

MGRES power plant from Cuciurgan, the breakaway region of Transnistria.
Photo source: Mădălin Necșuțu personal archive

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The Transnistrian File – The Ball and Chain Tied to Chisinau’s Foot on Its Road to Brussels

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Whether or not the Transnistrian file is resolved before the Republic of Moldova’s accession to the EU remains an equation with many unknowns. The current edition of the Foreign Policy Bulletin seeks to analyse from all angles the scenarios for resolving this issue, which has been dragging on for more than three decades, as well as the interests and attitudes of the actors involved in the process.

In an interview given to the foreign policy bulletin, award-winning analyst and decorated diplomat with 20 years of experience, Balázs Jarábik, explains his vision regarding the possibilities for resolving the frozen conflict in the Transnistrian region in a highly turbulent international context.

In the pages of the bulletin, the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Valeriu Chiveri, explains why it is important for this reintegration process to be

accelerated, but not forced, and notes that this is already happening de facto, as companies from the left bank of the Dniester River pay import and export duties to Chisinau, while many citizens from the left bank work and use the healthcare system on the right bank of the Dniestr River.

At the same time, TVR Moldova journalist Mădălin Necșuțu explains in his editorial why the Transnistrian file can also represent an opportunity for the EU, not just a problem, and how the Union can demonstrate political leadership, alongside the use of its financial instruments, in resolving this issue and potentially making use of this precedent in the future.

Last but not least, the Programme Director of the European Institute for Political Studies in Moldova, Viorica Țîcu, explains how Russia instrumentalises “sharp power” in the Transnistrian file, through a policy of “controlled freeze” that is closer to elements of hybrid warfare.

News in brief:

■ Citizens of the Republic of Moldova, who return to the country permanently, will continue to benefit from exemption from import duties on personal belongings and a vehicle, Radio Chisinau reports. The list of personal belongings that can be brought upon returning to the Republic of Moldova has been approved by the Government, in order to provide clarity regarding goods and facilities.

■ The next tranche of the European Union Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova, worth 168 million euros, is to be disbursed in early March, announced the Minister of Finance, Andrian Gavriliță. At the same time, the Government is counting on accessing a new tranche, of approximately 145 million euros, planned for mid-June.

■ The procedure for the acquisition of Lukoil assets by the United States «is moving forward,» claims the director of the Public Property Agency, Roman Cojuhari. He added that a court hearing is coming up to determine the final cost. The APP director specified that these are stations owned by individuals subject to restrictions, included on the list approved by the authorities. He emphasized that, from a legal point of view, the procedure has not been stopped.

The evolution of the situation in the Transnistrian region – from an economic and social perspective – is currently fully dependent on Chișinău



Valeriu Chiveri, the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration of the Republic of Moldova

Photo: Facebook

The Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration of the Republic of Moldova, Mr. Valeriu Chiveri, gave an interview to the FES/APE Foreign Policy Bulletin, in which we discussed the latest developments in the Transnistrian file. The discussion focused on Chișinău's future plans in relation to the separatist regime in Tiraspol and on how the Transnistrian file could become more important against the backdrop of peace discussions regarding Ukraine. We also addressed the issue of human rights in the region, as well as Chișinău's vision for resolving this frozen conflict in light of the European aspirations of the Republic of Moldova. We invite you to read the full interview:

■ There is a growing interest among foreign officials in the Transnistrian file. Can this phenomenon be explained by the international context in the region, including the Russian military invasion of Ukraine? What has changed to generate a greater, visible interest from Western partners regarding this issue?

■ You are right, there is significant interest not only from Western partners, but also from society in Chișinău and in Tiraspol. The possible explanation is, at the same time, both simple and complicated.

The geostrategic situation in the region has changed dramatically since the beginning of the large-scale war in Ukraine. It is considered that there is a

window of opportunity to accelerate the country's reintegration process. This perception is, in a way, true, but the issue must be viewed from several angles.

