



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree Programme in
Comparative International Relations

Final Thesis

**Moldova and the EU in the
Eastern Partnership
context**

The country's European integration process
and its perceptions at home

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Matriculation Number 867891

Academic Year

2022 / 2023

ABSTRACT

Questa tesi traccia l'evoluzione delle relazioni tra la Repubblica di Moldavia e l'Unione Europea nell'ambito della politica del Partenariato orientale e cerca di colmare alcune lacune nella letteratura sugli studi europei inerenti alla percezione del percorso europeo intrapreso dal paese da parte della popolazione e dei media locali. Dopo un breve approfondimento sui meccanismi utilizzati dall'UE nelle sue relazioni con il proprio vicinato, la tesi tratterà il percorso alquanto non lineare di avvicinamento della Repubblica all'Unione. L'evoluzione dell'opinione pubblica del paese e il modo in cui alcuni media locali descrivono la scelta della Moldavia a favore di una maggiore integrazione europea forniranno un quadro più completo di come l'Unione Europea, la sua presenza nel paese e le sue politiche vengono percepite localmente.

La Moldavia, spesso al primo posto tra i paesi dell'Europa orientale nell'indice per l'integrazione europea, ha ottenuto nel 2022 lo status di paese candidato all'adesione all'Unione Europea, mentre lo scorso 21 maggio decine di migliaia di cittadini hanno preso parte alla manifestazione pro-UE organizzata dal governo del paese per dimostrare il loro sostegno alla scelta europea del paese e alla sua adesione all'Unione dei 27. Il paese e la popolazione moldava non sono mai stati così vicini all'Unione Europea, tuttavia, come questa tesi dimostrerà, entrambi hanno spesso oscillato tra la vicinanza alla Russia e all'Unione a seconda del governo in carica e delle preferenze personali.

La Moldavia, che per secoli è stata terra di conquiste provenienti da est e ovest, si trova ora tra due blocchi politici, economici e culturali opposti: l'Unione Europea/Occidente da una parte e la Russia dall'altra. Attraverso il suo potere normativo ed economico, l'UE mira a creare una cerchia stabile di paesi amici nel suo vicinato. La Russia, invece, facendo leva sul comune passato storico e culturale, sull'energia e sulla presenza delle sue truppe militari nella regione separatista della Transnistria tenta di preservare ad ogni costo la sua influenza nel paese. Dal punto di vista economico, l'Unione Europea è diventata il principale partner commerciale della Moldavia ma in termini di energia, nonostante i recenti tentativi del paese di affrancarsi dalle forniture energetiche russe, la Moldavia continua ad essere altamente dipendente dalla Russia. Dal punto di vista politico, invece, il paese è parte del Partenariato orientale promosso dall'Unione Europea, mentre a est è membro della Comunità degli Stati indipendenti (CSI) – nonostante le sue recenti dichiarazioni di voler avviare la procedura per il ritiro dall'accordo sull'Assemblea interparlamentare della CSI – ed ha lo status di osservatore presso

l'Unione economica eurasiatica (UEE). Infine, è dal punto di vista culturale che il paese risulta essere estremamente diviso. I media russi continuano ad avere un importante ruolo nella sfera pubblica, con il 30% della popolazione che li preferisce al resto dei media locali o di quelli provenienti dall'occidente; dal punto di vista religioso la Chiesa ortodossa stessa risulta essere divisa tra la Chiesa ortodossa moldava e quella di Bessarabia. Tuttavia, sin dalla caduta dell'Unione Sovietica, è l'identità del paese e dei suoi cittadini che continua ad essere la più divisa tra occidente e la Russia. Buona parte della popolazione si sente legata alla Romania per la cultura e la lingua, che in passato è stata denominata moldava o romena nella Costituzione a seconda dell'orientamento del governo in carica. Al contrario, secondo la dottrina dell'identità moldavo-sovietica, i moldavi sono etnicamente, culturalmente e linguisticamente diversi e distinti dai rumeni. Perciò, si può concludere che grazie ai forti legami economici, culturali e storici con la Moldavia, la Federazione Russa ha svolto e continua a svolgere un ruolo significativo nella Repubblica.

Per quanto riguarda le politiche europee nel paese, fondato durante il vertice di Praga del 2009, il Partenariato orientale è un'iniziativa europea strategica e piuttosto ambiziosa che mira a rafforzare e approfondire i legami politici ed economici con sei paesi partner dell'Europa orientale e della regione del Caucaso meridionale, tra cui la Moldavia. L'obiettivo principale di tale politica è di rafforzare i legami politici e l'integrazione economica di questi paesi partner con l'Unione, per garantire la democrazia e soprattutto la sicurezza e la stabilità nell'Europa orientale e nella regione caucasica. Il Partenariato orientale è parte di una più ampia politica dell'UE nel vicinato, la Politica europea di vicinato (PEV), lanciata nel 2004 con l'obiettivo di costruire legami politici ed economici con paesi a sud e a est dell'UE che non hanno una chiara prospettiva di adesione. La risposta contrastante ricevuta dai paesi della PEV e la guerra scoppiata nel 2008 tra la Russia e la Georgia hanno spinto l'UE a rafforzare la propria presenza nel vicinato orientale. È proprio in questo quadro di forte instabilità che l'UE ha creato il Partenariato orientale come ramo orientale della PEV.

Gli studi relativi alla percezione del processo di integrazione europea dei partner orientali e del Caucaso nell'ambito della politica del Partenariato orientale e alla sua rappresentazione nei media locali sono piuttosto scarsi, se non assenti. Questa tesi cercherà di colmare almeno in parte questa lacuna. L'opinione pubblica tende spesso a essere trascurata, ma è ben noto che quando i governi non tengono conto delle preferenze dei cittadini che rappresentano, le soluzioni politiche individuate per la risoluzione di determinati problemi possono rivelarsi poco efficaci. Dopo aver tracciato il percorso di avvicinamento della Moldavia all'Unione Europea nel contesto del Partenariato orientale, la presente tesi si concentrerà sulla percezione che la popolazione locale ha delle aspirazioni comunitarie

del proprio paese dal 2000 a oggi, compresa la partecipazione del paese alla politica del Partenariato, e sulla contrastante rappresentazione della scelta politica del paese in due media locali. Come in altri paesi del Partenariato orientale, l'opinione pubblica continua ad associare l'Unione Europea a migliori condizioni di vita, prosperità economica, e a valori quali la democrazia, il rispetto dei diritti umani e lo stato di diritto. L'opinione pubblica moldava, così come le relazioni del paese con l'Unione, è stata fortemente influenzata nel suo sostegno all'integrazione europea della Moldavia da dinamiche politiche interne e dall'instabilità della regione. L'Unione Europea ha sempre goduto di un'immagine positiva nel paese sin dalla sua indipendenza nel 1991. Tuttavia, il sostegno dell'integrazione del paese nell'Unione dei 27 da parte della popolazione locale è stato piuttosto altalenante. Come si vedrà più avanti in questa tesi, la nascita dell'Unione Economica Eurasiatica ha rappresentato per il paese e per i suoi cittadini una buona alternativa all'Unione e un maggiore avvicinamento del paese alla Russia.

Il modo in cui i vari media locali scelgono di descrivere la scelta del paese a favore di una maggiore integrazione europea ha un ruolo fondamentale nella formazione dell'opinione pubblica moldava sulla questione. Il panorama mediatico moldavo appare estremamente polarizzato così come lo è il Paese stesso, a causa dell'instabilità politica e sociale e dell'eccessiva influenza che gli oligarchi hanno nella sfera politica, sociale e pubblica del paese. A seconda della loro appartenenza, l'Europa stessa e il percorso intrapreso dal paese vengono descritti dai media locali con toni e modi completamente opposti. In media pro-Cremlino, come ad esempio Sputnik Moldova, l'integrazione europea viene vista come un'ideologia di stato e la Moldavia è passata da soggetto di diritto internazionale ad essere un semplice oggetto di giochi geopolitici stranieri, cioè degli Stati Uniti e dell'Unione Europea in particolare. Nel quadro del Partenariato orientale, l'Accordo di associazione con l'UE è descritto come una politica di autoisolamento che ha reso la Moldavia completamente dipendente da interessi stranieri. Media pro-Occidente, invece, come Jurnal.md, vedono l'Unione Europea in termini più positivi e relativamente più obiettivi. L'integrazione europea è per la Moldavia l'unica possibilità del paese di crescere non solo economicamente ma anche culturalmente, socialmente, cioè la sola possibilità di entrare finalmente a fare parte del mondo cosiddetto 'civilizzato'. Infine, l'Accordo di associazione tra l'UE e la Repubblica di Moldavia nel suo creare una profonda e completa area di libero scambio tra i due partner, è un chiaro orientamento del Paese verso l'Unione Europea secondo questa percezione. Questa opposta interpretazione dell'integrazione europea fornisce un quadro più completo di come l'Unione Europea, la sua presenza nel paese e le sue politiche vengono percepite a livello locale.

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INTRODUCTION

*“Europa este Moldova.
Moldova este Europa.”¹*

On 21st May 2023 European Parliament President Roberta Metsola addresses the crowds at the European Moldova Assembly rally with these words in Romanian, which translate in English as follows: *“Europe is Moldova, Moldova is Europe.”* Moldova, a former Soviet republic sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania, applied to join the EU in March last year and after three months the country was granted candidate status, alongside Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Moldovans gathered in the Great National Assembly Square in Chisinau for the rally, brought with them EU flags and chanted pro-European slogans to show their support for their country’s European path. Moreover, demonstrators called on Moldova’s political leaders to specifically mention the country’s European orientation in the Constitution itself.² President Maia Sandu made it clear that Moldova’s main goal is now to become member of the European Union by 2030. However, it is fair to ask whether the country itself and its population have always been so firmly oriented towards the West and the European Union in particular.

The Republic of Moldova is a relatively young state in progressive attempts to define its own political trajectory. Its geographical position and its ethnical conflict have posed serious threats for Moldova which, after gaining independence, has been confronted with several political and economic hurdles, that risked putting the very existence of the country in question. Before the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the European Union was hardly present in the country. On the contrary, Russia has always been dominant in the former Soviet space and Moldova through pro-Russian parties, Russian-speaking minorities and most importantly, the Transnistrian conflict. All these and several other factors contributed to the country’s multi-directional foreign policy, with the preferences of the government oscillating between East and West based on benefits coming from abroad.³

¹ *Moldova is not alone - President Metsola addresses 75,000 Moldovans in Chisinau, May 2023*, The President European Parliament, Available at <https://the-president.europarl.europa.eu/home/ep-newsroom/pageContent-area/actualites/moldova-is-not-alone---president-metsola-addresses-75000-moldovans-in-chisinau.html> [Accessed 1/06/2023].

² *Tens of thousands rally in Moldova for EU membership, May 2023*, Al Jazeera, Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/21/pro-government-rally-in-moldovan-capital-draws-tens-of-thousands> [Accessed 1/06/2023].

³ *Moldova after 25 years of Independence and oscillating between East and West*, 2016, IPN News Agency,

It was in the context of the Eastern enlargement fatigue that the EU launched the new European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004 with the aim of building political and economic ties in its immediate neighbourhood. The Union usually builds partnerships with its border regions, integrates them in the EU market, and tries to share its values such as democracy and good governance. However, this is a new type of integration, an integration that goes beyond mere conditionality for countries that clearly lack membership perspective and, at the same time, are included in Russia's sphere of influence. The mixed response received from the ENP countries and the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, translated in the need for the European Union to boost its presence in the Eastern neighbourhood. Against this background, an Eastern dimension of the ENP was designed. Moldova has often been described as the frontrunner of the new Eastern Partnership initiative, which in the words of the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Stefan Füle turned from "an uncertain supporter" of the Eastern Partnership into a "staunchly committed and reliable partner."⁴ The EaP was launched at the Prague Summit in 2009 with the aim of supplementing the European Neighbourhood Policy and creating a stable and prosperous ring of friends in the Eastern neighbourhood through political association and further economic integration.

Literature on the perception of the European integration process in the framework of the ENP/EaP policy and on the policies' representation in local media is rather scarce, if not absent. After tracing Moldova's European integration process in the Eastern Partnership context, the present thesis intends to fill a gap in the EU literature, at least partially, by focusing on Moldovans' perceptions of their country's EU aspirations between 2000 to present day, including Moldova's participation in the EaP initiative, and its representation in local media. Moldova's path to Europe has not been linear nor has local population's support for its country's European integration process. These factors are strongly dependent on both internal political development and the geo-political instability of the region. The increased presence of the European Union in the Eastern Neighborhood determined a successful positioning at the top of society's preferences.⁵ Surveys in the country reveal that approaching Europe was/is for both politicians and the general population a way to solve all the problems Moldova was/is facing. As elsewhere in the neighbourhood, the general public in Moldova continue to associate the

Available at https://www.ipn.md/en/moldova-after-25-years-of-independence-and-oscillating-between-east-and-west-op--7978_1029277.html [Accessed 19/05/2023].

⁴ "Stefan Füle European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood EU Moldova Forum, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, Berlin, Germany 22 October 2012, European Commission, Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_12_753, [Accessed 27/04/202].

⁵ *Public Attitudes in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine towards the EU - between Adoration and Moderation*, 2021, IPN Press Agency, Available at https://www.ipn.md/en/public-attitudes-in-georgia-moldova-and-ukraine-towards-the-eu-7978_1081407.html, [Accessed 3/06/2023]

European Union with better living conditions, well-functioning economies, the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights. However, values such as human rights or democracy assistance recede into the background when corruption, poverty and instability are rampant. Since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, security emerged as the main accelerator for the country's attempt to join the 27-nation bloc. However, as this thesis will show, the European Union was and continues to be perceived by the general public in rather abstract terms, as a supranational body that should provide Moldova and Moldovans with benefits to work, travel, study in the EU, to improve people's living standard conditions, and to help Moldova develop its economy. Thus, the analysis of Moldovan public opinion on the EU integration and the Eastern Partnership policy will be carried out using a neo-utilitarian approach, which among the various approaches studying public opinion on issues concerning the EU, seems to be the most appropriate in this case.

The study is based on figures corroborated by several surveys conducted in Moldova by national and international institutions such as the Institute for Public Policy (IPP), EU Neighbours East, Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDS) 'Viitorul', Centre for Insights in Survey Research (CISR). The Barometer of Public Opinion (BPO) was carried out at the request of the Chisinau-based Institute for Public Policy (IPP). The first BPO dates back to August 2000 and the last one available was launched in November 2022. Since 2000, two BPOs have been carried out every year and each of them is based on a sample of more than 1000 respondents from the Republic of Moldova, Transnistria excluded. These surveys were taken as a basis for this analysis as the BPOs measure adherence to the European idea in Moldova and they are carried out systematically, making it possible to trace the evolution of Moldovans' public opinion on their country's European integration. "*In your opinion, which country should be the closest (in terms of relations) to your country?*" and *If a referendum were held today on Moldova joining the European Union, how would you vote?* are the two main questions in the BPOs that make it possible to trace the evolution of the country's drive towards Europe between 2000 to present day. More specific questions about the Association Agreement between the EU and Moldova and the Moldova's visa liberalisation regime as some of the main dividends of the Eastern Partnership initiative render it possible to indirectly evaluate public opinions' perception of the policy and the country's EU integration overall.

To a lesser extent, this thesis relies on several other surveys carried out by the Centre for Insights in Survey Research, a project of the International Republican Institute (IRI). With the exception of Transnistria, data was collected throughout Moldova between October and mid-November last year (2022) through face-to-face interviews. Similar to the BPOs, the two main questions that allow to trace the evolution of public opinion's perceptions on the matter are: "*How would you rate the current*

relations between Moldova and the EU? and Which of these countries do you consider to be the most important economic partner(s) and political partner(s) for our country?

In addition, the report on the assessment of Moldovans' public perception on the process of European integration and the Action Plan was carried out in 2008 by the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDS) 'Viitorul' using quantitative and qualitative methods. The data was collected by means of a representative poll with questions inspired from the questionnaire of the national poll (IDIS 'Viitorul', 2008).

Finally, the annual surveys carried out under the *EU Neighbours East* project aim at investigating the opinion and the knowledge that people in the Eastern Partner countries have on the EU and, in particular, on the EU-funded programmes and project for the development of these countries. The survey used in this analysis took place between February and March 2020, when 1,000 face-to-face interviews were carried out with respondents selected randomly (EU Neighbours East, 2020).

Several factors contribute to the tailoring of Moldovans' public perceptions vis-à-vis the EU. These include, *inter alia*, speeches and actions of local politicians, the way the European Union presents itself to the national government and its citizens, and the information products used to inform Moldovans about Moldova's positioning towards the EU and the country's European integration process. The role of Moldovan media in forming public opinion in the country and depicting the country's drive towards the EU deserves more careful consideration. Moldova has a rather rich media environment; a plethora of media outlets are operational in the Moldovan information market, with most of them representing political parties, others claim to be independent, but are actually linked to certain political parties and movements, thus only a few of them can be considered truly independent. The people involved in the Moldovan media environment and its overall structure have direct consequences on how public discourse takes place and which issues are then generally discussed. The topics discussed in the national media and the way in which they are discussed reflect the country's history and, most importantly, its current political climate. As more and more Moldovans are turning to digital devices to obtain information about national and international political matters, to complete the analysis on the evolution of Moldova's public opinion about the country's westward turn and its participation in the Eastern Partnership policy this thesis will focus on two of the country's most popular news websites according to the 2021 Barometer of Public Opinion (BPO) by the Moldovan Institute for Public Policy (IPP). Based on several articles published in Jurnal.md and Sputnik Moldova in the last few years, this thesis will compare the pro-EU and pro-Russia rhetoric in depicting Moldova's choice in favour of deeper European integration.

Sputnik is a Russian state-owned agency and radio service representing Russian authorities' official position. The Sputnik brand was launched in 2014, by the Russian media group *Rossiya Segodnya*. The following year Sputnik started to focus on “strengthening cross-cultural ties and facilitating information exchange among Eurasian countries,” thus covering fourteen former Soviet countries, including the Republic of Moldova.⁶ As stated in Sputnik Moldova’s official page, Sputnik engages in “showing a multipolar world, where each country has its own national interests, culture, history, traditions [...] it says what no one else has the guts to say.”⁷ Sputnik has long been one of the most powerful pro-Kremlin tools in the Republic. From anti-government messaging, it has now switched to a rather strong pro-Eurasian, anti-European, anti-NATO, and anti-Romania agenda.⁸ As a matter of fact, in February 2022 the Republic of Moldova decided to ban Sputnik.md, along with other pro-Kremlin sites such as gagauznews.md, rta.md, moldnod.ru amongst others, for incitement of hatred. However, the ban was not enough as new sites emerged after the blocking. Consequently, the country’s Information and Security Service has recently (March 2023) blocked five new other propaganda websites discovered in the country’s information space for the publication of false information that “threatens national security in a state of emergency.”⁹

On the other end of the spectrum, the pro-European online version of the television channel Jurnal TV, Jurnal.md, was founded in October 2009 by the director Val Butnaru. It represents one of the few TV stations in Moldova that do not broadcast programs from the Russian Federation, since all newscasts, talk shows, and entertainment programmes are produced at the local level. From its inception, Jurnal TV has acted as an opposition TV station and has always been a harsh critic of the government, especially of former Democratic Party leader Plahotniuc. As a matter of fact, Val Butnaru, the Jurnal Trust Media president and sole beneficiary since 2019, claimed that its main mission is “to be in opposition to power, any power, whatever it is called.”¹⁰ The Trust also comprises the newspapers ECONomist, Apropo Magazin, Jurnal de Chişinău, and radio station Jurnal FM.

⁶ *Sputnik News Agency and Radio*, ITU, Available at <https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/archive/stocktaking/Project/Details?projectId=1485950753>, [Accessed 8/05/2023].

⁷ Sputnik Moldova, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.com/docs/index.html> [Accessed 8/05/2023]

⁸ Cepoi, M. (2017), *The main influencers of public opinion, in The Moldovan information environment, hostile narratives and their ramification*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, p. 60.

⁹ *Sites of Russian propaganda media Sputnik blocked in Moldova*, March 2023, News Insight, Available at <https://insightnews.media/sites-of-russian-propaganda-media-sputnik-blocked-in-moldova/>, [Accessed 13/05/2023]

¹⁰ *Val Butnaru a redevenit unicul beneficiar al Jurnal Trust Media: „Misiunea principală e să fim în opoziție cu orice putere” (Val Butnaru has become the sole beneficiary of Jurnal Trust Media: “Our main goal is to be in opposition to power”)*, June 2019, Jurnal.md, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/68295b097f839a7c/val-butnaru-a-redevenit-unicul-beneficiar-al-jurnal-trust-media-misiunea-principala-e-sa-fim-in-opozitie-cu-orice-putere.html>, [Accessed 16/05/2023].

“While independent audience surveys show that Jurnal TV is the leader in viewers' preferences, economic agents are being blackmailed not to place their advertising on our TV station. The scheme is being set up by advertising sales houses controlled by Vladimir Plahotniuc and Igor Dodon” claimed director Val Butnaru in 2019.¹¹ As highlighted in the same article, the former head of the European Union delegation, Peter Michalko, and former US ambassador to Chisinau, James Pettit, also warned the authorities in Chisinau that the advertising market in Moldova has been monopolised by the Democratic Party (PD) and Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), noting that through these actions, Moldova's independent press simply cannot survive as it is deprived of financial sources necessary for its own survival.¹² Considering audience numbers in the last years, it can be said that Jurnal TV alongside its online version Jurnal.md play a substantial role in influencing Moldovans and their public opinion.

Finally, this thesis is structured as follows: after a brief review of the academic literature on the European integration process in the framework of the Eastern Partnership initiative and its perception in the Eastern neighbourhood, the second chapter will delve into the tools and mechanisms used by the EU in its external relations in its geographic vicinity, particularly into the concepts of conditionality and partnership in EU external relations. After tracing the Republic of Moldova's relations with the Union before and within the Eastern Partnership policy context, the thesis will investigate the evolution of the general attitudes towards the EU, its policies, and its overall presence in Moldova since the country's independence, before concluding with a comparison of the different pro-EU and pro-Kremlin rhetoric in Moldovan media about the country's choice in favour of the European Union.

¹¹ *Jurnal TV, pe primul loc în preferințe* (Jurnal TV as number one favourite), March 2019, Jurnal TV, Available at <https://www.jurnaltv.md/news/81c2b9b557d00ac3/jurnal-tv-pe-primul-loc-in-preferinte.html> [Accessed 8/05/2023]

¹² Ibidem.

I. A GROWING LITERARY INTEREST IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP REGION

This chapter presents a review of the academic literature on the European integration process in the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative and its perception in the EaP states. Since its inception in 2009, and particularly with the rapid flow of events since the late summer of 2013, this specific EU policy has attracted broad scholarly attention and has inspired the application of diverse analytical approaches, theories, as well as traditions. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the Eastern Partnership initiative has been approached mostly from an EU-centered perspective by looking into how these policies were chosen and developed by the Union and their effects in the country of interest. But, *what about the perceptions of the policy in the target countries?* First of all, in order to be able to make meaningful conclusions concerning the effectiveness of EU policies in the EaP partners, it is essential to understand national stakeholders' perceptions and expectations about the European Union in general and their country's European integration process. Moreover, *how are the European Union, its values and policies represented in national media around the Eastern neighbourhood?* After an initial brief description of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership initiative, this chapter will focus on the existing literature on the evolution of the EU policy in its geographic vicinity, and on what has been said so far about the perceptions and representation of the policy in national media landscapes in the Eastern neighbourhood.

1.1 The European Neighbourhood Policy

The shape of EU policy towards the new independent states of the former USSR has changed gradually after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The democratisation process and the transition to the market economy has called for a new approach towards the so-called Eastern Partnership (EaP) region. The conclusion of Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (PCA) with all the former Soviet countries, except from the Baltic states and Belarus, is the first stage in the evolution of the EU policy instruments addressing these countries, laying down the principles of economic co-operation and creating the framework for political dialogue.¹³ The PCAs can, thus, be considered as the founding agreements for the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours.

The last wave of enlargement has radically changed the European Union (EU) as a polity. As Korosteleva (2013) points out, not only did it alter the EU's geographical, political and socio-economic landscapes, but more fundamentally, it forced the EU to reevaluate its way of perceiving its frontiers, and its role vis-à-vis its external environment. Therefore, how to frame relations with its immediate neighbourhood became a pressing issue for the EU at the time.¹⁴

This important political change led to the launch, in 2004, of a new instrument in EU policy - the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The European External Action Service (EEAS), EU's diplomatic service, defines the ENP as “*the foreign policy framework aiming at bringing the EU and its Eastern and Southern neighbours closer to their mutual benefit and interest*”¹⁵ with the purpose of fostering stability, security and prosperity in the EU's neighbouring by working together on key priority areas, such as promotion of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and outreach and inclusion of civil society among others. It addresses a highly heterogeneous group of countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in the Eastern neighbourhood, and Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia in the South - that differ significantly in almost every aspect, from their levels of economic, social development to their political systems, as well as cultural and historical backgrounds. The one characteristic the sixteen ENP partners have in common is a certain geographic proximity to the EU. Yet, even in this

¹³ Sadowski, R. (2013). *Partnership in times of crisis. Challenges for the Eastern European countries' integration with Europe*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Poland, p. 11

¹⁴ Korosteleva, E. (2013). *Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: the Eastern neighbourhood*, Eastern Journal of European Studies, Centre for European Studies, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, vol. 4, p 12.

¹⁵ *The European Neighbourhood Policy*, EEAS official website, Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en [Accessed 9/02/2023]

respect, it should be noted that countries that share a physical land border with the Union might have a completely different perspective from that of countries in the South.¹⁶

In pragmatic terms, the European Neighbourhood Policy was driven mainly by security concerns, along with economic interests and export of democracy in the immediate neighbourhood. As highlighted by Buscaneanu (2006), with the ENP the European Union tried to safeguard three of its foreign policy priorities in the region: staying away from new accessions in the near to medium term; contributing to the resolution of some of the main issues characterising its neighbourhood and securing itself from the effects of these problems; and finally, the Europeanisation of these states in line with the EU values and norms, with the benefits of progressive integration.

The ENP is often depicted as an alternative to the membership perspective as from the beginning there were no intentions for the EU to offer more than partnership and less than membership. Although it is not about enlargement, the ENP do not close any doors to those who, in the near future, wish to apply for membership.¹⁷ It should be mentioned, however, that the key reason for the ENP's designing is linked to security concerns of the enlarged Union. Poverty, insecurity, violent or 'frozen' conflicts and failed governance – *inter alia* – are some of the main challenges faced by the EU and its neighbors, causing an exponential increase of illegal immigration, the spread of conflicts fueled by extremist and ethnic movements as well as the rise of organized crime, with negative effects spilling all over the entire European continent. Therefore, the promotion of stability, security and prosperity in the EU's neighborhood became a 'flagship' of the EU's foreign policy.¹⁸ Finally, another significant aspect of the ENP is the Europeanisation dimension, thus the European Neighbourhood Policy can be perceived as a form of external governance. In other words, the EU extends its values, standards and policies in its geographic vicinity while precluding the access to its fundamental institutions. Some of the instruments used by the European Union derived from the pre-accession process, such as Action Plans with agreed forms, targets, elements of conditionality to achieve a high level of integration.¹⁹

The ENP's ambitious objective of contributing to "strengthening the stability, security, and well-being "of its neighbours is best captured in President of the European Commission Romano Prodi's

¹⁶ Lehne, S. (2014). *Time to Reset the European Neighborhood Policy*, Carnegie Europe, p. 6.

¹⁷ Buscaneanu, S. (2006), *How far is the European Neighbourhood Policy a substantial offer for Moldova?*, Journal of Foreign Policy of Moldova, Leeds, pp. 9-10.

¹⁸ Fuior, C. (2007), *Democratic transformations in Eastern Europe: the efficacy of norm diffusion strategies of the EU and NATO*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, pp. 31-32.

¹⁹ Buscaneanu, S. (2006), *How far is the European Neighbourhood Policy a substantial offer for Moldova?*, Journal of Foreign Policy of Moldova, Leeds, p. 10.

speech and pledge to ‘share everything with the Union but institutions’ (Prodi, 2002). The ENP was from the beginning, neither an alternative to enlargement nor a policy designed to lead to candidacy or potential candidacy to the EU. As Schumacher (2017) puts it, by seeking to transpose the European norms, values, rules and regulations, the ENP best represents, and becomes a test case for, the EU’s ambition to establish itself as a global power.

