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5

The Path to EU Candidacy: Moldova-EU Relations After the Fall of the Soviet Union

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ABSTRACT

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Republic of Moldova has been undergoing a process of democratization and Europeanization. This paper investigates the close relationship between Moldova and the European Union after 1991 to demonstrate the steps the country had undertaken to become a candidate member in June 2022. We explore the history of creation of Moldova, particularly the shift from communism to liberal democracy. We then transition to trade as a facilitator of close diplomatic relations. Finally, we look into the obstacles to EU accession the country has yet to overcome: its conflict with the Transnistrian region, corruption, and the satisfaction of the Copenhagen Criteria. Even though the accession process was accelerated by the 2022 war in Ukraine, it is Moldova's continuous efforts to bring its social, political, and economic standards closer to those of EU Member States that earned the country its candidacy.

KEYWORDS

Moldova, EU accession, EU-Moldova relations, Transnistria

NOTES

This paper comes at an important time in Moldovan domestic and international affairs. It is an honor to be a voice in sharing about Moldova's history, political and economic developments, and accession to the European Union at this critical juncture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following its independence from the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Republic of Moldova has been undergoing a slow but steady process of democratization that corresponds to the standards set by the European Union. Towards that end, the country has maintained close relations with EU member states, particularly Romania, to form deeper connections with the economic and political mechanisms of the supranational organization. As a direct consequence of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Moldova has become a candidate state to the European Union and has been going through a series of steps to be accepted into the Union. Even though the war in Ukraine has accelerated the accession process, it is through its social, political, and economic collaboration with European Union countries since the fall of the Soviet Union that Moldova has made considerable progress in the process of democratization, leading up to the country receiving EU candidacy in June of 2022.

2. HISTORY OF MOLDOVA

Moldova shares its origins with its neighbor Romania, both peoples having Dacians as a common ancestor, a community that formed around 3000 BC in the Carpathian Mountains (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). While different empires instituted their dominion in the region throughout the ensuing centuries, it was between the 16th and 19th century that Moldova, together with the rest of the Romanian principalities, came under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire, which significantly shaped Romanian culture and the Romanian language (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). In 1812, Moldova, at the time known as Basarabia (or Bessarabia), was ceded to the Russian Empire, which marked the beginning of Russian influence in this territory that lasted till the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917, when Moldova united with the Romanian principalities to form România Mare, or “Big” Romania (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). This union did not last, as the Second World War led to the reoccupation of Moldova and the institution of Moldova as one of the republics of the Soviet Union (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). As part of the centralized economic system of the Soviet Union, Moldova became financially connected to Russia and the other Soviet republics (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). Mainly an agricultural exporter, the country enjoyed trade collaboration with the other Soviet republics while in the Soviet Union, an important element in the state’s consequent trade patterns following its independence (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moldova was left virtually on its own in a struggle to transition from a socialist centralized system of production to democratic capitalism.

Up until the year 1999, Moldova was in a severe financial struggle. Under the Soviet Union, the country’s trade was closely connected to that of other Soviet Union states. Moreover, Moldova did not have preexisting trade relations with Western European countries, which became one of the factors that led the post-Soviet Union state into a lengthened delay in cooperation with EU states (Orlova and Ronnås, 1999, p. 374). Prior to independence, 50% of Moldovan exports were with the Soviet Union while only 2% were with countries outside of the Soviet Bloc (Orlova and Ronnås, 1999, p. 375). Hence, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Moldova continued mainly trading with Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet Union republics (Orlova and Ronnås, 1999, p. 375). It is also important to note that even today Moldova is fully dependent on imports for its energy and raw materials. Additionally, much of Moldova’s manufacturing sector used to be located in the separatist region of Transnistria, a territory on the Eastern bank of Moldova claiming itself sovereign

and independent, which posed a significant economic problem after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Orlova and Ronnås, 1999, p. 376). In comparison, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Baltic States were able to receive economic support from Western and Scandinavian countries, which enabled them to virtually detach themselves from trading with the former Soviet bloc (Orlova and Ronnås, 1999, p. 394). The fact that even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and till the end of the 1990s much of Moldova's trade were with Russia made Moldova politically and economically dependent on the Kremlin, complicating Moldova's detachment from its main trading partner (Orlova and Ronnås, 1999, p. 394). Towards the end of 1998, imports from EU countries increased, but factors like the country's huge foreign debt, little foreign direct investment (FDI), and EU-imposed unilateral barriers to trade prevented Moldova from expanding much economically before the 2000s (Orlova and Ronnås, 1999, p. 395).

