



**Joining the dots and making sense of the key geopolitical developments in Europe, Eurasia and MENA**

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**Key points:**

- 1) What Role for China in Ukraine War: Diplomatic Mediator or Military Spoiler?
  - 2) How Turkiye's Quest for Political Stability Could Drive Continuity or Change in Its Foreign Policy
  - 3) Georgia's and Moldova's Strategic Balancing Sliding in Opposite Geopolitical Directions
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Source : <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/06/ukraine-counteroffensive-expectations-hype-russia/>

### 1) What Role for China in the War in Ukraine: Diplomatic Mediator or Military Spoiler?

In Issue 21/November 2022- February 2023, we concluded that turning the war in Ukraine into a protracted conflict was the likeliest geopolitical endgame, at least until there was broad agreement on the framework and main rules of interaction into a new European security system. This conclusion has been reinforced by the latest publications of distinguished international scholars.

For example, while assuming that the most likely outcome of this war was a bloody stalemate, R. Haas and Ch. Kupchan proposed in April 2023 a sequenced two-pronged Western strategy in Ukraine. It should be *“aimed at first bolstering Ukraine's military capability and then, when the fighting season winds down late this year, ushering Moscow and Kyiv from the battlefield to the negotiating table”*. In particular, when a stalemate might emerge in the fighting, the West should be brokering a cease-fire and a follow-on peace process aimed at permanently ending the conflict. Even though the end of the large-scale warfighting would freeze in place a new line of contact between Russia and Ukraine, Kyiv should not be asked or pressured to give up the goal of taking back all of its

land, including Crimea and the Donbas. While acknowledging the inherent difficulties for the West to bring to the negotiations table both Kyiv and Moscow, Haas and Kupchan argued that the current Western policy has run its course since it was *“unwise”* and *“unsustainable”*. They suggested that *“the West should approach other influential countries, including China and India, to support the cease-fire proposal”* and to *“increase the pressure on the Kremlin”*. (*“The West Needs a New Strategy for Ukraine”*, <https://foreignaffairs.com>).

In the same vein, S. Charap concluded in June 2023 that *“neither Ukraine nor Russia will likely establish control over what they consider their own territory”* (despite the legal legitimacy of Ukrainian territorial claims). That is the war might lead into a situation where both Russia and Ukraine would have to settle for a *de facto* line of control that neither recognized as an international border. Charap also suggested that the most plausible ending of the large-scale warfighting was an armistice agreement- essentially a durable ceasefire agreement- that would fall short of bridging political divides. However, it would end the hot war between Russia and Ukraine but not their broader conflict over the Ukrainian territories controlled by Moscow. He offered as an example

the case of the 1953 Korean armistice. An armistice agreement would leave Ukraine -at least temporarily- without all its territory, but it might offer an opportunity to recover economically and stop the death and destruction. However, the conflict over its lost territories would continue in the political, cultural, and economic domains where Western support to Ukraine could offer Kyiv a comparative advantage against Russia. (*"An Unwinnable war"*, <https://foreignaffairs.com>)

This might be easier to say than do since the West had a limited ability to leverage Moscow into an armistice agreement, given the ongoing large-scale Western confrontation with Russia. The Black Sea grains deal clearly showed that other international actors, which were perceived in Moscow as more balanced in their positions against Russia (like Türkiye, Israel or the United Nations), might have a better chance to succeed in bringing an undefeated (and still defiant) Moscow to a Western-led negotiations table.

However, recent international developments brought up the P.R. of China as a potential mediator of a prospective Ukraine-Russia armistice agreement. Could China effectively play such a role, while remaining reasonably biased against Ukraine? On February 24, 2023, one year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese Foreign Ministry released a 12-point position paper on a political settlement of the Ukraine *"crisis"*. Notably, Chinese language refers to settling the crisis rather than the conflict, which by itself reflects a large gap between Chinese and Western perspectives. The Chinese position paper required: to effectively uphold the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all countries; ceasing hostilities and resuming the peace talks; resolving the humanitarian crisis; keeping nuclear power plants safe; protecting civilians and prisoners of war; preventing the use of, or the threats to use, nuclear weapons; keeping global industrial and supply chains stable; promoting post-conflict reconstruction. However, it

has also demanded: abandoning the Cold War mentality, an unveiled backup of Russian argument that NATO enlargement was at the core of the war in Ukraine; and ceasing unilateral (i.e., unauthorized by the UN Security Council) sanctions, basically meaning Western sanctions against Russia. (<https://news.cgtn.com>)

