

Scrutinizing Security in the Black Sea Region: A Closer Look at Bulgaria, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova

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In the past years, it has become very clear that the Black Sea is of great geopolitical importance for Europe's security. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has also created turmoil in the Black Sea region. It poses major security challenges in terms of its military relevance, regarding energy supplies, in terms of connectivity, and the security of maritime trade routes. Russia's appetite for expansion endangers not only Ukraine, but potentially also the Republic of Moldova. Both the continuation and a possible end to the war are decisive for the future of the pan-European security architecture and for Russia's influence in the region. How vulnerable the West will further be to Russia will also depend on the US: the Trump administration in Washington publicly considers withdrawing a large part of US forces from Europe, which would have enormous security policy consequences for the Black Sea region, as Romania is one of NATO's strategic military bases with a strong US military presence.

The increasing threat posed by Russia combined with a potential withdrawal of US forces from Europe require the European Union (EU) to focus more strongly on the Black Sea region in terms of security policy and strategy. The EU and NATO member states Bulgaria and Romania, but also the Republic of Moldova, EU-candidate country since 2022, are under scrutiny and need to speed-up their national defense capabilities and resilience. At the end of May 2025, the EU consequently announced a new Strategy for a secure, prosperous and resilient Black Sea Region. NATO members are also closing ranks and decided at the NATO Summit in The Hague end of June 2025 (except for Spain) to historically increase their defense spending to five percent of GDP in the next years. The call for EU and NATO that they "must adopt cohesive strategies to strengthen security and economic resil-

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ience in the Black Sea, taking into consideration regional efforts by the littoral Allies”¹, is expressed in the recent draft report of Tamas Harangozo to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Where does all this leave the Black Sea littoral states of Southeast Europe? On the one hand, they are all strongly exposed to Russia’s meddling in their domestic affairs, either by means of corruption, disinformation, electoral interference, energy dependencies or by abusing its economic leverage. On the other hand, the war in Ukraine is for these countries immediately apparent and has a direct impact on their sense of security, against the backdrop of military support for or refugees from Ukraine, or as a result of Russian drones that more than once passed the Romanian border with Ukraine or even crashed on its territory or in its waters (Romania, Moldova and Bulgaria).

This special issue of *Southeast Europe in Focus* will offer an overview of security challenges in the region, combined with a perspective on both domestic politics as well as international strategies in the security realm with a focus on the Black Sea region.

In the **introductory contribution**, *Dimitrios Triantaphyllou*, provides an overview of the main security policy challenges (conventional and non-conventional) and the existing programs, structures, instruments and strategies on the part of EU and NATO to address them. The role of Turkey as an important regional power, NATO member and EU candidate is also discussed. After this introduction, we have asked three experts to take a closer look at three relevant case studies: These are **Bulgaria** (*Maria Simeonova*) and **Romania** (*Marian Zulean*), both NATO and EU members, and the **Republic of Moldova** (*Carolina Bogatiuc*), a recent EU candidate country that will hold decisive and landmark parliamentary elections on September 28, 2025.

The editors would like to extend their sincere gratitude towards the contributors of this volume.

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1 2025 – REVISED – THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND MOUNTING ECONOMIC CHALLENGES IN THE GREATER BLACK SEA REGION Tamas HARANGOZO (ad interim) (Hungary) – DRAFT REPORT 10 September 2025;
<https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2025-black-sea-report-harangozo-017-esctd> (accessed 13.09.2025).

Whither the Black Sea Region Today? More Challenges than Possible Paths Forward

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Executive Summary

- The fluid geopolitical landscape since the start of the Russian aggression in Ukraine since February 2022 and with the advent of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States reinforces the notion that the Black Sea Region is strongly influenced by developments in the rest of the world.
- Whatever efforts are underway, in particular by the European Union, they are unlikely to significantly impact the region's direction.
- The various regional and extra-regional stakeholders, like the European Union and its recent Black Sea Strategy, with their competing agendas and strategies further complicate any attempt to prioritize regional cooperation and integration processes and leave flank states like Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova exposed to the uncertainty brought about by the global realignment.

As the world, in particular Wider Europe, finds itself amid a fundamental geopolitical and geoeconomic transition, the Black Sea Region is also strongly affected by these changes. The continued Russian aggression in Ukraine since February 2022 has reaffirmed that both the August 2008 five-day war between Russia and Georgia, the annexation of Crimea in early 2014 and the simmering conflict in Donbass (Donetsk and Luhansk) since April 2014, are part and parcel of a greater Russia pattern of reassertion of its authority and *droit de regard* over the former Soviet space. The Russia-Ukraine war also affects the Black Sea Region overall by putting on hold or sidelining whatever initiatives, policies, institutions, and instruments have come to the fore since the end of the Cold War.

In fact, one of the biggest victims of the war is the attempt to promote inclusive policies that include the Russian Federation as well as its detractors to improve the region's economic, political, and social development. This approach has been particularly touted by the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) whose Ankara and Moscow-led approach has promulgated regional cooperation albeit the existing and growing strategic divide(s) since its founding in 1992. The war has also negatively affected the integrative

prerogatives of the European Union and its member states, albeit the consequential decisions regarding the accession processes of Ukraine and Moldova since June 2022. In other words, the freezing of integrative approaches in the region reflects the challenges to shape a stable European security order since the end of the Cold War. Despite the granting of EU membership perspective to Ukraine and Moldova, the distance to membership remains long and tenuous and uncertain if one is to judge by the decade long challenge faced by the countries of the Western Balkans. As if the region's challenges did not reflect an already difficult conundrum as to how to assess and tackle them, the Trump administration's reversal of the United States' 'get-tough on Russia' approach promulgated by the Biden administration has further compounded matters.

Evolving positions of key stakeholders

The evolving positions of key stakeholders need to be factored in the equation regarding the Black Sea Region. Marco Rubio, the US Secretary of State was clear in an interview on NBC, on 17 August, two days after the Trump-Putin Alaska Summit, regarding the Trump administration's Ukraine policy by stating that "This is not our war" and that "Life in America will not be fun-

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damentally altered” if the war in Ukraine continues.¹ On the other hand, Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, in an interview with the French LCI network two days later, on 19 August, called Vladimir Putin “a predator” and “an ogre at our gates”.² While Rubio’s remarks reflect a fundamental shift in the US position regarding the Ukraine war since Donald Trump was officially sworn in on 20 January this year, essentially backtracking on US policy regarding the Russian aggression in Ukraine since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Macron’s tone suggests a gradual yet steadfast hardening of position regarding Russia and its leadership since hosting Putin in August 2019 where he had declared “that the ‘architecture of security’ between the European Union and Russia needed reinvention to take into account of Russian strategic concerns.”³

The stress on Russia’s aggression in Ukraine since 24 February 2022 is important to understand as it overshadows and underpins everything strategic related to the Black Sea Region and its challenges, as is the Trump’s administration evolving position. A cursory look at the impact of the Ukraine war on the Atlantic Alliance is indicative, in particular with the number of references to terms such as “Russia (and anything “Russian”, “Ukraine (and anything “Ukrainian)”, “Euro-Atlantic”, and “Black Sea” in a number of NATO summit communiques preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, during the Russian aggression, and since the ascent to power of Donald Trump is telling.

Regarding the “Black Sea”, at the historic Vilnius Summit of July 2023, a dedicated paragraph emphasized its

strategic importance for the Alliance where this “is further highlighted by Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine”. There was also an emphasis on the need to uphold the 1936 Montreux Convention and “Allied regional efforts aimed at upholding security, safety, stability and freedom of navigation in the Black Sea region.”⁴ At the last pre-Trump era NATO Summit held in Washington in July 2024, the Communique included a focused paragraph on the strategic importance of the Black Sea for the Alliance together with that of the Western Balkans, *inter alia*.⁵

The impact of Trump’s policy reversal regarding Russia and its war of aggression is consequential. In contrast to the June 2024 G7 Leaders Meeting held in Italy where there were references in the Communique on the need to support Ukraine and to counter Russian aggression and strengthen the Euro-Atlantic space, there was no Leaders’ communique regarding the situation in Ukraine and Russian aggression at the June 2025 meeting.⁶ The relevant references were confined to the Chair’s Summary.⁷

The American Administration’s evolving Russia policy reversal impacts the Black Sea Region in multiple ways. First and most importantly, it further complicates the difficult consensus among NATO allies regarding Russia, its actions, and the ever-growing sanctions regime in place since at least the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

NATO Summit Communiques	“Russia/Russian”	“Ukraine/Ukrainian”	“Euro-Atlantic”	“Black Sea”
2021 Brussels Summit ⁸	61	26	29	4
2022 Madrid Summit ⁹	11	13	3	2
2023 Vilnius Summit ¹⁰	65	47	25	4
2024 Washington Summit ¹¹	43	64	19	3
2025 The Hague Summit ¹²	1	2	1	0

1 NBC: Marko Rubio says Ukraine-Russia conflict is ‘not our war’, https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/marco-rubio-says-ukraipne-russia-conflict-is-not-our-war-full-interview-245162053582?playlist=mmlsnnd_bestofnbc-nnd

2 Roger Cohen, “Macron calls Putin a ‘Predator’ and an ‘Ogre’”, *The New York Times*, 19 August 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/19/world/europe/macron-putin-predator-russia-ukraine-war.html>

3 Ibid. France’s pivot came about after the Russia invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with the Russian offensive leading France “to fundamentally rethink its approach to collective security on the eastern flank.” See, Élie Tenenbaum and Amélie Zima, “Return to the East: the Russian Threat and the French Pivot Towards the Eastern Flank”, IFRI Studies 119, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, June 2024, <https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/return-east-russian-threat-and-french-pivot-europes-eastern-flank>

4 2023 Vilnius Summit Communique, paragraph 79, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm

5 2024 Washington Summit Communique, paragraph 31, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm

6 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/14/g7-leaders-communique-borgo-egnazia-italy-13-15-june-2024/>

7 <https://g7.canada.ca/en/news-and-media/news/chairs-summary/>

8 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

9 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm

10 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm

11 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm

12 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm

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As Natalie Sabanadze and Galip Dalay clearly explain in a recent paper, *“The Black Sea is where Russia’s domestic priorities meet its external ambitions. This is where Moscow’s aspirations of territorial expansion and broader strategic objectives converge, and where Russia’s status as a global power is both tested and asserted. The Black Sea has become the primary battlefield in Russia’s struggle against Western hegemony and in the country’s efforts to shape a new international order – one in which Moscow secures what it perceives as its ‘rightful’ role as one of the world’s leading ‘civilizational centres’[...] The war in Ukraine, to a large degree, is Russia’s fight for dominance over the Black Sea region.”*¹³

The difficulty at deriving consensus regarding Russia, and by extension its role in the Black Sea region, is not only a Trump administration construct. The divergences among Western allies abound although Moscow’s actions in Ukraine have helped bridge the gap. The aforementioned references regarding President Macron’s changing views on Putin are a case in point as are Germany’s seminal decisions to invest in its defense or to insist on maintaining the Nord Stream 2 pipeline switched off, as well as Finland’s and Sweden’s decisions to put an end to their neutrality by joining the Atlantic Alliance, among others.

