

## An asymmetric neighbourhood: Moldova's risks, opportunities, and fears in its policy towards Ukraine

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Ukraine is of existential importance to Moldova. As a state resisting Russian aggression since 2022, and as a neighbour larger and more populous than Romania, it effectively fulfils the role of a guarantor of Moldova's security. These conditions underpin the unequivocal political support extended to Kyiv since the outset of the invasion, including open criticism of Moscow, participation in international solidarity initiatives, and the reception of nearly 140,000 Ukrainian refugees (approximately 6% of the population).

Bilateral relations nevertheless remain complex. The most significant source of tension concerns European integration: it is in Chişinău's interest to separate the accession processes of Moldova and Ukraine (so-called decoupling), an approach to which Kyiv does not consent. Additional frictions stem from the prospect of a Ukrainian intervention in Transnistria, trade disputes, and Chişinău's reluctance to engage in military assistance to Ukraine, arising from its constitutionally enshrined neutrality. Bilateral relations are further strained by statements from senior Moldovan officials, viewed in Ukraine as controversial, regarding the potential unification with Romania.

### Ukraine's strategic importance to Moldova

Ukraine plays a pivotal role in Moldova's foreign and security policy. The worst-case scenario for Chişinău would be the collapse of the Ukrainian state or Russia's seizure of control over its south-western region (the Odesa region), which would enable Russian forces to reach the border with Transnistria. Approximately 1,500 soldiers of the Russian Federation are currently stationed in this separatist region; their reinforcement or integration with the invading forces operating in Ukraine would fundamentally alter the security situation across the entire region and represent a direct threat to Moldova's sovereignty.

This strategic dependence leads Chişinău to view Kyiv's success in the defensive war as a prerequisite for its own security. Accordingly, it seeks to avoid statements and actions that could expose it to criticism from its Ukrainian partner – even where these might otherwise serve its own interests. At the same time, the relationship is clearly asymmetrical: Chişinău has a greater need for Ukrainian success than Kyiv has for Moldovan support. This reluctance to engage in disputes also reflects the

distinctive nature of Moldovan foreign policy, which has traditionally sought to avoid tensions and antagonisms in relations with its partners.<sup>1</sup>

An additional factor prompting Chişinău to avoid conflicts with Kyiv is the highly significant – from Moldova’s perspective – cooperation between the two countries’

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intelligence services. The Ukrainian side not only provides intelligence on Russian activities on Moldovan territory, including in separatist Transnistria (it is widely acknowledged that Ukrainian intelligence operates actively within this de facto state), but also supports Chişinău in the field of cybersecurity. The most recent manifestation of this deepening cooperation was the establishment in February this year, together with Ukraine and Romania, of the so-called Cyber Alliance for Regional Resilience.<sup>2</sup> The loss or weakening of this support would represent a significant setback, particularly in the context of intensifying Russian hybrid operations.

### Solidarity with Kyiv...

Since the outset of the Russian invasion, Moldova has consistently demonstrated solidarity with Ukraine. It unequivocally designates Russia as the aggressor, openly criticises the Kremlin’s policies, and supports the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state. The Moldovan authorities have also aligned themselves – albeit with some delay, in 2023 – with the vast majority of EU sanctions imposed on Russia.<sup>3</sup> In the first months of the war, Chişinău refrained from taking such decisions due to its then ongoing partial dependence on Russian gas and electricity.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, in international fora – both in the UN General Assembly and the Council of Europe – it consistently votes in line with other states supporting Kyiv. It also participates in the Crimea Platform, an international coordination format established at Kyiv’s initiative to counter Russia’s annexation of the peninsula.<sup>5</sup> Together with Romania and Ukraine, it co-forms a trilateral format of regional cooperation, encompassing, among other tasks, coordination of activities in the fields of security and European integration.

The scale of assistance provided to Ukrainian refugees is a particularly telling manifestation of Moldova’s solidarity. Since February 2022, more than 2 million people fleeing the war have crossed its border, and as of early 2026 nearly 140,000 refugees remained there, accounting for approximately 6% of a population of just 2.4 million (most likely the highest per capita figure in the world).<sup>6</sup> Women (39%)

<sup>1</sup> Russia currently constitutes a partial exception; however, it represents an atypical case. The deterioration of relations between Chişinău and Moscow has been ongoing for many years and has only accelerated following the outbreak of the full-scale war. It is worth noting that, even immediately after the launch of the invasion in 2022, Moldova – despite its criticism of the Kremlin’s actions – sought to avoid overly strong statements directed at Moscow.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Moldova, Ucraina și România, împotriva amenințărilor cibernetice. A fost înființată Alianța Cibernetică pentru Reziliență Regională’, Ziarul de Gardă, 22 February 2026, [zdg.md](#).

