU market, while useful, cannot replace the structural dependence on Moldova, but again, provided that the free Russian gas is in sufficient supply, and that Moldova purchases electricity from Transnistria. None of these is being the case as of 1 January 2025.

Shifts Since Crimea and Ukraine

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow gradually cut back direct budgetary support to Transnistria. This left the region struggling with recurring financial crises. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a turning point. For Transnistrian elites, the prospect of Russia absorbing Ukraine – and possibly Moldova, including Transnistria – was deeply threatening. They did not seek integration into Russia; instead, their priority has always been preserving their unrecognized “independence” and economic control.

Since 2022, Tiraspol has pursued a delicate balancing act. It has kept a cautious distance from Moscow to avoid antagonizing Kyiv and Chisinau. At the same time, it has sought to rebuild relations with both capitals, aiming to secure its future in a rapidly changing region. Multiple credible (unofficial) reports indicate that Transnistria's leader, Vadim Krasnoselski, has privately expressed readiness to negotiate reintegration into Moldova. However, this openness is driven by insecurity caused by the war. Once a peace settlement in Ukraine is reached, the incentives for Transnistria to talk reintegration may disappear.

Dilemmas and Scenarios for Reintegration

Moldova now faces three main strategic options. None is without risks, but each carries different implications for the country's EU trajectory, security, and long-term stability.

Scenario 1: Speedy Reintegration

Under this scenario, Chisinau and Tiraspol engage in meaningful discussions on reintegration, focusing on terms and guarantees that would make the process acceptable for both sides. These talks would likely be informal, shielded from external interference, and paired with firm leverage from Chisinau – using economic and political tools to encourage cooperation.

Advantages:

- The conflict would be resolved before Moldova's EU accession, eliminating a major obstacle for Moldova's European integration.
- Russian military presence could be dismantled rather than withdrawn. Local residents serving in Russian units could be demobilized and reintegrated into civilian life, while the small number of Russian officers could be deported individually.
- A clear settlement and Tiraspol's public assurances that they are happy with it and no longer need Russian "peacekeepers" would leave Moscow without a pretext to maintain troops/"defend Transnistria".
- The Transnistrian population, tired of uncertainty, would embrace (or at the very least accept) reintegration if it comes with EU prospects and economic stability.

Risks:

- Russia could attempt military or political interference to derail the process.
- Moldova's Western partners might hesitate unless properly informed and coordinated with.
- Many fear that reintegration could inject pro-Russian votes into Moldovan politics. Yet evidence suggests this risk is overstated. In the 2024 presidential elections, Maia Sandu performed well among Transnistrian voters, showing the diversity of opinion in the region.

Scenario 2: Reintegration in Sync with EU Integration

This option takes a slower approach. Instead of pushing for immediate political settlement, Moldova would focus on gradual integration of Transnistrian society and economy. Chisinau would apply EU standards and laws on both sides of the Dniester, aligning the region with the broader accession process. This will require a lot of policy-making and law-making to accommodate the ambiguous status of TN residents and businesses, and many unilateral measures to be implemented by Chisinau.

Advantages:

- Over time, Transnistria and Moldova would function as one country compliant with EU requirements.
- This approach sidesteps Russia by avoiding formal negotiations that could be sabotaged.
- It builds a de facto unity that, when the time comes,

makes political reintegration a matter of formal signing of agreements (if any), not of tough negotiations.

Risks:

- Russian troops remain unaddressed, a significant unresolved issue.
- Success depends entirely on Chisinau's determination and consistency in implementing reforms and unilateral measures.

Scenario 3: The Cyprus Model

The third scenario is to simply proceed with EU integration while leaving Transnistria unresolved, similar to Cyprus. On the surface, this seems simple: Moldova joins the EU with Transnistria formally part of Moldova, but in practical terms outside of the EU.

Dangers:

- Unlike Cyprus, Moldova is not an island. Transnistria is landlocked between Moldova and Ukraine, both aspiring EU states. This geography makes a frozen conflict untenable. A de-facto border would have to be established on the Dniester making a peaceful and smooth reintegration even less feasible.
 - Russian troops would remain in the region, undermining Moldova's and Ukraine's accession prospects and posing a threat to both countries.
 - Around 300,000 Moldovan citizens in Transnistria would be excluded from the EU, weakening their trust in both the Union and its values, and in their own country – Moldova.
- This scenario risks long-term instability and, most importantly, would allow Russia to maintain leverage in the region through its military and security personnel in Transnistria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage partners early

Coordinate with the EU, Ukraine, and NATO to ensure any reintegration process is supported, not obstructed.

2. Strengthen domestic resilience

Build political consensus inside Moldova on reintegration goals to minimize internal divisions.

3. Invest in broader and more accessible Moldovan public services for Transnistrian residents and legitimate businesses

Expand programs that bring Transnistrians into Moldova's educational, economic, and social spaces.

4. Prepare legal frameworks

Draft clear laws for reintegration, including transitional arrangements for administration, security, and justice.

5. Communicate benefits

Explain to both right-bank Moldova and Transnistria residents how reintegration supports stability, prosperity, and EU membership. Invest in peacebuilding and promotion of diversity programs.

The window of opportunity is narrow. Once Russia stabilizes in Ukraine, it will almost certainly redirect efforts to block Moldova's progress. When Russia "sorts out" Ukraine case one way, or the other, even by accepting a just peace, it will have freed resources to focus on Moldova and Transnistria and to prevent any progress. In the next six to twelve months Moldova has a chance to resolve its most enduring challenge and secure its place in Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

The Transnistrian question has haunted Moldova for over three decades. Today, for the first time in many years, there is both a risk and an opportunity. If Moldova acts decisively, it could reintegrate Transnistria and secure its European path. If it delays, Russia may reassert itself and "re-freeze" the conflict indefinitely.

Scenarios 1 and 2 are not mutually exclusive. The most

realistic strategy may be a hybrid: pursuing gradual EU-aligned integration while keeping the door open for accelerated political reintegration if/when circumstances allow. The key is preparation—ensuring that Moldova, the EU, and Ukraine are aligned and ready to seize the moment.

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