The Turkey Conundrum

The Alliance’s limited impact in the Black Sea Region can be attributed in large part to Turkey’s unwillingness to see its role as key regional stakeholder minimized in its attempts to compete as well as cooperate across the strategic divide with Russia since the end of the Cold War, unwilling to allow the region to become one of renewed great power rivalry as the conditions of the post September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States suggested.¹⁴ The growing attempts by Russia to assert itself in its near abroad and the pressures on Turkey to allow for more coordination among allies to counter the Russian threat has eventually

paved the way to increasing attempts by NATO to formulate a cohesive policy in the region. Although still elusive, the evolving NATO consensus has led to the aforementioned references both at the Alliance’s 2023 Vilnius Summit and the 2024 Washington Summit regarding the “strategic importance” of the Black Sea Region.

There has been much recrimination over time, though, as to which allies are to blame for the lack of greater NATO involvement. For example, many have blamed the lost opportunity to elevate Georgia’s and Ukraine’s status within the Alliance by granting them MAP (Membership Action Plan) status during the Alliance’s 2008 Bucharest Summit and bringing them closer to their eventual membership. While Turkey has a longstanding positive position towards NATO enlargement, it has repeatedly obfuscated when it comes to concerted NATO action in the region while opting for advancing multilateral cooperation at the regional level.¹⁵

The War in Ukraine and its Impact beyond the Black Sea Region

As the Ukraine war progresses, so does its impact beyond the immediate Black Sea Region. Russia’s reach beyond the Black Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East with its tenuous yet persistent military presence in post-Assad Syria and its growing presence in Libya suggest that both the war in Ukraine and the Black Sea Region cannot be perceived as disconnected from the wider geopolitical dynamics and the ever-growing divide between Russia and most of the West (albeit the Trump administration’s reservations and Turkey’s persistent efforts to minimize the Black Sea Region’s strategic relevance in the power play between Russia and the West).¹⁶ NATO’s Strategic Concept of June 2022 reflects in part the emerging consensus within the Alliance on the need to engage more with the region principally to make the Euro-Atlantic space more resilient in the face of the Russian threat.¹⁷ Yet, the obvious lack of clarity regarding the future of the Alliance by the

13 Natalie Sabanadze and Galip Dalay, “Understanding Russia’s Black Sea strategy: How to strengthen Europe and NATO’s approach to the region,” Chatham House Research Paper, Russia and Eurasia Programme, July 2025, DOI: 10.55317/9781784136543.

14 On Turkey’s role in and position regarding the Black Sea Region, see Mustafa Aydin, “Turkey’s Black Sea Policies (1991–2023) and Changing Regional Security Since the Russian Invasion of Ukraine” in Kornely Kakachia, Stephan Malerius, and Stefan Meister (eds.) *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region: Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Orders*, Springer, 2024, pp. 97–110.

15 See, for example, Tacan Ildem: NATO and Türkiye’s Black Sea/Caucasus Policy, Caucasus Watch, 27 January 2024, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/interviews/tacan-ildem-nato-and-turkiyes-black-sea-caucasus-policy.html>

16 The Russian presence in Syria is at the Hmeimim airbase and Tartous port on the coast, as well as at Qamishli airport in the northeast. See, for example, Samer al-Ahmed, “Russia’s military presence in post-Assad Syria: A growing security liability undermining stability”, Middle East Institute, 2 July 2025.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-military-presence-post-assad-syria-growing-security-liability-undermining>; On Russia’s presence in Libya, see Chris Stephen, “Putin’s Empire-Building Base Hunt Reaches Libya,” CEPA, 9 January 2025.

<https://cepa.org/article/putins-empire-building-base-hunt-reaches-libya/>

17 https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

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current US administration could imply that this could all be a case of “too little, too late”.

The effects of the war reflect many of the issues that make the Black Sea Region a focal point of the redefinition of the international order:

- Russia’s attempts to limit Ukraine’s extensive grain crop exports to the developing world and Ukraine’s strategies to ensure access of its grain exports to the rest of the world via alternative routes;
- the evolving energy diversification dynamics in the Black Sea/Caspian Sea region related to the decoupling from Russian oil and gas and the growing relevance of US shale gas exports to the region;
- overcoming the restrictions on freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and the constraints imposed by the Montreux Convention as well as the need to ensure stable supply routes of allied troops and military equipment to bases in regional countries;
- ensuring that Ukraine’s rare earth minerals are part of global supply chains to reduce dependence on China;
- the impact of the evolving nature of war and the defense industry’s interest in the real time testing of advances in military hardware (especially drones) in the battlefields of Ukraine;
- the increasing the impact of initiatives such as the Three Seas Initiative to enhance connectivity between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas while adapting to the realities of the conflict in Ukraine.

This implies both great power rivalry, compounded by a redefinition of global trade with the emergence of competing trade routes (some of which such as the Middle Corridor possess a Black Sea dimension) and a growing and evolving Chinese presence in the region as Beijing attempts to secure its own supply chain footprint in the region connecting its products to the markets of Western Europe.

In other words, the Black Sea Region cannot be perceived as detached from the rest of the world. It cannot be assessed as or viewed through the prism of a space consisting of only six littoral states (of which one, Russia, is either gobbling the others or increasing their insecurity while another, Turkey, seeks to recalibrate constantly its relations with Russia in order to keep other bigger stakeholders out while its strategic autonomy from the EU and the West is in full display), or

of 7 (including Moldova) or 9 (including Armenia and Azerbaijan).

Whither the European Union?

Where does this leave countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova which as front line or flank states are susceptible to Russia’s appetites in its neighborhood, the United States’ current lack of strategic clarity, Turkey’s perennial balancing act, NATO’s slow demise, and the primordial concern by European countries to play catch-up to meet their defense needs and ensure that Europe’s security is guaranteed? This is also happening at a time when the idea of the forces of European integration is contested from within in many EU member states and when pundits like former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi imply that the European Union is on the cusp of becoming irrelevant if it does not push through with reforms as it has now received a brutal wake-up call from the Trump administration.

At a time when the Union’s transformative powers seem to be arrested and it is experiencing a rollback of the influence of its values and norms, what possible dent could the new EU Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region adopted in May 2025 put on the forces of disintegration at play in the region? Although, paradoxically, one of the positive developments deriving from the killing fields of Ukraine has been to fast-track the process of candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova (and Georgia once it successfully addresses the various reservations linked to its status), the splits within the EU are growing. Hungary’s opposition to Ukraine’s EU membership and its reticence to support the delivery of assistance to Ukraine further complicates the Union’s impact on the Black Sea Region, as does more recently the addition of Slovakia which together with Hungary is upset by Ukraine’s bombing of the Druzhba oil pipeline which supplies some of both countries’ energy needs.¹⁸ It should also be noted that Moldova’s persisting Transnistria conflict makes this post-Soviet republic particularly vulnerable and any progress in its accession process especially tenuous.

Black Sea Strategy: A concrete step or a lot of hot air?

The EU’s new Black Sea Strategy attempts to refocus attention on the region by identifying five countries as relevant in the region – Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova,

18 Sandor Zsiros, “Hungary and Slovakia in spat with Ukraine over bombed Druzhba oil pipeline,” Euronews, 28 August 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/08/25/hungary-and-slovakia-in-spat-with-ukraine-over-bombed-druzhba-oil-pipeline>

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Ukraine, and Turkey – and calling for more cooperation with them. Still, it lacks “a concrete action plan, a clear implementation timeline, and, most importantly, a dedicated budget. Without these, the EU’s ability to translate its political intentions into concrete outcomes for the security of the Black Sea states will remain significantly limited. If it is meant to be “a response to ‘geopolitical challenges’ in a world where ‘dependencies are being weaponized,’ according to Marta Kos, Commissioner for EU enlargement,¹⁹ then it addresses the destabilization of the region brought about as a result of the Russian aggression while foregoing, for now, the promotion of a blueprint for the region post-conflict.

If its strategic approach remains largely declarative, this increases the risk of ceding influence to Russia in the immediate region and beyond it.²⁰ It also limits the conceptual space of the Black Sea Region by leaving out the countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) that have traditionally been part of previous EU processes to integrate the region such as the Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership, among others.

For all its possible deficiencies, the new EU approach might be laying the groundwork for regional, albeit limited, cooperation, for the time after the Ukraine conflict. However, it will probably be sidelined unless the Union tackles the challenges linked to its relevance and fails to concentrate on robust security guarantees for its member states and its candidate countries. In this regard, the big picture of where the fundamental geopolitical and geoeconomic transition will settle takes precedent over the focus on the Black Sea Region per se. This, unfortunately, means further vulnerabilities for the Union’s regional flank states and partners that will persist, if not increase, as they bear the brunt, after Ukraine, of the uncertainty brought about by the global realignment. It also implies a lack of possible policy prescriptions at this time other than focusing on increasing defense capabilities, safeguarding that rule of law and the functioning of democratic institutions, focusing on domestic reforms to ensure societal resilience, and maximizing their international engagements to raise awareness about the need to stabilize the Black Sea Region, at a time where the certainties of the postwar order within the Western camp are undergoing seismic shocks while those stemming from Russia re-

main steadfast in their attempts to influence the region and beyond.