Western leaders (and many analysts) rushed to dismiss the Chinese position paper for it had recognized some Russian arguments and stopped short of openly condemning Russian military aggression against Ukraine. NATO Secretary General J. Stoltenberg said that *"China doesn't have much credibility because they have not been able to condemn the illegal invasion of Ukraine"*, while the president of the European Commission, U. von der Leyen, noted that China had already *"taken sides"* in the conflict. U.S. national security adviser J. Sullivan also dismissed much of the paper's contents: *"My first reaction to it is that it could stop at point one, which is to respect the sovereignty of all nations"*. And the U.S. government disclosed shortly thereafter that *"intelligence suggested that Beijing was considering supplying weapons to Russia. [...] Chinese officials rejected those U.S. claims as baseless smears"* (<https://theguardian.co.uk>).

However, the Ukrainian position against the Chinese position paper has been more cautious. Kyiv's restraint might have been partly explained by president V. Zelenskyy's expectation to have Chinese president Xi Jinping listening to the Ukrainian position, more than a year after his country was attacked by the Russian forces. Indeed, president Zelenskyy's strategic prudence was rewarded on April 26, 2023, when he spoke over the phone with his Chinese counterpart. That phone call came one month after a widely publicized Russia-China summit in Moscow on March 20-22, 2023, where presidents V. Putin and Xi Jinping had vowed to strengthen their countries' *"Friendship, Cooperation and Common Development"*. On that occasion, president Putin endorsed China's *"peace plan"* for

Ukraine and the two leaders stressed the need to “*respect legitimate security concerns of all countries*” to end the war- a talking point extensively used by Russians to blame NATO enlargement for the war against Ukraine.

Nevertheless, both sides presented their phone call as a diplomatic triumph: a Chinese readout mentioned the “*current rise of reasonable thinking and voices from all sides*,” while president Zelensky wrote on Twitter that it was a “*long and meaningful conversation*”. However, this phone call was a walk on a geopolitical tightrope as the Ukraine-China relationship has become a balancing act for both leaders. China promised to send a special representative to Ukraine and to other countries to hold talks on resolving the “*crisis*”. On the other hand, given that China’s peace proposals largely aligned with Moscow’s interests and might allow Russia to stay indefinitely in occupied Ukrainian territory, Kyiv has shown itself somewhat wary of Chinese mediation efforts, but stopped short of rejecting them. Most likely, Ukrainian leaders realized that Beijing held greater leverage over Moscow than anyone else, which they could use in future peace negotiations. Chinese possible contributions to the post-conflict reconstruction of Ukraine should be also welcomed. (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

According to experts, China would be interested to maintain its neutrality in order to turn this war into an opportunity to recast its relationships with Russia, the U.S., and Europe; on the one hand, China would not want to see a defeated or excessively weakened Russia, therefore it continued to expand its political, security, and economic ties with Moscow in spite of Western sanctions; on the other hand, Beijing would like to avoid having Europe joining an U.S.-led anti-China global bloc. Therefore, China tried to “*posture itself as neutral*” and to limit its support to Russia, including by abstaining to provide lethal military support. Eventually, Beijing might be happy to let Russia to

hold the frontline of the global confrontation with the West both for it would help fostering a long-term Russian dependence on Chinese trade and investment, and for it might distract the U.S. from a deeper military engagement in its own neighbourhoods. (<https://www.brookings.edu> and <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>)

From this perspective, China might be interested to mediate a Western-backed cease-fire/armistice agreement between Ukraine and Russia, as long as this would strengthen its global prestige as a valuable “*peace broker*”, and it would reinforce its image as a neutral player, while protecting Chinese strategic interests. In addition, a break in the large-scale warfighting would favour restoring a stronger global economy, and it would mitigate the risk of excessively weakening Russia, as the Chinese leader would have a higher interest on both matters. From this perspective, China might continue to avoid selling weapons to either side of the conflict and to dissuade Moscow against a horizontal (expansion) or vertical (nuclear) escalation of the war. In addition, China might be persuaded to support UN-backed international security guarantees for Ukraine, and to make a substantial contribution to the post-conflict recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine. (<https://thehill.com>)

