

Is Moldova the next Ukraine? Why the EU must address the concerns of Moldova's Russian-speaking minority

Following a high-profile banking scandal which involved politicians siding with pro-European positions, support for the EU has plunged among Moldovans, while Russia's popularity has soared. But can similar unrest to that which emerged in Ukraine be avoided? [Alexander Tabachnik](#) and [Nadav Kedem](#) argue that the EU ought to reengage Moldova through its civil society rather than its elite, and that it needs to take into serious consideration the concerns of the country's Russian-speaking minority – especially in separatist Transnistria.



The European Union invests significant efforts in its Eastern Partnership policy initiative, engaging with former Soviet republics in an attempt to bring them into the EU sphere of influence rather than the Russian one. Sometimes, the end-result has been war. Georgia was the first large scale example of a potential Russian counter-policy and today's war in Ukraine offers another one.

Moldova, a small former Soviet Republic clamped between Romania and Ukraine, is another potential point of instability. The country is inhabited by around 3.5 million people. This figure includes Russian-speaking Transnistria, a separatist entity within Moldova that has been supported by Russia for about 25 years. But can the unrest experienced in Ukraine be avoided in Moldova? And how?

Moldova, Russia and the EU

Since its independence in 1991, [Moldova has been maneuvering](#) between Russia and the West in looking to define its political and economic interests. During recent years, however, Moldova has been considered something of a European success story. Unlike [other former Soviet Republics](#) that either tried to avoid any commitment to the western camp or have lost territories to de-facto Russian control during recent years, Moldova has represented the opposite trend.

A [pro-western "revolution"](#) took place in Moldova in 2009. Since then, its authorities have advocated a pro-western stance and have attempted to imitate European practices. However, the [adoption of European](#) norms has been fairly limited. Effectively, entire government agencies and political parties are controlled by local oligarchs. Under such circumstances, the formation of a modern society with EU-like features is difficult.

[Various corruption scandals](#) involving members of the Moldovan elite – which is considered 'pro-European' – has swayed public opinion against Europe. The public's impression is that only such elite groups profit from the association with Europe. The 'highlight' was a scandal in which [around \\$1bn](#) was stolen from three local banks. The scale of the theft is the equivalent of around [15 per cent](#) of Moldova's GDP: a significant [blow to the Moldovan economy](#) which has led to an economic crisis and the [depreciation of Moldova's currency](#).

The crisis also resulted in [growing public support](#) for Russia. Many Moldovans questioned the logic of a rapprochement with the EU given the country's [strong economic relations with](#) Russia, a traditional market for Moldovan goods and the Moldovan work force. According to a recent public opinion poll, about 40 per cent of Moldovans support the country's rapprochement with the EU, compared with 78 per cent in 2007. A very disappointing drop, especially when related to the roughly [50 per cent](#) of respondents who support membership of the Eurasian Customs Union, which has become a major instrument of Russian policy in the post-Soviet sphere.

Reengaging with Moldova

Moldova can still be kept in the EU's sphere of influence: Moldovan civil society and the protection of minority rights are the key for a successful European policy. Instead of taking a step back in the face of poor consensus rates, the EU should now reengage Moldova through its society rather than the elite.

The public's reaction to the recent banking scandal gives some hope for the future. While Moldovan civil society has been rather passive and weak in the past, on this occasion it [rose up](#) and demanded a government resignation while asking for structural changes. This civil society can be nurtured by the EU as a major partner: as these events show, the EU now has an initial infrastructure to work with.

The primary task is improving Moldova's state strength and political stability. This task may be achieved by transforming Moldova's institutions, which should be purged of corrupted officials, and by forming an active civil society and rule of law. It is apparent that, without significant EU pressure, necessary reforms in Moldova are impossible. The EU should act in Moldova more decisively and compel Moldovan officials to conduct the required reforms. This is especially the case given Moldova is highly dependent on Western economic assistance.

However, this is not enough. The EU should learn the lessons from [Russian policy](#) in Ukraine and elsewhere: the concerns of the Russian-speaking minority (ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Gagauz and other people) need to be addressed. Otherwise, they will legitimise Russian political and military intervention at a later stage. This aspect is often ignored by international commentators; and yet, EU policy is likely to fail without it. If Moldovan nationalists have no alternative but to seek EU integration, protecting the rights of Russian-speakers in Moldova would diffuse much of their objections, while delegitimising a potential Russian intervention.

A major development in Moldova is not just a theoretical possibility: during recent months, the [situation in Russian-speaking Transnistria](#) has been deteriorating. The clash between Moldova and Russia over Transnistria was relatively frozen until recently, but the conflict in Ukraine has changed that. Landlocked between Ukraine and Moldova, Transnistria has found itself under an economic blockade from both sides, severely affecting its economy. The crisis is further aggravated by Russia's economic difficulties, making it harder for it to support Transnistria. The situation cannot endure much longer and may trigger a Russian intervention.

Moreover, Russia is nurturing a Gagauz [separatist movement](#) in southern Moldova. The Gagauz are a predominantly Russian-speaking Turkic orthodox minority group that supports rapprochement with Russia and opposes close ties with the EU. This is another hotbed of tensions which might spark an unintended escalation in southern Moldova and an overall crisis.

It should be mentioned that the roots of Transnistrian and Gagauz separatism lie in ethno-national and cultural grievances. From the end of the 1980s, the Russian-speaking population of Moldova has seen their rights curtailed: Russian schools have been closed, the Russian language is now all but excluded from the public sphere and Russian speakers have been removed from government agencies. Some Moldovan political parties have kept radical nationalist, anti-Russian stances.

Yet [ethnic minorities comprise](#) more than 25 per cent of Moldova's population and their cultural rights cannot be ignored. Thus, the formation of a truly liberal civic society in Moldova is impossible without the recognition of the cultural rights of minorities. The recognition of cultural rights and a more inclusive policy by state agencies toward



minorities would pacify the situation in Moldova, including Gagauzia and even Transnistria. These measures would also help downscale Russia's influence in the two contested areas.

Ultimately the EU should suggest a better alternative for Russian speakers in Moldova. It must recognise the problems facing the Russian-speaking minority, guarantee and promote their rights and protect their identity. To this end, the EU should also work in direct contact with the country's minorities. The formation of a real, inclusive civic society will strengthen Moldova's statehood – and a role for the EU institutions in this process is critical. A process facilitating the reintegration of Transnistria within Moldova could then begin.

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