



On September 8, 2026, FES Moldova launched the study "The Republic of Moldova's Strategic Dilemma: EU Accession, Territorial Reintegration, and Lessons from the Cyprus Case."

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Two Objectives, One Dilemma: Moldova's European Path and Territorial Reintegration

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The relationship between EU accession and the Republic of Moldova's reintegration is the focus of this edition of the FES/APE foreign policy bulletin. It examines the study on this issue produced by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and authored by Denis Cenușă and Alexandru Flenchea. It presents three scenarios – accession as a reintegrated state, accession before reintegration, and the stagnation of both processes – and stresses the importance of developing a reintegration strategy during the pre-accession period.

A summary of the conference organised by FES Moldova to present the study brings together Moldovan and Cypriot experts' perspectives on the costs of an unresolved conflict, the Russian military presence and the need for political consensus in Chisinau. It highlights their warning that joining the EU does not gua-

rantee reunification and may reduce pressure to resolve the conflict.

In an interview, Cypriot professor Ahmet Sözen explains the limits of comparing the Transnistrian issue with Cyprus and proposes an agreement linking the stages of accession to concrete steps towards reintegration. He argues that the withdrawal of Russian troops, the region's status, the integration of institutions and the application of EU law should be addressed before accession, rather than postponed until afterwards.

Natalia Stercul's editorial examines the fiscal unification of the two banks and Moscow's response. It interprets the distribution of Russian passports and the opening of unauthorised polling stations in the region as tools for maintaining Russian influence, which complicate political reintegration despite growing economic ties.

News in brief:

President Maia Sandu met with a delegation of the Czech Senate led by Pavel Fischer on 22 September to discuss Czech support for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession, security cooperation and development assistance projects.

Foreign Minister Mihai Popșoi met his Hungarian counterpart, Anita Orbán, in New York on 22 September. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, she reaffirmed Hungary's support for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession on its own merits. Popșoi invited her to visit Chisinau. Their discussions focused on Moldova's European path, economic cooperation, expanding trade and attracting investment.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the holding of Russian State Duma elections in the Transnistrian region on 18–20 September without Chisinau's consent. The Moldovan authorities had authorised only one polling station, at the Russian Embassy in Chisinau. The ministry reiterated that electoral processes organised by another state in the Transnistrian region have no legal effect.

The Republic of Moldova Between EU Accession and Reintegration: Lessons from Cyprus

Summary of the discussions at the conference “The Republic of Moldova’s EU Accession and Territorial Reintegration: Scenarios, Risks and Lessons from Cyprus” by Madalin Necsutu



The Republic of Moldova is moving closer to the European Union with two strategic objectives that must be considered together: EU accession and territorial reintegration. Can the two processes advance simultaneously? Must one precede the other? And what happens if the Republic of Moldova reaches the point of accession without a solution for the Transnistrian region?

These questions were at the heart of the conference organised by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Moldova in Chisinau on 8 September 2026 to present a study authored by Denis Cenusa and Alexandru Flenchea. The discussion went beyond the three scenarios proposed by the authors. Moldovan experts and guests from Cyprus, Professors Hubert Faustmann and Ahmet Sözen, addressed the costs of the continuing conflict, Russia's role and the presence of Russian troops, economic interests in Tiraspol, the need for political consensus in Chisinau, and the risk that EU accession could subsequently reduce the pressure for reintegration.

The experience of Cyprus thus offered, above all, a warning: a state with a divided territory can join the EU, but membership does not guarantee subsequent reunification.

Felix Hett: **Two National Objectives**



Opening the conference, Felix Hett, the representative of FES Moldova, began with the link between the two national priorities: European integration and territorial reintegration. The question, he stressed, is whether the objectives “could be achieved simultaneously” or whether they must be pursued in a particular order.

For this reason, the study does not attempt to predict the future. Its three scenarios describe plausible developments; they are not forecasts. The distinction matters in a regional context that, according to Hett, is far less predictable than it was ten or 15 years ago.

Nor is the experience of Cyprus presented as a blueprint for the Republic of Moldova. It does, however, allow an examination of the consequences that strategic decisions may have both before and after accession.

Denis Cenușă: **Two National Projects That Must Be Considered Together**

For Denis Cenușă, an associate expert at the Centre for Eastern Studies in Lithuania and the Moldovan



think tank Expert-Grup, the starting point is the difference between the two processes. EU accession has a relatively predictable structure of negotiations, stages and objectives. Reintegration has no comparable framework.

Nevertheless, the processes are interdependent. Cenușă noted that messages from the EU increasingly point to the need to address the Transnistrian conflict during the accession process, rather than automatically postponing it until after Moldova joins the Union. At the same time, reforms carried out on the right bank must be designed with their future application in the Transnistrian region in mind. Otherwise, disparities between the two banks could make reintegration more difficult.

