

# Policy Brief

## THE TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT: FROM STAGNATION TO STRATEGIC CONDITIONING

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### ● DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

The unresolved Transnistrian conflict and the illegal military presence of the Russian Federation on the territory of the Republic of Moldova (RM) constitute a direct threat to national security. The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, approved in 2023, explicitly defines this context as a major vulnerability that undermines the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the state.

The persistence of the separatist regime on the left bank of the Nistru River generates immediate and systemic risks. These include:

- political instability, fueled by hybrid operations carried out by the Russian Federation with the aim of derailing the country's European path;
- erosion of social cohesion by maintaining an artificial division of the population;
- insecurity among citizens, especially those in the Transnistrian region and the Security Zone, who are subject to systematic violations of their fundamental rights; and
- strained international relations, through the perpetuation of a hotbed of instability on the eastern border of the European Union (EU).

The reintegration process is influenced by three interconnected levels.

#### Locally:

the presence of approximately 1,500 soldiers from the Russian Operational Group of Forces (ROGF) and the ammunition depots in Cobasna represent a constant source of military pressure.

#### Regionally:

the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally altered the strategic balance, logistically and militarily isolating the Transnistrian region from its external patron and creating a unique window of opportunity for Chisinau.

#### Internationally:

the confrontation between the Russian Federation and the West, together with Moldova's status as a candidate country for EU membership, places the resolution of the conflict in a new geopolitical framework, in which the security interests of Chisinau, Kiev, and Brussels are aligned.

## ● OVERVIEW

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The conflict has been stuck for three decades because of the direct political, military, and economic support the Russian Federation has given to the separatist regime, as well as the ineffectiveness of negotiation formats, such as the "5+2" format, which has legitimized Moscow's role as a "mediator," even though it's part of the conflict.

These incursions undermine the sovereignty and official neutrality of the Republic of Moldova, endangering the safety of citizens and social cohesion.

In an already tense political environment (between Russia's hybrid pressures and support for Ukraine), such incidents can destabilize internal balance and relations with external partners. The war in Ukraine and tensions on NATO's eastern flank amplify the phenomenon, as Russian forces test European response capabilities through hybrid means.

The analysis is based on a dual reality. On the one hand, Tiraspol's political rhetoric remains pro-Russian. On the other hand, economic data indicate a structural dependence on Western markets.

**TRADE:** In the first half of 2024, exports from economic agents in the Transnistrian region to EU countries exceeded 80% of the total, while imports from the EU accounted for 53%.<sup>9</sup> This reality contradicts the political discourse and creates a decisive point of economic pressure for Chisinau.

**HUMAN RIGHTS:** The region remains an area where fundamental rights are not respected. The incarceration rate is estimated at 391.67 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants, significantly higher than on the right bank (235.01) and the European average (116.2), reflecting the abusive use of detention.

**DEMOGRAPHICS:** There are no recent and reliable demographic data for the region. The 2024 census, which recorded a population of 2.4 million people in the territory controlled by the constitutional authorities, did not cover the left bank of the Nistru.

The main internal actors are the constitutional authorities of the Republic of Moldova and the de facto structures in Tiraspol, which are dominated by the "Sheriff" economic conglomerate. The decisive external actor remains the Russian Federation, which sustains the conflict through its military presence and financial subsidies — particularly in the energy sector. The core mechanism perpetuating the conflict is the presence of Russian troops, which provide security guarantees to the separatist regime and deter any attempt to re-establish constitutional control. Public perception remains fragmented. While the majority of Moldovan citizens support European integration, in the Transnistrian region decades of propaganda have fostered a distinct identity and distrust toward Chișinău. However, economic pragmatism and the widespread possession of Moldovan citizenship indicate a latent openness to the potential benefits of reintegration.

## ● CURRENT SITUATION

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The Recean Government has pursued a policy of gradual reintegration, focused on maintaining dialogue and implementing development-oriented projects. In 2024, there were three meetings at the level of political representatives and thirteen sessions of sectoral working groups. Each year, through the "National Reintegration Program", funds are allocated for infrastructure projects in the Security Zone — for 2025, 25 million lei have been earmarked for 30 such projects. These actions are aligned with the objective of EU accession, aiming to gradually extend the EU acquis across the entire territory of the country.

However, the Recean Government's policy (as well as those of previous administrations) has suffered from a gap between the declared strategic objectives and the tactical instruments employed.

### **Legislative and Institutional Gaps:**

There is no comprehensive reintegration framework law that clearly defines the phases, mechanisms, and final status of the region, leaving space for ad hoc policymaking. Institutional implementation capacity is currently concentrated within the Bureau for Reintegration Policies (BRP), highlighting the need for a more robust and coordinated inter-ministerial approach.

