

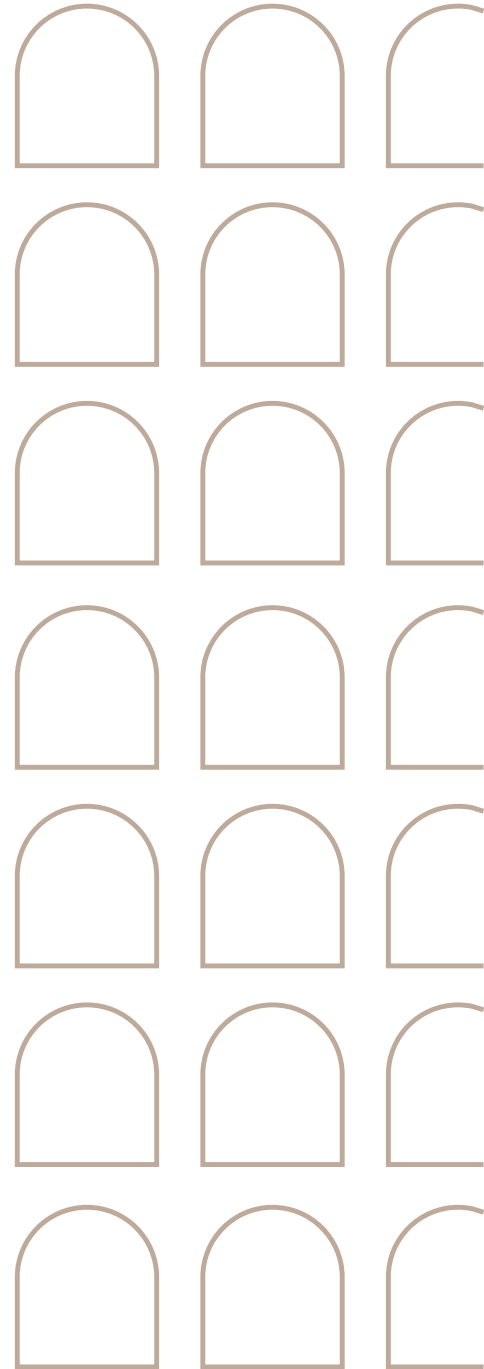
STG Policy Papers

POLICY BRIEF

STRENGTHENING EU-MOLDOVA COOPERATION: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE TRANSNISTRIAN SETTLEMENT PROCESS

Author:
Malvina Condratiuc

ISSUE 2024/09
MARCH 2024



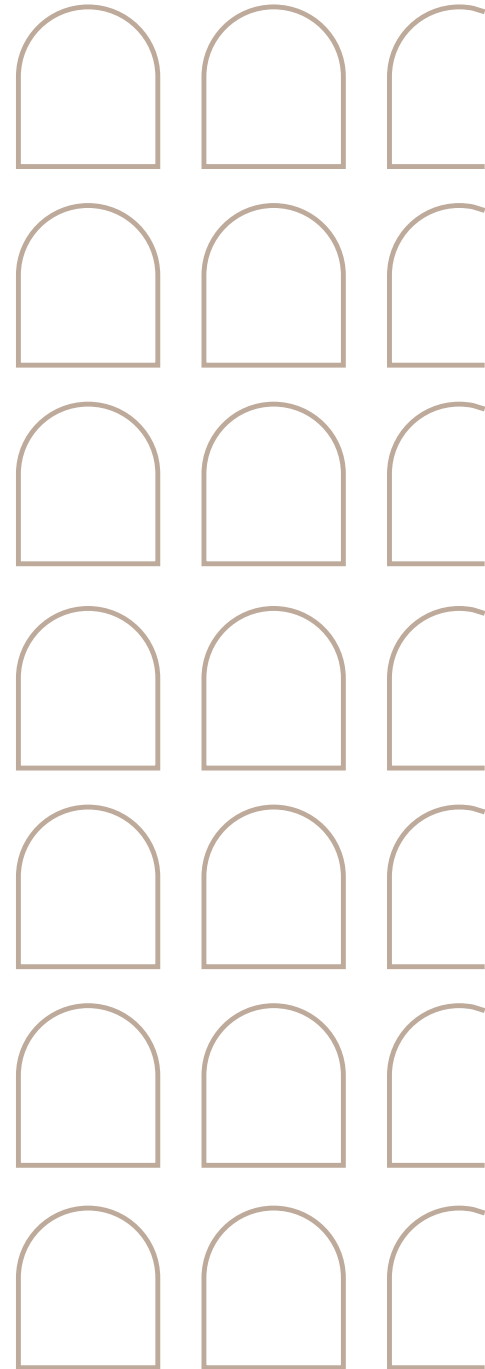
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper focuses on the importance of the negotiation process for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict and the potential for Moldova's EU membership as the main policy options in preventing an escalation of the conflict and in preserving peace and security in Europe. It provides an overview of the current condition of the existing negotiating formats and their capacity to address the issues hindering the interaction of Chisinau and Tiraspol in the negotiation process. It also explores the possibilities of resetting and adapting certain formats in the light of Moldova's progress in the process of integration into the European Union, in order to focus more on peace and security issues that threaten regional stability. The text highlights the areas where Moldova needs more EU support and expertise to bring the Transnistrian region back into the state's legal framework, thereby creating favourable conditions for conflict resolution and subsequently for Moldova's reintegration and EU integration processes.