First of all, it is a window of opportunity primarily for the European integration process, which creates for us a favourable framework to also promote the conflict settlement process, simply because the right bank has become much more attractive to citizens from the left bank of the Dniester, even if less attractive to the so-called leaders in the Transnistrian region. This attractiveness will grow as the Republic of Moldova's European integration process advances.

This is the source of the interest, and obviously it comes in the context of discussions about a possible peace agreement in Ukraine or, at least, a ceasefire. Such a scenario could also create certain premises for the withdrawal of Russian military forces illegally stationed in the Transnistrian region.

■ **How would you honestly describe the current state of the Transnistrian file: management, stagnation, or regression?**

■ Personally, I have been managing this file for less than three months. Everyone expects spectacular and immediate results, but in reality, this period could not generate visible progress. Nor did we aim for such results in such a short initial stage. We did not start from zero; instead, we focused on a detailed analysis of the reintegration process and on a realistic assessment of the situation on the ground, which is very dynamic.

We continue to analyse the regional security situation and the influence of the external factors already mentioned – the Russian military presence and the war in the neighbouring country.

In addition, this period allowed us to engage in very active dialogue with international partners, to reconfirm their support for a peaceful and sustainable solution to the file. At the same time, we have kept the communication channel with Tiraspol open.

■ **In the context of peace negotiations regarding Ukraine, is it appropriate or not to give broader exposure to the issue of resolving the Transnistrian file, so that it is better heard during this period? Do you consider**

it appropriate for the Transnistrian issue to be addressed more vocally in international forums?

■ Our position is that these are two separate, distinct processes. Ultimately, it is not yet known what the configuration of a potential peace agreement in Ukraine will be, and it may not necessarily be favourable to the reintegration process of the Republic of Moldova.

We are focusing on our own priorities, on this gradual reintegration process, as we have repeatedly mentioned. At present, the core element is gradual economic integration, which is the most advanced component of the reintegration process. It is expected to become a locomotive for reintegration in other areas as well.

Increased dependency

■ **Is the Transnistrian region today more dependent on Chişinău or more geopolitically vulnerable than before 2022?**

■ It is an entirely different situation compared to what we had in 2022, and even more so compared to previous years. The evolution of the situation in the Transnistrian region – from an economic and social perspective – is today fully dependent on Chişinău, including due to the fact that the Transnistrian region has practically become an island between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

All commercial and economic activities are increasingly coordinated from Chişinău, including through the mandatory registration in Chişinău of all companies from the left bank of the Dniester involved in international trade activities.

As you know, the so-called customs duties have also begun to be paid. This process of economic reintegration will continue, including through legislative adjustments at the national level, to extend the common economic space across the entire territory of the country.

Difficult dialogue

■ **What type of discussions are you currently having with representatives from Tiraspol? What are the main topics on the agenda? Do you intend to hold tête-à-tête meetings with them?**

■ We have the established formats of communication. In the 1+1 format we have not yet had any meetings. However, there is ongoing correspondence with Tiraspol to resolve a number of issues. A 1+1 meeting is being prepared and we hope it will be organized by the end of this month.

The working groups are also active. Since I took office, three working groups were convened by the end of last year. Another working group, on environmental issues, is expected to be convened in the near future.

So there is communication at the level of, or through, the established formats. The topics are, unfortunately, older items on the discussion agenda: the issue of schools with Romanian-language instruction in the Transnistrian region, the issue of farmers and their free movement, access of journalists to the left bank of the Dniester, as well as other topics of interest to Chişinău.

At the same time, I would like to emphasize that we will shape the discussion agenda so that the topics included genuinely contribute to the country's reintegration process. What have we done so far? We tried to resolve important but punctual issues, which did not have a major or visible impact on the overall process. We want to slightly change the perspective and, alongside these topics, also raise issues that contribute to the country's gradual reintegration.

■ **It has been discussed since last autumn, in Brussels, through the voice of Prime Minister Alexandru Munteanu, about a reintegration plan of the Government of the Republic of Moldova, currently under discussion with the EU and the United States. What stage is this plan at and what details can you offer us about it? When might we see it in its entirety?**

■ Everyone is inquiring about the existence of this plan. I have explained, in certain contexts, about the possibility or impossibility of drafting such a plan.

