

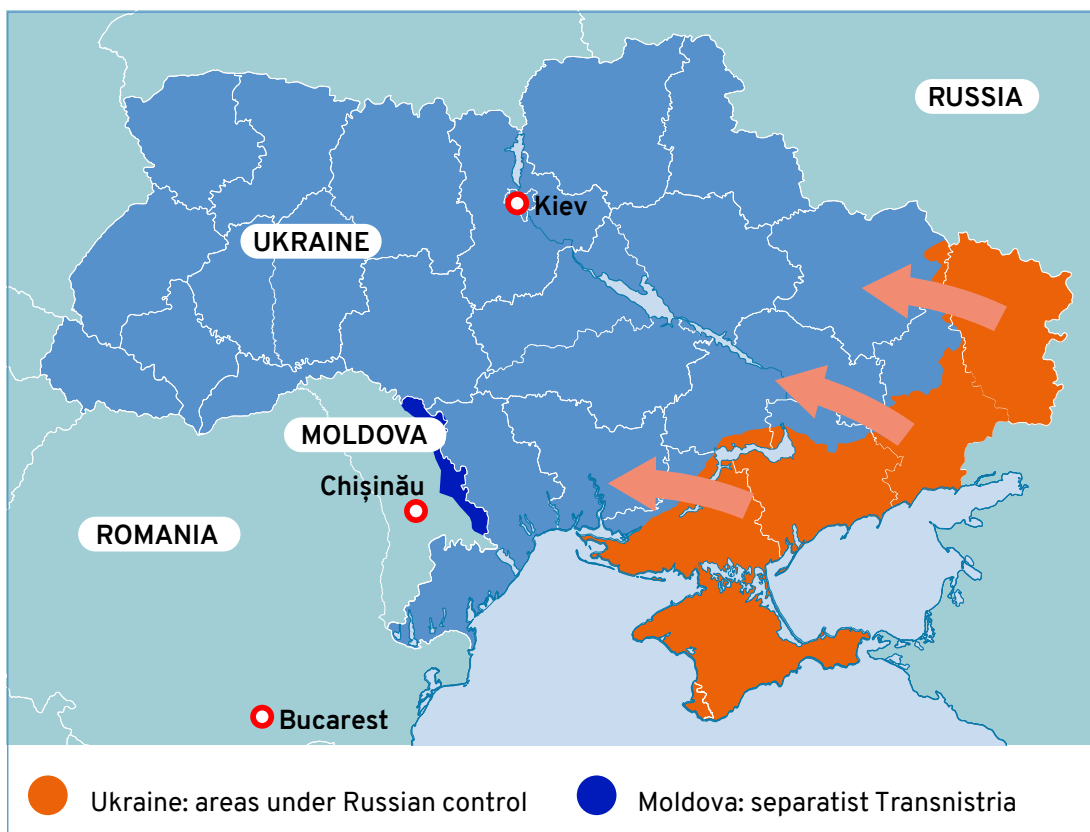
Romania and Moldova in 2025: Navigating Political Change



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Florent Parmentier,
Associated
researcher

In the South-West of Ukraine, the strategic, political and economic effects of the war are having a profound effect on the two Romanian-speaking states of Romania and Moldova. Behind this geographical, historical and cultural proximity, the two neighbouring countries are nevertheless distinguished by their distinct political trajectories following the collapse of the USSR (1991): Romania, anchored in the European Union and NATO, recently took a further step forward with its entry into the Schengen area on 1st January 2025, thus consolidating its Euro-Atlantic integration. In contrast, Moldova, which has been an official candidate for European enlargement since June 2022, remains constitutionally neutral in military terms and faces specific challenges linked to its geopolitical positioning.

The year 2025 promises to be a decisive turning point for these two nation states. Internally, crucial elections - presidential in Romania and parliamentary in Moldova - could redefine the political balance and national priorities. At regional level, developments in the war in Ukraine and the effects of the Trump presidency are clearly continuing to reshape European geopolitics, exacerbating the political and security stakes for these two countries.