Otherwise, if Beijing gave up to its self-restraint on selling weapons to Russia, it might dramatically shift the strategic balance to the detriment of Ukraine. That would face the West with a tough dilemma: either it would weaken its support to Ukraine and agree to a “*Russian peace*”, or it would jump into the war to salvage whatever was left from a broken Ukraine. To manage the highly consequential risk of China becoming a military spoiler in Ukraine, the West should reassure Beijing that maintaining the current Chinese-styled “*neutrality*” worked well for Chinese interests, including by reassuring Beijing against fears of potential global economic isolation. In conclusion, pushing the Ukraine war towards an armistice agreement might be the safest endgame

from a Western perspective. This is increasingly necessary as long as China is becoming more intransigent over Taiwan and deepening its geopolitical and wider partnership with Russia. The U.S. cannot prevent China and Russia strengthening ties and building a stronger alliance. Nevertheless, as long as there is hope in Beijing that Chinese global economic interests were safeguarded, Moscow and Beijing would hardly see eye-to-eye on the Ukraine war. Therefore, dismissing China's mediation ability would be bad policy for the Ukrainian state's survival and post-conflict reconstruction, as it might leave Beijing with no better option than fully embracing the terms of a Russian peace. And that might be fatal for the future of Ukraine.

In fact, China could not be expected to pursue conflict resolution in Ukraine, but merely some diplomatic mediation on crisis management. The outcomes of the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive and the resilience of Russian military positions might be decisive for boosting the chances of any cease-fire negotiations during this year. Western decisions over providing security guarantees to Ukraine might be also crucial. China could help reaching a long-lasting cease-fire in Ukraine, but the key issue is how it would choose to do that: entirely on Russian terms or otherwise.

## **2) How Türkiye's Quest for Political Stability Could Drive Continuity or Change in Its Foreign Policy**

On May 28, 2023, voters in Türkiye have given another five-years mandate to president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Before the first round of the elections this outcome was suspected (though not necessarily expected) by many and deplored by some, given his over twenty years tenure at the helm of the country. About 52% of Turkish voters trusted his political experience and resilience against domestic and external challenges and have eventually casted their vote for Erdogan. His newest

political victory went garnished by support from a majority of members of the newly elected Parliament.

Many observers of Türkiye's external relations have agreed that: *"Turkey's foreign policy is not expected to make a U-turn, and continuity will likely prevail over radical change"* and that *"Ankara will continue down the same path of partnership diversification (i.e., against global and regional powers), even if that means pursuing an uneasy balancing act"* (<https://www.ispionline.it/>) (for more topical analysis, see also [Geopolitical Trends Issue 20, August-October 2022](#)).

Nevertheless, political stability is unlikely to result in "more of the same" foreign policy, given the changing domestic and external challenges in and around the country, and Ankara's shifting regional and global status. The new foreign minister, Hakan Fidan- a former director of the National Intelligence Organization-, and a few other appointees in key posts of the new Government are most likely to prove this true.

An outline of possible geopolitical trends of continuity and change in Turkish foreign policy and how they might impact regional stability in Türkiye's neighbourhoods is quite timely. From this perspective, Türkiye's policy on Russia, including in the Black Sea, might hardly change (although the impact of Wagner Group's short-lived rebellion of June 23-24, 2023 is still to be considered in future analysis), while relations with the U.S. and the E.U. might slightly improve under the pressure of both political and socio-economic drivers of change. Relations with China, in particular in Central Asia, are likely to remain stable, while Iran policy might be subject to conflicting trends: whereas in the Middle East, and in particular in Syria, it might require some level of predictability, Turkish and Iranian interests in the Caucasus could clash over the so-called Zangezur corridor and the alleged oppression of Iranian Azerbaijanis.