If we are referring to a reintegration plan that would presume coordination with the authorities from the eastern districts, this is practically impossible as long as the leaders in Tiraspol do not recognize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. In the negotiation process there are two distinct positions: we, Chişinău, promote the country's reintegration,

while the leaders in Tiraspol speak about maintaining a status quo.

Therefore, such a plan, in the sense of a document agreed by both sides, is impossible to draft and implement at this moment. We speak, in practical terms, about a strategic vision, which will be followed by a reintegration plan and concrete actions over a fairly long period of time.

We are not speaking about half a year or one year, but about a longer horizon, since the processes are very complex. This is a difficult process and requires time, but also discretion. I would not say that such a plan is directly consulted with our partners, but they are informed about the actions we are undertaking in the context of drafting this vision. I believe that, in the not too distant future, some elements of this plan will appear in the public space through their practical implementation.

■ **Can we still speak of Russia as a “mediator” in the Transnistrian file, or must we consider it exclusively part of the problem? Can the 5+2 negotiation format still be functional in the current context?**

■ I can tell you, responsibly, that the 5+2 format is not functional, for obvious reasons, and looking ahead I have serious doubts that it could be revitalized. As long as Russia directly supports the regime in Tiraspol and as long as Russian military forces are illegally stationed on our territory, we cannot speak of a constructive mediating role for Moscow in the reintegration process.

Payment agent for gas, uncertain

■ **What is the current situation regarding gas supply in the Transnistrian region? Are there, at this moment, premises for a possible crisis situation in the context of gas deliveries to the region?**

■ Gas deliveries to the region are ensured on the basis of a less transparent and/or sustainable model. Crisis situations recur periodically, practically every 7–10 days.

We must consider the fact that the payment agent changes constantly, and the use of a new agent requires its verification by the European

side, in order to determine compatibility with the sanctions policies imposed on the Russian Federation.

At present, the region is supplied with gas for the current week. The gas supplier for the Transnistrian region remains the same; what changes periodically is the payment agent for these deliveries.

As I mentioned, the left bank of the Dniester is supplied with gas until the end of this week, but in a volume that is not very large, which does not allow the operation of major industrial enterprises, such as the Rîbnița Metallurgical Plant (MMZ), the Rîbnița cement plant, or other similar companies. The gas delivered to the left bank is sufficient only for electricity production and for covering the essential needs of the population.

■ **What is the current situation regarding human rights in the Transnistrian region? Have there been any improvements from this perspective?**

■ Personally, I do not see significant changes in the attitude of the structures in Tiraspol regarding human rights. I can tell you that Mr. Evgheni Șevciuk, the former leader of the Transnistrian region, has helped us, in a certain sense, to open the eyes of many people, including in other capitals, regarding the real situation of human rights in the Transnistrian region, by filing a lawsuit against the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation for alleged violations of his own rights.

In the documents that Șevciuk and his lawyers submitted to the ECHR, it is clearly mentioned that there are no functional mechanisms for guaranteeing human rights and that these rights are constantly violated in the region on the left bank of the Dniester.

Therefore, human rights remain an important item on our agenda. We will continue to call on the support of our partners, who can and already do contribute in this regard, in order to send a clear message to the leaders in Tiraspol about the need to return to compliance with fundamental human rights standards.

Reintegration and then integration

■ **Can the Republic of Moldova advance credibly towards the EU without a clear solution for Transnistria? Are there discussions with Brussels regarding possible European integration scenarios “with the Transnistrian file open”?**

■ I would first of all mention that we consider the reintegration of the Transnistrian region and the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU as two distinct processes. The ideal scenario would be for a reintegrated Republic of Moldova to become part of the European Union.

We must acknowledge that the objective of reintegration is complex and does not depend exclusively on the efforts of the Government of the Republic of Moldova. Earlier we mentioned the Russian military presence and the war in the neighbouring country. I would also add that in Tiraspol there is no political will for this reintegration process.

We consider that the European integration process offers real opportunities for the economic and social development of the districts on the left bank of the Dniester, but at the same time it creates a less flexible framework for conducting negotiations.