What impact will an uncertain future for Ukraine have on Romania and Moldova in 2025?

I • What the war in Ukraine has changed: a region under high tension

Since February 2022, the war in Ukraine has upset the geopolitical balance in the Lower Danube region, highlighting both new dynamics and old tensions.

From the very first days of the conflict, the reception of Ukrainian refugees illustrated unprecedented solidarity on the part of these countries: the European Union, its Member States and Moldova cooperated to offer protection and rights to people fleeing the war. For Moldova, according to data from the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, almost 1.2 million border crossings have been recorded since February 2022, while 135,000 Ukrainian refugees have been registered locally, which should be seen in the context of a modest population (around two and a half million inhabitants).¹ For Romania, again according to the same organisation, the figures are 5.8 million crossings and 192,000 registered refugees.² Undoubtedly, alongside nations like Poland, the Czech Republic, and even Hungary, this collaborative management of responsibilities has signified a crucial phase in the humanitarian response and in shaping political ties between the EU and its neighboring countries, which have faced the brunt of the war's repercussions.

Under President Maia Sandu's leadership, the war has undeniably accelerated Moldova's strategic realignment towards the European Union. Until then, Moldovan public opinion was divided over its geopolitical orientation, and strategic vulnerabilities had forced political leaders to exercise a degree of restraint in their actions. From this point of view, the recognition of its status as a candidate country in June 2022 symbolised a major turning point and an unprecedented European commitment to Chişinău, confirming the country's aspiration to move away from Russian influence. Hosting the second summit of the European Political Community in June 2023 was an important moment in the country's diplomatic history. This

1 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10784>

2 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10782>

rapprochement also reinforced the need for Romania to play a key role in supporting Chişinău's European integration, while taking into account its own regional strategy. Numerous parallel initiatives demonstrate the growing rapprochement between Romania and Moldova across economic, political, and linguistic domains.³

Romania's National Security Strategy for 2020-2024 aimed to bolster the country's position within the EU and NATO, while also increasing the presence of US troops in Romania. Additionally, it promoted initiatives under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy to enhance security, particularly in the Black Sea region.⁴ The presence of 4,500 US troops at NATO's Mihail Kogalniceanu airbase, which is undergoing modernisation and expansion work, shows the country's increased importance to the organisation's Eastern flank, particularly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, during the war and as a NATO stronghold in the area, Romanian policy may have been considered relatively cautious considering the officially relatively limited volume of arms deliveries to Ukraine, having focused more specifically on humanitarian and logistical action.⁵

It is also important to note that the war in Ukraine has had significant economic repercussions for both countries, impacting trade, energy security, inflation, and investment patterns. As an illustration, in 2022, Mol-

dova suffered a 5.9% contraction in its GDP and inflation of over 30%, while trade and remittances with and from Russia fell. As a transit hub for Ukrainian goods, Romania has seen its logistics infrastructure come under increased pressure, including its ports (e.g. Constanţa), roads and railways.⁶ For Moldova, Ukraine was both a supplier and a transit route for its exports: the closure of its ports forced Chişinău to redirect its trade to Romania, increasing costs and logistical difficulties, and therefore inflation. Finally, as the war also disrupted Ukrainian cereal exports, their facilitation by Romania came at the cost of tensions with Romanian farmers, who denounced unfair competition

While solidarity with Ukraine has been unprecedented across Europe, the war has also rekindled historical and cultural differences within the nationalist movement. In Romania, the memory of territorial losses since the Second World War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union sometimes fuels ambivalent feelings towards Ukraine. Some in irredentist circles see Ukraine as an unfair beneficiary of historic Romanian territories, while others criticise its perceived indifference towards the Romanian minority living on its soil.⁷ This minority, estimated at between 150,000 and 500,000 people, is at the heart of debates on the protection of linguistic rights.⁸

While Moldova has no territorial disputes with its neighbours, territorial issues add a