Author:

Malvina Condrațiu | Policy Leader Fellow (2023-2024), Florence School of Transnational Governance, EUI

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute



1. INTRODUCTION

Like many of the conflicts that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Transnistrian conflict started in the early 1990s. Aiming to maintain its territorial integrity, Moldova declared its independence in 1991, while the Transnistrian region leaders aspired for a potential integration into Russia. This discord led to an armed conflict in 1992, resulting in widespread devastation, the establishment of the secessionist regime, economic crises, smuggling, and other problems that continue to affect all aspects of Moldovan socioeconomic life.

For more than 30 years, this conflict has continued to exist as in an uncertain ceasefire, and its frozen nature has become a source of concern, particularly given Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine and its demonstrated ability to disrupt other conflict zones in Europe. Considering that Moldova shares a border with Ukraine to the north, east and south, including on the central (Transnistrian) segment, this position makes it Ukraine's most vulnerable neighbour and the next target of Russian aggression. If the Kremlin captures Odessa, it may be tempting to take Moldova or at least strengthen Russia's military presence in Transnistria.¹

Given that Transnistria is the closest flashpoint for the European Union, the prioritisation of a peaceful resolution formula within the Transnistrian settlement process is not only a pressing national concern, but also a regional imperative to maintain peace and stability in Europe. To prevent the conflict from escalating and from causing violence, instability, and humanitarian crises in the region, it is crucial

to address the issues that hinder peaceful dialogue between the parties. This can be achieved by strengthening cooperation between the EU and Moldova on human rights, security-related vulnerabilities, and other aspects of mutual concern in the Transnistrian settlement process.

2. WHAT POLICY OPTIONS ARE AVAILABLE TO MOLDOVA?

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Moldovan national authorities have been predominantly advocating for peace and solidarity, expressing a firm commitment to continuing the dialogue within the Transnistrian settlement process and to maintaining stability in the region. This approach has proven to be sufficient for this purpose, having been encouraged by European leaders, who have granted Moldova candidate status for EU membership and continued to provide multilateral support to Moldova on its European path.

The openness of the EU to Moldova's membership aspirations was further reaffirmed within numerous official meetings and historic events that took place during 2023. One such event was the "European Moldova" Assembly, attended by the President of the European Parliament, [Roberta Metsola](#), who complimented Moldova's contribution and its "courage in facing regional threats and protecting common European values". Within the framework of this event was also adopted a resolution calling for "expanding the international context of negotiations for a peaceful, final settlement of the Transnistrian conflict and using the EU accession process as a catalyst for increasing the welfare and living standards

¹ Assessing Potential Outcomes of the Ukraine War, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/assessing-potential-outcomes-of-the-ukraine-war/>

of Moldovan citizens in the reintegrated Transnistrian region".² Later, at the Meeting of the European Political Community, held in the Republic of Moldova on 1 June 2023, the head of states and governments, as well as leaders of the EU institutions focused on security and enlargement issues and reiterated messages of support for Moldova and Ukraine.