The authors developed three scenarios. The first, considered desirable, involves accession and reintegration proceeding in parallel, so that the Republic of Moldova joins the EU while exercising sovereignty over its entire territory. The EU acquis could then be applied in the Transnistrian region as well. The current context offers some opportunities: the region’s economic vulnerability, Russia’s diminished ability to support it as it did before 2022, its growing dependence on economic relations with the right bank, and the EU’s unprecedented openness towards the Republic of Moldova.

There are, however, constraints: Euroscepticism in some member states, the fragility of consensus on enlargement, the Republic of Moldova’s limited administrative capacity, and the economic and social costs of reintegration.

The second scenario involves the accession of a state that remains divided. The Republic of Moldova would become an EU member without its constitutional authorities exercising effective control over the Transnistrian region. The advantage would be that the conflict would not block its European path. Membership could also make the right bank more attractive to people and some business leaders in the region.

The risk is the loss of an important source of leverage. After accession, EU conditionality would no longer be able to encourage reintegration with the same force. Moreover, the EU would have to manage an unresolved conflict and a Russian military presence on the territory of a member state.

The third scenario is the most problematic: neither accession nor reintegration. Reforms slow, the European prospect loses credibility, and Russia may rebuild some of its influence over the region. In such a situation, actors in Chisinau and Tiraspol could seek the financial benefits of closer ties with the EU without undertaking the necessary political changes.

Cenușă identified one of the main lessons of Cyprus here: a window of opportunity can be missed, and the

status quo can become entrenched after accession. For the Republic of Moldova, the stakes are even higher because failure to resolve the conflict could mean Russian troops remaining in the Transnistrian region even after the country joins the EU.

Alexandru Flenchea: A Strategic Decision Is Needed



The message from Alexandru Flenchea, former Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration and director of the Peace Initiative Association, was direct: the Republic of Moldova must make a strategic decision about how to align EU accession with territorial reintegration.

“The absence of such a decision is itself a choice,” he warned. Without a clear objective and a shared strategy, the country risks completing neither process.

For Flenchea, coordination matters more than speed. The institutions responsible for accession and those handling the Transnistrian issue must work from the same strategic vision. The two processes have their own tools and resources, however, and should not be mechanically made conditional on one another.

Flenchea also questioned the assumption that the prospect of EU membership alone would persuade Tiraspol to accept reintegration. Access to EU benefits may appeal to ordinary citizens. For the political and economic system built around the Sheriff group, the rule of law, transparency of ownership and lawful competition may threaten the way it currently operates.

From this perspective, the Republic of Moldova must effectively extend its sovereignty: the Constitution, the law, the tax system and the rules of a lawful economy must also apply on the left bank. At the same time, reintegration must offer people credible guarantees concerning their property, incomes and pensions, access to education and social services, and the state’s ability to protect their interests.

Flenchea distinguished three components of the security problem: Russian troops, paramilitary structures in the Transnistrian region and the ammunition depot at Cobasna. Each requires its own solution. Regarding armed personnel, he proposed an essential legal distinction, expressed as “between passports, not uniforms”: between Russian citizens illegally present on the territory of the Republic of Moldova and Moldovan citizens who have served in the structures of the separatist regime.

Angela Gramadă: Without Consensus, There Is No Strategy



Angela Gramadă, director of the think tank Experts for Security and Global Affairs (ESGA), brought the need for domestic political consensus to the fore. The Republic of Moldova has committed itself to EU accession, but reintegration remains far less prominent in the debate about its European path.

In her view, the issue concerns both the government and the opposition, which has yet to offer a coherent and feasible alternative for reintegration. Discussions of the “Cyprus model”, Slavonia or other international precedents are insufficient without a strategy that Moldovan political actors can agree on and that addresses the state’s security interests.

Consensus is also needed at the European level. The accession treaty will have to be accepted and ratified by the member states, and the Republic of Moldova’s territorial situation will matter in that process. Accession and reintegration cannot, therefore, be treated as entirely separate issues.

Gramadă also emphasised the regional dimension of security. Reducing Russia’s presence and influence in the Transnistrian region is in the Republic of Moldova’s interest, but it would also reduce risks for Ukraine and European partners.

Regarding Romania, she recounted the conclusion of a discussion with relevant figures in Bucharest: they know the issue well, but their message was, “We want to know what Chisinau wants from us.” Romania can support European convergence, and Ukraine already plays an important role in security. Defining the objective of reintegration, however, is the Republic of Moldova’s responsibility.

Balázs Jarábik: **The Risk of a Prolonged** **Interim Period**



Political analyst and former Slovak diplomat Balázs Jarábik questioned the feasibility of the authors’ preferred scenario. Reintegration before accession would require several difficult conditions to be met at the same time: the withdrawal of Russian troops, sufficient institutional capacity in Chisinau, and society’s willingness to bear the costs of reintegration.