<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2023 Moldova implemented two decisions of the Council of the EU providing for sanctions in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by the Russian Federation in 2014, as well as the illegal annexation of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions (including a ban on imports of goods originating in those territories). In the same year, Chişinău – following the example of the Council of the EU – imposed sanctions on Iran in response to its military support for the Russian Federation in the war against Ukraine. It also restricted exports of dual-use goods to Russia.

<sup>4</sup> Until recently, Moldova was dependent on supplies of Russian gas, which covered 100% of the country’s demand. In December 2022, however, it began sourcing gas from alternative suppliers, purchased on European markets. At the same time, since the beginning of 2025, Moldova has no longer relied on electricity generated by the Moldavskaya GRES power plant located in Transnistria and owned by the Russian company Inter RAO UES. Romania is currently the main source of electricity for Moldova, which itself is able to produce approximately 30% of the power it consumes on a continuous basis. See for example K. Caľus, ‘Moldova: reduction of Russian influence in the gas sector’, OSW, 14 September 2023, [osw.waw.pl](#).

<sup>5</sup> K. Niecypor, ‘Inauguration of the Crimea Platform: a successful start to a difficult process’, OSW, 24 August 2021, [osw.waw.pl](#).

<sup>6</sup> The source of the data cited in this paragraph is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [unhcr.org](#).

and children (40%) predominate among the refugees, while the elderly and those with disabilities account for approximately 13% and 19% of the group, respectively. More than 86,500 individuals have been granted temporary protection status, ensuring legal residence as well as access to the labour market, education and healthcare until March 2027. The demographic profile of Ukrainians in Moldova contributes to a relatively low level of economic activity within this group. It is estimated that of the approximately 140,000 refugees, only around one in three has taken up paid employment.<sup>7</sup> However, although the reception of such a large number of displaced persons and their care represent a significant burden on the budget and institutions of a relatively poor state, Chişinău has consistently maintained this policy.

### ...and mounting disputes

Despite unequivocal political support for Ukraine, Moldovan–Ukrainian relations are burdened by a range of tensions. While these do not escalate into open conflict, they nevertheless complicate bilateral cooperation. They are both structural in nature – stemming from the differing interests and priorities of the two states – and incidental, relating to specific sectoral disputes.

At the root of these tensions lies a fundamental difference in the circumstances of the two countries. Ukraine is waging a defensive war in which the very survival of

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its statehood is at stake, and it is sustaining enormous human and material losses. It perceives itself as a state bearing the burden of defending the whole of Europe against Russian aggression – and expects unconditional solidarity from its partners. It reacts sharply to any attempts to exploit its precarious situation for the pursuit of particular political objectives, viewing them as an expression of cynicism and a lack of respect for the sacrifices being made.

Moldova, by contrast, while having a vital interest in Ukraine’s success, is aware that the current international situation – including the EU’s unprecedented readiness for enlargement – creates a window of opportunity that may close. Hence its drive to achieve the fastest possible progress in European integration, which is seen as a chance for a civilisational leap and a lasting safeguard against Russia. These actions, while rational from Chişinău’s perspective, are nevertheless at times perceived in Kyiv as an attempt to advance its own interests at the expense of a Ukraine engaged in active defence.

### The road to Brussels: jointly or separately?

The most significant source of tension between Chişinău and Kyiv at present concerns European integration. Moldova and Ukraine obtained EU candidate status in June 2022, and in December 2023 the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with both countries. From the outset, these have been framed within a so-called single negotiation package, meaning that key decisions – including the opening of individual clusters – are taken jointly with regard to both states.

Moldova, as indeed Ukraine, has made significant progress towards membership in recent months. The screening process – i.e. the review of national legislation for compliance with the *acquis* – launched in July 2024, was completed at a record pace in September 2025. Since December 2025, the government has been conducting technical accession consultations in three of the six clusters: fundamentals (core values),

<sup>7</sup> A. Nugmanov, ‘Refugiaţii ucraineni în Republica Moldova, la patru ani de război: drepturi, integrare şi planuri de viitor’, *Newsmaker*, 25 February 2026, [newsmaker.md](https://www.newsmaker.md).

the internal market, and external relations. Chişinău is ready to formally open negotiations in these areas; however, it is unable to do so owing to Hungary's veto concerning Ukraine.