- 3 For example, the status of the Romanian language in Moldova is a complex issue with political and cultural implications. Since Moldovan independence in 1991, this status has been the subject of debate and legislative changes: the "Romanian language" in the declaration of independence became the "Moldovan language" in the 1994 Constitution. However, in March 2023, the Moldovan Parliament passed a law stating that the country's official language is Romanian, thus replacing the term "Moldovan" in all laws and the Constitution. This decision was supported by the ruling Action and Solidarity Party and welcomed by Romania. See <https://www.iss.euro-pa.eu/publications/briefs/how-big-storm-assessing-impact-russian-ukrainian-war-eastern-neighbourhood>
- 4 https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf
- 5 <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-10-14/extremely-cautious-romania-s-approach-to-russian-invasion-ukraine>
- 6 While the Ukrainian Black Sea ports used to handle 90% of the country's agricultural exports, the war meant that Ukraine had to rely on the Danube ports, as well as those of Romania and Bulgaria. To reach these ports, these countries had to repair or rebuild the rail infrastructure and ensure faster transit for Ukrainian lorries. For example, the restoration of a rail link in Romania has enabled Ukrainian trains transiting through Moldavia to reach the Danube port of Galati directly for the first time in over two decades.
- 7 Romanian irredentist circles blame the Ukrainians for the integration of several territories historically linked to Romania at the end of the Second World War, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) and the Soviet annexations of 1940 and 1944. These territories include northern Bukovina, southern Bessarabia (now the Odessa oblast) and Serpents Island, which were part of the Kingdom of Romania before they were incorporated into the USSR and then attached to independent Ukraine in 1991.
- 8 For example, the Ukrainian law of 2017, which limits the teaching of minority languages at primary level and requires the use of Ukrainian in higher education, remains a major sticking point for Bucharest, as it is for Budapest. See <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/hungary-romania-unhappy-ne>

layer of complexity to Romanian-Ukrainian relations. One striking example is Snake Island, a small strategic territory in the Black Sea located some fifty kilometres from the Romanian border, opposite the Bay of Musura and the Romanian town of Sulina, at the mouth of the Danube into the sea. This territory, which was disputed between the Russians and Ukrainians at the start of the war, remains a symbol of the historical disputes between Bucharest and Kiev. Despite these tensions, Bucharest's strategy is to leverage its relations with Ukraine to strengthen its interests in Moldova, notably by advocating balanced treatment for both countries in the EU accession process. The simultaneous opening of accession negotiations for Ukraine and Moldova can be seen as a clear diplomatic victory for Romania, which attaches particular importance to the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. Thanks to its large reserves of natural gas (it will be the EU's leading producer in 2027 when Neptun Deep comes on stream, and a net exporter of gas) and its energy infrastructure, Romania has been able to support Chişinău's policy of energy diversification. This major change was made possible by EU financial aid, alternative supply routes such as the Romania-Moldova interconnector, and a strategic pivot towards European energy markets.

The war in Ukraine, for example, has opened up the prospect of redefining regional relations, though without erasing all the underlying tensions. How Romania and Moldova face up to these challenges in 2025 will depend on their ability to balance European ambitions, bilateral relations and responses to internal dynamics. Either they strengthen the South-Eastern flank of Europe's defence, or they become targets of destabilisation.

II • The disputed 2024 elections and resilience to foreign interference

Against this backdrop of regional upheaval, 2024 was marked by fiercely contested elections in Romania and Moldova, reflecting the growing tensions between European aspirations, rejection of the political system and external influences. These elections revealed the institutional fragility of both countries and highlighted the destabilisation efforts orchestrated by Russia.

