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The Ukraine crisis has complicated Moldova’s political situation ahead of signing an Association Agreement with the EU



*Moldova is scheduled to sign an Association Agreement with the EU later this month, with Parliamentary elections also due to be held in November. **Ellie Knott** and **David Rinnert** write on the impact the Ukraine crisis has had on domestic politics*

and Moldova’s delicate balance between the EU and Russia. They argue that the crisis has complicated the country’s political situation, with ethnic groups divided over relations with the EU and Russia’s annexation of Crimea. This could have an impact not only in terms of foreign policy, but also on the support for political parties in November.

Over the past two years, well before recent events in Ukraine, the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood had become an **increasing concern**. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however, has led to a deteriorated political situation across the region. Ever since the Crimean annexation, Moldova’s future has been analysed with waves of pessimism, however overly simplistic predictions about the country’s future and its geopolitical implications are not useful.

The situation in Moldova has become more complex in the past months, domestically and regionally, and the country, for the foreseeable future, is faced with having to negotiate a position between Russia and the EU. The first impacts of the Ukraine crisis on Moldova are likely to be felt in two key events in the next months, namely the planned signing of an Association Agreement with the EU this month and parliamentary elections in November.

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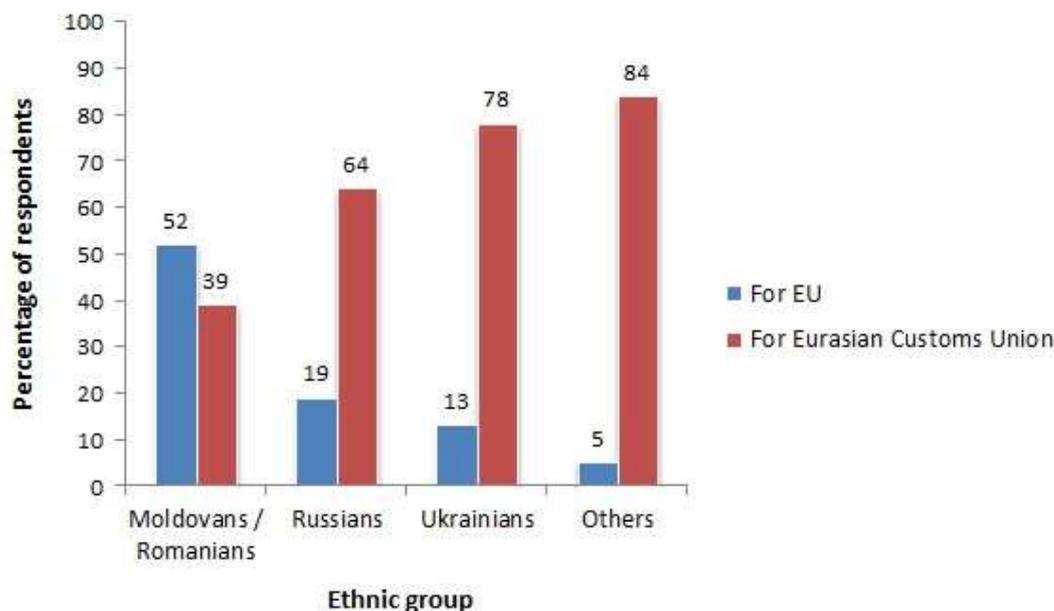


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While the political situation in Moldova was already tense before the Ukraine crisis due to the **resignation** of former Prime Minister Vladimir Filat in 2013 and increased Russian pressure on Chisinau, recent events in Crimea and beyond have further destabilised the 3.5 million-strong country. First, following Russia’s Ukraine intervention, Moldova **faces** increased domestic instability in several parts of the country. In March, the Parliament of Transnistria, a de-facto state in the east of Moldova, **formally asked** the Putin government to incorporate it into the Russian Federation. One month earlier, Gagauzia, an autonomous region in the south of the country, held an **unconstitutional referendum** in which a large majority of the voters expressed their will to join Russia’s Customs Union. Although the specific consequences of these steps for Moldova remain unclear for now, they already underline the increased risk of ethnic or language-based tensions in the country.

Second, rising internal divisions within Moldova are also emphasised by citizens’ polarised opinions on the country’s geopolitical direction. Since the Filat government took office in 2009, public support for the EU has decreased steadily, with 44 per cent of Moldovans preferring EU membership over Customs Union membership in May 2014 compared to much higher numbers in 2010. This declining support for the EU over the past years is also reflected in Moldovans’ opinions on Russia’s actions in Ukraine, as shown in Charts 1 and 2 below.