He outlined the possibility of a prolonged interim period. The Republic of Moldova would continue to move closer to the EU and align with it economically, legally and institutionally, without formally joining or resolving the Transnistrian conflict.

The war in Ukraine remains a decisive variable. Its outcome will affect both EU enlargement policy and Russia’s ability to support the Transnistrian region. Jarábik also noted that the Union itself would have to change to accommodate another major enlargement.

Closer economic ties between the two banks are necessary, but they do not amount to reintegration unless Chisinau’s political authority is accepted. From this perspective, Jarábik considers it likely that the EU will treat resolution of the Transnistrian issue as an implicit condition for accession.

Cristina Lesnic: **The State Must Be Able** **to Manage Reintegration**



Former Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration Cristina Lesnic emphasised the capacity of the state. Her formulation, “the state must manage, not merely represent”, sums up her criticism of an approach that handles the Transnistrian issue through meetings and statements without sufficient capacity to implement decisions.

For Lesnic, the lack of trust in institutions is a major obstacle. Reintegration also depends on the Republic of Moldova’s ability to show its own citizens that it is a functioning and credible state. The process requires broader cooperation among institutions, experts and civil society.

Cristina Lesnic supported the authors’ first scenario, in which reintegration and accession advance in parallel and converge when Moldova joins the EU, even though it entails substantial costs. Continued separation also has costs. Because they are spread over the long term, however, they are less visible politically. In her view, the reintegration strategy must be adaptable to change, and the scenarios should be discussed publicly before external developments force decisions to be made under pressure.

Hubert Faustmann: Accession Can Reduce Pressure for a Settlement



The second part of the conference brought a Cypriot perspective. Professor Hubert Faustmann of the University of Nicosia explained that Cyprus's accession process initially acted as a catalyst for reunification negotiations.

At first, there was a perception that the EU would not accept a divided state. This created pressure for compromise. The equation changed, however, when it became clear that Cyprus could join even without a settlement. Greece then linked its acceptance of EU enlargement to Cyprus's accession, and the prospect of a divided state joining the Union became a reality.

Once accession became certain, incentives to compromise declined. For some in the Greek Cypriot community, it could seem more attractive to negotiate later, from within the EU and from what they saw as a more favourable position.

This is one of the most important lessons for Moldova: accession can be a powerful source of leverage before a country joins the EU, but a much weaker one afterwards.

Faustmann also described the gradual normalisation of division. EU membership made life more comfortable for citizens of the Republic of Cyprus, including Turkish Cypriots who benefit individually from citizenship. Under these circumstances, the conflict continued without social pressure for a settlement growing sufficiently.

During the question-and-answer session, Faustmann also drew attention to the effect of time. Generations that experienced the violence retain memories of the conflict, but younger generations are not automatically more supportive of reunification: they may come to know increasingly little about the other community. Time can heal some wounds, but it can also turn separation into an accepted part of everyday life.

Ahmet Sözen: The Danger of a “Comfortable Stalemate”



Professor Ahmet Sözen, an expert in political science and international relations and founding director of the *Cyprus Policy Center*, brought the Turkish Cypriot perspective to the discussion in Chisinau. He cautioned, however, that the experience of Cyprus cannot be applied directly to the Republic of Moldova: the context of 2004 differs considerably from that of 2026.

Sözen recalled that, as early as 2002, he had warned of the risks of admitting a state with an unresolved territorial conflict into the EU. Accession would not remove the problem; it would bring it into the Union. More than two decades later, the conflict continues to have political and institutional consequences.

A central lesson concerns the order in which decisions are made. The signing of Cyprus's Accession Treaty in April 2003 changed the incentives for compromise. Once the Republic of Cyprus's accession was guaranteed, the Greek Cypriot leadership had fewer reasons to accept a settlement before the country formally joined the EU in May 2004. In Sözen's interpretation, the prospect of accession thus lost its force as a negotiating tool before a settlement of the conflict had been secured. The European instruments subsequently used to bring the Turkish Cypriot community closer to the EU did not have the same power.

For Chisinau, the lesson concerns when EU conditionality is used. If the Republic of Moldova's accession became certain before there was a clear path towards resolving the Transnistrian issue, some of the current incentives for compromise could weaken.

Sözen called the resulting situation in Cyprus a “comfortable stalemate”. Accession did not end the division, and in some respects, it became more entrenched. Both communities bear the costs of the conflict, but political actors do not consider those costs high enough to accept the compromises needed for reunification. The *status quo* therefore persists, even though it offers neither side a satisfactory solution.