3. TIES WITH THE EU

The European Union did much to improve the financial situation in Moldova and introduce it to European markets following this early financial collapse through cooperation agreements between the two parties. Moldova is a member of many economic trade pacts with the European Union, including the 1994 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and the Action Plan by the EU-Moldova Cooperation Council (Harbo, 2010, p. 23). The PCA was the first cooperation agreement that set up a legal framework for future economic collaborations, and was meant to establish a partnership foundation for “trade liberalization, legislative harmonization, cooperation in different sectors and an opening for political dialogue” that has expanded into other sectors ever since (Harbo, 2010, p. 23). The Action Plan Moldova, in turn, created a National Commission for European Integration in 2008, which was later supplemented by the intervention of national and international organizations to help attain criteria imposed by the EU in the promotion of its democratic norms (Harbo, 2010, p. 25). Since 2014, Moldova has also joined the Association Agreement, which establishes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) which makes exports and imports between Moldova and the EU easier and allows Moldovans to travel visa-free to the Schengen Area countries (Przetacznik, 2023). These agreements signify growing ties between Moldova and the EU and have played a crucial role in Moldova's path to EU candidacy. Currently, the EU is Moldova's biggest trade partner, the EU accounting for “45% of Moldovan imports and 58.7% of exports in 2022” (Przetacznik, 2023). Through these and other economic and political partnerships with the EU, Moldova has been able to steadily grow its economy, promote EU values, and fight internal issues of corruption, among others.

When it comes to promoting its universal norms of “peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights,” the European Union instituted several initiatives in Moldova to help promote said values (Niemann & De Wekker, 2010, p. 4). Corruption at all political and economic levels is still one of the main problems Moldova faces today and a serious impediment to Moldova's path to accession to the EU. In order to fight corruption, the state introduced the National Anti-Corruption Strategy, the Anti-Corruption Prosecution Office, and the national Integrity Authority, institutions meant to reduce the level of bribery in the country (Emerson et al., 2010, p. 4). Even with these institutions in place, a major incident of money laundering at the governmental level occurred in 2014, exemplifying the persistence of corruption in the country (Emerson et al., 2010, p. 3). It was clear that a more serious prosecutorial reform was necessary, which was finally adopted in 2016,

following the signing of the EU Association Agreement (EUR-Lex, n.d.). The new holistic approach is meant to impose “eight ‘integrity pillars’” that would remove the obstacles to “effective implementation of the existing anti-corruption legislation,” alongside its other clauses (Emerson et al., 2010, p. 6). Even though the legislation has been passed and matches international standards, the country still lags behind on corruption-related metrics. As communal trust is an important value in the European Union, Moldovan officials will have to tackle corruption more effectively to make EU accession a reality.

