

Dimitar Keranov: Bulgaria and Romania must expand cooperation

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Summary

The document is an interview with Bulgarian political scientist Dr. Dimitar Keranov about Bulgarian-Moldovan relations, regional security, and international relations in Southeast Europe following the start of Russia's large-scale military invasion of Ukraine.

Key points from the interview:

- **Moldova's Europeanization:** Dr. Keranov is in Chisinau and observes the country advancing economically and socially toward the EU, despite problems like corruption and Russian influence. He believes Moldova is politically ready for the EU and could realistically join in about five years, provided no dramatic domestic political changes occur.
- **Challenges and Russian Disinformation:** He discusses the societal division in Moldova, noting that the pro-European side won the elections, albeit by a small margin. He emphasizes that Russia is a serious source of disinformation, particularly in Russian-speaking regions like Gagauzia and Taraclia, spreading blatant lies to discredit President Maia Sandu and create artificial divisions. He addresses Transnistria, suggesting the region should not block Moldova's EU future and will likely rejoin the rest of Moldova eventually.
- **Bulgaria's Role:** Bulgarian-Moldovan relations have a greater strategic potential, as Moldova is key to European security. Bulgaria, as an EU and NATO partner, can offer assistance against hybrid threats, share its experience in energy diversification, and provide expertise. He highlights the success of the University of Ruse branch in Taraclia and a cultural center in Comrat, but notes that Bulgaria's political instability and corruption issues hinder a clear, comprehensive strategy for support.
- **Romanian-Bulgarian Cooperation:** Keranov stresses the importance of expanding Romanian-Bulgarian cooperation, especially in the Black Sea region, to face Russian aggression and disinformation. Both countries have a huge interest in Moldova's EU accession and should consider joint support initiatives.
- **Energy and Infrastructure:** Bulgaria is important for Moldova's energy security as a "European gateway" to gas corridors, providing access to LNG via Greece. He welcomes the December 2025 memorandum signed by Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania on infrastructure corridors between the Black and Aegean Seas, calling it a mechanism to improve regional coordination, logistics, and security, made possible by the war in Ukraine.
- **Foreign Policy Vision:** Keranov advocates for a modern Bulgarian foreign policy based on:
 1. **Strong support for Ukraine and Moldova.**
 2. **Real connectivity** (transport, energy, digital) to reduce vulnerability within NATO and eliminate dependence on Soviet weapons.
 3. **Defense against hybrid threats**, learning from Moldova's targeted strategy to neutralize Russian interference.He concludes that Bulgaria and Romania must be the most active countries in expanding cooperation in all areas.

- **Dimitar Keranov's Initiatives:** He mentions founding the [Bulgarian Institute for International Policy](#) (a think tank in Varna) and being one of the presidents of the [Institute of Political Science](#). He also maintains a Romanian-language Facebook page, ["International Politics Made Simple."](#) to present the Bulgarian point of view to the Moldovan public and show the advantages of EU membership.

Intro

Dr. Dimitar Keranov is the founder and member of the Board of Directors of the Bulgarian Institute for International Politics and one of the presidents of the Institute of Political Sciences. He holds a PhD in political science, specializing in the democratization of Africa. His expertise also covers international relations and internal political dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe.

Dr. Keranov is the only Bulgarian political scientist who speaks Afrikaans and is the author of the first conversation guide in this language for Bulgarians. In addition to his native Bulgarian, he also speaks English, German, Russian, Czech, Slovak, Croatian, Serbian, Spanish, Galician, Italian, Portuguese, Hungarian, Romanian, Dutch, and French.

The Bridge of Friendship spoke with Dimitar Keranov in the context of his interest in the positive trend in Bulgarian-Moldovan relations, as well as the increasingly better infrastructure connectivity in Southeast Europe. Dimitar Keranov embodies the new dynamic of Bulgarian-Moldovan relations—in addition to maintaining a Romanian-language page that presents Bulgarian topics to the Moldovan public, he is actively working on issues related to European integration and regional security.

Interview with political scientist Dr. Keranov

The Europeanisation of the Republic of Moldova

Mr. Keranov, let's start our conversation with an important clarification. You are currently in Chisinau, in the Republic of Moldova – a country that is confidently moving towards the European Union. How does the change feel, and does it feel at all? How is the Europeanization of the country and its rapprochement with the EU manifesting itself?