Editorial

Russian Tactics of External Response to the Fiscal and Legal Reintegration Measures of the Republic of Moldova

*Editorial by Natalia Stercul,
Executive Director of the Foreign
Policy Association (APE)*

In September 2026, the Transnistrian settlement process shifted from a policy of compromises to the accelerated fiscal integration of the Left Bank by Chisinau. The primary driver of these changes was the abolition of customs and tax exemptions for Transnistrian enterprises. The economic measures taken by the Moldovan authorities provoked a harsh reaction from Moscow, which immediately moved toward actions aimed at maintaining its geopolitical leverage in the region. For the first time in the history of the conflict, the Russian Ambassador to Moldova personally arrived in Tiraspol to hand out Russian passports to local residents. This unprecedented step by the diplomat, along with the subsequent opening of illegal polling stations for the Russian State Duma elections in the Transnistrian region, is viewed as unacceptable action that grossly violates the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova. Such a strategy by Moscow is aimed at creating long-term obstacles to the country's unification.

The transition of Chisinau from policy accommodations to the fast-tracked fiscal integration of the Transnistrian region

The thirty-year practice of granting compromise-based concessions to Tiraspol appears to have been definitively left in the past. Chisinau has officially shifted the reintegration process from the realm of political declarations to that of strict legal and economic enforcement, by



Natalia Stercul, Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association (APE)

ensuring a level playing field for economic agents on both banks of the Dniester and eliminating gray zones. However, it is worth noting that while the harmonization of tax laws is uncompromising, it was structured to minimize macroeconomic shocks and is rolling out in stages. On September 1, 2026, Chisinau ended over 26 years of customs and tax breaks for Transnistrian exporters and importers. This launched the first wave of duties, including excises and VAT on alcohol, tobacco, perfumes, and jewelry. From January 1, 2027, the list will expand to cover petroleum products, base metals, minerals and their concentrates, kaolin, and other clays. By April 1, 2027, natural gas and electricity will also fall under the new tax regime. The government aims to wrap up the entire tax unification process across the Republic of Moldova by January 1, 2030.

To defuse social tensions, Chisinau rolled out a 'return investment' tool via a special Convergence Fund. Through this fund, Chisinau aims to directly fund schools, hospitals, and roads in Transnistria. The calculation is that ordinary people on the Left Bank will experience

firsthand that their social well-being now depends directly on Chisinau, not Tiraspol. Notably, taxes collected from Transnistrian businesses into Moldova's central budget do not disappear there for good. They are pooled and channeled back to the Left Bank, solely for targeted infrastructure, healthcare, and social projects managed under Chisinau's supervision. This approach will show local residents the clear, direct benefits of reintegration.

Initial results of the reform indicated that during the first fourteen days of September following the abolition of tax preferences, approximately 850,000 lei flowed into Moldova's central budget. The introduction of duties caused a brief logistical shock. Local economic operators temporarily reduced the volume of declarations for new shipments of goods while assessing profitability, which led to a temporary slowdown in import dynamics to the Left Bank in the first half of the month. The Transnistrian side termed these measures 'economic strangulation' and a 'unilateral blockade' that destroys the '1+1' negotiation format. The Moldovan side, however, notes that enterprises permanently registered with the Public Services Agency of Moldova gain access to all tax deduction mechanisms on equal terms with Right-Bank businesses.

By implementing phased fiscal unification, the Moldovan authorities are pursuing long-term geopolitical and economic goals, anticipating a shift in the conflict settlement. What is the primary strategic intent of the country's leadership? First and foremost, it aims to dismantle Tiraspol's financial autonomy, which will occur as the Left-Bank administration is deprived of independent budget replenishment channels derived from shadow preferences. Without the customs margin, the budget deficit of the unrecognized republic will become critical. This is expected to force Tiraspol into making direct political concessions. Furthermore, Chisinau is demonstrating to Brussels its capability to control its borders and fiscal perimeter, which is critically important in the context of the launched negotiations for Moldova's accession to the European Union.

Thus, a highly realistic scenario of this plan appears to be the gradual but irreversible integration of the Transnistrian region into Moldova's legal framework. In order to preserve access to European markets under the DCFTA

agreement, business representatives will be forced to play by Moldova's rules, gradually distancing themselves from the political leadership of the unrecognized Transnistrian region. Ultimately, it is expected that the conditions for smuggling and the gray re-export of excisable goods will disappear, exposing the region's shadow economic zones and increasing revenues to the combined budget of the Republic of Moldova.

Strengthening of the Russian Federation's Leverage Instruments in the Transnistrian Region

Chisinau's implementation of new fiscal mechanisms and the phased economic integration of the region have led to a shift in the Russian Federation's tactics for maintaining its influence on the Left Bank of the Dniester. As Tiraspol's economic leverage weakens, Moscow has shifted its focus to legal and symbolic instruments, seeking to secure the legal loyalty of the local population.

