

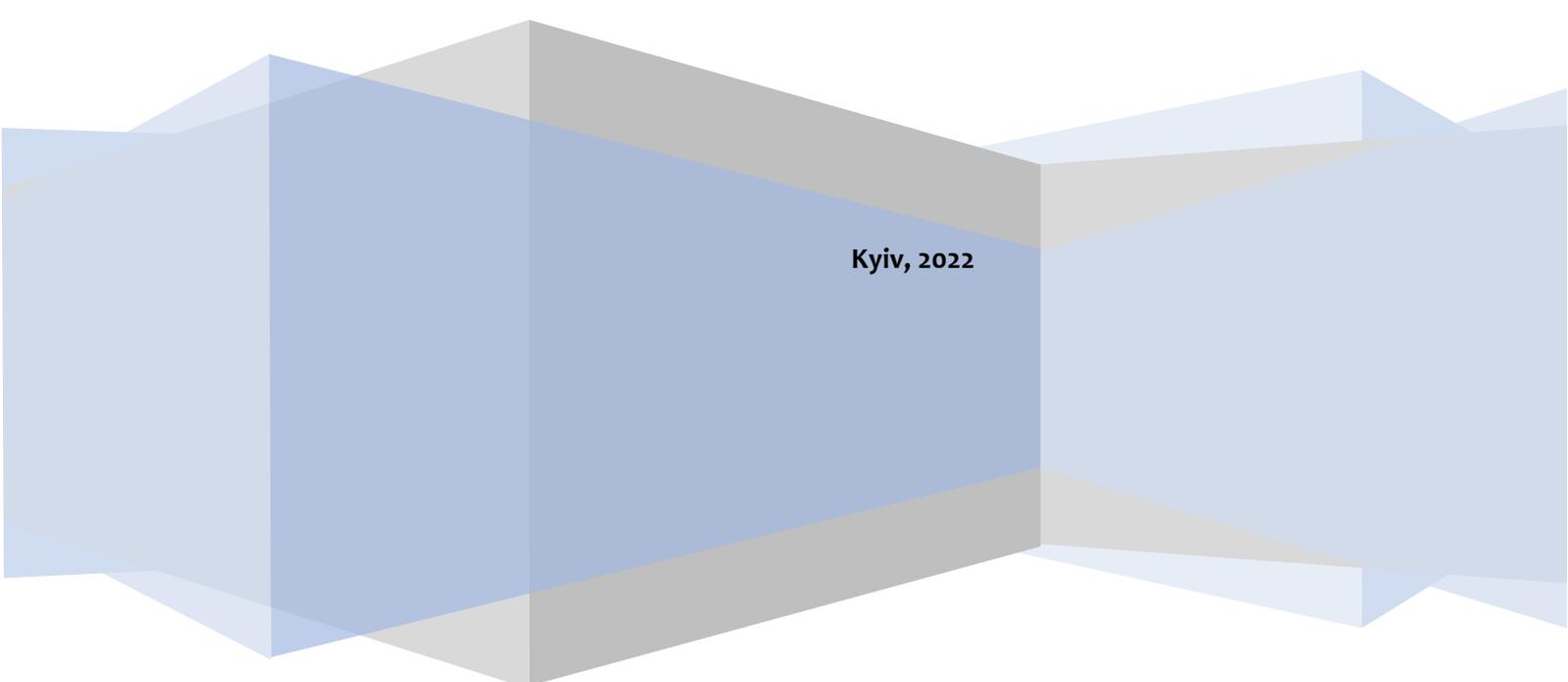
*Experts for Security and Global Affairs*

## **The Republic of Moldova in the Foreign Policies of Ukraine and Romania**

**Policy brief**

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# The Republic of Moldova in the Foreign Policies of Ukraine and Romania