The decision requires unanimity in the European Council, and Viktor Orbán's government has consistently blocked progress in accession negotiations with Kyiv, citing alleged violations of the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. Although Budapest does not oppose the opening of clusters by Moldova, its veto – within the framework of the package approach – automatically prevents progress for Chişinău as well.<sup>8</sup>

A possible solution would be to separate the two accession processes (so-called decoupling),<sup>9</sup> allowing Moldova to negotiate independently at a pace determined

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by its own reform progress; however, Chişinău does not formally advocate such an approach.<sup>10</sup> The prospect of decoupling provokes strong opposition in Kyiv.<sup>11</sup> In Kyiv's assessment, acquiescing to Hungarian political pressure would push Ukraine to the margins of the integration process, undermine trust in the EU, and intensify a sense of abandonment by its partners – potentially adversely affecting the morale of those engaged in the fighting. At present, EU membership is supported by around 80% of Ukraine's population.

In this context, Chişinău is seeking – actively and informally – to persuade both Kyiv and the capitals of EU member states opposed to decoupling that Moldova's parallel integration with the EU – and, ultimately, its membership – is in Ukraine's interest. Accession would contribute to the stabilisation of the country and the maintenance of its pro-Western course, thereby alleviating Kyiv's concerns regarding its south-western borders. At the same time, Chişinău signals – although this message is directed primarily at its Western partners – that halting the integration process would undermine the credibility of the current authorities, fuel growing social frustration and, ultimately, lead to the loss of a parliamentary majority by the pro-Western camp and to the destabilisation of the state.

The Moldovan authorities, having set a highly ambitious timetable of concluding negotiations by 2027 and achieving readiness for accession in 2028, thus find themselves in an uncomfortable position. Meeting these targets requires rapid progress in the negotiations, which is currently impossible due to Hungary's veto. At the same time, openly advocating decoupling would expose Chişinău to conflict with Kyiv – something the PAS is keen to avoid.

Moldova appears to be considering three scenarios. The first assumes a change of government in Hungary following the parliamentary election in April 2026 – should the opposition TISZA party form a government, this could lead to the lifting of the veto on Ukraine and the unblocking of the

<sup>8</sup> For more see K. Nieczydor, 'Cluster, open up! Ukraine's opportunities and risks on the road to the EU', *OSW Commentary*, no. 656, 10 April 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>9</sup> The decoupling of accession processes has precedent. In 2024, Albania and North Macedonia were separated, having previously been treated as a single package. Since then, Albania has made progress in its integration, while North Macedonia has not opened negotiations due to its dispute with Bulgaria.

<sup>10</sup> In March 2022, Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, called on the EU to consider Ukraine's membership application separately from those of Georgia and Moldova, arguing that "the submission of EU membership applications by Moldova and Georgia now looks like an attempt to attach two carriages to Ukraine's high-speed train heading to Brussels". At the same time, Kuleba criticised Tbilisi and Chişinău for failing to support the EU's new sanctions against Russia. See 'Заявку України на членство в ЄС потрібно розглядати окремо від заявок Грузії та Молдови – Кулеба', *Інтерфакс-Україна*, 7 March 2022, [ua.interfax.com.ua](https://ua.interfax.com.ua).

<sup>11</sup> 'В Києве назвали "неконструктивною" ідею о разделении Украины и Молдовы на пути в ЕС', *Point*, 30 April 2025, [point.md](https://point.md).

entire process. The second scenario envisages that decoupling would, as it were, be ‘imposed’ from above – proposed by Brussels or key Western partners. In such a case, the Moldovan government could formally express reservations while accepting this solution, emphasising that it would prefer to proceed along a joint track with Ukraine. Romania – Moldova’s closest ally and principal advocate within the EU – appears to be informally lobbying in favour of separation. The third scenario – least comfortable for Chişinău and viable only if the second fails – would involve openly requesting the decoupling of the negotiation process.