If previously the issuance of Russian documents on the Left Bank was mostly a technical and low-profile process handled via a mobile consular service, Moscow has now turned to overt actions to project its presence in the region, hitting back at Chisinau's integration steps. A clear sign of this tactical shift was the visit of Russia's Ambassador to Moldova, Oleg Ozerov, to Tiraspol in early September. There, he took part in a ceremony handing out international passports to locals. The passport processing followed a May decree by the Russian President that fast-tracks the citizenship process for Transnistrian residents.

It is important to note that while obtaining Russian citizenship was previously viewed by local residents as a core element of their legal identity, the situation has changed due to the closure of the border with Ukraine. The overwhelming majority of the Left-Bank population has pragmatically acquired citizenship of the Republic of Moldova, driven in most cases by the importance of freedom of movement. The accelerated issuance of Russian passports to Transnistrian residents - where the number of applications, according to the local administration, has exceeded 60,000 - is

Moscow's attempt to artificially restore the shaken balance of power and secure the status of compatriots for the Left-Bank population, thereby complicating the legal integration of the region's citizens.

Unauthorized Russian State Duma elections in the Transnistrian region

In parallel with all the aforementioned events, and in response to the phased economic integration of the region, Moscow deployed tools of overt electoral presence, organizing voting on the Left Bank of the Dniester despite the official stance of the authorities of the Republic of Moldova. In previous years, the official Moldovan authorities protested but demonstrated a certain degree of flexibility; however, in the current electoral cycle, Chisinau has taken an uncompromising legal position. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova approved the opening of only one polling station - exclusively inside the Russian Embassy building in Chisinau. Any attempts to organize electoral procedures in the uncontrolled territory were officially declared an unfriendly step violating the state's sovereignty. The Russian side ignored Chisinau's prohibitions. Fifteen unauthorized polling stations were opened in the cities of the Transnistrian region, enabling a significant number of local residents to vote, who demonstrated predictable support for the ruling party in the Russian Federation.

Thus, the mutual steps taken by the sides have shaped a fundamentally new reality. While Chisinau is successfully seizing economic control over the region, relying on the pragmatism of local business and the mass acquisition of Moldovan passports by the population, Moscow is attempting to compensate for this by creating artificial legal obstacles based on Russian identity. All of this exerts a dual impact on the reintegration process. On the one hand, there is an acceleration of the economic and legal convergence of the banks in practical terms. Driven by considerations of survival and freedom of movement, Transnistrian businesses and ordinary citizens are integrating into Moldova's legal and fiscal space at an accelerated pace, laying a solid foundation for the actual unification of the country. On the other hand, the actions of the Russian side create serious political barriers to the completion of this process. The accelerated issuance of passports and the holding of unauthorized elections deepen the ideological divide and preserve the political isolation of Tiraspol. This almost completely blocks any possibility of developing a compromise political status for the region and shifts any subsequent contacts between the sides exclusively into the realm of hard tactical bargaining. Under these conditions, the Russian tactic of external response to the fiscal and legal reintegration measures of the Republic of Moldova amounts to attempts to stall the actual convergence of the banks, turning an objective economic process into a protracted political and legal standoff.

“The EU Should Learn from Cyprus and Avoid Making the Same Mistake Again”

In an interview with the FES/APE Foreign Policy Bulletin, Ahmet Sözen, Professor of political science and international relations and founding director of the Cyprus Policy Center, explains why the Cyprus and Transnistrian conflicts differ in their origins and geopolitical context. Cyprus nevertheless offers a warning about separating EU accession from conflict settlement.

For Moldova, Sözen proposes a “package deal” that links EU accession benchmarks to concrete steps towards reintegration. He warns that postponing decisions on the withdrawal of Russian troops, border control, Transnistria’s status, institutional integration and the application of EU law until after accession could entrench the conflict. Read the full interview below:

Professor Sözen, the Cyprus and Transnistrian conflicts appear to share several features: a territory outside the effective control of the internationally recognised government, the involvement of an external power, and decades of negotiations. Yet the Cyprus conflict has a strong intercommunal dimension, while the Transnistrian conflict is rooted primarily in the post-Soviet geopolitical context. Which parallels are useful for understanding Moldova’s situation, and where might the comparison be misleading?

Turkey and Russia may, at first glance, appear to play similar roles as external powers, but there are important differences. Turkey was one of the guarantor powers under the treaties that established the Republic of Cyprus, with specific rights and responsibilities concerning the island. It is also a NATO member and the only country that recognises northern Cyprus.

Russia’s position in relation to Transnistria is different. Even Russia does not recognise



Ahmet Sözen, profesor de științe politice și relații internaționale și director fondator al Cyprus Policy Center

Transnistria as an independent state. We therefore need to be cautious when comparing the two cases: both the circumstances and the origins of the conflicts differ.