Hello, Mr. Mitev. Thank you for your question. Indeed, I am in Chisinau, where, as is typical for January, there is already quite a lot of snow. I can say that, from my visits to Moldova, I constantly observe how the country, despite some problems it faces – such as corruption and Russian influence – is advancing in all respects: economically and socially. In my opinion, Moldova is currently politically ready to join the European Union, as the government has clear pro-European views and is following a clear pro-European trajectory.

Institutionally, I would say that the country is partially ready. Of course, there is a clear division in society on whether Moldova should join and where it should go—toward Russia or toward the European Union. I would say that if there are no dramatic changes in Moldova's domestic

politics (which is not expected), the country could realistically join the EU in about five years—that is the mood here in Chișinău.

There is often talk about the division in the country and the orientation towards the East or the West. This is linked to other factors, which we can discuss later in the interview, but I would say that most Moldovans and the younger generations are in favor of European integration. Many of them travel to the European Union, study there, and see all the advantages and values that this brings.

Overall, Bulgaria's experience shows that corruption, weak institutions, and external influence can continue even after EU accession if they are not addressed systematically. I think public discourse often fails to recognize that EU accession alone does not solve all problems. But the results of the elections in Moldova clearly show that the majority of citizens want to be part of the Union – that is my impression and understanding here on the ground.

Is Maia Sandu's opposition anti-European?

In fact, in 2024, Moldova held a referendum on joining the European Union. It is interesting that Alexander Stoianoglo – a former chief prosecutor and candidate from the minority group, who was the leader of the movement against the European face of the country, President Maia Sandu – voted in favor of Moldova's association agreement with the EU in 2014.

At the time, it was also reported that his daughter was working at the European Central Bank. I mention these things because it is interesting to ask whether it is somewhat illusory that there is such strong resistance to the EU in Moldova, as the referendum showed (support for EU accession was just over 50%). Could the referendum results and attitudes toward the EU be explained more by internal competition than by geopolitical differences? The fact that Europe is strongly associated with Maia Sandu provokes resistance on the other side of society, not so much toward Europe as toward Sandu herself, but this is also reflected in attitudes toward the EU.

Yes, as in any country, there is internal competition between politicians, and it is normal for a party to try to discredit its opponents. Regardless of whether one supports Maia Sandu and her party, in the actual elections, the pro-European side of Moldovans managed to prevail, albeit by a small margin.

It should be noted that Moldova is a serious target of Russian disinformation. Things get complicated here because there are areas—mainly in southern Moldova, such as Taraclia and Gagauzia—that are dominated by Russian-language narratives in terms of information. Since the majority of the population there, for historical reasons, mainly uses Russian for everyday communication and access to the media and can therefore obtain information (or rather disinformation) from manipulative Russian-language media, this leads to greater distrust of the central government.

In my opinion, this distrust is exaggerated by certain politicians who support a pro-Russian line or simply want to discredit Maia Sandu. As you mentioned, this creates an interesting paradox: they say one thing and do another. They speak out against the European Union, but their children live and study in Western Europe or regularly visit destinations such as Italy and France to shop in the “hated” EU.

Russia, through its representatives, is deliberately trying to create a division in Moldovan society, which is largely artificial. They spread blatant lies—for example, that if Moldova joins the EU, Romania will annex it and Romanian troops will march through the country. This will not happen, but that is the narrative. It is important to note that there are many different ethnic groups in Moldova – there is a Bulgarian minority (about 2%), there is the autonomous region of Gagauzia. Everyone should retain their identity, but in Moldova these rights are guaranteed and no one threatens anyone’s identity or mother tongue. The idea of discrimination based on language is, in my opinion, unfounded and does not correspond to the real situation.

Perhaps this is the time to say a few words about Transnistria – whether it is possible for Moldova to join the EU without it. This region is de facto outside Chisinau’s control and functions as a military and political springboard for Russia. Transnistria should not block Moldova’s European future, and the EU cannot allow a Russian enclave to do so.

Economically, the pro-Russian regime there has no future and will fall sooner or later. Then, the region will probably voluntarily join the rest of Moldova in an agreed political process, as Chisinau considers it de jure its territory.