Chart 1: Responses in Moldova by ethnic group to the question: “If there were a referendum on Moldova’s accession to the EU/Eurasian Customs Union next Sunday which would you vote for?” (April 2014)



Note: Created by the authors using polling figures from the **Institute for Public Policy** (April 2014). Chart does not include refused/don’t know/other responses. Moldovans and Romanians make up the majority of the country’s population (over 70 per cent). As Russians, Ukrainians and other ethnic groups only make up a small percentage of the population the polling figures should be treated with caution for these groups.

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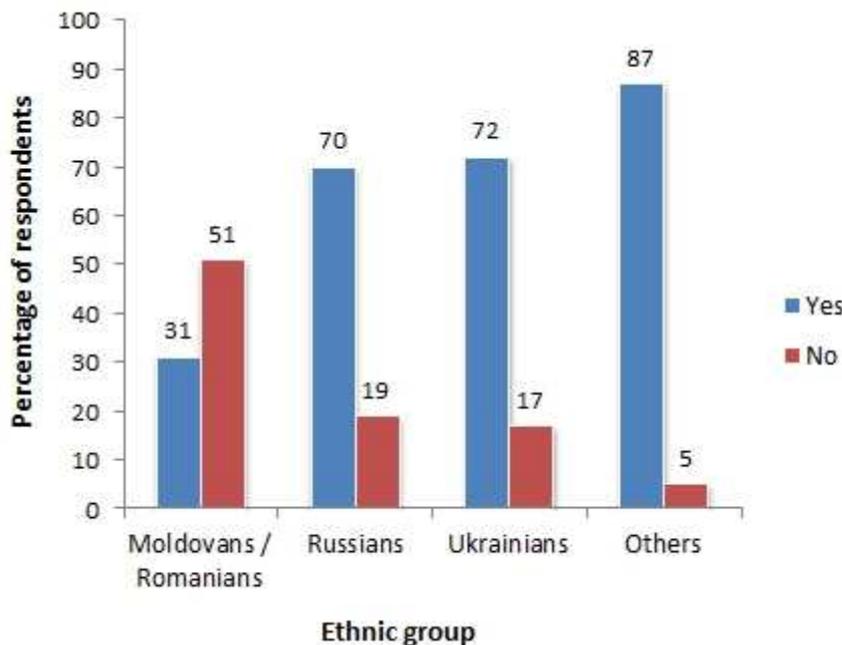
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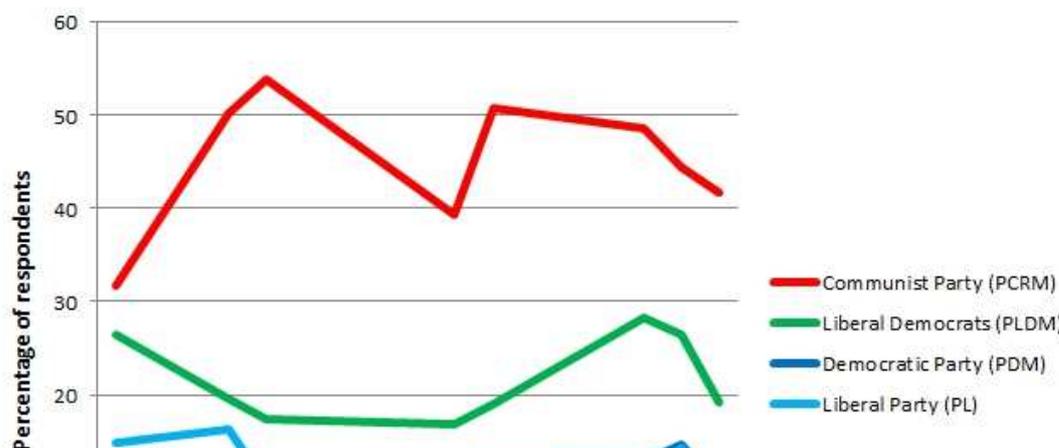
Chart 2: Responses in Moldova by ethnic group to the question: “Do you support the annexation of Crimea by Russia?” (April 2014)



Note: Created by the authors using polling figures from the [Institute for Public Policy](#) (April 2014). Chart does not include refused/don't know/other responses. Moldovans and Romanians make up the majority of the country's population (over 70 per cent). As Russians, Ukrainians and other ethnic groups only make up a small percentage of the population the polling figures should be treated with caution for these groups.