As you rightly noted, the Cyprus conflict emerged largely as an intercommunal conflict in the 1950s and 1960s. The conflict in Transnistria, by contrast, is rooted in the collapse of the Soviet Union and in Russia’s efforts to retain influence and control across the former Soviet space.

When accession loses its leverage

The Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in 2004 while the island remained divided. The entire island is legally part of the EU, but the application of EU law is suspended in the north, where the government in Nicosia does not exercise effective control. Looking back, did accession preserve the prospect of reunification, or did it inadvertently make the division more durable?

I would say mostly the latter. From around 1996 or 1997 until 2003, the EU's intention was to use the prospect of Cyprus's membership as an incentive to solve the Cyprus problem.

That remained the case until April 2003. For various reasons, we had failed to solve the Cyprus problem by the time the Accession Treaty was signed. At that point, EU membership ceased to be an incentive.

After accession, the EU also lost leverage over both sides. In that sense, perhaps unintentionally, accession became a dynamic that made the division more entrenched.

The lesson for Brussels and Chişinău

Shortly before Cyprus joined the EU, about 65 per cent of Turkish Cypriot voters supported the Annan Plan, while approximately 76 per cent of Greek Cypriot voters rejected it. Did the certainty that the Republic of Cyprus would join the EU regardless of the referendum result reduce the Greek Cypriot side's incentive to compromise? What should Brussels and Chişinău learn from the timing of the referendum and accession?

The EU should pursue a package deal that carefully sequences accession benchmarks alongside reintegration benchmarks. That is one lesson it should draw from Cyprus.

When the referendum results came out, Günter Verheugen, the European Commissioner for Enlargement at the time, said publicly that the EU had been misled by the Greek Cypriot side about its willingness to accept a solution. But after a 76 per cent vote against the plan, I would say that realisation came rather late. The EU should learn from Cyprus and avoid being caught by surprise again.

It would be better for the EU and Chişinău to agree on a package deal covering more than accession benchmarks. It should also set out the steps that Chişinău and Tiraspol would take in parallel with the accession process.

That would require a different approach from the one taken in Cyprus. Protocol 10 suspended the application of the EU acquis in the northern part

of the island pending a settlement. In Moldova's case, I think any comparable arrangement should include a sunset clause, so that the parties continue discussing and negotiating how the acquis could also be applied in Transnistria.

Can Russia hold a veto?

How important is it to resolve the Transnistrian conflict before the Republic of Moldova joins the EU? If a settlement were made an absolute condition for accession, could Russia effectively veto Moldova's European future by keeping its troops in the region and sustaining the political deadlock in Tiraspol?

That is a very legitimate point. You are absolutely right. But if the alternative is to admit Moldova unconditionally, without properly reintegrating Transnistria, the EU would have a territory within its borders that remained, in effect, dominated by Russia.

Ideally, the conflict should be resolved before accession, and every effort should be made towards that goal. Those efforts should go beyond technical measures. The EU and influential member states should also pursue high-level diplomatic efforts to secure, at a minimum, Russia's agreement to withdraw its troops from Transnistria.

The danger of a permanent division

Could Moldova follow an approach similar to Protocol No. 10 for Cyprus, joining the EU within its internationally recognised borders while the application of EU law is temporarily suspended in the Transnistrian region? What advantages might this offer, and how serious is the risk that a temporary arrangement would entrench the division?

If you look at Cyprus, it has been 23 years since Protocol No. 10 was agreed, and we are still nowhere near a solution. So there is always a risk that the division will continue.

At the same time, I understand the argument that it would be unfair to prevent a legitimate, democratically elected government from joining the EU when a majority of its population wants

membership, simply because the conflict in Transnistria remains unresolved. But we do not live in a fair world. The geopolitical implications also have to be taken into account.

Devolution, not federalisation

Negotiations on Cyprus have long centred on a bizonal, bicomunal federation based on political equality between the two communities. Could a federal or power-sharing arrangement work for Transnistria, or would it give the authorities in Tiraspol – and, indirectly, Russia – the power to block Moldova’s foreign policy, security decisions and European integration?

That is an excellent question. I am not an expert on the situation in either Chişinău or Tiraspol, but, as I understand it, federalisation is not on the table.

Speaking as an outsider with limited knowledge of the case, I would suggest considering some form of devolution: transferring certain powers from the centre to local authorities. That could be one way to integrate the region into Moldova.

There are examples in Spain and elsewhere of decentralisation or autonomy without federalism that could be studied. The idea would be to give local people a greater voice and more authority over local affairs, rather than governing the region entirely from Chişinău.

What must be settled before accession

Which issues must be settled before Moldova joins the EU: the withdrawal of Russian troops, the future of the current peacekeeping mechanism, control of the eastern border, the region’s status, residents’ and property rights, institutional integration, and the application of EU law? Which could be addressed gradually after accession?

I think all of these issues need to be clarified. Ideally, the steps to address them should be sequenced and tied to the accession process.