In Moldova, the referendum held on the same day as the first round of the presidential election divided the electorate. The narrow result of 50.4% fell significantly short of the executive's expectations. This mistrust of the European project was amplified by an aggressive hybrid war waged by Moscow: online propaganda, manipulation via social networks, and paid voting networks under the influence of Moldovan fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor weighed heavily on the campaign. On the evening of the first round, the outgoing pro-European president Maia Sandu denounced "an unprecedented attack on freedom and democracy on election day and in recent months", referring to the buying of 300,000 votes⁹ by Russian-influenced groups. Despite this, she won a significant victory over her Socialist-backed opponent Alexandr Stoianoglo, with 55.3% of the vote against 44.7% in the second round, thanks to strong support from the diaspora.¹⁰

In Romania, the presidential elections took an even more dramatic turn. The first round, held on 24 November, saw Călin Georgescu (22.95%) unexpectedly come out on top, a populist with anti-establishment (criticising "globalism"), anti-Ukrainian (advocating a halt to all military aid) and, to say the least, sceptical positions on NATO (doubting its protection in the event of an attack on Romania). Given his low profile prior to the election, doubts have arisen as to how he built his reputation on the TikTok network. Had Georgescu won the presidency and followed his programme, his strategic role in foreign and defence policy would most likely

9 https://www.ipn.md/ro/maia-sandu-moldova-s-a-confruntat-cu-un-atac-8013_1108280.html

10 <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2024/11/04/presidentielle-moldave-que-cache-la-reelection-de-maia-sandu/>

have led to Romania's support for Ukraine and NATO being called into question, marking a potentially major geopolitical turning point for the region.¹¹

However, to everyone's surprise, on 6 December the Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the entire electoral process (decision no. 32 of 6 December 2024), under article 146 f) of the Constitution, citing massive manipulation of public opinion attributed to a "foreign state", in reference to Russia. This cancellation, unprecedented in the country's recent history, led to the organisation of a new election, but it also fuelled increased political and social polarisation. Following this strong act the Venice Commission, a Council of Europe advisory body on constitutional issues, stressed in an opinion that the power of constitutional courts to annul elections should only be exercised in exceptional circumstances and must be clearly regulated to maintain public confidence in the electoral process.¹² In other words, taking a position on principles (and not specifically on the Romanian case), annulments should be based on clear, transparent and publicly accessible evidence, and the parties concerned must be given the opportunity to present their points of view. This position can be interpreted as an implicit criticism of the Romanian Constitutional Court's decision, because of its excessive nature, which undermines citizens' confidence in their political system.

In this situation, Călin Georgescu challenged the decision by taking his case to the European Court of Human Rights, claiming that his right to free elections had been violated, a claim which has since been rejected.¹³ On that occasion, he called for a second round of voting against his opponent, Elena Lasconi, who had finished second in the first round. Lasconi, leader of the Union to Save Romania (USR), a liberal centre-right party, herself

strongly criticised the Romanian court's decision¹⁴. What's more, the timing of the Court's decision, when the Romanian diaspora had already started voting, only served to amplify popular discontent and denunciation of the elites. Curiously, the Romanian parliamentary elections, held on 1 December, were not contested by the Constitutional Court or the intelligence services; they do seem to reflect a fragmented electorate, but not necessarily a manipulated one, as parliamentary elections lend themselves less to this type of electoral maneuvering than presidential elections. In this situation of confusion and turmoil, President Klaus Iohannis announced his resignation on 10 February 2025, explaining it as his desire "to spare Romania and Romanian citizens from a crisis", even though an impeachment procedure was about to be voted on in Parliament. From then on, it was up to the President of the Senate, Ilie Bolojan, to act as interim President until new elections were held in May, in a highly polarised political context.

These controversial elections illustrate the challenges that Romania and Moldova face in strengthening their democratic institutions while dealing with external interference, with the response of both states being reactive rather than pro-active. In 2025, if they are to avoid becoming bogged down, both countries will have to redouble their efforts to restore public confidence in their political systems and to deal with the geopolitical upheavals underway.