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The Republic of Moldova<sup>2</sup> is the country landlocked by Ukraine and Romania who are the only country's land-border neighbours. No doubt, the situation in Moldova matters for both Bucharest in Kyiv. Security risks, economic uncertainty, energy-supplies dependence and environmental challenges may have spillover effect and cross-border impact and affect Ukraine and Romania. The country also has strong historical, cultural and linguistic ties with Romania whereas Ukrainian minority in Moldova is the second largest which is another argument in favor of close relations within a triangle. That also results in a special place of the Republic of Moldova in the foreign and security strategies of both states, although such strategies and the respective policies are not necessarily explicit and coherent.<sup>3</sup> There is another common denominator which defines Ukraine's and Romania's policy towards the Republic of Moldova. Bearing in mind geopolitical competition in the region and Russia's attempts to secure its zone of influence, both Kyiv and Bucharest favor Moldova's pro-European choice and support European choice of the Republic of Moldova. The validity of this argument has only increased when the EU granted candidate status to both Ukraine and Moldova

## ***The Strategic Outline***

Romanian document that outlines foreign and security policy priorities (National Defense Strategy 2020-2024<sup>4</sup>) mentions that "supporting the European path of the Republic of Moldova, participating in bilateral strategic interconnection projects and supporting the efforts of the neighbouring state to strengthen its democratic institutions and increase its resilience is also part of Romania's strategy to contribute to the political, economic and security stabilisation of the NATO/EU neighbourhood, with direct benefits for all citizens of the Republic of Moldova and for the entire community of Romanian language, identity, history and culture". Also the Strategy emphasizes that "Regional cooperation is one of the main instruments for promoting Romania's

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<sup>3</sup> <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/18580.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/National\\_Defence\\_Strategy\\_2020\\_2024.pdf](https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/National_Defence_Strategy_2020_2024.pdf)

contribution to strengthening the security environment in its vicinity, along the lines of European and EuroAtlantic integration” whereas “...the Russian Federation contributes to the deterioration of regional stability with a direct adverse impact on the resilience of the states in the region, primarily the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia”.

There are only sporadic references to Moldova in Ukraine’s strategic documents. The Military Doctrine mentions Moldova in the context of current threats, in particular, the presence of the “Russian military contingent in Moldova’s Dniester region,” while the Energy Strategy of Ukraine until 2035 speaks about the need to “prepare the necessary legal framework and implement relevant steps to integrate the electricity markets of Ukraine and Moldova.” The updated in 2020 National Security Strategy of Ukraine (September) mentioned Moldova in the context of the need to develop pragmatic relations.<sup>5</sup> However, the Foreign Policy Strategy of Ukraine adopted in 2021 already mentions the importance of the strategic triangle of Ukraine, Moldova and Romania, and the necessity to reach strategic level of cooperation between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.<sup>6</sup>

Under the Moldovan government program, Moldova pursues “strategic” partnerships only with Romania, Ukraine and the United States.

However, there is a few game-changing moments that may further boost the relations in the Ukraine-Moldova-Romania triangle and enhance partnership between the three countries.

### ***The Game-changers and their Impact on the Relations***

First, the elections of the President and the Parliament in the Republic of Moldova have proved dominant positions of the current President Maia Sandu and Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) - the political party which supports her and has the majority in the Parliament and also promotes European path of the country.

After elections both Maia Sandu (contrary to her predecessor Igor Dodon who was mostly focused on relations with Russia) demonstrated interest in enhancing relations with Romania and Ukraine. First foreign leaders who she met after elections were the President of Romania Klaus Iohannis and President of Ukraine. In December 2020, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis visited Maia Sandu in Chisinau for the first time in six years as the two neighbors pledged to open a new chapter in their relationship. During the visit, Iohannis announced an economic aid package and said Romania would provide Moldova with 200,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine from its quota allotted by the EU.<sup>7</sup>

During the meeting during of Maia Sandu with Volodymyr Zelenskyy in January 2021 (when Kyiv was her first destination for the visit abroad) the two sides discussed EU membership as a common strategic goal, mutually stressed the support to sovereignty and territorial integrity of both countries within its internationally recognized borders and announced further cooperation on developing better transport links connecting the two countries and facilitating border-crossing procedures.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UPFP-31\\_03\\_ENG-FIN1.pdf](http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UPFP-31_03_ENG-FIN1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4482021-40017>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-moldova-strategic-relations-russia-/31044164.html>

Furthermore, in mid-February 2022 the previously achieved agreements were supplemented by a string of cooperation deals following joint governmental meetings. The deals included Romania granting Moldova 100 million euros in non-reimbursable aid for development projects. Agreements were reached on strengthening cooperation on investment and energy security, as well as fighting corruption and strengthening the rule of law.<sup>8</sup>

Afterwards February 24, 2022 became another game-changing moment in the relations between the three countries. Russian full-scale war against Ukraine that caused solidarity with the like-minded EU countries and institutions has opened the window of opportunity for both countries on their European path. Romania among others advocated support to Ukraine's and Moldova's pledge for the EU candidate status and the result was achieved.