## Transnistria: a Ukrainian proposal and a Moldovan refusal

The separatist region of Transnistria is an additional source of tension. Since 2022, Kyiv has informally and repeatedly indicated to Chişinău its readiness to carry out a military intervention in the region, aimed at neutralising the Russian forces stationed there, thereby securing Ukraine’s western flank and freeing up units currently deployed to guard the border with the de facto state.<sup>12</sup>

Chişinău has consistently rejected such proposals. In its assessment, such an intervention would lead to destabilisation on the left bank and generate a wave of refugees

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to the right bank. A country already grappling with the consequences of hosting 140,000 refugees from Ukraine is not prepared for a further influx. Moreover, military action would force Moldova into an accelerated reintegration of the breakaway region – for which Chişinău lacks the administrative capacity, financial resources, and political will. The authorities also fear the possibility of a retaliatory missile strike by Russia – such a scenario, while unlikely, remains part of their strategic calculations.

Although this issue does not generate tensions comparable to those surrounding decoupling, it nevertheless provokes irritation on the Ukrainian side. From Kyiv’s perspective, Moldova is preventing it from addressing a problem that directly affects Ukraine, while itself being unable to control Russian forces on its own territory. In response to such accusations, the authorities in Chişinău have in recent months begun to undertake their own measures aimed at increasing their influence in the separatist region.<sup>13</sup>

## Rhetoric in international forums

Additional tensions are generated in Kyiv by the rhetoric of the authorities in Chişinău, who in international forums emphasise that Moldova is the target of continuous Russian attacks and, while resisting them, requires support from its Western partners. Kyiv perceives such statements as an attempt to divert attention from the principal target of Russian aggression, and, at times, as efforts to secure resources Ukraine requires for its defence. Meanwhile, Ukraine argues that it is bearing incomparably higher costs in its confrontation with Moscow, and that Moldovan appeals risk diverting Western attention and resources.

Negative reactions in Kyiv were also prompted by a recent statement by President Maia Sandu, who in January this year, in an interview with British journalists, declared that if a referendum were held

<sup>12</sup> In July 2022, the head of Ukraine’s military intelligence (HUR), Kyrylo Budanov, stated that Ukraine was ready to assist Moldova in the “de-occupation” of Transnistria. See ‘Ukraine ready to help Moldova de-occupy Transnistria – Budanov’, *European Pravda*, 22 July 2022, pravda.com.ua. In December 2025, he reiterated this declaration in more explicit terms, stating: “We can resolve this issue if we take it on. Resolve it decisively”. See И. Игнатова ‘«Мы можем решить это радикально»: Буданов о судьбе Приднестровья и русском влиянии в Молдове’, *TCH*, 27 December 2025, tsn.ua.

<sup>13</sup> K. Całus, ‘Moldova: a convergence fund instead of a reintegration plan’, *OSW*, 17 February 2026, osw.waw.pl.

in her country on unification with neighbouring Romania, she would support the idea. Similar declarations were subsequently made by Prime Minister Alexandru Munteanu and Speaker of Parliament Igor Grosu.

Kyiv is critical of such statements for at least two reasons. First, a government engaged in defending the country's territorial integrity is disinclined to accept any changes to borders in the region – so as not to set precedents or provide propaganda leverage to states interested in revising the current order, such as Russia and, potentially, Hungary (in relation to Transcarpathia). Second, an expansion of Romania's borders is not in Kyiv's interest. Ukraine's relations with Bucharest have never been straightforward, and there are territories within Ukraine that, prior to the Second World War, formed part of the Kingdom of Romania – similarly to present-day right-bank Moldova. Unification could therefore contribute to the growth of revisionist tendencies in Bucharest.

### Trade disputes and the absence of military assistance

The atmosphere in bilateral relations is also, to some extent, affected by periodic trade disputes. A pertinent example is the situation in late January and early February, when serious tensions arose in the agri-food sector. Moldova's National Food Safety Agency (ANSA) suspended imports of Ukrainian poultry meat, citing the detection of the antibiotic metronidazole in feed of Ukrainian origin. Chişinău's decision was motivated not only by the desire to protect the domestic market, but also by reputational considerations – by tightening controls on the quality of imported products, the Moldovan authorities sought to demonstrate to Brussels their ability to enforce European food safety standards and the country's readiness to operate within the EU's single market.

Kyiv reacted sharply, regarding the Moldovan decision as an unjustified affront. The Ukrainian side challenged the grounds for the ban, noting that the contamination had been detected in feed

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rather than in the meat itself, and that the samples had been collected from birds already raised in Moldova, rather than from products imported from Ukraine. In response, the Ukrainian government prepared a draft embargo on Moldovan wine, grapes, and spirits, and Deputy Minister Taras Vysotsky explicitly announced the introduction of retaliatory measures.