We are transposing national legislation in accordance with the *acquis communautaire*, but as long as Tiraspol does not wish to follow the same path, we can imagine that these two processes might have different calendars and different rhythms of implementation.

We will promote the idea that Moldova’s integration into the EU could imply a suspension or temporary postponement of the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* on the left bank of the Dniester, until the moment when the Republic of Moldova consolidates its capacities and becomes a much more attractive country. In that context, the reintegration process could unfold in a much more active manner.

■ **Thank you!**

Interview conducted by Mădălin Necșuțu

From crisis to opportunity: Turning fear into soft power in the Transnistrian file

Resolving the Transnistrian issue remains an enigma or, rather, an equation with multiple unknowns. It is difficult to anticipate how this file will evolve. On the one hand, it is clear that Russia does not wish to relinquish control over the region or abandon this bridgehead that it has used, in various forms, for more than a hundred years.

On the other hand, it is equally evident that the Republic of Moldova currently lacks both the socio-economic capacity and the security capabilities to reintegrate the small separatist region, which represents approximately 11% of its territory.

Moreover, the outcome of the war in Ukraine could reshape discussions on Transnistria along lines different from those currently in place.

For these reasons, the Transnistrian file remains “in limbo,” characterized by a volatile evolution that could lead to multiple possible outcomes—or none at all. At present, Chișinău considers reintegration of the territory before accession to the European Union as the preferable option.

Given that accession is realistically set for 2030, with discussions about a possible acceleration toward 2028, the Transnistrian issue would, under this scenario, have approximately 2–4 years to be resolved. The situation would become even more complicated if the pro-European authorities in Chișinău were to push for a referendum on unification with Romania. In such a case, we would be speaking of an entirely different strategy, and matters would grow significantly more complex.

What is evident, however, is that the European Union will no longer accept a frozen conflict within its borders—let alone the presence of Russian troops on its territory, such as those stationed for over three decades on the left bank of the



Mădălin Necșuțu, journalist at TVR Moldova and Balkan Insight
Photo: Facebook

Dniester. This reality could generate tensions and even a potential casus belli between Moscow and the EU or NATO.

Therefore, matters are extremely complicated at this moment. Even Russia no longer exercises full control over the situation in Transnistria. If the EU were to block the current scheme for delivering Russian gas to the region—via payment agents in the United Arab Emirates and suppliers in EU member states considered friendly toward Russia—the situation surrounding the Transnistrian file could become even more complicated.

A Process in Motion

What is certain is that the reintegration process has already begun in a certain form, and Chișinău's strategy appears to be working. More precisely, it involves projecting and consolidating a superior economic model. The right bank has long surpassed the left bank in terms of quality of life.

Today, a significant portion of the private-sector workforce from the Transnistrian region comes to work on the right bank. Many people commute

daily or choose to relocate permanently to live there. Factories and companies in the Republic of Moldova employ, in considerable numbers, Moldovan citizens from the Transnistrian region. This is an undeniable reality.

Moreover, more and more residents of the Transnistrian region seek medical services on the right bank. At the same time, impoverishment on the left bank of the Dniester is accelerating. Russia no longer possesses the strength, leverage, or financial resources it once had to support this small separatist republic.

The Sunset of Transnistria's "Eldorado" Era

Even the business empire of the mammoth company Sheriff is no longer performing as it once did. A significant portion of Sheriff Group's liquid capital has, for some time, moved to European countries such as Germany. As a result, the Transnistrian region is beginning to creak from a business standpoint and no longer represents the gold mine or "cash cow" it once was.

This is especially true given that the region is no longer umbilically linked to the port of Odesa, from which substantial revenues once flowed through smuggling and trafficking in weapons, drugs, and human beings. Crime in the region is no longer connected to ex-Soviet mafia networks or to Chişinău to the same extent as before. Thus, from being Europe's "black hole," the Transnistrian region risks becoming, under its current leadership model, an unattractive wreck—even for major organized crime networks.