With respect to social and political dimensions, and similar to other Central and Eastern European (CEE) states, Moldova has been undergoing a process of Europeanization—as a result of both internal and external pressures. ‘Europeanization’ refers to the process by which the EU level of governance increasingly influences domestic politics and policymaking (Schmidke & Chira-Pascanut, 2011). The economic expansion and effective collaboration between the states of the European Union have become an attractive proposition for CEE states, facilitating a continuous eastward expansion of the EU to encompass countries like Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, among others, in 2004, as well as Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. One of the main instruments of the EU’s eastward expansion has been the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) that promotes EU values and collaboration with the EU’s neighbor states (Schmidke & Chira-Pascanut, 2011). Citing F. Schimmelfennig, this process of Europeanization expanded to Moldova and other CEE states through three different channels: conditionality, socialization, and domestic empowerment (Schmidke & Chira-Pascanut, 2011). ‘Conditionality’ is the extent to which an EU neighboring state prescribes and reinforces the EU *acquis communautaire*, the sum of legislations, legal acts, and court decisions of the EU, as well as the EU policy making process (Schmidke & Chira-Pascanut, 2011). Even though Moldova has made considerable progress in reforming its legislation to reach the requirements of the EU, the country still has a long way to go until it reaches the desired level. ‘Socialization’ refers to the indirect way of promoting the culture and values of the EU (Schmidke & Chira-Pascanut, 2011). Especially in recent years, Moldova has witnessed a rise in the pro-European sentiment and spread of European values among its populace. And, finally, ‘domestic empowerment’ is the domestic effort to “translate” the effects European integration would have on domestic affairs (Schmidke & Chira-Pascanut, 2011). Maia Sandu’s presidency, since she was sworn into office in 2020, has contributed to furthering the Moldova–EU dialogue and promoting EU-sponsored civil organizations in Moldova. As a result, Moldovan citizens were able to enjoy closer ties to EU initiatives in its neighboring countries. The process of Europeanization that Moldova has been undergoing brought the country closer to the values of the EU and, consequently, EU membership.

4. THE COPENHAGEN CRITERIA

The above-described efforts on the EU’s side and the gradual Europeanization of Moldova culminated in the historic decision of June 23, 2022, when the European Commission granted Moldova the candidate country status, thus starting a process of further reforming of Moldovan political, social, and economic institutions according to European standards (Przetacznik, 2023). The decision of the European Commission came as a direct result of the War in Ukraine and was made in conjunction with accepting Ukraine as a candidate state as well. For Moldova to become a member state, the country has to institute the Copenhagen Criteria—a series of political, economic, and legal guidelines all EU member states are required to ratify (Marktler, 2006, p. 344). The political criterion looks into the upholding of the rule of law, the way democratic norms are nationally promoted, the protec-

tion of human rights, as well as respect for minorities (Marktler, 2006, p. 344). Considering the level of corruption still present at many levels within the political and corporate spheres in Moldova, the country has yet to reach the EU standards in this area. The economic criterion asks for the country's capacity to do well in the EU single market, which would require the country's exports to withstand the competition in this market (Marktler, 2006, p. 344). Moldova has arguably made the most progress towards meeting this criterion out of the ones proposed by the Copenhagen Convention. Because the majority of Moldova's trade after the 2010s has been with EU countries, it should be feasible for the country to fully join the EU trade network once it becomes a member state, though it will likely struggle with the competition posed by the goods from other countries in the Union. Finally, Moldova has to adopt the *acquis communautaire*—the legal framework of the European Union—if it wants to become a member state (Marktler, 2006, p. 345). Through combating corruption and better institutionalizing this new legal system, Moldova will be able to ensure the rule of law is observed by the country's governmental bodies. Instituting said criteria in an effective manner will take time, but will ensure the better quality of life for Moldovans and the accession of the country to the EU.

In addition to the above Copenhagen Criteria, the European Commission has put forward a series of nine steps Moldova has yet to undertake to be accepted into the Union (European Commission, 2022). These cover areas like justice system reform, the fight against corruption, public institutions reform, and the removal of oligarchs from positions of power, all areas in which Moldova has been making steady improvement. Moldova has started aligning national legislation to that of the European Union, improving the country's judicial system through ensuring its independence and accountability, promoting free and democratic elections, enhancing national data protection, as well as working towards collaborating with Transnistria, among other initiatives (The European Commission, 2022). Though the above are areas in which reform requires time and unlearning of previous practices, the European Union has made considerable financial and social contributions towards reaching the proposed goals (The European Commission, 2022). By means of education and social campaigns, Moldovan people can also help contribute to the promotion of democratic values and Moldova's joining the European Union, especially with the help from countries like Romania.