*“If we are to keep pace with this changing world and shoulder our growing global responsibilities, we, as the Union, have to take the necessary measures. If we want to satisfy the rising expectations and hopes of countries abroad and the peoples of Europe, we have to become a real global player. We are only beginning to act as one. [...] We have to assume our role as a global player. The development of a substantive proximity policy should be one of the first steps.”*²⁰

Starting from 2007, the EU begin complementing the traditional bilateral approach of the ENP with a multilateral framework for cooperation and dialogue. The European Union further institutionalised its relations with the sixteen neighbours and created a more complex cooperation architecture which culminated, in 2008 and 2009 respectively, in the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative.²¹ This latter symbolises a significant change in the EU’s perception of its Eastern neighbourhood countries, which were no longer seen as part of the Russian-dominated post-Soviet area, but as the Union’s neighbours with prospects of rapprochement with the EU.²² The third regional initiative part of the ENP intended as a flexible framework complementing existing EU policy, the Black Sea Synergy, is defined by the EU Commission as an *“institutionalised forum for EU cooperation encouraging cooperation between the EU and the countries surrounding the Black Sea and for tackling common problems while encouraging political and economic reform.”*²³

²⁰ *A Wider Europe - A Proximity Policy as the key to stability*, speech delivered at “Peace, Security And Stability – International Dialogue and the Role of the EU”, Sixth ECSA-World Conference. Jean Monnet Project, Brussels 5-6 December 2002, European Commission Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_02_619

²¹ Schumacher, T. (2017). *The European Neighbourhood Policy: The challenge of demarcating a complex and contested field of study*, in *The Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy* (pp.3-15).

²² Sadowski, R. (2013). *Partnership in times of crisis. Challenges for the Eastern European countries’ integration with Europe*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Poland, p. 11.

²³ *Black Sea Synergy*, European Commission, Available at https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/black-sea-synergy_en [Accessed 11/03/2023]

The social upheavals engulfing the Arab world in early 2011- known as the Arab Spring - fundamentally changed the political landscape of the ENP and forced the EU to adjust its approach to the new reality on the ground. The ‘New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood’ formed the basis of the 2011 ENP review, where ideas such as the ‘3Ms’- markets, money and mobility - and ‘more for more’ as positive conditionality, and ‘less for less’ as negative conditionality emerged.²⁴ Subject to academic debate, the ‘more for more’ principle is seen as the principal change brought about by the ENP, which seeks to focus European assistance on countries carrying out effective reforms in respect of democratisation and the rule of law among others. With a series of graphs illustrating the average annual aid payments per country over the period 2007-2013 (chart 2) or the total aid volume for each partner country in the same period, weighted by the number of inhabitants in 2009 (chart 3), Sadowski (2013) illustrated how support for individual partner countries depends on the European institutions’ assessment of the political situation, applying the ‘more for more’ principle, and how it is in line with a project-based approach. Sadowski stresses another interesting point in the development of the ENP policy, stating that changes were always introduced in response to developments, and never anticipated events:

*“The ENP was launched because of the EU’s eastward enlargement and the pressure from the new Central European members. In the case of the Eastern Partnership, one of the impulses came from the Russian intervention in Georgia which threatened to destabilise the entire Southern Caucasus, and indirectly, also from the Russian - Ukrainian gas crisis in the early 2009. Finally, the ENP reform after 2011 was a consequence of the ‘Arab Spring’, over the outbreak of which the EU had had no influence.”*²⁵

The same conclusion can be drawn for the 2015 ENP review. The ‘Arab Spring’ did not transform the EU’s southern neighbourhood in a highly coveted liberal democracy while in the East the situation was similarly problematic with war in Eastern Ukraine and Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. In late 2014, Brussels realised that an additional review was overdue especially as the 2011 review did not offer adequate responses to the previous political developments, nor to the EU partners’ changing aspirations.²⁶ In response to the ongoing crises in the neighbourhood, the EU has,

²⁴ Kostanyan, H. (2017). *Assessing the European Neighbourhood Policy: Perspectives from the literature*, Centre for European Policy Studies (p. 26)

²⁵ Sadowski, R. (2013). *Partnership in times of crisis. Challenges for the Eastern European countries’ integration with Europe*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Poland, p. 15.

²⁶ *Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy*, European Commission, 2015, Brussels, Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52015JC0006>

in fact, moved away from its ambitious project of achieving ‘deep democracy’ and started focusing instead on extinguishing the ‘ring of fire’ in the neighbourhood.²⁷ Furness (2017) explained, for instance, that the revised ENP is a far more focused and realistic cooperation framework than the previous versions and represents a scaling back of the EU’s ambitions in the neighbourhood. As a matter of fact, the review recognised that “not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards”, and that the new policy intends to “reflect the wishes of each country concerning the nature and focus of its partnership with the EU.”²⁸ Ultimately, while it is true that the 2015 ENP Review is a step forward in acknowledging the deficiencies of the ENP and the main issues affecting EU’s neighbours, it concentrates on handling the current crises yet it does not provide a strategic long-term vision for the EU’s relations in the immediate neighbourhood.²⁹

1.2 The dilemma of conditionality without enlargement

The last round of enlargement forced the European Union to advance a new geopolitical doctrine to face the challenges in its new neighbourhood as the ‘carrot of enlargement’ in exchange for reforms was no longer included.³⁰ Aiming at promoting democracy, stability and prosperity at the EU’s eastern and southern borders, the European Neighbourhood Policy is modelled on the institutional and procedural experience of the EU’s last wave of enlargement, although it explicitly excludes a membership perspective.³¹ The ENP can, in fact, be seen as a new approach to EU conditionality.³² The principle of conditionality, as defined by Poli (2018, p. 527), is a “mechanism designed to exert pressure on EU partner countries to undertake domestic reforms inspired by respect of international standards.” However, its application to EU membership is relatively new and its meaning evolved over the years together with the very concept of membership.

²⁷ Kostanyan, H. (2017). *Assessing the European Neighbourhood Policy: Perspectives from the literature*, Centre for European Policy Studies, p. 135.

²⁸ *Review of the ENP*, European Commission, 2015, Brussels, Available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-01/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf

²⁹ Kostanyan, H. (2017). *Assessing the European Neighbourhood Policy: Perspectives from the literature*. Centre for European Policy Studies, p. 142.

³⁰ Browning, C. S., & Joenniemi, P. (2008). *Geostrategies of the European Neighbourhood Policy*. *European Journal of International Relations*, 4 (3), p. 3.

³¹ Sasse, G. (2008). *The European Neighbourhood Policy: Conditionality Revisited for the EU’s Eastern Neighbours*. *Europe-Asia Studies*, p. 296.

³² *Ibidem*.

When addressing the ENP, scholars pay considerable attention to the notion of conditionality. Poli (2018) identifies three new forms of conditionality within the framework of the ENP, which are enshrined in formal treaties and soft law acts and examines whether these can be in line with the principle of consistency to which the EU institutions are subject. They differ from the traditional ‘political conditionality’ whereby the EU has attempted to export the European values for the purpose of creating the necessary conditions for them to take root in third countries. The ‘good governance’ conditionality is the first form identified by the author, followed by the ‘migrant integration’ and ‘convergence conditionality’, the latter developed by the EU in its relations with three associated countries, namely Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This new form of conditionality, according to the author, is indispensable in the Eastern Partnership. Although it is not yet clear whether these countries will join the Union in the near future, the transformations necessary for their integration in the Union are so far reaching that the best option, Poli concludes, is to have a gradual and ‘controlled’ extension of the *acquis* in exchange of their participation to the internal market.³³

The EU’s attempt to achieve similar goals to those achieved in the last wave of enlargement with a similar process of aligning partner laws and processes with EU norms but without the stick of the golden carrot is one of the most commented fault-lines on the European Neighbourhood Policy/Eastern Partnership. Sasse (2008) suggests that the ENP amounts to a form of ‘conditionality-lite’ for non-candidate countries. In contrast to enlargement, the defining elements of conditionality - clear incentive and commitments - are vague and potentially limited. The ENP is the projection of several security concerns of both the EU as a whole and its member states: a concern for political stability at the EU borders, the desire to counter the negative implications of the last round of enlargement for the ‘outsiders’, and an attempt to create an attractive alternative to EU membership.³⁴ Offering ‘everything but institutions’ has been largely perceived as a failure to transform EU’s Eastern neighbourhood into the highly coveted area of peace, stability and prosperity, and, at the same time, it is thought to circumscribe the transformative power of the EU in its immediate neighbourhood. Piskorska (2018) focuses on the so-called ‘power of soft power,’ the ability of the EU to attract others and bring about changes in societies. Association agreements, economic cooperation, financial support and humanitarian aid, support for governments, civil society and

³³ Poli, S. (2018), *The Principle of Conditionality in the EU's Relations with its Neighbours: its Evolution and Reconciliation with the Principle of Consistency*, Diritto dell’Unione Europea (DUE), p. 525.

³⁴ Sasse, G. (2008). *The European Neighbourhood Policy: Conditionality Revisited for the EU's Eastern Neighbours*. Europe-Asia Studies, p. 295.

democracy are some of the examples of the EU's soft power instruments in the EaP states. However, the author argues that the European Union's offer does not meet the expectations of some of the Eastern Partnership countries, which have always expressed their desire to become members of the Union, as for example Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. What is more, building on the policy intended for candidate countries or aspirant countries, the European Union does not present an appealing offer to its neighbouring countries and this lack of a precise offer can even discourage potential candidates and make them choose Russia instead (e.g. Armenia). From the analysis of the impact of the EU soft power policy on its neighbours, the author concludes that the pace of progress is determined by the extent to which partners are willing to implement the necessary reforms; accordingly, many achievements have been met in the economic sphere and almost none in the areas of governance and democracy.³⁵

Undoubtedly the lack of membership perspective explains the overall ineffectiveness of the ENP, however, it cannot explain the different levels of democratisation in neighbouring states. Börzel and Lebanidze (2017) state that it is not the lack of a membership perspective itself but the inconsistency in applying conditionality that undermines EU's performance in promoting democracy in its neighbourhood. The authors identify two conditions for the EU's application of democratic conditionality: the absence of a democratisation-stability dilemma and the presence of pro-democratic reform coalitions. The EU is likely to apply democratic conditionality if it does not have to choose between democratisation and stability and if it can empower pro-democratic reform coalitions. Moreover, three groups of states in the ENP were identified in the article, which differ from each other both in terms of consistency and effectiveness of EU democratic conditionality. The first and biggest group comprises all of the Southern neighbourhood, except from Tunisia, and Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Caucasus region. It can be said that domestic conditions for consistency and effectiveness of EU democratic conditionality have been rather unfavourable in these countries. Belarus alone constitutes the second group identified in the paper, where the EU applied democratic conditionality but neither consistently nor efficiently. Russia has played a major role in undermining the leverage of the EU in the country, as well as other Western institutions providing financial support for the stabilization of Lukashenko's regime. Finally, in Georgia, Moldova, Tunisia, and Ukraine the EU has been more successful and efficient in applying democratic conditionality. If consistently applied, the authors conclude, the EU has alternative incentives to offer to promote and protect democratic change.³⁶

³⁵ Piskorska, B. (2018). *The Eastern Partnership – A Challenge for the EU's Soft Power in International Relations*. On-line Journal Modelling the New Europe., pp. 1-13.

³⁶ Börzel, T. & Lebanidze, B. (2017) "The transformative power of Europe" beyond enlargement: the EU's

“The goal of accession is certainly the most powerful stimulus for reform we can think of. But why should a less ambitious goal not have some effect? A substantive and workable concept of proximity would have a positive effect. Today I am going to talk about the need for a new political perspective on relations with our southern and eastern neighbours. My aim is giving them incentives, injecting a new dynamic in existing processes and developing an open and evolving partnership. This is what we call our proximity policy, a policy based on mutual benefits and obligations, which is a substantial contribution by the EU to global governance.”³⁷

Korosteleva (2011) appears to be particularly critical of the very concept of partnership applied by the EU. She argues that the EaP (as ENP) policy itself is designed in a special way to cover with the notion of “partnership” the actual distinction between “self” and “other”. Despite the fact that the EaP was formed to upgrade the EU’s relations with its eastern neighbours, in substantive terms the EaP remains strikingly similar to the original ENP. There is a marked continuity under the EaP in both the format of engagement and the prioritisation of EU ownership of rhetoric and actions. More crucially, as the author points out, the policy explicitly intended to be a ‘more ambitious partnership’, there persists the same conceptual ambiguity regarding the notion of ‘partnership’ that is central to the framing of the EU’s relations with its neighbours. In her words, a partnership is just used as an alternative to the membership for the EaP countries. In this case, there are not shared values between the EU and EaP countries and these latter are not seen as equal partners, rather as outsiders acting as “norm-takers”. Thus, it is hard to call the EU and EaP equal partners in terms of the size of their economies and political role on the international arena and, as Korosteleva outlines, in the absence of the presumed partnership the EU applies its traditional external governance approach, thus internal solutions to its external problems.³⁸ In conclusion, the author insists on the concept of partnership as closely linked to the EU’s aspirations in becoming a legitimate and credible ‘force for good’ in the international arena. Without acknowledging its transformative force, and especially its shortcomings, it is difficult if not impossible for the EU to achieve this ambitious goal.

performance in promoting democracy in its neighbourhood, East European Politics, 33:1, pp. 28-30.

³⁷ *A Wider Europe - A Proximity Policy as the key to stability*, speech delivered at “Peace, Security And Stability – International Dialogue and the Role of the EU”, Sixth ECSA-World Conference. Jean Monnet Project, Brussels 5-6 December 2002, European Commission, Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_02_619

³⁸ Korosteleva, E. (2011). *Change or Continuity: Is the Eastern Partnership an Adequate Tool for the European Neighbourhood?*, International Relations 25(2) pp. 243–262.

1.3 The Eastern neighbours

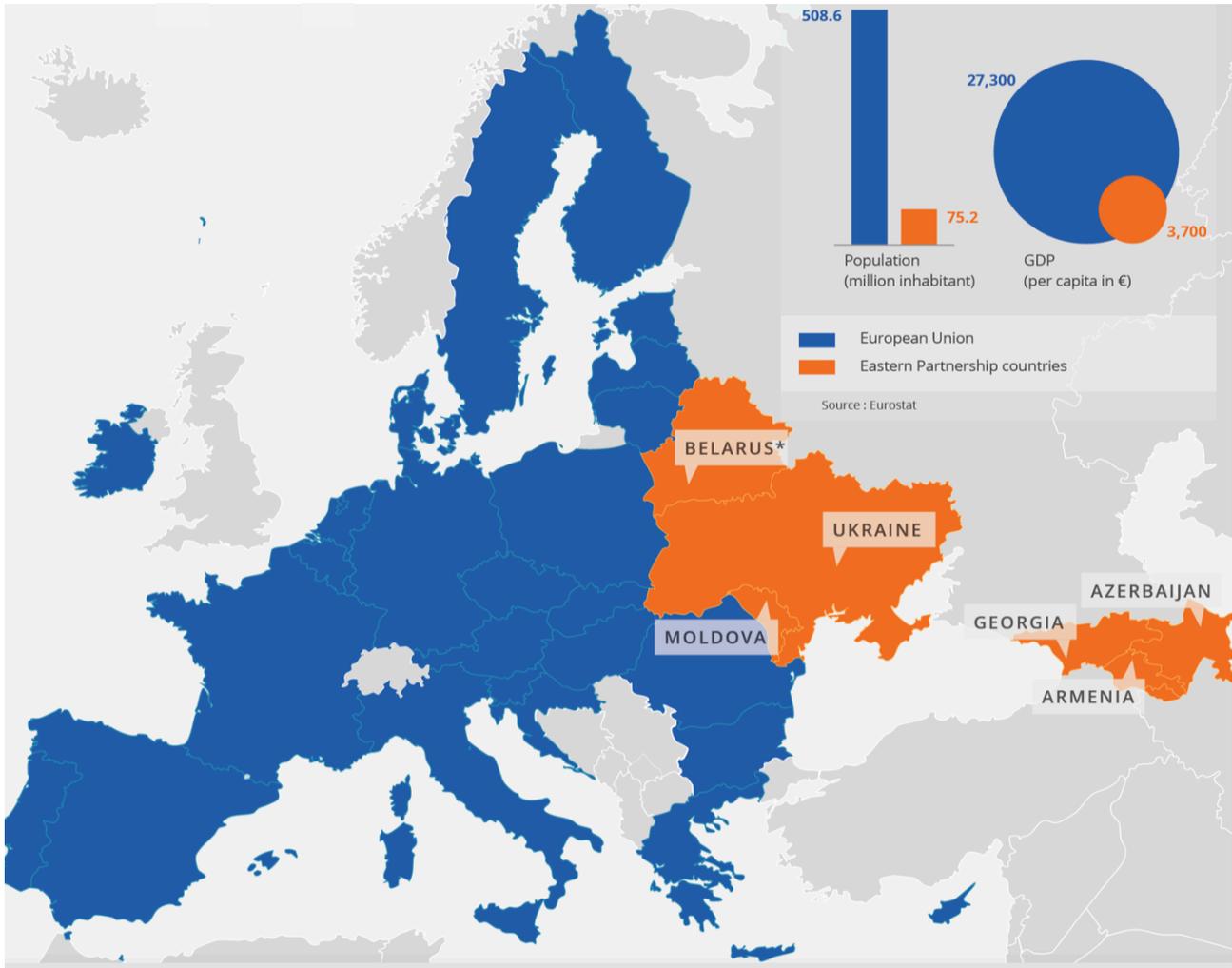


Fig. 1: Map of the Eastern Partnership population and GDP (2021).

* from June 2021, Belarus has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership.

Source: Council of the European Union.

The region demarcated by the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is an artificial policy construct invented by the European Union.³⁹ An official definition for the core subject of this thesis has been provided by the European Union External Action (EEAS):

³⁹ Bosse, G. (2014). *The Eastern Partnership and the disintegration of Eastern Europe: The end of the region-building project?* European View, 13(1), p. 98.

*The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint initiative involving the EU, its Member States and six Eastern European partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. It is a strategic and ambitious partnership [...] which aims to strengthen and deepen the political and economic relations between the EU, its Member States and the partner countries, as well as supports sustainable reform processes in countries of Eastern Partnership.*⁴⁰

The concrete proposal of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) had been published only in May 2008, by joint initiative of Poland and Sweden, whilst the final elaboration of the policy was rather accelerated not only by the outbreak of war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, but also by the gas supply cuts from Russia to Ukraine at the beginning of the year 2009. Thus, the EaP initiative is the result of the EU acknowledging the need to adapt to a new emerging reality in the eastern neighbourhood and to follow the European Commission's recommendations for a 'Strong ENP'.⁴¹ Based on commitments to the principles of international law and to fundamental values, such as democracy, the rule of law, the respect for human rights, as well as to, market economy, sustainable development and good governance,⁴² the partnership seeks to revamp the ENP's appeal in the area.

A crucial milestone in the EU-EaP cooperation was reached in 2014, when three of the six Eastern Partnership countries – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – concluded Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs), providing them with a framework for enhanced political collaboration and economic integration with the European Union.⁴³ However, it should be noted that the countries' reactions around the Association Agreements varied. In Ukraine, the initial failure to sign the AA in November 2013 triggered a wave of large-scale protests in the capital Kyiv – known as Maidan protests – which culminated in the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovyc, the consequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia and the start of the hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine. On the contrary, the security situation in both Georgia and Moldova remained relatively stable in the aftermath of the signature of the Association Agreements with the EU. Another

⁴⁰ *Eastern Partnership*, EEAS official website, Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en [Accessed 8/03/2023]

⁴¹ Korosteleva, E. (2011). *Change or Continuity: Is the Eastern Partnership an Adequate Tool for the European Neighbourhood?*, *International Relations* 25(2) pp. 243–262.

⁴² *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, Prague 7 May 2009, Council of the European Union, Available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf

⁴³ Țigănașu R., Cărbune, A. (2021). "Democracy, Governance and Economy: How EaP States Have Evolved in the Last Decade?" *Eastern European Journal for Regional Studies (EEJRS)*, Center for Studies in European Integration (CSEI), Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (ASEM), vol. 7(2), p. 209.

major incentive for cooperation was the area of visa liberalisation and reform to make it easier for citizens of the EAP states to stay in the Schengen Area for a short visit, with the ultimate goal of visa-free travel; Moldova was the first EaP state to reach a visa-free regime with the EU in 2014, while for Ukraine and Georgia this became possible three years later, in 2017.⁴⁴ A step forward in the EU-EaP relations has been reached in November 2017 at the EaP Summit with the adoption of a common reform agenda titled '20 deliverables for 2020.' The work of plan focused on delivering tangible results on the ground and improving the people's lives in four main areas: economy, governance, connectivity and society.⁴⁵

As far as Azerbaijan is concerned, the country initiated negotiation with the EU on a new framework agreement while, in the same year, Armenia signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which entered into force in March 2021. Belarus was seen as an active participant in the Eastern Partnership initiative, for instance the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements between the country and EU came into force in July 2020. However, due to "drastic deterioration of the overall human rights, democracy and rule of law situation in Belarus in the run up, conduct and aftermath of the August 2020 elections" this improvement in bilateral relations came to an end.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the EU decided to maintain its cooperation with Belarus within the Eastern Partnership framework at non-political levels, however, Minsk decided unilaterally to withdraw its participation from the EaP in June 2021.

*"The main goal of the Eastern Partnership is to create the conditions necessary to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the EU and EaP countries. [...] The initiative carries a clear political message about the need to maintain and bolster the course towards reforms."*⁴⁷ But, what about the actual implementation of these reforms? Are there any real improvements in the Eastern partners? According to Sadowski (2013), the Eastern Partnership turned out to be a predominantly bureaucratic instrument with limited political significance, which hardly matches the European Union's expectations. Little meaningful progress has been made in key areas,

⁴⁴ Axyonova V., Gerasymchuk S., Kakachia K., Rosca A. (2018). *The European Union as a Transformative Power, a Donor or a Security Provider? The view from the Eastern Partnership Countries*, European Foreign Affairs Review, p. 24.

⁴⁵ *Eastern Partnership*, EEAS official website, Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en [Accessed 8/03/2023]

⁴⁶ *The European Union and Belarus*, EEAS official website, [Accessed 08/03/2023] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/belarus/european-union-and-belarus_en?s=218

⁴⁷ *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, Prague, 7 May 2009, Council of the EU, [Accessed 08/03/2023], Available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf

such as democratisation, free-market transformations, European integration, political stability and regional security. Based on the analysis of the criteria and indexes describing the change in those areas in the period of time between 2004 – 2013, the author claims that the growing involvement of the EU and the development of its bureaucratic instruments has failed to contribute to any improvement in the area, revealing the limits of the EU's ability to become an agent of change in the region. Considering the partner countries' attitudes towards the EU and the level of their engagement with the Union, Sadowski states that current political and economic situation and the short-term interests of the ruling elites have here an important role to play.⁴⁸

A similar analysis is provided by Țigănașu and Cărbune (2021). The main objective of their analysis in dynamics (2010 vs 2020) is to explain the variations in values on different components – democratic, governance and socio-economic. Despite minor progress in the elements analysed, the fragility of the Eastern Partnership states from an economic, social, institutional or democratic point of view is still prominent, this being more obvious after the appearance of some destabilising crises (e.g., Ukrainian crisis in 2014). If in 2010 the EaP states appear to be more distant in terms of the analysed dimensions, in 2020 they come closer together forming a relatively homogeneous group with differences diminishing to some extent. Regarding the democratic dimension, it has been found that in ten years there have been no significant changes in the sense of improving security, institutional stability, or defense of fundamental rights. In socio-economic terms, most EaP countries have experienced the effects of the Ukrainian crisis, with their GDP being seriously affected by it. As stated by the authors, the dynamics of economic transformation do not depend only on the conclusion of associations or free trade agreements with EU, but it is rather subordinate to factors such as internal stability or the existence of a favorable framework for social inclusion. Finally, governance is strongly influenced by past models, history, political visions, or its cultural imprint among the others. Thus, it is important to note that the development of the EaP region is strongly influenced by history and getting rid of the Soviet Union's influence remains a great challenge for all the six countries.⁴⁹

Bosse (2014) also examines the successes and failures of the Eastern Partnership. However, what is noteworthy in her article is the fact that the EaP is considered not as yet another 'format for EU technical rule transfer' but as a proper political region-building project involving more than a mere

⁴⁸ Sadowski, R. (2013), *Partnership in times of crisis. Challenges for the Eastern European countries' integration with Europe*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Poland, p. 47.

⁴⁹ Țigănașu R., Cărbune, A. (2021). "Democracy, Governance and Economy: How EaP States Have Evolved in the Last Decade?," *Eastern European Journal for Regional Studies (EEJRS)*, Center for Studies in European Integration (CSEI), Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (ASEM), vol. 7(2), pp 208-233.

transposition of the EU *acquis*. From an initial brief evaluation of the key institutions and instruments of the EaP's multilateral dimension, it emerged that the EU has opted for an integration of the Eastern Partnership region through assimilation rather than emancipation. The absence of a coherent political and economic region due to the different levels of political and economic reform are, *inter alia*, some of the most challenging factors to the regional approach in the EaP region. Other relevant factors identified by the author are the lack of strong pre-existing economic and political ties among the countries as well as a bias within the EU's regional approach towards considering and integrating countries in the EaP as a peripheral region. Finally, the author stresses the need for an increased cooperation among the EaP countries that, among others, may help them somehow reduce their dependence on the Russian Federation. It is generally agreed that Russia's approach poses a growing challenge to the policy of the Union in its eastern neighbourhood. It is evident that the region and its states have been territorially fragmented, and they are compelled to choose between one player while restricting links with the other. Thus, the Eastern Partnership, Bosse concludes, "ceases to be a regional cooperation and integration project and becomes a matter of geopolitics, with big schemes, continental drifts, clashes of civilization."⁵⁰

Scholars perceive Russia as a major regional power and an EU alternative geopolitical pole for neighbouring countries. Korosteleva (2017) points out that the deadlock in EU-Russia relations has serious repercussions in the region's equilibrium. The paper provides an analysis of a changing Eastern neighbourhood and focuses on EU's struggles to understand and engage with the increasing complexities of the region. The EU encounters multiple economic, political, and especially security challenges, for which however Russia is considered the primary cause of instability in the region. As the author concludes, it is precisely this lack of 'positive othering' involving recognition and engagement between the EU and Russia –vis-à-vis each other, as well as in relation to their common neighbourhood - that prevents the development of more effective policies the region.⁵¹

Mikalay and Neuman (2022), for instance, trace the evolution of the EU's and Russia's discourse on the Eastern Partnership along four different frames – economic, (geo)political, normative, and security. According to their findings, a polarizing framing of the EaP as a geopolitical security arena

⁵⁰ Bosse, G. (2014). *The Eastern Partnership and the disintegration of Eastern Europe: The end of the region-building project?* *European View*, 13(1), pp. 98-99.

⁵¹ Korosteleva, E. (2017). *Challenges of a Changing Eastern Neighbourhood*. in Schumacher, Tobias and Marchetti, Andreas and Demmelhuber, Thomas, eds. *Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Routledge, London. p. 3.

has taken hold. In Brussels and Moscow the EaP is no longer framed in politico-economic terms and, especially with the so-called Ukraine crisis, it acquired an “adversarial security understanding, underpinned by logics of geopolitical and normative competition.”⁵² In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, subtle changes in the focus began to alter the framing of the EaP, but it is only from the 2015 EaP summit in Riga that the EU and partner countries clearly started to acknowledge the geopolitical competition for the region with Russia. Within the EaP framework, Russia started being formally called “the EU’s opponent and a threat to the region in question” only starting from 2017.⁵³ Thus, a more pragmatic EU started putting greater emphasis on stability and security of its partner region. On the other hand, not until the coloured revolution in Georgia and Ukraine did Russian political élites start to pay more attention to the EU’s policy in the common neighbourhood. It might be argued that, as long as the economy was at the heart of the Eastern Partnership, Russia saw the possibility for a constructive interaction between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union. However, things started to change when both parties started to frame security in geopolitical terms in their interpretation of the Eastern Partnership policy. In this respect, Russia no longer perceives it as a tool of economic cooperation, but a US-led effort to exclude Russia’s Eastern and Southern neighbours from its sphere of influence. In conclusion, both actors started to define “security as overcoming threats from each other, co-constructing an adversarial picture of the potential partner.”⁵⁴

But, *what drives partner countries’ decision to engage in one or the other project?* Starting from the premise that engagement in one or the other project does not depend only on external actors’ stimuli and pressures, but it is also linked to factors such as partner countries’ socio-economic needs, structural constraints influencing their foreign policies, and elites’ preferences, Delcour (2015) explore why partner countries engage in regional projects in the EU and Russia’s common neighborhood. In particular, she focuses on the main factors explaining the (opposite) choices made by Armenia and the Republic of Moldova. It emerged that the engagement with the Eastern Partnership or the Eurasian Economic Union depends mostly on three elements: the resonance of the EU’s and Russia’s offers in terms of norms and identities, the structural interdependencies, and the expected positive and negative outcomes of the chosen regional project and, finally, the domestic actors’ inclinations (ruling elite, business, civil society, or the general public). In the case of Moldova, for instance, although the country emerged to be highly vulnerable to Russian pressure, it is clear that

⁵² Mikalay, M., Neuman, M. (2022). *Framing the Eastern Partnership in the European Union’s and Russia’s institutional discourse*, Journal of Contemporary European Studies, p. 1.