Turkey and Russia are older strategic partners. Their complex partnership over the Black Sea has started



from sharing a number of common economic and security interests for the last 20+ years. It has then expanded towards new geopolitical areas, notably in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA). All along, a friendly personal relationship between presidents R.T. Erdogan and V. Putin, based on mutual trust and the ability to compartmentalize points of agreement and disagreement, has made a substantial contribution to strengthening the Russo-Turkish strategic partnership, in spite of Türkiye's NATO membership and Western confrontation with Russia over the last decade. The war in Ukraine has further proved its enduring resilience as Ankara provided military equipment to Kyiv, while not becoming directly involved in the Western political, diplomatic, and economic struggle with Russia. As G. Dalay has recently put it: *"Turkey has pursued two interrelated policies, attempting to be pro-Ukraine without becoming anti-Russia".* This particular foreign policy feature has enabled *"Turkey to play multiple roles. It plays a diplomatic role by trying to mediate the conflict, a humanitarian role by facilitating the grain deal along with the United Nations (UN), and a geopolitical role by controlling the passage to and from Black Sea through the Turkish straits. [...] Given its many benefits, this policy is unlikely to change."* (G. Dalay on <https://www.chathamhouse.org>)

In contrast, Türkiye's relations with the West have been marred by significant tensions since 2003 when the Turkish Parliament rejected the access of the U.S. troops during the war in Iraq. Moreover, in the aftermath of Romanian and Bulgarian NATO membership (both of them Black Sea Littoral states), the access of allied naval forces to the Black Sea and the role of non-Littoral states in regional cooperation have been subjects of contention between the U.S. and Türkiye. In the aftermath of the July 2016 failed *coup d'état* against president Erdogan, Türkiye's relations with the West have become mostly volatile and multi-layered, with

repeated ups and downs triggered by specific domestic or international events. In addition, under the leadership of Erdogan, Türkiye has become more nationalistic and inclined to assert its political and military power than before. However, most experts agree that Ankara's relations with the West might significantly improve over the next five years. Rebooting the economy is Erdogan's top priority. To that end, he would need foreign investment to flow again into Türkiye, and the U.S., the E.U. and others in the West might become, along China and the Arab monarchies, crucial in supplying it. *"This could forge a stronger link between economic and foreign policies, opening the door for a more cooperative and less transactional relationship with the EU, given the economic importance of the EU to Türkiye. [...] To attract more foreign investment and trade, capitalise on the restructuring of global supply chains, and create greater fiscal stability, better ties with the West, particularly the EU, which is Türkiye's main economic and trade partner, are vital."* (A. Paul, D.M. Seyrek on <https://www.epc.eu>). In addition, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the ongoing great power rivalry the issue of global supply chains might offer a great opportunity to Ankara *"to capitalize on the restructuring of supply chains as much as possible. However, its ability to do so will not only be down to economics, but also to the health of Turkey's relations with Europe and the West."* (G. Dalay on <https://www.chathamhouse.org>)

In Central Asia, Türkiye and China are struggling to fill the void left by the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's squeezing regional footprint. Ankara and Beijing have approached the region from different directions, and they have used different tools with different degrees of capability. They both have their own advantages and constraints. For example, Türkiye might have the potential advantage of benefitting from Western conditional support. However, Ankara might need to struggle to overcome the downsides of its

regional access being controlled by two potential geopolitical adversaries: Iran and Armenia. Ankara understands that the more Russia is hurt by the war in Ukraine and by the Western sanctions the more geopolitical space this creates for Türkiye in Central Asia. However, *"Russia is down but not out as far as Central Asia is concerned. It retains significant economic, military and cultural tools it can use in the short term to frustrate China's and Turkey's efforts to move in"*. (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

Unless the West recovered its stronger Central Asian engagement, and Russia stopped its wasteful war in Ukraine and re-focused on the region, China and Türkiye are likely to shape the future geopolitical landscape of Central Asia over the short to medium terms. Iran, Pakistan and India might also become more significant regional players but their levels of interest and progress in building relations with regional countries are still lagging behind. A stable, constructive China-Türkiye relationship in Central Asia seems therefore as the likeliest future. This would also bode well with Turkish interest to receive at least some Chinese FDI in support of reviving its ailing economy.