Under these circumstances, the current separatist regime appears to be hanging by a thread. It is unclear whether its leaders are negotiating an exit from the region or whether they will remain loyal to Moscow to the very end—the same Moscow that once enabled their financial prosperity. We cannot anticipate whether the current leadership will abandon ship before it sinks or cling to the status quo until the last possible moment.

Yet even this is not the most important issue. What matters most is what Chişinău will do to reintegrate this region. One thing is certain: without massive financial support from the European Union, the Republic of Moldova will not be able to resolve this problem on its own.

From Fear to Action on Frozen Conflicts

The Transnistrian region should not be viewed in Brussels merely as a black hole, but also as an opportunity. Against the backdrop of enlargement fatigue—visible since 2013—the EU could take the initiative in the Transnistrian file and use this opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Financial resources and political will are needed, and these can be mobilized within a few years. The Republic of Moldova, despite the complexity of its challenges, can become a model of political success for the EU—an example of the Union's capacity to help resolve a problem left behind by Russia.

Looking ahead, resolving the Transnistrian file could serve as a model for addressing other frozen conflicts in the Black Sea basin. The reconstruction of Ukraine, as well as the situations in Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, could eventually follow a similar trajectory—provided Russia does not emerge victorious from its military invasion of Ukraine.

Thus, every crisis can also be transformed into an opportunity. Brussels should not approach the Transnistrian file with fear or indifference; on the contrary, it could use this experience to project leadership and soft power beyond its borders, in a world where competition is becoming the defining keyword.

In conclusion, although at first glance the Transnistrian file appears extremely complicated, it can also function as a laboratory for smart EU policies aimed at reducing Russian influence in Europe. A Russia that maintains various "thorns" within the European space does not contribute to the continent's consolidation.

On the contrary, such artificial enclaves—created and activated periodically by Moscow according to its interests—maintain structural vulnerabilities. Short-circuiting these networks of influence and these uncertain territories would significantly contribute to strengthening European security as a whole. That is why not only Chişinău, but also the EU, must act decisively in the Transnistrian file.

Mădălin Necşu

There are arguments for increasing the international visibility of the Transnistrian dossier, especially under current conditions

Balázs Jarábik, an award-winning analyst and decorated diplomat with two decades of experience gave an interview to the *Foreign Policy Bulletin* in which we discussed in detail the situation of the Transnistrian file. We addressed the current state of this dossier, in which two actors involved in the mediation process are in open military conflict, and how this sensitive issue can be approached pragmatically. We also discussed the parallel processes currently underway: the country's reintegration and EU accession.



Balázs Jarábik, political analyst
Photo: Facebook

■ How has Russia's war against Ukraine reshaped the strategic relevance of the Transnistrian conflict? To what extent is the region's future determined by the outcome of the war, and to what extent by Chișinău's internal political capacity and strategy?

■ Russia's war has simultaneously reduced Transnistria's strategic depth and increased its strategic sensitivity. The conflict disrupted key logistics and rendered Russia's role as mediator politically untenable, while Ukraine's security considerations now define the outer boundaries of any realistic settlement. The region's future remains heavily conditioned by the trajectory of the war, as Russian military presence and leverage are the core structural constraints.

At the same time, Chișinău's strengthened geopolitical orientation has narrowed its strategic options: in the context created by the war, EU integration is viewed as the only viable exit from the current "dead end". This places greater weight on Moldova's internal capacity and strategic coherence. The PAS government is therefore pursuing incremental extension of regulatory and economic jurisdiction—using energy policy and customs instruments to deepen practical convergence—

while deliberately avoiding premature political settlement.

A Cautious Approach

How would you assess the current level of political will and strategic coherence in Chișinău regarding reintegration? Do you see evidence of a structured long-term strategy, or rather reactive crisis management?

Chișinău's political will is strong but primarily security-driven, which makes it cautious in execution. The government's core objective is to prevent Russia from retaining a "backdoor" influence—Transnistria is explicitly viewed in this light—while keeping EU accession on track by separating accession from reintegration. What is taking shape is not a classical, deadline-based reintegration roadmap but a gradual convergence strategy: legal and economic alignment, sectoral working contacts, and instruments such as a proposed convergence fund.