19 See, Yurii Stasiuk, “EU launches major Black Sea plan with eye on defense as Putin hovers,” *Politico*, 28 May 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-black-sea-plan-putin-russia-ukraine-war-invasion-defense-security-military-weapons/>.

20 Bogdan Cosma and Laurențiu Pleșca, “The EU’s New Black Sea Security Strategy: Right Goals, Unclear Means,” Policy Brief, German Marshall Fund, 2 June 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/eus-new-black-sea-security-strategy-right-goals-unclear-means>.

Bulgaria: Surface Stability, Structural Strain

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Executive Summary:

- Following Russia's war against Ukraine, Bulgaria stands as a frontline country, central to the development of European defense and deterrence capabilities alongside the Eastern flank.
- Through the available EU defense funding mechanisms, Bulgaria is building up on a long-overdue military modernization program.
- The war in Ukraine resulted in a sharp decrease in Bulgaria–Russia economic and energy ties, cutting a major channel of Russian influence.
- The EU's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea offers a framework to revitalize regional partnerships within a broader Euro-Atlantic context, with the littoral states playing a major role.
- However, Bulgaria's strategic gains risk being undermined by the ongoing democratic erosion, political and societal polarization as they challenge the coherence of foreign policy decisions and raise concerns about the efficiency of future defense spending.

As a result of a broad consensus across political, societal, and business elites, Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, realizing its “civilizational choice,” as former President Petar Stoyanov (1997–2002) described the country's Euro-Atlantic posture after 1989. Today, however, this consensus has become more fragile. Echoing a wider trend of multiple crises' effect on European politics – as described by Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard¹ – the rise of reformist and populist projects in Bulgaria led to seven snap elections between 2020 and 2024 and deep political and societal fragmentation.

Domestic Politics Between Reform and Regression

From 2009 to 2020, Bulgarian politics was dominated by the centre-right and conservative party ‘Citizens for a European Development of Bulgaria’ (GERB), a member of the European People's Party family. Chaired by Boyko Borissov, GERB emerged as a pro-European party promising a European development of the country. However, over time GERB became emblematic of the problems it once pledged to solve. Allegations of corruption, the politicization of the judiciary, and entrenched clientelist networks increasingly undermined Bulgaria's institu-

tions. As a result, the country experienced mass anti-corruption protests in 2013² and 2020³.

In this context, new political forces emerged, most notably the parties ‘We Continue the Change’ (PP) and ‘There is Such a People’ (ITN), disrupting the dominance of GERB and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). However, none of the new formations succeeded in forming a stable government.

In 2025, GERB is again the biggest political party in the country and lead coalition partner. It is an uneasy coalition of GERB with its once bitter rival – BSP, and the populist ITN. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Rossen Zhelyazkov, a GERB figure who cultivates a solid Euro-Atlantic profile, aligns with EU and NATO policies on Ukraine and new defense spending conditions.

Despite of the instability, Bulgaria achieved key EU integration milestones in 2025: full Schengen membership and Eurozone accession set for January 2026. However, this progress contrasts sharply with persistent concerns over the rule of law and independence of the judiciary strongly highlighted in the recent European Commission's Rule of Law Report.⁴

1 Krastev, I. & Leonard, M. (2024), A crisis of one's own: The politics of trauma in Europe's election year, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/a-crisis-of-ones-own-the-politics-of-trauma-in-europes-election-year/> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

2 BBC (2013), Bulgaria protests: Clashes outside parliament, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24911566> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

3 Dzhabazova, B. (2020), Riot police and protesters clash in Bulgaria as corruption crisis deepens, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/02/riot-police-and-protesters-clash-in-bulgaria-as-corruption-crisis-deepens-407760> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

4 European Commission (2025), 2025 Rule of law report – Communication and country chapters, https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en (last accessed 29 August 2025).

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The erosion of democracy in Bulgaria cannot be solely attributed to GERB's political dominance. A recurring figure in the state capture debate is Delyan Peevski – an MP for the Movement for Rights and Freedom, oligarch and media mogul. Sanctioned by the U.S. and UK since 2021 for corruption, bribery and meddling into the judiciary, Peevski's influence over Bulgarian politics has steadily grown to a power broker. Having repositioned his party from the liberal to the populist-conservative camp, Peevski's rise has broader implications, raising concerns about Bulgaria's commitment within the EU and NATO.

Bulgarian Political Elites and Russia / Ukraine

Despite vocal divisions over Bulgaria's strategic orientation, there is no parliamentary majority that challenges the country's membership in the EU or NATO. Only one party in Parliament – Revival, a nationalist, far-right force – is explicitly opposed to EU and NATO membership, advocating for stronger ties with Russia and opposing any support for Ukraine. Other actors – including GERB, We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB), and ITN – support Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic alignment, even if their commitment to reforms or to Ukraine support varies.

GERB has long positioned itself as a pro-European force, despite a mixed track record on Russia. During its previous terms in office, the party facilitated major Russian energy infrastructure projects such as the construction of the Turkish Stream pipeline, which allowed Russian gas, similarly to the notorious Nord Stream pipelines, to bypass Ukraine and reach Serbia, Hungary and Austria via Turkey and Bulgaria. GERB has publicly endorsed Ukraine's sovereignty and European / U.S. military assistance, but the return of Donald Trump to the White House affected the integrity of GERB's support. In December 2024, Borissov announced his withdrawal of support for a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine, citing the change of power in the U.S. as justification.

As a rare outlier, a short-lived government led by PP's Kiril Petkov in 2022 positioned itself as reformist, taking bold foreign policy decisions such as expelling 70 Russian diplomats⁵ and refusing to comply with Moscow's blackmailing to pay for natural gas deliveries in rubles⁶. The government managed to set up alternative gas supplies from the U.S. and Azerbaijan following Russia's stop of gas deliveries to Bulgaria in April 2022. Despite a coalition mix of reformists, pro-European, populists, and even pro-Russian parties, the government managed to secure arms and diesel supplies to Ukraine from the first hours of Russia's invasion.⁷

In contrast to party politics, president Rumen Radev⁸ has increasingly adopted rhetoric that aligns with Russian narratives. In 2021, Radev declared that "Crimea is Russian, what else could it be?" – a remark that contradicted the EU's official position on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Despite of the following backlash, Radev maintained his stance and has consistently opposed military aid to Ukraine, reiterating this position during President Volodymyr Zelensky's 2023 visit to Sofia.⁹ His popularity, however, remains the highest (39% / Borissov 22.3%)¹⁰, reflecting not so much popular support for these stances but rather trust in the presidential institution as a perceived counterbalance to party politics.

Bulgaria's political majority remains pro-European, even as certain actors exploit geopolitical uncertainty. But coupled with weak state institutions and democratic erosion, a scenario of a geopolitical shift cannot be ruled out. This ambiguity complicates Bulgaria's ability to articulate a unified strategic vision within EU and NATO frameworks.

Divided Sentiments: Bulgarian Public Opinion and the War in Ukraine**Traces of Russia's Influence in Bulgaria**

In Bulgaria, Russia has consistently sought to exploit institutional weakness for its own interests. Bulgarian

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- 6 Strzelecki, M., Tsoleva T. & Polityuk, P. (2022), Russia halts gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria, <https://www.reuters.com/world/poland-bulgaria-face-russian-gas-cut-ukraine-crisis-escalates-2022-04-26/> (last accessed 29 August 2025).
- 7 Henley, J. (2023), Bulgaria secretly supplied Ukraine fuel and ammunition in early months of war, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/18/bulgaria-secretly-supplied-ukraine-fuel-ammunition-first-months-war-russia> (last accessed 29 August 2025).
- 8 Rumen Radev won the elections in 2016 as independent candidate supported by the Bulgarian Socialist Party. He won a second term 2021.
- 9 Oliver, Ch. & Melkozerova, V. (2023), Zelenskyy mauls Bulgarian president over his opposition to arming Ukraine, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukrainian-president-volodymyr-zelenskyy-mauls-bulgarian-president-rumen-radev-over-opposition-to-arming-ukraine/> (last accessed 29 August 2025).
- 10 The Sofia Globe (2025), Bulgarian President Radev's approval rating has dropped five points since January, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2025/07/16/bulgarian-president-radevs-approval-rating-has-dropped-five-points-since-january/> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

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investigative journalist Christo Grozev has exposed¹¹ Russian plans to destabilize Bulgaria as early as 2016. Espionage scandals have also revealed Russia's influence operations in Bulgaria. In December 2020, Sofia expelled Moscow's military attaché for spying.¹² In March 2021, a former Bulgarian military intelligence officer was arrested for leading a spy ring – involving officials from Bulgaria's Military Intelligence, that collected classified NATO and EU data for the Kremlin.¹³ Sabotage operations – including the 2015 poisoning of arms dealer Emilian Gebrev – further highlight Moscow's tactics. *Bellingcat* later revealed links between the nerve agent used on Gebrev and the Novichok poisoning of Sergei Skripal in the UK.¹⁴

Russia's influence runs also through pipelines. While under Borissov's rule Sofia completed Turkish Stream in record time – at a cost of USD 1.5 billion to taxpayers – it delayed for over a decade the interconnector with Greece, which would allow for diversification of energy supplies away from Gazprom. The interconnector was only inaugurated in 2022, despite being initially negotiated in 2009.

Still, the war in Ukraine led to the withdrawal of Russian corporate assets such as Lukoil Neftochim Burgas, the largest refinery in the Balkans, located on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast. The Russian energy group has considered selling¹⁵ the refinery since 2024, but the deal is still to be revealed. The Bulgarian government holds leverage over the sale and may block it to prevent penetration of entities linked to, for example, Russia, Belarus, or Hungary. The future buyer will show whether Russian interests still find their way in Bulgaria.