5. MOLDOVA-ROMANIA RELATIONS

Thanks to the shared history, culture and language, Romania has always been an important supporter of Moldova, especially after Moldova was offered candidacy to the European Union. Romania became a member state of the EU in 2007, which extended the eastern border of the Union up to the border with Moldova and helped Moldova establish better trade relations with the rest of the EU countries. Since then, Romania has been a trade partner of Moldova through the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and a major supporter to Moldova's integration into the EU (Șoitu & Șoitu, 2010). While the ENP's main mission has been to tackle the issue in Transnistria, which will be expanded on in a later paragraph, it has also helped to strengthen Moldovan social and economic institutions. After becoming an EU member state, Romania has been able to export its goods to former Soviet Union states through Moldova as an intermediary, while Moldova has joined the European common market through Romania in a form of mutual support (Șoitu & Șoitu, 2010). While bilateral cooperation changed once Romania joined the EU, agencies like the Regional Bureau for Cross-Border Cooperation (BRCT) have guaranteed the continued

collaboration between the two states. Furthermore, through the creation of cross-border civil society organizations, the two countries have been able to achieve new mechanisms of cooperation, largely in the form of common events, the exchange of information, and workshops on European integration (Şoitu & Şoitu, 2010). All of these reflect the close ties between Moldova and Romania, and show the many ways Moldova was connected with the EU before becoming a candidate state.

6. TRANSNISTRIA

Despite Moldova's strong ties to European Union countries and its ongoing efforts to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria, there is one other significant obstacle to Moldova's EU accession, namely the issue of Transnistria. Transnistria, or Pridnestrovie, is a self-proclaimed sovereign nation in the eastern part of Moldova, populated by roughly 30% Russians, 20% Ukrainians, and 20% Moldovans/Romanians, alongside people of other nationalities (Nilsson & Silander, 2016). After the fall of the Soviet Union, a series of short civil wars—the Transnistrian Wars—were fought between 1990 and 1992 to prevent the secession of Transnistria (Nilsson & Silander, 2016). With the help of Russia, Transnistria was able to establish a formal border with the rest of Moldova and proclaim itself a sovereign country, though internationally it is still considered a region of Moldova (Nilsson & Silander, 2016). This territorial dispute would need to be resolved before Moldova can become part of the EU: Transnistria would either have to be recognized as a country or join the Union together with Moldova (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 9). Russian presence in Transnistria also poses a significant barrier to EU integration, as Russian army is still stationed in Transnistria following the Transnistrian Wars and Russia exerts considerable influence in the Transnistrian political sphere (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 9). Additionally, Russia finances about 80% of Transnistria's budget, is the main sponsor of the region's international affairs, and has issued Russian passports to 150,000 residents of the region (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 4). Transnistria also holds a notable external debt to Russia, particularly in its energy sector. To put things in perspective, Moldova's external debt is about 80% of its GDP, while Transnistria's is almost 400% of its GDP (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 2). Transnistria thus remains heavily dependent on Russia's interests and influence. These, and the fact that Moldovan people have not recognized Transnistria as a serious concern, as “according to various opinion polls, Transnistria ranks as the ninth or tenth priority for the population,” has left the Transnistrian issue yet to be solved (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 3).

Recently, the European Union has taken an important initiative to tackle the Transnistrian conflict. The EU has a 100-person EU border assistance mission in the region and has allocated funds for “confidence-building measures” to help advance democratic norms and encourage European integration (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 1). A number of civil society projects have also been implemented in the region to promote a better understanding of liberal democracy and the benefits of European integration. By strengthening Moldova's governmental institutions, increasing people-to-people contacts between Moldovan and Transnistrian citizens, and showing the economic benefits of trading within the EU, this prolonged internal conflict could finally be solved (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 9). As of right now, almost all Transnistrian exporters are registered with the Moldovan authorities and the region has enjoyed the benefits of trading with EU countries (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 7). Through amplifying the role these beneficial elements play in improving Transnistrian people's quality of life, it is hoped that Transnistrian authorities will make a calculated decision to join Moldova in its pursuit of EU membership. Considering how Transnistria is a buffer

zone for Russia and serves as a means by which Russia maintains its influence in Moldova, it is necessary for the Transnistrian conflict to be tackled to secure Moldova's European future (Popescu & Litra, 2012, p. 9).