11 The President of the Romanian Republic plays a key role in the country's political system, particularly in terms of foreign and defence policy. He represents Romania in international relations. He negotiates and ratifies international treaties, appoints ambassadors and accredits them to foreign countries. He takes part in government meetings on matters of national interest, including foreign policy. As supreme commander of the armed forces and chairman of the Supreme National Defence Council, the President is responsible for the country's defence. While he cannot rule by decree, he can mediate or arbitrate in internal political disputes

12 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2025\)](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2025))

13 <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cererea-lui-calin-georgescu-privind-reluarea-alegerilor-prezidentiale-respinsa-la-cedo-/33283628.html>

14 <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/elena-lasconi-critica-decizia-ccr-de-anulare-a-alegerilor-reafirmandu-si-an-gajamentul-de-a-ajunge-presedinte-voi-lupta-pentru-romani-si-democratia-noastra/>

III • 2025, between new elections and possible Trump's peace in Ukraine

The year 2025 promises to be a crucial one for Romania and Moldova, with crucial elections still to come and geopolitical developments linked to the war in Ukraine

In Romania, the parties in the ruling coalition - the Social Democrats (PSD), the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) - have set the presidential election for 4 May, with a possible second round two weeks later.¹⁵ The challenge for the current government is a major one: to maintain the country's pro-European trajectory in the face of rhetoric from Russia and now the United States that calls this anchoring into question. Political polarisation was undoubtedly reinforced by the rejection of Călin Georgescu's candidacy by the Electoral Commission on 9 March 2025¹⁶, in the name of Article 16 of the Romanian Constitution and the electoral law, which require candidates to follow a "fair and transparent" process. Another nationalist candidate, Diana Iovanovici-Șoșoacă, also had her candidacy rejected. Against this backdrop, the candidates fall into two main categories. On the one hand, there is a pro-European orientation, with candidates such as the moderate Crin Antonescu, Bucharest mayor Nicușor Dan and centre-right candidate Elena Lasconi all favourites. On the other, in the absence of Călin Georgescu, George Simion (of the AUR party) logically becomes the leader of the sovereignists, hoping to capitalise on rural discontent and economic frustration. Finally, the breakthrough of a surprise candidate, such as former prime minister Vitor Ponta (between 2012 and 2015), cannot be ruled out

On the public stage, at European level, a debate on freedom of expression has emerged around Elon Musk and his X platform (formerly Twitter), and more broadly on social networks such as TikTok. These platforms have become a battleground for information that influences public opinion and, potentially, election results. Adding fuel to the debate, US Vice-President J.D. Vance openly criticised the cancellation of the Romanian presidential elections and the limits on freedom of expression in Europe at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, arguing that it represented a break with democratic values.¹⁷

In this context, Donald Trump has also expressed his reservations about international aid. In his speech to Congress on 4 March 2025, he used the example of Moldova to condemn the misuse of USAID funds ("32 million dollars for a left-wing propaganda operation in Moldova"). Indeed, the suspension of this aid programme could have crucial political effects for Moldova: the withdrawal of these funds could not only undermine local initiatives to promote good governance and human rights but also weaken the Moldovan government's pro-European stance. Although the ruling PAS party won a comfortable victory in the July 2021 parliamentary elections (63 out of 101 deputies), and the presidential election and referendum validated the party's main policies in autumn 2024, the 2025 parliamentary elections remain uncertain. PAS will most likely come out on top, but its ability to govern in a coalition raises questions if the party does not obtain an absolute majority. While European support for Chișinău is likely to remain strong, US support is now in doubt, while Russia will seek to weaken the position of the current government. Opposite PAS, the opposition parties are in the process of recomposing themselves: the respective weight and campaign dynamics for the traditional bloc of socialists and communists,

15 <https://hotnews.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Monitorul-Oficial-Partea-I-nr.-44.pdf>

16 In addition to the suspicions of Russian interference, Călin Georgescu has been charged with six counts, including incitement to undermine the constitutional order, dissemination of false information, creation of an anti-Semitic organisation, promotion of fascist ideologies and falsification of the sources of funding for his campaign.

17 <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/02/14/changement-de-regime-le-discours-integral-de-j-d-vance-a-munich/>

the groups linked to Ilan Shor or the “Alternative” political bloc¹⁸ have not yet been determined pending the exact date of the legislative elections.