Additionally, Sofia has replaced part of its Russian nuclear fuel supply at the Kozloduy nuclear power plant with fuel from the U.S.-based Westinghouse cor-

poration. These shifts in the status of Russian assets in Bulgaria, which have long been weaponized by the Kremlin to exert influence in the country, are the major reason for the drastic decrease of Russian imports to Bulgaria by 81.3 % in 2024 compared to 2023.¹⁶

At the same time, Bulgaria remains one of the EU countries most targeted by Russian propaganda. Recent parliamentary elections were marked by Kremlin-backed campaigns amplified by the far-right pro-Russian party Revival and mirrored across a network of anonymous "mushroom websites".¹⁷ In terms of media output and social media posts originating from Russian diplomatic missions, Bulgaria ranks fourth in the Balkans with 1,572 items – far behind Romania, which leads with 7,193. The picture shifts dramatically, however, when looking at user interactions: here, Bulgaria takes the lead with 2.3 million interactions, compared to approx. 0.77 million in Greece and a drop to third place in Romania.¹⁸ This surge highlights the disproportionately high impact of Russian disinformation in Bulgaria.

Russia's disruptive activities in Bulgaria are a warning sign of Moscow's adjusted tactics of weakening EU and NATO countries not by conventional means, which could trigger a unified NATO response, but by means that fall below Article 5 of NATO, which is currently being complicated by the new administration in the White House.

Public Ambivalence: A Nation Caught Between Memory and Momentum

Despite public support for the EU and NATO, Russian propaganda is scoring gains. According to a European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) survey¹⁹ in 2025, 57 % of Bulgarians view Russia either as an ally that shares Bulgaria's interests and values, or as a necessary partner for strategic cooperation. Only 19 % of

11 Свободна Европа [Radio Free Europe] (2023), Русия е планирала опит за дестабилизиране на България по модела, приложен в Черна гора, каза Христо Грозев [Russia planned to destabilize Bulgaria using the model applied in Montenegro, said Hristo Grozev], <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32227331.html> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

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13 Deutsche Welle (2021), Bulgaria breaks up 'Russian spy ring', <https://www.dw.com/en/bulgaria-six-arrested-over-russian-spy-network/a-56934658> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

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15 Financial Times (2024), Russian energy group Lukoil considered sale of Bulgarian refinery to Qatari-British consortium, <https://www.ft.com/content/b77822f6-e2a7-420a-bb23-43a8d21548f2> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

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17 Wesolowsky, T. (2024), 'Mushroom Websites' Spread A Deluge Of Disinformation In Bulgaria, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-disinformation-mushroom-websites/32893788.html> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

18 O'Kelley, C. (2023), Russian Embassy Facebook Activity in Southeastern Europe, <https://disinfo-fence.eu/russian-embassy-facebook-activity-in-southeastern-europe/> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

19 Puglierin, J., Varvelli, A. & Zerka, P. (2025), Transatlantic twilight: European public opinion and the long shadow of Trump, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/transatlantic-twilight-european-public-opinion-and-the-long-shadow-of-trump/> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

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Bulgarians consider Russia a rival or an adversary, both significantly below the European average (60%).

According to another poll from 2024²⁰, nearly 30% of Bulgarians blamed Ukraine for starting the war – higher than in any other surveyed EU country. Fifteen percent said a Russian victory would be good for Bulgaria, compared to just 10% who saw a Ukrainian victory as beneficial. Similarly to almost all EU countries, about 90% of Bulgarians strongly opposed sending troops to Ukraine or increasing the military support for Kyiv.

But on the other hand, though one of the poorest EU-member states, a quarter of the Bulgarians responded that the war in Ukraine has shown that Bulgaria should be spending more on defense, even if that means cutting money on other areas such as health, education and crime prevention.

Weakened democratic resilience coupled with ambiguous public opinion elevate Bulgaria's political risk profile at a time when the EU and NATO ramp up the deterrence capabilities across the Eastern flank.

Bulgaria's Strategic Role in the Black Sea Theatre**Ripple Effects of War**

Bulgaria was in a strategically sensitive position following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Its proximity to the conflict made it a key transit zone, triggering concerns about refugee inflows and disruptions to critical supply chains.

More than 2.3 million Ukrainians passed through the territory of Bulgaria. However, as of June 2025, only 67,425.00 Ukrainians are under temporary protection by the Bulgarian state.²¹ Furthermore, less than 10% of the Ukrainians, roughly 4,500, currently receive state-funded accommodation. Of them, the majority suffers from chronic illnesses, and more than a quarter are

children. There is no official statistical information regarding the number of working Ukrainians, but the Ukrainian ambassador to Sofia has said that around 14,000 are active in the Bulgarian labor market.²² Despite the manageable number of refugees, the far-right party Revival has consistently promoted a populist narrative portraying Ukrainians as "refugee tourists" receiving preferential treatment.

Another immediate effect of the war was on the agricultural sector. Together with Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania, Bulgaria pressed the EU to respond to the negative impact of the zero-tariff on Ukrainian imports. The biggest issue for Bulgaria was caused by the cheap import of sunflowers as Bulgaria is the leading EU sunflower exporter with solid capacities for sunflower goods production. As a result of the free import of cheap Ukrainian sunflowers, the prices of local raw materials collapsed, with major Bulgarian processors and oil producers buying it up cheaply. This led to sharp discontent among farmers, who organized multiple protests across the country.

Ramping Up Defense Capabilities

As a Black Sea frontline state, Bulgaria faces heightened security risks following Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. The rapid evolution of regional threats, combined with shifting transatlantic dynamics, resulted in an altered geostrategic landscape. Bulgarian authorities and intelligence services acknowledge the seriousness of the Russian threat, including the possibility of aggression against other NATO member states.²³

As a response to the Russian aggression, NATO deployed battle groups along its Eastern flank. In Bulgaria, the multinational combat-ready battlegroup was established in March 2022, and Italy assumed the role of a framework nation. Recent signs show intentions to elevate the battlegroup into a brigade level.²⁴

20 Krastev, I. & Leonard, M. (2024), The meaning of sovereignty: Ukrainian and European views of Russia's war on Ukraine, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-meaning-of-sovereignty-ukrainian-and-european-views-of-russias-war-on-ukraine/> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

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In 2024, Bulgaria spent USD 2.208 billion or 2.04% of its GDP on defense compared to 1.5% in 2023²⁵ and 2022²⁶. The government announced plans to reach 3.5% by 2032. These novelties coincide with Bulgaria joining the Eurozone as of 1 January 2026. Sofia will maintain the current conservative fiscal policy but will benefit from the flexible fiscal rules on deficits as defined by the European Commission. In this context, Bulgaria will enter the Eurozone with stable fiscal parameters with the second²⁷ lowest public debt-to-GDP ratio in the EU standing at only 24.1% in 2024.

On a positive note, the war in Ukraine also revealed the potential of the Bulgarian defense industry. In 2022 alone, arms exports surged by 200%, primarily due to the provision of Soviet-standard ammunition to Ukraine. By 2024, Bulgaria had become one of Europe's leading exporters of munitions. On the import side, arms purchases increased by 920% between 2019 and 2023, stemming from two import deals with the U.S. for sixteen F-16 Block 70 jets in 2019 and 2022, reflecting the country's efforts to modernize its armed forces. The deals mark a major transition from the Soviet-era MiG-29 fleet to NATO-standard air capabilities.

The Bulgarian government has unreservedly endorsed NATO's 2025 decision to invest five percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in defense and security annually by 2035 at the latest. Contrary to expectations, this decision did not trigger a populist backlash. Within the context of the EU's Security Action for Europe mechanism, Bulgaria is preparing to borrow EUR 3.6 billion for comprehensive military modernization across all branches of the armed forces – land, air, naval, and digital.

Maritime security remains one of Bulgaria's most pressing vulnerabilities. In the summer of 2023, Russia's military exercises disrupted maritime activities and freedom of navigation in Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone. Long postponed, Bulgaria is now in a process of modernization of its maritime capabilities. Two multipurpose modular patrol vessels (MMPVs) are being constructed and expected to enter into service by late 2025 and 2026. These ships will be equipped with advanced weaponry and will benefit from a planned procurement of Link 22 communication sys-

tems from the U.S., improving interoperability and secure data exchange with NATO platforms.

In addition, the U.S. State Department has recently approved the sale to Bulgaria of a Naval Strike Missile Coastal Defense System and related equipment for an estimated cost of USD 620 million.

Bulgaria is also participating in the Mine Countermeasures Task Group Black Sea (MCM Black Sea) alongside Turkey and Romania. The group is tasked with clearing naval mines – an increasingly acute threat to commercial navigation and regional maritime safety.

Leveraging the EU's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region

A central priority of the strategy is the Baltic Sea-Black Sea-Aegean Sea transport corridor, aimed at fostering closer cooperation among countries across these interconnected regions which share similar threats. In this context, enhancing dual-use transport corridors – serving both civilian and military mobility – has become a strategic priority. In July 2024, Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece signed a trilateral agreement²⁸ to streamline the cross-border movement of troops and equipment, linking Black Sea and Aegean ports via optimized road and rail routes, the number of which is currently highly limited. But clarity on the state of military mobility in the region is still missing.

The success of the EU's strategic approach to the Black Sea will largely depend on effective strategic planning, sustained political will, and coordination across the region. It provides opportunities but these can be missed in case of compromised public institutions. The EU should therefore establish mechanisms to monitor strategic projects, including investment screening when national security assets are involved. With its EU and NATO membership and regional expertise, Bulgaria is well placed to drive forward the operationalization of the EU's Black Sea strategy – provided it sustains political will and aligns modernization with broader European efforts.

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26 Eurostat (2024), Government expenditure on defence, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/42728.pdf> (last accessed 29 August 2025).

27 Eurostat (2025), Government debt at 87.4% of GDP in euro area, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/2-22042025-bp?utm_source=chatgpt.com (last accessed 29 August 2025).

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Romania – A Key Player for European Security in the Black Sea Region

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Executive Summary

- Romania is a reliable member of both NATO and the EU. Pursuing political stability and a consensus on some strategic goals was a strength of the Romanian domestic policy until the elections in the fall of 2024, when a “Black Swan” type of surprise hit Romania in form of a hybrid attack that led to the annulment of the presidential elections.
- The new pro-European government is playing on the edge from June 2025, targeting to restore the public trust in political institutions while trying to repair the public finances and stimulate the economy, threatened by international credit agencies, the nationalist-populist opposition and the Damocles sword of a Russian threat.
- Despite some historical problems with Ukraine, exploited by the nationalist-populist opposition, Romania provided important humanitarian, economic and military contributions to support Ukraine after Russia’s invasion in 2022.
- Romania pursues an active and assertive foreign and security policy on the Black Sea. The country would like to assume a leadership role not only in strategy building but also in implementing the EU Black Sea Strategy. It therefore proposed to host the therein foreseen flagship initiative Black Sea Maritime Security. The defense capabilities of Romania are being expanded and the country adopted the defense spending targets agreed at NATO and EU levels in order to improve its defense and collective defense capabilities.