The main weakness lies in coherence beyond the security frame. Capacity constraints and uneven

inter-ministerial ownership at times make the policy appear reactive rather than structured, even when the direction is deliberate. At the same time, the PAS leadership operates with a sense of political validation, having won elections despite energy shocks and sustained Russian interference—an outcome that reinforces confidence in its strategic approach.

Vulnerabilities and Risks

What are the principal political, institutional, and security risks associated with reintegrating a territory that has functioned for over three decades under a Moscow-supported separatist regime?

The principal risks relate to the integration of coercive structures, the economic and political costs of reintegration, and the danger of institutional capture. Transnistria's security apparatus and Moscow-linked networks would be the most difficult to absorb; without careful transformation or dismantling, they could embed long-term vulnerabilities within the Moldovan state.

Politically, reintegration could introduce a substantial electorate shaped by decades of separatist narratives, Russian media influence, and patronage systems—potentially altering national political balances. Institutionally, a rapid political deal without phased legal harmonization and properly vetted cadres could weaken state coherence rather than strengthen it. Additional security concerns include residual Russian leverage, the Cobasna ammunition depot, and the strategic energy nexus around the Kuchurgan power plant.

Greater International Exposure

Is it necessary for the Republic of Moldova to increasingly vocally discuss this Transnistrian file, especially in the context of the tripartite negotiations between the USA, Ukraine and Russia in the United Arab Emirates? Do you think it is necessary for Chisinau to be more vocal on the Transnistrian file at the international level?

There are arguments for raising the international visibility of the Transnistrian file, particularly as

current conditions – especially that the economic model is no longer viable following the 2025 energy crisis - create openings for reintegration. However, the government's instinct is to avoid politicizing the issue in ways that could reopen space for Russia to reassert a “legitimate” mediator role. In a context dominated by Ukraine-focused negotiations, Chişinău favors disciplined and targeted messaging: prioritizing security concerns such as troop withdrawal and Cobasna, while advancing practical convergence based on EU standards and principles.

Chisinau's objective seems to keep Transnistria on the international agenda—in terms of regulatory alignment and the newly established mechanisms for applying EU standards—without allowing the issue to become a bargaining chip within broader geopolitical negotiations.

There is a lot of talk about changing the 5+2 negotiation format, which is no longer functional today due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Would there be a need for another international format for discussions on the Transnistrian file, or should the discussion be moved “in a package” with the large-scale negotiation for peace in Ukraine?

The 5+2 format is structurally frozen, but it remains, in principle, the only internationally recognized framework that includes all relevant actors. In reality, no durable arrangement on Transnistria—much like broader European security—can be achieved without Moscow's participation. At the same time, a direct “package” linkage to Ukraine peace negotiations carries risks for Moldova, particularly if it results in Russia reclaiming a formalized role on Moldovan territory under unfavorable conditions.

In the near term, from Chişinău's perspective, the most workable approach is pragmatic: maintain the 1+1 channel and technical working contacts, deepen EU-supported convergence, and use specific security-related entry points—such as Cobasna, demilitarization measures, and energy transparency—for calibrated external engagement. From a Moldovan and European viewpoint, any future format should be anchored in European norms and credible security guarantees. However, the current U.S. approach—prioritizing direct engagement with Russia in the broader regional context—may ultimately reshape the environment in which the 5+2 format could be reactivated.

Reintegration — A Long-Term Process

Is the reintegration of Transnistria an achievable political objective or rather a long-term technical process? Do you think there is a risk that reintegration, in its current form, will weaken the Republic of Moldova from within?

Reintegration is more realistically a long-term technical and institutional process than a near-term political event. A political settlement without deep preparatory convergence—legal alignment, fiscal integration, vetted institutions, and security-sector transformation—would be fragile and could weaken Moldova internally, even though there is currently no realistic risk of renewed military conflict between the two banks. The risk lies not in reintegration per se, but in poorly sequenced reintegration that imports opaque networks and coercive structures into the Moldovan state. From a security standpoint, the government's gradualist approach is therefore rational, but it will require stronger administrative capacity, clearer staging, and sustained political discipline to prevent drift or institutional overstretch. At the same time, a growing humanitarian dimension—driven by the energy shock and deepening economic crisis on the left bank—deserves greater attention in Chişinău, both as a moral responsibility and as a strategic opportunity for confidence-building.