On 14 December 2023, the European Council made a strategic decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, paving the way for the development of a negotiating framework and setting out a roadmap for accession talks. This decision of the EU may signify a step towards creation of a larger bloc built on shared EU values and regulations, which would make the EU more competitive vis-a-vis other powers on the global stage.³ For Moldova these evolutions are significant not only from the perspective of economic benefits, but also to reshape its public policies, ensuring their coherence with the EU integration process to provide coordinated responses to common security challenges. However, even if both the EU and Moldova recognize the importance of accomplishing these regional objectives, it will take considerable effort to make them a reality, given the situation within the Transnistrian settlement process as well as the challenging regional context.

3. UNSTABLE NEGOTIATIONS AMIDST REGIONAL CRISIS

However, maintaining peace and stability in the region is of utmost importance, and the peaceful negotiations for resolving the Transnistrian conflict remains a priority and

an unwavering principle of Moldovan policy. The settlement process has always been unstable, characterised by periods of openness to dialogue and trust between parties often followed by a lack of progress and reproaches.

In the current conditions, none of the existing platforms of dialogue can be fully functional. Amid Russia's war in Ukraine, the "5+2"⁴ (the main political format for the Transnistrian settlement) remains paralysed as both states are unable to act as guarantors, at least until the end of the war. The "1+1" format, which brings together the political representatives from Chisinau and Tiraspol to discuss potential solutions to the urgent issues from the agenda, has seen a very poor interaction, with only two meetings organised in 2023, compared to nine meetings in 2022. The 11 sectoral working groups (on education, health issues, human rights, economy, environment etc.), which bring together thematic experts from both sides of the Nistru, has also experienced a decline in activity, hosting a mere nine meetings in 2023, compared to 17 in 2022. The work of the Moldovan Delegation in the Joint Control Commission, tasked with monitoring the situation in the security zone and making preventive decisions to uphold peace and the rule of law in the peace-building process, has also been impeded by the numerous incidents in the security zone. While some platforms meet more frequently than others, the most difficult task is to achieve consensus on issues related to human rights and the provocations in the security zone.

² <https://moldovaeuropeana.md/> p.4

³ Khrystyna Parandii – Eastern Europe joins the Western Balkans. A new start for the EU's enlargement policy.

⁴ Negotiations in the "5+2" format or the Permanent Conference on Political Issues in the Framework of the Negotiation Process on the Transnistrian Settlement, are taking place with the participation of representatives of the parties (Chisinau and Tiraspol), mediators (OSCE, Russian Federation and Ukraine), and observers (United States and European Union).

With regards to human rights, the situation in the Transnistrian region can be described as deeply alarming. According to official sources from Chisinau, there are frequent reports of Transnistrian structures committing illegal detentions, abductions, expulsions, and discriminatory actions against the inhabitants of the region.⁵

However, due to the lack of effective control over the region, the national institutions are limited in actions to address individual cases of human rights violations, besides sending written requests to Tiraspol to stop illegal actions and restore people's rights, or calling for international partners intervention, including the 5+2 actors. As practice shows, Tiraspol often ignores these requests, and international partners suggest that Chisinau and Tiraspol should find a solution through dialogue.

Indeed, after almost two years of suspension, the sectoral experts in the field of human rights finally convened on 10 October 2023. During the meeting, the experts from Chisinau reiterated the proposal of establishing an effective mechanism to address individual cases of human rights violations. This mechanism presumes the active involvement of the civil society from both sides of the Nistru River, along with human rights defenders, lawyers, academics, and relevant international organizations. To guarantee citizens' rights and freedoms, the initiative calls for the establishment of permanent offices comprising experts on both sides of the Nistru, who would provide information on citizens' rights, legal services, and additional support. However, it has been reported that Tiraspol's reluctance to reach a consensus

on this alternative is impeding its realization.⁶

Among significant incidents in the Security Zone can be mentioned unauthorised movements of armoured military equipment by the Russian military contingent of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces, stops of civilian and diplomatic corps vehicles,⁷ dangerous live ammunition exercises close to residential areas, the installation of illegal block posts that intend to limit the freedom of the movement, and many others. The Moldovan Delegation in Joint Control Commission is constantly trying to address these issues, but without significant progress due to Tiraspol's and Moscow's opposition during the meetings.