My main point is that Moldova should not wait until accession to address them. These are important issues that, ideally, should be resolved before the country joins the EU.

Thank you!

Transnistria at the Gates of the European Union: Three Scenarios for the Future of the Republic of Moldova

Study by Denis Cenușă and Alexandru Flenchea

Summary by Madalin Necsutu



Denis Cenușă

The study **Moldova's strategic dilemma: EU Accession, Territorial Reintegration, and the Lessons from Cyprus**, produced by FES Moldova and authored by Denis Cenușă and Alexandru Flenchea, places at the centre of the debate one of the most difficult questions Chisinau will face in the coming years: how can the Republic of Moldova advance towards accession to the European Union without its European progress permanently freezing the Transnistrian issue and, conversely, without the lack of a solution for Transnistria giving external actors the opportunity to block the country's European integration?

The authors do not treat accession and reintegration as two separate processes, but as two interdependent strategic objectives whose different timelines may create both opportunities and major vulnerabilities. The study proposes three scenarios: Moldova joins the EU as a reintegrated state; Moldova becomes a member state while the Transnistrian region remains temporarily outside the effective application of the *acquis*; or both processes enter a prolonged period of stagnation. The first scenario is considered the most favourable for strengthening



Alexandru Flenchea

statehood, but also the most difficult politically and geopolitically.

The comparison with Cyprus serves primarily as a warning. The accession of a divided state is legally and politically possible, but the Cypriot experience shows that European integration does not automatically lead to reintegration. Once the goal of accession has been achieved, European leverage and domestic motivation to resolve the conflict may diminish. For the Republic of Moldova, the central conclusion is that the pre-accession period must be used not only to carry out reforms, but also to develop a coherent strategy for reintegration, security, economic integration and negotiations with the European Union.

Moldova Between EU Accession and Reintegration: How Can the Cyprus Trap Be Avoided?

The Republic of Moldova is moving towards the European Union at a time when the Transnistrian issue remains unresolved, the political negotiation process is effectively blocked, and Russia's war against Ukraine has radically

changed the regional security environment. These circumstances create a dilemma that Chisinau cannot avoid: must the country be reintegrated before accession, or can Moldova become an EU member while part of its territory remains outside the effective control of its constitutional authorities?

The study starts from the premise that this choice cannot be reduced to a simple formula of “accession first” or “reintegration first”. EU accession and the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict have different timelines, actors and conditions. The European process can advance through reforms and technical negotiations at a relatively predictable pace, while reintegration depends on factors beyond Chisinau’s control: Tiraspol’s position, Russia’s ability to maintain its influence in the region, the course of the war in Ukraine, and Western actors’ willingness to invest political capital in a settlement.

This asymmetry is the crux of the problem. Moldova could come very close to accession before comparable political progress is made on the Transnistrian issue. At that point, the EU and Chisinau would have to decide whether to keep the conflict outside the accession process or make its resolution a political condition for joining the Union.

Cyprus as a Precedent, Not a Model

The precedent most often cited is the Republic of Cyprus. The island joined the EU in 2004 without being reunified, and the application of the EU *acquis* was suspended in the northern part of the island, which lies outside the effective control of the government in Nicosia. In legal terms, this demonstrates that the existence of an unreintegrated territory does not automatically rule out a state’s accession to the EU.

Politically, however, the lesson is far more ambiguous. More than two decades after accession, the Cyprus conflict continues. European integration has reduced some of the costs of division, facilitated contact and given Turkish Cypriots access to a range of EU rights, but it has not created decisive momentum for reunification. On the contrary, the study points to the risk that the benefits of integration may allow people and businesses to adapt to a

comfortable *status quo*, while political elites lose some of their motivation to compromise.

This is the main warning for the Republic of Moldova. If Moldovan citizens in the Transnistrian region benefit from freedom of movement, access to the European market and, eventually, the rights that come with citizenship of an EU member state, without the region’s political status being clarified, the advantages of European integration may come to coexist with continued *de facto* separation.

The analogy with Cyprus must nevertheless be used with caution. In the Cypriot case, Turkey is a NATO member and has a complex institutional relationship with the EU. In Moldova’s case, the dominant external actor is Russia, which is in confrontation with the European Union and maintains a military presence on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. What could be managed in Cyprus as a political and legal exception therefore becomes, in Moldova’s case, a direct European security concern as well.

Three Scenarios, Three Types of Risk

The first scenario is also the authors’ preferred one: **Moldova is reintegrated before or at the same time as it joins the EU**. In this scenario, the two processes reinforce each other. The prospect of EU membership makes Chisinau more attractive to people and businesses in Transnistria, while the weakening of Russia’s influence and the economic vulnerabilities of the authorities in Tiraspol create room for compromise. At the point of accession, the EU *acquis* could be applied throughout Moldova’s internationally recognised territory.