At the European Council summit held on June 23, 2022 both Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate country status. The further steps on the European path will be dependent on the process of the reforms in both countries and on the fulfillment of the conditions imposed by the European Commission regarding Ukraine and Moldova's membership applications of 17 June.

In Ukraine they are related to the legal regulation of the appointment of Constitutional Court judges, an improvement in the process of appointing members of the Supreme Council of Justice and the High Qualification Commission of Judges, the completion of the process of the appointment of the head of the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau. Other reforms apply to the implementation of the law on the de-oligarchisation of the country, completion of the reform of legislation of the media and the rights of national minorities.

The European Commission was invited to report to the Council on the fulfilment of the conditions specified in the Commission's opinions on the respective membership applications as part of its regular enlargement package. The Council will decide on further steps once all these conditions are fully met. The progress of each country towards the European Union will depend on its own merit in meeting the Copenhagen criteria, taking into consideration the EU's capacity to absorb new members.<sup>9</sup>

Soon upon the EU's decision the President of the Republic of Moldova Maia Sandu visited Kyiv and met with the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The Presidents emphasized that thanks to the success of European integration, the countries will become even closer and will get a chance to share experience on the way to full membership in the European Union. Both parties pointed at the threats based on Russian aggression and Russian policy, so the responses of Ukraine and Moldova to these threats should be common and aimed at doing everything possible to make sure Russian aggression cannot threaten anyone in Europe anymore. Also, the Presidents discussed strengthening cooperation in the humanitarian sphere, economy, energy, politics, cross-border cooperation, as well as cooperation in the security sphere, which is now a priority.

In particular, during the negotiations the parties discussed resistance to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Transnistrian issue settlement, Ukrainian transit through the territory

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<sup>8</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/neighbors-romania-moldova-sign-deals-boost-ties-82828275>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/23/european-council-conclusions-on-ukraine-the-membership-applications-of-ukraine-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia-western-balkans-and-external-relations-23-june-2022/>

of the Republic of Moldova, energy cooperation, which is extremely important for the whole of Europe to achieve independence from Russian energy resources. In addition, the parties agreed to create new transit routes and expand the export transit potential, in particular by facilitating the border crossing between the two countries.

Maia Sandu stressed that Moldovan government institutions, charitable foundations, volunteer groups and ordinary citizens have joined forces to help people who fled Ukraine because of the war. The Moldovan government has also provided humanitarian assistance to Vinnytsia, Odesa, Chernivtsi, and the Mykolaiv region. She noted that Moldova is ready to provide support in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine and to assist Ukraine in the transit of goods whose exports have been suspended due to the blockade of Ukrainian ports by Russia.

Both Presidents also noted that they had agreed to cooperate in the implementation of reforms that would bring the membership of both countries in the European Union closer.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Window of Opportunity for the Further Cooperation***

The candidate status of Ukraine and Moldova and common security threats caused by Russia may serve as the additional driver for cooperation within the Ukraine-Romania-Moldova triangle. Another factor that may cement partnership is the fact that current government established in Romania made up of the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Social Democrats (PSD), together with the minority UDMR party has 318 seats out of a total of 466 and seems to be stable until 2024 parliamentary elections with the MFA assuring sustainability of the foreign policy course.

Both pro-presidential PAS in Moldova and Sluha Narodu in Ukraine have supermajorities in the parliaments. Thus if there is political will the cooperation initiatives can be implemented without significant delays.

1. **Security issue is prioritized** for the region under the current circumstances and cooperation in this field is essential and has different layers. Although cooperation within the triangle cannot resolve the security problems at a global and European level it may contribute into enhanced regional security.