⁵³Ivi, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 11.

its economic and political cooperation is growing stronger with the European Union. From the beginning, Moldova's choice in favor of EU integration was linked to its Romanian heritage which played a key role in the country's state-building after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finally, while EU norms and values resonate strongly in Moldova, the country's engagement in the EU's project is widely driven by a 'quest for benefits expected from EU integration.'⁵⁵ Delcour, however, admits that all the identified explanations contribute only partially to explaining why Armenia and Moldova choose to be part of these regional projects and that a deeper scrutiny of the infra-state level, namely actors' constellation and preference formation shaping countries' engagement in region-building projects is necessary.

Całus et al. (2018) provide an in-depth analysis and a systematic mapping of interdependences in three Eastern Partnership countries – Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine – across the areas of trade migration, energy, and security. More specifically, they focus on issue-linkages - strategies whereby an actor ties one policy area to another policy area - applied by external partners, their effects on national policies and their domestic elites' responses. Overall, Russia resulted particularly agile in exploiting existing interdependencies with EaP countries and applying issue-linkage strategies. Security emerged as Russia's preferred leverage and it has mostly been used in correlation to energy or trade. On the contrary, the EU has made a rather limited use of issue-linkage strategies, relying instead upon sector-specific conditionality to further expand cooperation with and integration of EaP countries.⁵⁶ However, as the authors note, the EU's proposal may also depend on Russia's strategies and EaP elites' preferences. The consequences of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the most recent actions in Eastern Ukraine are a case in point for which Ukraine, Moldova and more recently the EU as a whole, decided to drastically decrease their energy dependence on Russia.

As far as Moldova is concerned, the country is highly dependent on its international partners. Although the importance of Russia has been reduced noticeably over time, this latter still remains a key trading partner for Moldova, dominates its energy sector, remains the main destination for Moldovan labour migrants and plays a pivotal role in the Transnistrian conflict.⁵⁷ At the same time, cooperation between Moldova and the EU, and in particular Romania, have clearly grown stronger

⁵⁵ Delcour, L. (2015). *Between the Eastern Partnership and Eurasian Integration: Explaining Post-Soviet Countries' Engagement in (Competing) Region-Building Projects*, Problems of Post-Communism, 62:6, pp. 319 – 321.

⁵⁶ Całus K., Delcour L., Gazizullin I., Iwański T., Jaroszewicz M., Klysiński M. (2018). *Interdependencies of Eastern Partnership Countries with the EU and Russia: Three Case Studies*, EU-STRAT Working Paper No. 10, April 2018, 'The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries – An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment' (EU-STRAT), p. 10.

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

in recent years. From an economic point of view, the European Union is now Moldova's biggest trade partner; the reinstatement of Romanian citizenship for most of the Moldovan has significantly contributed to increasing labour migration from Moldova to the EU; and energy interdependencies are likely to expand as a result of Moldovan-Romanian energy projects.⁵⁸

1.4 The EU at home: perceptions and expectations in EaP countries

Since their inception in 2003 and 2009, and particularly after the rapid flow of events that have eventually resulted in the on-going crisis in Ukraine, both the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership initiative have been one of the most studied subjects in European studies literature. Scholars have long investigated their origins, functioning and effects, though so far mainly from an EU-centered perspective. Overall, it can be said that most studies focused primarily on how EU projects its internal solutions externally and how effective can EU governance be in its immediate neighbourhood.⁵⁹ For instance, Schimmelfennig (2012) by focusing on Europeanisation effects in the areas of regionalism, democracy and human rights in the ENP literature, identifies the strategies, instruments as well as the impact and effectiveness of the EU in applicant states. Similarly, Lavenex (2004) explores the dynamics which spur the extension of the Union's *acquis communautaire* beyond the circle of member states towards its southern and new eastern neighbours. However, as noted by Schumacher (2017), despite the growing body of European Studies literature dealing with the external image of the EU, there are very few studies that focus on governmental and non-governmental actors' perceptions in the EU's neighbourhood of both the EU and the ENP. As the author further explains, the EU, and thus its identity, is constructed not only from within, but also through its engagement with its external 'others' and that the EU's neighbourhood is "dependent upon the expectations and constructions of other international actors."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Całus K., Delcour L., Gazizullin I., Iwański T., Jaroszewicz M., Klysiński M. (2018). *Interdependencies of Eastern Partnership Countries with the EU and Russia: Three Case Studies*, EU-STRAT Working Paper No. 10, April 2018, 'The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries – An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment' (EU-STRAT), p. 11.

⁵⁹ Axyonova V., Gerasymchuk S., Kakachia K., Rosca A. (2018). *The European Union as a Transformative Power, a Donor or a Security Provider? The view from the Eastern Partnership Countries*, European Foreign Affairs Review, p. 24.

⁶⁰ Schumacher, T. (2017). *The European Neighbourhood Policy: The challenge of demarcating a complex and contested field of study*, in Schumacher, Tobias and Marchetti, Andreas and Demmelhuber, Thomas, eds. *Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Routledge, London, pp. 3-15.

However, drawing meaningful conclusions regarding the aptness of EU policies in the Eastern neighbourhood requires taking into account and understanding how the Union is perceived at home and what are the national stakeholders' expectations vis-à-vis the European Union. Literature on the perception of the European integration process in the framework of the ENP and EaP policies at home is rather scarce but deserves attention. Johansson-Nogués (2017) offers a general snapshot of the main attitudes towards the ENP, both in the region and at the EU level, and the norms and values it promoted. Some governments in ENP countries appeared to be very positive about the new policy, hoping that it could facilitate economic growth and supply substantial financial assistance. The EU's lack of flexibility, use of conditionality, and the long and complex administrative reforms, however, led ENP countries' governments to question the advantages of the ENP and to issue repeated calls for reform. As far as the public opinion is concerned, the author states that it remains at large greatly unaware of the ENP and its goals, seeing it as a mere EU-to-government affair. If initially perceived positively, by the end of the 2000s the European Commission acknowledged that the ENP was failing to have the same effects and normative suasion that EU accession had had in the last wave of enlargement. Member States and the European Parliament agree on the policy itself but often disagree about the norms promoted in the policy. In spite of the awareness of the policy's limits and various rounds of reform, the overall intra-EU perception appears to be that the ENP has yet to unleash its full potential in shaping EU's relations with its Southern and Eastern neighbours, a task made even more challenging by the changing geopolitical circumstances in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and the more recent Russian intervention in Ukraine, the author notes.⁶¹

Similarly, Sadowski (2013) reports about an increased disillusion of the EaP countries to the EU policy because the Union's offer does not seem to fulfil their expectations and both the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership initiative are perceived as mere instruments that serve the EU's interests. It should be acknowledged, however, that attitudes of the Eastern states and their level of commitment to relations with the EU depend on the current political and economic situation and, most importantly, on the interests of the ruling elites due to the oligarchic nature of these countries' political systems. In the context of integration with Europe, these factors have two important implications. First, the political elites' main interest is to defend if not strengthen their own positions within the existing system of power, as for instance the authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Azerbaijan. Second, oligarchic business groups have a considerable influence on political decisions and any progress on European integration or reforms will highly depend on internal conditions.

⁶¹ Johansson-Nogués, E. (2017). *Perceptions of the European neighbourhood policy and of its values and norms promotion*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the ENP*, Routledge, pp. 850-862.

Additionally, for countries for which EU membership is a key priority (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia), integration does not offer sufficient benefits which could offset its rather high financial and social costs. It should be noted, however, that European integration is not the only option available to the eastern neighbours, the alternative being the Russian-led initiative Eurasian Union (EEU). The two projects are mutually exclusive and, as the author acknowledges, this is contributing to the growing rivalry between them and is forcing the EaP countries to choose their integration models and directions.⁶² As far as the public society is concerned, Sadowski states that in the EaP countries it exerts very little pressure on the leaders to pursue closer integration with the European Union. With the exception of Moldova and Georgia, public society has had no particular impact on the governments' approval ratings, nor does it seem to be decisive for success at elections. As already reported by others in the literature, the public opinion is described by the author as seeing the ENP as a rather complex, incomprehensible process, with no mention of the more specific EaP initiative.

Hug et al. (2015), on the other hand, focuses on the Eastern Partnership, by examining its core policies and the institutions in charge of their implementation. In particular, they offer an interesting view of the role played by a number of member states and the influence that the European politics and public attitudes, had on EU's ability to act effectively in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Fawn describes here the Visegrad group (VG), constituted by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, as one of the best means to reach some of the EU's goals in the region. The Eastern Partnership initiative, in fact, was launched in Prague during the Czech EU presidency at the formal behest of the Polish-Swedish duumvirate and is seen as a key feature of Visegrad's activism within the EU.⁶³ As far as the issue of membership is concerned, governments of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have expressed their desire to join the club in the near future, whilst Belarus, Azerbaijan and Armenia have clearly stated that they are not interested, a position challenged, as noted by the author, by reasonably small portions of their civil societies. Historically, public opinion in the first two countries, Moldova and Ukraine, has been extremely divided in their opinions on EU integration, though events in eastern Ukraine have hardened their attitudes towards Russia. As Hug states, "*Russia's decision to force a choice, and its subsequent punitive actions, has helped bring the question of eventual EU membership for the Eastern partners to a head, a debate many in the Union had hoped to postpone for a very long*

⁶² Sadowski, R. (2013), *Partnership in times of crisis. Challenges for the Eastern European countries' integration with Europe*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Poland, p. 29.

⁶³ Hug, A. et al. (2015), *Trouble in the Neighbourhood? The future of the EU's Eastern Partnership*, The Foreign Policy Centre, p. 29.

time, if not indefinitely.”⁶⁴ In describing the challenges facing Moldova on its path to Europe, Cenuşa reports about a blurred image of the EU in the country, shaped not only by the internal expectations of the population, but also by the EU’s lack of an efficient communication strategy and the overall geo-political instability in the area. Contributing to the negative image of the EU at home, Russian propaganda remains highly efficient in the country due to the dominant position of Russian media in both local media market and especially among the Russian minority.⁶⁵

Engagement with the European Union has varied according to the different constellations of Eastern Partners’ identities and assumed various institutional forms over the course of the years. The diversity of the EaP is, according to Vieira (2021), the result of ongoing social interaction between the EU and Eastern Partnership states, a constant reshaping of their respective identities, and is informed by the positioning of EaP states towards a particular dimension of the EU’s ‘self’: the ‘potential we’. By identifying three ideal types of EU–EaP interactions – accepting the EU’s projection of self/potential we, accepting of Russia’s projection of self as EaP states’ ‘significant we’ and rejecting both the EU and Russia’s projections of self – the author explores the diverse positioning of the six Eastern partners.⁶⁶ Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are associated with the first ideal type adopting a series of reforms and accepting the AA/DCFTA. By rejecting both the EU and Russia’s significant we, both Azerbaijan and Belarus fit the third ideal type. However, Belarus’s contestation of the EU’s potential we is different from Azerbaijan’s: while contesting the essence of the EU’s potential we, Belarus sees the EU as an important actor for its independence and sovereignty. Finally, in the case of Armenia, the EU’s potential we is accepted in line with the ‘policy of complementarity’.⁶⁷ Armenia defines Russia as its significant we, at least in part, expressed in a formal military alliance and strategic, as well as its participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The author concludes with an interesting observation: the fact that it is more straightforward to classify EaP states as part of the first rather than the second ideal type attests the success of the EU’s projection of its identity on its neighbourhood, compared with Russia’s projection of its significant we. This finding is part of a wider debate on the attraction of Russia’s ‘soft power’ in its ‘near abroad’ while also

⁶⁴ Hug, A. et al. (2015), *Trouble in the Neighbourhood? The future of the EU’s Eastern Partnership*, The Foreign Policy Centre, p. 9

⁶⁵ Cenuşa, D. (2015), *The challenges facing Moldova on its path to Europe*, in *Trouble in the Neighbourhood? The future of the EU’s Eastern Partnership*, Hugh et al. , The Foreign Policy Centre.

⁶⁶ Vieira, A. (2021) *The European Union’s ‘Potential We’ between Acceptance and Contestation: Assessing the Positioning of Six Eastern Partnership Countries*. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, p. 298.

⁶⁷Ivi, p. 306.

confirming that the immediate neighbourhood will remain a site of contestation between the EU and Russia.⁶⁸

Drawing on the empirical investigations of the official discourses in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, Korosteleva (2011) reveals an increasing gap between EU rhetoric and expectations in Eastern European countries. As noted earlier in the thesis, the author states that the notion of ‘partnership’ appears to be ill defined, thus preventing the effective and legitimate realisation of the European Neighbourhood Policy/Eastern Partnership in the region. In the absence of clearly defined notions of ‘values’ and ‘means’, the policy is thus permeated with inconsistencies in vision and action between Brussels and neighbouring states whilst horizontal/vertical discrepancies impede the effective implementation of the policy on the ground. Belarus and EU relations, for example, are “clearly interest-driven, technical, and mostly apolitical, with only infrequent reference to the EU’s political *acquis*.”⁶⁹ When comparing the discourses of the EU Commission, member states and Belarusian government, the author states, the picture of engagement becomes rather fragmented. However, the parts widely acknowledged that the only way forward is through the partnership of mutual interests and the acceptance of ‘the other’ as different, rather than as a ‘threat’ or ‘inferior’. Although Moldova is often described as the front runner of the Eastern Partnership, both Moldova and the EU acknowledge the EU’s excessive bureaucratisation, sluggish response especially in time of crisis and reactive engagement. This often translates in a gap between expectations at home and the overall capacity to implement. In addition, Russia’s influence, as elsewhere in the neighbourhood, will continue to play a decisive role in piloting Moldova towards European integration.⁷⁰ The author concludes that Eastern European states themselves recognise inconsistencies within the Eastern Partnership policy, and reveal limited commitment and opportunism, for which the EU is partly to blame.

Finally, Axyonova et al. (2018) provide an interesting contribution to the perception of the EU and its initiative in three specific EaP countries: Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. More specifically, their piece maps and evaluates various discursive frames used by particular civil society actors who seek to impact the policy choices of their governments, namely think tanks, in a period of two and a half years (November 2013 and May 2016). While acknowledging that think tanks are part of the

⁶⁸ Vieira, A. (2021) *The European Union's 'Potential We' between Acceptance and Contestation: Assessing the Positioning of Six Eastern Partnership Countries*. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, p. 312.

⁶⁹ Korosteleva, E. (2011). *Change or Continuity: Is the Eastern Partnership an Adequate Tool for the European Neighbourhood?*, International Relations 25(2), p. 252.

⁷⁰ Ibidem.

analytical community and their views might not be representative of the whole society in their countries, the authors focus on this specific group as their attempts to influence policy process through lobbying activities or campaigns intending to form public opinion have become more and more apparent since the beginning of the century.⁷¹ From their findings, it can be stated that the EU enjoyed a very positive image among Georgian, Moldovan and Ukrainian think tanks. Despite all the criticisms in the security domain, rather high were the expectations of the EU to assume a greater role in providing regional security in the future. From an economic perspective, EU's assistance was regarded as essential for the development of all three countries, while in Ukraine eventual membership to the EU was in many cases presented as a natural way forward. The authors conclude by pointing out that this is where the EU is facing its biggest challenge of meeting expectations in the EaP countries and thus preserving its credibility and legitimacy as an external actor.⁷²

⁷¹ Axyonova V., Gerasymchuk S., Kakachia K., Rosca A. (2018). *The European Union as a Transformative Power, a Donor or a Security Provider? The view from the Eastern Partnership Countries*, European Foreign Affairs Review, pp. 38-39.

⁷² Ibidem.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a review of the academic literature on the European integration process in the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and its perceptions in the EaP countries. Although this particular EU policy has attracted broad scholarly attention, it has been approached mostly from an EU-centered perspective, with the main focus on the implementation of the policy and its general effects in the Eastern neighbourhood. As emerges from the literature on partner countries' preferences and perceptions at home, there is an increasing gap between EU rhetoric and expectations in Eastern partners. Some scholars report an increased disillusion of the EaP countries regarding the EU policy as what the Union has to offer does not seem to fulfil their expectations. Engagement with the European Union has, in fact, varied according to the different constellations of Eastern partners' identities and assumed various institutional forms over the course of the years. The Russian-led initiative Eurasian Union is once again presented and perceived as an alternative to the EU integration. However, little attention has been dedicated to the attitudes of the general public within the Eastern partners and no attention has been paid to the media representation of the countries' European integration process. From the very few studies focusing on public opinion in the EaP countries, the former appears extremely divided on EU integration, though more recent events in eastern Ukraine have hardened their attitudes towards Russia.

Public opinion often tends to be overlooked but it is well known that when governments fail to acknowledge the preferences of the citizens they represent, policy solutions to pressing issues may fall short in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. The de-Europeanization of political processes herewith illiberal actions can generate strong protest sentiments, whilst in other cases, pro-European governments may find themselves overwhelmed by the socio-economic impact of current crises and this can be exploited by the opposition to spark vocal protests within the countries. After tracing the evolution of the special relationship between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova in the Eastern Partnership framework, this thesis will address a gap in the European studies literature by investigating public opinion's perception of the EU in Moldova, the country's participation in the Eastern Partnership initiative and its European integration process thus far. Finally, particular focus will be dedicated to the different pro-EU and pro-Kremlin rhetoric of the country's European integration process in national media by analysing two opposing news websites: Sputnik Moldova and the pro-EU Jurnal.md.

II: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND MAIN ASSUMPTIONS

Over the last decades, the European Union has extensively promoted its *acquis* to third countries, substantially increasing its presence in the international field. The enlargement policy has long modelled EU external relations with its immediate neighbours as it was widely considered as the most effective mechanism of Europeanisation beyond the member states. Therefore, the European Neighbourhood Policy provides a framework for the development of a new kind of relationship with its neighbours beyond the threshold of membership in the short-medium term. Through the ENP, the EU tries to define a new type of ‘external governance’, by revisiting certain conditions for EU membership and extending them to countries without an explicit prospect of membership.⁷³ Before diving into the EU-Moldova relationship, it is necessary to focus on the modes and mechanisms that the EU uses in its relations with third countries. As this chapter will show, conditionality is the main strategy that the EU uses to promote its goals in its geographic vicinity. In EU external relations, the concept of partnership is defined by Korosteleva (2011) as a new philosophy of EU cooperation aiming at framing its relations with those neighbours who lack the immediate prospect of membership. Thus, the evolution of the concept in the EaP framework will explain the Eastern neighbours’ role and influence in their relations with the European Union. Finally, the geopoliticisation of the Eastern Partnership region will conclude this theoretical chapter. Geopolitics plays a key role in the pursuit of further expansion of EU’s foreign policy. As this chapter will demonstrate, the Eastern Partnership region’s strategic positioning between Russia and the EU renders it a crucial foreign policy goal for the both the EU and Russia's regional strategies.

⁷³ Sasse, G. (2008) *The European Neighbourhood Policy: Conditionality Revisited for the EU's Eastern Neighbours*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60:2, p. 297.

2. 1 Models of EU external relations

From an International Relations perspective, the European Union (EU) has been hard to define, as it does not match with the traditional definition of state-centered international order nor with that defining an intergovernmental organisation. The EU is a distinct international player, and it is sometimes referred to as a *sui generis* construction.⁷⁴ Norms tend to play a major role in European Union's external relations, thus concepts such as normative power, civilian power, soft power, and post-modern power, amongst others, started to emerge to describe this peculiar entity.⁷⁵

Manner's definition of the EU as a normative power has undoubtedly sparked the highest interest. The concept of normative power implies that the European Union is constructed on a normative basis and this peculiarity predisposes it to act in a normative way in its external relations. According to the author, the EU can thus be called a normative power because it has the ability to change norms in the international system.⁷⁶ The empirical evidence that the author uses to demonstrate that the EU is a normative power relies largely on the policies it pursues. For instance, as a case study Manner mentions the EU's international pursuit of the abolition of the death penalty, and notes that within that context the European Union was – *inter alia* – willing to impinge on state sovereignty, to intervene in support for individuals and, most importantly, aimed at achieving that goal without any obvious material gains.⁷⁷ However, long before being labelled as a normative power, the EU has been regarded as a civilian power. The first to introduce the idea that the EU could be a power that is neither military nor purely economic, but one that relies mainly on civilian means, such as ideas and opinions, was François Duchêne.⁷⁸ According to Diez (2005) the concept of normative power, rather than being distinct from civilian power, is already embedded in the latter.

On the other end of the spectrum, several other scholars offer an alternative theoretical study of the EU as an international actor. Hyde-Price (2006), for instance, regards these 'liberal-idealist' views as being too reductionists as they seek to explain international outcomes through elements located at a national level; they do not take into account the concept of power appropriately; and finally, they are

⁷⁴ Moravcsik, A. (1998), *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*, Cornell University Press.

⁷⁵ Casier, T. (2013). *The EU–Russia Strategic Partnership: Challenging the Normative Argument*. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65(7), p. 1378.

⁷⁶ Manners, I. (2002), *Normative Power Europe: a contradiction in terms?* *University of Canterbury*, 40/2, pp. 235-258.

⁷⁷ Ivi, pp. 252-253

⁷⁸ Diez, T. (2005). *Constructing the Self and Changing Others: Reconsidering 'Normative Power Europe'*. *Millennium-journal of International Studies*. 33. 613-636.

explicitly normative, in that they regard civilian and normative power exclusively in a positive manner.⁷⁹ The EU, just like any other international actor, pursues its own foreign and security policy priorities, or rather those of its Member States, as Europe's great powers "will continue to jealously guard their sovereign rights in pursuing their own foreign and security policy priorities."⁸⁰

Similarly, Zielonka (2013) uses the imperial paradigm to criticise the EU's normative power discourse and defines the Union as a modern type of empire with a new version of *mission civilisatrice*. The EU is thus perceived as a vast territorial unit able to dictate international rules and shape the notion of legitimate behaviour at its desire. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the European Union began to construct a normative discourse about protecting human rights, democracy and spreading prosperity in its geographic vicinity to justify its newly created foreign policy and to legitimise its territorial expansion, transfer of laws and resources.⁸¹ From its application in Eastern Europe, for instance, it emerged that post-communist countries were seen as mere norm takers, not givers, as they had to accept Western values and norms constituting the new European project. Thus, adaptation and assimilation of these western values were the main preconditions for these countries to become part of the European family.⁸²

The European Neighbourhood Policy promotes and/or projects European interests, norms and principles in EU's geographic vicinity. It has been frequently addressed as successor to the European Union's enlargement policy, however, in contrast to enlargement, the ENP does not imply an advancement of the EU's geographic borders.⁸³ It should be mentioned, however, that the ENP/EaP also matter in the EU bordering and, as mentioned by Marchetti (2017), some scholars define the European Neighbourhood Policy as the Union's first geostrategic document. To capture this ultimate character of the EU, several models of the European geopolitics and EU borders geostrategies have been outlined. Westphalian, Imperial, and Neomedieval models are some cases in point. The Westphalian model presumes that the power from the center is blurred to the borders and the EU is depicted as a unitary actor with its own currency, border regime, and security policy. The second model, labelled 'Imperial', depicts the EU as a series of concentric circles, thus presumes that power is distributed from the center, Brussels, to the borders with different degrees. Finally, the third and

⁷⁹ Hyde-Price, A. (2006) 'Normative' power Europe: a realist critique, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2, p. 219.

⁸⁰ Ivi, p. 231.

⁸¹ Zielonka, J. (2013) *Europe's new civilizing missions: the EU's normative power discourse*, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 18:1, pp. 35-38.

⁸² Ivi, p. 42.

⁸³ Marchetti, A. (2017) *Of borders and boundaries: the Neighbourhood as the EU's buffer zone*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy*, Routledge.

last model depicts the EU as a neomedieval actor, with power no longer located in one center in Brussel, but regionalized through different networks.⁸⁴ The term ‘geostrategy’ refers to a particular way of dealing and organising borders, thus it “*entails particular mental geographies and perceptions of particular landscapes and territories [...] ways of approaching and dealing with the land, of how to move within it and how to change and order it.*”⁸⁵ Examples of EU borders geostrategies are ‘networked non border’, which presumes that the role of the borders is declining, and the free movement of goods, people, and services should be implemented, while, on the contrary, the geostrategy of the ‘march’ refers to the creation of a protective buffer zone between the inside and the outside. Another strategy is the ‘colonial frontier’ and it presumes that the area beyond a frontier should be transformed according to the desire of the inside with the perspective of ultimately incorporating the outside. Finally, while the ‘colonial frontier’ is mobile, the geostrategy of the ‘limes’ perceives the frontier as permanent, thus it considers that there should be a limit of the transformation of the outside.⁸⁶

The European Neighbourhood Policy looks different in the North as compared with the South and East, due to the constructive role that the neighbours themselves can play in framing which geostrategy the EU can apply. Browning and Joenniemi (2008) identify in the South a more pronounced limes strategy, underlining a Westphalian understanding of the EU. In the East, however, they identify an overall imperial tendency as a result of the European ambitions of the neighbours, with the EU oscillating between a ‘limes’ and a ‘colonial frontier’ strategy. The desire of the EU to create a buffer zone with Russia coincides with the ‘march’ geostrategy. As far as the Eastern Partnership region is concerned, the EU does not perceive it as a threatening region and its rather close to the EU in geographic, institutional, and values terms, thus it can become an insider –falling under the ‘colonial frontier strategy.’⁸⁷ This fluctuation and lack of coherence in the ENP, however, is largely criticised in the European academic literature. In cooperation with ‘outsiders’ the EU always faces a security-stabilization dilemma, a trade-off between an undemocratic stability and transformation of the region. From an International Relations perspective, the ENP inherits both rationalist and constructivist elements as it is frequently associated with a trade-off between the EU’s security and democratisation agenda vis-à-vis neighbouring countries.⁸⁸ Thus, in most cases, the EU gave preference to its own pragmatic interests rather than to its core values when engaging with the

⁸⁴ Browning, C., Joenniemi, P. (2008), *Geostrategies of the European neighbourhood policy*, European Journal of International Relations, 14, 10, pp. 5-8.

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 10.

⁸⁶ Ivi, pp. 13-14.

⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 31.

⁸⁸ Marchetti, A. (2017) *Of borders and boundaries: the Neighbourhood as the EU’s buffer zone*, in The Routledge Handbook of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy, Routledge, p. 285.

European Neighbourhood Policy. A number of reasons explain EU's choice: the core values of the EU are ill-defined and ambiguous in their nature; the vagueness of objectives and values translates in different, and sometimes contrasting, interpretations; finally, there is no clear prioritisation of the various goals, which sees the EU choose depending on what it finds most appropriate in each particular case.⁸⁹ To conclude, the colonial frontier geostrategy is closely linked to the concept of external governance which is often applied in the study of the EU relations with other countries. The next section of this chapter will cover this theory.

2.2 Theory and modes of EU external governance

Over the last three decades, the European Union has engaged extensively in the promotion of its norms and regulations - *acquis communautaire* – to third countries, increasing substantially its presence in the international field. The EU uses a vast array of external relations from the traditional field of external trade to democracy promotion and cooperation in policy areas that fall under its legislative competence.⁹⁰ Thus, external governance in European Union's external relations can be defined as the extension of EU rules, norms and policies to third countries and international organisations beyond formal membership. This development is most evident in the European neighbourhood, where the EU has put forward new alternative forms of integration below the threshold of membership.

The study of EU's external relations generally requires taking into account concepts such as integration, governance and Europeanisation. Conceptually linked, they all refer to different aspects: integration is mostly linked to the level of authority transfer from the state to a supranational union; governance focuses on the forms and modes in which this authority is exercised; and finally, Europeanisation refers to the mechanisms through which EU governance influences states and their policies and the effects they produce.⁹¹ As far as the concept of integration is concerned, EU literature traditionally reserved it to member states, while 'external relations' referred generally to non-member states. In this conceptual dichotomy, 'enlargement' referred to the formal transition from non-member

⁸⁹ Kostanyan, H. (2017). *Assessing the European Neighbourhood Policy: Perspectives from the literature*, Centre for European Policy Studies, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Lavenex, S., Schimmelfennig, F. (2009) *EU rules beyond EU borders: theorizing external governance in European politics*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 16, p. 791.