How does the unresolved Transnistrian conflict interact with Moldova's EU accession trajectory? In this context, is the frequently invoked "Cyprus scenario" a meaningful precedent, or is Moldova's geopolitical position too different for such a model to be viable?

This is the Achilles' heel of the government's approach: it assumes that EU accession can be insulated from the unresolved status of the left bank, yet Brussels is unlikely to accept a durable separation. While the EU provided strong political and financial backing to the PAS government, the post-2025 context is shifting toward firmer conditionality and "homework." Increasingly, EU officials emphasize that accession planning concerns "one Moldova," including the left bank.

The frequently cited "Cyprus scenario" is therefore a weak analogy. Moldova's security environment is more exposed, Russian troops remain on its territory, and the degree of economic interdependence is significantly different—over 80% of Transnistrian exports already reach the EU via the right bank. Chişinău understands replicating another Cyprus is politically unrealistic, particularly from the perspective of EU member states. As a result, government officials increasingly speak about post-accession protocols and structured convergence mechanisms, rather than assuming that a Cyprus-style accession model is viable.

The Transnistrian Issue through the Lens of Russian “Sharp Power” in 2026

*Analysis by Viorica Țicu,
Director of Strategic Programs
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In 2026, more than three decades after the outbreak of the 1992-armed conflict, the Transnistrian issue continues to represent a structural vulnerability for the national security of the Republic of Moldova. The current geopolitical context shows that the dynamics of this issue can no longer be explained exclusively through the classical concepts of *hard power* or *soft power*, revealing instead the perspective of *sharp power* instruments as an analytical lens for understanding its nature, functionality, and prospects within the regional security equation.

The concept of *sharp power* describes forms of political and strategic influence exercised by states with authoritarian political regimes—through subtle, asymmetric and often indirect means—aimed at affecting the decisions, perceptions, and political processes of other countries without the use of direct military force. The term was first used in 2017 in studies on invisible but effective power instruments used by states such as Russia and China to expand their influence globally.

The term was consolidated in a report published by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), entitled “*Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*.” The document responds to an increasingly evident observation in international politics: modern authoritarian states do not limit themselves to the traditional use of power to influence political processes and information environments in democratic states. The authors underline that, starting in the 2000s, authoritarian regimes, especially Russia and China, developed new systematic strategies, marking a fundamental shift in the



*Viorica Țicu, Director of Strategic Programs
at the European Institute of Political Studies of Moldova
Photo: Facebook*

way international influence is exercised. These strategies use subtle and asymmetric means to penetrate and manipulate the informational, political, and cultural environments of democratic societies. Their purpose is to create internal divisions, erode public trust in institutions, polarize opinions, and weaken democratic cohesion. Among the instruments used are disinformation, propaganda, financial support for favourable political actors, and media influence.

Forms of Action of Russian Sharp Power

In the case of the Russian Federation, *sharp power* manifests itself through a combination of informational actions, including modern technologies such as sophisticated mechanisms of automated disinformation and cyberattacks, aimed at undermining citizens' sense of security and influencing the behaviour of leaders in targeted states. In this context, Russia projects its sharp power particularly toward countries in the post-Soviet space, focusing especially

on supporting political actors favourable to Moscow's interests, through whom it undermines trust in state institutions, shapes public opinion, and exploits existing social and political divisions.

In the context of the Republic of Moldova, the concept of *sharp power* provides an analytical framework for understanding the political pressures exerted by Moscow, the effect of the military presence on internal decisions and perceptions, and the way disinformation campaigns, based on manipulation and falsehoods, contribute to shaping political and geopolitical narratives and influencing public perceptions.