From the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye has opposed the al-Assad regime. In 2011, it severed diplomatic relations with Damascus and threw considerable support behind the Syrian opposition and armed rebels in Northern Syria. Afterwards, Türkiye avoided engaging the Syrian regime, focusing instead on fighting against the People's Protection Units (YPG) which, according to Ankara, had supported Kurdish separatism and violence in Türkiye. Ankara has also worked to establish a peace corridor - a buffer zone to repatriate Syrian refugees and prevent violent spillover into Türkiye. Since the end of last year, Ankara has initiated efforts to get closer to Syria, which would likely continue in the new mandate of president Erdogan. The newly appointed Turkish foreign minister has led efforts to organize a Turkish-Syrian summit. Given the recent history of

the Turkish-Syrian relations, and the occupation of a significant part of Northern Syria by Turkish (or Turkish-supported) forces this might be indeed a challenging task. Syrian president B. al-Assad has become more intractable with Ankara. Before taking a personal meeting with Erdogan, he demanded the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syria, while at the Arab League summit, on May 19, 2023, he accused Türkiye of "Ottoman expansionism." (<https://www.ada.edu.az>) This is why Russian mediation might be vital for this potential rapprochement, while Iran, one of the staunchest supporters of the al-Assad regime, should be also persuaded to okay it.

This brings us to the most problematic external relations task facing the new Turkish government: forging a stable, though difficult, relationship with Iran. Apparently, this might work better in the Middle East, in particular due to the reintegration of Syria with the Arab League; Türkiye's continued efforts to mend its relations with Arab neighbours; Russian interests to offer mediation; China-mediated *rapprochement* between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, tensions might be boiling out in the South Caucasus over the Zangezur corridor (details in our [Issue 21, November 2022-February 2023](#)) and over defending secularism in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis from Iran.

In late November 2022, as protests spread throughout Iran, and amid rising tensions between Baku and Tehran over a range of issues, Azerbaijani President I. Aliyev declared: *"We will do everything possible to defend our way of life as well as the secular direction of the development of Azerbaijan and of Azerbaijanis, including Azerbaijanis living in Iran. They are part of our nation"*. In fact, president Aliyev aligned his position with that expressed in Baku a couple of years ago by president Erdogan himself who noted at the time that the Azerbaijanis of Iran were very much a matter of Turkish concern. While the presidents didn't question the territorial integrity of Iran, there have been voices in the

Azerbaijani Parliament claiming that Azerbaijan should be renamed Northern Azerbaijan with a view to a potential future unification with Azerbaijanis living in Iran. In response, Iranian armed forces extensively exercised close to the Azerbaijani border raising fears of the outbreak of a war, in which Türkiye would have to intervene, as a close ally of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's closer cooperation with Israel including on intelligence exchange has also fed Teheran's suspicions against Baku's intentions. Nevertheless, according to Azerbaijani experts, while a full-fledged conflict is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future, the Iranian-Azerbaijani "war of words" might go on for some time. (<https://jamestown.org>)

On the other hand, president "*Erdogan's acrobatics between East and West and his muscular strategy in the Mediterranean have elicited concern in Washington and Jerusalem as well as in other capitals such as Athens and Cairo.*" Fears have prevailed over a possible replication in the Mediterranean of Turkish partnerships being paired with tensions. In the current turbulent regional context, Israeli-Turkish relations might probably continue to improve cautiously. (<https://besacenter.org>)

In conclusion, after securing a new mandate, president R.T. Erdogan would essentially continue balancing in Türkiye's neighbourhoods between the West, China, and Russia. This might contribute to, though it won't be sufficient to guarantee, regional stability in the "sea of geopolitical change" surrounding Türkiye. And, whether it likes it or not, the West would have other five years ahead to forget the ideological differences and adjust its policies to deal with Turkish strategic autonomy in the regions of shared interest.

### 3) Georgia's and Moldova's Strategic Balancing Sliding in Opposite Geopolitical Directions

Sixteen months after the launch of the Russian war in Ukraine, the balance of power in the Wider Black Sea (WBS) remains highly volatile. Expansion or containment are the potential near-term outcomes of the war. Expansion might end up into a new East European regional chaos, while containment might lead the belligerents towards military deadlock and unfinished war.