⁹¹ Schimmelfennig, F. (2017). *Beyond enlargement: Conceptualizing the study of the European neighbourhood policy*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the ENP*, p. 66.

to member status or from external relations to integration.⁹² However, as the EU has designed a more sophisticated system of differentiated integration for non-member states with or without the potential promise of membership, scholars had to go beyond the dichotomous conceptualisation of membership and enlargement. Similarly, the concept of governance has been traditionally applied to member states, yet it does not stop at the EU's formal borders. Not only do the EU's rules and policy regimes such as commercial policy or migration policy often have an external dimension, but the EU also establishes institutional arrangements with non-member countries designed to extend its internal institutions and policies.⁹³ Finally, 'Europeanisation' is a broad concept and has been used in diverse ways. Europeanisation can be driven by institutional logic – the 'logic of consequences' or the 'logic of appropriateness'.⁹⁴ According to the logic of consequences, Europeanisation can be driven by the EU through sanctions and rewards (external incentives model). The impact of external incentives increases with the benefits and the credibility of EU conditionality. On the other hand, the logic of appropriateness stipulates that actors choose the behaviour that is appropriate for their social role and the social norms under given circumstances (social learning). Second, Europeanisation can work through different channels, via governments from the EU or, through transnational processes via societal actors within the target state. And finally, Europeanisation can be direct/EU driven or indirect/domestically driven. In the case of non-member states, Europeanisation refers to the mere transfer or 'downloading' from the EU.⁹⁵

Linked to the concept of Europeanisation, conditionality and socialisation are the two most used and compared mechanisms of EU impact. Based on the logic of consequence, conditionality is a direct, intergovernmental mechanism according to which the EU provides non-member states with incentives such as financial aid, market access or institutional ties on the condition that they meet the EU's demands. The size of the EU's rewards and the credibility of its conditionality have a direct impact on the effectiveness of conditionality. By contrast, socialisation is based on the logic of appropriateness. It comprises all EU efforts to 'teach' EU policies to outsiders, to persuade non-members that these policies are appropriate and, as a consequence, to motivate them to adopt EU policies.⁹⁶ The two strategies can be complementary and mutually reinforce their effectiveness, but

⁹² Schimmelfennig, F. (2017). *Beyond enlargement: Conceptualizing the study of the European neighbourhood policy*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the ENP*, p. 66.

⁹³ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁵ Ivi, pp. 75-80.

⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 66.

under certain conditions, they might also undermine each other. All other mechanisms of EU impact are considered as varieties of these two fundamental mechanisms, varieties that work more indirectly and/or transnationally than conditionality and socialization. In the case of conditionality, additional mechanisms are externalisation, transnational incentives, and transnational externalisation, while imitation, transnational socialisation, and societal imitation are mechanisms deriving from socialisation.⁹⁷

The external relations of the European Union heavily relied on the direct governance framework with hierarchy and conditionality being at its heart. Pertaining to the degrees of geographical proximity, these mechanisms included the enlargement strategy and aid relations with third world countries.⁹⁸

The enlargement strategy has long modelled EU external relations with its immediate neighbours, being widely considered as the most effective mechanism of Europeanisation beyond the member states. At the other end of the spectrum, the EU has also enjoyed a “proven track-record of aid cooperation” with third world countries premised on strict conditionality but not necessarily demanding full convergence with the vast body of EU *acquis*.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, alignment by the neighbours with EU norms and regulations – *acquis communautaire* – was regarded as strategically important for the EU, to preserve and enhance stability, prosperity, and security on its neighbourhood, as well as to increase its presence in the international arena. Hence, developing a credible and effective framework of engagement with the neighbourhood region (especially eastwards) became a critical priority for the EU.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2004, can be perceived as the first attempt to create a new type of association that provides interested neighbouring states with an alternative to enlargement. With the last waves of enlargement in 2004 and 2007, the new approach towards candidate countries is placed somewhere in-between a remote accession perspective and support for alternative regional integration based on the *EU acquis*, which, as Lavenex (2011) puts it, can be seen as the institutionalisation of a ‘waiting room’ for membership.¹⁰⁰

Considering the context in which the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) originated, it can be assumed that the fifth enlargement experience formed a solid basis for the formulation of the new

⁹⁷ Schimmelfennig, F. (2012). *Europeanization Beyond Europe*. European Community Studies Association Austria (ECSA-A), Living Reviews in European Governance (LREG), p. 8.

⁹⁸ Korosteleva, E. (2013), *Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: the Eastern neighbourhood*, Eastern Journal of European Studies, vol. 4(2), p.12.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Lavenex, S. (2011). *Concentric circles of flexible European integration: A typology of EU external governance relations*. Comparative European Politics. p. 373.

policy in the neighbourhood. First, the policy discourse of the ENP is based on a similar approach and content of the accession conditionality, first developed for the candidate countries from Eastern and Central Europe, as neighbouring countries have to respect the “*commitment to shared values, that is respect for human rights, including minority rights, the rule of law, good governance, the promotion of good neighbourly relations, and the principles of a market economy and sustainable development as well as to certain key foreign policy goals.*”¹⁰¹ Additionally, this approach is complemented by a flexible political dialogue, regular monitoring, reporting and evaluation, elements already present in the enlargement policy itself. However, as the ENP does not pursue the aim of EU accession, it can be thus perceived as a test for the EU to define itself internationally, even more so as the neighbourhood has been identified as a key area for European security.¹⁰²

2.3 EU’s influence in the neighbourhood: the notion of conditionality

Political conditionality is a complex phenomenon, and it is rather challenging for scholars to agree on a definition. The concept of the ‘first generation of political conditionality’ emerged in the aftermath of the cold war, referring mainly to negative measures in the field of development. However, this traditional understanding of the concept soon appeared obsolete and did not fully capture various characteristics and leverage mechanisms applied by aid donors to incentivise political reforms.¹⁰³ From an international relations point of view, conditionality can thus be described as a mechanism through which states and international institutions aim at influencing other states by using material incentives. Conditionality differs from a broader set of means of international influence generally subsumed under socialisation, with the main difference being the use of material (positive and negative) incentives in the latter case and the persuasion by the EU and identification of target countries with the EU in the former.¹⁰⁴

Political conditionality has not lost relevance in the EU’s external relations and its nature, quality, and objectives have become broader and more diversified. From tying political conditions to EU membership, the EU expanded its spectrum of conditionality to include sanctioning aid recipients and

¹⁰¹ Delcour L., Tulmets E. (2008), *Pioneer Europe?: Testing EU Foreign Policy in the Neighbourhood*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft Mbh & Co, p. 505-506.

¹⁰² Ibidem.

¹⁰³ Koch, S. (2015), *A Typology of Political Conditionality Beyond Aid: Conceptual Horizons Based on Lessons from the European Union*, World Development, Volume 75, p. 98.

¹⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 99.

using targeted sanctions in foreign policy and, more recently, to promote sustainable development through trade agreements. There are four different types of EU political conditionality which further specify the different incentive structures and leverage mechanisms developed by the Union. *Ex-ante*/positive conditionality is the first type of conditionality identified, and it most notably refer to the EU's accession, association, and trade policies (e.g. pre-accession conditionality or pre-ratification conditionality). *Ex-ante*/negative conditionality is not an explicitly stated official strategy used by the EU, and it mostly relates to political conditionality applied "behind closed doors", in political dialogs and negotiations of beneficial agreements. Possible examples include the withdrawal of offered cooperation instruments (e.g. budget support or capacity building) or the threat to withhold the actual benefit. The use of *ex-post*/positive conditionality, on the contrary, is well established in the EU official discourse and used in a number of external policies. It is also called 'incentivising conditionality', since positive measures are being used to encourage better governance (e.g. the 'more for more' approach in its Neighborhood Policy). Finally, the last type of conditionality is *ex-post*/negative conditionality, also known as 'sanctioning conditionality', and its subtype as it exists in a grey area between conditionality and social learning.¹⁰⁵

The concept of conditionality is probably as old as politics itself, yet its application to EU membership has only started developing in the mid-1990s, thus it is closely related to the evolution of the concept of membership itself.¹⁰⁶ The first two waves of enlargement were strictly political and underscored the need of an institutional framework beyond the establishment of free trade areas, as well as, the lack of impetus by member states for building such a necessary institutional framework. The Copenhagen criteria, a watershed for the theoretical conceptualization of politics, vastly contributed to the recognition of accession prerequisites, as well as, to the exemplification of what the EU represented and prioritized. Administrative capacity for fully applying the *acquis communautaire* was recognized as a fourth criterion for accession in 1995 in the Madrid European Council, thus supplementing the Copenhagen criteria.¹⁰⁷

Conditionality emerged as one of the major policy mechanisms in the ENP yet, it was soon identified as a rather controversial mechanism, vaguely defined on the side of both the incentives and the adoption costs. With the notion of 'conditionality-lite', Sasse (2008) tries to capture this relationship.

¹⁰⁵ Koch, S. (2015), *A Typology of Political Conditionality Beyond Aid: Conceptual Horizons Based on Lessons from the European Union*, World Development, Volume 75, pp. 101-102.

¹⁰⁶ Papakostas, N. (2012). *Deconstructing the Notion of EU Conditionality as a Panacea in the Context of Enlargement*, L'Europe en Formation, p. 217.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 218.

The main elements of conditionality, being the incentive structures, the consistency and credibility of the conditions, an underlying power asymmetry and the adoption costs, are all lower, weaker, vague and in flux within the ENP.¹⁰⁸ At first, the ENP's conditionality could be seen as being 'harder' rather than 'lite', as the return for adopting the EU *acquis* is less clear for ENP countries than it was for candidate countries. However, as the author argues, the ENP's emphasis on democracy, the rule of law or free trade is also easier to bypass by ENP countries' governments, softening the very concept of conditionality from both sides.

EU membership conditionality is considered the backbone of the EU's external political integration capacity, the linchpin of strengthening the integration capacity of post-communist countries. Accordingly, the absence of the 'golden carrot' of membership perspective is thought to circumscribe the transformative power of the EU in its immediate neighbourhood.¹⁰⁹

Whether in the East or in the South, the EU has not consistently applied political conditionality. In a context of asymmetric relations, conditionality has increasingly mirrored the shadow of hierarchy and focused on EU technical standards, thereby overlooking ENP countries' preferences, needs and constraints, and falling short of producing any lasting impact. Similarly, sector-specific conditionality, a highly targeted conditionality based upon legal approximation with the EU *acquis* and EU-promoted rules and standards, has only worked in countries committed to approximating their legal frameworks with the EU economic and trade-related *acquis*. In Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, for instance, this specific conditionality has played a prominent role in the preparation of the Association Agreements (AAs), Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Areas (DCFTAs) and visa liberalisation provided under the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative.

EU institutions and member states have been rather reluctant in applying negative conditionality measures in the neighbourhood, and the ENP represents a policy shift toward 'positive conditionality', rewarding those countries that undertook significant reforms so that they could consolidate this reformist impetus. In fact, the EU has been rather reluctant to use sanctions in response to adverse political developments and has maintained a rather low-profile in terms of democracy and human rights violations in those countries where it has strategic interests (e.g. despite the growing authoritarianism and a violent crackdown on civil society in Azerbaijan, the EU maintains its relations with the country as it imports energy in a context of diversification of EU

¹⁰⁸ Sasse, G. (2008) *The European Neighbourhood Policy: Conditionality Revisited for the EU's Eastern Neighbours*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60:2, p. 303.

¹⁰⁹ Börzel, T., Schimmelfennig, F. (2017) *Coming together or drifting apart? The EU's political integration capacity in Eastern Europe*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24:2, pp. 285-286.

energy supplies away from Russia). Interestingly, the 2015 ENP review does not mention conditionality - neither political nor sector-specific – while it merely indicates that the ‘more-for-more’ approach had proved to be rather successful in partners committed to reform and thereby implicitly acknowledged that conditionality had failed when such commitment was absent. The absence of any reference to the word ‘conditionality’ is indicative of the shortcomings of the ENP, primarily the lack of consistency and the EU-centric nature of conditions.¹¹⁰

2.4 An evolving partnership and partners’ role in the EaP

The analysis of the evolution of the very concept of partnership in the Eastern Partnership context will give a more nuanced picture of the partners’ role and influence in the European policy in the region. Partnership is a rather elusive concept both to analyse and realise (Milner 1992: 466). Perceived as an instance of cooperation, partnership in International Relations is described as any form of social interaction between actors allowing them to achieve a set common goals by sharing certain resources together,¹¹¹ thus it “requires that the actions of separate individuals or organizations—which are not in pre-existent harmony—be brought into conformity with one another through a process of negotiation, which is often referred to as policy coordination.”¹¹² In EU external relations, the concept of partnership is defined by Korosteleva (2011) as a new philosophy of EU cooperation aiming at framing its relations with those neighbours who lack the immediate prospect of membership. Thus, this relationship should be voluntary, non-binding, with equal shares of learning for both sides in the pursuit of their foreign and national policies.¹¹³ In EU external relations, three different types of partnership can be identified: *partnership as supplementary to EU governance*, e.g. EU aid relations with third countries; *partnership as a replacement of governance*, as illustrated by the strategic partnerships of the EU with key international players; and finally, *partnership as complementary to the EU governance*, as conceived for the immediate

¹¹⁰ Delcour, L., Soler i Lecha, E. (2017). *European neighbourhood policy mechanisms: Conditionality, socialisation and differentiation*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Routledge, p.870.

¹¹¹ Siitonen, L., (1990), "Political Theories of development Cooperation- A study of theories of International Cooperation," Research Paper 86, World Institute for Development Economics Research.

¹¹² Keohane, R., (1984), *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 51.

¹¹³ Korosteleva, E. A. (2011). *Change or Continuity: Is the Eastern Partnership an Adequate Tool for the European Neighbourhood?* *International Relations*, 25(2), p. 245.

neighbourhood.¹¹⁴

The very concept of partnership is not entirely new for the EU external policy, and it first originated in the mid-1990s during the process of enlargement. Realising that both the success and failure of both negative and positive conditionality is closely related to the national context and the political will of the third states, the Commission decided to introduce new policy ideas based on concepts such as differentiation, partnership, participation as well as innovative ways of controlling and evaluating the effectiveness of conditionality.¹¹⁵

The EU has undergone at least three paradigmatic shifts in its relations with the eastern neighbourhood. As previously explained, the first paradigmatic shift associates with a move away from enlargement towards a new policy and strategy – the European Neighbourhood Policy – launched in 2004. At least on a discourse level, there seems to have been an important conceptual shift in viewing partnership as an act of negotiated compliance, thus leaving partner countries some forum for discussion, and in this way certainly aspiring to bring ‘the other’ into the process of the EU’s construction of ‘self’ in international relations.¹¹⁶ However, the reality was completely differently. Korosteleva (2017) terms this new EU approach in the immediate neighbourhood as “*disciplinary governance*”, which, while successful in the case of enlargement, bore only limited effect on the neighbourhood. As noted by Korosteleva (2012), in the absence of a strong incentives structure, the conceptual ambivalence of the notion of partnership allowed the EU to return to its traditional governance approach by setting alone the reform agenda and, by means of conditionality, demanding the neighbours’ convergence with the EU *acquis*.

A more comprehensive policy iteration emerged by 2008 in what is perceived the second paradigmatic shift in EU policy towards the eastern neighbours. References to partnership in EU official documents started to increase, thus leading to the establishment of two new regional partnership initiatives in the years to follow - the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) for the southern neighbourhood in 2008 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in the East in 2009.¹¹⁷ Although still lacking a proper definition in ENP/EaP official documents, partnership gained further renewed

¹¹⁴ Korosteleva, E. A. (2012), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: Towards a more ambitious partnership?*. Routledge, p 23.

¹¹⁵ Tulmets, E. (2007). *Policy adaptation from the enlargement to the neighbourhood policy: a way to improve the EU's external capabilities?*. *Politique européenne*, 22, pp. 63-64.

¹¹⁶ Schimmelfennig, F. (2017), *Beyond enlargement: Conceptualizing the study of the European neighbourhood policy*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the ENP*, Routledge, p. 66.

¹¹⁷ Korosteleva, E. (2013), *Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: the Eastern neighbourhood*, *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, vol. 4(2), p.13.

momentum with the launch of the new regional and more differentiated policy. Its constitutive elements of ‘shared values’ and ‘joint ownership’ have received some elaboration, both in rhetoric and practice. However, the conceptual uncertainties of ‘what’ – and more essentially ‘whose’ – values, as well as ‘how much reciprocity is allowed’, persisted.

Finally, *A New Response to a changing neighbourhood* represents the third shift in the evolution of the EU governance and the third generation of partnership.¹¹⁸ As Korosteleva (2017) points out, the document corroborates the critical shift in the EU’s way of thinking towards its neighbours, abandoning, at least on a discursive level, its previous hierarchical government approach. Moreover, it offered greater EU instruments and increased commitment of all levels of society, from civil society to local authorities, national governments, and media representatives amongst other. As far as the notion of partnership is concerned, from its initial launch as a mere idea, partnership is now fully embedded within the policy structure and instruments under the ENP and EaP. However, its deficiencies are still plentiful. Not only does it seem that the agenda-setting still is the prerogative of the EU, but also the practice of relationship continues to be expressly Eurocentric.¹¹⁹

In a joint communication by EU High Representative Mogherini and EU Commissioner Hahn, the EU announced on 18 November 2015 the results of a new ENP Review, which reflects the EU’s inclination to abandon its one-size-fits-all approach based on its own values (Blockmans in Crombois, 2019). This change is mirrored in the new terminology that the EU has been using in reference to its neighbours, with the main stress being on stabilisation and differentiation over democratic reforms. As for the EaP, since the ENP Review, it has lost some of its visibility on the EU’s external policy agenda. As a result, it has drifted towards placing greater emphasis on stabilisation and differentiation. The new emphasis on differentiation can be seen in the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Armenia. This agreement is much more modest in scope than the initially planned DCFTA as the latter proved to be incompatible with the country’s decision to join the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Korosteleva, E. (2017). *The Challenges of a Changing Eastern Neighbourhood*, *The Routledge Handbook of the ENP*, Routledge.

¹¹⁹ Korosteleva, E. (2013), *Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: the Eastern neighbourhood*, *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, vol. 4(2).

¹²⁰ Crombois, J. (2019), *The Eastern Partnership: Geopolitics and policy inertia*, *European View*, Volume 18, Issue 1, pp. 89-96.

2.5 The geopoliticisation of a region: external actors' role in the EaP region

In its attempt to exert soft power over a ring of friends, the EU is faced in the East with a challenge that it does not meet in the South, a country which is both a neighbour and a global player, that is Russia.¹²¹ The region in-between the EU and Russia has undoubtedly been developing into an area of competition between the two actors. With the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU aimed at integrating its eastern neighbours just without the prospect of membership. For its part, Russia has exhibited an increasing assertiveness towards its Western neighbours - Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova – with the main aim of strengthening its economic clout and export its own model of governance. In these three societies orientations towards integration with EU coexists with an acute awareness that Russia's role in their countries remains of paramount importance. Peoples in these countries “cannot decide whether they belong, else than being stuck between powerful neighbours.”¹²²

The 2014 Ukraine crisis led observers and analysts stress that the EU had adopted a more geopolitical approach to its relations with the Eastern partners and the net result was a growing ‘geopoliticisation’ of the Eastern Partnership region.¹²³ Geopolitics can be defined as the analysis of the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations.¹²⁴ Thus, the main features of a geopolitical endeavour are: projecting or seeking to dissuade hard power; reflecting objectives or concerns related to territoriality; and actions taken against, or at least decided in consideration of, other powers.¹²⁵

In Makarychev and Devyatkov's (2014) words, the EU's understanding of geopolitics differs from classical geopolitical approaches and is closer to what is known as ‘critical geopolitics.’ This school of thought claims that geopolitics still matters, but instead of hard power, the conflict is one of identities that are transformed through competing discourses, communications and narratives. Geopolitics, based on this interpretation, is thus about rearticulating actors' geographical affiliations and getting them to reconsider their being part of certain geographic areas. Hence, it is more about

¹²¹ Delcour L., Tulmets E. (2008), *Pioneer Europe?: Testing EU Foreign Policy in the Neighbourhood*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft MbH & Co, p. 516.

¹²² Lowenhardt, J. (2005), *Stuck in the middle. The shared neighbourhood of the EU and Russia, 2000-2005*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael, pp. 6-7.

¹²³ Crombois, J. (2019), *The Eastern Partnership: Geopolitics and policy inertia*, European View, Volume 18, Issue 1, pp. 89-96.

¹²⁴ "Geopolitics". 2023. Encyclopedia Britannica, Available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/geopolitics>, [Accessed 20 April 2023].

¹²⁵ Cadier, D. (2019) *The Geopoliticisation of the EU's Eastern Partnership*, *Geopolitics*, 24:1, p. 78.

choices than control.¹²⁶

Yet, these views might create the misleading impression that the EaP region had previously been devoid of a geopolitical dimension and they tend to misread Russia's policy in the neighbouring region.¹²⁷ The EaP has undoubtedly have a geopolitical dimension from its implementation and the positions of various member states make this clear. For instance, for their profoundly conflictual historical relationship and their proximity to Russia, Poland and the Baltic States saw the EaP as a buffer between them and Russia whilst other member states, such as France and Germany, viewed it as a possible bridge with the Russian Federation. As it is widely believed, the South Ossetian conflict in 2008 has accelerated the discussions for the creation of the Eastern Partnership and it tragically shown the need for the EU to better take into account the regional role of Russia.¹²⁸ Finally, caution is needed when assessing the geopoliticisation of the EaP as there was a general tendency to emphasise the new geopolitical turn in Russian policy towards the neighbourhood. However, the Eurasian Economic Union, for example, failed to attract the vast majority of the EU Eastern partners with the exception of Armenia. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula first, and more recent events in Eastern Ukraine, contributed to pushing not only Ukraine but also other countries of the Partnership region further away from Russia's own sphere of influence.¹²⁹

Cadier (2018) argues that geopoliticisation of the Eastern Partnership states was not only caused by exogenous factors, but also carried forward from within the European policy community through its foreign policy discourse that, based on actors' political subjectivities and their policy agenda, framed the EaP as an endeavour aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the Eastern neighbourhood states and at rolling back Russia's influence. The geopolitical storyline on the EaP was never adopted explicitly in EU official discourse. However, this is mainly a manifestation of the EU's traditional ambiguity rather than a mark of the narrative's irrelevance for the EU.¹³⁰ From the author's analysis of the domestic discourses in Poland and the Czech Republic in the years before and around the launch of the Eastern Partnership, it emerged that despite the differences in how the EaP was promoted in the two countries, enunciations of the geopolitical storyline on the EaP was denoted in both national contexts. The two countries played an important role in conceiving and implementing the Eastern Partnership policy. Poland has undeniably been the main actor behind the separation of

¹²⁶ Makarychev A., Devyatkov A. (2014). *The EU in Eastern Europe: Has normative power become geopolitical?* PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 310. Available at <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/eu-eastern-europe-has-normative-power-become-geopolitical> [Accessed 19/04/2023].

¹²⁷ Crombois, J. (2019), *The Eastern Partnership: Geopolitics and policy inertia, European View*, Volume 18, Issue 1, pp. 89-96.

¹²⁸ Ibidem.

¹²⁹ Ibidem.

¹³⁰ Cadier, D. (2019) *The Geopoliticisation of the EU's Eastern Partnership*, *Geopolitics*, 24:1, p. 73.

the EU Eastern neighbours from the ‘ring of friends’ collectively gathered under the ENP. Its first proposal to develop EU policies towards the post-Soviet space dates to 2003 and the so called ‘Polish-Swedish proposal’ of 2008 can be considered the backbone of the Eastern dimension of the ENP. As far as the Polish discourse on the EaP is concerned, the initiative was occasionally framed as a buffer against a feared resurgence of Russia’s neo-imperialism, as a way to prevent building new barriers at the EU and Poland’s Eastern borders and a mean to prepare these countries for EU membership.¹³¹ The fact that Poland understood the situation of its neighboring states encouraged it, and still does, to adopt an active role in Eastern policy. As for the Czech Republic, from the discourse of the Czech Atlantist coalition, the EaP was partially articulated as policy of containment of Russia’s geopolitical ambitions in the region, of rollback of its influence in the Eastern neighbourhood, and, as for Poland, of preparation of Eastern partners’ accession to the EU. As stated previously, the fact that some of these debates about the EaP happened in the wake of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008, an event that boosted politicians’ and media attention towards the Eastern neighbourhood, often led them to apprehend the region through the prism of Russia’s behaviour in its near abroad.

However, consequences of the EaP geopoliticisation should not be underestimated. First, it provided ample rhetorical ammunitions to Moscow’s denunciation of the EU’s ‘expansionism’ and to its framing of the EaP as an EU sphere of influence. Second, the geopoliticising discourse sent the wrong signal to local elites in the Eastern neighbourhood about a firm determination of the EU to win their hearts and minds over Russia and, more problematically, about Brussels’ willingness to lower or even set aside the EaP’s conditionality criteria and benchmarks for reform in order to do so.¹³²

From the very few studies focusing on third countries’ interests in the region, other than Russia and the EU, it emerges that from late 1990s the presence of other players like the US, China, Turkey, Iran and some of the EU member states slowly but steadily grew in the region. Their involvement was encouraged and welcomed by the local rulers, bringing new diversification in the political, diplomatic, economic, cultural and military engagements, which helped the then newly established states to safeguard their sovereignty and to diversify their external relations.¹³³ There is a wider tendency in the EaP region towards opening up and engaging with a plurality of actors. More than a decade of the Eastern Partnership policy highlights the tendency of the Eastern neighbours to exchange goods more with outside powers than between themselves as, apart from energy trade, there

¹³¹ Cadier, D. (2019) *The Geopoliticisation of the EU’s Eastern Partnership*, *Geopolitics*, 24:1, pp. 81-82.

¹³² Ivi, pp. 89-90.

¹³³ Secrieru, S., Hovhannisyan, M., (2019), *The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: Looking back, thinking ahead*, Chaillot Paper/153, p. 7.

is little complementarity between the economies.¹³⁴

The post-Soviet space between Russia and the EU is a unique setting for the politics of transatlantic relations and the presence of a great former power forces both the EU and the US to take into account Russian interests when promoting their own strategic policies in the region.¹³⁵ From a geopolitical point of view, the US has an interest in influencing events in the Eurasian border areas (particularly in Europe and South-East Asia). The ENP contributed to a certain extent to the harmonisation of transatlantic positions in this geopolitically crucial space and it has in a number of instances been instrumental in advancing an EU policy agenda that is better tailored to individual cases and more in tune with American policy. The cases of Georgia and Ukraine are exemplary. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia has attracted particular US attention because of its status as a key energy transit country while Ukraine and its strategic integration into the West has the potential to redraw the map of Europe if not of the world politics.¹³⁶ Moldova's pro-Western politicians are willing to enhance cooperation with Washington under President Biden. Nevertheless, European integration is the dominating priority. Accordingly, the American assistance appears as a supporting and complementary Western support for the overall domestic reform agenda.¹³⁷

With no immediate goals to alter the existing political status quo, China remains an external actor that tends to ignore the internal dynamics in EaP countries unless they harm its economic interests. The only exceptional case would be Belarus, where China's policy might be considered conducive to supporting internal reform, given its interest in increasing its economic presence via promotion of investment opportunities and trade.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Secrieru, S., Hovhannisyan, M., (2019), *The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: Looking back, thinking ahead*, Chaillot Paper/153, p. 14.

¹³⁵ Rynning, S. & Jensen, C. (2010) *The ENP and Transatlantic Relations*, in *The European Neighbourhood Policy in Perspective: Context, Implementation and Impact* by Wolff, R. & Whitman, S., Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics, p. 141.

¹³⁶ Ivi, pp. 141-146.

¹³⁷ *EaP bulletin n.14. : From Trump to Biden in the eyes of Eastern Europe (and the European Union)*, 3DCFTAs: Understanding Association Agreements between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova and Ukraine, Available at [https://3dcftas.eu/publications/eap-bulletin-no-14-from-trump-to-biden-in-the-eyes-of-eastern-europe-\(and-the-european-union\)](https://3dcftas.eu/publications/eap-bulletin-no-14-from-trump-to-biden-in-the-eyes-of-eastern-europe-(and-the-european-union)), [Accessed 19/04/2023]

¹³⁸ Jaroszewicz, M. et al. (2018), *The EU and other external actors in the Eastern neighbourhood: Maximizing the transformative impact*, EUSTRAT, pp. 3-4.

Conclusion

The European Neighbourhood Policy is often described as a new phase in the EU's external governance and as an extension of EU conditionality under the threshold of membership. As this chapter discussed, conditionality emerged as one of the major policy mechanisms in the European Neighbourhood Policy, the backbone of the EU's external political integration capacity. Accordingly, the absence of the 'golden carrot' of membership perspective has often been thought to circumscribe the transformative power of the EU in its immediate neighbourhood.¹³⁹ In a context of asymmetric relations, conditionality has mainly focused on EU technical standards, often overlooking ENP countries' preferences and needs. The evolution of the concept of partnership in the Eastern Partnership policy context further complements the understanding of the Eastern partners' position in the policy. Although reviewed several times, the concept remained rather vague in the EU's rhetoric and actions, with important implications for both the effectiveness of the EaP initiative and the EU's desire to increase its role in the international arena.¹⁴⁰ The last 2015 ENP Review, however, reflected the EU's inclination to abandon its one-size-fits-all approach based on its own values, with the main stress being on stabilisation and differentiation over democratic reforms. Finally, situated in between Russia and the EU, the Eastern Partnership region has undoubtedly been developing into an area of competition between these two actors. The latter is at the same time a strategic foreign policy goal for the EU's regional strategy and borders while the Russian Federation claims regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space. As the next chapter will show, in the case of the Republic of Moldova, Russia exhibits an increasing assertiveness towards its Western neighbours – Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine – with the aim of strengthening its economic clout and exporting its own model of governance.