The Black Sea region has always been an area of strategic interest for Romania. For NATO and the European Union (EU), it became a strategic neighbor once the country joined both organizations in 2004 and 2007. The main goal of this paper is to present the role of Romania as a NATO and EU member in developing a substantial Black Sea Security Strategy. The first part of the paper assesses the recent domestic policy focusing on the public perception of security challenges. The second part briefly reflects on the impact of the war in Ukraine on both domestic and foreign policy, while the third part describes the national security and defense policy of Romania in the context of the Black Sea Security Strategy.

Domestic Policy: Pursuing Consensus and Political Stability

The Romanian politicians quote – very often – the famous diplomat Nicolae Titulescu, the former Presi-

dent of the League of Nations during the interwar period, who once said: “Give me a good domestic policy in order to give you a better foreign policy”. Titulescu wanted to explain the interdependence between a stable and efficient domestic policy environment and a credible and influential foreign policy.

The search for stability and consensus on foreign policy goals was a constant of all governing coalitions since 1995, when President Ion Iliescu and 18 leaders of all major political parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to ask for a consensus on joining the EU. Although I considered the so called “Snagov consensus” rather a foreign policy myth, I should admit that pursuing internal stability and consensus on foreign policy goals was a persistent preoccupation of the majority of political parties in Romania.¹ For example, when the Romanian coalition government consisting of three parties – the National Liberal Party (PNL), the Social Democratic Party (PSD),

¹ Zulean, M. (24.06. 2025), “Consensul de la Snagov” sau “Santajul de la Snagov”? [The Snagov “consensus” or the Snagov “blackmail”?], Contributors, <https://www.contributors.ro/consensul-de-la-snagov-sau-santajul-de-la-snagov/> (accessed 13.09.2025).

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and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) – saw political stability at risk in 2023, it presented the “innovative plan” to rotate their prime-ministers and ministers within the governing coalition for the next four years.² It furthermore changed the dates of all three forthcoming elections from 2024 for their benefit and made controversial appointments for electoral oversight bodies which raised concerns about the body’s impartiality and integrity.³

However, their ‘innovative plan’ that was meant to win all – the local, presidential and parliamentary elections – in 2024 and to govern together for the next four years failed miserably at the first round of presidential elections from November 24, 2024, when the independent candidate Calin Georgescu, a pro-Russian and anti-Western candidate qualified for the second round, alongside with Elena Lasconi, the candidate of the liberal party “Union Save Romania” (USR). Two days before the second round of elections the Romanian Constitutional Court unanimously annulled the results of the first round based on some declassified intelligence documents that alleged electoral interference from Russia and a suspiciously effective large-scale TikTok influence campaign in support of Georgescu.⁴ He was then barred from running again in the elections in May 2025.

The Romanian Constitutional Court’s annulment of the 2024 presidential elections sparked widespread interest in the mass media around the world, as well as among US leaders. The American Vice President JD Vance questioned the annulment of presidential elections due to “flimsy suspicions of an intelligence

agency and enormous pressure from its continental neighbors”⁵. Later on, the US Administration indulged the tone of criticism and accepted that “[t]he country was scheduled to rerun the first-round presidential elections in May 2025”.⁶ In his article in NATO Review, Corneliu Bjola from Oxford University addressed the allegations of Russian interference in the 2024 Romanian presidential elections, focusing on the evolving nature of hybrid warfare (algorithmic manipulation and cyber-enabled disinformation campaigns).⁷ As for the reasoning of the Constitutional Court decision, Bogdan Iancu explained in March 2025 in detail the annulment as a “militant democracy” decision.⁸ However, incumbent Romanian President Nicusor Dan admitted in a recent interview that he has no clear picture on what happened in the presidential elections of November 2024 despite some reports on a hybrid war and cyber-attacks of Russia on other EU and NATO countries.⁹ Mid-September 2025 the Prosecutor General Alex Florenta announced that former presidential candidate Calin Georgescu has been sent to trial in a second case along with over 20 individuals for attempted crimes against the constitutional order.¹⁰

The elections were rerun in May 2025 and Nicusor Dan, an independent candidate, won the elections with 53.6 % of the vote against George Simion (from the “Alliance for the Unity of Romanians”, AUR), who won 46.4 %. Then, a so-called pro-European coalition consisting of Social Democrats (PSD), National Liberals (PNL), the “Save Romania Union” (USR) plus the Hungarian Minority Party (UDMR) formed the new government on June 23, 2025, nominating the liberal Ilie Bolojan as prime-minister. The Bolojan govern-

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3 Badulescu, C. (2024), Freedom House. Nations in transit 2024, Romania, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/romania/nations-transit/2024> (accessed 06.09.2025).

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9 Ernst, I. (11 September 2025), President says not much clarity on Romania’s cancelled presidential elections yet, Romanian Insider: https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/nicusor-dan-despre-anularea-alegerilor-prezidentiale-nu-pot-sa-spun-ca-am-imagina-clara-fata-de-ce-s-a-intamplat-3408397?mc_cid=8dd5400e40&mc_eid=cd1f92f96c (accessed 14.09.2025).

10 Radio România Actualități (16 September 2025), Calin Georgescu, sent to trial along with over 20 people: <https://www.romania-actualitati.ro/news-in-english/calin-georgescu-sent-to-trial-along-with-over-20-people-id216550.html> (accessed 16.09.2025).

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ment promised to continue Romania's reformist and pro-European path, based on three pillars: order in public finances, good governance and respect for citizens.¹¹ The governing coalition holds about two thirds of the seats in parliament. However, the Bolojan government is playing on the edge: It is aiming to restore public trust in political institutions while also trying to consolidate the public finances and to stimulate the economy – all that alongside with some politicians who previously have caused the budget deficit (Romania's consolidated budget deficit rose to 4.04 % of GDP after the first seven months of this year).¹² Moreover, the government navigates between Scylla and Charybdis, i.e. between the requirements of international credit agencies and the threats of a nationalist-populist opposition. Already in September 2025, the Romanian government had to face and survived four non-confidence motions brought up by the three opposition parties in parliament.¹³

As mentioned above, rebuilding trust is a very challenging task. Trust in the Romanian political institutions has always been very low, but the recent electoral crisis led to the lowest trust in post-communist history. According to TRUEDEM, in 2025¹⁴ only 10 % of the Romanian public had trust in political parties, 16 % in the government and 14 % in the parliament. The same survey found that trust in EU institutions is generally higher in Northern and some Western European countries, while lower levels are recorded in parts of Southern and Eastern Europe. As for the case of Romania, the level of trust in European institutions is on average 40 %, close to the level of trust in Germany (on average 42 %), while the level of trust of Northern European countries is on average 60 %.

Having in mind those findings, one can assume that the Romanian troubled elections had a huge impact on trust in EU membership. The latest Eurobarometer "EP Spring 2025 survey" from May 2025 asked the question: "In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative

or very negative image?" About 45 % of the Romanian public underlined a total positive image, while 19 % showed a negative feeling, slightly less than the EU average.¹⁵

In a GLOBSEC study, trends from 2020 to 2024 show that Romanian society "is very supportive of the country's place in the Western alliance while expressing some doubts about the policies of the EU and NATO": 83 % of Romanians backed the country's EU membership, while 88 % support being part of NATO.¹⁶ Nevertheless, despite this very positive image of Romania's Western integration, Jana Kazaz identified for GLOBSEC some contradictory trends in her recent analysis: while 91 % of Romanians back membership in the European Union and 76 % of Romanians say they would defend their own country in case of foreign attack, the support for the narrative that NATO is a tool of U.S. control in Europe has risen from 29 % to 39 % in the past five years. Kazaz concludes that "Dan's victory offers a moment of opportunity – but whether it can become a turning point depends on how convincingly democratic leaders rebuild trust and deliver on their promises".¹⁷

The War in Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had an impact on its Western neighbors both regarding their domestic and foreign policy. Romania and Poland have the longest borders with Ukraine among EU countries and were affected not only in terms of humanitarian assistance but also regarding the threat perception of the public. Although Romania was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Ukraine and to establish diplomatic relations (1992), bilateral relations have experienced ups and downs. Among the issues in dispute were the question of territorial delimitation, the status of the Snake Island, the construction of the Bystroe channel by Ukraine, the rights of Romanian minorities and Ukraine's ambivalent policy on Trans-Dniester and

11 Romanian Government (June 2025), Programme for Government 2025–2028 of the PSD–PNL–USR–UDMRParliamentary Group of National Minorities in the Chamber of Deputies, <https://gov.ro/en/objectives/strategies-policies-programs/programme-for-government-2024-2028> (accessed 13.09.2025).

12 Dumitrescu, R. (29 August 2025), Romania's budget deficit rises to over 4 % in first seven months of 2025, Romania Insider: <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-budget-deficit-seven-months-2025> (accessed 14.09.2025).

13 Mihai, C. (8 September 2025), Romanian government survives first no-confidence motions, Euractiv: <https://www.euractiv.com/news/romanian-government-survives-first-no-confidence-motions> (accessed 14.09.2025).

14 Haerpfer, C. W., Norris, P., & Kizilova, K. (2025). TRUEDEM Online Survey 2025 (Version 1.0 – preliminary release) [Data set], TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project, <https://www.truedem.eu/resources-and-deliverables/online-survey-2025> (accessed 08.09.2025).

15 European Union (2025), EP Spring 2025 survey, Country Factsheets in English: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3572>, (accessed 08.09.2025).

16 Szicherle P. (02.10.2024), Public Attitudes in Romania: Staying in the West With Some Doubts, GLOBSEC: <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/public-attitudes-romania-staying-west-some-doubts> (accessed 19.09.2025).