In our [issue No.19/ May-July 2022](#) we discussed how Georgia and Moldova were struggling to adjust their policies to weathering the current "geopolitical storm" in the WBS. At the time, we concluded that Georgia mirrored Ankara's "walk on a tight rope between the West and Russia". Meanwhile, Moldova had been geopolitically caught between, on the one hand, the indispensable need of European financial and economic aid to help her keep the economy afloat through multiple crises, and, on the other hand, Russian hybrid war against her pro-Western government.

Over the past year, neither Tbilisi nor Chisinau succeeded to maintain their policies against Russia and the West in equilibrium. They have sled in opposite geopolitical directions with Tbilisi apparently moving closer to Moscow, and Chisinau tilting to pro-Western and anti-Russian positions. No wonder why Brussels assigned Moldova a symbolic role in the Western confrontation with Russia as the host of the second European Political Community (EPC) summit held on June 1, 2023. Moscow reciprocated with new openings to Tbilisi (lifting the ban on direct air travel between the two countries and cancelling visa requirements for Georgian visitors) approved by the Georgian government to the chagrin of its Western partners. How did Georgia and Moldova lose their respective geopolitical balances and how could they get it back?



## Georgia



Source : <https://www.bbc.com>

The government has continued to take an increasingly prudent attitude towards the war in Ukraine while conspicuously (some would add “but falsely”) claiming its Euro-Atlantic and European aspirations.

Last February, the Georgian Parliament began discussing two draft laws on “foreign agents”, both of them endorsed by the ruling majority. They have been attacked for a close similarity to Russia’s foreign agent law, used to shut down the free press and human rights groups, although the authors claimed they were inspired from the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Supporters argued those draft laws would enable the state to control malign foreign influence more efficiently in the country. Georgian opposition, NGO sector, and the country’s foreign partners disagreed. On February 28, 2023, EU Commissioner for human rights, Dunja Mijatovic, expressed concerns to the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament. Numerous ambassadors from EU member states in Tbilisi have likewise expressed fears about where those laws might lead Georgia. Their adoption would have very likely resulted in the termination of many foreign grants and foreign donations by NGOs, leading to the closure of programs and the dismissal of Georgian staff. (<https://cepa.org>) As of March 7, 2023, many Georgians started to protest outside the Parliament building after the body adopted the controversial bills in a first reading. Two days later the Georgian Dream (GD) government suspended the discussion on the foreign agents’ laws in the Parliament, citing popular protests, and saying they were going to

engage in a national consultation instead. Indeed, on March 10, 2023 the Georgian Parliament rejected the draft laws after the second reading. (<https://jamestown.org>)

However, this political crisis has not come out of the blue. It was only the latest in a series of events driven by extreme political polarization that have damaged Georgia’s image in the West since October 2020 in the aftermath of the latest elections.

In another turn to the worse of Georgia-Western relations, on April 5, 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken issued a statement announcing that the State Department has publicly sanctioned four Georgian judges imposing visa restrictions on them. The U.S. ambassador to Georgia explained that they were engaged in significant corrupt activity. Georgian authorities reacted ambiguously to the sanctions against the judges. President S. Zurabishvili stressed that she was “not happy” and was “worried” by the US decision, while Prime Minister I. Garibashvili expressed his “full support” for the sanctioned judges and announced that “*any interference with the independent court of a sovereign country was unacceptable and inadmissible*”. (<https://jamestown.org>)