¹³⁹ Börzel, T., Schimmelfennig, F. (2017) *Coming together or drifting apart? The EU's political integration capacity in Eastern Europe*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24:2, pp. 285-286.

¹⁴⁰ Korosteleva, E. (2013), *Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: the Eastern neighbourhood*, *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, vol. 4(2), p. 32.

III: DECONSTRUCTING MOLDOVA'S CHOICE IN FAVOR OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

The Republic of Moldova is a relatively young state in terms of progressive attempts to define its own political trajectory. Its geographical position and its ethnical conflict have posed serious threats for Moldova which, after gaining independence, has been confronted with several political and economic hurdles that risked putting the very existence of the country in question. Before the European Neighbourhood Policy, the European Union was hardly present in the country and the initial failure of the EU to support Moldova in its democratic transition let many fear that the country would have been left alone in the context of preparation of the eastwards enlargement.¹⁴¹ On the contrary, Russia has always been present and dominating the former Soviet space and Moldova through, *inter alia*, pro-Russian parties, Russian-speaking minorities and the status of Russian language, the Church and most importantly, the Transnistrian conflict. All these factors contributed to the country's multi-directional foreign policy, with the preferences of the government oscillating between East and West based on the source of external benefits.¹⁴² "When cost-and benefits of the Russian pressure become significantly bigger than those from the EU, Moldova ... will choose the course of action that will benefit the most powerful." (Minzazari in Korosteleva, 2012; 117). After briefly tracing the history of the country, this chapter will analyse Moldova's non-linear path to Europe and the key role that Russia played and continues to play in the country despite the latest developments in Eastern Ukraine and the radical change in the country's attitude towards its big Eastern neighbour.

¹⁴¹ Bosse, G. (2010). *The EU's Relations with Moldova: Governance, Partnership or Ignorance?* Europe-Asia Studies, 62(8), p. 1291.

¹⁴² *Moldova after 25 years of Independence and oscillating between East and West*, 2016, IPN Press Agency, Available at https://www.ipn.md/en/moldova-after-25-years-of-independence-and-oscillating-between-east-and-west-op--7978_1029277.html [Accessed 19/05/2023].

3.1 Moldova as a newly independent state

Located in South-Eastern Europe, the Republic of Moldova is wedged between Central Europe, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Balkans. Contemporary Moldova is part of the former Principality of Moldavia to the East of the river Prut, which for several centuries was at the frontier between three important empires in the old continent: Ottoman, Habsburg and Russian. Its geographical position has always been strategic and essential in the evolution of geopolitics as it is known today, either as a part or the victim of some of the most important treaties and strategic territorial changes influenced by great powers. Notable examples are the treaties signed during the reign of Napoleon and the Russian Tsar Alexander I, which resulted in the annexation of Bessarabia to the Russian Empire in 1812, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) between the USSR and Nazi Germany, which again ceded the territory between the Dniester and Prut to the Soviets, or the famous attempt to divide Europe between Stalin and Churchill, whereby the Soviets would have control over 90% of the Romanian territory (of which this region was a part). All these examples prove the strategic relevance of the territory known today as the Republic of Moldova. The territorial changes that occurred during the XIX-XX centuries marked the process of identity formation and creation of this state. After a century of Russian rule, the Bessarabian region separated from Russia in 1918 and opted for unification with Romania. In June 1940 Soviet forces occupied the area to then split it between a new Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) and the Ukrainian SSR.¹⁴³ In August 1940 a strip of land East of the Dnestr was incorporated into the new Moldavian SSR. It is thus appropriate to state that the Republic of Moldova is a relatively young state in progressive attempts to define its own political strategies.

The latest Global State of Democracy report by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) describes President Maia Sandu's Moldova as a 'bright spot' when it comes to the democratic progress.¹⁴⁴ However, Moldova's regime trajectory has not been linear and oscillated between 'authoritarian' and democratic tendencies, thus it is often described as a 'hybrid regime'.¹⁴⁵ During its experience as a Soviet republic, all economic and political decisions were taken elsewhere in the Union, and foreign relations depended exclusively on Moscow. Thus, the new ruling

¹⁴³ Löwenhardt, J., Hill, R. J., Light, M. (2001). *A Wider Europe: The View from Minsk and Chisinau. International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 77(3), p. 614.

¹⁴⁴ *Global State of Democracy Report 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent, 2022*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Available at <https://idea.int/democracytracker/g sod-report-2022> [Accessed 1/06/2023].

¹⁴⁵ Parmentier, F., *The European Neighbourhood Policy and Moldova: A resilient oligarchic system wedged between EU and Russia*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the ENP*, Routledge p. 609.

elites have found it difficult to establish democracy and market economy in the country. Moldova had no democratic institutional model to rely on, as in the case of Baltic states for instance which had enjoyed independence during the interwar period. The catastrophic economic decline and the inaptitude of political elite to resolve constitutional issues has put the very existence of the country in question.¹⁴⁶ The country's economy remained largely agricultural at the beginning of the 1990s and the share of rural population remained relatively high. The demise of the USSR left the country heavily dependent on Russia, with 80% of its exports, in fact, oriented towards the Russian market. In addition, Moldova experienced several major economic crises in just over a decade: the first in the initial years after independence, a second in 1998 (caused by the Russian financial and economic crisis) and in 2009 (collapse of market and remittances). Chronic under-employment has led to massive emigration, when between 600 000 to one million Moldovans, mainly working population, left their country, a country where remittances represented up to 36% of the GDP in 2008, contributing to an over-evaluation of the national currency with damaging consequences for its exports.¹⁴⁷

In the Republic of Moldova, ethnic identity is at the basis of an overwhelming ethno-political conflict, with Moldovanism and Romanianism being the two opposing interpretations of the country's ethnic identity. Both interpretations revolve around well-defined values and beliefs. For Moldovanism, Moldovan people are different from Romanians. They speak Moldovan and, most importantly, they regard Romania and Romanianism as threats to Moldova's independence. On the contrary, Romanianism regard these differences as regional variations of a common Romanian history and pan-Romanian culture.¹⁴⁸ Thus, Romanianism has a clear Western orientation of its foreign policy, whilst Moldovanism, on the contrary, defends Moldovan statehood and it is more prone to the East.¹⁴⁹ In addition to this question concerning the Moldovan majority, the country has several other minorities over its territory. According to the 2014 Census, 75.1% of Moldova's population stated they were Moldovans, Romanians were 7.0%, Ukrainians 6.6%, Gagauz 4.6%, Russians 4.1%, Bulgarians 1.9%, Roma 0.3%, while the other ethnicities represented only 0.5% out of the total population of the country.¹⁵⁰ With the fall of the Soviet Union, Gagauzians formed the Autonomous Territorial Unit

¹⁴⁶ Löwenhardt, J., Hill, R. J., Light, M. (2001). *A Wider Europe: The View from Minsk and Chisinau*. International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 77(3), p. 613.

¹⁴⁷ *Moldova, a major European success for the Eastern Partnership?*, 2010, Foundation Robert Schuman, The Research and Studies Centre on Europe, Available at <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0186-moldova-a-major-european-success-for-the-eastern-partnership> [Accessed 27/04/2023].

¹⁴⁸ Baar, V. & Jakubek, D. (2017). *Divided National Identity in Moldova*, Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics. 11, p. 82.

¹⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 83.

¹⁵⁰ *Key results of the 2014 Population and Housing Census*, 2017, National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic

(ATU) in Southern Moldova. Unlike other ethnic minorities in Moldova, Gagauz people have no other country with their name.¹⁵¹ Thus, the 1994 ATU autonomy law established that the unit preserves its independence in case Moldova will unite with Romania. This quieted Gagauzians down for the moment, but ethnical and political tensions still continue to fuel fears over their autonomy.¹⁵²

As several other post-Soviet states emerging from the ashes of the Soviet Union, Moldova chose to strengthen its ties with Western Europe. However, this choice provoked serious tensions with a large minority of ethnic Russians located between the Dniester river and Ukraine, who wished to remain close to Russia or declare its independence. Transnistria is the nearest frozen conflict in the Eastern neighbourhood. As Popescu (2010) states, Transnistria is the most ‘solvable’ of all secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space as the likelihood of violence in the region is rather low, while most of the issues opposing the conflicting parties are of economic and political nature, not ethnic or military as elsewhere in the neighbourhood. This thin strip of land emerged in 1992 after a small-scale conflict between the Moldovan government and the authorities of the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR). The Soviet Fourteenth Guard Army’s intervention proved to be decisive in the resolution of the conflict that was frozen afterwards by the Yeltsin-Snegur agreement in 1992.¹⁵³ TMR now functions as an independent state with its own national government and currency.

3.2 The Republic of Moldova and its non-linear path to Europe

Moldova’s path to Europe has not been linear. So as to appreciate the progress in EU–Moldova cooperation and the difficulties both parties have encountered in establishing a firm dialogue over the years, Korosteleva (2012) divides the history of their relations into three distinct periods. The first period, defined by the author as “a troubled birth of an independent state,” goes from 1991 to 1994 and it is characterised by the country’s economic, social and political rehabilitation, given the critical

of Moldova, Available at https://statistica.gov.md/en/key-results-of-the-2014-population-and-housing-census-34_2854.html, [Accessed 27/04/2023].

¹⁵¹ Szeles, M. R., (2021) *Examining the foreign policy attitudes in Moldova*, Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7810516/> [Accessed 27/04/2023].

¹⁵² Ibidem.

¹⁵³ Parmentier, F., *The European Neighbourhood Policy and Moldova: A resilient oligarchic system wedged between EU and Russia*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the ENP*, Routledge p. 607.

situation and the impasse in which Moldova found itself as a newly independent state.¹⁵⁴ With steadily declining birth and fertility rates, Moldova was rapidly becoming unsustainable as a nation: massive emigration, often illegal, towards West and Russia, government corruption and a poorly managed economy, which remained in recession for much of the 1990s further exacerbated the already dire situation that the implosion of the Soviet Union had left behind it. The separatist war in Transnistria left Moldova with a frozen conflict on its territory and deprived it of major resources, since the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic controlled 90% of Moldova's energy, 28% of its industrial enterprises and a third of its total industrial production.¹⁵⁵ As Korosteleva (2012) notes, as a former Soviet republic, logic would suggest that Moldova would seek closer ties and a more strengthened cooperation with the CIS states, especially Russia. Instead, Moldova chose to progress on its path to European integration, characterized by the development of a democratic system and the formation of an institutional framework according to the criteria proposed by its Western neighbors. However, the dire need to guarantee its energy security, forced Moldova to turn East and maintain its relationship with Russia as a guarantor of stability. In the years to follow, this behaviour "consolidated into a lengthy vacillated struggle to be noticed by the EU, and to remain allies wherever possible, with Russia."¹⁵⁶

The dissolution of the USSR created a new international framework and external forces were forced to adapt. In addition to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the newly independent states, the European Community strove to their political and economic transformation, with the EC TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States) programme being the main instrument to boost the transition process in all former soviet republic, except for the Baltic states.¹⁵⁷

The second period defined by Korosteleva (2012), known as 'hesitant Europeanisation' and framed between 1994-2009, sees Moldova's relations with the EU formally enshrined in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which was signed on 28 November 1994 and entered into force on 1 July 1998 for a period of 10 years.¹⁵⁸ Overall, the EU's policy was one of modest engagement with the country and it did not address Moldova specifically. Rather, relations with Moldova were

¹⁵⁴ Korosteleva, E. (2012), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?* BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies. Routledge, p. 105.

¹⁵⁵ Löwenhardt, J., Hill, R. J., Light, M. (2001). *A Wider Europe: The View from Minsk and Chisinau*. International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 77(3), p. 614.

¹⁵⁶ Korosteleva, E. (2012), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?* BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies. Routledge, p. 106.

¹⁵⁷ Buscaneanu, S. (2006), *How far is the European Neighbourhood Policy a substantial offer for Moldova?* Leeds, p. 5.

¹⁵⁸ *Moldova-EU relations*, Government of the Republic of Moldova, Available at <https://mfa.gov.md/en/content/moldova-eu-relations>, [Accessed 26/04/2023].

developed as part of EU's relations with the Western Newly Independent States (NIS).¹⁵⁹ The partnership established between the Community and its member states on the one side, and the Republic of Moldova on the other, aimed at providing a basis for legislative, economic, social, financial, and cultural cooperation; promoting trade and investment between the parties so as to foster their sustainable economic development; finally, supporting the efforts of the Republic of Moldova to consolidate its democracy and to complete its transition into a market economy (PCA, p. 3). With the new document, three new bodies responsible for the implementation of the agreement ratified by the Union and the Republic of Moldova were institutionalised, as follows: the Cooperation Committee – comprising senior civil servants; the Cooperation Commission – formed by ministers and commissioners; and finally the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee - a joint body between national and European parliamentarians, which is the first joint institutional basis for cooperation between the EU and Moldova.¹⁶⁰ The PCA execution for Moldova has been a challenging but some clear accomplishments were achieved on the way, especially relating to the processes of Moldova's legislative adaptation to the EU *acquis* and facilitation of its access to the European market. However, there have also been some considerable inconsistencies and failures, for which Moldova blamed the absence of benchmarks in the PCA, its late enforcement and limited motivation for reform lacking a well-defined finality (Buscaneanu in Korosteleva, 2012).

In 1996 under Snegur's presidency for the first time Moldova officially announced its aspirations for membership. Sturza government was the first Moldovan Cabinet to appoint European integration as its main foreign policy priority. However, due to the frictions inside the Alliance for Democracy and Reforms (ADR), the coalition that appointed the Sturza government, forced the government to resign undermining substantially the diplomatic efforts of Moldova on its way to European integration.¹⁶¹ In 2001 Moldova became a member of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe (SPSEE), a regional cooperation project complementary to the European integration process. After a three years period of 'incoherent' foreign policy, further integration with Europe started to come back gradually to the top of its external relations agenda.¹⁶² Buscaneanu (2006) considers the establishment by President Vladimir Voronin of the National Commission for European Integration (NCEI) in November 2002 the starting point of this return to the pro-EU rhetoric, aimed at the elaboration of

¹⁵⁹ Bosse, G. (2010). *The EU's Relations with Moldova: Governance, Partnership or Ignorance?* Europe-Asia Studies, 62(8), p. 1296.

¹⁶⁰ Korosteleva, E. (2012), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?* BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies. Routledge, p. 106.

¹⁶¹ Buscaneanu, S. (2006), *How far is the European Neighbourhood Policy a substantial offer for Moldova?* Leeds, p. 5.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*.

the European Integration Strategy of the Republic of Moldova. Further actions strengthened the re-orientation in the field of external relations, *inter alia* renaming of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs into Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration (MFAEI); establishment of ministerial and departmental subdivisions in charge of EU integration.¹⁶³ An institutional framework which further strengthened cooperation between the Union and Moldova is provided by the establishment of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Moldova in Brussels (January 2005), which lacks political nuances but represents a proximity to the EU capital and institutions.

Facing the prospect of one of the biggest enlargements in its history, the EU established the European Neighbourhood Policy to deal with its new neighbours in the East and in the South. In March 2003, the Commission published the 'Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: a new framework for relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours' proposing that the EU should aim at establishing a ring of well-governed, democratic and prosperous states in the immediate neighbourhood – a 'ring of friends' - with whom the EU enjoys close, peaceful and co-operative relations (Commission, p. 4). The main tool for the implementation of the ENP is the Action Plan (AP), a document listing a number of objectives and targets for an enhanced multi-dimensional dialogue between the EU and its immediate neighbourhood. The Action Plans cover a number of key areas, ranging from political dialogue, to trade and measures to obtain a stake in the EU's internal market and most importantly, as noted by Buscaneanu (2006), they supplement and are designed on existing arrangements (e.g. Association Agreements or PCAs). The EU-Moldova action plan was signed in February 2005.

The Union became involved in the territorial dispute in the Transnistrian region for the first time in 2003, when Council members Kees van Rij, Carl Hartzell were granted observer status in the Moldova-Transnistria Constitutional Commission. Subsequently, official EU documents stipulated the need to establish joint border control between Ukraine and Moldova, which would also minimise and solve existing problems related to organized crime, illegal arms dealing, smuggling of narcotics and human beings.¹⁶⁴ Following the opening of the EU Delegation to Moldova and the starting of the talks to the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, in the same year, EUBAM (European Union Border Assistance Mission) was officially launched to assist the border between Moldova and Ukraine. In May 2006 Moldova became member of the South-East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECPP), which was seen by the Moldovan government as further step towards European

¹⁶³ Buscaneanu, S. (2006), *How far is the European Neighbourhood Policy a substantial offer for Moldova?* Leeds, p. 6.

¹⁶⁴ Löwenhardt, J., Hill, R. J., Light, M. (2001). *A Wider Europe: The View from Minsk and Chisinau*. International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 77(3), p. 615.

integration.¹⁶⁵

The year 2009 proved to be rather tumultuous for Moldovan politics. It is determined by a radical political and social transformation of the country, with elections in April of the same year and the onset of an acute political crisis, which saw Moldova lacking a president for more than two years. The situation was solved with the creation of the Alliance for European Integration (AEI) in 2010 and the subsequent election of a new president. However, the 2009 political crisis considerably disrupted the progress of the Action Plan which called for EU intervention to restore stability in the country. The Association Agreement negotiations with the country, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) were launched on in January 2010 and would be concluded after 15 plenary rounds of negotiations in June 2013.¹⁶⁶

Finally, the last period identified by the author is distinguished by the attempts of the governing authorities to re-establish stability and balance so as to solve Moldova's struggles and to adopt a clearer and more coherent foreign policy strategy.¹⁶⁷ With the new government, the EU-Moldova relations have been restored at a full pace. Korosteleva (2012) states that Moldova substituted Ukraine as the 'darling of international financial aid', with the highest per capita allocation in the Eastern region thanks to the €273.14 million for the period 2011–14. Whereas a total of \$2.6 billion was allocated during the communist government until 2009 to reduce budget deficit, the new AEI government and its implementation of the Economic Stabilisation and Recovery Plan succeeded at attracting additional funds: \$590 million from the IMF, \$100 million from the World Bank and the EBRD, as well as €102 million from its closest European neighbour, Romania. The effectiveness of this financial aid can be seen in the structural changes and progress made in the state's system of administration. The European Commission's 2009 Communication mentions Moldova's progress in this process of initiating reforms in the justice and energy sectors, but highlights limitations on fundamental principles such as human rights, freedom of expression, the fight against corruption and transport, which justifies Korosteleva's definition of this period as one of 'hesitant Europeanisation'.

However, it should be noted that the author's paper was published in 2012 and since then some progress has been made in this regard, especially under the auspices of the Eastern Partnership

¹⁶⁵ Korosteleva, E. (2012), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?* BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies. Routledge, p. 107.

¹⁶⁶ *Moldova-EU Association Agreement*, Government of the Republic of Moldova, Available at <https://mfa.gov.md/en/content/negotiating-new-agreement>, [Accessed 26/04/2023].

¹⁶⁷ Korosteleva, E. (2012), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?* BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies. Routledge.

initiative. The Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union was signed in 2014, which in essence summarises a series of commitments that the Republic of Moldova and the European Union and its Member States have undertaken so as to deepen and strengthen existing ties. In order to fulfill these commitments, the parties agreed in the AA to establish an institutional mechanism to monitor implementation, but also to take decisions on issues falling under the provisions of the Association Agreement. The National Plan for the implementation of the EU-Moldova AA is the main instrument for internal monitoring of the EU integration process. In the preamble of the Association Agreement, the EU acknowledged Moldova's European aspirations, including its commitment to building a deep and sustainable democracy and market economy.¹⁶⁸ In addition, following the inter-institutional consultations between the EU's main institutions under the ordinary procedures in the Treaty of Lisbon on 3 April 2014, the decision on the liberalisation of the visa regime for Moldovan citizens was signed and the decision entered into force on 28 April 2014. The visa free regime has been facilitating travel, business, and people to people contacts.¹⁶⁹ But, a critical moment in Moldova's European path has been marked by the acceptance of the application to EU membership. On 23 June 2022 EU leaders have recognised Moldova and Ukraine's European perspective and granted them EU candidate country status.

3.3 Moldova as the success story of the Eastern Partnership?

“It is no secret that our ambition is to one day bring Moldova into the EU. The Eastern Partnership is an opportunity for us to strengthen and deepen our European choice and we are ready to work hard to overcome the current framework.”¹⁷⁰

President Maia Sandu

¹⁶⁸ *The European Union and the Republic of Moldova*, Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/moldova/european-union-and-republic-moldova_en?s=223, [Accessed 26/04/2023].

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁰ *Address by President of the Republic of Moldova*, Maia Sandu, at the Eastern Partnership Summit, 2021, Preşedinţia Republicii Moldova, Available at https://presedinte.md/rom/discursuri/mesajul-presedintelui-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu-in-cadrul-celui-de-al-saselea-summit-al-parteneriatului-estic?fbclid=IwAR2WUC2n4IxSe4i5XmAjj8d_V2_KtevPsIC58eVcvj5T-hwdop-kBeWFf4w [Accessed 27/04/2023]

Moldova has often been described as the frontrunner of the Eastern Partnership initiative, turning from “an uncertain supporter” of the Eastern Partnership into a “staunchly committed and reliable partner.”¹⁷¹ The EaP was launched at the Prague Summit in 2009 with the aim of supplementing the European Neighbourhood Policy and creating a stable and prosperous ring of friends in the Eastern neighbourhood. To achieve this rather ambitious goal, the Republic of Moldova and the other five Eastern partners were offered the prospect of political association and economic integration, on the basis of respect for democracy, rule of law, shared ownership, differentiation and mutual accountability.¹⁷² When the EaP proposal was put on the table in 2008, Moldova and Ukraine were rather reluctant in embracing the initiative as it clearly lacked the so much longed membership perspective. In an interview to the Russian newspaper Kommersant, when asked about its expectations from the Eastern Partnership, Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin stated that the EaP reminded him of a new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) controlled by Brussels and forming a ring around Russia.¹⁷³ The case of Moldova clearly illustrates both the successes and failures of EU’s Eastern Partnership policy.

The Eastern Partnership was launched immediately after the events of the so-called 'Twitter revolution' of 7 April 2009 and the fall of the communist regime of the Republic of Moldova. For eight years (2001-2009) Vladimir Voronin was both the president of the ruling party, the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), as well as the president of the country. This rather symbolic event for Moldova turned out to be a new beginning and fostered a new multilateral opening of the state. In the aftermath of the April events, several opposition parties founded the Alliance for European Integration (AEI), under the leadership of Vlad Filat. Under his administration and in the EaP framework, the relations between the EU and Moldova have deepened and widened in scope, with new areas of cooperation, a stronger alignment in democracy promotion and new trade and investment initiatives. Moldova was often referred to as the ‘success story’ of the Eastern Partnership, and, in fact, according to the EaP Index 2015, ahead of the 2013 Vilnius Summit Moldova was indeed giving the best performance compared to the other partners in the region. Negotiations on the

¹⁷¹ “Stefan Füle European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood EU Moldova Forum, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, Berlin, Germany 22 October 2012, European Commission, Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_12_753 , [Accessed 27/04/2023].

¹⁷² Groza, I. (2019), *Moldova: renewed hope after a string of setback*, in *The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: Looking back, thinking ahead*, Chaillot Paper/153, p. 42.

¹⁷³ “Восточное партнерство” напоминает кольцо вокруг России” (The Eastern Partnership: a ring around Russia), Kommersant, February 2009, Available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1126593> , [Accessed 27/04/2023].

Association Agreement started in 2010, and the following three years proved to be essential. The Vilnius Summit in November 2013 represented a turning point in EU-Moldova relations. Some analysts, in fact, argue that Moldova benefited from the rapprochement with the EU, amidst the Ukrainian crisis, and that it helped accelerate the subsequent decisions on visa liberalisation by the EU authorities. The benefits of the abolition of the visa regime not only with EU member states, but also with those in the Schengen area, are nonetheless considerably positive, further advancing Moldova's relations with the Union and contributing to the fight against illegal migration. Thus, in 2014 not only did the country sign the Association Agreement with the EU but it was also the first state in the EaP to obtain visa-free travel to the European Union, becoming very ambitious regarding its relations with the EU and asking for a clearer European integration perspective.¹⁷⁴

While economically Moldova got closer and closer to the EU over the years, politically it has experienced significant democratic backsliding. Things started to change dramatically with the demise of Prime Minister Vlad Filat in April 2013, due to endemic elite corruption. Despite obtaining victory in the parliamentary elections of November 2014, the new Prime Minister Iurie Leanca could not maintain his position either and in 2015 political instability reached a peak, with five new heads of government in just a few months.¹⁷⁵ The fragile structure of the Alliance for European Integration (AEI) suffered from constant censure motions by the communist opposition, but also from disagreements and mutual accusations between some members of the coalition in power, most famously the conflict between Vlad Plahotniuc, a billionaire who de facto controls the Democratic Party of Moldova, and Vlad Filat, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova. It is noteworthy that between 2009 and 2014, Moldova fell from 89 to 103 in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index; the highest corruption levels were reached in late 2014, when around \$1 billion (nearly 15 per cent of Moldova's GDP) disappeared from three of the main Moldovan banks - Banca de Economii, Banca Sociala and Unibank. Filat and Plahotniuc have been both business and political competitors, until Vlad Filat's arrest in Parliament on 15 October 2015. The arrest, supposedly orchestrated by Plahotniuc, has led him to consolidate his power in the Moldovan political system through control of the state apparatus, control of part of the Moldovan press, and parts of the political elite as well as financial power (Calus in Parmentier, 2018). The banking fraud revealed a systemic and ubiquitous level of corruption among the Moldovan pro-European political elite, tarnishing

¹⁷⁴ Gotișan, I. (2019). *Eastern Partnership and Moldova: recent trends*. International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs, 28(1/2), p. 94.

¹⁷⁵ Parmentier, F., (2018) *The European Neighbourhood Policy and Moldova: A resilient oligarchic system wedged between EU and Russia*, in The Routledge Handbook of the ENP, Routledge p. 610-611.

Moldova's reputation in Brussels and its European ambitions.

After the 2015 Riga Eastern Partnership Summit, Moldova had already become a renegade “success story.”¹⁷⁶ Due to its diminished credibility as a result of the corruption scandals and banking fraud, Moldova moved into the camp of EaP underperformers hiding behind Ukraine and Georgia. Prior to the 2017 EaP Summit in Brussels, the country was to launch a strengthened bilateral dialogue with the EU in areas such as security and defense dialogue, while multilaterally, Moldova was seeking more opportunities for closer cooperation with both the other EaP partners and the EU to explore the potential of the DCFTA and to deepen cooperation in the field of energy and digital issues. However, EU-Moldova relations continued to deteriorate after the controversial cancellation by a court of the local election results in the capital Chisinau in June 2018. As a consequence, the European Union suspended all its financial assistance and budget support programs.¹⁷⁷ After months of failed attempts to establish a governing coalition, the pro-Russian Party of Socialists and the pro-EU ACUM (Now!) bloc managed to form a parliamentary majority in June 2019. It took, however, about a week for the new pro-reform technocratic government led by Maia Sandu, the leader of one of two parties forming the ACUM bloc - Party for Action and Solidarity - to take office. With the advent of the new pro-EU government and the subsequent victory of Maia Sandu of 2020 presidential election, the Association Agreement and Moldova's European integration process were then back on track as the cornerstones of Moldova's foreign and domestic policy.¹⁷⁸ In the aftermath of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Moldova appears more and more committed to its European path. The country was granted candidate status for the EU last June 2022. However, the country and its president seem fully aware that important domestic reforms are needed, and for Moldova to be accepted as a member by all the 27 EU countries might take years. “*We are aware that political decisions at the EU level have to be made. We are also aware that these are not easy decisions. But granting Moldova candidate status is the right decision. We belong in the European Union.*”¹⁷⁹

As far as the dividends of the Eastern Partnership policy are concerned, the Deep and Comprehensive

¹⁷⁶ Gotișan, I. (2019). *Eastern Partnership and Moldova: recent trends*. International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs, 28(1/2), p. 95.

¹⁷⁷ Groza, I. (2019), *Moldova: renewed hope after a string of setbacks*, in *The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: Looking back, thinking ahead*, Chaillot Paper/153, p. 45.

¹⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 45-46.

¹⁷⁹ “*Moldova belongs in the European Union*” says President Maia Sandu, (18 May 2022), European Parliament Press Release, Available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220517IPR29930/moldova-belongs-in-the-european-union-says-president-maia-sandu> [Accessed 29/04/2023].