Still in Moldova, the separatist territory of Transnistria could once again be in the news, not because of a military risk (due to the absence, at this stage, of territorial continuity with Russia), but rather because of an internal socio-economic collapse likely to destabilise the country just a few months before parliamentary elections. The energy crisis in Transnistria in January 2025 is a good illustration of the region’s specific economic and political vulnerabilities.¹⁹ Since Gazprom cut off gas supplies in January, this small separatist region has been plunged into a critical humanitarian situation, raising fears of destabilisation for Moldova as a whole.

Furthermore, while 2025 looks set to be a year of transition or tipping point on the Ukrainian front, the conclusion of the war will have a direct influence on the country’s prospects for reconstruction, where the challenges are colossal. The two neighbours, Romania and Moldova, should be key players in the reconstruction of Ukraine, in particular to strengthen energy infrastructures, modernise transport systems and support the rehabilitation of areas destroyed by the conflict. At the same time, an agreement extremely favourable to Russia or an abrupt withdrawal of the American presence could pose serious risks to the security and stability of these countries. A possible acceleration of Ukraine’s EU accession process as part of a potential settlement of the conflict would undoubtedly have an impact on the processing of the simultaneous Moldovan application, but this acceleration is subject to numerous political contingencies.

Faced with these challenges, Moldova and Romania are trying to strengthen their cooperation. Moldova, although neutral, sees Bucharest as an essential ally in securing its European future. Conversely, Romania is

endeavoring to balance its commitments to Ukraine with its own geopolitical interests and the internal dynamics tied to upcoming elections. The forthcoming months will be decisive. Faced with the presidential election in Romania, energy pressures on Transnistria, parliamentary elections in Moldova, and developments in the Ukrainian conflict, these two nations find themselves at a crossroads, navigating immediate challenges and strategic opportunities.

• **Conclusion.** **Between resilience and regional reinvention**

Romania and Moldova find themselves in 2025 facing distinct political and geopolitical trajectories, shaped by internal dynamics and external pressures. For Romania, a member of the European Union and NATO, the main challenge lies in defending its democratic roots in the face of rising populism, external interference and the failings of its own political system. In Moldova, the quest for stability and accelerated rapprochement with the EU is coming up against the challenges posed by Moscow’s hybrid war and the economic fragility exacerbated by energy tensions.

The war in Ukraine has not only redefined strategic alliances but also strengthened Chişinău’s European aspirations while accentuating the EU neighbourhoods vulnerabilities. Bucharest and Chişinău’s responses, whether in the form of bilateral cooperation, efforts to counter disinformation²⁰ or initiatives to contribute to Ukrainian reconstruction, testify to a shared desire for resilience in the face of challenges.

With 2025 shaping up to be a pivotal year for South-East Europe, Romania has the choice of following either the Polish or Hungarian example, in other words, either European rearmament or a more sovereignist policy critical of Brussels institutions. At the same

¹⁸ A newcomer on the political scene, the “Alternativa” bloc includes the mayor of the capital Ion Ceban, former Socialist-backed presidential candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo, former prime minister Ion Chicu and former MP Mark Tkaciuc.

¹⁹ The gas crisis had been foreseeable for several months: see for example

²⁰ https://www.sciencespo.fr/api/portal/uploads/Disinformation_and_Democracy_answering_the_Youth_b53de3a91c.pdf

time, Moldova will have to face increased Russian pressure if Trump imposes peace on Ukraine, which is bound to have major collateral effects. Such an outcome would have significant repercussions, not only on regional stability, but also on Moldova's internal dynamics, where political and social tensions could be exacerbated.

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Institut Jacques Delors

Penser l'Europe • Thinking Europe • Europa Denken
18 rue de Londres 75009 Paris, France • www.delorsinstitute.eu
T +33 (0)1 44 58 97 97 • info@delorsinstitute.eu



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