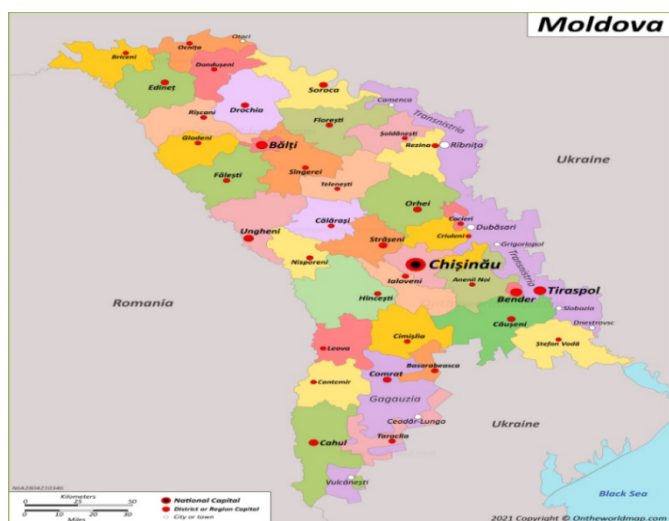
Those most recent developments have reinforced a stereotype pushed by the Georgian opposition, and by some experts on the region about the GD party being pro-Russian. The party’s founder -billionaire B. Ivanishvili- has also been plagued by accusations of holding pro-Kremlin views. The rationale for such a stereotype is partly understandable as the Georgian authorities constantly accused Ukraine and the West for attempting to involve Georgia in an armed conflict against Russia. (<https://carnergieendowment.org>) Yet, given the recent history of Russia-Georgia relations, one can hardly expect that any responsible, largely popular Georgian party would do anything likely to be perceived as pro-Russia. That would amount to “political suicide”. Actually, the Georgian government might be aiming to build a pragmatic

relationship with Moscow stemming from past experience showing that geopolitical biases could hardly help solve its territorial disputes with Russian protégés.

Since June 2022, the EU has differentiated Georgia from Moldova and Ukraine by recommending the former should gain a “European perspective” and be admitted as a formal E.U. candidate once it fulfilled certain conditions, such as reducing political polarization, strengthening the independence of the judicial system, and bolstering anti-corruption. (<https://www.epc.eu>) In that context, the GD government might have also hoped to capitalize on Georgia’s essential geo-economic position in its race to getting the E.U. candidate status.

Latest evolutions seemed to question, if not actually endanger, Georgia’s aspirations for E.U. membership. Nevertheless, they shouldn’t justify withholding Georgia’s E.U. candidate status beyond the end of this year. Leaving Georgia in geopolitical limbo will be manipulated by the Kremlin, leading to pro-Russian narratives and further destabilisation attempts. While Georgia's progress on reforms remains essential, the E.U. must also consider the geopolitical implications of its decisions. Russian invasion of Ukraine highlighted what many experts had been saying for years: to protect its security and prevail as a regional power the E.U. must take up geopolitical responsibility on its neighbourhood.

## Moldova



Source : <https://ontheworldmap.com>

In contrast to Georgia, over the last months, Moldovan foreign policy has shifted to displaying blatant anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian positions. As expected, this new policy has triggered Russian anger and intensified its hybrid warfare against the pro-Western authorities in Chisinau.

This policy shift has come since mid-February 2023 with the swearing in of a new Prime-Minister, D. Recean, the former national security advisor of president M. Sandu. On that occasion, he unveiled in the Parliament new goals and priorities regarding Transnistria, which would undo the “acquis” of at least 25 years in the Transnistrian settlement process: Transnistria's "demilitarization" was defined as the complete evacuation of "unlawfully stationed" Russian troops, arms and ammunition; a diplomatic solution was needed leading to the "recovery of Moldova's full sovereignty" in Transnistria; the implementation of Moldova's European integration programs in the entire territory of the country should be imperative, including in Transnistria; establishing a direct dialogue, in "1+1" format, with Tiraspol's de facto leadership on economic and technical matters; replacing the multilateral “5+2” format negotiations with bilateral engagement with each participant to maintain stability and avert any incidents in or around Transnistria. (<https://jamestown.org>)

Further to that, against the background of long-standing, opposition-staged, anti-government public protests, Moldovan president M. Sandu briefed the Parliament, in mid-March 2023, on “Moldova’s reconstructed policy toward Russia”. She elaborated around the following points: Russia was attempting to overthrow the constitutional order in Moldova; the Kremlin resorted to destabilizing Moldova from within; Pro-Russia Moldovan parties (meaning primarily former president I. Dodon’s Socialist Party and I. Shor’s “Shor Party”) were in the Kremlin’s service; their only goal was to provoke violence, chaos, and war. Consequently, the Moldovan government has re-

evaluated its decision to not join the E.U.'s sanctions against Russia. It seems it might align itself with the E.U.'s personal sanctions, though not yet with the economic sanctions. Moldova has also taken steps to withdraw from the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). And the Moldovan Parliament adopted a "Declaration on Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine" amounting to a criminal indictment of Russia. (<https://jamestown.org>)