At the core of these problems, is considered to be the illegal presence of Russian military troops in the Transnistrian region, which violates Moldova's neutrality and increases security risks for the state. Moscow is blocking any progress towards resolving the frozen conflict in Moldova, which remains a major security risk for Chisinau. Russia's military, political and moral support for the breakaway region is one of the biggest impediments to Moldova's development, prosperity and reintegration. In addition to keeping the conflict alive for 30 years, Russia is now actively obstructing Moldova's aspirations for peace and EU membership, using disinformation among its main tools of destabilisation on both banks of the Nistru River. As a consequence, these actions further undermine Moldova's fragile social cohesion and hamper the government's ability to create solid support for its European accession agenda.⁸

5 <https://gov.md/ro/content/problema-respectarii-drepturilor-omului-regiunea-transnistreana-ramane-vizorul-biroului>

6 <https://gov.md/ro/content/sedinta-expertilor-sectoriali-domeniul-drepturilor-omului-s-desfasurat-la-bender>

7 <https://gov.md/ro/content/cazurile-de-incalcare-regimului-zonei-de-securitate-semnalate-la-comisia-unificata-de>

8 Elena Roubinski - Russian Disinformation: The Moldovan Case What lessons can be drawn from the Russian destabilisation of Moldova?

4. THE PERSPECTIVE FOR MOLDOVA'S INTEGRATION INTO THE EU

The long-term multilateral cooperation between the EU and Moldova, including the Transnistrian settlement, has been crucial in fostering confidence between the two banks of the Nistru River. Presently, it provides favourable conditions for the region's return to the country's legal framework and thus increase the chances of Moldova to further integrate into the EU.

It is worth mentioning that the EU's role has always been beyond that of an observer in the 5+2 format. Functioning as a key ally in Moldova's peace and reintegration process, the EU has provided crucial assistance in areas such as border control, civil society development, and the facilitation of people-to-people contacts.

The EU-Moldova Association Agreement has opened up exceptional prospects for Moldova's socio-economic development, including for that of the Transnistrian region. During the implementation of this agreement, the region has experienced several benefits such as: access of Transnistrian products to the EU market (in 2022, exports from the Transnistrian region to EU countries amounted to 67.1%; a significant increase of 10.2% compared to the indicators of 2021⁹); a reduction of non-tariff barriers in the EU market following the implementation of minimum quality standards; improvements in the business climate in the region and, as a result, stimulation of investment activity.

These indicators of the region's dependency of the EU market largely explain the lack of significant or aggressive reactions in the Transnistrian region towards Moldova's candidacy for EU membership. Depending on how the regional situation develops, integrating the Transnistrian business sector within the economy across the Nistru River could have strong potential, as long as Tiraspol shifts its political orientation from Eurasianism to integration with the Republic of Moldova.¹⁰

Nevertheless, given that one of the primary objectives of enlargement is to guarantee the security of the European continent,¹¹ any further economic support without addressing current security issues may lose the potential to bring the conflict to a resolution, or at least to minimise the risk of escalation. In some cases, it might even inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of the conflict by providing resources that can be exploited by various parties involved. In the case of the Transnistrian settlement process, economic development can be a catalyst for peace and stability, but it requires simultaneous efforts to address security concerns. However, balancing economic support with security considerations is a complex challenge, for the EU it is an exceptional opportunity in the context of the enlargement process.

In the conditions of the dysfunctionality of 5+2, a format revised and adapted to current realities would place emphasis on EU and Moldovan common security concerns that have been neglected within the Transnistrian settlement process. In particular, the withdrawal of Russian military troops and the effective management of

⁹ <https://gov.md/ro/content/671-din-exporturi-si-501-din-importuri-efectuate-de-catre-companiile-din-regiunea>

¹⁰ Nicolae Afanas- The impact of the Association Agreement Moldova-EU on the Transnistrian region. https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/209-218.pdf

¹¹ Laurence Boone - The Forthcoming Enlargement, or The European Revolution In The Making, <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2023/12/02/the-forthcoming-enlargement-or-the-european-revolution-in-the-making/>

risks associated with the Cobasna depot are very important issues to address. Some studies suggest that an eventual explosion would be the equivalent to the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima in August 1945.¹²

Nevertheless, even if the EU and Moldova might succeed in putting key security issues on the negotiation agenda, due to the Russian disinformation campaign, restricted access to information and lack of freedom of expression, it is less likely that the residents of the Transnistrian region will be well informed about the efforts made at the regional level to protect their security and well-being. The same applies to the visibility of European, international, and national assistance and humanitarian aid that the national authorities are redistributing to its citizens residing in the Transnistrian region.