Since Moldova is a neutral state often it was often reluctant to engage in security cooperation operation neither with Ukraine nor with Romania. Often that was also necessary to prevent Russia from further aggressive steps against Moldova. Even in the Roadmap on priority areas for cooperation between Romania and Moldova signed in November 2021 security issue is not mentioned, whereas the document rather focuses on renewal of the financial framework cooperation, interconnection in energy and transportation and sectoral cooperation.

However, there are already voices that raise the **idea of mutual defense of Moldova with Romania**. For example, such idea has been voiced by ex-minister of defense of Moldova Viorel Cibotaru who suggests that an agreement on mutual defence could take many forms. It could be a bilateral agreement, or be part of other types of deals, but would refer to a deep, strategic

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-ukrayinskoyi-derzhavi-zustrivsyaz-prezidentom-moldovi-76081>

partnership that goes beyond the existing legal frameworks of standard cooperation that Moldova has with several states.<sup>11</sup> Besides, the idea of the joint battalion is being discussed.

In this regard, **Ukraine may also join the format of the joint battalion**, in particular bearing in mind the existing experience of the existing Multinational Slovak-Hungarian-Romanian Engineer Battalion Tisa - an engineering unit intended to quickly respond to flooding and other natural disasters in the Carpathian Region or Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade - a multinational brigade of countries of the Lublin Triangle consisting of units from the Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian armies.

Noteworthy, Moldova has already offered Ukraine first military aid in the form of a brigade of sappers.<sup>12</sup> That can be another aspect of military cooperation where Romania may also engage.

Another security related issue, that potentially may have regional and cross-border impact, is **Transnistrian problem resolution**. The EU is already engaged in the process of the Transnistrian settlement. It is represented in the 5+2 format (Moldova, Transnistria, OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, the EU and the US) and alongside with the US has the observer's status. However, current situation makes progress on the political "third basket" impossible.<sup>13</sup> But it does not necessarily mean that the format is dead. Moreover, the geopolitical developments and the candidate status for Moldova prove that the EU should have a stronger voice in the process of settlement and has the right to promote its status to the role of the guarantor and mediator, especially bearing in mind that the respective status of Russia was sort of recognition of its geopolitical ambition to keep the Republic of Moldova in the sphere of its geopolitical control whereas the new realities open new opportunities. Although it is unlikely to expect any success in the short-time perspective, the respective consultations can be initiated by the EU and the role of Romania in advocating this issue in the EU can be indispensable. Chairmanship of another EU-member - Poland in the OSCE, as well as emerging security partnership between Romania and Poland can ensure better chances for launching the respective discussion.

Another Transnistria-related issue of concern which has to be taken seriously is **Kolbasna ammunition and armaments depots**. The armaments inherited from the 14th Army were left in depots in Kolbasna town that is situated on 132 hectares on the North of Moldova near Rybnitsa in the Transnistrian region. Generally, withdrawal or utilization of the 14th Army armament was foreseen together with the withdrawal of Russian troops. However, it did not occur.

The four incidents in Transnistria on 25th, 26th and 27th of April 2022 (attacks on local security agencies' offices and radio towers in the north of the region, as well as gunfire near the village of Kolbasna) draw attention to the Kolbasna site since one of the incidents occurred in the dangerous proximity to the depots. Incidents like that cause concerns and have to be transparently investigated and explained whereas the safety of the depots is to be ensured by the international community. This is important in particular due to the fact that an explosion of the depots could result in a technological disaster affecting not only Transnistria and Moldova but also the neighboring countries, because the territory from 500 to 3000 square km could be stricken.<sup>14</sup> Bearing in mind that the EU candidate states Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova can be affected

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<sup>11</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/call-for-moldova-romania-defence-treaty-draws-hard-questions/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://newsreadonline.com/moldova-offered-ukraine-first-military-aid-in-the-form-of-a-brigade-of-sappers/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/head-of-osce-mission-to-moldova-uk-response-28-april-2022>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.irf.ua/files/eng/text\\_eng.pdf](https://www.irf.ua/files/eng/text_eng.pdf)

and Romania as a neighboring state may also face the consequences, it is of immense importance for the three countries to engage the EU into the problem solution and to invigorate its leading role in this process. The additional argument for the EU's further engagement is the environmental dimension of the Kolbasna problem. Both the techno-catastrophe caused by the potential explosion of the depots or much needed projects on utilization of the ammunition have environmental dimension and the EU's oversight in this regard will have added value.