President Sandu's speech in the Parliament came in the wake of the disclosure by J. Kirby, the spokesperson of the U.S. National Security Council, of a Russian "internal strategy document". At a press conference, he announced that U.S. intelligence had determined that the Kremlin was plotting to topple Moldovan democracy by staging and using protests in Moldova as a basis to foment a manufactured insurrection against the Moldovan government. Subsequently, global media published a Russian "Strategy for Moldova" focusing on countering alleged attempts of external actors (primarily the U.S., E.U., Türkiye and Ukraine) to interfere in the internal affairs of Moldova, to strengthen the influence of NATO and weaken the positions of Russia. It envisioned Moldova joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (E.E.U.), and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). And it would seek the "neutralization" of any actions by the Moldovan government to expel the Russian military presence in Transnistria. (<https://news.yahoo.com>)

Apparently, the rapid deterioration of relations between Chisinau and Moscow has also irritated Moldova's Gagauz minority. In 2014, the signing of the Association Agreement between the E.U. and Moldova prompted the Gagauz to organize an illegal referendum, which saw most participants reject EU integration in favour of closer ties with the Russian-led E.E.U. (<https://carnegieeurope.eu>) On May 14, 2023, E. Gutsul has been elected governor of Gagauzia region of Moldova. She was

proposed by the Shor Party (a pro-Russian Moldovan opposition party disbanded on June 19, 2023, by a decision of the Constitutional Court) and has made of restoring relations with Russia, and preventing European integration, a central part of the election campaign. That is exactly the opposite of the new Moldovan foreign policy. It looks like the outcome of this election in Gagauzia would offer Russia a fresh opportunity to create instability in Moldova, by leveraging Russian influence over the Gagauz minority.

To remain a viable state and to keep alive its European integration aspirations, Moldova might need to continue to navigate in-between the conflicting regional interests of the E.U., Russia, and Türkiye. The new policies against Russia, Transnistria, and prospectively against an increasingly hostile Gagauz minority will make this navigation harder, riskier, and potentially playing in favour of expanding the war in Ukraine to (parts of) Moldovan territory.

Mainly for geopolitical reasons, the West should continue to expand its political, economic, financial, and security support to Moldova for maintaining domestic stability, as the Moldovan opposition would continue to struggle to upend the pro-European stance of Moldova in favour of preserving an outdated strategic ambiguity playing on the elusive "neutrality" of the country. Nevertheless, the explicit rejection of the "5+2" format for dialogue on Transnistria might also offer a dummy "reason" to Moscow to proceed, when that would suit best its geopolitical interests, with the annexation or the unilateral recognition of independence of Transnistria (according to Russian playbooks used in Ukraine and in Georgia). The consequences for Moldova's and more broadly for regional stability would be dire. They should be seriously considered in further developing "*Moldova's reconstructed policy toward Russia*".



### About EGF

The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) was established in early 2010 by several independently minded practitioners of European geopolitics, who saw a certain vacuum in the information flow leading into the European geopolitical discussion. EGF is dedicated, therefore, towards the promotion of an objective, Pan-European geopolitical debate incorporating the views of Wider-European opinion shapers rather than simply those from the mainstream European Union (EU) member states. EGF seeks to elaborate upon European decision makers' and other relevant stakeholders' appreciation of European geopolitics by encouraging and effectively expanding the information flow from east to west, from south to north. In order to achieve these objectives, the European Geopolitical Forum was established as an independent internet-based resource, a web-portal which aims to serve as a knowledge hub on Pan-European geopolitics. EGF's strength is in its unique ability to gather a wide range of affiliated experts, the majority of whom originate from the countries in the EU's external neighbourhood, to examine and debate core issues in the Wider-European geopolitical context. Exchange of positions and interactivity between east and west, south and north, is at the heart of the EGF project. Please visit our website for further information at [www.gpf-europe.com](http://www.gpf-europe.com).

### About the Author

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