7. PRO- AND ANTI-EU SENTIMENT

Lastly, we cannot overlook the role of pro- and anti-EU sentiment in advancing Moldova's EU candidacy. As seen in the arguments above, Moldova has been experiencing conflicting geopolitical priorities, with Moldovan citizens aligning themselves with either pro- or anti-EU causes. These conflicting viewpoints are most evident in the two main narratives pushed on Moldovan citizens (Țicu, 2016, p. 54). The first one sees Moldova as Romania, meaning sharing most of its history with current-day Romania and being part of "Big Romania" (Țicu 54). Many Moldovan citizens today do in fact identify as Romanians and see Russia's influence in the region since the 19th century as having adversely affected their homeland. The Romanian identity narrative has existed ever since Moldova's independence, but became more prominent during the 2009 parliamentary elections, when Moldovan people overthrew the, at the time, communist government, and instituted the democratic Alliance for European Integration, which helped scale up the pro-EU integration agenda (Țicu, 2016, p. 54). This narrative is also widespread today thanks to Maia Sandu's pro-EU initiatives, especially on Moldova's path to EU membership. The other narrative identifies Moldova as a country completely detached from Romania, allegedly having a distinct language and history from its Romanian counterpart (Țicu, 2016, p. 55). This concept was, historically, largely defended by members of the Communist Party, but some Moldovan citizens reinforce it even today (Țicu, 2016, p. 55). It is hard to defend the second stance, since Moldovans and Romanians speak the same language, Romanian, and there are extensive accounts of the shared history between the two countries (Țicu, 2016, p. 56). Țicu (2016) also identifies a third narrative, the Transnistrian trend, based on Transnistrian people as a distinctive and independent people, as described in the previous paragraphs (Țicu, 2016, p. 56). Various gatherings organized by either side are meant to align citizens' political interests to either the Romanian or the Moldovan narrative, the pro- or anti-EU sentiment. There are many examples of events in support for both sides, most recently a pro-EU gathering organized by Maia Sandu that took place on May 21, 2023. Reportedly, tens of thousands of Moldovan citizens attended the event, expressing their desire for Moldova to ascend to the European Union and to further European values in Moldova (Gavin, 2023). In the context of Moldova's candidacy, the conflict between the two narratives is going to continue to pose a barrier to EU integration. Nevertheless, the expanding Romanian account in recent years has definitely contributed to bringing Moldova closer to EU membership, and it played a role in Moldova receiving its candidate status.

8. CONCLUSION

As argued above, Moldova has had close ties with the European Union ever since the fall of the Soviet Union. The country has gone to great extent to implement political, economic, and social initiatives that would bring it closer to the democratic norms promoted by the EU. Moldova has tried to tackle corruption, become a more competitive seller on the European market, and ensure the freedom and equality of its citizens, alongside many other projects it has gradually implemented to advance its EU candidacy. The country has received support from European states, Romania in particular, and hopes to continue collaborating with said states in the accession process and beyond. National authorities have

also gone to great lengths to tackle the border issue with Transnistria, cooperating with its neighbors and other European countries to solve said problem. It is reasonable to infer that Moldova still has a long way to go until it reaches the level of democracy, political and economic stability, and support from its citizens, that would match the criteria imposed by the European Union. Thus, while Moldova has made great progress, it still has a long way to go to reach the goal of EU membership. Though Moldova receiving EU candidacy together with Ukraine has definitely accelerated the accession process, Moldova has been making its own progress towards aligning itself closer to the values of the EU. Through strengthening its governmental bodies, inspiring the citizens' trust in governmental authorities, and including civic society in the process of democratization, Moldova can become a member of the European Union.

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