Free Trade Area (DCFTA) set up a free-trade area between Moldova and the EU. It has proved to be rather successful as exports to the EU increased in value terms by 22% compared with the pre-DCFTA period.¹⁸⁰ The European Union is now Moldova's biggest trading partner (52.2% of the country's total trade), followed by Russia (10.5%) and China (8.3%), while around 63% of Moldovan exports are destined to the EU markets. In 2021, for example, the EU's exports to Moldova amounted to €3.8 billion, an increase of about 22% from 2020, with key exports being machinery and appliances, and mineral products. As far as Moldova's exports to the EU are concerned, there has been an increase by 13.4% in the 2020-2021 period, after a small decrease in the previous years. Some of the main EU imports from Moldova are electrical machinery and appliances, and vegetable products amongst others.¹⁸¹ The Moldovan agribusiness sector is the sector which has clearly benefited the most from the free trade area set up by the DCFTA. As Groza (2019) claims, the exports of agricultural products to the EU markets grew by 44%, offsetting the losses of exports to the CIS countries after Russia imposed an embargo on Moldovan wine, fruits and vegetables, and the armed conflict in Ukraine.

The visa-free travel regime with the EU is probably the most important result for Moldova in the Eastern Partnership. It is though that the foundations of the visa liberalisation regime and process for Moldova were laid along with the official launch of the EaP in May 2009. The plan for visa liberalisation offered to Moldova was divided in four main parts. The first section dealt with document security, including biometric passports; the second with illegal migration, particularly in terms of border and migration management; the third with public order and security; and finally, the last part related to external relations and fundamental rights.¹⁸² Thus, Moldova and the EU actively cooperate in the field of security and migration, including areas such as legal migration, development and fighting against illegal migration. Since 2017, for instance, Moldova has been part of 15 actions under the Migration Partnership Facility.¹⁸³

Finally, under the Erasmus+ programme Moldovan students are now able to study, train and gain experience in the European Union. Moldova was the first amongst the EaP countries to become a

¹⁸⁰ Groza, I. (2019), *Moldova: renewed hope after a string of setbacks*, in *The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: Looking back, thinking ahead*, Chaillot Paper/153, p. 46.

¹⁸¹ *EU trade relationships with: Moldova*, European Commission, Available at https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/moldova_en, [Accessed 29/04/2023].

¹⁸² Gotișan, I. (2019). *Eastern Partnership and Moldova: recent trends*. *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 28(1/2), p.106.

¹⁸³ *The European Union and the Republic of Moldova*, Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/moldova/european-union-and-republic-moldova_en?s=223 [Accessed 29/04/2023].

member of the EU Horizon 2020, the EU framework programme for research and innovation with a view to fostering integration in the European Research Area.¹⁸⁴

3.4. Between Russia and the West: a delicate balance

After the collapse of the communist regime in 1991, Moldova found itself in a completely new reality. The flawed democracy, dysfunctional institutions and severe economic crisis prevented Moldova from maintaining and sustaining its national interests in its external relations in the region.¹⁸⁵ Moldova was greatly struggling to survive unassisted by external powers at the beginning of the 2000s: 80% of Moldova's exports went to Russia; by 1997 Moldova had accrued an energy debt of 11% of its GDP; the frozen conflict in the breakaway region of Transnistria and the 1998 Russian economic crisis drove Moldova to the brink of national insolvency.¹⁸⁶

Moldova finds itself positioned in-between two opposing political, economic and cultural blocs: the European Union/West and Russia. The EU uses its normative and economic power with the purpose of creating a stable ring of friends in the immediate neighbourhood. Russia, however, uses its cultural, energy and military leverage to preserve its influence in the near abroad. Economically speaking, the EU is Moldova's biggest trade partner, accounting for 52% of its total trade¹⁸⁷, however, in terms of energy, the country is totally dependent on Russia. From a political point of view, Moldova is part of the Eastern Partnership initiative promoted by the EU, while in the East, it is part of the Community of Independent States (CIS) and observer in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Finally, it is from a cultural point of view that the country continues to be extremely divided. Russian media still dominate the public sphere, while from a religious perspective, the Orthodox Church is split between

¹⁸⁴ *The European Union and the Republic of Moldova*, Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/moldova/european-union-and-republic-moldova_en?s=223 [Accessed 29/04/2023].

¹⁸⁵ Nantoi, O., Platon, A. (2013), *Using a protracted conflict to promote geopolitical interests: Russian Federation's policy towards the Republic of Moldova*, in *Competition of Geopolitical Interests in Post-Soviet Space: Future Prospects for the Eastern Partnership Countries*, Gerasymchuk, S., Institute for Public Policy, p. 18.

¹⁸⁶ Korosteleva, E. (2012), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?* BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies. Routledge, p. 116.

¹⁸⁷ *EU trade relations with Moldova*, European Commission, Available at https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/moldova_en, [Accessed 28/04/2023]

the Moldovan Orthodox Church canonically subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church and the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, which is part of the Romanian Orthodox Church.¹⁸⁸ Since independence, Moldovan identity oscillates between Moldovanism and Romanianism. As stated above in this chapter, Romanianism emphasises the shared ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage between Moldovans and Romanians. On the contrary, Moldovanism is based on the Soviet Moldovanist identity doctrine, which stresses the fact that Moldovans are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically different and distinct from Romanians.¹⁸⁹

Due to strong economic, cultural and historical ties with Moldova, Russia played and continues to play a significant role in the Republic of Moldova. For Moscow, Moldova appears to be a minor issue on its periphery compared to Ukraine, Chechnya or the Caucasus, yet it is “in the same basket of troubles that would never have happened if the Soviet Union had stayed intact.”¹⁹⁰ Due to its Cold War mindset, Russia’s interest in hegemony over Moldova increased noticeably when Romania became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). To regain and consolidate its influence in the country in the 2000s, Russia relied on a mix of attraction and coercion, thus on soft and hard power instruments, such as economic embargoes, gas supply interruption and managed instability in the breakaway region of Transnistria. Russia’s strong economic performance had a magnetic effect on elites and populations in the region, with Russian passports attracting more and more people, who started to migrate to work and live there.¹⁹¹ In addition, nostalgia for the USSR is an important slogan to attract important segments of Moldovan society. Moldovan ethno-linguistic diversity is also widely used to hamper Moldova’s European perspectives.¹⁹²

Moscow’s behaviour towards Chisinau is strongly determined by the rather low level of competence and high corruption levels of Moldovan elites. The Moldovan political class, in fact, perceives Russia as an essential actor in the process of conflict resolution in Transnistria, and Russia’s political will is

¹⁸⁸ Morar, S. & Dembińska, M. (2021) *Between the West and Russia: Moldova’s international brokers in a two-level game*, Eurasian Geography and Economics, 62:3, p. 293-294.

¹⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 295.

¹⁹⁰ Smith, P. (2005). *Moldova’s Key International Relationships*. In *Moldova Matters: Why Progress is Still Possible on Ukraine’s Southwestern Flank*, Atlantic Council, pp. 7–12.

¹⁹¹ Saari, S., Secieru, S. (2019), *Shifting ground: how megatrends are shaping the eastern neighbourhood*, in *The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: Looking back, thinking ahead*, Chaillot Paper/153, p. 8.

¹⁹² Nantoi, O., Platon, A. (2013), *Using a protracted conflict to promote geopolitical interests: Russian Federation’s policy towards the Republic of Moldova*, in *Competition of Geopolitical Interests in Post-Soviet Space: Future Prospects for the Eastern Partnership Countries*, Gerasymchuk, S., Institute for Public Policy, p. 19.

still perceived as the main determinant for success.¹⁹³ Russia has traditionally seen Transnistria as a tool to maintain its military presence in Moldova. Indeed, as noted by Smith (2005), Transnistria provided the perfect excuse for Russia to consolidate its military and political presence in the region, with the result that solving this frozen conflict does not seem to be in the agenda of both Russian policymakers and Transnistrian elites in the foreseeable future.

¹⁹³ Korosteleva, E. (2012), *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: towards a more ambitious partnership?* BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies. Routledge, p. 116.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this chapter, Moldova's European path has not been linear, and the country has continuously oscillated between East and West in its multi-directional foreign policy. As noted by Groza (2019), one of the key internal elements having a negative impact on Moldova's performance on its European path is the close relationship between big business and government institutions which repeatedly undermined reforms, maintained high levels of corruption, and, till last year, prevented the country from gaining EU membership perspective in the framework of the Eastern Partnership initiative. As for the Eastern Partnership policy, the country has often been dubbed as the success story of the new European policy in the East. However, as noted in the chapter, the new EaP worked rather positively when this implied short-term financial, economic or political gains for the elites in power. As far as the EU's conditionality is concerned, the results were more effective when important reward was attached, such as financial assistance, visa-free travel or access to the EU market for Moldovan products via the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).¹⁹⁴

In its oscillating between East and West, the Russian Federation has remained a powerful pole of attraction.¹⁹⁵ Moldova's dependence on the country is at least fourfold. First, the resolution of the conflict in Transnistria cannot exclude Russia since its troops are stationed in the unrecognized breakaway region. Some 2,600 troops, remnants of the Soviet 14th Army, are stationed in Transnistria and are still in control of the Russian Federation.¹⁹⁶ Second, despite the country's attempts to diversify its energy supplies to prevent further destabilisation from abroad, Moldova remains heavily reliant on Russian gas flows. Third, the country is highly dependent on remittances from abroad. And finally, as showed in the most recent public opinion survey by the Institute for Public Policy (November 2022), although recent events in Ukraine have helped consolidating Moldovan society in favour of the West and the EU in particular, almost 30% of the respondents still continue to have a high level of trust in media coming from Russia (IPP November 2022). The close connection between public opinion and the trust in media is the focus of the next and last chapter of the present thesis. After tracing the evolution of Moldovan's perceptions about the country's drive towards Europe, the last part of the following chapter will focus particularly on the different pro-EU and pro-Russian rhetoric in two of the most influent media websites in the country.

¹⁹⁴ Groza, I. (2019), *Moldova: renewed hope after a string of setbacks*, in *The Eastern Partnership a Decade on: Looking back, thinking ahead*, Chaillot Paper/153, p. 46.

¹⁹⁵ *Moldova after 25 years of Independence and oscillating between East and West*, 2016, IPN News Agency Available at https://www.ipn.md/en/moldova-after-25-years-of-independence-and-oscillating-between-east-and-west-op--7978_1029277.html [Accessed 19/05/2023].

¹⁹⁶ Löwenhardt, J., Hill, R. J., Light, M. (2001). *A Wider Europe: The View from Minsk and Chisinau*. International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 77(3), p. 615.

IV. PERCEPTIONS AT HOME: BETWEEN MODERATION AND ADORATION

At this point in the thesis, it is appropriate to question: *what do Moldovan citizens think about the European Union, its policies and Moldova's choice in favour of further EU integration? How did public opinion's attitude evolve over the years and what role, if any, have mass media played in it?* The analysis of the views expressed will reveal whether the European Union itself, the Moldovan government, or the NGOs operating in the country – *inter alia* – have managed to involve the citizens of Moldova in the process of the further integration of their country into the Union. To check this hypothesis, the second paragraph exposes the approach used to carry out the analysis and the materials employed for the assessment. The following sections will reveal what people's views on the European Union and its policies of integration are and will try to identify what factors have contributed to them. In this respect, particular attention will be dedicated in the last sections of this chapter to examining the role of media in Moldova, which can be crucial in structuring public opinion on political issues of general interest. To conclude, the way in which media outlets depict the country's drive towards Europe will also give a more nuanced picture of how the European Union, its presence in the Republic of Moldova and its policies, particularly the Eastern Partnership initiative, are perceived in the country.

4.1 A neo-utilitarian approach in the study of public opinion

Based on figures corroborated by several surveys conducted in the Republic of Moldova (IPP, EU Neighbours East, IRI, CISR), the following analysis shows the evolution of the trend of opinion in favour of further EU integration, thus in favour of the Eastern Partnership initiative. But first, *what exactly is public opinion? How is it measured?* In spite of the vast amount of literature on the notion, the definition of public opinion remains rather controversial, and analysts are still divided on a precise definition on the concept. V. O. Key summed up the difficulty in measuring public opinion in an accurate manner, ‘to speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost’ (V. O. Key in Oxford Reference). According to the Oxford dictionary, public opinion is the aggregation of the views of individuals in society.¹⁹⁷

There are a wide range of procedures to learn about public opinion and measure it. Scholars divided the various methods of learning public opinion into informal and formal methods. The former does not involve any formal explicit research methodology and includes for example, elections, letters from constituents, and media coverage amongst others. Formal methods, on the other hand, involve formal research methodologies and definite research designs. Examples of formal methodologies are telephone surveys, focus groups, and content analysis. The most common method by far for learning about public opinion is the sample survey.¹⁹⁸

Traditional definitions of public opinion stress the key role that elites and those best informed in society have in influencing it. With the advent of scientific survey techniques in the XX century, there has been a proliferation in empirical analysis of public opinion. In the words of George Gallup, public opinion is the average opinion measured by summing up the opinions of every individual to form an aggregate opinion in society. Polling enabled a relatively accurate and continuous measurement of public opinion; thus, public opinion usually corresponds to that uncovered by mass surveys.¹⁹⁹

However, surveys pose several methodological and practical issues. They should, therefore, be used with caution as surveys on the same topic are often carried out by different agencies in different time periods and often involve different wording of similar questions. This renders the comparison rather

¹⁹⁷ *Public opinion*, Oxford Reference, Available at <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100353599;jsessionid=47D819FDABB39D839F2C24A6049B3E41> [Accessed 3/05/2023]

¹⁹⁸ Broker, R., Schaefer, T., (2015), *Public Opinion in the XXI century: Methods of Measuring Public Opinion*, Central Washington University.

¹⁹⁹ *Public opinion*, Oxford Reference, Available at <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100353599;jsessionid=47D819FDABB39D839F2C24A6049B3E41> [Accessed 3/05/2023]

problematic. The different formulation of the same issue can, in fact, make the comparison problematic because it then becomes difficult to establish to what extent the differences in the answers reflect an effective change in events and are not brought about, rather, by different wording of questions. Another important aspect to keep in mind is the different political salience of the questions proposed to the interviewees. Some people are more interested and involved in certain policy areas, or simply have stronger opinions than others on a certain issue. The opinion poll, however, treats each individual opinion as similar in weight.²⁰⁰

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned risks, however, it must be recognised that opinion polls, when designed appropriately, are the most appropriate tool for analysing the citizens' orientation on political issues affecting a community. This thesis will use the results of the surveys carried out in Moldova by national and international survey institutions, such as Institute for Public Policy (IPP), EU Neighbours East, International Republican Institute (IRI), Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR).

Public attitudes can shape and constrain the process of European integration through mass political behavior and more generally, they provide the political foundation for integration.²⁰¹ The endurance of the EU political system is closely related to public compliance with and acceptance of EU law, thus, it makes public support a key element of European integration. But *which factors explain variations of the citizens' support for European integration?* As the next section shows, the European Union is mainly perceived by the general public in rather abstract terms, as a supranational body that should provide Moldova and Moldovans with benefits (to work, travel, train), improve people's living standards, and help Moldova further develop its economy amongst other advantages. The analysis of Moldovan public opinion on the EU integration and the Eastern Partnership policy will thus be carried out using a neo-utilitarian approach in this thesis, which among the several approaches studying public opinion on issues concerning the EU, has obtained convincing empirical evidence and seems to be the most appropriate in this case. Based on this theory, citizens of countries interested in EU integration evaluate the European Union mainly through the filter of their interests and the alleged consequences (positive or negative) that further integration in the EU can have on their socioeconomic situation. In other words, it is the economic welfare that shape citizens' attitudes towards EU integration and their support is positively related to their welfare gains.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Everts, P., Isernia, P. (2001), *Public Opinion and the International Use of Force*, Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science, p. 7.

²⁰¹ Gabel, M. (1998). *Public Support for European Integration: An Empirical Test of Five Theories*. *The Journal of Politics*, 60(2), p. 333.

²⁰² Ivi, pp. 336-337.

It is, however, appropriate to bear in mind that individuals' perception of costs and benefits is a mere approximation of what can be best for a country as individuals are never perfectly informed about all the possible options in the field, thus there are large gaps in their knowledge about government and politics. Individuals' opinions and preferences about politics depend *inter alia* by their economic interests, their social status etc. They can also be shaped by underlying values that reflect norms established in a community. Individuals' identities play an important role in shaping their preferences as well since they tap into fundamental psychological attachments that go beyond interests and values. And finally, preferences can also be formed socially as the product of various agents and processes known as political socialisation. Numerous are the agents of socialization: family, education, involuntary and voluntary social groups amongst others.²⁰³ In other words, this lack of information can be structural to the public opinion of the candidate countries.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the lack of complete information about a specific issue does not prevent citizens' from forming critical judgements on a certain issue as they have an elaborate image of the EU, and they compare it with their individual or sectoral interests.²⁰⁵ Cognitive psychology studies provide an interesting explanation of this phenomenon. The inherent limits to the storage capacity of human memory cause individuals to use "cognitive shortcuts" to overcome this limit of the human brain. Information shortcuts are easily obtained and used forms of information that serve as a 'second-best' substitute for information which is tough to obtain. Shortcuts enable a facilitated learning process as they allow individuals to select the available information and insert it into pre-existing individual mental schemes that give it meaning. Shortcuts, therefore, allow citizens to orient themselves in the political sphere and to formulate opinions in line with their values. Shortcuts incorporate learning from past experiences, daily life, the media, and political campaigns.²⁰⁶

As far as the determination of political judgment is concerned, studies that use cognitive psychology to explain the utilitarian attitudes of individuals emphasise that it is the result of a mental process that combines emotions with rationality [Barisione in Mattina, 2004]. Thus, individuals would use "affective intelligence" by virtue of which emotions, inherent in any human behavior, dynamically

²⁰³ *Public Opinion: chapter study outline*, Available at <https://www.norton.com/college/polisci/american-government12/core/ch/10/outline.aspx> [Accessed 3/05/2023]

²⁰⁴ Mattina, L., (2004), *La sfida all'allargamento: L'Unione Europea e la democratizzazione dell'Europa centro-orientale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 258-259.

²⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁶ Popkin, S. (1991), *The reasoning voter: communication and persuasion in presidential campaigns*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 44.

alter how people incorporate habitual and contemporaneous considerations into political judgement²⁰⁷ and act as an incentive when making choices and/or formulating entirely rational judgments. In other words, contrary to what is thought, emotions and rationality can both be used by individuals in their interpretation of political phenomena. Or, based on their state of attention, individuals may rely more on one or the other. When critical vigilance is scarce, for example, there are more favorable conditions for an emotional treatment of information. On the contrary, when the threshold of intellectual attention is high, rational logic will lead to the formulation of a more critically grounded judgment.²⁰⁸

Now, *what are the main sources of information for citizens? How do they acquire political information?* People acquire political information while making individual economic choices and navigating daily life.²⁰⁹ However, news media – television, newspapers, radio, magazines, social media – have now become the most widespread sources of information. Nowadays press, radio, television and the Internet are the main platforms for mass communication with the purpose of informing, educating, influencing and shaping public opinion. The mass media deeply affects how citizens think about politics as daily life information and media information are tightly linked to one another - it is the media that tells people what their government is doing. As demonstrated by Popkin (1991), both political evaluation and votes depend upon the citizens' views of the government's national agenda, thus the problems they consider the most important. The salience of pregnant issues at the national level has traditionally been measured in the Gallup poll and other national polls by asking: "*In your opinion, what is the most important problem your country is facing?*" Such a question reflects two different aspects of issue salience: what is important and what is conspicuous.²¹⁰

Media has the power to influence and sometimes drive individual attitudes and behaviours. With the introduction of the Internet more and more people are now able to access the political informational flow. However, it raises a unique problem in that it allows people to control what they do and, most importantly what they do not see. People can customize their feed, effectively reducing the possibilities of seeing opposing views.²¹¹ The information seen online may or may not be distorted,

²⁰⁷ Marcus, G. E., MacKuen, M., Neuman, W. R. (2011). *Parsimony and Complexity: Developing and Testing Theories of Affective Intelligence*. *Political Psychology*, 32(2), p. 334.

²⁰⁸ Mattina, L., (2004), *La sfida all'allargamento: L'Unione Europea e la democratizzazione dell'Europa centro-orientale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, p. 260.

²⁰⁹ Popkin, S. (1991), *The reasoning voter: communication and persuasion in presidential campaigns*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 27.

²¹⁰ Ibidem.

²¹¹ Carey, S. (2018), *Perceived public opinion vs. actual public opinion and media's influence*, College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses, University of Louisville pp. 11-12.

including information on public opinion. Misinterpretation of public opinion may happen for many reasons and media plays a key role in this case by showing, for example, biased snap polls due to immense pressure to create more and more new content (Chadwick in Carey, 2018). Individuals' answers to survey questions are essentially random in their variation over time, it is likely that individuals adjust their answers based on new "considerations" that are mentally accessible at the moment. Thus, these considerations are often influenced by messages heard from the media and the politically elite.²¹²

According to mass communications theory, the way in which something is presented to the public influences the people's interpretation of that information. There are two main frameworks within this framing theory: natural and social. While natural frameworks are simply physical occurrences, social frameworks are built on natural frameworks but focus on the social causation of events such as the manipulation of other people. These influences how people interpret the information received and then use these frameworks to make decisions (Goffman in Carey, 2018). Moreover, framing theory goes on to say that how the coverage is presented shapes how individuals perceive that issue, for example when journalists create a frame for a certain issue and then present it in a particular manner, this frame influences how individuals perceive that issue. It is from there that we can determine whether the framing by the media has become biased.²¹³ Finally, the framing theory is often coupled with the agenda setting theory, according to which media drives the agenda by influencing the salience of the issues for people based on media coverage.²¹⁴

4.2 Moldova's drive towards Europe in the eyes of its public opinion

The promotion of democratic values and norms at the civil society level, which is the main beneficiary of the normative actions promoted by the European Union, is an additional essential component in Moldova's path towards European integration. Therefore, for a viable and participative society, the key guarantors of success are social reforms and an improved education system - pillars of a society actively involved in decision-making and which enjoys open and transparent government, parliament, and local institutions. Starting from the 'people to people' objective developed under the European

²¹² Carey, S. (2018), *Perceived public opinion vs. actual public opinion and media's influence*, College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses, University of Louisville pp. 11-12.

²¹³ Ibidem.

²¹⁴ Ibidem.

Neighbourhood Policy, and later under the Eastern Partnership, the extent to which international projects and educational programmes are more accessible and transparent is, essentially, a sign of the level of integration between European partners and an impact on both the exchange of ideas and experience. These appear to be essential factors in social progress for the Republic of Moldova.

In spite of the support for EU integration by several pro-EU governments, the European orientation does not seem to be rooted in the Republic of Moldova's past. Throughout its history, Moldova has been torn between Romania and the Russian empire, and the tension between the two actors has deeply influenced Moldovans' views of their place in the world.²¹⁵ Moldova's exit from the Soviet Union in August 1991 and its subsequent entry into the UN family the following year raised the difficult question of the country's future orientation.²¹⁶ The transition towards a market economy, the economic reforms, and radical social changes in Moldova after its independence had positive support from the community that hoped to see positive results in the short time. However, these initial hopes soon collided with reality, leaving space for desperation and deception. This phenomenon seemed to be rather common in the entire post-soviet space.²¹⁷ As described by Danii (1998), the dynamics of public opinion polls initiated by the Independent Service for Sociology and Information 'Opinia' since 1991 showed the existence of tension in the society due to the poor results of the reforms; the share of the population defining the current situation in Moldova as favourable did not exceed 10%, while the share of those considering it critical was between 80% and 90%. In spite of society's democratisation process, the polls continuously showed a strong detachment of the governing institutions from people's needs, problems or interests, with people's dissatisfaction for the level of democracy and the quality of public administration growing higher and higher.²¹⁸ As reported by Löwenhardt (2001), at the end of the 1990s the popular view of Europe was simple: 'Europe is rich, so we will be rich.' A similar attitude towards European integration was expressed by a deputy minister, blaming 'Brussels' for a 'lack of political will' in its policy towards Moldova, according to which "nine years of independence have shown us our impotence in dealing with our own affairs."²¹⁹ Approaching Europe was, thus, seen by both politicians and the general public as a way to solve all the problems Moldova had been facing since independence.

²¹⁵ Löwenhardt, J., Hill, R. J., Light, M. (2001). *A Wider Europe: The View from Minsk and Chisinau*. International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 77(3), p. 617-619.

²¹⁶ King, C. (1994). *Moldovan Identity and the Politics of Pan-Romanianism*. *Slavic Review*, 53(2), p. 345.

²¹⁷ Danii, T. (1998), *Public opinion: hopes and realities of the reforms*, in *Moldova in transition: economic survey*, Centre for Strategic Studies and Reforms (CISR), Chisinau, p. 103.

²¹⁸ Ivi, p. 104.

²¹⁹ Löwenhardt, J., Hill, R. J., Light, M. (2001). *A Wider Europe: The View from Minsk and Chisinau*. International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 77(3), p. 617-618.

The first Barometer of Public Opinion (BPO) of the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) in 2001 showed that 47% of the population supported Moldova's path of European integration while 35% preferred to remain only in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (IPP, 2001). The favourable sentiment towards European integration ranged between 60% and 70% from 2003 to 2011 with the peak reached during the rule of the communist party. In 2007, in fact, there was a record high of 76% support for the European path. It should be noted, however, that in the polls citizens were not asked to choose between joining the EU and joining a customs union, such as the Eurasian Customs Union. The citizens were only asked which country should be Moldova's strategic partner. Moldovans' preferences at this point showed a lack of knowledge of the European integration process, as between 50% - 60% of Moldovans chose Russia as the main strategic partner for their country.²²⁰

Similarly, another survey carried out by the experts of IDIS Viitorul in the period of February-March 2008 assess in what way the Action Plan meant something for the public opinion of the Republic of Moldova. Focusing on the collection of valid data by means of a representative poll organized at a national level, the report highlights that the cognition of the EU in that year was rather superficial at the public level. Although 93.6% of respondents asserted that they have heard about the EU, 77.7% knew what the EU is, but only 46.2% of them were familiar with the European Neighbourhood Policy, and only 36.6% knew about the existence of the Action Plan between their country and the EU. There was a massive support for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU (77%), despite the fact 56% of the respondents considered that the information they had about the EU was insufficient.²²¹

The Report investigates the European integration problem in the context of 'social agenda' existing at the level of citizens of the Republic of Moldova, and manifesting itself in term of perceptions, values and expectances of the respondents. According to the data of the poll, the most important problems the Republic of Moldova faced in 2008 carried a social-economic connotation. The author categorises these problems into three distinct categories depending on their importance: problems of incomes (over 15%); problems of corruption (12.5%); and problems related to the Transnistrian conflict (4.7%) and other social problems considered relevant by less than 4% of the population.

²²⁰ Cepoi, M. (2014), Informarea societății moldovenești privind procesul de integrare europeană: între acțiuni întârziate și manipulare, IDIS „Viitorul”, p. 5.

²²¹ *Report on the Assessment of the Public Opinion Regarding the Process of European Integration and Implementation of European Union – Republic of Moldova Action Plan*, (2008), IDIS Viitorul, p. 9.

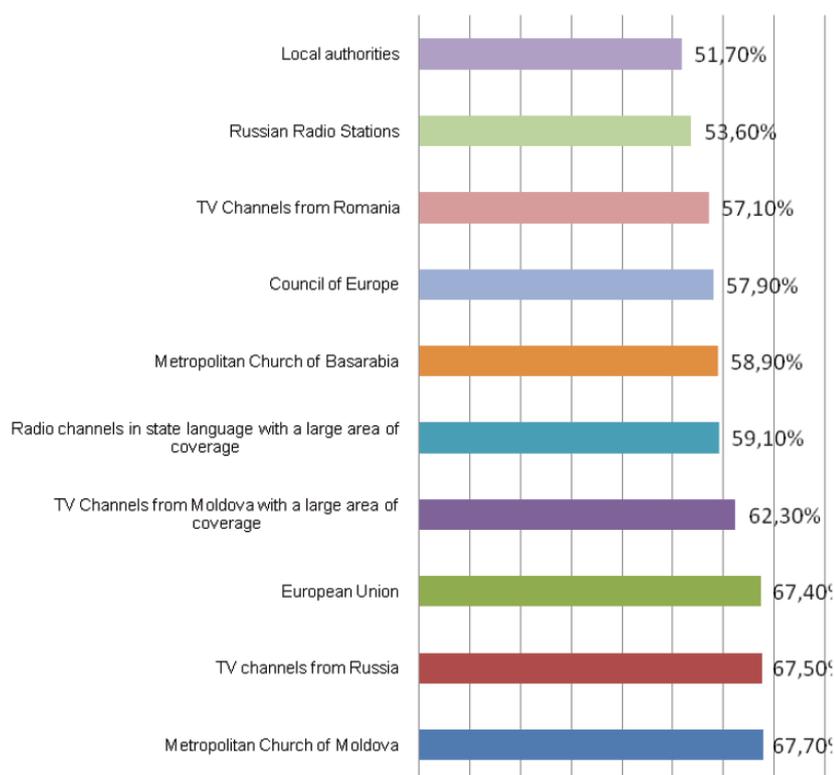


Fig. 2: Confidence in public and private institutions from the Republic of Moldova in 2008.

Source: Report on the Assessment of the Public Opinion Regarding the Process of European Integration and Implementation of European Union – Republic of Moldova Action Plan (2008).