Third, political parties are trying to gain political capital out of these divisions and the Ukraine crisis ahead of Moldova's Parliamentary elections in November. While the current pro-EU government, consisting of the [Liberal Democrats](#), the [Democratic Party](#) and the [Liberal Party](#), aims at signing the Association Agreement later this summer, the Russian-leaning [Communist Party](#) leader Vladimir Voronin underlines that Moldova “needs to have relationships with its strategic partners [Russia and the FSU countries]”. Nevertheless, as Chart 3 shows, recent polls indicate that the Ukraine crisis has led to decreasing public support for the Communists, who in 2013 benefited significantly from the domestic crisis surrounding former Prime Minister Filat.

Chart 3: Voting intention in Moldova (January 2013 – May 2014)



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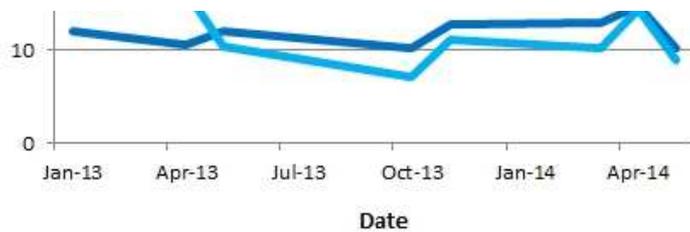
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Within the EU’s plagued Eastern Partnership (EaP), an initiative aiming at political stability and economic strength on the EU’s eastern border, [Moldova](#) has been eligible for the greatest source of funding relative to the size of its population and economy. The EU has been explicit that it does not situate itself in “[geopolitical competition](#)” with Russia over Moldova, and does not see Moldova’s deepening political and trade relations with the EU as incompatible with Russian-Moldovan relations. However this position is naive because the EU is seeking to match what Russia offers (an alternative supplier of gas and an alternative market for Moldova’s [wine](#)). Further, the EU argues its free trade zone does not impede Moldova’s sovereignty, unlike the Eurasian Customs Union which the EU argues, as a “[supra-national institution](#)”, would restrict Moldova’s sovereignty over its trade decisions.

Since the crisis in Ukraine began, there has been a clear rhetoric from the EU in [showing](#) EaP states an “even stronger, more determined and resolute commitment” to offer them “a different future” to their “rocky past”, and a clear change of pace in the advancement of EaP policies in Moldova and Georgia. [Van Rompuy](#) indicated, even in December 2013, that the EU was now willing to “speed up” the signing of Association Agreements with Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Moldova’s signing of the Association Agreement has already moved ahead from August to June of this year. In April, Moldovans received visa free access to the EU. This was long seen as the “[the most crucial issue](#)” for EaP states due to the tangible benefits that this brings everyday Moldovans and the business elite. Yet this overstates the degree to which ordinary Moldovans are travelling to the EU with 83 per cent, according to an [IPP](#) poll, not travelling to the EU within the past 5 years. It is hard to tell also how many of those who did travel to the EU did so with Romanian passports, given Romania’s policy of [facilitating](#) the (re)acquisition of Romanian citizenship.

While the EU’s association with Moldova has gained pace, crucial issues relating to EU-Moldovan relations remain unresolved. Of particular importance is how Transnistria would fit within Moldova’s Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, which is part of the Association Agreement. Transnistria and Moldova will have until 2015 to resolve their relations in respect of the agreement, but all signs have indicated that Transnistria will not agree to

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Moldova’s position, and instead would lose its privileged trading preferences with the EU.

As **Nicu Popescu** has argued, Transnistria needs to think about its own interests and avoid “killing what’s left of Tiraspol’s economy because of political slogans” given that 30 per cent of Tiraspol exports are directed to Moldova, while another 40 per cent are directed to EU countries, leaving only a small percentage directed to Russia. Transnistria’s call to Russia for integration, however, demonstrates the increasingly tense political situation between Russia, Transnistria and Moldova, and how Transnistria will situate itself remains unpredictable.

Within the EU, Romania has been one of Moldova’s key advocates. Romania too is one of Moldova’s core bilateral partners and has tried to counter-balance Russia’s influence in Moldova, through measures such as the Iasi-Ungheni pipeline which would offer Moldova an alternative first source of gas (of which 25 per cent will be **funded by the EU**). Yet Romania’s stance toward Moldova often steers too much beyond pragmatic relations toward a sentimental relationship with the country, as a territory that it feels was unfairly annexed by the Soviet Union (key to Romania’s facilitated citizenship policy) and where Romania **claims** the majority of the population are ethnic Romanians.