The Bulgarian role in southern Moldova

In the picture you describe, of a divided society and misinformation, Bulgaria enters 2025 with visits at the highest level – by the foreign minister, prime minister, and vice president. It seems that the Republic of Moldova relies heavily on Bulgaria. A branch of the University of Ruse has been opened in Taraclia, as well as a Bulgarian cultural and language center in Comrat (the capital of Gagauzia). What exactly is Bulgaria’s role and what are its opportunities to contribute to the Europeanization process in Moldova, including through its links with minorities?

These are very important questions. Bulgarian-Moldovan relations have much greater strategic potential than is traditionally recognized. For a long time, they were perceived as a niche topic related only to history and minorities. However, since the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Moldova has become a key element of European security. This changes its significance for Bulgaria, which is a stable partner in the EU and NATO.

In the energy sector, for example, Moldova is looking for a way out of its dependence on Russia, and Bulgaria has experience—albeit difficult—in this process. Bulgaria could offer assistance against hybrid threats, common platforms against disinformation, and expertise for the Moldovan administration.

Of course, we must support our minority in Taraclia. The branch of the University of Ruse is one of the best examples, along with various infrastructure projects. But Bulgaria must move away from focusing exclusively on the minority and toward more comprehensive support for

Moldova's European path as a whole.

This is where an unpleasant moment comes in—due to our internal problems related to corruption and political instability, the Bulgarian state seems to lack a clear strategy. This image and this real problem are also perceived negatively by part of the Bulgarian minority in Moldova, which sometimes blocks cooperation.

The Bulgarians here are proud of their origins and language and need textbooks, books, and support for cultural centers. Due to frequent changes of government and purges in the administration, there is a lack of continuity in Bulgaria. People on the ground often do not know who to turn to for help.

The Bulgarian state, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provides funding for development projects such as school renovations. Isn't the process of submitting applications through the embassy or non-governmental organizations clear?

What is being done is good, but I think more needs to be done. Initiatives such as the University of Ruse are a success, but there is still untapped potential.

The Taraclia branch of the University of Ruse has been operating for several months. What feedback have you received about its work? How is it changing people's lives?

The university is a big step forward because teaching is in Bulgarian. This is also convenient for Bulgarians in Ukraine, who can study in Taraclia instead of moving to Bulgaria, which is easier financially. The university is extremely popular, and I would be delighted to see more specializations offered there. This is one of our greatest successes in the region in recent years.

Romanian-Bulgarian relations and Moldova

You mentioned that Bulgaria should be more active in its relations with Moldova. How do Romanian-Bulgarian relations fit into this context? After the war in Ukraine began, there was a "thaw" in relations, and in 2023 a strategic partnership declaration was signed. What is the significance of this Romanian-Bulgarian rapprochement for what is happening in Moldova?

Romanian-Bulgarian relations are traditionally good and very important, especially now that we are facing Russian aggression and disinformation warfare. Cooperation at all levels – economic and military (especially in the Black Sea region) – must be a priority. Both Bulgaria and Romania have a huge interest in Moldova's accession to the EU. The two countries should consider joint initiatives to support Moldova, for example in the fight against hybrid attacks.

Cooperation between Bulgaria and Moldova in the energy sector

In terms of energy, Bulgaria is also becoming important for Moldova. What exactly is happening in this sector?

Excessive dependence on Russia has proven problematic for the entire EU since the attack on Ukraine. Bulgaria could share its experience in diversification and risk management and could help Moldova with its supply of electricity and other raw materials. Moldova needs to minimize its dependence on electricity produced in Transnistria. Bulgaria is important as a European gateway to gas corridors and provides access to liquefied natural gas (LNG) via Greece. The more Moldova is supplied through the European network, the less Russia will be able to use energy as a means of pressure.

How certain is it that Russia is losing its influence over energy in the Republic of Moldova? As far as I know, the company supplying gas to Transnistria is Hungarian, and Hungary maintains close relations with Russia. Are we sure that there is no Russian component in the natural gas supplied to Transnistria or even the rest of Moldova?