As far as the confidence in the EU in the year 2008 is concerned, as shown in figure 1, the EU is the third at the top of citizens' trust (67.40%), preceded only by the Orthodox Church (67.70%) and TV channels from the Russian Federation (67.50%). Overall, EU institutions are more appreciated by citizens in Moldova than the country's national institutions (51.70%). As noted by the authors, it is worth mentioning that the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia, associated with an EU member state - Romania - has a rather high level of trust from the general population (58.9%).²²²

By means of direct questions, the report goes on to assess the cognition of the EU in Moldova. The general cognition of the EU is supported mainly by motivation and individual interests. When asked how much they are interested in Republic of Moldova's relations with the EU, 22.2% of the

²²² *Report on the Assessment of the Public Opinion Regarding the Process of European Integration and Implementation of European Union – Republic of Moldova Action Plan, (2008), IDIS Viitorul, p. 9.*

respondents answered they were ‘very interested’ (22.2%), while the majority answered ‘interested’ (46.6%). Although much attention is paid to the EU (67.2%), when asked about specific EU policies and its neighbourhood, such as the European Neighbourhood Policy, most respondents did not know about the existence of ENP (49.20%) while only 32% of respondents knew about the existence of the EU-RM Action Plan in comparison to 6%, who did not know anything about it, and 3% who gave unclear answers.

The citizens’ attitude towards the European Union and the accession to EU in 2008 was overall positive. Thus, in case of a referendum, 77% of the respondents would have voted for the accession of Moldova to the EU, in comparison with 34.9% who would have voted for NATO. Moreover, public opinion was rather self-critical regarding the image of their country in the EU. At the same time, 56% of the respondents considered that the EU had a good image in the Republic of Moldova, while 18% considered that its image is ‘very good’ in the country.²²³ Liberal values such as democracy, human rights, and respect for democracy are often associated with the European Union. As noted by Korosteleva (2012), in contrast to their Eastern neighbours, Moldovans did not consider themselves as culturally different to the rest of Europe and ascribed many liberal values (e.g., democracy, respect for diversity and human rights) often associated with the EU, to their country.

As for the information of citizens regarding the European integration process, the report highlights a low interest to find out more information on the topic. TV channels seemed appreciated with a higher score than central authorities regarding their contribution to integration (14.1%-10.8%), followed by print media (newspapers and magazines) 8.8%, radio stations 8%, political parties 7.1%, NGOs 5.5%, economic agents 3.2% and the church. Thus, respondents preferred traditional resources of information, such as TV and Radio, and preferred less to search on the Internet, use leaflets, brochures or conferences. These preferences, as noted in the report, were strongly interconnected with age and level of education. As a matter of fact, the level of education correlated with the confidence or support for the integration of their country into the wider Euro-Atlantic space. Thus, those who claimed that they would vote positively in a referendum for Moldova’s accession to the EU and NATO seemed to have a higher level of education. Among the group of states which can help the Republic of Moldova in its path towards European integration, there were Romania (with nearly 19.5%), followed very closely by Italy (12.7%) and France (11.7%). Surprisingly, Russia followed them with a percentage of 10.1%. As noted by the authors, the paradox of this choice made by the respondents was probably connected with the ambiguity and the special role and influence that Moscow had/has on the political

²²³ *Report on the Assessment of the Public Opinion Regarding the Process of European Integration and Implementation of European Union – Republic of Moldova Action Plan*, (2008), IDIS Viitorul, p. 32.

and economic processes in Republic of Moldova, which implicitly influence the improper roles which the public voice attributes it on different occasions. It can be said that these percentages represented the strong option “with Russia” which existed and still exists in the Republic of Moldova. Finally, the data emerging from this opinion poll points out that ethnic origin is strongly correlated with the choice of the media: minorities from the Republic of Moldova (Russians, Ukrainians, Gagauzians, Bulgarians amongst others) were massively directed to the Russian sources of information, especially to Russian TV channels. Therefore, their trust in Russian media is much higher than it is in any other means of information.²²⁴

Under the framework of the Eastern Partnership, the EU-Moldova visa liberalisation dialogue was launched on the 15 June 2010. A section of the 2011 Barometer of Public Opinion is dedicated to the impact of the visa-free regime in the EU. Respondents were, first of all, asked how often they travel to the EU, where and for what purposes. At the national level, the vast majority of Moldovans never travelled to the EU (83%) while only a few respondents answered that they travel there less than once a year (9%). As for the most popular EU destinations, Romania (54%), Italy (21%) and Bulgaria (17%) were the most targeted countries in the European Union for leisure and work. The main benefits deriving from the visa-free regime seemed to be, according to the respondents, reduced visa processing times, ‘no need for intermediaries for visa processing’, and finally, the possibility to travel more often to the EU (IPP, 2011).

The year 2011 saw the biggest drop in supporters for EU integration. The results of the November 2011 Public Opinion Barometer show that only 47% of the Moldovan population would choose European integration while only 23% saw the EU as Moldova’s main partner, a drop of almost 15% and 12% respectively in one year - 61% and 35% in 2010 (IPP, 2010, 2011). The main reason for this drop is to be attributed to the emergence of the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union (CU) in 2010 as an alternative geopolitical project to the European Union. Thus, the CU has started to be presented and promoted to the general population in Moldova through Russian media campaigns, which are very popular and trusted by Moldovans. However, as noted by Cepoi (2014), even before this substantial drop in 2011, Russia was depicted by the general population as Moldova’s main strategic partner and many voted in favour of the country’s further EU integration as no other viable project was proposed to them, especially one of rapprochement with Russia.

²²⁴ *Report on the Assessment of the Public Opinion Regarding the Process of European Integration and Implementation of European Union – Republic of Moldova Action Plan*, (2008), IDIS Viitorul, p. 32.

Over the course of the 2013 political crisis in Moldova, the EU lost considerable support from the general public and various social stakeholders, mainly due to the fact that Filat administration was closely connected to the European integration project and many people were disillusioned by the corruption of the Alliance for European Integration (AEI). The concept of ‘European integration’ has thus gradually lost its currency as most citizens have not seen any concrete results.²²⁵ The population’s trust in the government and the parliament dropped to an all-time low that year. In fact, the percentage of those who trusted the government was rather low (15% in April 2013), while even fewer people, a mere 13% of the population, said they trusted the justice and the court system in Moldova (IPP, 2013). Two years later, in 2015, the Director of the Institute for Public Policy Arcadie Barbăroșie commented on the perpetuation of the crisis as follows: “*This is a systemic crisis caused by the low quality of country governance, corruption, and scandals in the ruling coalition. Citizens have been strongly dissatisfied with the quality of governance, as is reflected by the poll.*”²²⁶ Hand in hand with the political crisis, the support for EU integration continued to stay at rather low levels. In November 2013, when asked to choose between the EU and the Customs Union, 44.7% of all Moldovans interviewed believed that the European path should still be a priority for their country, while 43% emphasised that their country should become a member of the Customs Union, thus taking a pro-Russian path instead. Moreover, within the framework of the Eastern Partnership policy, respondents were also asked about the Association Agreement with the EU and the visa liberalisation regime. Most of them seemed well informed about the AA that Moldova was about to sign with the European Union while 46.5% of them were positive about Moldova meeting the EU visa liberalisation criteria (IPP, 2013).

However, at this point some questions arise: *what did Moldovans know about the European Union and Moldova’s European integration? What are the values more often associated with the EU?* The EU was and is still perceived in abstract, general and even superficial terms by the majority of the population. As emerged from the 2013 BOP, when asked what the EU meant to them, the most common answers were freedom to work, travel and study in all EU countries, worsening of relations with Russia, economic prosperity, peace and loss of Moldova's independence amongst others. Therefore, the European Union was mainly perceived as a supranational body that should have

²²⁵ Rinnert, D. (2013), *The Republic of Moldova in the Eastern Partnership: From Poster Child to Problem Child?*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, p. 6.

²²⁶ *Absolute majority of Moldovans do not trust in three pro-European parties currently seeking to create a new ruling coalition* – Barometer, 8/12/2015, Available at <http://www.infotag.md/politics-en/214299/> , [Accessed 8/05/2023].

provided Moldova and Moldovans with benefits to work, travel and learn. European integration was often presented and perceived as an arduous process in which Moldova has been engaged for many years and which was no longer yielding results. On the other hand, the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) was presented through concrete and valid benefits in the short term. According to the same BPO, for almost 40% of the population, ECU meant cheaper gas, the possibility to work everywhere in the Union, especially in the Russian Federation under more favourable conditions, and economic prosperity (IPP, 2013).

The BPO published in November 2014 highlights an interesting fact. When asked to assess Moldova's relations with the Russian Federation after its annexation of the Crimea in February of the same year, only a small percentage of respondents answered positively (22%) while the majority assessed the relations negatively (58%). However, when asked to choose between joining the EU and the Eurasian Customs Union, interestingly enough, 43% of Moldovans opted for the latter while only 39% of them chose the EU. As fig. 2 shows, the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU was criticised by the majority (64%) as it was thought to cause big losses for entrepreneurs due to their exit from the Russian market, whilst the same percentage of respondents saw it as an easier access to the EU labour market and 54% of them, for example, agreed that the AA would lead to more imports from the EU, thus destroying the local market. Television (83%) and the Internet to a lower degree (23%) were the main sources of information for Moldova's agreement with the EU for most of the respondents. However, information campaigns on national TV and the Internet did not change Moldovans' negative opinions about the agreement signed between the two parts (IPP, 2014).

Evaluarea răspunsurilor la întrebarea: *Ce părere aveți Dvs. despre următoarele afirmații?*

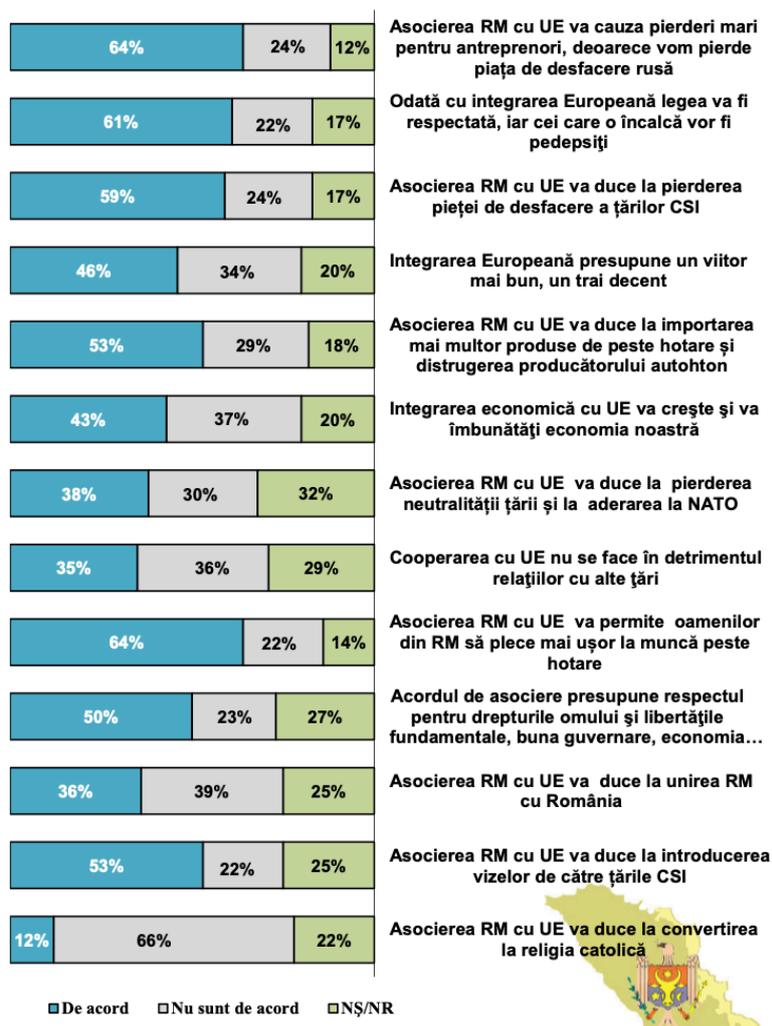


Fig. 3: “What is your opinion about the following statements?”

Source: IPP, 2014.

Despite the positive image that the EU continued to have in Moldova and the high level of trust that people had in the European institutions over the years, people continued to prefer the Eurasian Customs Union (40%) compared to the EU (39%) when asked to choose between the two institutions. What is more, the majority appeared to be against a possible Moldova-Romania unification (58%) while only 23% of respondents voted in favour, a negative trend that continued over the years despite President Sandu’s pro-EU government. As for the official language of the country, Moldovan was chosen by 63% of the population against 34% who voted for Romanian (IPP, 2017).

In February 2020, the EU Neighbours East project carried out its annual survey among the six Eastern partners to investigate the attitudes and the level of information that citizens of the EaP countries have on the European Union and, in particular, on EU development and cooperation projects in the region. As emerges from the report, nearly 70% of Moldovans said that they have seen/heard information about the EU in the three months preceding the survey and most of the information received was from TV channels. Although television is confirmed as the most important source of passive exposure, online media, such as the Internet (57%) and especially social media (27%) play an important role. The so-called ‘active searchers’ showed a considerable interest in the European Union and especially in the lifestyle of the EU, general information about the EU and EU relations with Moldova amongst others. One in three citizens who searched for information about the EU were also interested in the opportunities offered by the EU, economic news from the Union and its programmes in the cultural and educational field.²²⁷

The awareness of the EU’s financial support was widespread among Moldovans and a rather high percentage of them (82%) knew that the European Union was financially supporting their country. Education appeared to be the strongest characterising factor in this regard, with 92% of educated individuals acknowledging the EU’s financial support versus 77% of those with a lower level of education. Citizens from the most important cities and the Russian-speaking population tended more frequently not to express a definite opinion (18% and 17% respectively). Nearly 60% of citizens aware of the EU’s financial support considered it effective while those who have Russian as their mother-tongue were the most critical (58% of them consider the EU’s support as ‘ineffective’ versus 34% of native Romanian speakers). A similar divide was observed between the Chisinau residents (52%) and inhabitants of smaller settlements (32%).²²⁸

Among Moldovans aware of the EU’s financial support, the knowledge of EU-funded programmes stands at 45% with highly educated citizens as the most informed of all socio-demographic groups (69% vs 42% of those with a lower level of education). ‘Infrastructure development projects’ continue to be the most well-known (58%). ‘Education programmes’ were mentioned by 43% of citizens, a possible attestation of the country’s participation in Horizon 2020, Erasmus+ and the Mobility Partnership Programme. Around one in four individuals aware of EU-funded programmes also cited projects in the area of health and medicine (24%), and around one in five also knew about programmes in the field of agricultural and rural development (20%), justice/police reforms (20%), culture (18%)

²²⁷ *Annual Survey Report: Republic of Moldova, 2020*, EU Neighbours East, p. 23.

²²⁸ *Ibidem*.

and economic reform/business promotion (17%).²²⁹ Finally, the quality of EU-related information was rated *very* or *fairly* positively by over 85% of Moldovans who looked for it.²³⁰

With the advent of the new pro-EU government and the victory of the most-pro EU president Maia Sandu in 2020 presidential election, Moldova's European integration process was back on track on the top of Moldova's foreign and domestic policy agenda. As the same report found, Moldovans with a positive view of the EU accounted for the majority of the population (61%). Nearly all are native Romanian speakers (88%), whereas neutral Moldovans, who account for 29% of the population, are more concentrated among Russian native speakers (18%) and other languages (20%), such as Ukrainian, Gagauz language and Bulgarian. People with a neutral stance were also more likely to live in the north of the country (36% versus 21% for EU supporters), to be males (51% versus 46%), and to be older (32% versus 23%).²³¹

When asked to rate Moldova's relations with several external actors, the country's relations with the European Union and Romania received the most positive answers, 79% and 85% respectively, while only 43% of respondents rated Moldova's relations with Russia in positive terms. Almost half of the national respondents (47%) rated them rather negatively. Similarly, the first two most important economic and political partners were, according to national respondents, the European Union (72% and 67%) and Romania (57% and 55%), followed by Russia (55% and 46%), the United States (29% and 30%) and China (27% and 19%) (IRI, 2021). When asked to choose between joining the EU and the Eurasian Customs Union, more than half of the respondents opted for the EU (56.8%) while only 27.9% chose the latter. As for the reunification with Romania, most of the respondents voted against it (46%), while a slightly lower percentage of respondents (41%) voted in favour (IPP, 2021).

In the aftermath of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Moldova appears even more committed to its European path. More than half of the respondents continued to answer positively about Moldova's relations not only with the EU (72%) and Romania (75%), but also with Ukraine (69%) and the United States (64%). The number of respondents who see Moldova's relations with Russia negatively continues to grow (69%) while only 20% of them rate them positively. Moreover, when asked to assess the activity of the country's leadership regarding the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union, more than 60% of them were rather content with how the government was leading the country towards the EU (IPP, 2022). According to the same BPO, as fig. 4 shows, when

²²⁹Ivi, pp. 12-14.

²³⁰ *Annual Survey Report: Republic of Moldova, 2020*, EU Neighbours East, p.23

²³¹ *Ibidem*.

asked how much they knew about EU’s support in various sectors, most of the respondents knew that the EU was supporting the country in tackling COVID-19, and in facing Russia’s weaponisation of gas, while almost half of the respondents did not know about the EU’s support in enhancing the country’s security and defense system (IPP, 2022).

Cât de bine cunoașteți despre asistența ajutorul acordat RM de către Uniunea Europeană pentru următoarele domenii?

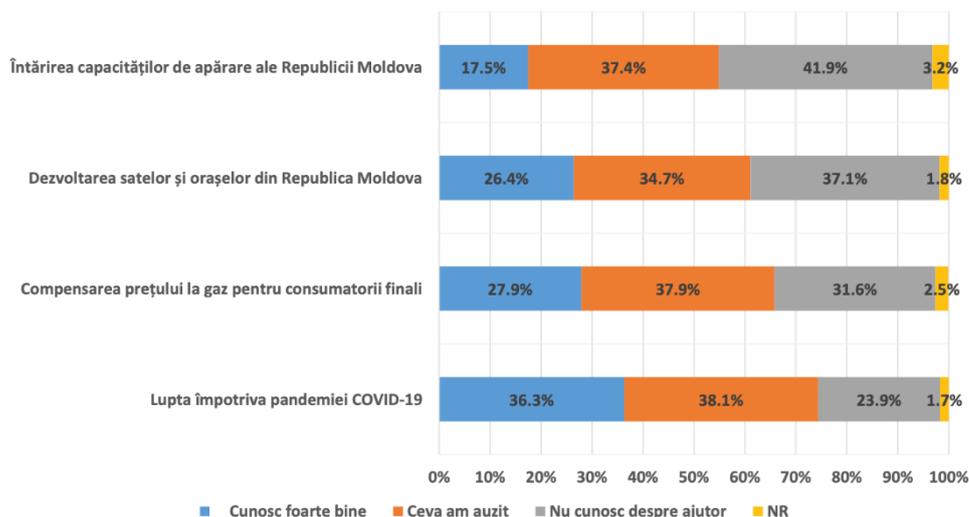


Fig.4: “How informed are you about EU’s support to Moldova in the following fields?”
Source: IPP 2022.

4.3 Moldova’s struggle to shake off political influence in the media

After tracing the evolution of Moldovans’ perceptions of the Republic’s European integration process in the Eastern Partnership context and stating the important role that the media plays in shaping and informing public opinion, the last part of this thesis will be dedicated to the country’s media landscape and the way in which Moldova’s drive towards deeper EU integration is depicted in national media. As emerged from several BPOs and the EU Neighbours East 2020 Report cited in the previous section, media outlets, such as television, online news websites and radio, are Moldovans’ favourite

source of information on national and international political matters. Moldova's media landscape appears to be extremely polarised, as is the country itself, due to political and social instability as well as excessive influence by oligarchs in political, social and public spheres. Media remain trapped by the competing interests of political parties and affiliated business groups, which represents one of the greatest obstacles to its independence in the country. In 2017, for example, more than 80% of national TV stations were owned by people affiliated with political parties, of which 70% were owned only by former Chairperson of the Democratic Party (PDM) and business magnate Vladimir Plahotniuc, who held a quasi-monopoly on the TV advertising market.²³² Despite leaving the country after he lost power in 2019, Plahotniuc still owns several television stations or controls them through intermediaries. To date, the vast majority of the sectors in the media industry are still dominated and controlled by the entourage of political parties and oligarchs.²³³ Important media, such as Prime TV, NTV Moldova and TV6, are owned by relevant political figures. The Socialist Party has been benefiting from the support of four television stations, and Ilan Şor, a pro-Kremlin oligarch who is in self-imposed exile in Israel, owns two.²³⁴

Since independence, media in Moldova has been under the total control of the state. It was only in 2009 that a partial improvement in the media landscape was registered with the newly elected governing coalition. In the following year, Moldova obtained a higher position in the annual Press Freedom Index published by Freedom House compared to the previous years, gaining a status upgrade to *Partly Free*. This result reflected, as a matter of fact, the new government's commitment to increasing protection for journalists and to reform the regulatory framework. However, despite these promised reforms only a few of the commitments were put in place, with many provisions regarding media liberalisation and freedom of expression as yet to be implemented. When signing the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU in 2014, Moldova committed to building a more independent and pluralistic media landscape. However, as noted by Belikova (2017) in her article "*Moldova's Media Struggle to Shake Off Political Influence*", the media section of the National Action Plan for implementation of the agreement is considered rather outdated and it mainly applies to the broadcast sector. Thus, problems faced by online and print media, including disinformation

²³² *Moldova's Media Struggle to Shake Off Political Influence: The fate of press freedom in the country is closely tied to the success of its democracy*, 2017, Freedom House, Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/article/moldovas-media-struggle-shake-political-influence> [Accessed 1/05/2023]

²³³ *Freedom in the world 2023: Moldova*, 2023, Freedom House, Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2023>, [Accessed 11/05/2023].

²³⁴ *The Media Market in Moldova: Realities and Trends*, 2022, Independent Journalism Centre, Available at <https://cji.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/IJC-study-The-Media-Market-in-Moldova-Realities-and-Trends-1.pdf>, [Accessed 11/05/2023].

campaigns, are simply left unaddressed.²³⁵ Since 2013, Moldova's position in the World Press Freedom Index has barely budged from the bottom of the *Partly Free* category.²³⁶ The country ranked 91st in 2019, having dropped 15 places since 2016, while according to the latest World Press Freedom Index, Moldova has a global freedom score of 62 out of 100.²³⁷

Television was and remains the primary source of information for a high proportion of the Moldovan population. Reuters Foundation in its report on media consumption and audience perception in the Republic of Moldova states that, when asked about their favourite news sources by type of channel, almost three in five respondents (57%) chose TV media outlet, which was more than twice as popular as the internet (23%). What is more, women were more likely to choose TV media outlet than men (63% vs. 52%), with men relying more on the internet (28% vs. 17%). Much bigger differences can be found by age, with younger adults significantly more likely to choose online platforms. Television remains the most popular news media for people over 55 years, while social media is dominant for young adults aged between 18 and 35 years old. The internet is also more favoured among people with higher levels of education. When asked to justify their choice, most of the respondents said that they selected a certain news source because the content aligned with their personal interests (51%) while just 10% of respondents answered that the reporting aligned with their personal values and/or political views; for a similar proportion other news sources of information were not trustworthy (9%). Interestingly enough, as stated in the report, being perceived as 'independent' did not seem to influence media consumption habits. Just being independent appears likely to have little attraction. The independent media, as highlighted in the report, need to be part of the most common platforms people tend to use, mostly TV and social media, but they also need to provide content that is interesting to potential consumers.²³⁸

As far as online media is concerned, it started developing in Moldova at the beginning of the 2000s

²³⁵ *Moldova's Media Struggle to Shake Off Political Influence: The fate of press freedom in the country is closely tied to the success of its democracy*, 2017, Freedom House, Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/article/moldovas-media-struggle-shake-political-influence> [Accessed 1/05/2023].

²³⁶ *Moldova: Media Consumption and Audience Perception Research*, Thomson Reuters Foundation, Available at https://epim.trust.org/application/velocity/newgen/assets/TRFMoldovaReport_ENG.pdf , [Accessed 11/05/2023].

²³⁷ *Freedom in the world 2023: Moldova*, 2023, Freedom House, Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2023> , [Accessed 11/05/2023].

²³⁸ *Moldova: Media Consumption and Audience Perception Research*, Thomson Reuters Foundation, Available at https://epim.trust.org/application/velocity/newgen/assets/TRFMoldovaReport_ENG.pdf , [Accessed 11/05/2023].

when the first publications in online format appeared. However, the limited access to the Internet, the lack of funds and equipment, *inter alia*, hindered the development of this type of media for years.²³⁹ During communist rule, when traditional media was under government control, digital platforms represented an excellent forum of freedom of expression. This unexpected development was due to its crucial and active role in the events of April and those that followed afterwards; disputed election results resulted in mass protests in 2009, which originated on social media – the so-called *Twitter revolution* – and later on, the mobilisation gathered more than 20.000 people on the streets of the capital, Chisinau.²⁴⁰ The interest in online publications increased when they became the only timely sources of information for citizens in Moldova and of reference for international media. The news portal *Unimedia*, the website of the TV station *ProTV Chisinau*, and the online version of *Ziarul de Garda* were among the most accessed news websites in that year. The increased interest of the public for online content was used as a catalyst for TV, radio stations, and newspapers to develop their online pages.²⁴¹ The development of these online platforms and the internet has thus given the public greater access to a variety of information sources and created greater interactivity between users and producers of media content. Therefore, the digitalisation process brought about more diversity in the media and a greater degree of transparency for public institutions.²⁴²

However, low levels of media literacy often made many in Moldova susceptible to disinformation campaigns.²⁴³ In the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by neighbouring Russia, the Moldovan parliament imposed a state of emergency along with stringent measures to tighten control over disinformation and hate speech with the main purpose of undermining media outlets that carry disinformation produced abroad, especially in the Russian Federation. However, even these extreme measures were not enough to counter the effects of foreign and national propaganda and the persistence of the division of the country's media into pro-EU and pro-Russia outlets.²⁴⁴ Not only the media, but also the entire public including politicians and businessmen are split into along these two opposing ideologies. Recently, the influence of Russian authorities and media in Moldova has increased noticeably, with many Russian oligarchs owning media outlets operating in the Republic

²³⁹ *Harta Mediilor digitale: Republica Moldova*, 2012, Open Society Foundation.

²⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁴¹ *Media Landscapes of Eastern Partnership Countries*, 2011, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Available at https://ypc.am/upload/Media%20Landscapes%20of%20EaP%20Countries_eng.pdf [Accessed 2/05/2023].

²⁴² *Harta Mediilor digitale: Republica Moldova*, 2012, Open Society Foundation.

²⁴³ *Analysis: Strengthening Moldova's independent press in the shadow of polarization and propaganda*, International Press Institute (IPI), August 2022, Available at <https://ipi.media/analysis-strengthening-moldovas-independent-press-in-the-shadow-of-polarization-and-propaganda/> [Accessed 2/05/2023].

²⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

of Moldova. Russia's influence remains strong in the Republic, also because local institutions do not seem to be strong enough to combat Russian propaganda in the country. The Kremlin's use of information warfare is targeted, comprehensive and intelligible.²⁴⁵ Its influence translates in a variety of forms and actors, *inter alia*, the political use of the concept of 'compatriots' mainly targeting national minorities and ethnic Russians, instrumentalisation of separatism and the frozen conflict in the breakaway region of Transnistria and most importantly, identity politics invoking the Russian world narrative and Soviet nostalgia.²⁴⁶ As far as Soviet nostalgia is concerned, positive attitudes towards the Soviet era went from 48.6% of respondents in a 2009 survey to around 56% in 2016. More than half of the respondents (56%) regretted the fall of the Soviet Union, 47.5% of Moldovans would have liked to have the USSR back and almost half of them (48.5%) would have voted in favour of their country joining the Soviet Union (IPP, 2009, 2016). All of this further undermines Moldovans' low level of trust in national institutions and contributes to the state's persistent legitimacy crisis.²⁴⁷

The analysis of the several opinion poll results reveals a strong correlation between what Moldovans choose to watch/read (especially the preferences for Russian media production) and both their ethnicity and geopolitical preferences. As stated in the previous section, ethnic origin is strongly connected to the media space: minorities from the Republic of Moldova are massively directed to the means of Russian information, especially to television. Their trust in Russian media is much higher than in any other means of information.²⁴⁸ In the context of EU integration, for example, Moldovans with a positive view of the EU in 2020 accounted for the majority of the population (61%). Their most characteristic feature is that nearly all are native Romanian speakers (88%) geographically located in the Centre and the South of the country. They also tend to be younger (46%) and more educated (12%) than people who assumed a more neutral stance. On the contrary, neutral Moldovans, who account for 29% of the population, are more concentrated among Russian native speakers (18%) and other languages (20%) and are slightly more prevalent in the north of the country, home to a large number of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. Media in Russian is their preferred source of information (73%), followed by media in the national language (57%). Moreover, neutral Moldovans rely more

²⁴⁵ *Civil society under Russia's threat: Building resilience in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova*, 2018, Chatham House, Available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/11/civil-society-under-russias-threat-building-resilience-ukraine-belarus-and-moldova-0/4> [Accessed 10/05/2023].

²⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁸ *Report on the Assessment of the Public Opinion Regarding the Process of European Integration and Implementation of European Union – Republic of Moldova Action Plan*, (2008), IDIS Viitorul, pp. 33-34.

on traditional news media and less on new media such as the internet.²⁴⁹

As stated above, television has long been the main source of information for the vast majority of the Moldovan population. Some of the first BOPs show that more than 70% of survey participants used to watch TV daily and only 13.8% of them read newspapers. Russian TV channels were the most trusted source of information (66.3%), followed by Moldovan channels (55.9%) (IPP, 2003). In 2008 the situation remained unaltered. Television was still the first choice in terms of the most important source of information (78.6%). However, for the first time the options include the Internet, chosen in this case by only 2.3% of the surveyed population. In 2013, however, the Internet jumped from being bottom in the rankings to being the second most preferred source of information (16.9% first choice; 16.5% second choice), while TV remained dominant (69.5% first choice; 18.7% second choice) (IPP, 2013). After almost a decade, TV media outlets are still cited as the most preferred source, however, if frequent usage is considered, Internet surpasses TV (38% of individuals ‘always’ rely on Internet devices versus 35% for TV). As for the penetration of national media in Romanian and Russian, nearly all citizens use both (88% and 85% respectively), although their circulation is different – 42% of Moldovans ‘always’ access media in Romanian versus 24% who do so in Russian. Foreign media in Russian is also widely used (only 34% of citizens ‘never’ rely on them), whereas the usage of both national and foreign media in other languages is less common (around 40% of the population use them) and more sporadic (around 5% ‘frequently’).²⁵⁰

As emerges from the data cited in this section, Moldovans are increasingly turning to digital devices, which are on the way to becoming the main source of information in the country. The most recent Barometer of Public Opinion in the country posing this question, published in June 2021, reveals that, when asked about their favourite news websites, the majority of respondents gave preference mostly to pro-Western media outlets, except for one pro-Kremlin news site. *jurnal.md* (19%), *știri.md* (17%), *protv.md* (15%), *zdg.md* (10%), *point.md* (7%), *tv8.md* (6%), *unimedia.md* (4%), *sputnik.md* (4%), *timpul.md* (3%), and *moldova.org* (3%) are the ten news pages most voted for by the general population in Moldova in that year (IPP, 2021). Based on this data, the final section of the present chapter will focus specifically on two of these news media, namely *Jurnal.md* and *Sputnik Moldova*, to compare the opposing views that they present about the European Union and its values, Moldova’s European integration process and the Eastern Partnership initiative.

²⁴⁹ *Annual Survey Report: Republic of Moldova, 2020*, EU Neighbours East, pp. 6-7.

²⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 19.

Privately funded			State funded		
Pro-Kremlin	Mixed	Pro-Western	Pro-Kremlin	Mixed	Pro-Western
Accent TV TV-7 TNT Bravo TVC-21 EURO TV N4 ALT TV/Orhei TV Prime TV* NTV Moldova* RTR Moldova* Rossia-1*	Realitatea TV MAKLER LOGOS-PRESS Kommersant	Publika-TV Canal 2 Canal 3 Jurnal-TV Pro TV Acasa TV Moldova Publika-FM Vocea Basarabiei Kiss FM Radio Noroc Pro FM Radio Nova Jurnal National Ziarul de Garda TIMPUL iPN Unimedia agora.md newsmaker.md	REN-TV Regional IPNA Teleradio Gaugauzia RIA-Novosti ITAR-TASS Regnum lenta.ru	CTC (Ukraine) TVR1 TVR2	Regional TV IPNA Teleradio Moldova RFE/RL Radio Deutsche Welle BBC RFI Radio Chisinau
Panorama Moldavskie Vedomosti AiF Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove*					
Prime FM INFOTAG Life News Sputnik*					

—
* — reproduces mostly state funded content
News Agencies and other news-making media
TV companies
Radio stations broadcasted in Moldova
Private printed media

Fig. 5: Some of the most influential media outlets in Moldova and bias.

Source: *The Moldovan Information Strategic Environment, Hostile Narratives and their Ramification.*

4.4 Moldova's turn to Europe in online media: Sputnik Moldova vs Jurnal.md

At this point of the thesis, it is appropriate to ask: *how is the European Union represented in the Moldovan media? What about the country's European integration process and its being part of the Eastern Partnership initiative? Has the rhetoric changed after Moldova was granted candidate status in June 2022?* This section will mainly revolve around these issues by analysing two of the most preferred news websites in the Moldovan media environment. Branch of the Russian state-owned agency Sputnik, Sputnik.md in the 2021 Barometer of Public Opinion was chosen by 4% of the population in the Republic of Moldova and it is the first among all pro-Russia news website in the list, strengthening the Kremlin's footprint in the country. On the other end of the spectrum, there is

Jurnal.md, the online website of the pro-EU television channel Jurnal TV and, according to the same BPO, the first not only among the ten most preferred news websites but also among the other pro-Western websites chosen by the Moldovan public in that year (IPP, 2021).

Echoing messages from the Kremlin, Sputnik Moldova often depicts Moldova as a victim of Western expansionism. One of Sputnik's Directors and formerly a leader of the Popular Christian Democrat Party (PPCD), Iurie Roșca, defined liberal ideas as 'a virus'.²⁵¹ In the words of the author, the liberal paradigm, and more precisely, the European integration, has become a state ideology that served as a national idea for both the alliance that has "usurped power in the country" since 2009, as well as for political and civic groups actively contesting power. Orthodoxy, once persecuted and excluded from the public sphere during the communist regime, occupies a prominent political role in both Moldovan and Russian societies. The Orthodox Church and its values are often used as a means of protecting society from a weak and decadent West. According to the author, secularism or anti-clericalism is the main element of this new ideology, this new religion. He continues defining this religious blindness as "the most worrying collective disease of our country, which, unfortunately, is not an exception, but is one in a long list of countries that have fallen from the communist to the liberal model."²⁵²

Roșca also touches on the mainstream media, stating that it is oversaturated with pro-EU rhetoric, fed daily by experts and analysts trained and financed by Western (European and American) foundations, who support the development of democracy in countries like Moldova and who present themselves as the ultimate upholders of the truth.²⁵³ In a state of collective euphoria, politicians, journalists, university professors, teachers, librarians as well as lawyers were, according to the author, unwittingly repeating the magic formulas of the new ideology, such as European values, European principles, European norms, European path, European destiny etc. Thus, the entire field of the human sciences is subordinate to the same ideology and invaded by the myths of liberalism, such as globalism, open society, equal opportunities amongst others.²⁵⁴

"The theory of non-military wars, applied with maximum efficiency in countries such as the Republic of Moldova, aims, through the entire propaganda machine, mass culture and

²⁵¹ *Integrarea Europeana ca ideologie de stat și maladie colectivă (European integration as a state ideology and social malady)*, 2015, Sputnik Moldova, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.com/20151007/2227757.html> [Accessed 13/05/2023].

²⁵² Ibidem.

²⁵³ Ibidem.

²⁵⁴ *De la comisarii bolșevici la cei europeni (From Bolscevic to European commissioners)*, 2014, Sputnik Moldova, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.com/20150821/1436330.html> , [Accessed 13/05/2023]

consumerism, at paralysing any critical spirit, logical reasoning [...] Brainwashing as a weapon to control society was employed not only by the communist regime but it is used even more effectively by the so-called democratic regimes."²⁵⁵

The role reserved for countries like the Republic of Moldova is that of a colony in a global system dominated by economic colonialism. Along with the other ex-communist countries, Moldova is often depicted as a target-country for the “sharks of speculative capitalism” and for this ‘immoral’ model to take hold in Moldovan society, economic occupation was preceded by intellectual occupation. This vast manipulation of people’s minds on the basis of predetermined parameters imperatively involves the massive penetration by Western influence in media, the education system, and in political parties. Thus, from being a subject of international law, in the words of the author, Moldova has now become the object of foreign geopolitical games. Moldova, no longer a Soviet satellite, is now seen as a satellite of the Western powers, the United States and the European Union: “*We tended towards self-government and ended up under foreign rule [...] And the obedience of governmental action with Western directives is being relentlessly monitored by the new clergy in the person of TV hosts and ‘independent experts’ fed by foreign grants and the purse of local oligarchs.*”²⁵⁶

In a long analysis of the last wave of enlargement, Roșca studies the advantages and disadvantages of European integration as, at that time, this issue was the subject of intense debates, not least because the EU was actively pursuing to bring a group of post-Soviet states - mainly Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine - into its orbit under the Eastern Partnership initiative.²⁵⁷ In his words, the prospect of EU membership acted as an incentive for Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) to overtake the poorer countries in the region on three main directives: institutional adaptation, economic integration, and cohesion policy. The European path of the CEE countries is here described as a consequence of the collapse of the socialist system and the special role that the EU played in the new geopolitical epoch. Additionally, the catastrophic worsening of the Russian economy in those years - the main trade and investment partner of Eastern Europe for many years - led to the political and economic

²⁵⁵ *Integrarea Europeana ca ideologie de stat și maladie colectivă (European integration as a state ideology and social malady)*, 2015, Sputnik Moldova, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.com/20151007/2227757.html> [Accessed 13/05/2023].

²⁵⁶ *De la comisarii bolșevici la cei europeni (From Bolscevic to European commissioners)*, 2015, Sputnik Moldova, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.com/20150821/1436330.html> , [Accessed 13/05/2023].

²⁵⁷ *Despre avantajele și riscurile integrării europene. Partea I (About the advantages and disadvantages of the EU integration. Part I)*, Sputnik Moldova, 2015, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.com/20150716/924136.html> , Accessed [13/05/2023].

reorientation of the CEE countries. From his analysis it emerged that the model of economic growth established in the Central and Eastern European countries was simply not sufficient to shed light on the historically inherited status of economic and social semi-periphery; and history has shown, according to the author, that European economic integration entails serious risks for economically weaker states. These countries are here described as particularly sensitive to the instability of the European economy, commodity markets and capital flows compared to other countries in the region. The author concludes by saying that the goal of creating economic growth will inevitably lead to the urgent need to reform this model of economic growth based on integration. The CEEs would thus need to reduce dependence on Western capital, export differentiation and a shift from importing technology to creating their own innovative goods.²⁵⁸

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is frequently presented as an alternative to the European Union. After claiming that “*the European Union has no special plan for our country for the next ten years, [...] as Brussels is dealing with its own business, it has long forgotten about the process of European integration of its eastern neighbours, ceding the issue to NATO,*” Aleksand Isaev explains why it would be more convenient for Moldova to become a member of the EAEU.²⁵⁹ In the Eastern Partnership framework, the Moldovan trade was hit hard by the hasty and unannounced signing of the Association Agreement with the EU, described as a policy of self-isolation and a radical rupture in traditional relationships with traditional partners (Russia) which transformed Moldova from a loyal foreign trade partner into a country fully dependent on foreign interests.²⁶⁰ Quoting former President Igor Dodon, the author concludes that cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union represents an opportunity to boost Moldova's economic potential after many years of economic impasse.

Finally, several articles intended mainly for the Russian-speaking segment of the population describe Moldova's integration process as a ‘path to degradation’ and accuse the national authorities of destroying the economy of the country on the pretext of European integration. Citing Suharevskaya, a Russian political scientist, European integration is depicted as ‘a road to nowhere’ and Eastern Partnership countries like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – compared to their CIS counterparts – are

²⁵⁸ *Despre avantajele și riscurile integrării europene. Partea III (About the advantages and disadvantages of the EU integration. Part III)*, 2015, Sputnik Moldova, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.com/20150728/1069774.html>, Accessed [13/05/2023]

²⁵⁹ *Dece Moldova are nevoie de Uniunea Economică Eurasiatică (Why Moldova needs the Eurasian Economic Union)*, 2018, Sputnik Moldova, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.com/20181206/moldova-are-nevoie-uniunea-economica-aurasiatica-23434458.html> [Accessed 13/05/2023].

²⁶⁰ Ibidem.

poorer and less industrialised. The penetration of Moldovan products in Europe comes at the expense of lowest quality goods being destined to the Moldovan market - raw materials, genetically modified and unhealthy food products, amongst others. The expert concluded stating that "*there is a degradation and de-industrialisation of the economy, which entails an outflow of Moldovan population. For the European Union this is more convenient than Arab or Muslim migrants, who are alien to the European culture and mentality. Migrants from the Eastern partners are very hard-working people, which ensures the economic development of the EU countries. Therefore, Euro-integration is certainly a path to degradation.*"²⁶¹

On the other end of the spectrum, the first pro-European mass-media institution in the above cited list, Jurnal.md, depicts Moldova's path to Europe in more positive, independent, and objective terms. As a case in point, the Eastern Partnership policy is here presented in President Sandu's words, as a platform that can further support Moldova's efforts in its EU accession process. The initiative has brought positive tangible benefits for Moldova – visa liberalisation, support for thousands of businesses, especially MSMEs, investment in road infrastructure and social institutions, educational opportunities for young people and scientists – and the European Union has become Moldova's first trading partner and its largest investor.²⁶² In this context, the Association Agreement between the EU and the Republic of Moldova is here described as a clear orientation of the country towards the European Union as it has created deep and comprehensive free trade between the two partners. In other words, Moldova benefits from reduced or even zero tariffs on exports of its products to the EU, an increased market for services and better conditions for attracting foreign investment. Under the AA, exports of Moldovan products to the EU were reported to have increased by 5.5% in 2015 and by 7.7% in 2016. Most importantly, Moldova can trade freely not only with the EU, but also with the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at the same time. Finally, the author reminds readers that Moldova retains full rights regarding its trade policy, as it is not a member of any customs union.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Сухаревская: евроинтеграция – путь к деградации (*Suharevskaya: European integration as a path to degradation*), 2021, Sputnik Moldova, Available at <https://md.sputniknews.ru/20210818/suharevskaya-evrointegratsiya--put-degradatsia-43974453.html> [Accessed 13/05/2023].

²⁶² *Piedicile din relațiile Uniunii Europene cu Republica Moldova (Obstacles in the relationship between the European Union and the Republic Of Moldova)*, 2019, Jurnal.md, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/e27a802ad91a1b54/piedicile-din-relatiile-uniunii-europene-cu-republica-moldova.html> [Accessed 15/05/2023].

²⁶³ *Uniunea Europeană - cel mai important partener comercial al Republicii Moldova (The European Union – Moldova's main trading partner)*, 2017, Jurnal.md, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/economic/2017/12/6/uniunea-europeana-cel-mai-important-partener->

European integration is thus described in the portal not as one of the many projects but the project of this generation of politicians. Unlike Sputnik Moldova, Jurnal.md reports the opinion of pro-EU politicians such as PAS deputy minister Virgiliu Pâslariuc. According to him, Moldova's European course should be irreversible, and the so-called 'Russian world' should no longer be perceived by Moldovan citizens as the only possible alternative as it was in the past. The deputy continues that *"Moldova must return to its European family, because our history and our values show us that we are Europeans. We are now determined to take further steps towards European integration, which means security, prosperity and freedom."*²⁶⁴ Finally, the deputy concluded that the government was determined to start accession negotiations with the EU as soon as possible and invited all citizens to take part in the European Moldova National Assembly organized by President Sandu on the 21st May, with the aim of *"telling the world that we are Europeans and that this is the path we have chosen."*²⁶⁵

However, the portal has often found itself critical of the government's approach to Moldova's European integration process. In the article dealing with the Eastern Partnership policy, the author does not hesitate to highlight the problems that Moldova was facing at the tenth anniversary of the EaP initiative, such as the lack of transparency in the formation of a parliamentary majority, the bank fraud scandal and the phenomenon of selective justice. In the words of Tăbârță, a policy expert from IDIS Viitorul quoted in the article, those ten years of the Eastern Partnership were a period full of hope, positive reforms and important achievements for Moldova. The launch of the EaP policy, however, overlapped with the arrival of an apparent pro-European government. *"When substantive reforms were necessary to modernise the Moldovan society, I noticed that this pro-European class was not so pro-European after all [...] After ten years, we are exactly where we started ten years ago, or maybe even worse. In terms of human rights, political rights, we even regressed compared to 2009"* Tăbârță concluded.²⁶⁶

[comercial-al-republicii-moldova/](#), [Accessed 15/05/2023].

²⁶⁴ *Integrarea europeană este proiectul generației noastre (European integration is the project of our generation)*, April 2023, Jurnal.md, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/5f6c32ce0a985875/opinii-integrarea-europeana-este-proiectul-generatiei-noastre.html#> [Accessed 15/05/2023].

²⁶⁵ *President Maia Sandu's message to citizens on the convening of the European Moldova National Assembly on May 21*, April 2023, The Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, Available at <https://presedinte.md/eng/discursuri/mesajul-presedintei-maia-sandu-catre-cetateni-cu-privire-la-convocarea-adunarii-nationale-moldova-europeana-in-data-de-21-mai> [Accessed 15/05/2023].

²⁶⁶ *Piedicile din relațiile Uniunii Europene cu Republica Moldova (Obstacles in the relationship between the European Union and the Republic Of Moldova)*, 2019, Jurnal.md, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/e27a802ad91a1b54/piedicile-din-relatiile-uniunii-europene-cu-republica-moldova.html> [Accessed 15/05/2023].

In another article published two years earlier in March 2017, D. Spătaru accuses the same pro-European government of being too vague in its promises and for using abstract and sterile expressions, such as 'we will ensure Moldova's European integration', 'we will not allow President Dodon to divert our pro-EU foreign policy' or even 'we will consistently implement the Action Plan in the framework of the Moldova-EU Association Agreement'.²⁶⁷ The author's main critique in the article is the fact that the government failed to take into account people's vision and, most importantly, their expectations of Moldova's European integration process. '*What should an ordinary citizen get from all these big words and empty promises?*' continues the author, criticising a government that sees the European integration only in terms financial support from the European Union. According to Spătaru, at that time people's main concern was the suspension of the Schengen area with the aim of better protecting EU borders against the threat of global terrorism. This decision might have had important consequences for Moldovans, who would have been either forced to return to their home country or once again pay exorbitant sums to traffickers to reach Europe in search of a more decent life. The author concludes by stating that unless people do not receive concrete answers and solutions to their doubts and fears, the government and Moldovan citizens will continue to live in parallel worlds and perceive their country's European integration process in totally different terms.²⁶⁸

Finally, unlike Sputnik Moldova, Jurnal.md does not depict the Eurasian Economic Union as the best alternative to the European Union for Moldova nor an opportunity to boost the country's economic potential. On the contrary, it is described as follows:

*“The EAEU is a group of openly authoritarian states, or with similar tendencies, characterized by a compromised justice system and flourishing corruption, where the media is not free and human rights are not respected. But most importantly, it is an area of economic instability due to high dependence on extractive industries and vulnerability to external sanctions, frequently due to Russia's aggressive policy. Moreover, Moscow's tendency to use economic instruments - embargoes, gas leverage amongst others - for political ends undermines the very economic agreements it promotes.”*²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ *Ce nu înțelege guvernarea și ce răspunsuri așteaptă oamenii când aud despre integrare europeană (What the government does not understand and what people expect when hear about the EU integration)*, Jurnal.md, 2017, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/opinii/2017/3/5/ce-nu-intelege-guvernarea-si-ce-raspunsuri-asteapta-oamenii-cand-aud-despre-integrare-europeana/>, [Accessed 15/05/2023]

²⁶⁸ *Ce nu înțelege guvernarea și ce răspunsuri așteaptă oamenii când aud despre integrare europeană (What the government does not understand and what people expect when hear about the EU integration)*, Jurnal.md, 2017, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/opinii/2017/3/5/ce-nu-intelege-guvernarea-si-ce-raspunsuri-asteapta-oamenii-cand-aud-despre-integrare-europeana/>, [Accessed 15/05/2023]

²⁶⁹ *Ce a vândut Dodon la Soci? (What did Dodon sell in Soci?)*, Jurnal.md, October 2017, Available at

The EAEU pursues a unified foreign trade policy with third countries, thus all the members of the Eurasian Economic Union are meant to apply the same regulations, tariffs, as well as antidumping or other measures to protect their domestic market. As noted in one of the articles cited above, membership of the Eurasian Economic Union is not compatible with the Association Agreement with the European Union.²⁷⁰ Thus, the Eurasian integration, long promoted by Moldova's former President Igor Dodon, is here presented as a simple *myth* as it is clear that these structures are not fully functional: first the Commonwealth of Independent States, then the Customs Union, and finally the Eurasian Economic Union. Finally, the author concludes that the very political and economic situation of the member countries show that these structures can guarantee neither peace nor prosperity for the members and that the sheer number of these projects clearly demonstrates their lack of effectiveness.²⁷¹

<https://www.jurnal.md/ro/economic/2017/10/13/ce-a-vandut-dodon-la-soci/> , [Accessed 14/05/2023].

²⁷⁰ *Uniunea Europeană - cel mai important partener comercial al Republicii Moldova (The European Union – Moldova's main trading partner)*, 2017, Jurnal.md, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/economic/2017/12/6/uniunea-europeana-cel-mai-important-partener-comercial-al-republicii-moldova/> , [Accessed 15/05/2023].

²⁷¹ *Ce a vândut Dodon la Soci? (What did Dodon sell in Soci?)*, October 2017, Jurnal.md, Available at <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/economic/2017/10/13/ce-a-vandut-dodon-la-soci/> , [Accessed 14/05/2023].

Conclusion

The assessment of the public opinion enabled the evaluation of common citizens' opinions towards the progress or failures of the Moldovan government in the process of the European integration of the country. As noted in this final chapter, the general population in the country continues to associate the European Union with better living conditions, well-functioning economies, democracy and respect for human rights; thus, pro-EU sentiments in Moldova, as elsewhere in the neighbourhood, are broad but rather shallow. It is noteworthy that both the public and governments tend to perceive the country's European choice in geopolitical terms and the possibility to choose between the European Union and the Eurasian Union brings to the fore the high level of polarisation characterising Moldovan politics and society. Moreover, as this chapter highlighted, there seems to be a strong correlation between what Moldovans choose to watch and/or read and both their ethnicity and geopolitical preferences.

As for the European Union in Moldovan media, from the analysis of the pro-Russia news website Sputnik Moldova it emerges that the liberal paradigm, and more precisely the European integration, is described here as a state ideology and a "social malady". Moldova is often depicted as an object of foreign geopolitical games, more precisely, a satellite of the Western powers - the United States and the European Union in particular. As for the Eastern Partnership and its dividends, the Association Agreement with the EU is seen as a policy of self-isolation which rendered Moldova fully dependent on foreign interests. On the other end of the spectrum, Jurnal.md describes the EU in more objective and positive terms. The country's European integration is here seen as the project of the current generation of politicians. Finally, the Association Agreement between the EU and the Republic of Moldova, on the contrary, is described in the articles in rather positive terms as it has created a deep and comprehensive free trade area between the two partners, and it is as a clear orientation of the country towards the European Union and the West in general.

CONCLUSION

This thesis traced the evolution of the special relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union under the Eastern Partnership initiative and addressed a gap in European studies literature by investigating Moldovans' perceptions of their country's drive towards the EU and its depiction in local media. Since independence, Moldova's European path has not been linear and, based on the government in power, the country has been oscillating between East and West in a multi-directional foreign policy. However, with the election of President Maia Sandu in 2020, often described as the most pro-EU president in the country since independence, Moldova's European integration process is now at the top of the Republic's foreign and domestic policy agenda. Moreover, the Eastern Partnership policy is often depicted by the governing coalition as an opportunity to further strengthen the country's European choice and to reach Moldova's main goal, namely EU membership.

Moldova was often referred to as the 'success story' of the Eastern Partnership, the strategic initiative launched by the European Union in 2009 with the aim of strengthening and deepening its political and economic relations with six Eastern neighbours, including the Republic of Moldova. As discussed in the present thesis, the case of Moldova clearly illustrates both the successes and failures of the EU's EaP policy. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area set up a free-trade area between Moldova and the EU, making the European Union Moldova's biggest trading partner. The visa-free travel regime with the EU is probably the most important result for Moldova in the Eastern Partnership framework, that has been promoting travel, business and people-to-people contacts since 2014. However, the EaP policy worked positively when it implied financial, economic or political gains for the elites in power. As noted in the third chapter, corruption was and continues to be one of the major elements impacting Moldova's performance on its path to Europe. The close relationship between big business and government institutions has often undermined reforms, maintained high levels of corruption, and, till 2022, prevented the country from being granted EU candidate status in the framework of the Eastern Partnership initiative.

Situated in between Russia and the EU, the whole Eastern Partnership region is a strategic foreign policy goal for both the EU and the Russian Federation, the latter claiming regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space, including Moldova. Although the European Union is now the main political and economic partner of the Republic, Russia remains a powerful pole of attraction for Moldova and

Moldovans. The energy warfare Moscow is conducting against the country, the presence of its peacekeeping troops in the breakaway region of Transnistria, and Moldova's reliance on remittances from abroad, especially from Russia, renders it difficult for the country to fully break its ties with its big neighbour in the East. In addition, Russia's strong cultural and historical ties with Moldova, nostalgia for the USSR and the Moldovan ethno-linguistic diversity are some of the most widely employed elements by Moscow to attract important segments of Moldovan society and hamper the country's European ambitions. As previously discussed, the very identity of both the country and its citizens continues to be divided between West and Russia. A large part of the population feels connected to neighbouring Romania through a common past, culture and language – now referred to as Romanian in the Constitution. In contrast, according to the Moldovan-Soviet identity doctrine, Moldovans are perceived as ethnically, culturally, and linguistically different and distinct from Romanians. As several Barometers of Public Opinion published by the Moldovan Institute of Public Policy showed, a good percentage of Moldovans continue to prefer Russia and its Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative to a deeper European integration. Although some outlets were recently banned in the country, Russian media continue to occupy a prevalent position in the Moldovan media landscape and almost 30% of Moldovans still prefer to rely on them for their news on political matters.

The assessment of Moldovan public opinion allowed for the evaluation of common citizens' opinions towards the progress or failures of the Moldovan government in the process of strengthened European integration of the country. As noted in the last chapter of this thesis, Moldovans see the European Union in rather abstract terms, associating it with values such as democracy, human rights, better living conditions and well-functioning economies. A deeper European integration for Moldova means, for the general population, better living conditions, economic development and poverty eradication as well as easier access to the EU for work, travel and study abroad experiences. It can be said that overall, since the country's independence in 1991, the European Union has always been perceived in rather positive terms. However, as amply demonstrated, support for Moldova's European integration has often oscillated between adoration and moderation over the years. When the Eurasian Customs Union was established in 2010 by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, the following year registered the biggest drop in supporters for EU integration, a drop of almost 15% compared to the previous year (IPP 2010, 2011). Hand in hand with the political crisis in 2013, the support for EU integration in Moldova continued to stay at rather low levels. Despite Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, between joining the European Union and the Eurasian Customs Union almost half of Moldovans opted for the latter option, whilst a slightly lower percentage chose the Europe. Moreover, the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU was met with criticism as it was mainly

perceived as a huge loss for entrepreneurs and as a way to destroy local markets with more low-quality imports from the European Union. However, with the new pro-EU governing coalition and in the aftermath of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Moldova and its population appear more committed to the country's drive towards Europe than ever before and the huge pro-EU rally in May 2023 is a case in point.

Finally, the different ways in which Moldova's European integration process is represented in national media provide a clearer and a more complete picture of how the European Union, its policies and Moldova's European turn are perceived at the national level. The information products used to inform the general population on the issue are among the several factors contributing to tailoring Moldovans' public perceptions vis-à-vis the EU. As emerged from the present thesis, a plethora of media outlets are operational in Moldova and most of them are owned and represent local political parties. The people involved in Moldovan media and its overall structure have thus important consequences on how public discourse takes place and which issues are generally discussed. Television was and remains the primary source of information for a high proportion of the Moldovan population. However, digital devices are now on the way to becoming the main source of information in the country as more and more Moldovans use them to get informed about national and international political matters. From the analysis of two of the most preferred news websites in the Moldovan media environment according to the 2021 BPO, a completely different, if not opposite, picture of Moldova's drive towards Europe emerged. In pro-Russia media, such as Sputnik Moldova, European integration is described in negative and geopolitical terms. From being a subject of international law, Moldova is here perceived as a mere object of foreign geopolitical games in the hands of the United States and the European Union in particular. As far as the Eastern Partnership is concerned, the Association Agreement with the EU is here described as a mere policy of self-isolation for the country. On the other hand, Jurnal.md, a pro-EU media outlet, describes the EU in more positive and objective terms. European integration is seen as Moldova's unique opportunity to grow economically, culturally, and socially, as its key to the European club and the so-called 'civilised' world. Finally, the Association Agreement between the EU and Moldova and the creation of a free trade area between the two partners are, in the authors' opinion, a clear drive towards Europe and the West in general.

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