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Moldova is at the crossroads between Russia and the EU ahead of the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius



*The Eastern Partnership is an initiative aimed at strengthening the EU's relations with neighbouring states in Eastern Europe. Ahead of the next Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November, **Ellie Knott** assesses the factors influencing Moldova's relationship with the EU. She notes that although Moldova has been governed by pro-*

EU governments since 2009, the country has come under significant pressure from Russia. Moldova may also need to resolve its relationship with the disputed territory of Transnistria before it can progress further along the path to EU accession.

After the Alliance for European Integration came to power in 2009, ending eight years of rule by Moldova's Communist Party (PCR), the main goal of Moldova's foreign policy became clear: the desire for European integration. Moldova has been one of the few success stories of the EU's **Eastern Partnership** (EaP). The next EaP summit, to be held in Vilnius in November, is highly anticipated as Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia are all hoping that their progress towards European integration will be rewarded with the signing of EU Association Agreements, deep and comprehensive free trade agreements, and progress with visa liberalisation regimes. However there is a need to be realistic about these states' relations with the EU, given the problems they face internally and externally.

The progress of the Alliance for European Integration has been notable, as it has been able to change the **perceptions of Moldova** from the "last bastion of



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Communism in Europe” to the “recognised leader” of the EaP. However Moldova has also had its fair share of political crises, with parliament unable to elect a President between 2009 and 2012. Then in February 2013, the Alliance for European Integration was dissolved following allegations of corruption and tensions within the coalition parties. Parliament removed the Prime Minister, Vlad Filat, and the constitutional court ruled that a new Prime Minister had to be instated. Moldova was therefore left without a government until May 2013 when the Pro-European coalition was formed. These crises have **damaged** Moldova’s reputation as the EaP leader by demonstrating the fragility of Moldovan politics, and deepened a loss of faith in politics among Moldovan society.



EaP meeting in Chisinau, Moldova, Credit: EPP (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

For countries like Moldova, there is huge symbolic importance placed on the signing of an Association Agreement with the EU. From the EU’s perspective, it is a “**game changer**” because “for the first time we [the EU] will make a quantum leap towards... real transformation in that post soviet space”. Similarly, some political analysts have **identified** the signing of an Association Agreement as the point at which Moldova will decisively and irrevocably exit from the ‘Russian World’. Many in Moldova are pleased at the prospect of being able to divorce themselves, at least symbolically, from Russia’s influence. However this ignores the problem of Transnistria, the large community of Russian speakers in Moldova, the large migrant Moldovan labour force in Russia, and Moldova’s opposition parties that prefer relations with Russia over the EU.

Beyond the symbolic level, there are material political reasons for seeing Association Agreements with EaP states as a decisive step in the positioning of these states between east and west. The EU has underlined the “**lack of compatibility**” between Association Agreements and joining a Eurasian Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The **EU explains** that this is “not about politics or ideology” but reflects the principle that the EU “cannot make legally binding agreements with partners that are not in charge of their external trade policies”, as would be the case with Eurasian Customs Union agreements. While EaP states might like to keep their options open in terms of relations with the EU and Russia, the EU is unequivocal in terms of the mutual exclusivity of agreements.

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For Moldova, like other EaP states, the strengthening of relations with the EU will impact upon relations with Russia. Russia is Moldova's second largest trading partner, after the EU, and the only current provider of Moldova's gas, although construction of [the Iasi-Ungheni pipeline](#) between Romania and Moldova will begin soon. Russia has taken an attitude towards Moldova that verges on bullying. [Sergei Lavrov](#), Russia's Foreign Minister, and Dimitry Rogozin, one of Russia's Deputy Prime-Ministers, warned Moldova that EU negotiations would have consequences such as [trade sanctions](#) and increasing the price of Russian gas, with Rogozin adding "[I hope you won't freeze](#)".

As the [Economist](#) has argued, this is part of Putin's policy of "arm-twisting ex-Soviet countries to join his Eurasian Customs Union". These tactics have just worked on [Armenia](#), whose government announced recently that it would join the Customs Union and no longer pursue EU Association status. Meanwhile, Russia recently banned [Moldovan wine](#) exports again, to encourage Moldova to reconsider its path towards closer EU cooperation.

A further complicating factor concerns Transnistria, a separatist region subsidised by Russia. The EU has sent mixed messages to Moldova about whether it has to resolve the Transnistria situation to be eligible for EU accession. In 2012, [Barroso](#) said that it was "critical to settle" the issue, but that there was not an "absolute link" between resolution and Moldova's path towards EU integration. However in 2013 [Traian Băsescu](#), the Romanian President and a significant supporter of Moldova joining the EU, said regarding Transnistria that "the EU will not repeat the error made with Cyprus"; thereby suggesting that Moldova has to resolve the Transnistria issue in order to progress further in its path toward accession.

Rogozin has warned Moldova that progressing further with the EU would mean they "[would lose Transnistria](#)". Besides EU accession, if Moldova signs a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, this will impact on Transnistria's trade relationship with the EU, where [50-60 per cent of Transnistria's products](#) end up, as it will no longer benefit from Moldova's Autonomous Trade Preferences. Transnistria will be forced to choose between joining the free trade agreement itself and being subject to the highest EU tariffs as an exporter of "goods of non-specific origin". The EU would prefer that Moldova can convince Transnistria to join the agreement, but this seems both unlikely and [wishful thinking](#) given Transnistria and Russia's stance on Moldovan-EU relations.

Moldova is therefore trapped in a Catch-22 situation amid on-going internal political turmoil. For many, the strengthening of Moldova's relationship with the EU, such as signing of the deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, is the "[only possible game in town](#)". If Moldova can sign an Association Agreement with the EU in November, this will be a good signal of how much has been achieved in a short period. However it will answer as many questions as it solves, with an Association

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Agreement promising nothing in terms of Moldova’s long term goal of EU accession. It will also incur severe costs in terms of relations with Russia, as Russia’s threats would impact the daily lives of Moldovans significantly.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Ellie Knott is a PhD candidate in the Department of Government at LSE. Her research looks at Russia’s kin-state policies in Crimea and Romania’s kin-state policies in Moldova.

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stevecoventry October 15, 2013 at 11:04 am - [Reply](#)

Good article, but Moldova will only initial, not sign, the Association Agreement at Vilnius.

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