17 Kazaz J. (21.05.2025), Dan's Victory and The Battle for Romania's Democratic Centre, GLOBSEC: <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/commentaries/dans-victory-and-battle-romanas-democratic-centre> (accessed 09.09.2025).

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Moldova. The 1997 “Treaty of Good Neighborly Relations and Cooperation between Ukraine and Romania” and bilateral negotiations solved most of those issues, but they remain today on the agenda of the Romanian opposition.

After the Russian invasion in 2022, Romania provided an important humanitarian contribution to Ukrainian refugees and supported the “Grain from Ukraine” initiative. However, the Romanian decisionmakers decided to classify the amount of military aid to Ukraine. That secrecy motivated the Romanian opposition to speculate that helping Ukraine endangered the country’s economic stability. The Fiscal Council of Romania was asked by an opposition politician from the “Alliance for the Union of Romanians”, Gheorghe Piperea, a Member of the European Parliament, to disclose the amount of aid. The Fiscal Council answered that it was 1.5 billion USD worth (2022–2025). The European Parliament estimated a similar figure, based on the Ukraine Support Tracker and the EU statistics.¹⁸

When a BBC reporter asked the former Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu about all kind of Romanian aid to Ukraine, his answer was invariably: “No comment!”¹⁹ However, during a visit of the Romanian Minister of Defense Ionut Mosteanu to Ukraine in August 2025, the Ukrainian Minister of Defense Denys Shmyhal revealed that Romania “has already provided Ukraine with 22 military aid packages, and soon our soldiers will receive the 23rd”²⁰. Shmyhal also mentioned that Romania continues to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16 Fighting Falcons and helps the formation of its air defense shield.

National Security and Defense Policy of Romania in the Black Sea Region

The Black Sea region was historically in the center of global power competition, starting with the Crimean War (1856). After the war, it shifted between being a so-called “Turkish lake” to a “Russian lake”, until NATO enlargement and Romania’s and Bulgaria’s EU accession.²¹ According to a Chatham House report of

2024, “The Black Sea is essential for Russia’s self-perception as a great power. Its regional policy is to create and leverage vulnerabilities by challenging the territorial integrity of littoral states, weaponizing energy and trade dependencies, disrupting connectivity, and increasing its military presence”.²²

Romania dedicated a chapter in its National Security Strategy 2007 on security and prosperity in the Black Sea Region, stating that “Romania has a fundamental strategic interest in seeing the Black Sea area stable, democratic and prosperous, tightly connected to the European and Euro-Atlantic structures”²³. After joining both NATO and the EU, Romania not only included the Black Sea region in its national security strategies but also advocated for an increased involvement of both organizations in the Black Sea region. Among other initiatives it contributed to the launch of the “EU Black Sea Synergy”, then lobbied the US Congress in 2023 to pass a “Black Sea Security Act”, and finally helped in 2025 to draft the “European Union’s strategic approach to the Black Sea region”.²⁴

Although the “European Union’s strategic approach to the Black Sea region” is criticized as being rather a visionary than a pragmatical and clear approach, there is a step further to accomplish the EU goals of supporting the democratic resilience of a region vital to Europe’s stability and prosperity. The new EU Strategic approach sees the Black Sea as a potential hub of security, stability and prosperity, based on three pillars: (1) enhancing security, stability, and resilience; (2) fostering sustainable growth and prosperity; (3) and promoting environmental protection, climate change resilience and preparedness, and civil protection. Based on these pillars, the Strategy came up with three flagship initiatives: 1) a Black Sea Maritime Security Hub; 2) boosting connectivity; and 3) reinforcing preparedness of coastal communities. However, what makes this strategic approach more realistic than the previous strategies is the fact that the EU proposal wants to coordinate its approach with littoral countries such as Turkey, Ukraine or Moldova.

18 European Parliament (2025), State of Play: EU support to Ukraine, EPRS_BRI (2025)775834_EN.

19 BBC Hardtalk (2023), Romanian FM: ‘What is important is to help Ukraine’, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0fcxsjz> (accessed 13.09.2025).

20 Dumitrescu, R. (26 August 2025), Ukraine says Romania preparing 23rd military aid package, Romanian-Insider: <https://www.romania-insider.com/ukraine-romania-preparing-23rd-military-aid-package-2025>, (accessed 09.09.2025).

21 Voicu, M., Kizilova, K. Zulean, M. (2023), Social Values and Identities in the Black Sea Region, Lexington Books.

22 Dalay, G., Sabanadze, N. (07 March 2024), How geopolitical competition in the Black Sea is redefining regional order, Chatham House: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/how-geopolitical-competition-black-sea-redefining-regional-order> (accessed 10.09.2025).

23 The President of Romania (2007), The National Security Strategy of Romania, chapter 6, page 32.

24 European Commission (28 May 2025), JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL – The European Union’s strategic approach to the Black Sea region: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/joint-communication-european-parliament-and-council-eu-union-unions-strategic-approach-black-sea_en (accessed 10.09.2025).

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All those strategies are well-intended, but unless they align with capabilities and are equipped with resources, they are doomed to fail. What are the Romanian military capabilities to contribute to such strategies? Romania is an active member of both NATO and EU and its army has a personnel strength of 90,000 people, 75,000 being active-duty military. Global Firepower, a data base on global military capabilities, assesses that in six to twelve months Romania could mobilize 251,115 active-duty military.²⁵ According to the latest National Security Strategy 2020–2024 “... Membership to the European Union and NATO, as well as the Strategic Partnership with the USA, are the foundation of Romania’s foreign policy ...”²⁶. The future National Defense Strategy will be presented to Parliament by President Nicușor Dan only within six months after he assumed office (May 2025). Still, he has already mentioned to Romanian diplomats that the “strategic trinity” will remain the basis of his defense and security policy.²⁷

On Euro-Atlantic burden sharing it is worth noting that Romania conceives its defense policy not only as a consumer but also a producer of security. Every year, the Supreme Council of National Defense assesses the defense capabilities and approves the Romanian troop deployments abroad, mainly its contribution to peacekeeping missions. On the other hand, Romania complements its self-defense capabilities with NATO capabilities. Thus, on the Romanian territory there are headquarters of the NATO Force Integration Unit (NFIU), the Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE), the Multinational Corps Southeast (MNC-SE) and a NATO Battlegroup as a NATO Enhanced Forward Presence, having France as a framework nation. As for the U.S. presence, Romania hosts the United States Army Garrison (USAG) Black Sea at the Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base (MKAB) as well as a

key element of the U.S. European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) Aegis Ashore. There is a plan to expand MKAB to become the biggest base in Europe.²⁸ The number of US American soldiers in Romania is 3,000, distributed over several military bases across the country.²⁹ Although there are some plans on US force reductions in Eastern Europe, some people consider that Romania holds the key to use Romania’s infrastructure, including the MKAB, for the use of allied force as Romania’s contribution to securing peace.³⁰

Regarding defense spending, Romania pledged after 2015 to spend 2% of its GDP on defense although it didn’t succeed until recently. Romania pledged in 2025 to spend above the NATO Guideline of 2% of GDP and above the 20% of all expenditures on military equipment.³¹ Moreover, it signed the NATO Hague Summit Declaration in June 2025 that agreed on a new 5% commitment, from which 3.5% should be spent annually by 2035 to meet NATO Capability Targets. Overall, Romania leads – together with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – the list of increased defense expenditure as a share of GDP on NATO’s Eastern Flank.

Another source of funding for defense and security comes from the EU, which became aware of the acute and growing threat and of challenges from a potential US withdrawal from Europe and came up in spring 2025 with a “White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030” and a ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030. SAFE – Security Action for Europe – is the EU’s new financial instrument (€150 billion) designed to provide financial support for the member states to speed up defense readiness. Within the SAFE program, Romania will receive an allocation of €16.7 billion to modernize the military and its infrastructure.³²

25 Global Firepower (2025), 2025 Romania Military Strength:

https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=romania (accessed 10.09.2025).

26 President of Romania (2020), National Defence Strategy 2020–2024:

<https://www.presidency.ro/en/president/core-documents> (accessed 10.09.2025).

27 President of Romania (26 august 2025), Speech of the President of Romania, Nicușor Dan, upon receiving heads of diplomatic missions, heads of consular offices, and directors of Romanian cultural institutes on the occasion of the Annual Meeting of Romanian Diplomacy: <https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/speeches/speech-of-the-president-of-romania-upon-receiving-heads-of-diplomatic-missions-heads-of-consular-offices-and-directors-of-romanian-cultural-institutes-on-the-occasion-of-the-annual-meeting-of-romanian-diplomacy> (accessed 10.09.2025).

28 Thorpe, N. (23 June 2024), Romanian village set to become Nato’s biggest airbase in Europe, BBC:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c977wggg4pgo> (accessed 15.09.2025).

29 US Department of State (January 20, 2025), U.S. Security Cooperation with Romania:

<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-romania> (accessed 15.09.2025).

30 Breedlove, Ph. And Howard, G. (August 29, 2025), Romania Holds the Key to Ukraine Peacekeeping, National Interest:

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/romania-holds-the-key-to-ukraine-peacekeeping> (accessed 15.09.2025).

31 NATO (28 Aug. 2025), Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025):

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_237171.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 10.09.2025).

32 Barac, P. (September 10, 2025), Romania receives the second-largest financial allocation of €16.68 billion under the SAFE Program to strengthen its defense capacity: <https://www.thediplomat.ro/2025/09/10/romania-receives-the-second-largest-financial-allocation-of-e16-68-billion-under-the-safe-program-to-strengthen-its-defense-capacity/> (accessed 10.09.2025).

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Due to threats posed by Russia on the Black Sea, the proximity of the war in Ukraine, and Romania's leadership in Black Sea initiatives in the past two decades as well as regarding its growing defense capabilities, Romania wishes to host the flagship initiative – the Black Sea Maritime Security. This wish was reiterated by President Nicușor Dan again at the recent visit of European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen to Romania.³³ During this visit, von der Leyen stated on Instagram "Romania is a key asset for Europe's security – keeping us safe, in the air and on the Black Sea".