With the official announcement of negotiations regarding Moldova's accession to the EU will arise new development opportunities for the country to advance its reforms and compliance with EU norms and regulations. This comprehensive process might offer auxiliary opportunities for EU and Moldova to address communication challenges related to the Transnistrian issue, build trust, and demonstrate a shared commitment of both the EU and Moldova to the stability and prosperity of the region.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The disastrous consequences of Russia's war on Ukraine have catalysed Europe's belated awakening to further consolidate and defend the continent's peaceful future. Along with meeting the challenges, this situation has highlighted policy alternatives for maintaining peace and stability in the

region. In the case of Moldova, ensuring coherence between Moldova's reintegration policies and those of the EU within the Transnistrian settlement process seems to be the most optimal approach.

As the Transnistrian settlement process is very complex and challenging, aligning it with Moldova's aspirations to integrate into the European Union may lead to a lengthy outcome; one requiring the concentration and strengthening of both national and international cooperation on the main issues that hinder that process.

An important tool in this regard could be the EU Confidence Building Measures Programme (EU CBM Programme), the overall objective of which is to contribute to the facilitation of the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict by increasing confidence between Chisinau and Tiraspol through [joint initiatives](#). By involving local authorities, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders from both sides of the Nistru River, this programme has the huge potential to complement the efforts of the Moldovan authorities on sensitive areas of dialogue, filling the gap created by Chisinau's lack of access and effective control over processes in the region.

Specifically, this programme could focus more practically on the mechanisms for continuous human rights monitoring in the Transnistrian region such as: organizing advocacy campaigns to raise people's awareness of human rights and legal protections; facilitating media literacy programs to empower the local population to critically engage with information and counter disinformation.

As the main implementers of the EU CBM Programme are the UN Agencies and the

¹² Academician Gheorghe Duca, <https://fms.md/efectele-unei-eventuale-explozii-depozitului-de-armament-si-munitii-de-la-cobasna>

EU Embassies to the Republic of Moldova, there are many ways for them to align better with Chisinau priorities in promoting human rights and SDGs in the Transnistrian region. A positive example of such coherence was observed during the Sweden's Chairpersonship of the OSCE in 2019. By actively promoting gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Sweden ensured an extraordinary cooperation with OSCE and the Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration on Moldova's National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325. It facilitated the participation of women representatives in the working groups from both banks of the Nistru River in training activities, allowing them to share their concerns about humanitarian aspects of political dialogue, to increase their negotiating skills and to build trust between them. Through this exercise Moldova's NAP provisions have at least been disseminated (if not expanded) across the Transnistrian region. As the importance and positive impact of women participation in maintaining and promoting peace and security is widely recognised, this direction must be continuously supported and promoted within the Transnistrian settlement process.

Empowering policies of the country's reintegration involves addressing the multifaceted and complex nature of the reintegration policies, which encompass tasks related to the reintegration process and negotiations on the Transnistrian settlement. Through entities such as EUBAM and relevant regional organizations such as CoE, OSCE, and EU Member States' Embassies, the EU could facilitate the reintegration process by being more engaged in the activity of the sectoral Working Groups providing expertise and

support through additional CBM activities on sensitive aspects of dialogue. For instance, CoE and Romania could bring added value to the activity of working groups on education by addressing issues faced by Transnistrian-based Moldovan schools teaching in Romanian, some of which do not have their own premises, are over monitored by the Transnistria structures,¹³ and are exposed to various risks and vulnerabilities.

Transparency on the EU integration process and information campaigns in the Transnistrian region is crucial due to Russian propaganda and disinformation. The Moldovan citizens residing in the Transnistrian region must feel included and welcomed in the EU integration process in order to avoid destabilisation. Highlighting the positive impact of EU-funded projects on the lives of people in the conflict zone, organising joint events, workshops, and seminars focusing on shared values, history, and cultural heritage, as well as elucidating support provided by the EU and Moldovan authorities to the region could all be relevant for this purpose.

Raising awareness and call for dialogue on peace and security aspects. The EU should be more vocal in protecting its borders and Moldova should be more courageous in defending its national interests. Although, in the current circumstances it might be difficult to think about renewing the dialogue with Russia on peace and security aspects, issues of common concern need to be reiterated and continuously addressed to prevent more serious problems from emerging.