The advantage is clear: the EU does not take in a frozen conflict, and Moldova joins as a functioning, territorially consolidated state. The difficulty is that success depends on a rare convergence of factors: weaker Russian leverage, sufficient administrative capacity in Chisinau, Tiraspol’s willingness to compromise, sustained EU support and domestic political consensus.

The second scenario involves **Moldova joining the EU before reintegration**. This is the scenario closest to the Cyprus precedent. Application of the *acquis* could be

temporarily suspended in the Transnistrian region, while reintegration efforts would continue after accession. Its main benefit is that Russia or the authorities in Tiraspol could not turn the conflict into a veto over the European future of the Republic of Moldova as a whole.

The risk, however, is equally significant: once Moldova has joined the EU, it and its partners could lose their sense of urgency. Brussels' instruments of conditionality would weaken, while Tiraspol could seek to gain as many economic and social benefits as possible from Moldova's EU membership without accepting the political costs of reintegration. The study describes this possibility clearly: accession could make Moldova a centre of attraction, but it could also entrench the division.

The third scenario is the least favourable: **both accession and reintegration stall**. This could result from a combination of adverse developments: insufficient reforms, a deterioration in relations between Chisinau and Brussels, rising Euroscepticism in the EU or Moldova, and Russia regaining the capacity to support the Transnistrian region economically and politically. In such circumstances, European integration would lose its appeal, and Chisinau would gradually lose the leverage it has over Tiraspol.

Chisinau's Real Leverage Lies in the Economy

One of the study's most important conclusions is that the Republic of Moldova already has stronger tools for reintegration than the stagnation of political negotiations might suggest. The most important of these are economic.

More than 2,300 companies from the Transnistrian region that conduct foreign trade or benefit from international programmes are registered as Moldovan legal entities and use the Republic of Moldova's banking system. The right-bank market and the EU are the main destinations for the region's exports. This integration has been built gradually through customs, tax and banking measures adopted by Chisinau over more than two decades.

Following the 2025 energy crisis, the region's economic vulnerability increased further. From the perspective of reintegration, this shifts the balance of leverage. In place of a Transnistria structurally tied to Russia through energy and trade, a region is emerging that depends increasingly on access to the Moldovan and European economies.

The authors warn, however, that economic integration should not be confused with political reintegration. The experience of Cyprus shows that trade and mobility can reduce tensions without resolving disputes over sovereignty and political status.

The Military Issue Cannot Be Postponed

While economic and administrative matters can be managed gradually, the Russian military presence poses a different problem. An EU member state with Russian troops stationed in a part of its territory outside government control would create an unprecedented situation for the Union.

The study therefore recommends developing an integrated security strategy: ending the presence of the Operational Group of Russian Forces, transforming the current peacekeeping mechanism, addressing the issue of paramilitary formations through a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programme, and neutralising the ammunition stockpiles at Cobasna. All these elements should be negotiated with international partners and set out in a roadmap, rather than left as stated objectives.

If Moldova reaches accession before reintegration, the authors consider it necessary to negotiate in advance with Brussels a legal mechanism inspired by Protocol No. 10, which was applied to Cyprus. The essential difference, however, should be the inclusion of clear provisions for the gradual application of the *acquis* and reintegration after accession, so that the temporary exception does not become permanent.

The Greatest Mistake Would Be to Make No Choice

Perhaps the study's most important point is that none of the three outcomes is predetermined. The Republic of Moldova cannot control the war in Ukraine, Russia's decisions or political changes in EU member states. It can, however, influence how accession and reintegration relate to each other.

This leads to the authors' central proposition: **how the two processes are aligned matters more than speed.** Very rapid accession without a credible plan for Transnistria could create a long-term problem. Yet artificially slowing the European path until ideal conditions for reintegration emerge could give Russia an indirect veto through the conflict.

Chisinau therefore needs a strategy on two levels. On the one hand, the accession process must be protected from attempts by Tiraspol or Moscow to block it. On the other, closer ties with the EU must be used systematically to deepen economic, social and institutional integration between the two banks.

This requires concrete guarantees for people in the region concerning property, pensions, jobs, language rights and recognition of documents. It also requires an economic offer attractive enough for reintegration to be seen as an opportunity rather than a loss.

The experience of Cyprus shows that the EU can manage territorial division. It does not, however, show that the Union can resolve it after accession. From this perspective, the most important window of opportunity for the Republic of Moldova is the pre-accession period. That is when Brussels has its strongest conditionality, Chisinau its greatest motivation for reform, and the prospect of access to the European market and EU citizenship may exert the strongest pull on the Transnistrian region.

The dilemma, then, is not whether Moldova must choose between Europe and reintegration. The strategic challenge is to prevent success in one of these goals from causing failure in the other.

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