**2. Energy cooperation can be another key to the enhanced cooperation between the three states.** Moldova is the most vulnerable due to its heavy dependence on supplies from Russia. However, Ukraine and Romania can do a lot to make this dependence less decisive. **Romania has already announced its readiness to support Moldova.** Romania's Energy Minister, Virgil Popescu, on Wednesday said Romania will produce more natural gas than it needs once it starts extracting gas from the Black Sea area – and will then be in a position to export to countries in the region, with Moldova a priority. The Iasi-Chisinau interconnector built in October 2021 to link Moldova to the energetic European system potentially can be a key to diversification of gas supplies and increase the level of the Moldovan energy independence. Although time is needed and the first Romanian extractions from the Black Sea are not expected for some years, Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca announced the first gas from the Neptune Deep field would arrive no later than 2026.<sup>15</sup>

**Ukraine in its turn possesses Europe's leading networks of underground gas storage (UGS) facilities.** Today, the company operates 11 underground storage facilities with total active capacity of 31 billion cubic meters. Underground gas storage facilities enable efficient and reliable supply of natural gas, ensuring uninterrupted transit of gas through Ukraine to Europe and the creation of gas reserves to boost energy security. The company provides storage services to both suppliers and consumers.<sup>16</sup> This puts **Ukraine, with its storage capacity, into a position of the potential reserves hub which can assure storage of both gas extracted in Romania as well as gas purchased by the Republic of Moldova.**

Bearing in mind the fact that launching of the respective projects is time-consuming the EU's role for both accelerating the project and attracting investments is essential. Also, the EU can contribute into assuring resilience of both Ukraine and Moldova in the energy domain.

**3. Information security** is also an important sphere of trilateral cooperation. While Ukraine and Romania proved their resilience towards Russian information attacks, the Republic of Moldova remains vulnerable to the Russian information operations. According to the COVID-19 Response Index<sup>17</sup> Romania and Ukraine were ranked the highest in terms of resilience, society and governmental response, although still did not reach the top marks. Concurrently Moldova was scored the lowest. That only proved the trend noticed back in 2018 when according to the Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>18</sup> Moldova was also recognized as one of the most vulnerable states of the region.

Certainly, the government of the Republic of Moldova is doing the right steps to decrease this vulnerability. The recently passed Informational Security Law bans the broadcast in Moldova

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<sup>15</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/05/romania-plans-to-export-black-sea-gas-to-moldova-region/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://utg.ua/en/utg/gas-transportation-system/underground-gas-storage.html>

<sup>17</sup> [http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DRI\\_11\\_10WEB.pdf](http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DRI_11_10WEB.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <http://prismua.org/en/dri-cee/>

of Russian TV news and political analysis. The law, designed to counter Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine, says that the ban will still apply after the expiration of the state of emergency established in Moldova after Russia invaded Ukraine. The document prohibits news and analytical broadcasts from countries that have not ratified the Convention on Transfrontier Television and stipulates that 50 per cent of TV content must come from EU countries, the United States and those states that have ratified the Convention.<sup>19</sup>

However, it does not necessarily fix the problem since does not regulate flow of Russian disinformation via the alternative channels and social media and does not contribute into the higher media literacy of the vulnerable groups. In this regard Ukrainian and Romanian assistance in the mentioned domain can be of added value. Implementing media literacy projects, training and supporting Moldovan propaganda debunking teams, creation of the alternative content are the tasks that Romania and Ukraine can and should accomplish.

Summarizing, both Romania and Ukraine are moving in the direction of deeper and stronger ties with the Republic of Moldova. The EU candidate status for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova not only boosts these ties but also creates an umbrella for the joint projects and initiatives due to the growing awareness of the EU in the region and also because of the fact that priorities of the EU in the region and priorities of the three countries largely coincide. The areas of security, energy cooperation and fighting disinformation seem to be the most burning ones although do not exhaust the perspective domains of cooperation including infrastructure, minority issues, other kinds of sectoral cooperation. Boosting cooperation and implementation of the successful projects can open a new page in trilateral cooperation and contribute to the common good to the people of the region and wider.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/20/moldova-bans-russian-media-to-counter-propaganda-over-ukraine/>  
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