33 *Președintele României* (1 September 2025), Conferința de presă comună a Președintelui României, Nicușor Dan, cu Președintele Comisiei Europene, Ursula von der Leyen [The common press conference of the Romanian President, Nicușor Dan, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen]: <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/declaratii-de-presa/conferinta-de-presa-comuna-cu-președintele-comisiei-europene-ursula-von-der-leyen-la-finalul-vizitei-la-baza-57-aeriana-mihail-kogalniceanu-si-la-portul-militar-constanta> (accessed 10.09.2025).

Moldova's Fight for Sovereignty

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Executive Summary

- The Republic of Moldova is at a critical crossroads, not only politically, but strategically. The war in Ukraine, the ongoing illegal presence of Russian troops in Transnistria, and an accelerating wave of hybrid threats have placed Moldova under constant pressure. Economic blackmail, cyberattacks, and disinformation are no longer distant dangers, they are daily realities.
- Moldova's status as a neutral country is being tested by a rapidly changing security environment. Small and vulnerable as it may be, Moldova now holds a key position on the geopolitical map of the Black Sea region, an area increasingly defined by instability, military build-up, and fierce competition for influence.
- While the parliamentary elections scheduled for 28 September 2025 represent an important test of the country's democratic resilience, they are just one step in a much longer journey. The real stakes go beyond a single electoral moment: they concern whether Moldova continues firmly on its European path or risks drifting back towards Russia's sphere of influence.

This paper provides an up-to-date analysis of Moldova's security environment and political evolution. It begins by assessing the regional pressures Moldova faces: the fallout of Russia's war against Ukraine, the strain on state institutions, and the renewed urgency of defence and resilience. It also looks at Moldova's relationship with international partners, including the European Union (EU) and NATO, and the specific vulnerabilities linked to the unresolved conflict in Transnistria.

The second part turns to the domestic front: the growing polarisation of Moldovan society, the competing influences of pro-European and pro-Russian forces, and the fragility of public trust. It explores how disinformation, identity politics, and economic hardship shape perceptions of Moldova's future. It also analyses how Russia continues to deploy hybrid tools, from campaign financing to religious influence to undermine Moldova's democratic institutions.

Taken together, these internal and external pressures paint a complex picture. The threats Moldova is facing are not hypothetical, they are real, immediate, and deeply interconnected.

Between War and Resolve: Moldova's Security in a Shifting Region

The war in Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped Moldova's understanding of what security means and what it demands. However, not everyone in the country comes to the same conclusions. According to the IMAS poll¹ (June 2025), 69% of Moldovans believe Ukraine is the most affected party in the war, acknowledging the human and material devastation. However, 60% consider that Europe has suffered more than Russia from sanctions, pointing to rising energy prices and inflation. This does not necessarily signal sympathy for Moscow but rather shows how daily hardships and repeated narratives can fuel doubt about the West's role and intentions.

Moldova's neutrality, once mostly seen as a constitutional formality, is now being pushed to its limits by real-world events: a brutal war next door, waves of refugees, relentless disinformation, and the collapse of old energy and trade ties. People have watched Russian missiles fall just beyond their villages and opened their homes to Ukrainians fleeing violence. For many, this experience has not only stirred fear, it has made the case for why Moldova needs to be anchored more firmly in Europe.

¹ Știri.md (3 July 2025), Sondaj: 66% dintre cetățeni sunt împotriva aderării Moldovei la NATO [Survey: 66% of citizens oppose Moldova's accession to NATO], <https://stiri.md/article/social/sondaj-66-dintre-cetateni-sunt-impotriva-aderarii-moldovei-la-nato/>, (accessed 18.08.2025).

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In the course of the war, state capacity has come under serious strain. The refugee crisis², energy shocks, and rising inflation have exposed weak points in Moldova's institutions, but they have also triggered important reforms and attracted strong international support. In recent years, Moldova's security relationship with the European Union has deepened in ways that would have seemed unlikely a decade ago. In April 2025, the EU agreed for the first time to provide lethal military support to Chişinău: €20 million for short-range air defence systems, together with another €40 million for mobility and command equipment.³ This was a major shift and a sign that Brussels now sees Moldova's security as directly tied to Europe's own stability.

A key milestone came in May 2024, when Moldova became the first non-EU country to sign a formal Security and Defence Partnership Agreement with Brussels. The agreement set out cooperation on defence, resilience, and hybrid threats, and showed clearly that the EU now treats Moldova as part of its security space, not just a neighbour at its border. This external recognition also comes with a stronger push for Moldova to strengthen its own defence at home.

Moldova's army is small, about 6,500 active personnel and much of the equipment is old. But since the start of the war in Ukraine, things have started to change. The defence budget grew from 0.39% of GDP in 2022 to 0.55% in 2023, with a goal of reaching 1% by 2030.⁴ Most of this money goes into modernisation, while training with partners has become just as important. In 2024, Moldova took part in more than 30 exercises with NATO countries, the highest number so far. Step by step, the country is building a more capable and better-connected defence.

Still, serious vulnerabilities remain. The unresolved conflict in Transnistria, where Russian troops remain stationed illegally, poses a direct threat. The region not only challenges Moldova's territorial integrity, but also creates risks for broader destabilization. Disinformation, energy pressure, and corruption often overlap with networks based in Tiraspol, making this more than just a frozen conflict. In fact, it is an active risk to Moldova's governance and reform efforts.

At the same time, Moldova is still navigating its place in the world. Once seen as a peripheral state, it is now at the centre of a broader confrontation between two visions: a democratic, rules-based European order, and an authoritarian sphere of influence dominated by Moscow. Moldova's choices and its vulnerabilities are no longer just national. They carry implications for the entire region, and for the future of the EU's eastern frontier.

This dual reality of internal transformation and external pressure defines Moldova's security outlook today. The challenge is no longer just about managing neutrality or resisting interference. It is about building resilience, aligning institutions with European standards, and ensuring that the country is not just protected, but anchored in a community of values where peace and sovereignty are guaranteed.

Whose Moldova? A Country Torn Between the East and the West

Moldova's political scene is marked by growing polarisation and tension, a dynamic that has only intensified in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections on 28 September 2025. On one side, the pro-European leadership continues to advance reforms and strengthen institutions, aiming to align Moldova with EU standards. On the other side, pro-Russian forces are exploiting disinformation, economic frustrations, and identity debates to weaken public trust in the country's European trajectory.

This is no longer a competition of policies, but a competition of visions. Should Moldova stay on the course toward EU membership, or turn back to its historic dependencies on Russia? For many years, this "geopolitical party competition" was more rhetorical than real. What is new today is that the choice of visions is tangible: EU accession talks are underway, while Russia's war in Ukraine and its pressure on Moldova give the alternative a sharper reality than ever before.

While support for EU integration remains resilient, particularly among young people and urban populations, other segments of the electorate, especially in rural areas or among older generations, remain influ-

2 UNICEF Moldova reports that, since the start of the war in Ukraine, almost 800,000 people have fled to the Republic of Moldova. About 116,000 remain, nearly half of them children: UNICEF, Every child is protected in the Republic of Moldova, <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/en/every-child-protected-republic-moldova> (accessed 18.08.2025).

3 Council of the European Union (24 April 2025), European Peace Facility: Council Adopts Two Assistance Measures in Support of Moldovan Armed Forces, press release, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/04/24/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-two-assistance-measures-in-support-of-moldovan-armed-forces/>, (accessed 18.08.2025).

4 Government of the Republic of Moldova, National Defence Strategy of the Republic of Moldova 2024–2034 (Chişinău, 2024), 8–9, https://www.army.md/img/userfiles/file/strategii/sna_2024-2034_en.pdf

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enced by economic links to Russia, pro-Kremlin media, or nostalgia for Soviet-era stability. Polls reflect this division. According to the *IMAS Barometer* from June 2025, 43 % of respondents support Moldova's European integration, while 41% oppose it. Attitudes toward NATO are even more divided: 66 % of respondents say they would vote against joining the Alliance, with only 18 % in favour⁵, a reflection of both disinformation and the legacy of constitutional neutrality.

Polling remains fluid, but the broader picture is clear: Moldova's future in Europe cannot be taken for granted. While elections are a key test of democratic will, the country's long-term direction will be determined by what comes after, through governance, reforms, and strategic consistency.

In this fragile context, Russia continues to exert pressure using an arsenal of hybrid tactics. These include:

- Financing political actors through informal channels, as revealed in multiple investigations by *RISE Moldova* and *Ziarul de Gardă*, pointing to coordinated cash flows toward pro-Kremlin parties and candidates during elections.⁶
- Turning energy dependence into a tool of pressure, particularly in winter, when Moscow has historically manipulated gas prices or cut supplies to create discontent and instability.
- The Transnistria card: The region matters less as a battlefield and more as a pressure tool. The Cuciurgan power plant located in Transnistria provides much of Moldova's electricity, giving Moscow leverage. On top of that, Russia uses Transnistria in speeches and media to scare Chișinău, spread anti-EU messages, and stir fears of instability around elections.
- Spreading disinformation, notably through coordinated networks such as the Russian "Matryoshka" system, which uses AI-generated videos and fake

international sources to attack Moldova's leaders and to sow confusion.⁷

- Building influence among religious figures, by maintaining regular contacts with over 900 religious leaders and 200 laypeople. Between summer 2024 and the second round of the presidential elections, many received monthly payments (ranging from \$300 to \$1,000) via MIR cards from the "Evrazia" Foundation, with the clear goal of spreading anti-EU narratives and ultraconservative messages.⁸
- Organizing cyberattacks, particularly around election periods, targeting government servers, media platforms, and critical infrastructure. In the first half of 2025 alone, over one thousand cyberattacks were recorded against Moldova's public institutions, including critical systems with many traced back to networks linked to Russia.⁹

The recent campaign by "Matryoshka" is emblematic. Based on a June 2025 investigation by *The Insider*, the network disseminated fake videos mimicking content from European institutions and media outlets to discredit President Maia Sandu and portray Moldova as a puppet of the West, a tactic previously used in Romania and Georgia.¹⁰ At the same time, official voices in Moscow, such as Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, openly accuse the West of "turning Moldova into a second Ukraine," and the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service warns of NATO transforming Moldova into a "military testing ground."¹¹

The governing Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), represented by Igor Grosu and strongly backed by President Maia Sandu, with Prime Minister Dorin Recean heading the government, has defined EU accession as a national objective, not just a political agenda. The government aims to open the first negotiation cluster with the European Commission by the end of 2025 and achieve to be fully prepared for membership

5 *Știri.md*, Survey: 66 % of citizens oppose Moldova's accession to NATO.