Although in early March 2026 the parties managed to reach a technical agreement – establishing a mechanism for joint laboratory controls after which supplies are to be resumed – the dispute illustrates growing frictions. Under conditions of economic strain caused by the war, both states are increasingly inclined to protect their own sectoral interests, even at the expense of relations with a neighbouring state.

A further source of enduring irritation on the Ukrainian side is Chişinău's reluctance to engage in any form of military assistance to Ukraine. Moldova consistently invokes its constitutionally enshrined neutrality, refusing even symbolic gestures beyond humanitarian aid. A telling example of the Moldovan authorities' consistency in this regard was the issue of six inoperative Moldovan MiG-29 fighter aircraft, which Kyiv sought to acquire in spring 2022. Chişinău ultimately refused, fearing Russian retaliation. Although the MiG issue is no longer relevant, it remains in the collective memory as an example of early-war tensions that have contributed to a lack of trust and a more critical perception in Kyiv of its western neighbour.

## Public opinion: solidarity with refugees, distance from politicians

While the authorities in Chişinău unequivocally support Kyiv and condemn Russia, Moldovan society views its eastern neighbour in a more nuanced manner. On the one hand, attitudes towards Ukrainians and refugees from Ukraine are generally positive or neutral. According to a UNHCR survey conducted at the end of 2025, an overwhelming majority (91%) of the latter report that they feel accepted by local communities in Moldova. On the other hand, perceptions of the war and its protagonists are far less clear-cut. Volodymyr Zelensky ranks among the foreign leaders with comparatively low levels of public trust in Moldova – according to the IMAS barometer of February, fewer than 20% of respondents expressed confidence in him. For comparison, Alyaksandr Lukashenka records around 37% trust, and Vladimir Putin 35%.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the distribution of opinions regarding responsibility for the war is complex and has been evolving towards a diffusion of blame: in 2022, 41.6% identified Putin as the main culprit and 43.6% pointed to NATO, the West, and Zelensky,<sup>15</sup> whereas in February 2026 the share of those attributing responsibility exclusively to Russia had fallen to 25%, while nearly one third of respondents blamed “all sides”.

These sentiments are reflected in Moldova’s political debate. Openly anti-Ukrainian slogans are not widespread; however, some opposition parties, including pro-Russian ones, exploit the increasingly accepted view of diffused responsibility for the outbreak and continuation of the war to call on the Moldovan government to maintain distance from the conflict and refrain from engagement on either side (including through political support for Ukraine).

## Outlook

Moldovan–Ukrainian relations are likely to remain complex and marked by structural tensions in the coming years. The pace of European integration will likely be the most significant source of disputes. Moldova has objective reasons to advance more rapidly in the negotiations than Ukraine: it is a significantly smaller country in both territorial and demographic terms, with a limited economy and a marginal industrial base, which considerably simplifies legal harmonisation and the negotiation of transitional arrangements. Moreover, there are no EU member states that openly oppose Moldova’s integration.

The issue of Hungary’s veto may be resolved if the opposition TISZA party wins the parliamentary election in April 2026. Its leader, Péter Magyar, although opposed to a ‘fast-tracked’ path for Ukraine’s integration, would be unlikely to block the opening of negotiation chapters with Kyiv. Even in such a scenario, however, Moldova is likely to proceed with negotiations at a faster pace, and the growing disparity in the advancement of the process may be perceived negatively in Kyiv. In the longer term, this could contribute to a gradual cooling of bilateral relations.

In the longer term – most likely after the end of the war – the management of the Dniester River may become an additional source of friction. Ukraine controls the greater part of the river’s course and possesses extensive hydropower infrastructure, the expansion of which has long raised concerns in Moldova. Although since 2012 the two countries have cooperated within a commission for the protection of the Dniester basin, and in 2024 they signed an agreement on transboundary environmental cooperation in line with the Espoo Convention, the issue may return to the agenda once the international situation stabilises.

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<sup>14</sup> A social-political survey by IMAS, February 2026, [imas.md](https://imas.md).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Un moldovean din trei crede că Rusia „denazifică” Ucraina (IMAS)’, Europa Liberă, 20 April 2022, [moldova.europalibera.org](https://moldova.europalibera.org).