### **Gaps in Dialogue and Monitoring:**

Reliance on dialogue formats where Tiraspol systematically blocks sensitive topics (e.g., the non-convening of the human rights working group in 2024) demonstrates the limitations of the current approach. State mechanisms for monitoring and documenting human rights violations remain insufficient, with the main role assumed by civil society organizations, such as the Promo-LEX Association.

### **Strategic Communication Gaps:**

Government communication remains predominantly reactive. There is no proactive, sustained, and multilingual campaign to explain to citizens on both sides of the Dniester River the tangible benefits of reintegration and the costs of perpetuating separatism.

For citizens living on the left bank of the Dniester, the current situation results in

chronic deprivation of fundamental rights. International reports document the absence of fair trial guarantees, the suppression of freedom of expression and association, the persecution of schools teaching in the Latin script, and the restriction of freedom of movement — particularly for farmers in the Dubăsari district, who are subjected to illegal taxation.

This reality undermines trust in state institutions and weakens national social cohesion.

## ● **CONCLUSIONS**

Maintaining the status quo is no longer a viable option. In the long term, failure to resolve the conflict: (1) compromises national security, leaving the state vulnerable to external aggression; (2) will block the EU accession process, as the existence of an uncontrolled territory where the rule of law is absent directly contravenes the Copenhagen criteria; (3) perpetuates an abusive regime that systematically violates the rights of Moldovan citizens.

A paradigm shift is imperative: from a policy of persuasion through dialogue to a policy of strategic conditioning, using newly created economic and geopolitical levers to enforce compliance with national legislation. This approach must be supported by transparent public communication and close coordination with external partners (Ukraine, EU, USA).

## ● **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Munteanu Government is recommended to adopt a three-level action plan with cross-cutting integration of human rights objectives.

### **A. GOVERNMENTAL LEVEL: RESTORING SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH REGULATION**

- **Full Fiscal and Customs Integration:**  
Establish a national mechanism that directly

links the economic benefits granted to the region — such as access to the DCFTA and banking transactions — to the cessation of violations underlying ECtHR judgments (e.g., ensuring the unrestricted operation of schools in the *Catan* group of cases) and to the practical restoration of victims' rights.

- **Adoption of a Framework Law on Reintegration:** Draft and adopt a comprehensive legal act defining a model of broad regional autonomy (based on functional European precedents), guaranteeing cultural and linguistic rights while clearly reaffirming the supremacy of the Constitution and the exclusive authority of the Republic of Moldova in matters of foreign policy, defence, and justice.
- **Ensuring Energy Independence:** Complete the energy interconnection projects with Romania and the EU to eliminate dependence on the Cuciurgan power plant and integrate the electric grid on the left bank of the Dniester into the national energy system, under the supervision of the National Agency for Energy Regulation (ANRE).

## B. SOCIETAL LEVEL: COMMUNICATION AND CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

- **Launch of a Strategic Communication Campaign (“Reunification”):** Implement a public information campaign, in both Romanian and Russian, to highlight the tangible benefits of reintegration and the European path — including economic opportunities, social advantages, and freedom of movement — for every citizen, while countering disinformation narratives.
- **Creation of a Transnistrian Civic Initiatives Fund:** Allocate resources, in partnership with external donors, to support joint projects by civil society organizations, independent media, and local communities on both banks of the Dniester River.

These initiatives should focus on human rights, local development, and investigative journalism, fostering trust and societal cohesion across the divided communities.

## C. DIPLOMATIC LEVEL: MOBILIZING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

- **Establishment of a Targeted Sanctions Mechanism:** Create an inter-institutional unit (comprising the Bureau for Reintegration Policies – BRP, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration – MFAEI, and the Intelligence and Security Service – SIS) to systematically document serious human rights violations and submit lists of individuals from the de facto Tiraspol administration to external partners (EU, USA, UK) for the application of individual sanctions — including travel bans and asset freezes.
- **Initiation of the Transformation of the Peacekeeping Mission:** In close coordination with Ukraine, the EU, and the United States, declare the current peacekeeping format obsolete and propose its replacement with a multinational civilian mission under an international mandate (OSCE or EU). This would serve as the first step toward the complete demilitarization of the region.
- **Securing the Release of Political Prisoners and Restoration of Fundamental Rights:** Set the unconditional release of all political prisoners (such as Vadim Pogorlețchi) and the repeal of recent initiatives that contradict human rights standards — for example, the so-called “Gurețchi Laws,” which criminalize appeals to national or international authorities — as non-negotiable conditions for any political dialogue regarding the region's final status. Individuals responsible for such abuses should be included in the targeted sanctions lists.