¹³ <https://newsmaker.md/ro/directorul-promo-lex-rusia-nu-a-executat-pana-in-prezent-obligatiunile-cedo-din-dosarul-scolilor-cu-predare-in-limba-romana-din-transnistria/>

The Florence School of Transnational Governance (STG) delivers teaching and high-level training in the methods, knowledge, skills and practice of governance beyond the State. Based within the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, the School brings the worlds of academia and policy-making together in an effort to navigate a context, both inside and outside Europe, where policy-making increasingly transcends national borders.

The School offers Executive Training Seminars for experienced professionals and a Policy Leaders Fellowship for early- and mid-career innovators. The School also hosts expert Policy Dialogues and distinguished lectures from transnational leaders (to include the STG's Leaders Beyond the State series which recorded the experiences of former European Institution presidents, and the Giorgio La Pira Lecture series which focuses on building bridges between Africa and Europe). In September 2020, the School launched its Master-of-Arts in Transnational Governance (MTnG), which will educate and train a new breed of policy leader able to navigate the unprecedented issues our world will face during the next decade and beyond.

The STG Policy Papers Collection aims to further the EUI School of Transnational Governance's goal in creating a bridge between academia and policy and provide actionable knowledge for policy-making. The collection includes Policy Points (providing information at-a-glance), Policy Briefs (concise summaries of issues and recommended policy options), and Policy Analyses (in-depth analysis of particular issues). The contributions provide topical and policy-oriented perspectives on a diverse range of issues relevant to transnational governance. They are authored by STG staff and guest authors invited to contribute on particular topics.

Florence School of Transnational Governance

European University Institute
Via Camillo Cavour 65, Firenze, FI 50129
Email: stg.publications@eui.eu

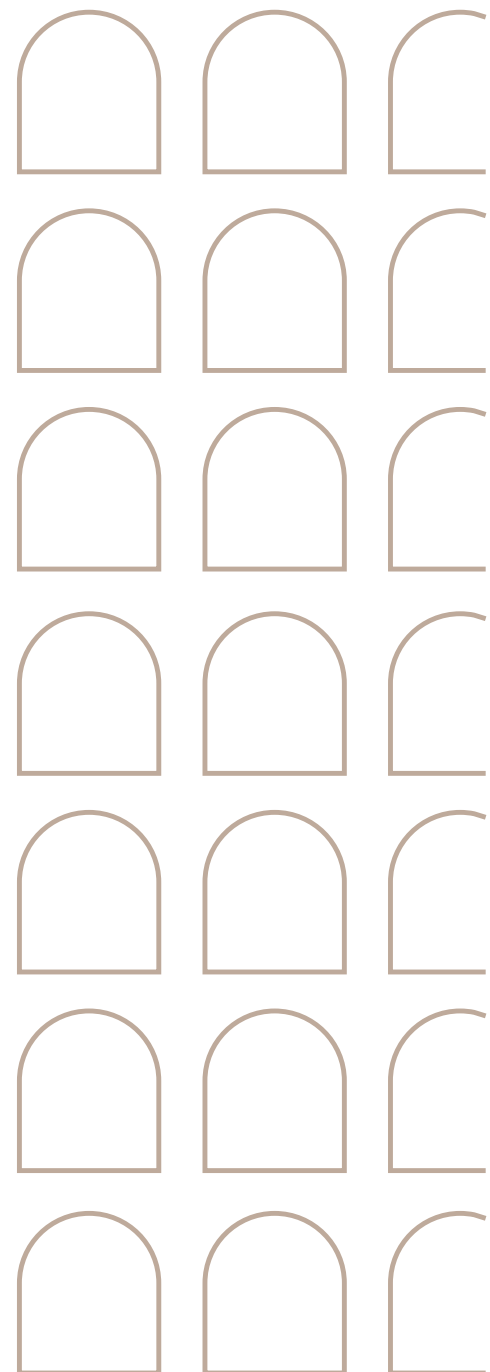
www.eui.eu/stg



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) International license which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.



DOI: 10.2870/90605
ISBN: 978-92-9466-505-8
ISSN: 2600-271X
QM-BA-24-009-EN-N
© European University Institute, 2024