Your question is legitimate, given the ties between Hungary and Russia. At this point, I cannot confirm with certainty whether such a component exists. But what I can say is that the risk of a Russian element can always exist in non-transparent intermediate models – the solution is transparency, competition, and infrastructure that allows for real choice.

Cooperation on infrastructure in Central and Southeastern Europe

On 3 December 2025, Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania signed a memorandum on the construction of infrastructure corridors between the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. This is a clear sign of the Euro-Atlantic vision for interconnectivity in the region. What changes do you expect from now on?

This memorandum was made possible by the war in Ukraine and the realization that Southeast Europe is vulnerable in terms of infrastructure. We need more regional coordination. This is not an isolated event, but a management mechanism that will improve rail and road links, logistics, and security. This is also beneficial for the economy. I welcome this initiative, although it should have taken place much earlier.

There is also the Three Seas Initiative, which aims to connect the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic Sea, and the Black Sea. However, Romania seems much more enthusiastic about this project than Bulgaria. Where does this difference come from—are Sofia's reasons geopolitical, or is the reason rather a lack of sufficient funds within the Three Seas Initiative?

The Three Seas Initiative has real potential, but it suffers from limited funding. Bulgaria is cautious because Sofia does not see the direct benefits or realize the importance of the initiative. Again, we come back to the political instability in our country and the lack of in-depth expertise at the highest levels of government.

Dimitar Kenarov's initiatives

In 2025, you founded a think tank for international relations and also lead an association of people in the field of political science. Would you like to introduce them?

With great pleasure. I am one of the founders of the [**Bulgarian Institute for International Policy**](#). This is a unique initiative for the city of Varna—an independent think tank whose mission is to promote debate on political issues in Bulgaria and Europe. We do this through analyses published in our online magazine “Regions.”

I am also one of the presidents of the [**Institute of Political Science**](#), founded in 2017, initially as a youth association. In 2025, we restructured with the aim of becoming one of the leading associations of people in the field of political science in the country. We want to combat political superstitions and encourage youth participation so that the voice of the younger generation can be heard in the political debate. The two structures complement each other—one develops the scientific discipline, and the other provides international analysis.

You also have a Facebook page in Romanian, aimed at the Moldovan public. It presents what you call “the Bulgarian point of view.” What prompted you to do this, and what has been the reaction?

The page is called [**“International Politics Made Simple”**](#) and is a personal project that does not promote the positions of any party. My goal is to present the Bulgarian point of view to the Moldovan public in accessible language and in historical context—for example, on topics such as protests in our country or the introduction of the euro.

The reactions have been very positive, especially from pro-European circles in Moldova. Most Moldovans have an extremely good attitude toward Bulgarians. I haven’t even received the expected criticism from pro-Russian circles, which makes me happy – it means that Bulgaria’s position is interesting to everyone. Through this page, I try to show the advantages of EU membership. It is a symbol of our good relations.

Bulgaria’s modern vision of foreign policy

Before concluding, I would like to pose a challenge to you. The legacy of the past often makes us think of Bulgaria as an “island” surrounded by enemies, where we reproduce among ourselves, rely on our uniqueness, and are suspicious of different people and those who come from outside. What should a modern foreign policy vision for Bulgaria look like in the context of the new reality after the war in Ukraine?

Bulgaria made its civilizational choice long ago – the EU and NATO. We must have a clear regional vision and be a reliable pillar of security, not a passive observer. This includes increased cooperation with Romania and Greece. I do not share the view that we are surrounded by enemies – Romania is not our enemy.

The main principles of such a strategy should be:

- 1. Strong support for Ukraine and Moldova.** Moldova should not be left at the mercy of Russia’s appetite.
- 2. Real connectivity.** Transport, energy, and digital, to reduce our vulnerability and increase competitiveness within NATO. We must eliminate our dependence on Soviet weapons.

3. Defense against hybrid threats. We must learn from Moldova's experience. They realized they were the target of a hybrid war and managed to neutralize Russia's interference in their elections through a targeted strategy. In Bulgaria, this is not yet fully understood at the highest levels of government.

In conclusion, Bulgaria and Romania are the two countries that need to be most active and expand their cooperation in all areas.

Photo: Dimitar Keranov (source: Dimitar Keranov)

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خبرنگار بلغاری که زبان رومانی و زبان فارسی را حرف می زند.

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