By maintaining indirect levers of control, Moscow can influence the political decisions of Chişinău without resorting to open military confrontation. Thus, *sharp power* becomes a foreign policy instrument adapted to contemporary realities, in which information warfare and the manipulation of perceptions play a central role. The Transnistrian issue fits almost perfectly into this logic.

Sharp Power and the Transnistrian Issue in 2026

In 2026, the Transnistrian issue can no longer be analyzed exclusively within the classical framework of “frozen conflicts” in the post-Soviet space. Although the military dimension remains relevant, the current dynamics indicate a transformation of the region into an instrument of structural influence over the Republic of Moldova.

From this perspective, the conflict is not merely an unresolved territorial problem, but a strategic mechanism through which the Russian Federation maintains its capacity for indirect intervention in Chişinău's political and geopolitical processes. Moscow seeks to preserve and amplify its political and military influence over the Republic of Moldova, including in the Transnistrian region, using not only classical instruments of power but also sophisticated mechanisms of narrative influence and diplomatic pressure.

Moreover, in 2026, the dominant dimension of the Transnistrian issue is the narrative, informational-discursive one. The messages promoted by Russian officials aim to consolidate Moscow's image as an indispensable actor in maintaining regional stability, while simultaneously shifting responsibility for the deadlock in negotiations onto the authorities of the Republic of Moldova.

In this framework are also included the recent, provocative and deeply politicized statements of Oleg Ozerov, the unaccredited Russian ambassador to Chişinău. His public interventions challenge the official positions of the Republic of Moldova and attempt to redefine the role of the Russian Federation in the region, presenting the Russian presence in Transnistria as legitimate and necessary for stability.

Through this discursive strategy, Moscow seeks to consolidate its self-proclaimed status as a “guarantor of peace” and to externalize responsibility for the stagnation of the settlement process, attributing it either to Chişinău or to the broader geopolitical context.

Shifting Discursive Emphases

This discursive reversal is essential: Russia does not appear as part of the problem, but as an indispensable actor in its resolution. By amplifying these messages in the media space, the objective is to shape public perception and maintain internal polarization favourable to Russian interests. This type of discourse is neither accidental nor purely bilateral. It reflects a coherent strategy of shaping the informational and political space of the Republic of Moldova.

The narratives promoted pursue several objectives simultaneously: influencing public debate, weakening the pro-European consensus, fuelling identity cleavages, and keeping the Transnistrian issue in a zone of strategic ambiguity favourable to Moscow. Ambiguity thus becomes a geopolitical resource.

For the year 2026, maintaining the conflict in a state of “controlled freezing” serves this strategy. A definitive settlement would diminish Moscow's capacity to influence the geopolitical

trajectory of the Republic of Moldova. By contrast, the perpetuation of an ambiguous status quo allows for the periodic activation of the Transnistrian issue as a lever of pressure—in electoral moments, in international negotiations, or in tense regional contexts. The conflict thus becomes a mechanism of structural constraint, limiting the decision-making autonomy of the Moldovan state.

By combining latent hard power with active sharp power, Russia maximizes the dependencies and vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova without resorting to open military escalation. Transnistria is no longer merely a disputed territory, but a strategic vector of Russian influence in Eastern Europe. In this logic, the Transnistrian issue in 2026 represents not only a regional security problem, but an instrument integrated into a broader strategy of geopolitical competition.

In conclusion, the analysis of the Transnistrian issue in 2026 must go beyond the static paradigm of a frozen conflict. The region represents an instrument of structural influence, integrated into a broader strategy of Russian sharp power. By combining latent military pressure with narrative and diplomatic interventions, Moscow seeks to maximize the dependencies and vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova, maintaining indirect control over its geopolitical developments.

In this sense, the Transnistrian issue fits into a logic of multidimensional influence: latent hard power, active sharp power, and soft power through diplomatic instrumentalization. Russia does not need to alter the military realities on the ground to achieve its objectives; it is sufficient to maintain a controlled level of uncertainty and to shape discursively the perception of the conflict. Therefore, the assessment of the perspective in 2026 depends on the capacity of the Republic of Moldova to transform the conflict from an instrument of external penetration into an effective process of reintegration.

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