During the last Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, which should have been about Moldova’s deepening relations with the EU, the Romanian President, Traian Băsescu, **talked** of (re)unification with Moldova still being the remaining goal of Romania’s foreign policy (having already achieved NATO and EU accession), much to the **EU’s** consternation. Romania’s stance toward Moldova is therefore caught between these competing approaches, and can be counter-productive for EU-Moldovan relations.

However, Moldova will be forced to strike a balance between Moldovan-EU and Moldovan-Russian relations because Russia will remain a key partner for Moldova, as the main source of remittances and gas. Russia’s position for Moldova remains complex, not only because of Transnistria’s call which it has so far heeded. But also because of the region of Gagauzia, which is situated in an interesting position of being the only region within Moldova where Russia has lifted its **wine ban**, following the Gagauzian referendum mentioned above. Russia’s position toward Moldova focuses on the need for its ongoing neutrality. Indeed **Sergei Lavrov**, Russia’s Foreign Minister, has said that Transnistria is not at risk from Russian interference so long as Moldova remains “neutral”.

Yet ideas of what constitutes Moldova’s neutrality have many interpretations. From **NATO’s** perspective, a Moldovan partnership with NATO “is compatible with neutrality” based on their relations with already neutral states, and is also “compatible with having good relations with Russia”. From the perspective of Russia,



however, **Dmitri Rogozin** has argued that even an “association with the EU means changing Moldova’s neutral status” on the basis that to “join the EU you need to accede to NATO”. This overplays what the EU is offering, given that there has been a careful emphasis on the fact that an Association Agreement does not equate to a promise of future accession.

The prognosis, however, for Moldovan-Russian relations should not be totally pessimistic. Russia has shown itself to be more willing to intervene than predicted, but Russia also has more interests that it can simultaneously instrumentalise. This is evident now in **Abkhazia**, where Russia is faced with dealing with the president fleeing in a de-facto state they endorse. It is hard to predict therefore how Russian-Moldovan relations will progress because the Ukrainian crisis has caused growing uncertainty across the wider post-Soviet region.

Taken together, the crisis in Ukraine has further complicated the (geo)political situation in neighbouring Moldova from a number of perspectives. It is clear that Moldova will have to continue to negotiate a position between Russia and the EU, but it has decreasing room for manoeuvre in which to do this. As argued previously, EU member states should consider the Russia factor in their affairs with Moldova in more depth and, for example, separate the Europeanisation discourse from a security discourse.

Internally, the EU should ensure a streamlined position especially with regard to Romanian foreign policy. Moldova should also try to strengthen its regional cooperation, especially with Ukraine, because both countries now face similar geopolitical situations between Russia and the EU. For Moldova, the coming months will remain tense not only because of the surrounding geopolitical situation, but also because of upcoming Parliamentary elections that might lead to a domestic political earthquake later in 2014.

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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. Feature image: Moldovan Prime Minister Iurie Leancă at a meeting of the European People’s Party, Credit: European People’s Party (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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About the author



Ellie Knott – London School of Economics

Ellie Knott is a PhD candidate in the Department of Government at





LSE researching Romanian kin-state policies in Moldova and Russian kin-state policies in Crimea ([@ellie_knott](#)).



David Rinnert

David Rinnert is a Master of Public Administration dual degree candidate at the LSE and Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, with a focus on development and governance in the post-Soviet space.

Following his undergraduate studies in Berlin, New York and Paris, he worked in Georgia and Moldova. In addition, he is an independent policy analyst and has published several papers on the region. You can follow him on Twitter:

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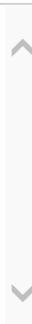
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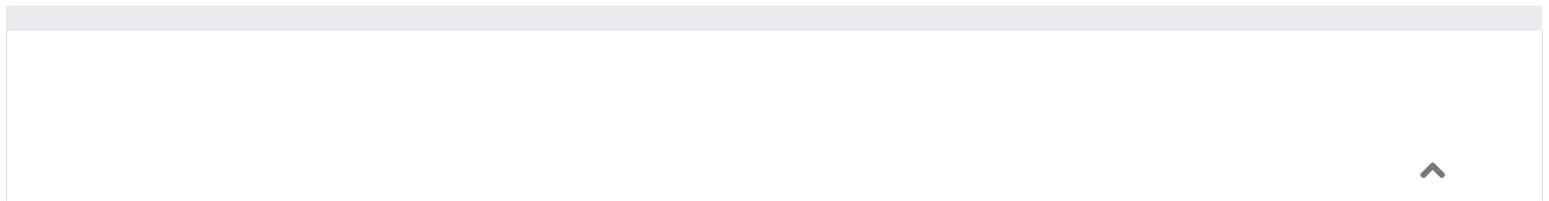
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