6 *Ziarul de Gardă* (2024), *Serving Moscow. Three months among Shor's 'slaves'*. ZdG undercover investigation, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxdk3EO6mk&t=25s> (accessed 18.08.2025).

7 *EUvsDisinfo* (3 July 2025), *Matryoshka's Moldovan Manipulation*, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/matryoshkas-moldovan-manipulation/> (accessed 18.08.2025).

8 *Jurnal.md* (May 2025), *Moscova a reluat sprijinul financiar pentru unii preoți ai Mitropoliei Moldovei, care să intensifice propaganda rusă* [Moscow has resumed financial support for some priests of the Metropolis of Moldova to intensify Russian propaganda], <https://www.jurnal.md/news/de5e8420c9774a55/moscova-a-reluat-spriznul-financiar-pentru-unii-preoti-ai-mitropoliei-moldovei-care-sa-intensifice-propaganda-rusa.html> (accessed 18.08.2025).

9 *Actualitate.md* (July 2025), *Peste 1.000 de atacuri cibernetice la instituțiile publice în doar 6 luni* [Over 1,000 cyber attacks on public institutions in just 6 months], <https://actualitate.md/peste-1-000-de-atacuri-cibernetice-la-institutiile-publice-in-doar-6-luni/> (accessed 18.08.2025).

10 *The Insider* (June 2025), *Russian bots from the 'Matryoshka' network target EU summit in Moldova with fake videos impersonating The Insider and other media*, <https://theinsider.ru/en/news/282450> (accessed 18.08.2025).

11 *Pro TV Chișinău* (17 July 2025), *O a doua Ucraină. Zaharova acuză Occidentul că vrea să transforme Moldova într-o bază NATO pentru confruntarea cu Rusia* [A second Ukraine. Zakharova accuses the West of wanting to turn Moldova into a NATO base for confrontation with Russia], <https://protv.md/ucraina/o-a-doua-ucraina-zaharova-acuza-occidentul-ca-vrea-sa-transforme-moldova-intr-o-baza-nato-pentru-confruntarea-cu-rusia---2731324.html> (accessed 18.08.2025).

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by 2030. On the other side, the opposition, led by Igor Dodon (former president, Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, PSRM), Ion Ceban (mayor of Chişinău, National Alternative Movement, MAN), Vasile Tarlev (former prime minister, now leader of the “Viitorul Moldovei” party), and Irina Vlah (former governor of Gagauzia, Inima Moldovei party) offers an alternative narrative aligned with Moscow.

In this light, the September elections mark an important milestone, but not a destination. Moldova's struggle for sovereignty, democracy, and European integration continues beyond the ballot box. What is at stake is not just the makeup of the next parliament, but the country's place in Europe for decades to come.

The Opposition's Playbook: Old Allies, New Tactics

Rather than presenting a coherent plan for Moldova's development, opposition leaders rely on familiar instruments: disinformation, promises of cheap Russian energy, and appeals to nostalgia for the Soviet past. These tactics are amplified through loyal media outlets, proxy organizations, and direct backing from Moscow.

On 10 July 2025, three well-known pro-Russian figures – former President Igor Dodon, former Gagauz governor Irina Vlah, and former prime minister Vasile Tarlev – travelled to Moscow to meet with Russia's Deputy Prime Minister, Aleksandr Novak.¹² The meeting was framed as a discussion about reviving Moldova's “historic ties” with Russia and securing the resumption of direct gas deliveries, a message clearly tailored to voters concerned about rising energy prices ahead of winter.

In their public discourse, these leaders position themselves as defenders of Moldova's “national interest,” often invoking neutrality and pragmatism. Yet their statements reveal a deeper ideological alignment. “I am not against Europe, but I am eurosceptic,” declared Igor Dodon, the long-time leader of PSRM, arguing that the European Union is becoming “a military bloc”.¹³ Such narratives are widely circulated in pro-Russian

media and aim to present the EU as a threat to Moldova's sovereignty and peace.

Both Vasile Tarlev and Irina Vlah are now vocal proponents of a return to close ties with Russia. However, their own professional and economic ties with EU countries, including Romania, cast doubt on the consistency of their messaging.¹⁴ This dual positioning, pro-Russian politics at home and European-linked interests abroad, raises serious questions about their credibility.

Meanwhile, their alignment with Russian political narratives echoes a larger strategy: to present themselves as a domestic “alternative” to pro-European forces, while simultaneously serving as informal channels for Kremlin messaging. Moscow has made clear it is ready to work with political actors in Moldova “who prioritise national interests over geopolitical games”, a clear signal of support for this part of the opposition.

This is not merely political strategy. It is a calculated effort to reshape Moldova's strategic orientation, using energy populism, disinformation, and selective economic arguments. These tactics intensified ahead of the elections and are likely to persist in the post-electoral landscape, making Moldova's already unstable political situation even harder to manage.

This raises a broader question: the EU has invested heavily in recent years to reduce Moldova's dependence on Russian energy, including through interconnections with Romania and integration into the EU electricity grid. Why then is Russia's narrative still so effective? The main reason is that the benefits of diversification are long-term and less visible to citizens. Price shocks and high bills are immediate, and Moscow exploits this gap with powerful messaging.

Another key figure positioning himself as an “alternative” is Ion Ceban, the mayor of Chişinău. Although he publicly claims to support Moldova's European integration path, his political trajectory tells a more ambiguous story. A former member of the Communist and then Socialist party, Ceban has long been associated with pro-Russian narratives and strategies. In 2022, a

12 TV8 (10 July 2025), Dodon, Tarlev și Vlah au mers la Moscova: Vor livrări directe de gaz, fără să explice cum ar fi posibil [Dodon, Tarlev and Vlah went to Moscow: They want direct gas supplies without explaining how this would be possible], <https://tv8.md/2025/07/10/video-dodon-tarlev-si-vlah-au-mers-la-moscova-vor-livrari-directe-de-gaz-fara-sa-explice-cum-ar-fi-posibil/285022> (accessed 18.08.2025).

13 INDEX.md (Telegram channel), (24 July 2025), post citing Igor Dodon: “I am not against Europe, but I am eurosceptic ...” Available at: <https://t.me/indexMLD/68903> (accessed 18.08.2025).

14 TVR Moldova, (11 July 2025), Tarlev și Vlah, cu afaceri în România, discută la Moscova, reluarea „relațiilor seculare” [Tarlev and Vlah, with businesses in Romania, discuss in Moscow the resumption of ‘secular relations’], <https://tvrmdmoldova.md/article/010298ac80d52b9e/tarlev-si-vlah-cu-afaceri-in-romania-discuta-la-moscova-reluarea-relatiilor-seculare.html> (accessed 18.08.2025).

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U.S. government report¹⁵ linked his party, the National Alternative Movement (MAN) to a broader influence network coordinated by former FSB officer Iurii Gudilin, a connection Ceban has firmly denied.

In July 2025, Romanian authorities barred Ceban from entering both Romania and the Schengen Area for five years, citing national security concerns.¹⁶ This unprecedented move highlights the seriousness with which regional partners treat his political connections and influence. Despite this, Ceban continues to brand his party as centrist and solution-oriented, seeking to appeal to voters disillusioned with both the current government and overtly pro-Russian factions.

Ceban's case underscores a broader pattern in Moldovan politics: the opposition to the pro-European government consists of actors who publicly distance themselves from Moscow while maintaining opaque ties, ambiguous messaging, or have had past affiliations that align with Russian strategic interests. As Moldova moves forward with its EU accession process, the durability of these influence networks will continue to shape both domestic politics and foreign policy alignment.

Looking Ahead: Moldova's Strategic Choice and Europe's Response

The coming months will determine not just Moldova's political leadership, but its long-term strategic identity. The September 2025 elections will either consolidate the country's European momentum or mark a dangerous drift back into uncertainty and external dependency.

The European Union, for its part, has made unprecedented commitments. Through the €1.9 billion EU Growth Plan, Moldova stands to benefit from accelerated funding, structural reforms, and deeper integration into the single market. This long-term support is complemented by immediate assistance to address current vulnerabilities. In early 2025, the EU approved a €64 million emergency package to help Moldova manage the energy crisis. Of this, €30 million were allocated for the joint purchase of gas and electricity for

both banks of the Dniester, including €20 million in humanitarian support specifically for the Transnistrian region.¹⁷ This approach underscores that EU solidarity extends to all communities, regardless of political divisions.

The historic Moldova-EU summit in Chişinău reinforced this message: Moldova is no longer seen as being caught in between, but as part of Europe's strategic future.¹⁸ But external support, no matter how robust, cannot substitute for domestic clarity and political will. Moldova's security, prosperity, and sovereignty depend on staying on the course of reform and resisting the pull of authoritarian influence. This is not just a national challenge, it is a European test.

The new legislative term faces a defining task: to anchor Moldova's European path through concrete reforms. This means advancing justice reform and anti-corruption, implementing the EU Growth Plan, and consolidating the country's energy independence. These are not abstract goals, they are the conditions that will decide whether Moldova moves closer to EU membership or risks falling back into vulnerability.

Ultimately, Moldova's sovereignty will depend not only on external guarantees, but on its citizens' ability to sustain reforms and reject manipulation.

15 U.S. Department of the Treasury (26 October 2022), Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin's Malign Influence Operations in Moldova, Press Release, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1049?utm> (accessed 18.08.2025).

16 Reuters (10 July 2025), Romania bans Moldovan mayor from border-free Schengen area, ministry says, <https://www.reuters.com/world/romania-bans-moldovan-mayor-border-free-schengen-area-ministry-says-2025-07-09/> (accessed 18.08.2025).

17 European Commission (27 January 2025), The EU offers emergency support to tackle the energy crisis in Moldova, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_329 (accessed 18.08.2025).

18 European Council (4 July 2025), EU-Moldova summit, <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20250704-eu-moldova-summit> (accessed 18.08.2025).